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Black Women and the Pandemic Imagination: Pedagogy as a Rehearsal of Hope During Covid-19

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"BREONNA TAYLOR" BY GILDA POSADA VIA JUSTSEEDS.ORG

The performance of hope in the face of catastrophe is an aesthetic practice; a practice combining theory and practice in which performance and rehearsal are linked. For instance, we don't entirely know what it is to live in a democracy in which every person is ascribed dignity that they're human and seen as human. The social order suppresses our imagination and attempts as it can.

- Erica Hunt

Introduction: Precarious Pedagogy, Black Lives Matter, and Covid-19

Before the start of the Spring 2021 semester, a meme circulated of a golden retriever perched in front of a laptop, wearing a purple and red necktie; he is presumably on a Zoom call. He smiles as an apocalyptic scene, replete with a mushroom cloud, a possible air strike, and images of a city on fire, plays out in the background. Its caption read: *Faculty trying to finish their courses for January 2021*. The meme reflected the anxieties of faculty, many of whom abruptly pivoted to online teaching mid-semester without any preparation, as we were being asked by university officials to create a sense of normalcy in a time of utter chaos. Faculty were charged with attending to the affective needs of students; we were asked to provide stability, to model civility and professionalism, while being accommodating, flexible, and lenient.

Collegiate responses to Covid-19 raised renewed concerns about inequities students face in higher education and therefore mirrored Jennifer Fisher's call in 2011 to implement a "precarious pedagogy." Drawing from Judith Butler's work on precarity, Fisher states, "a precarious pedagogy expresses an ethical and political obligation to young people; it places a demand upon educators and administrators to be responsive and responsible to the forms of interdependency, vulnerability, and injurability that differentially characterize their lives instead of seeing their actions as strictly individual and divorced from shared conditions" (418). And yet, Sean Hill reminds us that African Americans' "existence as a precarious class . . . precede[s] neoliberalism" and that the "last several decades are only unique in that the pool of precarious persons has now expanded to include white Americans and others of European descent, the lives that have 'mattered' both historically and contemporaneously" (95).

Using the afterlife of slavery, fugitivity, and precarity as analytics, scholars such as Tina Campt, Saidiya Hartman, Fred Moten, and Christina Sharpe underscore the continued vulnerability of black life under neoliberalism. Hartman specifically theorizes that black postmodern lives are "still imperiled and devalued by a racial calculus and a political arithmetic that were entrenched centuries ago" that she defines as "the afterlife of slavery," hallmarked by "skewed life chances, limited access to health and education, premature death, incarceration, and impoverishment" (6). Therefore, while I am quite sure this meme resonated with many, for black faculty who were already navigating slavery's afterlife, and race scholars in general, the emotional and psychological toll of the pandemic was exacerbated by an extreme resurgence of white supremacist

activity, by the fervor of global protests against anti-blackness, and by confronting the fact that Covid-19 was striking blacks at an alarmingly disproportionate rate. And so, as I prepared to teach my third semester online since the national shutdown in March 2020, not only did I lament the decision to design a brand-new course rather than repurpose an old one, I asked myself on numerous occasions, "What were you thinking, offering to teach a course on pandemics during a pandemic?"

Following the lead of scholars like John Smyth, in my courses, I am invested in a "critical re-imagining of teaching" that "rehabilitates the intellectual and political in teaching and that advocates for social responsibility and social justice" (Smyth 13). Creating the course *Black Women and the Pandemic Imagination (BWPI)* was my way of combating how public education is "being compromised, corrupted and corroded by 'management pedagogies'" and now by the right's attack against Critical Race Theory as a scapegoat for any critical analyses that decenter or disparage white supremacy (13). Earlier in my career, I sometimes encountered students who were a bit frustrated because I had elucidated several racial injustices without supplying any concrete solutions. I quickly learned the importance of providing transcendent tools (literature and theory) as a way of offering hope and encouraging activism. hooks contends, "When we only name the problem, when we state complaint without a constructive focus or resolution, we take hope away. In this way critique can become merely an expression of profound cynicism, which then works to sustain dominator culture" (xiv). In order to move beyond the level of complaint, in Spring 2021 I taught *BWPI* at Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU), while teaching in the Department of Gender, Sexuality and Women's Studies (GSWS). I designed *BWPI* as intentional pedagogy that emphasized *hope* as a heuristic and therapeutic analytic through reading and watching the imaginative texts primarily of black women that showcased the apocalypse, contagion, and dystopian presents/futures from an intersectional perspective.

