

Black Intellectuals, Black Archives, and a Second American Founding

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“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 Aboriginals 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.

Works Cited

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