

The Sour Thunder

an internet opera

composed and performed by

Mendi + Keith Obadike

1	The Airport	1:20
2	Sesom Arrives	1:05
3	The Months	2:10
4	Familiar Things	4:30
5	Blue Jasper	3:39
6	Down the Hill	:25
7	Piece of the Way	1:52
8	Peanut Vendor	3:03
9	Where was Adrian Piper? (note in broken Spanish)	2:34
10	The Yos	3:10
11	The Outskirts of Town	1:33
12	Bed of Suffering	4:52
13	Salud, Amistad, y Negritud	:49
14	One Dusk	1:04
15	An Unknown Name	1:16
16	Mudcloth and Spandex	1:45
17	The Myth	:59
18	She Came to Us	1:02
19	Trouble (a yellow mumble)	2:13
20	Follow the Scent	:23
21	Even the Magnolia	2:13
22	Like an Alien	:23
23	The Taste of Sugar Cane	3:44

We conceived of this piece as an Internet opera and sonic book. It was commissioned as the first media art project by the Yale Cabaret in 2002. The music for the project is grounded in our backgrounds in new music and hip-hop. Many of the textures used are created from our digitally treated hollowbody guitars, Nigerian mbiras, and field recordings of environmental sounds. The vocals are processed in order to emphasize speech melody in the recordings. Other textures are created through customized patches created on hardware synthesizers. All of the recordings were made in our home studios in North Carolina and Connecticut.

In the original performance at Yale the story was told simultaneously in two spaces. Two actors were located in the Yale Cabaret and two actors were located in the adjacent Afro-American Cultural Center. At the intermission the audience switched performance spaces. From these spaces images and sounds were streamed to the web. Each performance space showed a split screen projection of the two performances.

The story of *The Sour Thunder* is frayed at the ends and wound to the root. It is half autobiography and half sci-fi epic. We tell this double-sided story through sound-text pieces and songs. One end of the story begins in Solaika Dast, a world where scent is the primary means of communication. A being from Solaika Dast, named Sesom, is sent to a new world where her sensibilities take on new meanings. This end of the story is braided with vignettes from Mendi's experience as an insider/outsider student-tourist in the Dominican Republic. While some pieces clearly tell Sesom's story or Mendi's, others fit squarely in the nexus between the two.

Mendi + Keith Obadike, September 2004

Marcus Gardley and Mendi in the
live performance at Yale



As our story begins . . .

Mendi's story

Mendi is traveling with a friend to study Afro-Dominican Culture and Hispanophone Caribbean Literature at Pontificia Universidad Catolica Madre y Maestra in the Dominican Republic. She hopes to improve her Spanish and learn more about Black people in the Dominican Republic. She comes from a place where Black people celebrate their connection to the African Diaspora. Mendi goes to meet other descendants of people who survived slavery. She thinks of herself as uniting those whom slavery has dispersed. She imagines that at worst she will become homesick while she is away. She never imagines that anything could make her a stranger to herself.

Sesom's Story

Solaika Dast is the lone state in a world where scent is the primary means of communication. The Sour Thunder, which is nothing more than a scent to outsiders, symbolizes the great new invention of each generation, Solaikan identity, and a desire for more. Every age, Solaikans release the Sour Thunder in a formal ceremony. This ritual is a moment of national bonding. Through smelling the Sour Thunder, Solaikans identify with one another and feel loyal to the state. The scent makes Solaikans feel timeless--the Solaikan ideal is frozen in this moment. It is as if everything has always been perfect, like this.

In past ages, the Sour Thunder has been pillaged from a neighboring world during wars. Because children on Solaika Dast are usually born as twins, those who are born without a twin have a unique place in society. For Solaikans, one's character is perceived through one's relationship to one's twin. One's twin is one's reflection and responsibility. Ages ago, the Vred, the governors of the planet, ruled that all children of single birth would be separated from their families and raised in a government school. As they grow older, single birth Solaikans are sometimes required to perform duties in the name of Solaika Dast. Single birth soldiers of previous generations have gone to various parts of

a neighboring planet in groups to steal the Sour Thunder. They have always sacrificed large numbers of the twinless and each group has had to learn for itself how to accomplish the task.