I live in Richmond, VA, the former capital of the Confederate States of America. In the summer of 2020, protests against state sanctioned violence against blacks and for the removal of Civil War monuments, as well as an onset of armed protestors lobbying for gun rights at the Capitol, were all held walking distances from my house and VCU. Dealing with black death on two fronts took an emotional and psychological toll on me and I imagined black students were feeling similarly overwhelmed. The course was an implementation of precarious pedagogy created to cater to the affective needs of students, who, like myself, were struggling to make sense of this particular historical moment when many of us are battling two epidemics simultaneously: COVID-19 and the global rise of white supremacy. Although birthed during a pandemic that exposed the socio-economic factors that make African Americans more vulnerable to COVID-19, *BWPI* is similar in scope to the various Black Lives Matter courses and complementary hashtag syllabi that have cropped up nationally since Trayvon Martin's murder in 2012 that expose and explore the precarity of black life in the United States.

While students were not familiar with the discourse surrounding precarity, many were, nonetheless, intimately acquainted with its effects even before Covid-19. Speaking about the perceived life-chances of young black and Latinx urban students prior to the coronavirus when she worked as a teacher artist at the Museum of Contemporary African Diasporan Arts in Brooklyn, New York., Colleen Coleman states that many “have a difficult time seeing a future. For some reason, the future is a blur, as if they live in the land where time stands still” (Womack 184). In general, all of my students were anxious about the future; they were questioning the democratic process, they had an acute suspicion of media reportage, and they felt cheated out of a normal college experience, and they expressed feelings of hopelessness. If they were feeling like me, current events had likely intensified their feelings of displacement and alienation; this perhaps caused my black students specifically to further question their place in the nation; do their lives matter? Do our lives matter?

The majority of students who take my courses are often engaged in community activism or are passionate about social justice issues. There are progressive cis-gendered white students and there are students who hail from various marginal communities -- black, Latinx, and other students of color, as well as queer, trans, and gender non-conforming students. Therefore, I purposefully decentered whiteness throughout the course; rather than view *BWPI* as a microcosm of the larger society, I wanted to provide a space where students feeling disenfranchised and disoriented could grapple with feelings of uncertainty. The existence of systemic racism, homophobia, transphobia, sexism, etc., was not up for debate; students had either experienced discrimination firsthand or they had taken previous classes on gender and race; therefore, there was no need to persuade my students that discrimination was real.

I surmised that my students, who are largely comprised of members of Generation Z and to a lesser extent, Millennials, were processing Covid-19 and Black Lives Matter from different ideological perspectives than my own. The anxieties and feelings of disillusionment my students were facing stemmed largely from the supposed *singularity* of this historical moment. In contrast, I have been contemplating the end of the world since I was thirteen years old when I was traumatized by the film, *The Day After* (1983), which depicted a full-scale nuclear exchange between the US and the Soviet Union; whether it’s a nuclear holocaust, zombie apocalypse, or 9/11, I have been thinking about the extinction of the human species, and also the dissolving of first-world nations and their accompanying bourgeoisie lifestyles, for quite some time now.

The election of Trump finally laid to rest a widespread belief in our country’s alleged trajectory towards becoming post-raciality, proving, once again, Derrick Bell’s accurate assessment of racism as a permanent component of US society. According to Bell, racism is predicated on a cyclical pattern of whites who hold vague, and yet persistent, beliefs that gains benefitting racial and sexual minorities ultimately curtail the lifestyle and rights of cis-gendered white citizens overturning strides made towards making the nation more equitable. And so, rather than make progressive strides towards making the nation more equitable, after any so

called victory for civil rights, there is backlash against these gains, which results in another cycle of civil rights violation (i.e., slavery followed by reconstruction, white pushback against reconstruction brings forth Jim Crow segregation). So in many ways, the more things change, the more they stay the same.

Given the cyclical nature of racial oppression, Rather than allow myself to sink further into a deepening cultural malaise, I routinely turned to literature, particularly the works of black women, for guidance and feminist life lessons, as I have done previously in moments of crisis, rather than allow myself to sink further into a deepening cultural malaise. With *BWPI* I provided students an opportunity to unearth a usable past; the goal was to analyze representations of black women navigating fraught moments and to revisit the works of black feminist artists and writers to offer not merely solace, but pathways to resistance and survival.

Writing from a modernist viewpoint during the height of World War I, literary critic Van Wyck Brooks is credited for the term “usable past,” which is defined by Jeffery K. Olick as “a set of historical referents that could give shape to contemporary efforts. A ‘usable past’ is thus an invention or at least a retrospective reconstruction to serve the needs of the present.” Brooks endeavored to make a distinction between U.S. art and letters and those of Europe; he saw American arts as “riddled with contradictions stemming from their lack of an obvious binding tradition, as well as from the mixing of immigrant cultures.” According to Olick, Brooks argued that “in order for American culture to emerge from its state of incoherence, it would be necessary to construct a “usable past’ for it . . .” In many ways, I would argue that American culture has largely solved its problem of “incoherence” as Brooks articulated it by cultivating white supremacy as its most salient guiding principle. Therefore, I offer a postmodern appropriation of Brooks’s phrase “usable past”; rather than pinpoint a cohesive tradition of black women’s liberation poetics, I encourage a multivalent approach in order to provide students with a variety of tactics to solve the problem of social inequity.

