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Articles on Language and Literature
Literary Criticism and Book Reviews
Association News and Reports

THE COLLEGE LANGUAGE ASSOCIATION



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About *CLAJ*

I. General Publication Information

The *CLA Journal* (ISSN 0007-8549) is a multilingual peer-reviewed bi-annual publication by the College Language Association. It is issued in March and September of each year. The subscription price for *CLAJ* to non-members and to libraries is \$80.00 yearly in the United States, \$82.50 in Canada, and \$93.00 in other countries. The price of current single copies is \$42.75. The price of single copies of current Special Issues is \$43.75.

II. *CLAJ* Mission Statement

Established in 1957, *CLAJ* is a multilingual, international publication that fosters socially engaged, innovative, and groundbreaking scholarship in language, literature, linguistics, and pedagogy cultivated by the diverse international membership of CLA. *CLAJ* is the voice of a community of scholars, the first in establishing a forum for intellectual discourse among black scholars in language and literary studies. Articles treating the languages and literatures of all nations will be deemed worthy of careful consideration for publication. In keeping with its desire to develop the study of the languages and literatures of Africa and its global diaspora as an important area of scholarship, *CLAJ* is committed to offering critical perspectives and new developments in the analysis of language, literature, and cultural studies representative of the diverse scholarly interests of its members while privileging the African diaspora and transcultural black identities. *CLAJ* neither considers previously published material nor manuscripts submitted elsewhere.

III. CLA Membership Requirement

CLAJ welcomes year-round, mission-appropriate submissions yet limits publication of any work considered to only those authors who **have** or **will** satisfy prerequisite membership in the organization.

IV. Formatting Requirements for Essays Submitted for Publication in *CLAJ*

CLAJ requires standard formatting for all essays, including those submitted for consideration in special issues. Submissions that do not adhere to these specifications will not be considered for publication. For regular biannual issues, your anonymous manuscript should be submitted as an email attachment to Dr. Sandra G. Shannon, *CLAJ* Editor, at editor@clascholars.org.

- Manuscripts must be Microsoft Word documents, double spaced, with one-inch margins, and Times New Roman 12 pt. font.
- Manuscripts should be approximately 20-24 pages (7000-8000 words), which exclude footnotes and works cited.
- Formatting and citations should conform to *MLA Handbook* (8th Edition, 2016).
- *CLAJ* requires references in the form of footnotes.

Manuscripts should also be accompanied by a separate additional file that contains

- a cover letter with the author's name, address, email address, telephone number, and professional affiliation.
- an abstract of the essay that does not exceed 250 words formatted as a single-spaced page with the essay title and author's name.
- a biographical sketch of the author in approximately 100 words. (If the work is collaborative, a separate biographical sketch is required for each author.)
- A statement of the author's CLA membership status.

V. Guidelines for Book Reviews and Book Reviewers

CLAJ currently considers unsolicited book reviews for publication and dispatches books to qualified members for solicited reviews.

If you would like to submit an unsolicited book review, suggest a book for review, or request to become a reviewer, please send an email to the *CLAJ* Book Review Editor, Dr. Tosha Sampson-Choma at tchoma@ksu.edu. If, after a week, you have not received an acknowledgment of your query or submission, please query again or write to the senior editor of the *CLAJ* at editor@clascholars.org. Please write "Book Review Query" or "Book Review Submission" in the subject line of the email as applicable.

The book review should

- include a brief summary of the book's central argument.
- offer an assessment of the book's contribution to the existing literature in its field.
- provide a frank evaluation of the book's strengths and weaknesses.
- maintain a collegial and constructive tone.
- adhere to MLA style guidelines.
- be 500-2000 words in length.

VI. Publication Decisions

Upon completion of the external review process and editorial decision, authors will receive prompt communication by email regarding the status of their essay. Direct specific questions regarding the review process to editor@clascholars.org. All decisions are final.

VII. Guidelines for Special Issues

To propose a special issue, prospective guest editors need to

- submit a 500-word abstract describing the issue and its scholarly significance.
- include a list of contributors, their essay titles, and their corresponding abstracts (200-300 words).
- provide a timeline of completion.
- note that the special issue has a 100-page minimum.
- alternately, if the guest editor(s) plans an open call for papers (CFP), they should include a draft of the CFP and information regarding the circulation of the CFP.

Once the special issue is approved, the Guest Editor will lead the process from proposal to publication.

The Guest Editor

- develops and maintains timelines to ensure timely publication.
- oversees the peer review process.
- acts as a point of contact for reviewers and authors.
- copyedits the submitted essays.
- ensures each essay adheres to *CLAJ* formatting requirements (see Section IV).
- compiles the table of contents.
- writes an introduction contextualizing the submissions.
- sends all essays as a group in a zip file of individual Microsoft Word documents to *CLAJ* editor at editor@clascholars.org.
- ensures that the required information described in Section IV accompanies the essays.
- provides evidence to the *CLAJ* Editor that all contributors have paid memberships to CLA
- submits their own biographical sketch (100 words), full name and affiliation, telephone number, email address, and mailing address.

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THE COLLEGE LANGUAGE ASSOCIATION

www.clascholars.org

A PROFESSIONAL ORGANIZATION OF COLLEGE TEACHERS OF ENGLISH AND FOREIGN LANGUAGES

The College Language Association, founded in 1937 by a group of Black scholars and educators, is an organization of college teachers of English and foreign languages which serves the academic, scholarly and professional interests of its members and the collegiate communities they represent. Since 1957, the association has published the *CLA Journal*, a peer-reviewed biannual publication featuring scholarly research and reviews of books in the areas of language, literature, linguistics and pedagogy.

The College Language Association . . .

- Fosters high professional standards for teachers of language and literature and promotes productive scholarship among its members;
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For Us, To Us, About Us: Racial Unrest and Cultural Transformation

Dana A. Williams and Kendra R. Parker

As the official journal of the oldest and largest professional association for faculty and scholars of color who teach languages and literature, The *College Language Association Journal* (CLAJ) has consistently contributed to humanities scholarship in unique ways that speak to scholarly imperatives. This special issue, *For Us, To Us, About Us: Racial Unrest and Cultural Transformation*, is no different in this regard. But it is unique in the sense that it attempts to do the work that many of CLA's scholars are committed to doing every day in our communities and in our classrooms: to keep in mind the scholar's role as public intellectuals uniquely poised to help meet certain needs of the masses. This issue was born, in no small part, out of a belief that Black academics have a moral and ancestral obligation to embrace our roles as tea leaf readers, as interpreters of the drums. To be clear, there is no shortage of "think pieces" and commentaries by Black people about this storied moment in our history. But how many of them are intentional about speaking to and being in conversation with Black communities to which they belong? How many use language, tropes, images, and themes with which the full range of readers will be familiar? This is the work this issue tries to do.

Using as springboard the calls for change initiated by George Floyd's death at the hands of police officer Derek Chauvin, *For Us, To Us, About Us* aims to explore the possibilities for meaningful and systemic cultural transformation, which we interpret broadly to include everything from the removal of confederate flags and monuments to statements of solidarity by arts organizations to a flood of *mea culpas* about the ways mainstream institutions (from universities to book publishers to awards and prize committees) have been—and will no doubt continue to be—complicit in authorizing institutionalized racism. This interrogation of culture is at the heart of what we do as language and literature and humanities scholars. Accordingly, the contributors to this issue grapple with the full range of "hot topics"—from anti-racist reading lists to navigating grief and anger. But, too often, the humanities work we do is done in isolation instead of in community, disjointedly from one challenge to the next, and for scholarship's sake instead of for the express purpose of Black people's liberation. We reject this tendency towards isolation and disjointedness; *For Us, To Us, About Us* is guided by the spirit of Toni Cade Bambara who worked to "produce stories that save our lives" (41), because as Bambara warned us, salvation is the issue.

As we work to rectify these (sometimes self-imposed) silos, we don't claim to speak *for* the streets. In 8:46, Dave Chapelle said it best: "These streets will speak for themselves, whether I'm alive or dead. I trust you guys." Indeed. The streets, the grassroots organizers, the people doing the work—seen and unseen—speak for themselves, whether we, behind the walls of academia speak up or not. We know this. We also know as Black educators we are inheritors of a specific tradition. A long tradition. A tradition that compels us to be responsible for the minds we have the privilege of engaging. Accordingly, we—and the contributors—approach this with that tradition in mind, providing contexts and lenses for our students, which helps them hear from the streets with a clear recognition that we don't claim to talk for the streets except to the extent that we are in them.

"And still I see no changes"?

Certain aspects of this moment feel eerily familiar. There's an element of rememory present. When Marvin Gaye released his eleventh studio album *What's Going On?* in 1971, for instance, neither of us had been born. Yet, our souls were present for its debut. Its relevance almost fifty years later calls to mind the sanctity of one of Black culture's most compelling tropes—the "changing same," which Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones) coined in 1966 in relation to the blues impulse in America. "Through its many changes," he wrote, "it [the blues impulse] remained the exact replication of *The Black Man In The West*" (180). *What's Going On?* is indeed the blues in one of its highest forms, and its ongoing prescience buttresses Baraka's point—the more things change, the more they stay the same. We would do well to learn from the breathlessness of that album, the way it bleeds from song to song. One song gets the shine, but it takes the whole album to capture the spirit of the moment.

At least part of the beauty of the changing same trope is how well it captures the irony of difference amid similitude. The trope gives us permission, somehow, to say that as familiar as this moment is, there is also something importantly different about it. For one thing, the incremental approach to change has finally lost its staying power. We live in the age of Amazon Prime, where goods can be ordered with one-click, come off the shelf, be packaged, shipped, and delivered to our doorsteps in less than 24 hours. The "we want it now" generation has ushered in the "impatient nation," where we tell stories in 280 characters, order food from apps and have it delivered in minutes or it's free, forego human interaction for the speediness of self-checkout, and send text messages like "LOL" (when we opt to use letters at all instead of an emoji or GIF). What also makes this latest iteration of the culture wars different is the fact that the U.S. is flailing in its attempt to manage the COVID-19 pandemic. In the face of more than four million confirmed cases

and 159,000 reported related deaths (as of this writing), Americans' understanding of national myths of exceptionalism has finally begun to align more with reality than with myth. The fissures are too deep to sustain the lies of "culture" any longer. Unlike other moments of state-sanctioned violence against Black men, women, and children that ended tragically, George Floyd's death occurred during a pandemic, when so many people were sheltering in place and feeling vulnerable. To an impatient nation, the eight minutes and forty-six seconds it took to kill Floyd seemed like a lifetime. We were all at home to watch it, to be angered by it, and to put our bodies on the line to protest it. Change was imminent. There would be no slow drip; there was an inevitable barrage.

In three short months, the laundry list of change looked something like this. Two days after George Floyd died in police custody, protests erupted across the country. A few days after Floyd was killed, "Central Park Karen" was fired from her job after a video of her calling the police on Christian Cooper, a Black man who was bird watching, went viral. On June 5, Mayor Muriel Bower authorized a name change of the section of 16th Street, NW in Washington, DC, to "Black Lives Matter Plaza," amid calls to defund police all over the country. Unwilling to meet that demand, the compromise was to offer a symbolic show of solidarity. The month of June saw protestors and city officials alike topple, vandalize, or officially remove monuments exalting white supremacy from New York to Mississippi. Surely, Nina Simone is somewhere rejoicing (while still humming "Mississippi Goddam")—by month's end, the state finally voted to remove the Confederate flag emblem from its state flag, after stubbornly retaining it for 126 years. The first big news of July was the Andrew Mellon Foundation's announcement. Under Elizabeth Alexander's leadership, the Foundation announced its intent to focus its grantmaking on social justice projects. As part of its racial reckoning, the publishing industry offered its responses by appointing two Black women—Dana Canedy, the former administrator of the Pulitzer Prize, and Lisa Lucas, the executive director of the National Book Foundation—as top executives at two of the industry's largest houses: Simon and Schuster and Knopf. And the NFL, still denying any conspiracy to blackball Colin Kaepernick and realizing that commissioner Roger Goodell's June statement against racism wasn't quite enough, announced in July that a recorded or live version of the Negro National Anthem would be played at every game during Week 1 as a show of solidarity with Black people. Theatre workers of color joined forces to demand a meaningful response to historic, systemic racial injustice in the industry. And the list goes on and on. Part of the work we have to do now is to make sure that the changes we have seen have meaning and the changes being called for are enacted. That is work that we must all do together.

“For us, this shit is for us”

We resist the primacy of anti-racist reading lists; often, they are concerned more with white audiences and have little more than a panacea-like value. Accordingly, this issue features essays written by CLA members who responded to the call for short essays that we thought might be classified as “essential” reading for Black college students and the faculty who teach them. Given its importance, this is the first issue of *CLAJ* that is free beyond the CLA membership. At this moment in our history, we are reminded of CLA founders’ mission and our rooted existence at the intersection of scholarship and pedagogy. The significance of this going back to fetch it is not lost on us. The essays in this issue are designed to stand alone; however, for those interested in reading cover to cover, and we suggest this unreservedly, the essays have been organized into two parts: **Part I: You Good, Fam?** and **Part II: Dear Black Academics**. For those interested in incorporating this issue into their classrooms, the **Coda** offers a series of ready-made discussion questions and writing prompts.

A masterclass in the art of eloquent rage, the issue’s opener is Theri Pickens’s “The Echoes of History, a Personal Professional Meditation.” Pickens highlights the ableism that sought to erase and minimize all the resources and needs disabled people had lobbied for (for decades). In expressing dismay at how accommodations became available so quickly as abled folks sought to obey—or push for—work from home orders, Pickens discusses how Black disabled epistemologies become apt survival and thriving tools for us during a time of COVID-19 and beyond.

In “COVID-19 and Black Grief in the Academy,” Elizabeth J. West critiques the white academic gaze that, because of the COVID-19 pandemic, offers white academics an opportunity to recklessly gaze and assess Black grief. West reflects through her recent and not-so-recent experiences on how Black people in academic spaces—staff, students, and faculty—are subject to laboratory like treatment from white intellectuals observing or studying Black suffering. Her essay offers a snapshot of this phenomenon. Angelyn Mitchell, Shauna M. Morgan, and Kendra R. Parker each consider what writers like Octavia E. Butler, Lucille Clifton, and Toni Morrison have already told us about these moments. Morgan’s essay reveals that Clifton’s vast body of work, both artful and instructive, contains a poem for every day and every moment. Morgan demonstrates that Clifton has left us a body of work to help us reflect and guide us to the life of freedom we have always imagined. In “Surviving the Pandemic: Necessary Lessons from Morrison’s *Beloved*,” Mitchell shows how one of the most important texts in the African American archive, Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987), offers necessary lessons of the resilience, persistence, and perseverance for today. Parker, in her annotated letter “As the World Burns: ‘Checking In,’” deconstructs her May 30th e-mail to her students, sharing with a

much larger audience how Octavia E. Butler's life and work (specifically *Kindred*) leaves us with guidance on preparing for survival and embracing the liberatory potential of interconnected communal networks.

Part II, Dear Black Academics, opens with David F. Green, Jr.'s "Views from the Bricks: Notes on Reading and Protest," which examines Hip Hop's role within the genre of Black social protest literature, noting that Hip Hop music provides an interesting entry point into the study of Black protest. Green ruminates on Hip Hop's musical and visual contributions to the modern Black protest canon; and, he examines DaBaby's "Rockstar" remix for the 2020 BET Awards and H.E.R.'s "I Can't Breathe," emphasizing their importance to understanding and examining recent social protest campaigns against police brutality and other systemic racist practices. Beauty Bragg points to an expansive literary tradition that reifies autonomous Black self-conception, from Equiano's narrative to Erykah Badu's *Mama's Gun*. Bragg's "We Are Our Own Monuments, and We Can Be Theirs, Too" reminds us that "[o]ur self-love... is a powerful challenge to the national discourses that have erased or minimized Black achievement and contributions to anything that the mainstream of this nation celebrates" (177).

Kenton Ramsby and Howard Ramsby II's "Black Books and Dead Black Bodies: Twitter, Hashtags, and Antiracist Reading Lists" marks a shift in the contributors' pieces. They explore how the remarkable feats in sales and media attention achieved by books about race and African American booksellers in June 2020 indicate that significant news coverage about brutalities committed against Black people can substantially drive the interests of reader-consumers. Using Twitter analytics, they feature the work of an undergraduate student who tracked the hashtag "#HowToBeAnAntiRacist" to monitor Twitter's discourse before and after George Floyd's murder. What the analysis reveals is that the relative lack of attention for African American fiction suggests that these genres matter less for consumers in dire moments, at least in comparison to antiracist nonfiction.