By the time the last group found the Sour Thunder, most of the members had been killed in battle. Blue Jasper was one of the surviving members and, finally aware that single birth Solaikans are chosen for this dangerous task because their difference makes them expendable, refused to return to Solaika Dast. He told the returning Solaikans to inform the Vred he had decided to stay in order to make the journey easier for future generations. Blue Jasper would guard the Sour Thunder and simply give it to the next generation. It would be easier, he argued, for one Solaikan to move across borders undetected than for a group to do so.

To some extent, Blue Jasper believes that many lives will be spared by this plan. However, he also knows that, if detected, the lone Solaikan will be in more danger than those of previous generations had been. Blue Jasper is determined to free himself from his circumstances and stop the practice of endangering all twinless for the good of all other Solaikans. Still, he feels guilty about the uncertain dangers facing the first Solaikan who will make the journey alone and feels that her life is his responsibility.

When Blue Jasper's generation has forgotten the scent of the Sour Thunder, and only the memory of the encounter survives, it is time for another Solaikan to make the quest. A single birth Solaikan, whose identificatory scent translates to the sound "Sesom," is chosen from among the members of the Vred School. She has been taught that to be chosen for this mission is a privilege and she accepts her charge as the fulfillment of a prophecy. She imagines that at worst she will die for Solaika Dast a hero and that returning with the Sour Thunder will give her a place of honor. She never imagines that anything but death could separate her from her homeland.

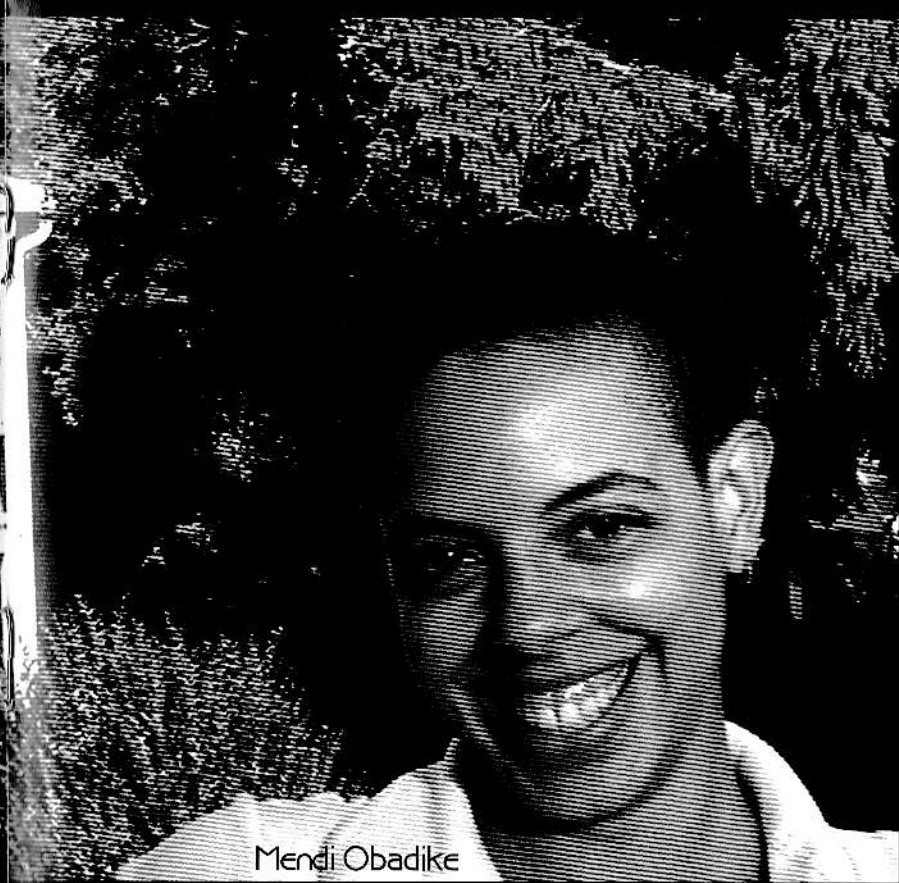
She departs from Solaika Dast with an aroma that could only be described as optimism. As soon as she crosses the border into this new territory, she is dizzy by her own odor of inadequacy. As the story opens, she is lost.



