

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

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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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