The issue's final two essays are written by Greg Carr and Tony Bolden, two scholar-activists with long and deep ties to the communities they write about. Though Carr concedes, "Contemporary Black academics... are poised to speak, once more, to themselves, their publishers, and their ever-shrinking readership of patrons and fellow-craft" (184), his essay "Black Intellectuals, Black Archives, and a Second American Founding" offers a hopeful outlook—a "Second Founding" of these United States. Carr emphasizes that this Second Founding must be rooted in the oral and written archives of Black memory, as they "inform our moment to speak the unspeakable, to voice new realities, and to discard the anxieties and concessions of cultural assimilation" (189). In "Let's Keep It Funky: Reflections on Black Studies During the Black Lives Matter Uprising," Bolden laments the loss

of Black intellectual activity and the Black Studies tradition that is removed from the community and from radicalism. Bolden critiques Black public intellectuals who do not, like “black-blues writers,” offer “the most serious challenge to white epistemology and capitalist ideology this nation ever produced” (193). Instead, Bolden observes, these Black public intellectuals “[provide] negligible insight on white supremacy.” Bolden’s essay acknowledges “the price” of Black academics’ acceptance into mainstream academia is to “deny—the blues and its cultural philosophy like family secrets” (194). Bolden issues a clarion call, reminding Black academics to “keep it funky” in the spirit of Aime Cesaire and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o; Jayne Cortez and Henry Dumas, Amiri Baraka; Langston Hughes and Octavia E. Butler. In invoking these visionaries (and calling on the names of others), Bolden reminds us—much like Carr—that we must “claim” the radical Black Studies tradition, rooting ourselves in a black-blues tradition.

This issue has all of the advantages and limitations of a “rapid response” to anything. The contributors here were each equally reluctant to add to the commentary that emerged too hastily in response to a sudden national, mainstream interest in what Black academics think. But they relented because the things they write about in the pages that follow are things they think about and teach as a matter of course, not as a matter related to the “fierce urgency of now” (King). They also responded because of our shared interest in and commitment to the singular ground-rule we established when we sent out the call—write for us, to us, and about us.

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The Echoes of History, a Personal Professional Meditation

Therí A. Pickens

Hello Therí. This is Jill Reich calling from Bates College. I'm very pleased to be calling and... and... uh perhaps you can think why and that is that we would very much like to have you to join us on the faculty here at Bates. So, I'm calling to talk about an offer. Um, it's Tuesday afternoon about uh 5:30. I'll be in the office for about another half hour. You can reach me tomorrow at uh 207-786-6066. I'm afraid I'm going to be at meetings most of the evening. Uh, but I'm going to send you an email and, uh, we really look forward to talking and hope that uh we can work something out so that you can join us here at Bates. Thanks, Therí, and I'll talk to you soon. Bye-bye.

This voicemail is from Tuesday, March 8, 2011.

It was a moment of professional triumph. It was also a moment of fear.

I had an offer for a tenure-track job, but I had to negotiate the parameters. I hasten to add that few of us know the art of negotiation and seldom do we learn in graduate school. Though I had great mentors (still do!), this process was daunting nevertheless. I needed to negotiate aspects of my career that most junior faculty think about: a base salary increase, course reduction for the first two years, start-up funds, teaching development, and a deeper reserve of conference travel funds. Books like *The Academic Job Handbook* advise job seekers on best practices in contract negotiation. Noticeably absent, for me at least, was advice on how best to negotiate aspects of my career related to my disability: digital access to my classroom so that I could teach remotely in case of illness, physical access to both my office and classrooms in case of inclement weather, accessible housing within scooter distance to the campus, increase in the yearly conference funding allowance because traveling with a disability is expensive. When Bates' former Dean of Faculty Jill Reich called to "work something out," I am certain that she knew she would need to consider my disability. Nonetheless, joining the faculty at Bates seemed like it would be an exercise in trying to create a separate but equal working space¹ in a place where ableism was assumed to be a common denominator between employees.

I am grateful that Drs. Dana Williams and Kendra R. Parker saw fit to include me in this necessary publication. I want to give a special thank you to Dr. Shanna Benjamin for her adroit assistance in helping me make this rage eloquent (*pace* Brittney Cooper).

¹ The reference to *Plessy v. Ferguson* is very much intended. The separate but equal doctrine still exists as part of the de facto segregation for the disabled.

Though the conversations about my disability and my tenure-track life were supposed to be separate—that is, my discussions with administrators about contract terms that were negotiable and our dialogues about disability accommodations that I was legally entitled to—they happened with the same parties during the same meetings. Simultaneously negotiating my contract perks and outlining disability needs risked conflating the two and negating the urgency of the latter. In other words, adding my needs for disability requests to the list of terms I was already negotiating could have been viewed as asking too much or understood as interchangeable with other requests. For example, could administrators read my desire for more conference funding as an exploitative move that was all about being able to travel more on Bates' dime?² The dean could have asked whether an increase in base salary meant that I could personally underwrite costs associated with creating accessible housing. Ultimately, in a town where most housing near the campus is owned by the college and none of it is accessible, the school had to create the parameters for me to be able to join the faculty and work at Bates. Plainly put, I cannot work where I cannot live.³ Further, these requests for access were not a question of if they could/should be done but rather how they needed to be done. That list was, in effect, not really negotiable. You'll note that I used the auxiliary verb "could" to describe the privileged reaction of hemming and hawing about disability. I use this verb specifically to remind folks that regardless of my experience, this privilege affects the possibilities for the disabled in an ableist world.⁴

During March 2020, much of the world began to work from home, learn from home, and shelter-in-place. I certainly was saddened to see daily activities, travel plans, and socialization nearly grind to a halt. I was also deeply concerned that people would not care about the vulnerable and the marginalized, those whose experience of local and national pandemic directives was exacerbated by preexisting conditions. Since I fit into these categories, I was also deeply afraid. And, I was angry. I am still angry. Actually, I am enraged. The constant messages to stay six feet apart and wash your hands meant that now folks had to pay attention

² I hasten to add that these kinds of questions and more have been actually asked.

³ Some readers who are not familiar with the life of a small liberal arts college may balk at the idea that the college should provide housing. However, the social landscape of a small liberal arts college relies on the community that surrounds the college. That includes the faculty who live there. In some cases, faculty who cannot find housing cannot take these positions. This is part of the reason small liberal arts colleges own property, to diminish the financial barrier for incoming faculty. For me, this barrier would have been financial as well since the ADA would allow for me to alter a residence, but I would also have to pay to make it accessible, a cost-prohibitive venture in this case.

⁴ As always, grammar matters. The auxiliary verb and the subjunctive mood will indicate that I am speaking about possibilities, not just for myself, but for other disabled scholars as well.

to contagion in ways they hadn't before. As an immuno-compromised person, I have had to exit the bathroom after people who do not wash their hands and avoid large crowds for fear of getting seriously ill. I have also had to ward off people who hug usually without consent. Internally, my reaction is: *You're a hugger? So, that means you get to touch me without consent and endanger my health with your germs? I don't think so.* Externally, I have to fend off the unwanted advances of people who wish to be free to violate my boundaries and body. I set boundaries to protect my health and physical well-being only to be met with suspicion around my motives and disbelief about the severity of a hug. People's protests against following these rules clarified that they never want to live like me. People balked at the possibility of a temporary life with only some of the cautions I have had to live with for years. I watched them say they couldn't take it. I watched them imply my life wasn't worth living if it had to be lived like this.

I also observed people demonstrate how little they care for the vulnerable. Those cute little memes about boredom and the praise of the great pause—those are two sides of the same coin. Each makes too much and too little of the privilege of being able to leave one's home. So many of the disabled have limited social interaction because places to gather are not accessible physically, culturally, or socially. This does not just include restaurants, but also concerts, library stacks, museums, theatres, and stores.⁵ Few of the conversations about staying at home accounted for several facts: that some people have been forced to stay at home for years; some people will need stay at home for years; some people are too under-resourced to stay at home; and, some are unsafe at home. It is a privilege to talk about boredom. It is a privilege to view this as a break.

More to the point of this essay, the COVID-19 work-from-home orders meant that now most jobs were accessible. Part of the reason I went into the academy was because I knew my elite degree would not have overridden my Blackness and disability if I needed accommodations like work-from-home.⁶ That is, getting workplace "accommodations" for a nine-to-five office job is not a guarantee despite the Americans with Disabilities Act. For physical access issues, employers can claim that changes to infrastructure are too expensive. For the desire to work from home, employers can twist job requirements such that working from home appears to be unreasonable.⁷ Keeping in mind that Black folks are often thought of as lazy and asking too much, my requests could be considered a desire to "get over" rather

⁵ The Metropolitan Museum of Art is part of a long-term initiative called "Crip the Met" designed to bring access to the museum in multiple ways, including the descriptions of art, physical access, and auditory access, among others.

⁶ My undergraduate degree is from Princeton University.

⁷ Many employers are now deploying this logic to get people back into the workplace.

than a need to “get through.” Keep in mind also that disability does not coincide with capitalist notions of production. The disabled are understood as drains on resources. Supposedly, we are not worth the resources expended on us because our lives are less valuable. During discussions about the novel coronavirus and hospital capacity, disabled people knew that when the calculus was done to determine whose lives were worth saving, we would not be on the list. In employment, this amounts to the disabled being paid below minimum wage and not having opportunities to work at all.⁸

I want to be clear.

This is not a bourgeois-ification of Black Lives Matter in the wake of COVID-19. This is not some petty professor’s rebuke based on what she did or did not receive. What the novel coronavirus reveals is that disabled Black folks are not free. COVID-19 exacerbated long-standing issues for Black disabled folk. It killed us and is killing us in record numbers. This is the heft of intersectional feminism. This is me “[realizing] that the only people who care enough about us to work consistently for our liberation are us. Our politics evolve from a healthy love for ourselves, our sisters and our community which allows us to continue our struggle and work” (Combahee River Collective 264). Disabled Black folks do not have adequate housing, health-care, access to food, communities, and safety, among other resources. People’s reaction to COVID-19 revealed long-standing ableist attitudes and reliance on long-standing ableist structures. People who don’t want to follow the rules or be careful because it is their prerogative may be killing someone. People who are frustrated at this new reality ignore the fact that some of us have had to live like this for years. People who denigrate services online and who are in a rush to get things “back to normal” are in a rush to relegate us back to the margins.

I wish someone would have something to say about my strident affect. “What I have is anger,” in the words of Brittney Cooper. “Rage, actually. And that’s the place where more women should begin—with the things that make us angry” (2). My anger comes from the desire to protect and defend Black disabled people: our histories, our traditions, our rights, our lives. I am angry COVID-19 revealed and continues to reveal how much racism and ableism govern American life. I am angry Black folk were and are dying in record numbers because of the high levels

⁸ Here, I refer to the HR582 Raise the Wage Act 2019, which has not yet been passed. It was first introduced to the House of Representatives by Robert Scott (D-VA). The law would raise minimum wage to \$15.00 over a period of seven years. It also would preclude states from paying people with disabilities below minimum wage. Proponents of the law say it would result in economic self-sufficiency for people with disabilities. Opponents of the law say it would eliminate many jobs designated for the disabled altogether.

of co-morbidity in our communities and the limited resources we have to receive quality care and secure gainful employment. I am angry Black disabled folk were and are dying in record numbers. These facts were not met with a turn to Black disabled people for wisdom or insight. Instead, national coverage elides the virus's impact on Black folk and neglects to mention disability as a salient factor. This time disability was called by other names for the purpose of erasure. Had it not been, Black disabled epistemologies would be instructive for the current moment.⁹

As I have written elsewhere, Black women's anger, in this case Black disabled women's anger, is a generative, community-building affective enterprise: "Black women's anger carries with it the weight of discourses meant to dismiss, deny, and disappear it. Yet, this anger (and all accompanying emotional and affective charges) remains even in the refusal of it" (29). Even as others refuse to engage with Black disabled people's perspectives, my anger remains. Along with it, I gather a few final thoughts about what Black disabled epistemologies offer at a time when people are encountering the structures of ableism for the first time and when people (seemingly for the first time) are truly outraged about racism.¹⁰

First, Black disabled folks have a history of survival. Consider the pseudoscience concocted to control slave populations (i.e., *drapetomania* was the mental illness that made slaves run away and to cure it slaveholders were instructed to cut off body parts) or to justify Jim Crow legislation (i.e., Black people are too feeble-minded to vote; Black people are too diseased to live near). Black people were navigating disability as a discourse. You see, much like race is a social construct, so too is disability. During those eras, Black literature bears witness to the particular survival strategies Blacks used when disability was used against them: Harriet Jacobs's disability as a result of desiring freedom from the garret, Frederick Douglass's manipulation of others' belief in his stupidity in order to gain literacy, and James Weldon Johnson's manipulation of ableist rhetoric as tool for surviving anti-Blackness. Further, Black writers depict the lived experience of impairment as a complex lived experience as well as a critique of American capitalism and racism. William Attaway's *Blood on the Forge* (1941), Chester Himes's *Lonely Crusade* (1947), August Wilson's century cycle, Toni Morrison's entire corpus, Nalo Hopkinson's entire corpus, and Octavia E. Butler's entire corpus include the experiences of Black disabled folk and their tools of survival. These characters are not perfect representations of disability politics. These characters are not metaphors about disability. They are not sentimental representations. Instead, they pinpoint the complexity of how one survives while being both Black and disabled.

⁹ It is important to note that there have been significant Black disabled voices on social media including Imani Barbarin, Vilissa Thompson, Keah Brown, and Leroy Moore.

¹⁰ I highly encourage readers to examine the wealth of quality scholarship in Black Disability Studies.

Second, Black disability is a generative space. We create. We do not have to dig deep into Black history to think about the figures who altered the world while having a disability. This list is by no means exhaustive. Harriet Tubman. Stevie Wonder. Henry “Box” Brown. Lorraine Hansberry. Toni Braxton. Tionne “T-Boz” Watkins. Ramon Reed. Octavia E. Butler. Blind Lemon Jefferson. Audre Lorde. Venus Williams. The list goes on. We are so accustomed to remaining silent about disability, that we do not know the impact disability has had on Black culture. At times, this is because disability is called by other names like “the sugar” for diabetes or “touched” for someone who has cognitive impairment or mental health concerns. When this occurs, disability becomes so much a part of the landscape that the impairment itself and all that it shapes is rendered invisible. At other times, we do not know the impact of Black disability because disability remains ensconced in shame. Given the long history of associating Blackness with disability, Black folks (including some Black disabled folks) shun the association with disability and opt for stories about themselves that diminish or disregard disability as generative.

Third, Black disability is nimble. During the initial shelter-in-place orders, people were confused and upset about how they were going to live in quarantine. I will not go so far as to say that Black disabled people did not share these anxieties. However, I will point out that the crises of imagination around work and play assumed many so-called truths that are the purview of white people and the abled. For instance, some people could not figure out how to create community. Because Black disabled people often lack the resources to do many tasks on their own, they rely on community and the interdependence of people. It is a privilege to assume that you can do it all on your own. It is also a lie. But, that’s another matter. Since the communities we rely upon are often under-resourced, we find ways to get what we need. Here is the nimble-ness. We pivot because we have to. If we don’t, we don’t survive.

If we don’t, we don’t survive.

That is the lesson of the pandemic for me: We will survive because we have to. Black disabled people could not foresee the novel coronavirus. But, we could foresee the disregard for our lives, the way capitalist gain would trump public health, the lust for violence against the vulnerable, and the dismissal of our epistemologies.

But, still we know what we know.

Black disability has been here. Black disability is everywhere. We have a history. We have stories. We are legion.

