



## Hull

### Xandria Phillips

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Nonbinary poet Xandria Phillips's poetry collection *Hull* employs the language of dreams and fraught journeys, laying bare the historical and current threats to black and queer bodies.

The still-powerful forces of colonialism and slavery haunt the book, most so in the title poem that evokes the claustrophobic atmosphere of a slave ship undergoing the Middle Passage. Historical and mythological figures make frequent cameo appearances. The multi-part "Intimate Archive" is a collection highlight, documenting incidents of the exploitation of black Americans, including Sally Hemings's impregnation by Thomas Jefferson, the Tuskegee Experiments, and Angola prison.

Even playful poems that imagine interactions with famous Africans and black Americans from history, including nineteenth-century sculptor Edmonia Lewis and Sara Baartman, a Khoikhoi woman exhibited in European freak shows for her large buttocks, are alive to the perceived danger posed by black achievement and women's sexuality. Phillips is triumphant in flipping certain narratives—for instance, putting Baartman in the position of a paying voyeur.

These free verse poems are rich with alliteration ("the brine of our brutish blood") and are innovative in their layouts. At their most demanding, individual words are dotted across sparse pages, but there are also prose poems and poems that are deliberate in forming shapes on the page, including a pair of open legs and an X.

Frequent shark imagery creates a sense of foreboding that is counterbalanced by bird metaphors. Instead of flying above trouble as symbols of freedom, birds are more often seen faltering: starlings fall from the sky in a haphazard manner; a phoenix struggles to rise from the ashes of a KKK lynching. Amid the often melancholy subject matter come cheeky entries, like a sex dream about Michelle Obama.

In the tradition of Natasha Trethewey and Danez Smith, Phillips sees a through line from slavery to racism past and present. *Hull* is their bold indictment of prejudice.

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