In addition to various secondary sources, the course was structured around five primary texts: Mary Seacole’s autobiography, *Wonderful Adventures of Mrs. Seacole in Many Lands* (1857); Zeinabu irene Davis’s film, *Compensation* (1999); Toni Cade Bambara’s novel, *The Salt Eaters* (1980); Octavia Butler’s Afrofuturistic novel, *Parable of the Sower* (1993); and Colm McCarthy’s dystopian zombie film, *The Girl with All the Gifts* (2016). I merged these fictional representations with journalistic, medical, satirical, and theoretical material to suggest that our current moment is not an anomaly – blacks and other people of color have trod this ground both in the fictive and the real worlds. For the purposes of this paper, however, I will confine my forthcoming analyses and remarks to texts that are either Afrofuturistic (i.e., written by black writers) or Afrofuturist (i.e., in principle, that is in their insistence on black futurity and humanity).

Teaching *BWPI* through the lenses of Afrofuturism and critical pedagogy at this historical juncture seems crucial in combating feelings of despair and erasure on the part of

both students and professors. Both analytics afford students a sense of agency over their destinies and empower them to dream of equitable futures that don't compromise their own processes of self-actualization. Overall, my sense of urgency in preparing students to face a world that is reverting, shaking off any pretense of becoming post-racial, or pro-woman, or queer friendly, or trans friendly, has gained momentum since Trump's presidency and as I've watched his influence spread like a virus itself, sparking a rise in anti-blackness and white supremacy both in the U.S. and globally. I see this current historical moment an opportunity for *revolutionary dreaming*, an opportunity to usher in a new world order. In *BWPI*, students critically read the texts of black women as a way of *rehearsing hope* in order to find strategies to combat the disconcerting notion that the world might very well be hell-bent on their annihilation.

The remainder of this paper is an amalgamation of my use of Afrofuturism and critical pedagogy as analytics that underscore my creation of *Black Women and the Pandemic Imagination*, as well as articulation of how I structure course design and reading and teaching

pedagogical strategies around the revolutionary potential of hope and Tanya Shields's conceptualization of "feminist rehearsal."

Rehearsals of Hope: Afrofuturism and Critical Pedagogy

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Those of us who teach about colonialism, imperialism, and racism have worried about job security, fearing what has recently come to pass – a widespread mobilization of the right against Critical Race Theory. This latest push towards hyper-surveillance of race scholars and the further dissemination of "alternative facts" predicated on the denial of America's racist past has convinced me that it is my ethical duty as a professor to explain to students how systems of oppression impact their lives in rather profound ways. According to bell hooks, "Hope is essential to any political struggle for radical change when the overall social climate promotes disillusionment and despair." Taken together, Afrofuturism and critical pedagogy are complementary liberatory frameworks that seek to dismantle white supremacy by granting agency to and insisting upon the visibility of the disenfranchised.

Teaching *BWPI*, I followed Colleen Coleman's lead by using Afrofuturism as a way to get students to imagine black futures. Dewitt Douglas Kilgore and Lisa Yaszek view Afrofuturism as an episteme that attends to black erasure in Western history by insisting on black visibility as a precondition of any imagined future, especially an equitable one. Bennett Capers argues that in addition to "subsidiary themes" like "foregrounding alienation and envisioning reclamation" of the themes that encompass Afrofuturism, "The most important of these is the insistence that people of color in fact *have* a future, and a commitment to disrupting racial, sexual, and economic hierarchies and categories" (111). The insistence upon black futurity in this more contemporary iteration of Afrofuturism, as Kilgore contends, "betokens a shift in our largely unconscious assumptions

about *which histories matter* and how they may serve as a precondition for any future we might imagine" (emphasis mine, "Afrofuturism" 564). Afrofuturism, then, can be thought of in tandem with restorative justice movements like Black Lives Matter because, according to Yaszek, Afrofuturism insists "both on the authenticity of the black subject's experience in Western history and the way this experience embodies the dislocation felt by modern peoples."

Critical pedagogy, Henry A. Giroux argues, "attempts not only to provide the conditions for students to understand texts and different modes of intelligibility, but also opens up new avenues for them to make better moral judgments that will enable them to assume some sense of responsibility to the other in light of those judgments" (717). Therefore, I see critical pedagogy as predicated on empathy, and social responsibility, as well as allowing for the possibility of anti-racist thinking and white allyship. Giroux further explains that critical pedagogy is "invested in both the practice of self-criticism about the values that inform teaching and a critical self-consciousness regarding what it means to equip students with analytical skills to be self-reflective about the knowledge and values they confront in classrooms" (717). Contrary to the widespread misperception that liberal professors seek to indoctrinate their students with leftist ideology, I make it clear in all of my classes that I am providing frameworks of analyses so that they can think for themselves, or, as Paulo Freire argues, "take themselves in hand and become agents of curiosity, become investigators, become subjects in an ongoing process of quest for the revelation of the 'why' of things and facts" (96).