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COVID-19 and Black Grief in the Academy

Elizabeth J. West

On April 22, 2020, more than a month into the state of Georgia's shelter-in-place decree, I found myself like most of my colleagues madly trying to bring a chaotic semester to its conclusion. In the throes of this madness I received from a white colleague an e-mail with the subject heading, "Good article." In his routine reading of the *NYT*, this rather optimistic, happy-go-lucky, save-the-planet, regent's professor kind of guy informed me, with a seeming tone of glee, that he had just encountered a stimulating article: "I read this really moving essay in today's *Times* and thought you might know the author— she works on Black women's spirituality and got her degrees at Emory." The article was an opinion piece by a prominent scholar from one of those name-dropping northeastern liberal arts colleges. My colleague thoughtfully embedded the article into the e-mail, saving me—one who does not have a subscription to the *Times*—the trouble of having to click on the link or log on for library access. As I perused the first lines of this article with reverberations of the tone of self-satisfaction that emanated from my colleague's words, I thought of Herman Melville's anti-heroes in his short stories, "Bartleby, the Scrivener" (1853) and "Benito Cereno" (1855). The narrator in "Bartleby" is a lawyer who confesses that he is an old man who, from his youth, "has been filled with a profound conviction that the easiest way of life is the best" (1103). He further explains that his discomfort with conflict is evident in the nature of his work, which entails "a snug business among rich men's bonds and mortgages and title-deeds" where all who knew him considered him an "eminently safe man" (1103). This narrator is no less dangerous than the more racially conscious but also cheerful Captain Delano of "Benito Cereno," whose sense of an ordered world is Black people remanded to their intended place as slaves in the manifest world of whiteness. He explains this to the distraught Cereno who has been traumatized by the slaying of his shipmates at the hands of the Black insurrectionists and then later by the brutal image of the leader, Babo, who has been executed and his body burned to ashes, with the exception of his head "fixed on a pole in the Plaza . . . [where it] met, unabashed, the gaze of the whites" (1183). To this horrifying and barbaric end, the optimistic Delano consoles Cereno with the assurance that "all is owing to Providence. . . . the past is passed . . . Forget it" (1182).

It is worth noting that Melville's works were not so widely read or acclaimed during his own life but were minted "American classic" at the turn of the 19th century into the 20th century with the invention of a field of study called "American Literature" in the discipline of English Literature. This transformation hints at the

grim and sinister heart of the academy. That the foundation of American literary greatness—the notion of its very Renaissance¹ even—rests in works that teach and celebrate the casualness at which whites may gaze the grief and suffering of others, especially Black others, reflects the very casualness with which too many white academics feel they can enter and exit Black spaces of pain for the satisfaction of a “good read.” While *Bartleby* is not Black, he is a silenced, impoverished other whose suffering serves only as a spectacle in the quiet and solitude of the lawyer’s insulated world of privilege and financial comfort. He has the privileged position of “studying” *Bartleby* and his unfortunate plight without having to feel any responsibility or obligation. Similarly, aboard the *San Dominick*, Captain Delano amuses himself with observations of the Black captives and how fitting he finds them for the role of slave. Reminiscent of Thomas Jefferson in Query 14 in *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Delano assumes the position of objective and authoritative gaze. This is no less the enslaving and colonizing gaze that lives in the academy to date. I have been reminded of this white informed proclivity as I witness scholars scurrying to figure out how their research might be enhanced through studies of this heightened moment of Black suffering issued in by COVID-19 and its economic impact, on the one hand, and the escalated numbers of images capturing injury and murder of Black people at the hands of police and white citizens on the other. It’s a wonderful time, it seems, to study Black grief. A recent and most horrifying example of this phenomenon is a call for papers entitled “‘Floyding’ Institutional Racism,” in *Intellectus, The African Journal of Philosophy*. Clearly an allusion to the gruesome murder of George Floyd at the hands of Minneapolis police, this call represents the kind of gearing up in the academy for gains that can be had at the expense of Black people. Academia seems to hold no reservations about making spectacle of and intellectual (and ultimately financial) capital from cruising the world of Black pain.

In the article my colleague forwarded (I deliberately choose not to provide the title of this article or name its author as I restrain from propagating the very gazing that I call out in this article), a Black woman professor from one of America’s elite northeastern liberal arts institutions recounts the logistical nightmare and sorrow of experiencing her mother’s death during the no travel, social distancing mandates of the COVID-19 fallout. As I read the first few lines and thought of my colleague’s enthusiasm at sharing this article, I was compelled to suspend my reading of the article, and though I in fact do know its author, I have not been able to return to it. The story she tells of a deeply ingrained set of systems that lead to the overwhelming health crisis afflicting Black people was all too familiar and, at

¹ Here, I refer to the era of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Herman Melville, and Walt Whitman, which is called the American Literary Renaissance.

the time of the article's publication, too fresh and too personal. I was in the midst of my own experience with a brother who, on Good Friday, had been placed on a ventilator (and remains intubated three months later as I write today) and with concerns about whether his immediate household members had been infected also. Like many families, I was also struggling with the loss of a family member and the realization that Zoom was the medium that would bring us together to celebrate and memorialize her life. I could go on with my own list of the kinds of experiences many people were and are enduring during this pandemic—experiences that are hitting Black families and communities in disproportionate numbers. But I am always cautious of casting my pearls before swine: the experience of sharing and exposing grief constitutes a sacred and intimate bond, and the academy is not interested in Black grief for its embodiment of humanness.

As we deal with this grief and the added personal and financial responsibilities that the virus and its fallout have caused, Black faculty, students, and staff continue to navigate an environment where the racism and racial hostility that we confront during “normal” times does not dissipate in the learning platforms of the virtual. I have found the COVID-19 moment an especially difficult one to navigate professionally. It is more challenging than usual to sustain and suppress the everyday frustrations of navigating Blackness in an anti-black world, of trying to exemplify for students a dignity in the work of Black scholarship when my colleagues and academia itself continue to bastardize the work except when choosing to co-op or gentrify it. And, again, most challenging is the need to contain my personal grief, struggles, and even joys during a moment in which there is an increased appetite for viewing Black life to reaffirm the “Providential” specialness of whiteness. I am perhaps at the precipice of that bitterness that whites historically find so distasteful in Blacks, the kind of bitterness that disturbed William Dean Howells as he read Charles Chesnutt's 1901 novel, *The Marrow of Tradition*. Howells, who had lavished praise upon Chesnutt for his conjure tales, did not find *The Marrow* to his liking. Although he could understand the history that informed the novel's look at America's racism, Howells nevertheless found the work too scathing. In his review of the novel, Howells wrote, “The book is, in fact, bitter, bitter. There is no reason in history why it should not be so, if wrong is to be repaid with hate, and yet it would be better if it was not so bitter” (qtd. in Farnsworth xv). Howells's disfavor with Chesnutt and his novel exemplify a historical propensity for white America not only to gaze Black grief but also to dictate its manifestation, particularly when it is triggered by white sanctioned terrorism. Chesnutt's novel is based on the real-life Wilmington race riot of 1898 in which white mobs sought out and killed Black people and destroyed Black businesses throughout Wilmington, North Carolina. Howells would have preferred that Chesnutt hide from public viewing the savagery of whites as they murdered Black people. Even worse for Howells was the novel's

reminder of the history of white male sexual violation of Black women and the concluding image of a white woman heiress on her knees before the Black husband of her illegitimate “mulatto” half-sister. Much is insinuated in this final scene, but clearly Howells found it an expression of hate that a Black man’s vision of revenge would be represented in the vision of a white woman on her knees before him.

This COVID-19 era has reminded me that in academia, Black people’s pain and grief may be of interest to white people but acceptable for viewing and/or publication only in the form that does not greatly disturb or disrupt white consciousness and white optimism. As I read my colleague’s ending wish, “I hope you’re doing ok,” I thought about a moment in an earlier semester in which I passed by his graduate seminar as I was walking down the hallway on the way to my office. I overheard a white student delivering a class presentation. He began this academic assignment with his confession that he had always been a racist, that he had been raised like this as a young child, and that this was the world he knew. It sounded like one of those AA confessions that you see fictionalized in movies, except his confession did not strike me as regretful. His tone seemed to suggest that he was relishing the moment of standing before a class that included Black students and being indulged as he exerted his white world view to an audience he could command through my colleague’s authority. Immediately after the class, my fears were confirmed by one of the students, a young Black man in his first semester of graduate classes (who I personally recruited) who entered my office expressing his outrage that this white supremacist had been awarded a platform to throw around the N-word at his leisure. This, of course, is not uncommon in classrooms at my institution, as I have had similar visits to my office from students sharing this kind of experience. The academy is a dangerous place for Black people, and if I had been at risk of being sucked into the world of white intellectualized empathy in the anno COVID-19 era, I was saved by my colleague’s e-mail early in the crisis. For that I am grateful as it reminds me that for the sake of my students—Black and White—I cannot be lured into or propagate “good reads” exchanges on Black grief as expressions of understanding or human connectedness. The academy has much work to do in reconciling its orchestration of and complicity in anti-black discourse and practices, and this must not be sugar coated with a continuation of reckless, uninformed, institutionalized gazing and studying of Black life.

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Surviving the Pandemic: Necessary Lessons from Morrison's *Beloved*
Angelyn Mitchell

"Won't You Celebrate with Me"

—Lucille Clifton

won't you celebrate with me
what i have shaped into
a kind of life? i had no model.
born in babylon
both nonwhite and woman
what did i see to be except myself?
i made it up
here on this bridge between
starshine and clay
my one hand holding tight
my other hand; come celebrate
with me that everyday
something has tried to kill me
and has failed.

From Phillis Wheatley's eighteenth-century historic witness to Jesmyn Ward's twenty first-century southern witness, the gifts of Black women writers are legion. One of their many gifts in their cultural productions is their unapologetic proclamation that Black lives do indeed matter. By centering Black life as vital, Black women writers also offer survival strategies because, as Lucille Clifton writes, "everyday / something has tried to kill [us] / and has failed" (25). Embedded in her poem of origins is a poetic of survival. Clifton's invitation to celebrate her survival may be read as generative as it posits joy as central to survival. This reminder is important, especially at this time; joy may be eschewed in the

grip of survival. Clifton's generous invitation to celebrate situates the Black self as capable of survival, which offers hope, and worthy of celebration, which invokes joy. The agency of both—survival and joy—is a daily choice, Clifton reminds. Reminding her reader that the celebration is as important as the survival, Clifton uses the word “celebrate” three times in this short poem. Clifton's poem, like much of Black women's writing, is just one of many examples of what Toni Morrison calls, in her Nobel lecture, the “life sustaining properties” of language: language that “arcs toward the places where meaning may lie” (20).

In our present moment of life-threatening events, Black women writers and their gifts of “life sustaining properties” seem especially essential. Our classrooms are both sites of threat (because they challenge the status quo) and sites of sustenance. Historically, it is in our classrooms, as well as in our scholarship, that critical discussions of race and its significance in American life occur—we've been doing what is currently popularly termed “anti-racism” work in teaching African American literary and cultural studies. Quite frankly, the COVID-19 pandemic has disproportionately ravaged Black and Brown communities in terms of all quality of life indices, including health, safety, education, employment, housing, and nutrition. Concomitantly, violently racist policing, especially its embrace of extralegal, state sanction executions, continue to terrorize Black and Brown communities. The intersection of these two clear and present dangers—one immediate, fueled by systemic inequities; the other systemic, demanding life-threatening protests—highlights how precarious Black life is in racialized America. The dialectical conversation between these two traumas situates Black life today as existing in both Saidiya Hartman's “afterlife of slavery” and Christina Sharpe's “the wake,” simultaneously.

As “subversive intellectuals,” to use Fred Moten and Stefano Harney's term, those of us who work in African American studies and return to our classrooms this fall might consider how Black women writers might help us navigate these twin crises (101). Their lessons of resilience, perseverance, and hope can guide us as these “something[s]” try to kill us” (Clifton, line 14). Unquestionably, there are many lessons of resilience, perseverance, and hope in the archive of African American literature, from Harriet Jacobs's “loophole of retreat” (114) to Jesmyn Ward's hurricane. And there is, of course, Toni Morrison, our most celebrated of writers, whose works, especially *Beloved* (1987), offer many sites of generative instruction for times like ours.

To my mind, Morrison's *Beloved* provides a unique opportunity to explore key examples of resilience, perseverance, and hope—all needed to advance possibilities for survival. At first glance, one might think surviving slavery is the lesson of *Beloved*, but Morrison expands our understanding of surviving horrific

experiences emanating from slavery in its aftermath by revealing how trauma is cyclic and generational. Moreover, Morrison posits survival as an agential matter—as not simply a choice, but as the possibility of choice, even in circumscribed circumstances. Two key scenes—Baby Suggs’s sermon in the Clearing and Denver’s choice to “go on out the yard” (244) to save herself and her mother—both occur long after slavery’s end, and both represent the gifts of resilience, perseverance, and hope born of their traumatic experiences in slavery. And both scenes provide important lessons for now.

In the Clearing, Baby Suggs preaches an ethic of self-love, a love that shields against what she considers slavery to be: the “nastiness of life” (23). Her message resonates in our present moment because it reminds us of what is within our control when all seems to be beyond our control. Baby Suggs extolls, “The only grace they could have was the grace they could imagine. That if they could not see it, they would not have it” (88). If grace is mercy, if grace is favor, if grace is love, depending upon one’s religious or spiritual orientation, it is undoubtedly what one can bequeath to one’s self, regardless of circumstance, condition, or context. In other words, this gift of love to one’s self is within one’s realm of possibility—even when little else is or seems to be. Moreover, this foundational lesson centers all three gifts—resilience, perseverance, and hope—as essential not only to surviving, but also to thriving. Building upon this foundational lesson, Morrison continues:

‘Here,’ she said, ‘in this here place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard. Yonder they do not love your flesh. They despise it. They don’t love your eyes; they’d just as soon pick em out. No more do they love the skin on your back. Yonder they flay it. And O my people they do not love your hands. Those they only use, tie, bind, chop off and leave empty [. . .] Touch others with them, pat them together, stroke them on your face ‘cause they don’t love that either. You got to love it, you! And no, they ain’t in love with your mouth. Yonder, out there, they will see it broken and break it again. [. . .] This is flesh I’m talking about here. Flesh that needs to be loved. Feet that need to rest and to dance; backs that need support; shoulders that need arms, strong arms I’m telling you. And O my people, out yonder, hear me, they do not love your neck unnoosed and straight. So love your neck; put a hand on it, grace it, stroke it and hold it up. And all your inside parts that they’d just as soon slop for hogs, you got to love them. The dark, dark liver—love it, love it, and the beat and beating heart, love that too. More than eyes or feet. More than lungs that have yet to draw free air. More than your life-holding womb and your life-giving private parts, hear me now, love your heart. For this is the prize.’ (88-89)

A full exegesis of this passage is beyond the scope of this paper, but I do want to highlight Morrison's intentionality in anatomizing Black bodies in this passage. Doing so allows her to recoup, reconstruct, and reclaim Black bodies in slavery as whole, as loved, as precious. Morrison also reminds her readers of the ultimate prize—self-love—a powerful counter she offers to the oppressive and maligning nature of white supremacy. This reminder is always important as the institutions of white supremacy—what is unnamed but known “out yonder”—seeks to denigrate Black subjectivities in every possible way, as sketched here by Morrison. Morrison's attention to the beauty of the Black body, to the commodification of the Black body, to the spirit within the Black body, to the economy of the Black body, to the tactility of loving the Black body, and to the totality of white supremacy's perversities and cruelties to both the Black body and the Black psyche provides a pedagogy of American slavery and history. It also provides an object lesson of Black resistance, born of resilience, perseverance, and hope, as Baby Suggs explains how each action will counter the traumas of slavery and white supremacy. Significantly, Baby Suggs begins and ends the sermon with affective modes of expression, reifying the power of body and spirit as a bulwark against the assaults of slavery and white supremacy. Resilience, perseverance, and hope are the essence of Baby Suggs's sermon in the Clearing, where readers may be renewed by her words.

The other scene from *Beloved* that is useful in thinking about the lessons of resilience, perseverance, and hope involves Denver, when it seems “past errors taking possession of the present” will destroy her mother (256). Fearful of the dangers within and outside, Denver is also afraid of the unknown if she seeks help. Morrison employs the ancestral voice of Baby Suggs to guide a panicked Denver in what is both a moment of traumatic repetition and of self-preservation. Morrison writes:

Remembering those conversations and her grandmother's last and final words, Denver stood on the porch in the sun and couldn't leave it. Her throat itched; her heart kicked—and then Baby Suggs laughed, clear as anything. “You mean I never told you nothing about Carolina? About your daddy? You don't remember nothing about how come I walk the way I do and about your mother's feet, not to speak of her back? I never told you all that? Is that why you can't walk down the steps? My Jesus my.” But you said there was no defense. “There ain't.” Then what do I do? “Know it, and go on out the yard. Go on.” (244)

Again, Morrison's attention to Black bodies and trauma through examples from Baby Suggs's life—her broken hip and Sethe's battered feet and back—and focalized through Baby Suggs's voice points to the brutality of white supremacy. But the lesson of resilience, perseverance, and hope is crucial to Denver's recovery.

