

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.

Works Cited

- Badu, Erykah. "A.D. 2000." *Mama's Gun*, Motown, 2000.
- Bassard, Katherine Clay. *Spiritual Interrogations: Gender, Culture and Community in Early African American Women's Writing*, Princeton UP, 1999.
- Blight, David. "Lecture 23-Black Reconstruction in the South: The Freedpeople and the Economics of Land and Labor." HIST 119: The Civil War and Reconstruction Era, 1845-1877," *Open Yale Courses*, <http://openmedia.yale.edu/projects/iphone/departments/hist/hist119/transcript23.html>
- Ferguson, Karen. *Top Down: The Ford Foundation, Black Power, and the Reinvention of Racial Liberalism*, U of Pennsylvania P, 2013.
- Hughes, Langston. "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain." *Call and Response: Key Debates in African American Studies*, edited by Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Jennifer Burton, W.W. Norton, 2011, pp. 365-368.
- Lindsey, Treva B. "Post-Ferguson: A 'Herstorical' Approach to Black Violability." *Feminist Studies*, vol. 41, no. 1, 2015, pp. 232-237.
- Scahill, Jeremy, and Robin D.G. Kelley. "The Rebellion Against Racial Capitalism." *The Intercept*, 24 June 2020, <https://theintercept.com/2020/06/24/the-rebellion-against-racial-capitalism/>
- Walker, Margaret. "For My People." *Poets.org*, <https://poets.org/poem/my-people>,
- Willis, Susan. "Memory and Mass Culture." *History and Memory in African-American Culture*, edited by Robert O'Meally and Genevieve Fabre, Oxford UP, 1994, pp. 178-187.