

2024 THIRD Annual Forum Report: Kai Hazelwood's The Shed

By Amelia Groom

For Kai Hazelwood's presentation at the THIRD Annual Forum 2024, participants met online for a two-hour gathering at The Shed, a virtual space designed and hosted by Garden, who were introduced in advance as a "QTBIPOC led organization that designed our virtual playground and stewards a 24/7 virtual space for BIPOC who are practicing covid safety to gather, work and play in community. (Garden is a BIPOC only space, but The Shed is open to all!)."

The Shed comes out of Hazelwood's experience of spending a year and a half in bed due to interrelated PTSD, acute illness, disability, and the cumulative effects of structural inequities. During these 18 months, she was accompanied by Bisoux, her pet snake, who lives at the foot of her bed. As Hazelwood writes in *A Gathering for Personal and Global Apocalypse* (which can be found inside The Shed):

My people were born through portals at the edge of the world. Narrow windows in dark cells full of grief, fear, and hot bodies, above cold ocean and sharp rocks along the coast of West Africa. Those that survived this portal, the long inhumane journey that came after, and the brutal conditions of enslavement, led to me. I have the strength of their perseverance in my DNA, their brilliance at survival, their ability to cultivate joy and play in the unimaginable reminds me I already know how to survive the end of the world.

I'm grieving the loss of my body's ability after diagnosis and long illness, and I'm struggling, caught in the portal of this personal apocalyptic moment, to love my crip-self, while also inside of a global apocalypse. I find myself desperately searching for more teachers to show me how to survive the end of the world, both personal and worldwide. I found who I needed, here already, living quietly in a tank at the foot of my bed. This is a ritual for my snake love Bisoux, my pet who has been my companion now for almost 20 years; my teacher in the wisdom of creatures who shed their skin and my snakecestors, who wove their way in graceful S shapes across the world long before I was a glimmer in the dreams of my human ancestors.

Hazelwood chose to make The Shed a virtual space for two main reasons: first, because her community is spread across the world and remote access offers an opportunity to come together, and second, because we are living in a pandemic and virtual gatherings are COVID-safe.

Upon arrival at The Shed, participants are invited to design an avatar to represent them. Once inside, it's a non-linear, choose-your-own-adventure scenario. You can move through a series of

landscapes with different zones and features including listening stations, somatic exercises, gathering points, study resources, games, and reading materials.

Along your way, a reptilian creature might offer you a link to the mixtape *Sssongs for Ssslithering*, described by Hazelwood as “Music that has inspired my own shedding, shifting, moving and transforming over the last two years,” which features songs by Nina Simone, Mahalia Jackson, Riz Ahmed, Macy Gray, FACESOUL, Konyikeh, Lady Blackbird, Chavela Vargas, Dominique Fils-Aimé and others. If you want to dance, simply press the z key and your avatar will start dancing.

In the pond area, you might encounter *Ssstudy*, a collection of resources compiled by Hazelwood as a compilation of “scholars, friends, chosen family, healers, teachers and more” who have influenced the project. Here you can learn about historic figures and contemporary writers including Resmaa Menakem, John Lewis, Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, Alice Sheppard, Dr Shena Young, Jack Halberstam, and Audre Lorde. Hazelwood also gives a shout-out to her “boffice or ‘bed office’ – where much of my writing and life takes place these days,” and, of course, to Bisoux, who “continues to teach me every day and is my primary research partner.”

In the desert landscape, there’s a cluster of boulders where you can hang out and listen to readings from texts like *Tenderness: A Black Queer Meditation on Softness and Rage* by Annika Hansteen-Izora and *Undrowned: Black Feminist Lessons from Marine Mammals* by Alexis Pauline Gumbs.

Sandwich boards throughout The Shed lead you to an essay by Hazelwood titled *On Grief At The End of The World: A Black, Disabled, Queer Ritual for Personal and Global Apocalypse*. “Liberation is a technique, I’m learning mine from snakes,” Hazelwood writes. “Their capacity to move in any direction at every moment, the slowness they remind me to play with, their capacity to be in a constant state of transformation, and yet be fully themselves at any moment. Their shedding, constantly becoming and unbecoming, living peacefully in perpetual apocalypse.”

In The Shed’s jungle space, you might encounter *Reptile Time*, a series of guided somatic exercises in grief and healing, inspired by “reptilian slowness.” How does the snake’s capacity for extremely slow movement – and for periods of quiet stillness – relate to the capacity for shedding and transformation? What sort of transformation is possible within pause and rest? “We are moving away from the linearity, the speed, the neatness of time measured by a clock – towards the millennia-spanning slowness of snakes,” says Hazelwood, in the audio track guiding the exercises. “Feel downwards into the earth, connecting with what’s beneath you. Linger in this reaching down awareness [...] Remember, the world has been ending forever – we have to learn how to slow down enough to transform with it – grieve it – the answers lie through the portal created by grief.”