Denver seeks help after relying on Baby Suggs's examples of resilience and perseverance. Baby Suggs urges Denver to leave her comfort zone where she is entombed in the past to seek the possibilities of the future in spite of her terrifying present. Turning to her community becomes a source of hope for Denver.

The lessons of resilience, perseverance, and hope may be all we can offer, but they are powerful, and they are sustaining. All are necessary pretexts for caring for ourselves and for our students. In this moment, we would do well to remember and to teach what Audre Lorde wrote: "Caring for myself is not self-indulgence. It is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare" (130). For Black folk, living through the terror of COVID-19 as well as state sanctioned violence and murder will indeed be an act of political warfare. But we do have powerful lessons from Black women writers to guide and to inspire.

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“come into the / black / and live”: Poetry and the Dream of Black Liberation

Shauna M. Morgan

the news

everything changes the old
songs click like light bulbs
going off the faces
of men dying scar the air
the moon becomes the mountain
who would have thought
who would believe
dead things could stumble back
and kill us¹

~Lucille Clifton

“The poetry sustains,” said Lucille Clifton in conversation with Sonia Sanchez at The New School in New York City during the first of the now well-known Cave Canem reading series (1070). During the reading, which occurred shortly after the attacks of September 11, 2001, Clifton, within a matter of ten minutes or so, read several poems that demonstrated the scope and range of her writing and engagement with era-shifting and history-making moments, whether they be personal or public. She began with a poem written about her sister, moved through poems that bore witness to racist violence against Black and indigenous people, and connected that reality to a continental Black struggle. Her short reading closed with new poems, as she noted, written after the tragedies of that moment. One opened a space that acknowledged that the collective trauma the nation felt was something not unfamiliar to Black folks in the United States. Worth quoting fully here, the poem “Friday nine fourteen” presents as analogous to the U.S. American crimes against Black and brown folks and the “villainy” of that moment in 2001:

¹ From Clifton’s *Good News about the Earth: New Poems*, Random House, 1972.

Some of us know
we have never felt safe
all of us
Americans weeping as some
have wept before
Is it treason to remember?
What have we done
to deserve such villainy?
Nothing
we reassure ourselves
Nothing.

The nuance here is not to be missed, however, as she further indicts the United States and questions its culpability. The line breaks in this short poem signal that there are multiple audiences and multiple speakers within the collective “we” of the poem. Indeed, as she begins, “Some of us know / we have never felt safe / all of us / Americans weeping as some / have wept before” (1045). A student of Sterling A. Brown and Owen Dodson, Clifton, in the vast body of her work, which is at once artful and instructive, has a poem for every day and every moment. In Toni Morrison’s foreword to *The Collected Poems of Lucille Clifton 1965-2000*, she noted that Clifton was most often praised for her “moving declarations of racial pride, courage, steadfastness [and] eloquent elegies for the vulnerable and the prematurely dead” (xxviii). However, she cautions us not to miss the “astute, profound intellect” and “the range and complexity of the emotions she forces us to confront” (xxx-xxxi).

Particularly in this moment, we must return to Clifton, reaching for not only the inspiring and loving words within, but seeking the insight that she offers through an imagination that calls us to participate in our own visioning of a future. Writing in a literary tradition that long declared the need for political art, Clifton remembers the experiences of people in the Diaspora and roots our liberation in the spirit of African identity as she declares “the news” of the time, offers the answers to our cries, and situates them within the realm of history and a past rooted in a Black radical tradition. Writing then, Clifton was even preparing

for the now, and she has left us a body of work to help us reflect and guide us to the life of freedom we have always desired—a life we must continue to imagine. It is this moment of creating, too, which sustains. Not only is the content of Clifton’s poetry sustaining but also the context to which it speaks and the revisioning and imagining that moment engenders. In her poem “after Kent State,” which opens the collection *Good News about the Earth*, we are warned about the unbridled possibility of white violence. The poem reads, “only to keep / his little fear / he kills his cities / and his trees / even his children oh / people / white ways are / the way of death / come into the / black / and live.” Referring to the May 4, 1970, massacre in Kent, Ohio, where student protestors were killed by the National Guard, the poem urges us to find and root ourselves in a Black consciousness that promises life. Indeed, in this time when we find ourselves declaring Black Lives Matter—a matter of fact that needed no such announcement in our own spaces—it is critical that we return to a poet who has witnessed and written about struggle and has dreamt of another way of being in the world.

In the preface to his book *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination*, Robin D.G. Kelley speaks of “alternate visions and dreams that inspire new generations to continue to struggle for change” (iv). Later, he emphasizes the need for imagination or what he calls “poetic knowledge,”² wherein “social movements do not simply produce statistics and narratives of oppression. Rather, the best ones do what great poetry always does: transport us to another place, compel us to relive horrors and, more importantly, enable us to imagine a new society” (9). Lucille Clifton has done all those things and more. The poetry, as Eleanor W. Traylor has said of Clifton and her peers (Mari Evans and Nikki Giovanni) whose works were honored at Howard University’s 2007 Heart’s Day event, “launched a groundswelling intervention in the reading and writing of poetry. That intervention directed an understanding of a poem as a contextual event in which cultural identity and cultural value are crucial markers of meaning” (3). These “crucial markers,” tools of Black freedom struggles, instruct us to remember ourselves outside and beyond U.S. America’s definition. Clifton’s poem “africa” reads, “home / oh / home / the soul of your / variety / all of my bones / remember” and calls us to remember that our sense of self and knowledge of freedom exist beyond the constraints of a white supremacist heteropatriarchal capitalist society (93). Clifton reminds us that mourning is necessary and important in times of struggle. Her elegy for Malcolm X resonates because we “will always mourn Malcolm” as Sister Sonia Sanchez has said, but also because we are regularly and intimately familiar with the sustained mourning of our murdered. The poem “malcolm” declares, “nobody mentioned war / but doors were closed / black women shaved their heads / black men rustled

² Kelley notes that he draws this concept from Aimé Césaire’s 1945 essay “Poetry and Knowledge.”

in the alleys like leaves / prophets were ambushed as they spoke / and from their holes black eagles flew / screaming through the streets” (100). The anxiety and despair we feel during the COVID-19 pandemic is but a fragment of the anguish we endure as Black folks in this land, and the urgency we feel sends us “screaming through the streets.” Clifton’s poetry is a sustaining force as we traverse this long and sinuous path to freedom, and she instructs us to gather knowledge, to acquaint ourselves with what has come before in thought and action. The poem, which begins, “i am accused of tending to the past / as if i made it, / as if i sculpted it / with my own hands. / i did not,” acknowledges that a complex legacy has been left for us. It continues, “this past was waiting for me when i came, / monstrous unnamed baby, / and i with my mother’s itch / took it to breast / and named it / History. / she is more human now, / learning language everyday, / remembering faces, names and dates. / when she is strong enough to travel / on her own / beware, she will” (327). Flowing with metaphors and symbols, the poem, at once, directs us to nurture ourselves boldly even as we claim, reshape, and nurture something we are bequeathed; it encourages us to make what we have produced—be it knowledge or action or some other necessary work—travel. Go beyond. This poem exemplifies the poetic knowledge of which Kelley speaks and echoes his reflections in *Freedom Dreams* (a dream “poised for action” also in the wake of September 11, 2001) where he asks, “What shall we build on the ashes of a nightmare?” and answers “now is the time to think like poets, to envision and make visible a new society, a peaceful, cooperative, loving world without poverty and oppression, limited only by our imaginations” (196). Clifton, in her 2008 collection *Voices*, offers us a possibility with the poem “the dead do dream” as the first stanza reads “scattered they dream of gathering / each perfect ash to each / so that where there was blindness / there is sight / and all the awkward bits / discarded” (662). Toni Morrison has said that Clifton is “comfortable and knowing about the dead” as evinced in this poem as it reminds us that our ancestors, the cloud of witnesses, can offer us a kind of sight. But Clifton’s poetry grounds us in the possibility of birth as well, and one could argue that, in the corpus of her work, the past, present, and future live at once, and we are reminded to be rooted to it to nurture it. Her poem “birth-day” tells us:

today we are possible.

the morning, green and laundry-sweet,
opens itself and we enter
blind and mewling.

everything waits for us:

the snow kingdom

sparkling and silent
in its glacial cap,

the cane fields
shining and sweet
in the sun-drenched south.

as the day arrives
with all its clumsy blessings

what we will become
waits in us like an ache.

Lucille Clifton’s poetry helps us to remember, reflect, and dream; and in that dreaming we must imagine the possibility of a future we can bring forth—a freedom we can birth—a child called liberation emerging after the pain and strife of this moment. Indeed, there is a sustenance in that future, and already we carry it—this art that lives in us like an ache.

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As the World Burns: “Checking In”
(An Annotated Letter to My Students with
Lessons from Octavia E. Butler)

Kendra R. Parker

It should not have been difficult for me to write to my spring 2020 students; we had already endured so much together. In January, I arrived to class red-faced, puffy-eyed, and barely on time—I had an encounter with an officer. In February, we caught whispers of a Black man murdered while jogging in Brunswick—a stone’s throw from Georgia Southern University’s three campuses. In March, we all felt the COVID-19 disruption of the semester, our lives, and the world. And, we were all still reeling from the October 2019 book burning and death of a Black male student-athlete. For five days, I tried to type them something. For five days, I was silent. For someone whose students frequently quip, “Dr. Parker you always got something to say,” such silence was palpable. But they deserved to hear from me. Five days after George Floyd’s murder, I e-mailed my students who, three weeks earlier, had completed my course. But there is so much my message did not say. And so, dear reader, I present to you my letter to them, accompanied by annotations and reflections on Octavia E. Butler’s work, whose wisdom infuses me daily.

From: Kendra R. Parker

To: ENGL 5590

Date: Saturday, May 30, 2020, 9:42 PM EST

Subject: As the world burns: Checking in

Hi, all:

I don’t have any words of wisdom or cherry-picked quotes from King, X, or Douglass. But after our semester together, where we have discussed so many topics that are underlying many of the things that we are seeing unfold in real time as I type, I didn’t feel right not reaching out to you just to say: take care of yourselves. It may look different for each of you, but however you do it please take care of yourselves. To my Black students in particular: whatever you’re feeling right now is absolutely valid. Don’t let anyone tell you any differently.

If you protest—and however you protest—be safe.

If you're angry about Ahmaud Arbery and George Floyd, you should also be angry about Breonna Taylor, Sean Reed, and Tony McDade. The latter three are a Black woman, a Black man, and a Black trans man also recently shot dead by police.

There are so many others. Too many names.

That's all I have folks.

Love and light.

Dr. Parker

"take care of yourselves."

Butler's *Kindred* (1979), a novel about a 26-year-old Black woman who time travels back-and-forth between her 20th-century American present and the 19th-century slavery past, emphasizes the importance of preparation. Each time Dana Franklin returns to her American present, she prepares for an inevitable return to the past, packing essentials: a comb and brush (114), sleeping pills (117), soap (114, 195), aspirin (114), antiseptic (195), Excedrin (195), pocketknife, toothpaste (114, 195), and clothing (114, 195). While Dana is unsure of when she will return to slavery's embrace, she knows she *will* return, and she prepares in advance to care for herself. Like Dana, I want you to anticipate the challenges ahead and equip yourself with tools necessary for your survival and wellness. Identify what you need. (Is it a therapist? To take your medication? To get a daily dose of sunshine? To complete deep breathing exercises?) And then figure out how to access it. I encourage you to use your campus' student wellness centers and mental health professionals, and I offer you three apps you can access from your smartphone or tablet: *Therapy for Black Girls*, *The Safe Place*, and *Pride Counseling*.

Prioritize and normalize your mental and physical health.

"To my Black students in particular..."

There were only three white students enrolled in my class. I wrote the e-mail for my Black students, but I decided to include my white students because I wanted to remind them that if they were not paying attention, their Black peers and Black professor did not have that luxury. I added "to my Black students in particular," because Black people are conditioned to perform strength, perpetuating the myth of unshakeability. I wanted them to give themselves permission to *feel*.

"If you protest—and however you protest—"

Many chose to take to the streets. Did you?

Don't answer that. Your activism will not look like everyone else's.

Ignore those who say your activism must be public and that you must take to the streets. First, it is an ableist assumption. Second, we are in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, and you may be (or live with someone who is) immunocompromised. Or, maybe you're scared of getting shot by rubber bullets or doused with tear gas—or worse. Heather Heyer, Summer Taylor, and Garrett Foster died while protesting.

Your activism does not need to be public to be powerful.

The 1955-1956 Montgomery bus boycott was set to begin four days after Rosa Parks was arrested for refusing to move from her seat on Thursday, December 1, 1955. This meant that “[b]etween Friday and Monday morning, organizers had to get the word out to tens of thousands of people” (Tufekci 63). Alabama State College English professor Jo Ann Robinson and two of her students used a mimeograph machine at the college to produce 52,000 leaflets. The leaflets, which announced the boycott, were completed overnight (Tufekci 63). However, they needed to be distributed. But how? Zeynep Tufekci notes,

Without the digital tools we take for granted today, without even universal home telephones, distributing the leaflets required using a substantial number of previously existing organizations. In all, there were sixty-eight African American organizations in Montgomery . . . Within one day, practically every African American home had a copy of the leaflet. (63-64)

Tufekci's observation highlights the importance of individual and grassroots organizing to galvanize movements prior to the advent of digital tools. Similarly, Georgia Gilmore organized Black women cooks, maids, and service professionals with “The Club from Nowhere,” “an underground network” of Black domestic workers who sold food to help raise money for the bus boycott organizers (Nadasen 29). The money from the food sales was used to provide alternative modes of transportation for Black people who relied on the Montgomery bus system but chose to boycott (Robnett 64-65, Godoy). These Black domestic workers “were service workers with a particular set of skills that could be utilized for political mobilization” (Nadasen 31). Though Robinson and Gilmore's contributions are not typically at the forefront of recollections and discussions about 1960s liberation movements, what's clear is this: without such behind the scenes work, there is no movement.

Gilmore, Robinson, and others used their talents and resources to participate in liberation and justice movements. What talents, resources, and passions do you have that can be used for political mobilization?

You have your own part to play.

Your activism may not look like everyone else’s.

But get in where you fit in.

And let’s get to work.

“You should also be angry about...”

The semester’s theme was freedom, and we read eight Black autobiographical texts that were published between 1845 and 2019, exploring liberation’s intersections with genders, disability, weight, enslavement, sexuality, violence, fashion—and more. As I closed my e-mail, I wanted to reinforce our semester long journey by calling attention to the lack of attention surrounding Breonna Taylor and Tony McDade’s murders. In naming them, I hoped to remind my students of an important point: that #BlackLivesMatter as a rallying cry all-too-often has a cisheteropatriarchal¹ focus—one we must resist.

Our collective liberation depends on our willingness to live in community and work with, advocate for, and demand the liberation of the most disenfranchised. Butler once explained, “[I]t is a writer’s duty to write about human differences, all human differences, and help make them acceptable” (Harrison 6), citing her own life experiences, which taught her to create communities regardless of differences. Butler shared: “I always automatically create community. This has to do with the way I’ve lived [. . .] I’m used to living in areas where there’s real community [. . .] So, I’ve always lived in clusters of people who found ways of getting along together even if they didn’t much like each other, which was often the case” (Mehaffy and Keating 60-61).

In *Kindred*, solidarity between Dana and Alice (her 19th-century doppelganger) is presented as “conflicted, ambiguous, even aggressive” (Levecq 41). Dana finds herself at odds with Alice, a newly enslaved Black woman, but they find ways of coexisting. Dana observes that “elsewhere, under other circumstances, I would probably have disliked [Alice],” but she puts those feelings aside because “[they] had a common enemy to unite [them]” (Butler 236). They learned to respect each other, and when possible, worked to alleviate the harm the other experienced. They worked to ensure the other’s survival. This lifestyle of respect, co-existence, and working together toward a singular cause is necessary, and it asks you to disrupt your comfort and live with, commune with, and advocate with oppressed people.

¹ “Cisheteropatriarchy” is a system of power that affirms and benefits cisgender, heterosexual men at the exclusion, oppression, and exploitation of women and LGBTQIA+ individuals.

Like Dana and Alice, you must learn to coexist, not for the sake of coexistence but for the sake of communal survival, wellness, and liberation. Such goals cannot be realized if you view Black disabled, queer, transgender, same-gender loving, gender non-conforming, and nonbinary people as undeserving of humanity, love, and justice. Your righteous discontent and profession of #BlackLivesMatter must not come at the expense, disparagement, and victimization of multiply marginalized Black people, especially those whose lived experiences do not check the cisheterosexist boxes of respectability.

