

## COVID-19 and Black Grief in the Academy

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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 19<sup>th</sup> century into the 20<sup>th</sup> 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 Renaissance<sup>1</sup> 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

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<sup>1</sup> 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.

#### Works Cited

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