Critical pedagogy at its core is an ethical methodological approach to understanding the world so that we can reshape it anew. In *Pedagogy of Hope*, Freire argues, "If the great popular masses are without a more critical understanding of how society functions, it is not because they are naturally incapable of it . . . but on account of the precarious conditions in which they live and survive, where they are 'forbidden to know'" (96). Therefore, as with Afrofuturism, I use critical pedagogy as a tool; by revealing how the precarious conditions of their lives were not happenstance, but are instead systemic in nature, students can aim to change systems of discrimination and oppression. Stanley Aronowitz explains that critical pedagogy enables learners "to help set the conditions for producing a new life, a new set of arrangements where power has been, at least in tendency, transferred to those who literally make the social world by transforming nature and themselves" (ix). Marginal students in particular seek to use "theory as a tool for liberation" (i.e., bell hooks) and generally value learning concepts that help them name the particular subjugation they've experienced, as well as developing a critical lexicon for how systemic oppression directly affects them.

For the first week of class I chose two short videos made by African American women prior to the dissemination of the Covid-19 vaccine. We watched Aliah Sheffield's viral TikTok video of her singing "Earth is Ghetto" (2021) and the video Dr. Susan Moore posted on social media in protest of her inhumane and negligent treatment at the hands of fellow medical practitioners who reported, after her death, that they were intimidated by Moore. Elena Nicolaou explains:

"The conceit of Sheffield's song, sung from the perspective of a stranded alien looking to escape back to her home planet, was inspired by a viral TikTok video in which a woman—with her face cloaked with a green alien filter—pretends to give a report from her first trip to Earth. 'I'm not going to lie, I was uncomfortable. We were in the ghetto,' the user, @flossybaby, says. 'These people are disgusting.'"

While in the original TikTok, the alien found herself in an actual ghetto, Sheffield's revision castigates Earth as a whole as being ghetto. Sheffield's lyrics ("Earth is ghetto I wanna leave/ Can you beam me up, I'm outside on the street / By the corner store, you know the one on 15th") speak to feelings of being alien and of alienation on the part of blacks, and of our desire to leave Earth to find some sort of respite. We discussed "Earth is Ghetto" in conjunction with War's 1972 song, "The World is a Ghetto"; both are laments that speak to black precarity and the subsequent feelings of racial fatigue, disorientation, and a general sense of malaise.

In contrast, Dr. Moore's death punctuates the consequences of remaining here on Earth for blacks. We re-watched Dr. Moore's last public words together (on Zoom) as a class; afterwards, there was a moment of silence, interrupted by the sound of quiet weeping on the part of a few of the students. Two students empathized with Moore; one recounted her mother's harrowing experience with doctors that inevitably led to her death, while another student expressed an acute anger against whites: "They don't see us as human, we are disposable." These visceral reactions summarize the general feeling of precarity among my students; the notion that at any moment their lives could be erased, snuffed out by the state. We had begun to create a safe space in which students could be vulnerable; black students were able express the pain racism caused them, while white students and other non-blacks were afforded a space for empathy. We discussed the prevailing stereotypes held by the medical team -- that she was angry, uppity, intimidating -- that undergirded their racist neglect. We also discussed who gets to be "grievable" as another entry way into the ways in which black lives do not matter. According to Michalinos Zembylas's interpretation of Butler's work, "Those who are not 'recognizable' as 'humans' are more precarious and therefore 'ungrievable' compared to those who are recognized as human and thus deserving to be 'grievable'" (102).

According to bell hooks, "Hope is essential to any political struggle for radical change when the overall social climate promotes disillusionment and despair" (*Talking About a Revolution* 52). Throughout *BWPI* I stressed how hope could be implemented as a practice; to this aim I introduced them to the work of feminist scholars, such as Sara Ahmed, Saidiya Hartman, bell hooks, Erica Hunt, Mariame Kaba, Brandy Nicolle Kelly, and Tanya Shields, as foundational theoretical texts that foreground Afrofuturism and critical pedagogy as analytics premised on hope. Teaching resiliency runs the risk of perpetuating martyrdom, privileging survival over thriving, and envisioning invincibility as more admirable than vulnerability. The latter is problematic because prefiguring blacks as superhuman can perpetuate racist assumptions that blacks feel less pain than whites. Rather than teach resiliency in the face of or as an antidote to white supremacy, I relied on these texts to

encourage students to *rehearse hope*, or rather to develop a practice of active engagement with the past – an engagement that: 1) promotes empathy; 2) sees it as a moral imperative to present an accurate rather than sanitized version of United States history and therefore founded on multi-ethnic, racial, and cultural perspectives, rather than renditions touted to appease and uphold white supremacy; 3) seeks to excavate the past in search of viable lessons for liberation.