“There are so many others. Too many names.”

I was thinking about Black victims of police violence outside of the U.S. like Cláudia Silva Ferreira and Flávio Ferreira Sant’Ana² and about militarized police violence more broadly. *Kindred* reminds us of the importance and necessity of linking global movements for liberation. On one of her returns to the present, Dana

turned on the radio and found a news station—tuned in right in the middle of a story about the war in Lebanon [. . .] The news switched to a story about South Africa—blacks rioting and dying wholesale in battles with police over the policies of the white supremacist government. I turned off the radio and tried to cook in . . . peace. South African whites had always struck me as people who would have been happier living in the nineteenth century, or the eighteenth. In fact, they were living in the past as far as their race relations went. They lived in ease and comfort supported by huge numbers of blacks whom they kept in poverty and held in contempt. (Butler 196)

Butler’s juxtaposition of the Lebanese Civil War and South African apartheid against Dana’s recent experiences and reflections on 19th-century American enslavement functions as a clarion call for us to build well-organized freedom movements. For me, to think about the “[South African] blacks rioting and dying wholesale in battles with police” (196) is not only to think about American Black people defending themselves against the militarized-police occupations of Ferguson or Minneapolis but also around the world. Butler’s blending of Dana’s past/present, reminds me of Angela Y. Davis’s words:

² My own awareness of these murders in Brazil came from Reighan Gilliam’s article, “‘Do I Look Suspicious?’ Digital Acts in Response to Police Violence Against Afro-Brazilians,” *CLA Journal*, vol. 58, no. 4, 2015, pp. 286-302.

Just as we say "never again" with respect to the fascism that produced the Holocaust, we should also say "never again" with respect to apartheid in South Africa, and in the southern US. That means, first and foremost, that we will have to expand and deepen our solidarity with the people of Palestine. People of all genders and sexualities. People inside and outside prison walls, inside and outside the apartheid wall. (60)

In the spirit of Davis and Butler, I invite you to think about coalition building. Know that your liberation here means little if the collective liberation of oppressed people globally is not realized.

"Love and light"

I have long been known to close my e-mail correspondence with "All the best," and recently, I have switched to "Cheers." Neither seemed appropriate.

Love, a "strong affection for another arising out of kinship or personal ties," encapsulated the kinship we formed throughout the semester—a result of the Black Life Writing we read and the autoethnographies we wrote instead of traditional researched essays. Light, as a verb, means "to ignite," and as a noun, it can mean "expression in someone's eyes indicating a particular emotion or mood," usually as insight or revelation. I hoped my e-mail was a light in both senses of the word.

Only one student immediately responded to my message; some took days, some took weeks, and some, I imagine, are wrestling with the weight of the world and my words.

But each reply affirmed the love and light I hoped to transmit.

Though I did not have the words then, I seem to have found some now.

This has been my letter to you, dear reader.

Love and light.

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Views from the Bricks: Notes on Reading and Protest

David F. Green Jr.

In reflecting on the African American protest tradition and the outsized role of storytelling as one of its most profound tools for reasoning through social unrest and social injustice, I believe our ability to understand Hip Hop music's complicated messaging will be essential to examining critical responses to legal and social victimization. For me, Hip Hop remains vital to discussions of the African American protest tradition and to the critical work of reflection, healing, and organizing. The recent rise of Hip Hop songs, such as Kendrick Lamar's "We Gon Be Alright," as popular protest songs are testament to Hip Hop music's function with the lives of marginalized people (Limpong). Moreover, Hip Hop artists' skillful manipulation of multimedia resources across several digital and print platforms represents a bridge between tradition and social change. The podcasts, music videos, film clips, memoirs, interviews, and even tweets from these artists represent textual compositions that move seamlessly across genres, reading communities, and institutions. Thus, Hip Hop protest songs produce a type of literature designed for careful rereading, yet the processes of reading and method provide new and rich entanglements between texts, authors, genres, and platforms.

I am reminded here of Todd Boyd's measured observation in *Am I Black Enough for You?: Popular Culture from the Hood and Beyond* that "rap can be used to analyze the mutually illuminating yet divergent categories of race, class, and gender in African American society. [Because] [m]ore often than not, questions of race dominate both popular and critical discussions about rap music" (39). Yet, rap and its broader cultural practice of Hip Hop music remain largely on the outskirts of cultural, literary, and rhetorical studies—a side dish often served up alongside the main course. I often wonder: what can Hip Hop's visual and verbal compositions provide our understanding of racism, police brutality, or youth cultural activism? Although Hip Hop-based education and Hip Hop scholarship continue to increase and grow, Hip Hop's role within African American Literature, for example, demands a change in approach to its conception and relevance (Jennings and Petchauer 220). In their essay "Teaching in the Mix: Turntablism, DJ Aesthetics and African American Literature," Kyesha Jennings and Emery Petchauer make an intriguing case for reimagining how conversations between older and newer Black writers can occur. For them, the DJ's approach of simply introducing new songs thematically or sonically linked to earlier songs of different genres models a type of skillful reimagining of African American literature as discussion occurring across time and taste (221-222). This method is called a "drop," literally the

dropping in of a new song on top of the previous, which symbolizes the creative ways DJs use reading and research to bring together texts that share unrecognized commonalities. What might we gain from rethinking the juxtaposition of Hip Hop music and older literary texts within the African American writing tradition as a series of synchronous and asynchronous conversations occurring across time?

Ralph Ellison's response to writer Irving Howe's essay, "Black Boys and Native Sons," is instructive here (Gates and McKay 1361). While I will not go into the substance of Howe's criticism or Ellison's rebuttal, paraphrasing Ellison's distinction between ancestors and relatives adds to this discussion of Hip Hop and the African American literary tradition. As Ellison explains, Black writers *do not* choose their relatives—those associated with them because of ethnic and discursive commonalities—but they *do* choose their ancestors—those who shape their thinking, voice, and dispositions (1361). My question then becomes, what writers might we consider ancestors and what writers might we consider relatives? I asked this question as I rewatched some of the more spirited protest performances presented at the 2020 BET Awards and songs released in response to Derek Chauvin's murder of George Floyd. What conversations or strategizing might erupt from placing James Baldwin's essay "Notes of a Native Son" in conversation with rapper Da Baby's remixed performance of "Rockstar" at the 2020 BET Awards? How might readers benefit from a complex discussion of Hip Hop R&B artist H.E.R.'s "I Can't Breathe" in relation to Audre Lorde's "A Litany for Survival"?

These multimedia Hip Hop compositions come to represent a type of mobile Black literature that is both symbolic and explicit in its criticisms of the state-sanctioned police violence and the repression of Black voices and identities. H.E.R.'s "I Can't Breathe" video represents an obvious homage to the *suppressed* voices of Eric Garner and George Floyd, who both uttered the tragic phrase prior to their murders at the hands of police officers, in 2014 and 2020 respectively. The impassioned song serves in many ways as a call-to-reflection and a call-to-arms. H.E.R. uses slow methodical drumming to highlight the unstated tension bubbling throughout the song. The video is peppered with clips of modern protesters marching at various sites and under varying conditions. The names of Black victims are shown throughout the video slowly filling up the screen.

In many ways, the slow pace of the song, the impassioned chorus, and the crafted spoken word poetry for the third verse of the song all capture and mimic the painful witnessing of George Floyd's protracted death that viewers of the recorded scene and live witnesses had to bear (I must take time to say her name, Darnella Frazier, the young woman who recorded Floyd's last moments and played a crucial role to our bearing witness to his unjust death). I am reminded of Karla Holloway's discussion of the complex intermingling of law and literature

in understanding both Black life and the white supremacy guiding many of the more arcane legal practices of the U.S. in her work *Legal Fictions: Constituting Race, Composing Literature*. Holloway notes, “If law can make a man, it can unmake them. Not unlike a critically ungendered (but fully sexualized) reading of Frederick Douglass’s struggle with his slave master Covey, legal boundedness is always a storied and contestatory struggle with the potential of the fully human” (53-54). As she goes on to express later in the book, Black bodies provide a contradiction of sorts to the American legal system, a reminder of the illegality of its historic actions toward Black people and its persistent struggle to address the legacies of promoting a people as property and evidence (77-79). This is embedded in the ways the legal system fails to effectively judge the differences between inhumane treatment and the protection of property. These contradictions abound and maintain a tenuous and painful relationship that is both instructive and devastating. Protest songs such as H.E.R.’s “I Can’t Breathe” capture the struggle of negotiating a contingent humanity within a deadly, racialized policing system, and they press us to rethink our collective beliefs about “order” and “institutions.”

Visually, the complex pairing of critical lyrics with stimulating visuals adds another dimension to contemporary social protest compositions. The rapper DaBaby’s remixed performance of his song “Rockstar” as well as Anderson Paak’s recorded performance of his single “Lockdown” for the 2020 BET Awards both stop to reimagine and articulate—through simulated violence—the kind of “contestatory struggle” (Holloway 53-54) over one’s humanity that appears in much of African American literature. While I appreciate what such performances by these two “mainstream” artists suggest about the direction of Hip Hop protest writings, I think what scholars of Hip Hop might provide for many of our angry and hurting communities is a way of processing these complex verbal, visual, and sonic elements. This dynamic manifests itself within Hip Hop music prior to these artists’ performances. For example, Pharoahe Monch’s intriguing short film “Clap (One Day)” represents the kind of politically charged compositions that anticipate the digitally circulated deaths of Black persons at the hand of police officers.¹ “Clap” begins with a white plainclothes police officer asking a Black informant about the whereabouts of a suspected criminal. Under duress, the informant provides the officer with the address of the unnamed suspect’s family and would repeat for viewers the apartment number of 1D, shown visually in the plainclothes officer’s notebook. A team of police officers dressed in riot gear and black wool face masks are then shown aggressively approaching apartment 1B (in obvious error),

¹ The song appears on Monch’s W.A.R album (*We Are Renegades*), which was released in March of 2011 to much critical acclaim. The short film is directed by Terence Nance and written by Nance and Kevin Nelson.

the home of a Black mother and her young son, shown readying themselves for their day. Next the mother is forcefully pulled from the apartment and silenced with a hand over her mouth as the officers search the apartment, and the young son is shown with headphones on entering the bathroom. Seconds later, the son is shot dead by an unnamed Black officer played by actor Gbenga Akinnagbe. The horrified officer is haunted by this tragic mistake throughout the rest of the film, and in a state of extreme guilt, he begins to see a silent Black audience of mourners applauding his mistake everywhere that he turns. The film reaches its climax when the unnamed officer experiences a psychotic break in a local cemetery and is himself shot, while wearing civilian attire, by another unnamed Black officer in uniform.

In the Black signifying tradition, the “clapback” functions as a derisive response to an unwarranted provocation. A speaker, attacked verbally, uses wit and clever timing to respond with equal or greater derision than their adversary’s initial insult. However, the clapback moves beyond the realm of the dozens and signifying, as its redress to a perceived slight, especially racially tinged slight, bypasses any consideration of playfulness unique to signifying and exerts a type of linguistic force on its target. Monch’s reference to this verbal practice takes on greater symbolic meaning, as the clapback has also become a reference for individuals returning to fire to an assailant shooting at them (“I had to clapback at those fools shooting at us”). Cleverly, Monch adds another layer to this term, suggesting that a clapback can also be a type of witnessing that both shames and questions those who participate in procedural police violence. I come back to Monch’s video in part because it highlights the possibilities of Hip Hop music in challenging viewers and readers to rethink how particular artists participate in Black rhetorical and literary protest traditions. Keith Gilyard and Adam J. Banks illustrate the numerous ways African American writers such as Monch, H.E.R., and DaBaby have strategically employed tropes, symbols, and coded language to reframe for readers and listeners the numerous perspectives that inform the collective dispositions of Black people (5). As they also note, these writings often present a narrative quest for freedom that has been instructive and enduring.

I won’t pretend that any analysis alone will significantly change the way police brutality or anti-black racism is discussed. Yet, the sweeping views of each video illustrate the need for further discussion of these texts by language and culture scholars. To develop an integrative view of Hip Hop within the Black Protest tradition requires a vivid reimagining of that tradition for an audience that moves seamlessly between tweets, podcasts, film clips, and reading selections. English and Cultural Studies curriculums have always remained sensitive to the value of historical events and influential social movements. The next phase of inquiry should include interrogation of the multimodal presentations of texts that speak

to the broad emancipatory interests of Black and marginalized people. To blend such work into conversations about past writing and writers presses the tradition forward in ways that mimic the fluid movement between rupture and flow that Hip Hop DJs use to work their magic on the 1s and 2s. Moreover, such an approach asks readers, critics, and scholars alike to begin to expand the ways Black writers are discussed, presented, heard, read, and reconsidered. If African American protest literature arises out of a need to respond to varying unjust social phenomena, then it is never absent of emotion or politics, and it is always a reflection of our collective beliefs about a people's humanity and their evolving understanding of what freedom should look like.

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We are our own monuments, and we can be theirs, too

Beauty Bragg

“We build our temples for tomorrow, strong as we know how,
and we stand on top of the mountain, free within ourselves.”

~Langston Hughes, “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain”

For my people standing staring trying to fashion a better way
from confusion, from hypocrisy and misunderstanding,
trying to fashion a world that will hold all the people,
all the faces, all the Adams and Eves and their countless generations;

Let a new earth rise. Let another world be born.

~Margaret Walker, “For My People”

These two quotations sprang to mind for me as I contemplated the implications of COVID-19 racial unrest and transformation because the quotes speak to some of my own varying responses to the events of spring and early summer 2020. Hughes and Walker implicitly address issues of Black self-conception, Black imagination, and the historical function of Black music, each of which is a thread in my consideration of the immediate future. The conclusions I draw reflect a synthesis of many aspects of my experience. I have engaged in much therapeutic talk with friends, most of whom are black academics. I have responded to queries from former students about what I make of all of this. I have listened to the points of view of my young neighbors ranging from fifteen to twenty-seven, who are mostly processing the legacy of race in this nation in a serious way for the first time. I have tried to provide counsel and guidance to my own two young adult children, who are trying to figure out what their role in these events and society in general should be. Like Hughes and Walker, I think that at the heart of any strategy for transformation must be a recognition of our own cultural authority.

Just briefly, I want to turn to an instructive example, embodied in Nas’s commemorative performance of his 1994 debut album, *Illmatic*, with the National Symphony Orchestra at the Kennedy Center in 2014. The possibility of such a performance reflects the work that went into shifting a national discourse away from attacks on rap and other aspects of hip-hop culture in the late twentieth century to opening the possibility for its public celebration as a national art form in

the second decade of the twenty-first century. It is the result of the collective work of black artists and intellectuals, which insisted on the right to define the political and aesthetic value of the form. As an encapsulation of the question of whether symbols matter—a question also addressed in the present call for the removal of racist monuments—such a moment should remind and assure us that our work matters and invite even more generations to join the tradition of collaborative black inquiry that has surely, if more desultorily than we would like, brought us to this moment of reckoning.

Our efforts have not been in vain. The impact of our deconstructions of systemic racism can be measured both in the number of people of all races and ethnicities who took to the streets, globally, in the summer of 2020, and in the efforts of some to discredit public conversations meant to help us consider the complexity of what we face as a society trying to move away from the framework that has recently defined national efforts to resolve the race problem. Here, I am thinking, for example, of the rancor with which the “1619 project” has been met. For many, the “controversy” of this project is almost unfathomable since the evidence that every sphere of American public life has consciously excluded black people in their natal periods is abundant and multi-dimensional. However, the project’s detractors’ objections make perfect sense when viewed from the perspective of Karen Ferguson’s *Top Down: The Ford Foundation, Black Power, and the Reinvention of Racial Liberalism* (2013), wherein she argues that the liberal vision shaping late-twentieth-century racial resolutions was rooted in a development model that paralleled U.S. approaches to foreign policy in the recently decolonized third world. The approaches emerging from this vision, she suggests, were oriented toward building racial consensus “through the diversification of the American establishment” rather than focus on “collective action and group-based solutions,” which the black power movement sought in order to “transform the United States according to their redistributive social-democratic vision” (10). The 1619 project and the work that many of us have been doing in the classroom to identify the specific mechanisms by which black citizenship has been circumscribed, of course, points toward transformation rather than integration by exposing the rotten foundations of our national edifice.