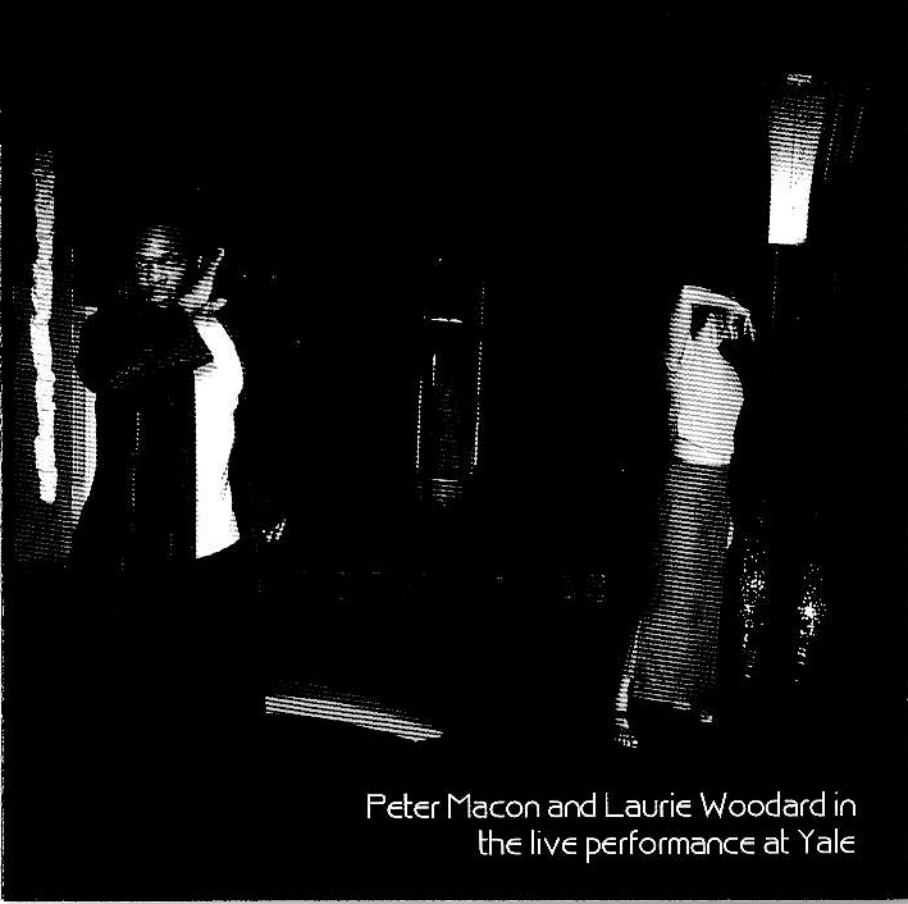
Marcus Gardley and Leona Woodard in the live performance at Yale