The tenets listed above derive from Shields's book, *Bodies and Bones: Feminist Rehearsal and Imagining Caribbean Belonging*, in which she uses the term "feminist rehearsal" to explain her "methodological approach to reading texts that promotes multivalent readings that encourage unity and consensus building through confrontation with overlapping histories of knowledge, power, and freedom" (1). Throughout the book, she meticulously "rehearses an event, archetype, or community to illustrate the ways in which meaning has several reference points, not just one," thus usurping the hierarchy of whites in history's retelling (2). Shields models a type of critical analysis that promotes active reading and "encourages the reader/audience/viewer to become an actor," meaning that they do not just create meaning, but they create solutions (1).

In addition to developing empathy by attending to overlapping histories, rehearsing hope also means forming an understanding that history is not fixed or stagnant, but dependent on who holds power. Therefore, rehearsing hope is a moral imperative to learn a more accurate and inclusive history. Once a more equitable understanding is gained, students can then study the past for ways to effectively fight oppression. Giroux explains that Freire saw hope as "a practice of witnessing" and "an act of moral imagination" ("Prologue" xvii). For Freire unearthing and perhaps even reclaiming the past was a practice of hope based on an "understanding of history as opportunity and not determinism" (Freire, 1994, p. 91). Concurrently, using Saidiya Hartman as an example, Hunt explains that Hartman has a way of "reading the past in order for us to kind of practice not only what happened in the past but to kind of bring it into the present as present tools . . . that we can use to survive what could only be the apocalypse – the end of their world and perhaps the beginning of ours." The past, then, should be shifted through to determine what's usable; it should be viewed as an occasion to learn, revisit, and provide insights on how to navigate the present and change the future.

Things Fall Apart: Exploring the Apocalyptic and Afrofuturistic in the Black Female Imagination

This section of *BWPI* was inspired, of course, by Chinua Achebe's novel, *Things Fall Apart* (1958). The novel depicts the cataclysmic impact and subsequent eraser of pre-colonial life in Nigeria upon the arrival of Europeans in the late 19th century. Although I covered the transatlantic slave trade and *The Wonderful Adventures of Mrs. Mary Seacole* in this section as examples of apocalyptic and imperialist

ruptures, Toni Cade Bambara's *The Salt Eaters* is the emblematic Afrofuturistic text I selected that demonstrates the connection between the apocalypse and the insistence upon black futurity. A dense text to be sure, *The Salt Eaters* does not readily come to mind as a canonical Afrofuturistic text. However, I posit that the novel's almost stream of consciousness narration, its magical realist components, and its sometimes imperceptible narrative shift between the past, present, and future characterize it as Afrofuturistic. For example, both Afrofuturism and critical pedagogy stress the interconnectivity between the past, present and future; studying the past and envisioning the future enable one to rehearse hope. Smyth argues that "a truly critical pedagogy involves an examination of existing social relationships on three levels: that of history, of current practice (including its hierarchal bases), and the potential to transform arrangements in the future" (201). This tripartite approach to pedagogy bears a striking resemblance to Capers's belief that Afrofuturism comprises "forward thinking as well as backward thinking, while having a distressing past, a distressing present, but still looking forward to thriving in the future."

Erica Hunt contends that "the end of the world has been on repeat certainly for African descended people or indigenous North Americans. The end of the world came and somehow was survived, if just barely . . ." Here Hunt is suggesting that for diasporic black populations, our origins encompass cultural disruption; and from slavery to some semblance of freedom our communities have faced both interpersonal and collective cataclysmic rifts in the wake of white supremacy. Whether wrenching a child from an enslaved woman, or decimating black and Native communities, these moments alter black perceptions of time. Many of our decedents were already thinking in an Afrofuturistic mindset, whether that meant imagining an equitable future on Earth or on a heavenly plane of existence. In *Long Black Song*, Houston Baker explains that with "Traditional African American notions of the apocalypse: it opts for 'an absolute, linear (chronometrical) time moving from the creation to the judgment day, which, [blacks] felt, would be the day of their liberation" (*Long Black Song* 46). Therefore, it is no wonder that African American culture, letters, and literature are rife with allusions to pandemics and apocalyptic references which demonstrate an anxiety about and a preoccupation with the precarious nature of black life both in the US and abroad. And yet the insistence upon black futurity has meant cultivating an aesthetic practice of "the performance of hope in the face of catastrophe," as Hunt stipulates in the epigraph to this paper.

Set in what Bambara terms, "the last quarter of the 20th Century," her novel creates a sense of urgency for her characters and readers to become decolonized or find a sense of wholeness before the day of reckoning. Bambara writes, "The eighties are now upon us – a period of devastating conflicts and chaos, a period that calls for organizing of the highest order and commitment of the most sticking kind, a period for which the sixties was a mere referral and the seventies a brief respite, a breathing space" (14). By way of contrast, one student mentioned Barack Obama's presidency and their feelings of *hope* that racism

was becoming a thing of the past. Here I introduced the concept of post-raciality and asked if Obama's term in office was a similar moment of respite, comparable to what Bambara imagines of the seventies. These brief conversations enabled students to further compare Bambara's statement to our current moment, particularly in regards to anti-black protesting in Summer 2020 as perhaps a radical response also rooted in hope. In the novel, the end of the world is imminent; the book's characters then, are not just thinking in terms of the future, they are actively working to ensure black futurity. The apocalypse, then, emerges as an apt metaphor for both decolonization and revolution. Bambara's text provides concrete steps on how to foment a revolution by centering oneself outside the dictates of racist ideology and Western discourse.