Of course, in addition to revelation, we also need imagination. The black literary tradition from Olaudah Equiano’s *Interesting Narrative* (1789) to works of the present is filled with examples of artists imagining what would be required to shape a world in which we existed whole and equitably. Equiano saw that the needful thing in his particular social era was that those with dominion recognize him as human. Looking back at slavery and imagining possible grounds for a transformation of racial symmetries, Sherley Anne Williams, in *Dessa Rose* (1986),

points to the need for white people to move beyond recognition of black humanity and embrace our interdependence. In *Meridian* (1976), Alice Walker looks back at the Civil Rights Movement and points to the need for white allies to confront their own self-image as an obstacle to alliance. In works like *Parable of the Sower* (1993) and *Fledgling* (2005), Octavia E. Butler challenges us all to imagine black women in particular as capable of wielding social authority. We must keep these and other acts of imagination in mind as we try to formulate strategies that move us toward equity. The examples Butler provides prompt us to commit to seeking the voices of the least of these among black people to identify and activate their heretofore overlooked capacities. As black women have previously pushed us toward a recognition of black intersectionality, so too will the voices of, say, women who do not typically get counted as women or bodies that don't conform to common notions of capability. Treva B. Lindsey makes the stakes clear in her analysis of an earlier moment of state crises, the Ferguson occupation. She reminds that "[t]he push toward being more inclusive in our documentation and our activism surrounding anti-Black state violence opens up a dynamic space in which we can intentionally and collectively make visible and legible all victims of state and state-sanctioned violence" (Lindsey 237).

We must keep faith with our forebears and continue to make our claim to a place in the civic life of the nation. This is presented less as an act of faith in the institutions than it is an expression of a sense of historical entitlement. I believe in the claim Bailey Wyatt, a newly-freed man, asserts in response to being pushed off the Virginia land he had been occupying:

... we has a right to the land where we are located. Why? I'll tell you. Our wives, our children, our husbands, has been sold over and over again to purchase the lands we now locates upon. For that reason, we have a divine right to the land. And then didn't we clear the lands and raise the crops of corn and of cotton and of tobacco and of rice and of sugar and of everything? And then didn't them large cities in the North grow up on the cotton and the sugars and the rice that we made? (qtd. in Blight)

At the same time, we must offer vigorous critique of capitalism since it is that system's elaboration, largely through slavery, that has bequeathed to us a set of governmental and social systems inherently hostile to black people. Examining a concept like racial capitalism, for instance, can help us to better understand how to approach the various systemic problems we face. A recent interview with historian Robin D.G. Kelley, provides one example. He asks us to rethink the function of the police from the perspective of racial capitalism (a concept he attributes to Cedric Robinson). Kelley notes, "The police were designed to protect property going back to, not just the slave patrols, but even the system of jails in cities in the 19th

century... So, when you think about the whole system of policing, it's organized around property... [C]apital needs a police force that could terrify people" (Scahill and Kelley).

Armed with more nuanced understandings of the negative impacts of current practices and new visions of the future we can work to extend the collective enterprise that has brought us to this unique moment in history. We maintain the hope that our contributions will be recognized, but that recognition may not take the usual public forms of statuary, plazas, and holidays. In fact, our actions may constitute the recognition. Consider Erykah Badu's "A.D. 2000" from the album *Mama's Gun*, which critiques the notion of "monumentalization" as it is practiced in U.S. public institutions. In a song characterized by spare guitar licks and even sparer lyrics, the vocals proclaim: "they won't be naming no buildings after me / to go down dilapidated / my name to be misstated" (Badu), thus suggesting the limits of the kind of memorialization typically practiced in the public domain. However, I don't think the song rejects the notion of historicization. The very title indicates the concept of historical location and marks an epoch. The work of Katherine Clay Bassard and Susan Willis¹ reminds us that this mode of theorization is typical of Black musical production that has always been concerned with the production of group memory, group values, and group aesthetics. In this way, Black people are constantly memorializing, re-membling, and reconstructing ourselves and our ancestral legacies, as the epigraphs to this essay indicate.

Our self-love, enacted in the halls of academia (white or black), is a powerful challenge to the national discourses that have erased or minimized black achievement and contributions to anything that the mainstream of this nation celebrates about itself: bravery, iconoclasm, and innovation spring most readily to mind. Many of us are, in our professional roles, our students' (and often our peers') first encounter with embodied blackness in the educational sphere. The dissonance of our presence alone can be provocative, but the potential expands exponentially when we consciously model our own self-regard. It can prompt them to question the representations of blackness that they have encountered; it can provoke a recognition of the erasure of black excellence; and in the best cases, it can lead to their recognition of the power and significance of symbols and narrative. When we as self-loving black teachers, mentors, scholars, and commentators model our authority and its bases in our communal experiences as well as the scholarship we have absorbed, we enable our students—black and white—to imagine and expect new models. Each of us who is present here, categorically, stands as testament to black vitality and the state's failure to conquer us.

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Black Books and Dead Black Bodies: Twitter, Hashtags, and Antiracist Reading Lists

Kenton Rambsy and Howard Rambsy II

In 2000, Janifer P. Wilson started Sisters Uptown Bookstore in Harlem, New York. For two decades, she struggled to turn a profit selling books, and so Wilson worked a different full-time job to keep her bookstore afloat. But her fortunes greatly improved during the summer of 2020, as conversations and sympathy concerning violence against black people prompted unprecedented sales of black books at black-owned booksellers. Wilson welcomed the uptick in profit yet was conflicted about the circumstances: “to have our business surge in a matter of weeks as the result of an unfortunate incident with a man losing his life and the whole world getting to see it has just impacted my spirit and soul” (de León et. al). Like many people, Linda Duggins, Senior Director of Publicity at Grand Central Publishing, thought that it was “awesome” that conversations related to Black Lives Matter led to unprecedented support for books by African Americans and black-owned bookstores. However, she too had reservations. “It does sadden me,” she noted, “to know that the push for the sales is connected to that stacking of dead Black bodies” (de León et. al).

As life-long participants in and students of black culture, we are aware of the longstanding interest in successful black books expressed by African American literary scholars and general readers. The remarkable feats in sales and media attention African American booksellers and books about racism and white privilege achieved in June 2020 indicate that significant news coverage about brutalities committed against black people can substantially drive the interests of reader-consumers. This situation is made evident in the available data and reporting on book publishing. The relative lack of attention for African American novels and volumes of poetry suggests that these genres matter less for consumers in dire moments, at least in comparison to what is categorized as “antiracist” nonfiction. Our observations reveal that those of us who study and teach African American literature should do more to discuss the relationship between successful black books and dead black bodies.

Not long after George Floyd was killed on May 25, protestors took to the streets. Activist groups removed or altered Confederate statues. Employees prompted their employers to release public statements supporting Black Lives Matter. And, notably, people published and circulated antiracist reading lists. The lists were especially designed for apparent white audiences or other groups that presumably

overlooked the histories of black struggle and white supremacy. Journalists, scholars, librarians, and others offered roundups of titles that addressed systemic racism, and sympathetic readers responded by ordering those book recommendations—in some cases tens of thousands of select works.

Our long-standing interest in the implications of data concerning black cultural products led us to consider the convergence of protests and books sales. We focused on bestselling books supplied by NPD BookScan and presented in *Publisher's Weekly*. During the month of May, virtually no book on the top ten bestseller list dealt directly with antiracist topics or subjects, though Michelle Obama's autobiography *Becoming* remained on the list. In the first week of June, however, a discernible shift took place. *So You Want to Talk about Race* (2018) by Ijeoma Oluo entered the bestseller list at number 2 with 35,859 sales for the week, and *White Fragility: Why It's So Hard for White People to Talk about Racism* (2018) by Robin DiAngelo was ranked number 3 with 30,221 sales. The next week, Oluo's and DiAngelo's books remained on the top ten bestsellers list and were joined by Ibram X. Kendi with *Stamped from the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America* (2016) at the #5 spot and *How to Be an Antiracist* (2019) at the #7 spot with sales at 37,862 and 26,755, respectively.

Between May 25, when Floyd was killed, and July 3, the last date for which we collected book data, DiAngelo's *White Fragility* sold 408,401 copies; Kendi's *How to Be an Antiracist* sold 308,309; and Oluo's sold 185,850. Put another way, those three books, along with Kendi's *Stamped from the Beginning*, sold more than 1 million copies in June. Those are extraordinary figures for books that address racism and white privilege. The publication and social media circulation of numerous antiracist reading lists were part of the reason these books emerged on the bestseller lists. Antiracist reading lists are nothing new, but the profusion of those lists after a brutal killing unquestionably heightened reader-consumer interest in the topics.

Less than two weeks after Floyd was killed, dozens of publications, including *The Guardian*, *The New York Times*, *TIME*, and *Vogue* to name only a few, released antiracist reading lists. Nonfiction titles pervaded the book roundups. In addition to works by Kendi, DiAngelo, and Oluo, the lists frequently included Michelle Alexander's *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (2010), Bryan Stevenson's *Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption* (2014), Ta-Nehisi Coates's *Between the World and Me* (2015), and Layla F. Saad's *Me and White Supremacy: Combat Racism, Change the World, and Become a Good Ancestor* (2020). Numerous public libraries published lists of books and educational resources concerning racism and social justice on their websites. The phrase "antiracist reading list" appeared only sporadically prior to June 2020, at which point the term became linked to Floyd and the subsequent protests.

Each year since 2015, more than two hundred black people were killed in encounters with police officers. Hardly any of those deaths led dozens of media outlets to publish antiracist reading lists. Moreover, in the past, consumers were apparently not inspired to purchase collectively hundreds of thousands of social justice books in a concentrated period of time. Scholar Lauren Michele Jackson critiqued the aims of antiracist reading lists, explaining that “the goal is no longer to learn more about race, power, and capital, but to spring closer to the enlightened order of the antiracist.” The lists suggest that becoming an antiracist surpassed the idea of becoming an engaged reader of, say, African American literary art. Reading novels by Toni Morrison and Colson Whitehead or short stories by Edward P. Jones and Nafissa Thompson-Spires perhaps do not offer the kinds of instructions that readers seek when they purchase *White Fragility*, *So You Want to Talk about Race*, or *How to Be Antiracist*. Ultimately, antiracist reading lists privilege explaining race and racism, especially to white people, while diminishing the possibility of black readers exploring varied considerations, especially in artistic and creative genres.

People typically show interest in one or two antiracist or social justice books at a time, but rarely have bestseller lists been dominated by social justice literature. Only after Officer Derek Chauvin held Floyd down by his neck for eight minutes and forty-six seconds did reader-consumers, outraged by yet another death of an unarmed black man, turn to books and black bookstores as they did in June. There was some precedent though. On June 17, 2015, Dylann Roof killed nine black people at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in South Carolina. The publisher Spiegel & Grau had initially set a September release date for Coates’s *Between the World and Me*. However, officials at the publisher decided to move the publication date up to July 14, in view of the public conversation taking place in response to the atrocities Roof committed as an act of white supremacy. *Between the World and Me* was a tremendous success, selling over 500,000 copies within a year of its release. The publication of a book discussing the American tradition fatally harm African Americans in the aftermath of the horrifying murder at Mother Emanuel church anticipated the increased attention on books addressing the problems of whiteness and racism.

The interest in antiracist books in June 2020 was marked by disproportionate numbers of black people affected by the coronavirus, national and international protests in response to racialized police violence, and persistent circulation of reading lists highlighting the most relevant titles. Large numbers of readers chose to further demonstrate their support for black people by making their book purchases through African American booksellers. “We’ve probably sold more books in the last month than we sold our entire first year in business,” said one

black bookstore owner in an interview with *The Washington Post* (Mayes et. al). “Since the protest started, we are seeing pretty overwhelming support from what, based on the reading list, appear to be well-intentioned white folks that are trying to educate themselves about race in America and anti-racism.” Libraries across the country also reported a significant increase in requests for antiracist and social justice literature (Mayes et. al). Without the terrifying video of a white police officer extinguishing Floyd’s life, who knows what reading about race in America in June 2020 would have looked like?

To help us track the online discourse surrounding antiracist reading lists to see how Floyd’s death appeared in discussions on Twitter, we enlisted the help of Tre Merritt, a Mellon Fellow, rising junior, and English major at Howard University. Tre recently finished Howard’s Mellon-Mays Digital Humanities summer institute where he acquired a range of skills related to data analysis. Tre scraped Twitter and identified 3,598 tweets that contained the hashtag “#HowToBeAnAntiRacist.” We used these tweets to track the online discourse on Twitter before and after Floyd’s death regarding this particular hashtag. Tre assisted us by running two topic modeling experiments—a process allowing humanities scholars to recognize key points and patterns in large bodies of information. Between May 27, 2018 and May 24, 2020, the hashtag #HowToBeAnAntiRacist generated 2,095 tweets with the majority (1,140) occurring between August and September 2019. The majority of the tweets referenced Kendi’s book. The various topics ranged from themes of institutional racism, live book discussions, and online reviews related to the hashtag and presumably the book. The phrase “Black Lives Matter” was only minimally linked to the “#HowToBeAnAntiRacist.”

Between May 25 and July 12, 2020, after Floyd’s murder, the same hashtag associated with Kendi’s book generated 1,505 tweets. In a little over a month, the book generated more than half of the tweets it did the previous two years. The hashtag #HowToBeAnAntiRacist represented Kendi’s book and became more readily associated with “Black Lives Matter” and “BLM” hashtags. In addition, #HowToBeAnAntiRacist was frequently linked to the phrase “White Fragility,” especially after the death of George Floyd. Our research confirmed the extents to which social justice terms, slogans, book titles, and the names of people who have been killed converge during a defining moment.

There are some indications that support for social justice and the practice of antiracism will expand. Public opinion has greatly shifted in favor of Black Lives Matter. Several activist groups received an influx of cash contributions to support their work. Furthermore, the Ford and Mellon Foundations, both led by African Americans, Darren Walker and Elizabeth Alexander respectively, have recently

signaled that they will devote far more of their substantial financial resources and cultural capital to social justice projects. These shifts will have far-reaching consequences for the arts and humanities as well as the future of black books.

To what extent, though, will the rise of nonfiction about racism and white privilege affect interest in traditional genres covered in African American literature courses? So far, relatively few novels, collections of short stories, and volumes of poetry have appeared on antiracist reading lists. Canonical figures like Morrison, Zora Neale Hurston, Richard Wright, and others are likely secure in college curriculums, yet emergent African American creative writers will likely struggle to gain wide, enduring readerships. In the aftermath of George Floyd, with large numbers of people seeking out books that describe racism, police brutality, and white privilege, it seems reader-consumers have preferred explanatory texts rather than artistic ones.

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Black Intellectuals, Black Archives, and a Second American Founding

Greg Carr

“To speak the unspeakable has become an important strategy of resistance.

The unspeakable is always, whatever else it is, a political category, a form of censorship. The unspeakable is rendered mute in order to throw a polite silence over contradictions felt as socially unbearable. The voices of the repressed break a silence that respects the sacred, profanes the rituals that propel correct action, unravels the unspoken law of hierarchy, pollutes the codes of purity and threatens language with division. After it is spoken, the unspeakable may be assimilated, but not without new anxieties, new rigors demanded of polite discourse. Such was the case with the Black Aesthetic” (Taylor 5).

The color-blind pandemic of COVID-19 has found common ground with America’s perpetual racial pandemic. The country’s natural anti-Black social antibodies, sufficient until now to fend off attempts to infect it with new life as a re-imagined experiment in plurality and equality, are threatened anew with a multiracial, intergenerational, and multi-class general strike against the existing order. This time these antibodies may not be enough to prevent the death of their host, the end of the mythology of the settler colonies-turned-settler state. More even than a Third Reconstruction, what may be emerging from the current viral attack is a Second Founding, this one bereft of the white nationalist anchors of the first.

Desperate to hold on to the old ways, policymakers, cultural mythmakers, and corporate owners of the means to profit from it all are making cosmetic concessions—from hastily-arranged webinars on “anti-racism” to market interest-driven adjustments to product branding—hoping to rally their dying hosts for one last extension of their profitable lives before realities of demographics and dissent induce the new birth. Black American “thought leaders” fight to gather coins and fleeting celebrity as white-facing race interpreters in a Battle Royale of the mass commercial mediated public sphere. Everyone else inclined to speak publicly mounts electronic soapboxes, where speaking truth to power is instant and subject to instant surveillance and policing. Contemporary Black academics, more distant from African communities they have interpreted with swelling acuity than at any time in their long American sojourn, are poised to speak, once more, to themselves, their publishers, and their ever-shrinking readership of patrons and fellow-craft.