Keith Obadike



Mendi Obadike



Peter Macon and Laurie Woodard in
the live performance at Yale

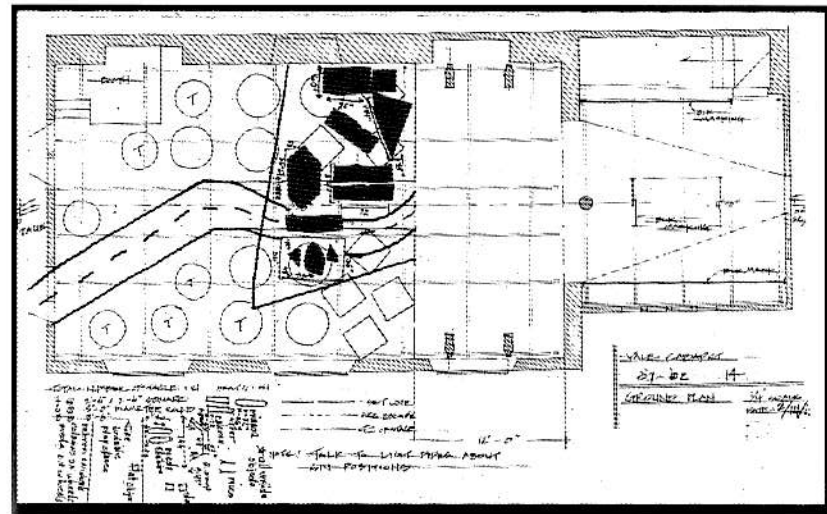
Mendi+Keith Obadike make music, literature and conceptual art works. Many of their projects concern the relation of new media narratives to older methods of social filtering. Their artwork has been exhibited internationally. They have received commissions from the Whitney Museum of American Art, Yale University, and Electronic Arts Intermix and the New York African Film Festival. Mendi+Keith have received awards from Franklin Furnace, the Connecticut Commission for the Arts, the Connecticut Critic's Circle award for Outstanding Sound Design, the John Hope Franklin Award from the Center for Documentary Studies, the Andrew W. Mellon Award in Humanistic Studies, the Naomi Long Madgett Poetry Award, and the National Video Resources/Rockefeller New Media Award. Their work has been featured in publications from Spain, Ireland, Denmark, South Africa, Italy, and the United States. Their online sound and art works include the sound piece *The Uli Suite* (1998-99), based on Nigerian abstract painting form, the soundscape *Sexmachines* (2000) for Nam June Paik and James Brown, *Blackness for Sale* (2001), a performance in which they auctioned Keith's Blackness on eBay, *Keeping Up Appearances* (2001) a hypertext prose piece, and *The Interaction of Coloreds* (2002), an online skin color verification system. Mendi+Keith's most recent projects are a surround sound piece for DVD, *The Pink of Stealth*, and Mendi's new book, *Armor and Flesh*, published by Lotus Press. Keith has received a BA in Art from North Carolina Central University and an MFA in Sound Design from Yale University School of Drama. Mendi has received a BA in English from Spelman College and is completing a PhD in Literature at Duke University. Their upcoming projects include two more opera's *TaRonda Who Wore White Gloves*, and *Four Electric Ghost* for Toni Morrison's Atelier at Princeton. More information about *The Sour Thunder* and other works can be found at www.blacknetart.com.

Mendi + Keith give an early
reading of *The Sour Thunder* at
Duke University



Acknowledgements

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Detail of groundplan and set design by painter and designer Torkwase Dyson

Produced and engineered by Mendi + Keith Obadike
All vocals and instrumentals by Mendi+Keith Obadike

The Sour Thunder was recorded on two Alesis ADATs and edited in Protools. All vocals were recorded with an AKG 414. The guitars include an Alvarez Electric semi-hollow body, a Fender HM Strat, a Hofner 60s Verythin hollow body, and a Philip Kubicki Factor bass. Keyboards include a Fender Rhodes, a Roland S50, a Roland D50, a Roland Juno 106, a Roland R8, a Korg M1, a Korg DSS1, and an Emu ESI 32. Other instruments include: hand-made brass and copper bells, a goat-skin bongo and djembe, a metal Dominican guira, a five inch Nigerian mbira with resonator, a three-inch South African mbira, and a yellow whirly tube. The recordings were mixed and processed using a Yamaha ProMix 01v.

The Sour Thunder was mastered by Scott Metcalfe at Mind's Ear
Cover image by John Vega

Live Performance Production Credits:

Concept, Text and Music: Mendi + Keith Obadike
Website Design and Programming: John Vega
Stage Direction: Marcus Gardley
Stage Management: Maddalena Deichmann
Set Design: Torkwase Dyson
Choreography: Tim Acito
Lighting Design: Tan Falkowski
Costumes: Camille Assaf
Sound System Design: Keith Obadike
Live Sound Engineers: Daniel Baker, Philip Peglow
Scent Design: Iona Rozeal Brown
Video Design: Dave Deitch

Video System Installation: George Dobuzinsky
Technical Design and Construction: Colin Buckhurst

Actors:

Peter Macon as Blue Jasper
Laurie Woodard as Mendi
Marcus Gardley as Black Elusive Presence
Iona Rozeal Brown as the Warm Hearted Child
Mendi Obadike as Sesom

The Chorus: Susan Finque, Gia Forakis, Brendan Hughes, Shaunda Miles, Sallie Sanders, Marcella Smith, Marnye Young

Hypertext e-Mix: Houston Baker, Christian Campbell, Coco Fusco, Duriel Harris, Nalo Hopkinson, John Keene, Ferentz Lafargue, Wahneema Lubiano, Dawn Lundy Martin, Paul D. Miller aka DJ Spooky, and Ronaldo V. Wilson

Executive Producers: David and Becky Starobin

Graphic Design: Brad Napoliello

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