I, along with a host of other scholars, characterize the novel as a book-long decolonization/healing process for the protagonist (Velma Henry), the inhabitants of the town of Claybourne, as well as for readers seeking to resolve their double consciousness. Bambara likens activism with spiritual self-purpose and therefore offers concrete ways throughout the novel to achieve alignment and self-actualization in order to fulfill one's purpose and covenant to a higher power – perhaps in time for Armageddon or the revolution. I ended my opening lecture on *The Salt Eaters* by underscoring the five steps Bambara offers to achieve revolutionary subjectivity as outlined in my book, *Writing the Black Revolutionary Diva*: 1) Recommitting to a higher spiritual power (which Bambara sees as synonymous with affirming one's essential self), 2) becoming "self-centered," 3) engaging the process of "self-recovery," 4) understanding that decolonization is a choice, and 5). choosing a method of revolutionary action.

Although this section was inspired by Achebe's novel, "Things Fall Apart" is also an accurate metaphor for the coup that took place in *BWPI* after I assigned this text. In previous courses, students responded positively to texts that foreground self-actualization. However, the decisions that I made to actively attend to my students' precarity and feelings of disarray proved to be my downfall. For example, I decided not to take attendance; therefore, attendance was spotty. I elected to wait a month into the semester before testing their knowledge of the material, and despite encouraging them to read, without grade incentivization it was clear that many were often not reading. The biggest problem, however, was that many of the students neglected to read the course description I had provided to their advisors prior to class, and therefore were looking to vent and use the course solely as a therapeutic site rather than a critical one. Adding insult to injury, the English department neglected to cross-list my course (which is problematic since my background is staunchly in English and the university currently have no tenured professors specializing solely in African American literature); therefore the majority of the students had very little experience with humanities courses.

At the beginning of the course, the students created a GroupMe with the intention of using the messaging app to study together. However, when members of the group were confused about the readings, rather than come to me to get further clarification or help, they used the app to talk about how difficult the course was, thus confirming my

ineffectiveness as a professor. I am a firm believer that when white male professors are deemed rigorous, this belief translates into the need to rise to his expectations and a belief in that professor's innate genius. Not so with black female professors whose rigorousness is often interpreted as a failure on the part of the professor to understand the intellectual capabilities of her students; she is "presumed incompetent." For example, the leader of the coup was a science major who admitted to me in private to me that she hadn't taken an English course since high school. She informed me that her high school teacher, a white male instructor, had taught her the "Socratic Method." Overlooking the unspoken insult that her former teacher knew more about teaching than I did, despite the fact that he hadn't been teaching for over 20 years as I have and also didn't hold a Ph.D. in English, I informed her that I *had* been using the Socratic Method. I also confirmed her excessive absences and her failure to watch the recordings of class that I made and uploaded in the event of students not being able attend the class synchronously.

I gave a lecture on how to read the text, created reading comprehension quizzes, and asked them to write a paper on *The Salt Eaters*. To my dismay, I experienced an unprecedented number of plagiarized quizzes and papers. I dealt with these instances by failing students for the plagiarized assignments, but spared them disciplinary action from the university. Things came to a head after they received their grades on *The Salt Eaters* paper. Students confronted me in a respectful manner to inform me that they were struggling. The conversation, which I initially found to be a constructive one, was hijacked by the aforementioned ringleader who took the opportunity to list out the myriad ways I had failed them as a professor. She succeeded in both making me visibly angry and putting me on the defensive. Students from the GroupMe interjected and tried to convince me that they did not share her sentiments and merely wanted extra help. The fact that the attack was launched by a black female student and in front of the entire class stung. Although I am not a proponent of respectability politics, I was taken aback by her chastisement and her belief reliance that I would not respond in kind to her admonishment maintain my composure *because* of my position as professor.

All of the things we were instructed to do to assuage student anxiety during Covid-19 did little to bolster the sense of connection and community that is usually established in my courses. And But ultimately, I was wounded at her inability *to see myself in her*, to see that as a black professor, my job and life are just as precarious as her own. I was used to white entitled students, but *black* entitled students still rattle me. The student expressed a resentment of authority figures, yet because I was am a black woman she felt she could more readily attack me and deem me to be lacking, rather than be self-reflective about her performance in class and her unwillingness to think critically about the material she was reading.