There was a time when American Apartheid separated Africans from open enemies and natural allies in a fashion that required Black thinkers, teachers, organizers, and writers to work openly and more effectively on behalf of the race. The White Redemption followed the dismantling of *de jure* segregation during the Second Reconstruction of the 1960s, this time including the mining of Black communities for serviceable talent in every area from athletics to academics. The twin effect of this siphoning of essential personnel was the weakening of Black institutions and mass movements and the transformation of Black insurgent academic work into white proximate rhetorical posturing.

History provides every generation with opportunities to create realities and, in the wake, to narrate its successes and failures in penultimate acts of witness and testament. In the current moment, scholars of African descent can glimpse possibilities of structural transformation in some ways unprecedented in recent history. The capacity to see what might be accomplished must, however, be strengthened by a renewed memory of what was accomplished by previous generations facing even more dire forces and circumstances. During the second White Redemption,¹ Black academic memory of previous generations' often heroic triumphs and sacrifices on our collective behalf was amputated in the operating rooms of white academia, the patient's self-images sutured instead to contemporary popular culture, French poststructuralists and institutional desire for stone and ivy from Cambridge to Palo Alto. After a long season of studied contempt, some of these Black Frankensteins sought to warm themselves at the fires of the formal Black intellectual formations of the American Apartheid era, tended at the time by a shrinking contingent of wise elders and Negro College apprentices.

The pages of the *College Language Association Journal*, like those of the *Journal of Negro History* and *Negro History Bulletin* as well as publications of the American Teachers Association, National Medical Association, National Bar Association, and the army of various Black social organizations document the foundation of institutional Black intellectual resistance and place-making. The current moment does not call for these pages to curate and give platform to the amputated memories and sutured identities of Black Frankensteins. We know and reject their fevered dreams of mediated favor and must face a collective question: *In this moment, do we have the collective will and desire to join the general strike against the existing social order, to speak the unspeakable by consulting and thinking with the witness*

¹ "Redemption" is one of the terms used to describe the southern overthrow of U.S. Reconstruction that included the rise of Jim Crow laws. By the early 1870s, White militias and other unreconstructed Whites had begun to engage in domestic terrorism, including voter suppression, lynching, and other forms of racial violence. Between 1881 and 1901, Southern states enshrined political terrorism by rewriting the state constitutions they had been forced to adopt as the price of readmission into the Union. See Nicholas Lemann's *Redemption: The Last Battle of the Civil War*.

and testament of previous generations? What are the consequences of our choices to remain silent now? Our choices in shaping our living reality will define whether we can add our witness and testament to the lives and words of those ancestors and the yet unborn. This is the challenge of the contemporary scholar responsible for thinking, teaching, and writing in and from Black institutional formations.

As Clyde Taylor observes in *The Mask of Art*, the central challenge of the Black Arts/Aesthetic Movement of the 1960s and 1970s was to displace whiteness as the cultural logic of the modern world. Beyond continued declarations in word and art that we must identify and weaponize the use of Black values in our creative work, subsequent generations of Black thinkers found themselves choosing increasingly to depoliticize Black study. This is the central evasion that has over-informed contemporary Black academic life. This moment allows us to rethink this evasion and make better collective choices. Teaching and learning in this moment of structural crisis, especially at Black institutions, requires a renewed dialogue with the vast archive of Black memory, oral and written. It also lies in confronting the facts as they are. America is a conflagration of former European settler colonies whose white enameled veneer has required regular patching since its inception. Beneath that white veneer of stubborn and heavy-handed national mythmaking, the vital, teeming, and still burgeoning multiracial patchwork writhes, each group feeding its own distinct and complicated governance structures, movements, memories, and ways of knowing. States should not be conflated with the nations who fill their borders, and the layering of artificial narratives by formal education does not displace the education through acculturation that students receive at home.

America's integrated school systems and segregated classrooms are soldered together by curricula, textbooks, assessments, rituals, and totems forged on the anvil of the melting pot thesis, with due respect to "salad bowl" analogies that no educator I know has ever really bought. After conjuring an artificial genealogy of origin that requires "terra nullius" (the negation of Aborigines as fully human), American schooling undertook and perpetuates the accretive construction of the concept of citizenship as the preferred condition of humanity, with white American citizen being the most powerful-to-date evidence of its potential perfectibility.

The concept of an American people working collectively toward "a more perfect union" is preceded by recruitment into a different kind of cause than the one I was drafted into by my neighborhood, Sunday School, and K-12 teachers before receiving the officer training provided by our historically Black universities, followed by superannuated training in HWCU Law and Africana Studies programs. As a Black teacher who has taught Africana Studies in Black universities and for predominantly Black K-12 schools, in majority-Black classrooms and

predominantly Black community institutional formations, I have worked alongside equally committed comrades to explore similarities and differences that exist along the broad experiential continuum of blackness, a luxury many of our fellow teachers in non-Black contexts do not have.

Within these formations, class and culture frame inquiry and drive dialogue more than race, revealing our common humanity without a constant pleading for external recognition. Outside of these spaces, Blackness is more likely to be read as monolithic and/or representational, serving to perpetuate a non-Whiteness fighting to relate or resolve itself into a common (white) American experience. Our teaching and learning environments are less likely to engender an impulse to shout the corrective phrase “Black Lives Matter.” If the phrase were to be uttered at all, it would more likely serve as shorthand for asking an assailant to consider whether their own life was worth enough to test my resolve to preserve mine.

The Black America we know and live in never totally bought the narrative of American exceptionalism, a narrative that asserts that America, even with its structural flaws, is the most enlightened and advanced society to ever exist in world history. To do so would have been to reject our being as inherently flawed. Strong and consistent voices of Black self-determination and self-regard can only rarely be heard over the curriculum’s din of self-congratulatory white assumptions of Black aspirations to whiteness such as a thin interpretation of Kenneth and Mamie Clark’s “doll test” used in *Brown v. Board of Education*. A thicker interpretation of Black children choosing white dolls would include asking how those same children and their parents regarded white people in areas such as trustworthiness, honesty, affection, suspicion, or wariness. Whiteness for Africans in America is respected for its potential to harm Black life, not for its inherent goodness. Black people have never aspired to whiteness as much as we have wanted the legal and political protections of white citizenship in order to fortify our distinct freedom dreams. When daily denials of human rights pooled into the aforementioned watershed expressions of white, state-abetted racial terror, they were met with the aforementioned Black force. Segregation of Black communities spawned thriving Black business districts from Durham and Wilmington, North Carolina to Tulsa, Oklahoma, which sparked white terrorism followed in turn by resilient Black rebuilding. The exclusion of Black people from professional sports gave birth to the Negro Leagues, which in turn led to the integration of white baseball and the eventual overwhelming of the sport by Afro-Anglo and Afro-Latino players. In every area of human activity, from business and the arts to education and science, Black collective advances within the walls of segregation were met with redoubled and fear-driven white exclusion until, unable to withstand the force of Black achievement, white institutions relented, absorbing enough of that achievement to manage to retain control of the broader economic, social, and political ecosystem.

The orientation and attitude of teachers at HBCUs and in other institutional Black educational formations are reflected in the archive of Black institutional memory. One contemporary example of the value of Black institutional memory for teachers and students in this moment will suffice as a point of entry. As contemporary mass entertainment media celebrates the recent publication of Eddie S. Glaude, Jr.'s rumination on the life work of James Baldwin, *Begin Again: James Baldwin's America and Its Urgent Lessons for Our Own* (2020), another much earlier text produced by Black scholars in Black institutional formation provides a better window into the range and thrust of Black thinking on Baldwin and his meaning. *James Baldwin: A Critical Evaluation* (1981), the first comprehensive study of Baldwin's life and work, was edited by Therman B. O'Daniel, former editor of the *CLA Journal*, founding editor of the *Langston Hughes Review*, and long-time Professor of English at Morgan State University. It was published by Howard University Press the same year that O'Daniel and seven others founded the *Review* and drew on previously published articles on Baldwin in the *CLA Journal*, *Black World*, *Phylon*, and *Negro American Literature Forum*. Baldwin's work as a novelist, essayist, short story writer, scenarist, interlocutor, and general public-facing thinker is debated across the full ideological range of Black intellectual life in these pages of accessible prose. Most of the contributors were from HBCU faculties and informed their analyses with their experiences as Black people living and working in Black spaces. In contrast to Glaude's analysis, these scholars' collective insights do not center a white audience. Faculty considering how to "teach" a thinker like Baldwin "in these times" would be rewarded by consulting the edited O'Daniel text as a point of discursive departure.

The most powerful acts of teaching require translation of often challenging texts and difficult concepts so that students can model and acquire techniques of content mastery. Syllabi are roadmaps for connecting students with writing in what begins as a monologue from the writing speaker. Teaching is dialogue, driven by text but ultimately requiring listening and repeating. The texts in our Black archive lie mute, awaiting our search for writers who are still speaking if we will but listen. Ayi Kwei Armah reminds us of the process in his 2005 text, *The Eloquent of the Scribes*:

The ancestors may be contacted in books, songs, prayers, proverbs, music, ritual and art. The soul which wishes to receive inspiration makes a habit of visiting these sites of ancestral existence, to ask questions, to listen and to read, to analyze and to sift. After that, having nourished itself with insights from the ages, courage from beloved ancestors, and clear-eyed observations of present reality, the creative soul can go to work. (274)

The problem with American education in this moment is not fundamentally one of technology—we will manage through this pandemic to find ways to educate ourselves, though transitions will not be without their blood. This would not be the first time children of African descent faced educational peril: generations of the enslaved, the only fully racialized “essential personnel” in American history, were deliberately excised from American education’s socializing and acculturating functions. Ironically, the same denial of “access” to the American educational system allowed for these Africans and generations of their descendants to preserve echoes of their acculturation systems that form the core of “Black American culture” and fed our ability to protect ourselves against and ultimately largely dismantle American *de jure* apartheid. In this moment, we would do well to consult that institutional Black archive for insights to inform our moment to speak the unspeakable, to voice new realities, and to discard the anxieties and concessions of cultural assimilation in favor of a new and final American founding.

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Let's Keep It Funky: Reflections on Black Studies During the Black Lives Matter Uprising

Tony Bolden

Toni's chocolate brown face was a picture of concern. "Why are you wasting your time in Afro-American Studies?," she asked. It was 1984, and back then I was known as a poet. Toni was one of the few black poetry students in the University of Iowa's prestigious Creative Writing Program where Gerald Stern, New Jersey's first Poet Laureate, and other acclaimed poets taught. I was pursuing a master's degree in Afro-American Studies. The department chairperson, Darwin T. Turner, was a pioneering scholar of African American Studies who'd graduated Phi Beta Kappa at the University of Cincinnati at age 16, earned his master's degree at age 18, and earned his Ph.D. from the University of Chicago at age 25. Yet there were stigmas surrounding black studies. One of my professors was poet-scholar Melba Joyce Boyd, who was in her early-to-mid thirties then, and refreshingly unconventional. Melba, as she preferred to be called, was often blunt in her criticisms of the campus culture.

"Most of the white professors in this building think Black Studies is a joke," she said one day in class. But even before my arrival at Iowa, I heard similar comments from students and faculty at Dillard University in New Orleans.

"What are you gonna do with that?"

"Tony, you could make money as an attorney. Why don't you go to law school?"

"But Afro-American Studies, Tony? Really? Why not English? American Studies? Anything that'll give you some flexibility."

So, I understood Toni's perspective. I just didn't expect to hear that from a black poet. I had been active in black theater as well as the youngest member of Congo Square Writers Union, a community-based collective of black writers that was an outgrowth of Free Southern Theater (FST) founded by John O'Neal, Doris Derby, and Gilbert Moses in 1963. FST (admission was free) provided a cultural component to the Civil Rights Movement, but members soon realized they needed to develop playwrights to write specifically for the black southerners they wanted to mobilize. After FST moved to New Orleans, Tom Dent founded BLKARTSOUTH, a writers' workshop completely free of corporate or academic control. When I joined Congo Square, the core group, including Kalamu ya Salaam, Quo Vadis Gex-Breaux, and Chakula Cha Jua, and others were still quite productive. From my perspective, then, studying African American literature at the graduate level

felt like a logical extension of what I'd been doing. Black writers who grew up during the blues era, between 1890 and 1950, were among our foremost political thinkers. Their centrality to Black Studies and my decision to study them seemed natural. Besides, Turner's program offered the added benefit of studying African literature. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, Bessie Head, Chinua Achebe, Buchi Emecheta, Ayi Kwei Armah, and many others opened a whole new intellectual world. I was entertained by their storytelling and amazed at their sharp critical analyses of colonialism. Armah's treatment of *neocolonialism* in the novel *Why Are We So Blest?* (1972) helped me interpret African American artists and intellectuals who championed capitalist ideology or affirmed establishment paradigms during the late 20th century and early 2000s.

Before graduate school, though, I naïvely assumed that black art and black resistance were interrelated. Almost all the black writers I'd known or studied exemplified some sort of connection to our struggle against white supremacy. I remember a small, private gathering during which Douglas Turner Ward, author of the famous play *Day of Absence* (1965), told Tom that he started out writing for the *Daily Worker*, the newspaper of the Communist Party, and that he was imprisoned for two years, in the 1950s, for being a conscientious objector to the Korean War. His story and similar others piqued my curiosity about black writing. And later, in graduate school, I watched then young political scientist Manning Marable, who'd recently published *How Capitalism Underdeveloped Black America* (1983), argue persuasively that black writers provided crystal clear analyses of black life in America.

In retrospect, then, Toni's question reflected the growing split between black community-based artist-intellectuals and those of us on university campuses. Beginning in the 1980s, black artists and intellectuals increasingly envisioned the campus, not the community, as our definitive venue and reference point. Ronald Reagan's presidency precipitated a rise of conservative ideology that affected campus politics, signaling the demise of the Black Cultural Revolution that flourished in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Whereas black southern Christians in the Civil Rights Movement focused largely on legal statutes such as voting rights, the Black Power Movement and Black Arts Movement (BAM) were both influenced by Malcolm X, who recognized that white supremacy was based partly on the myth that white epistemology and aesthetics were naturally superior to those in black culture. As political scientist Errol Henderson observes, "[T]he most influential theorist of [the Black Power Movement] was Malcolm X, who argued the necessity of black cultural revolution in the political revolution he sought, making it a central objective of his major organization, Organization of Afro-American Unity" (x). Black Studies therefore represented an extension of Black Panther Party

leaders' popular phrase, "Power to the people." Whereas holding political offices and building financial institutions were both vital to the community, real people-power would also be manifested in youth development. Specifically, this would include classes, programs, teaching methods, political theories, and writings that reflected artistic tastes, learning styles, and political interests of the foot soldiers of the Black Studies Movement. Bunchy Carter, founder of the L.A. Chapter of the Black Panther Party, was killed because of a dispute with the US organization concerning the African American Studies center at UCLA. Likewise, the incident that sparked the student strike at San Francisco State that led to first Black Studies program, founded in 1968, was the firing of George Mason Murray, who was Minister of Education in the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense.

For this reason, Black Studies was highly criticized. J. Saunders Redding's 1979 essay "The Black Revolution in American Studies" is a prime example.

The concept "black studies" conceived in frustration and bitterness by an articulate and highly emotional minority is of questionable validity as a scholarly discipline.... The Black Studies concept is action-oriented, and to the extent that it is so oriented it is anti-intellectual.... [I]t embraces a heavy, indeed, overriding emotional component that is referred to as "soul force," which force conditions ways of acting, feeling, and thinking... (8)

Redding's comments appear laughable today, but his impact may be stronger than we might suspect. The next generation of black literary scholars, who were more sophisticated, successfully upended the original model of Black Studies. According to Sylvia Wynter, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., delivered the "*coup de grace*." His "poststructuralist and 'multicultural' literary theory and criticism ... set out to do for the now newly incorporated black middle classes what the Euro-American literary canon did and continues to do for the generic, because white, and hegemonically Euroamerican middle classes" (Wynter 110). Though the new model maintained the illusion of black resistance, academic theorists cast professionalism and radicalism as contradictions in terms. Rather than rejecting the *concept* of Black Studies, they changed the joke and slipped the yoke, to borrow a phrase from Ralph Ellison.¹ As Wynter observes, "The emergence of the Black Studies Movement in its original thrust, before its later cooptation into the mainstream of the very order of knowledge whose 'truth' in 'some abstract universal sense' it had arisen to contest, was inseparable from the parallel emergence of the Black Aesthetic and the Black Arts Movements and the central reinforcing relationship that had come to exist between them" (110).

¹ The title of the essay referenced here is "Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke" published in *Shadow and Act* (1964).