In consultation with other race scholars, both at my institution and at other universities, I came up with a solution. I decided to ask students to read Darrius D'wayne Hills's "'Admirable or Ridiculous?': The Burdens of Black Women Scholars and Dialogue in the Work of Solidarity" and

Jasmine Roberts's "Resisting the Mammy Professorhood During Covid-19." I wanted to make them understand that I was in need of healing too, that I was *not* okay and severely needed a little of the grace I was trying to afford them. And, also, to a large degree I had created this course to deal with my own anxiety and feelings of helplessness brought about by the pandemic and the barrage of overt racism that was happening globally. But, ultimately, I am ashamed to admit here, I didn't assign either of these texts and moved on as if the public confrontation had never happened. Failure to confront the issue inevitably when in fact it caused me stress each time I turned on Zoom to face the students. I felt defeated and couldn't rally enough to repair our connection or their faith in me. In hindsight, not addressing her comments publicly emboldened the student to perform a series of microaggressions throughout the course. For example, much later in the course she interrupted a class discussion to say the following: "Not necessarily about the book, but when I was in, like a freshman and sophomore in high school, like all of the teachers that I thought I absolutely hated me. Actually, not necessarily adored me, but they liked me. They like how it was like as a student. And my mom, she reiterated this statement. I mean, she was like, the thing about you is that you're going to tell someone how it is. You're going to tell someone how it is. Whether, they like it or not. It's like okay, you're either going to ask me how it is and I'm going to tell you or I'm just going to tell you. So either way, you're going to find out if you like it, that's your business and if you don't, that's awesome and that's your business too." So, I assumed that because she perceived me as disliking her, this was her way of nudging me to respect her brutal honesty – the subtext is that she was offering me constructive criticism regarding my errors in teaching. To their credit, other students seemed to ignore her outbursts, and would steer the conversation back on track rather than let the lesson be derailed – I thought these moments were a mercy, to be honest.

To avoid this type of interaction in the future, I have since made sure that my class was cross-listed with English when I taught this course again in Spring 2022 and included early on the texts by Hills and Roberts and implemented the consensus building tactics that I used prior to the pandemic and when I was teaching in person. In hindsight, I understand that I just didn't have the fight in me and was unwilling to entertain a discussion that would require a level of vulnerability I wasn't able to display. I had lost trust in them. Thankfully, things rebounded when we read Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower*, and I was provided another opportunity to demonstrate how a black woman writer used her text to rehearse hope.

Dystopias, Utopias and the Performance of Hope

I was tempted to end the course on a meditation on black joy as an antidote to white supremacy; however, this ending seemed antithetical to the purposes of the course. For example, joy and pleasure might very well communicate the possibility of hope, but black people have always had light and laughter even in our most dismal moments. In keeping

with the concept of rehearsing hope by reading black female-authored and themed material, I wanted to end with a section on Afrofuturism that focused on critical dystopias. Jim Miller explains that dystopian works of literature are “motivated out of a utopian pessimism in that they force us to confront the dystopian elements of postmodern culture so that we can work through them and begin again” (337).

The featured critical dystopic texts for this section were Octavia Butler’s *Parable of the Sower* and Colm McCarthy’s *The Girl with All the Gifts*. Butler’s *Parable of the Sower* (1993) and *Parable of the Talents* (1998) have received renewed interest because the Earthseed series eerily prophesies Donald Trump’s rise to power and the ensuing economic collapse of the U.S. (The first book is set in 2024 and charts the authoritarian rise of Presidential candidate Christopher Donner who is decidedly anti-science and who wins the election based on his promise to dismantle the government and to create more jobs. The next book is set in 2029 and highlights Donner’s successor, Texas senator Andrew Steele Jarret, a religious zealot whose platform is “make America great again”). However, I posit that the environmental crisis that has brought forth a zombie apocalypse and subsequently rendered the air unbreathable are themes that can be readily associated with Covid-19 as well as our current iteration of Black Lives Matter. What makes these works of “critical dystopias” are their didactic qualities. Thomas Patrick Moylan explains that critical dystopian texts are “exposé[s] of the present moment” that “linger in the terrors of the present even as they exemplify what is needed to transform it” (198-199). Prior to discussing the text, I introduce students to the terms “Afrofuturism” and “speculative fiction,” and I map out the distinctions between critical dystopia, dystopia, and utopia. I also have students define neoliberalism as a way of articulating one of the premises for the dystopic landscape presented in the text. I spend a lot of time deconstructing the notion of utopia as a positive concept. One student mentioned that fact that utopias were subjective. We discussed how utopianism is a sort of totalitarian idea. Because of its subjective nature, inclusivity is impossible. We then discussed how Butler’s implementation of critical dystopia is meant to teach us how to survive in hostile environments; therefore, we shift through the text to unpack the lessons Butler is trying to express.

Parable of the Sower is set in 2024; the United States is a bleak and unstable nation due to the effects of global warming and a neoliberalism run amok that has caused the wage gap to be insurmountable. The protagonist, Lauren Oya Olamina, is an African American teenager who inevitably sets out on her own after her neighborhood comes under siege. During her travels, she rejects the teachings of her Baptist minister father, and essentially writes her own bible predicated on the notion that “God is Change”; the resulting text is called *Earthseed: The Books of the Living* and she eventually establishes a religion called *Earthseed*. The association of Lauren with a deity is further highlighted by the fact that she has a disease called “hyper-empathy” that causes her to feel the sensations of others she encounters – both pleasure and pain.

In contrast to *The Salt Eaters*, students were enthusiastic about reading this text and saw many parallels between the

novel and current events. The most popular theme was the black woman as God. This label was applied not just to Lauren, but Butler as well, as we meticulously teased out connections between the text and real life. One student characterized Butler as “god-like” because she thought Butler’s novel was prophetic. A colleague at another university sent me a file that had all of the verses from Lauren’s *Earthseed: The Books of the Living* in one document. In the main assignment for the novel, students were asked to do a close-reading of two complementary parables and to tie their analyses to a major theme of the book and explain why it resonated with them, as well explain how the parable was useful for this current moment.

As quite a different critical dystopian text, *The Girl with All the Gifts*, directed by Scottish filmmaker Colm McCarthy, and based on a 2014 novel by the same title penned by British writer, Mike Carey, offers a meditation on what black futurity could look like unencumbered by a racist past. Because the filmmaker and original novelist are white, the film would not traditionally be considered an Afrofuturistic text. However, Afrofuturism clearly functions as an analytic throughout the film. Set on the outskirts of London ten years after a global pandemic has initiated the extinction of the human race, a contagion has infected most of humanity by turning people into zombie-like creatures called “hungries.” The fate of humanity rests on hybrid children thought to have been infected in utero; the children become violently voracious, similarly triggered by the scent of animals and what I call “traditional humans.” They are sequestered at the military base which doubles as both a “school” and a medical facility where doctors experiment on the children in the hopes of synthesizing a vaccine.

In *The Girl with All the Gifts*, the existential crisis at the heart of the film is the pending demise of the human species. This preoccupation thereby initially seems to override our fixation with racial binaries and hierarchies. However, I encourage students to discuss the ways in which the hybrid children stand in for racialized, and perhaps queer, subjectivity – particularly when we learn that Melanie, the film’s young black protagonist, was originally written as a white girl in Carey’s novel and at times in the film it appears that she has a crush on her teacher. I also explain how in the world of the film, the hybrid children are considered illegitimate and unwanted progeny – which replicates nineteenth-century discourse on biracial children. Students were then placed in groups and asked to debate whether the hybrid children should be allowed to survive or be sacrificed for the continuation of the human race as we know it. For this exercise, I used Sylvia Wynter’s conception of the “overrepresentation of Man” to demonstrate how people of color and queer communities are disenfranchised by the Western construction of the Human and how the hybrid children present as another genre of Human that re-evaluates the hierarchical position of whiteness as the universal signifier of Man.

The course ended with a discussion of how the movie inadvertently encapsulates the racist, homophobic, and xenophobic fears of Others overwriting or overpopulating our traditional understanding of the Human as white, male, and heterosexual. However, we discussed how the decision to keep the original ending, where Melanie decides to set the

pods that have created the contagion on fire, thereby hastening the demise of traditional humans, is the real subversive move of the film. Students readily made the comparison of the atmosphere becoming intolerable to humans – who literally can no longer breathe – with Eric Garner, George Floyd, and a host of others murdered by law enforcement officials using illegal methods of detainment that constricted the air passages.

Elizabeth C. Hamilton's discussion of Afrofuturism and the "Afronaut" (i.e., black astronaut) as space traveler is congruent with the function Afrofuturism served in the course, as well as the role I saw myself and the students enacting within the learning environment. Hamilton contends, "Situating the Afronaut in contemporary art and Afrofuturism is very much about finding safe spaces for black life. It is about exploring and protecting and preparing the body for hostile environments" (18). Rather than view students as "Afronauts," I think of my students and myself as us as "forward thinking as well as backward thinking" time travelers shifting through the past to find what's needed to create the equitable futures we seek rather than just "preparing the body for hostile environments," as Hamilton suggests.

After a semester of radical dreaming and practicing hope in the midst of a global pandemic, it was my intention that students felt equipped to make the world over – a bold conceit at best. But, Hunt argues "So the heuristic of performance and practice gifts us with something. Using our minds, our bodies, hearts and imagination to enact and create situations, encounters, improvisations that call from us the sociality we dream of it's like practicing the muscles we will need to cultivate the new ground in which we can breathe." So, if we cannot breathe in this hostile environment, I suggested to my students that they take a page from Melanie's playbook. Melanie's decision to save herself rather than sacrifice herself for humanity can be read as a symbol of hope with regards to Afrofuturism – not only will there be black people in the future, Melanie's actions have also incinerated any trace of the world's racist past, thereby affording the children who remain the opportunity to live life free of racist scripts of blackness. So, I end the course with a perhaps not so subtle call to arms. Melanie's final act of claiming the world for those who had previously been disenfranchised becomes the ultimate act of hope.

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