The mainstream model positioned academic theory, based mostly on European philosophical writings, not only as the criterion of knowledge but also as the conceptual framework in which black expression would be evaluated. This was a major switcheroo. Amiri Baraka and Sonia Sanchez, prominent poets of the Black Arts Movement, had both taught at San Francisco State and contributed to the founding of the Black Studies program. In fact, Baraka wrote the rebuttal to Redding. Likewise, poet Sarah Webster Fabio, who recorded with her own band, was also part of BAM and helped establish the Black Studies programs at Merritt College and University of California at Berkeley. Storytelling, playwriting, and composing poems based on *black* forms that excited and enlightened audiences in radical edutainment—all this became as antiquated as old dance moves. And since BAM elaborated on the New Negro Movement of the 1920s (now known as the Harlem Renaissance), it's not surprising that academic theoretical formulations of black culture displaced much of 20th-century black writing in Black Studies except for such notable black women writers as Toni Morrison, Zora Neale Hurston, and Octavia E. Butler. From an ideological standpoint, black-blues writers present the most serious challenge to white epistemology and capitalist ideology this nation ever produced. Their black visions of democracy illuminate proletarian values, sympathies, and aesthetics that invoke a compatible economic system.

This is quite different from what public intellectuals tend to advocate, especially insofar as they represent petite bourgeois interests and perspectives. Additionally, their status as spokesmen seems to be based on the presumption that academic achievement translates into political wisdom. But these are apples and oranges. Public intellectuals have provided negligible insight on white supremacy whereas old school black writers were crystal clear on this issue. As Langston Hughes might put it, they knew the ways of white folks.²

A brief comparison between scholars' statements during the 2016 presidential campaign and passages from older black writers is revealing. In an article in *The New Yorker* published in July 2015, Jelani Cobb posited wishful thinking in lieu of political analysis. "Measured against the probability of, say, the Chicago Cubs winning the Super Bowl," writes Cobb, "the Presidential campaign of Donald John Trump, real-estate baron, clothier, and firer of faux employees, has a degree of plausibility....Trump stands almost no chance of gaining the Republican nomination, or ascending to the Presidency if he did." Yet Cobb wasn't alone. Consider Cornel West's tweet the same year: "Brother Bernie and Brother Trump are *authentic human beings* in stark contrast to their donor-driven opponents" (emphasis added). For his part, Eddie Glaude, Jr. couldn't distinguish between a neo-confederate and a traditional, center-right bourgeois politician. When Amy

² I am referring here to Hughes's collection of short stories, *The Ways of White Folk* (1934).

Goodman asked about his voting plans, Glaude quoted Herman Melville's story "Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street," stating, "I prefer not. I can't stand either one of em" (Goodman et. al.). Finally, Marc Lamont Hill stated, "I would rather have Trump be president for four years and build a real left-wing movement ... than to let Hillary be president and we stay locked in the same space" ("Marc Lamont Hill").

The comments by Cobb, West, Glaude, and Hill typify the naïveté associated with petite bourgeois perspectives. Harold Cruse's criticism of certain black leftists a half-century ago is eerily pertinent to our situation today: "The radicalism of Negro Left intellectuals has a militant verbiage but a middle-class orientation.... [They] have developed as a stratum that expresses not the needs of the Negro masses but its own needs as an articulate class" (Cruse 230). That Hughes was questioned by Trump's lawyer and mentor, Roy Cohn, when he appeared before the House Un-American Activities, in 1953, and therefore faced the threat of being blacklisted—all of this accentuates the irony that *he* best described the power dynamics of mainstreaming Black Studies in his poem, "Note on Commercial Theatre," wherein the speaker laments: "You've taken my blues and gone— / . . . / And you fixed 'em / So they don't sound like me" (lines 1, 5-6). Hughes's statement on the blues is a metaphor for blackness in white-controlled venues. It's an age-old problem that numerous writers have discussed. "Swing—From Verb to Noun," said Amiri Baraka.³ Swing reflected swag. It came through in the way we moved: Jitterbug, Hucklebuck, Ballin' the Jack. All verbs as vibrant as life. The blues was the blackness of blackness: an African-derived ontology in a world defined by dollars. The textures of black sound were too rough and tumble. Capitalists demanded a toned-down version: a little less brooding here, a little less syncopation there. The altered expression was a fraction of truth: three-fifths of black-blues reality, hence James Baldwin's 1985 collection of essays *The Price of the Ticket*. On some level, this is what happened to Black Studies.

Our price of acceptance into mainstream academe was to deny the blues and its cultural philosophy like family secrets. Consider Black Arts writer Henry Dumas, for instance. He was killed at age thirty-four by a New York City police officer in 1968. Dumas' poem, "America," is arguably a definitive blues statement. He uses an analogy to illustrate our fraught relationship with American capitalism, particularly the contradiction between our determination to be free and white America's determination to control us.

If an eagle be imprisoned
On the back of a coin
And the coin is tossed into the sky,
That coin will spin,
That coin will flutter,
But the eagle will never fly. (88)

Fittingly, the poem appears to describe an ordinary situation: someone tosses a quarter into the air, and as we might expect, it flips and flutters etcetera. But where the eagle symbolizes freedom and democracy in American society, the majestic bird has no movement of its own volition. It remains an inscription on the coin, a captive image twirling and tumbling in midair. Dumas is signifying, then. The eagle represents black folks, and the coin represents capitalism from slaveocracy to its present form of neo-confederacy—hence, the title “America.” Like countless blues singers, Dumas didn’t simply *reflect* black disfranchisement. He pinpointed the mindset that perpetuates it, too. The implication is that so long as financial interests trump those of the populace, exploitation can be normalized, and freedom is a broken-hearted blues. Thus, Dumas concluded that in the present system, “the eagle will never fly.” This perspective is remarkably similar to those of black activists who are fighting for democracy in the streets of America. Yet discussions of Dumas’ writings are infrequent to say the least.

For Dumas and other independent black writers, critical analysis was a basic component of creativity. As pioneering black feminist scholar Barbara Christian stated in 1987: “... people of color have always theorized, though often in forms quite different from the Western form of abstract logic . . . in narrative forms . . . in riddles and proverbs, in the play with language” (53). Indeed, this is the realm of art. Feeling. Sensuality. These things matter. In fact, the phrase, “I feel you,” used to be quite common. This meant that person understood and empathized with you. Nikki Giovanni even titled her 1970 poetry collection *Black Feeling, Black Talk/Black Judgement*. Historically, black writers have infused sensuality into political analyses so that readers and listeners “could all feel it at the same time / on the same level like a Joe Louis punch” (Cortez, “You Know” 58). The assumption that analysis is limited to academic scholarship is thus a fiction of the white establishment.

In addition to writers I’ve already mentioned, there was Sterling A. Brown, Gwendolyn Brooks, Margaret Walker, Randolph Edmonds, Lorraine Hansberry, Gayl Jones, Toni Cade Bambara, John Oliver Killens, Wanda Coleman, Sherley Anne Williams, Ntozake Shange, August Wilson, and many others who illustrated the ways we walked, talked, rapped, sang, sermonized, improvised, and danced on the good foot. Their writings are word pictures of laughter and pain, victories and

defeats, lovers and haters and backstabbers, too. More fundamentally, though, these writings represented our cultural values, folkways, precepts, and worldviews—which is to say, our spiritual understandings of the world which emphasized freedom, fairness, contrariness, and rebellion just for the funk of it.

So, while scholars—myself included—use footnotes to verify information, black-blues writers could smell evil lurking like a fox near a chicken coop way cross yonder or peep it from around the corner of a sanctified church or a psychedelic shack across the railroad tracks. For instance, in Hughes’s poem “Harlem,” published in his book-length poem *Montage of a Dream Deferred* (1951), he foretold the stank, anti-black hatred that triggered the Black Lives Matter Movement. The poet asks, “What happens to dream deferred?” (line 1) And after exploring several possibilities—“dry up” (2), “fester” (4), “*stink*” (6), “crust over” (7)—Hughes concludes: “*Or does it explode?*” (10).

Similarly, Jayne Cortez, another Black Arts writer who led her own funky blues-jazz band, the Firespitters, captures the festering anger, resentment, and racial animus many white people felt toward African Americans in her 1977 poem “Brooding”: “They’re brooding in Rosedale / with pipe-bombs in their mouths” (8). Obviously, white terrorists like Gregory McMichael and Travis McMichael, who basically lynched Ahmaud Arbery in broad daylight, are still brooding. Five years later, in 1982, Baraka, who wrote extensively about blues, addressed a similar theme in his poem “World War 3 Even Your Muse Will Get Killed!” In the final three lines, the poet exclaims, “I keep seeing / Nazis, no shit / Nazis!” (6). A generation later, in 2009, shortly after Barack Obama was elected President, Baraka followed up on his previous observation in a lecture at the University of Kansas titled “Racism, Imperialism, and the Obama Presidency.” In his paper, Baraka alluded to Hitler’s Third Reich and clearly implied that Obama’s presidency would be succeeded by an extreme right-wing figure.

But even writers who held conflicting political views understood this problem. Butler is rightly cited today as a visionary. Her 1998 novel, *Parable of the Talents*, includes Texas Senator Andrew Steele Jarret, whose presidential campaign slogan is “Help us to make America great again” (20). The question, then, is how did Butler, Baraka, Hughes, and many other black writers develop such prescience? Other African Diasporic writers were equally prescient. In *Discourse on Colonialism* (1955), the Martinican Négritude writer Aimé Césaire’s analysis of French liberals’ latent fascism foreshadows white American liberals’ support for Donald Trump: “[I]t would be worthwhile to study ... the steps taken by Hitler and Hitlerism and to reveal to the very distinguished, very humanistic, very Christian bourgeois of the twentieth century that without his being aware of it, he has a Hitler inside him, that Hitler inhabits him” (14). Similarly, the Marxist Kenyan writer Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o,

who scribbled his novel *Devil on the Cross* (1981) on toilet paper in prison created a comical satire of capitalism in which robber-devils meet inside a cave for a thievery contest that seems similar to the Republican National Convention in 2016.

What distinguishes all these writers is that they imagined art as a critical reflection of conditions and realities that affect black people the most. Their writings outline the sociohistorical contexts of our multifarious experiences, all while illustrating how our most intimate pleasures spill over like sex or how our most dreaded fears and distressing heartbreaks wreak havoc in our lives after which we discover secrets of resilience through spiritual agency and transcendence. By examining our deepest thoughts, our bemused gestures, and our hilarious predicaments, black-blues-writers functioned as our cultural philosophers. Their writings explored the breadth of questions we didn't articulate, while signifying #BlackLivesMatter before we knew how much ourselves. Yet our references to them are often as invisible as my cousin Pookie and his mother Anna Marie at family gatherings when I grew up. So, let's keep it funky. The gospel of Billie Holiday is "God bless the child that's got its own." These are our own. Claim them.

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Coda

We hope these essays open doorways to discussions about history, rootedness, and literary ancestors, serving as an alternative way to explore liberation through a framework that welcomes all students into the conversation. Thus, we conclude *For Us, To Us, About Us* with this **Coda**, which includes a set of questions that serve as writing prompts or discussion starters.

Making Connections

1. In what ways do the essays in part I of this collection participate in the African American women's literary tradition?
2. The contributors in part one use she/her pronouns. How might gender impact approaches to the subjects of racial unrest and cultural transformation? To put it another way, speculate on several reasons why writers who use he/him pronouns are not featured in Part I. What gender politics may be unintentionally reinforced with this division?
3. In "The Echoes of History, a Personal Professional Meditation," Pickens writes that "people are encountering the structures of ableism for the first time" (Pickens 145). Define "ableism." How might an understanding of ableism and black disability epistemologies transform your thinking or approach to your academic disciplines, whether Africana studies, gender and sexuality studies, English, philosophy, psychology, or others?
4. In "Let's Keep It Funky: Reflections on Black Studies During the Black Lives Matter Uprising," Bolden remarks, "Black Studies therefore represented an extension of Black Panthers Party leaders' popular phrase 'Power to the people.' Whereas holding political offices and building financial institutions were both vital to the community, real people-power would also be manifested in youth development. Specifically, this would include classes, programs, teaching methods, political theories, and writings that reflected artistic tastes, learning styles, and political interests of the foot soldiers of the Black Studies Movement" (Bolden 192).

How does Bolden's comment that "this would include classes, programs, teaching methods, political theories, and writings that reflected artistic tastes, learning styles, and political interests of the foot soldiers" (Bolden 192) link back to arguments Green makes about Hip Hop music, young social activists, and the Black Lives Matter movement in "Views from the Bricks: Notes on Reading and Protest"?

5. In “Black Books and Dead Black Bodies: Twitter, Hashtags, and Antiracist Reading Lists,” the Ramsby brothers conclude their essay with the final thought: “Canonical figures like Morrison, Zora Neale Hurston, Richard Wright, and others are likely secure in college curriculums, yet emergent African American creative writers will likely struggle to gain wide, enduring readerships. In the aftermath of George Floyd, with large numbers of people seeking out books that describe racism, police brutality, and white privilege, it seems reader-consumers have preferred explanatory texts rather than artistic ones” (Ramsby and Ramsby 181). Compare their closing observation with the overall thesis posited in Bragg’s essay “We are Our Own Monuments, and We Can Be Theirs, Too.”
6. What can we learn from “Black Books and Dead Black Bodies: Twitter, Hashtags, and Antiracist Reading Lists” about conspicuous consumption and commodification? How do the essay’s findings critique the sell-ability of public displays of black death? What conclusions does the essay draw about the relationship between these anti-racist reading lists, reader-consumers, and Black death?
7. Why is looking at the history of Black resistance important for bolstering 21st-century Black liberation movements and engineering social change? What “archives of Black memory” (Carr 139) do you personally need to tap into?

Creating Interventions

1. Choose one essay from part II. Write a response letter highlighting the selected writer’s argument(s) and then providing ways these argument(s) can be extended.
2. You have been asked to write a letter to the co-editors about this special issue. What’s missing from the special issue? If you were to commission a “part two,” where would you like to see the issue go further? Write a response letter highlighting the overall issue’s main purpose and then providing ways these argument(s) can be expanded or broadened.
3. In her essay “Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation,” Toni Morrison writes that “it seems to me interesting to evaluate Black literature on what the writer does with the presence of an ancestor,” noting that ancestors “are not just parents, they are sort of timeless people.” Consider the essays in this volume. What does each essay “do” with—or in—the presence of an ancestor? Using Morrison’s words as a guide, evaluate the writers’ arguments based on their engagements with the ancestors.

Analyzing Styles

1. Identify the poetics (literary devices and strategies) in one essay of your choosing. For example, does the writer use imagery, simile, or metaphor? What are the effects of these literary devices, and how do they relate to the theme or meaning of the essay?
2. Parker's essay shifts between the first person ("I" and "my") and second person throughout, using the "dear reader" and an imaginary "you" as if giving instructions to someone—an unusual stylistic choice as personal essays usually stick with "I." How does Parker's shifting pronoun usage affect the message?
3. What does Carr mean when he uses the descriptor "Black Frankensteins" in his essay "Black Intellectuals, Black Archives, and a Second American Founding"? Who are the "Black Frankensteins," and what is Carr's attitude towards them? Consider Carr's word choice, "amputated," "sutured," "operating room," and "patient." Explain how Carr's use of medical language and imagery functions to support his essay's overall thesis.

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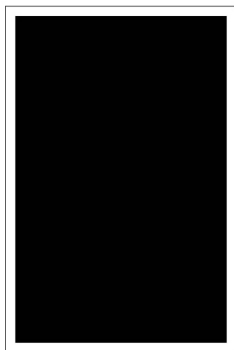
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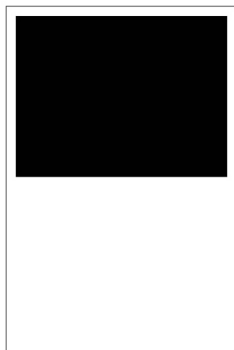
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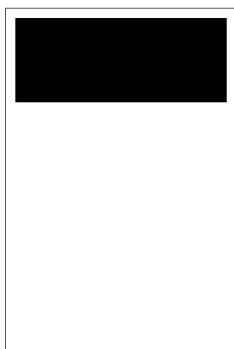
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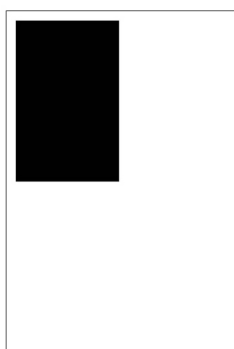
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