

RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

Afrofuturism: Race, Erasure, and COVID

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IMAGE: COURTESY OF THE ARTIST, ALISHA B. WORMSLEY

“THERE ARE BLACK PEOPLE IN THE FUTURE” reads an art installation (Image A) created by Alisha B. Wormsley in the summer of 2018. The billboard, part of an annual community art project in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, was removed after being embroiled in a controversy when opponents deemed it racist, offensive, and divisive. In speaking about the installation, Wormsley stated, “It started out as a black nerd sci-fi joke. A response to the absence of non-white faces in science fiction films and TV...Afrofuturism dares to suggest that not only will black people exist in the future, but that we will be makers and shapers of it, too” (Sharpe 2018). In an act as familiar as the African American tradition of call-and-response, Wormsley laughs to keep from crying—that is, she deftly deploys humor to address a fundamental problem: Black erasure. What started out as a response to the absence of non-white faces in sci-fi became a rallying cry against gentrification and the literal removal of Black faces from their neighborhoods, which are often their historical homeland, the places to which their ancestors relocated after emancipation. Pittsburgh is one of the most gentrified cities in the United States and neighborhoods like East Liberty are a prime example of America’s preoccupation with policing, displacing, and erasing Black bodies. Wormsley’s installation counters this oppression and, judging by the response, successfully so. The billboard does not open old wounds but reveals how those wounds have been left to fester, how healing is a long way off. After a successful petition by supporters, the billboard owner offered to put the installation back on display, but Wormsley refused. The wound has been exposed and we must confront it.

In the ensuing years since the controversy, Wormsley’s installation has grown into a larger multimodal collection with dozens of pieces that incorporate the now famous phrase in various ways. Wormsley’s work has attracted critical as well as popular attention. Its artistic, cultural, and socio-political influence continues to grow: signs that read “There are Black People in the Future” have appeared at social justice protests; musician Otis Galloway’s 2018 electronic album, with its distinctively futuristic funk vibe, is titled “There are Black People in the Future (REMASTERED) Inspired by the Art of Alicia (sic) B. Wormsley.” Meanwhile social justice organizations like the Pittsburgh-based *SisTerPGH* have commissioned billboards that read “There Are Black Trans People in the Future”—a modification of Wormsley’s phrase enacted in recognition of “Trans Remembrance Day,” which honors those lost to transphobic violence.

Wormsley’s work continues to inspire and presently is a part of an Art-Work-in-Residence Program taking place in cities like Houston and Detroit, and overseas in countries like Germany. According to the program, “There Are Black People in the Future” is both a project of critical memory intervention and a catalyst for conversations that promote positive change. It, like this special issue, is interested in imagining the unimaginable. Imagining blackness in the future is a radical act that, as bell hooks articulates, contests a “deep nihilism [that] penetrates in a destructive way the very ground of our being. It is there in that space of collective despair that one’s creativity, one’s imagination is at risk, there that one’s mind is fully colonized, there that

the freedom one longs for is lost (341). In countering erasure, the essays comprising this issue utilize pedagogies that make visible the possibilities and potentialities Afrofuturism offers. They explore different texts and textures that intimate a future not overly determined by prescribed racial constructs but one that embraces the varied traditions, experiences, knowledge(s), and cultures of Black people.

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Our decision to publish this special issue on teaching Afrofuturism during a global pandemic is in part an acknowledgement of the radical transformations taking place within distinct kinds of classrooms, not simply those located within the walls of academia. Akin to Wormsley and as reflected in the essays comprising this special issue, we are interested in Afrofuturism as critical memory intervention and catalyst for conversations that promote positive change. (Project Row Houses) As a launching point for their conversation on erasure, we asked authors to consider Dewitt Douglas Kilgore’s definition of Afrofuturism as a “cultural force, an episteme that betokens a shift in our largely unthought assumptions about what histories matter and how they may serve as a precondition for any future we may imagine” (564). We chose this definition of Afrofuturism because we are not only interested in what Afrofuturism is but also what it *does* and what our authors do with it. Kilgore’s articulation gestures toward both the future and the past, helping us understand Afrofuturism as an immersive artform that lends itself to forward-thinking and alchemizing actions. The pandemic has made Black erasure visible in ways that cannot be ignored. Through the lens of Afrofuturism, the authors featured here investigate the ways in which erasure is reified in contemporary American society and also advance counter-narratives that disrupt this erasure. When we say “erasure,” we are referring to the deliberate material, representational, and literal abolition of blackness—Black people, their experiences, and their culture(s).

In this introductory essay, we, a queer Black woman and a straight white man, start by rooting our special issue in historical specificity. We demonstrate how America’s longstanding practice of Black erasure has resulted in a present-day reckoning, exhibited by the movement for Black lives, the *1619 Project*, and the January 6th insurrection, which compels us to reevaluate what is meant when we say “America.” Next, we provide a brief history of the field, grounding readers in key Afrofuturistic concepts and familiarizing them with our particular deployment of Afrofuturism. From here we utilize the seminal dates of January 6th, 2021, and March 13th, 2020, respectively, as

devices to highlight Afrofuturism's significance as both a theory and a praxis used to analyze and understand Black people and their culture—historically and presently. Afrofuturism can make truth-tellers of us all. As articulated by Ashley R. Hall, truth-tellers are those “trouble-makers [whose] truth-telling is transformative because it generates moments for us to (re)imagine and redefine our [Black] lives beyond the now by making visible the hegemonic frames working to exploit, dehumanize, and dispose [of? Dispossess?] us” please leave this as is because it's a direct quote (343). Correspondingly, the essays which make up this special issue do the important work of Afrofuturistic theorizing by analyzing texts (film, literature, and fashion) as well as the essential and acute work of engaging Afrofuturism as praxis (through their pedagogy).

“In America,” scholar Ta-Nehisi Coates tells us, “it is traditional to destroy the black body—it is heritage” (103). During three eventful years between 1919 and 1921, the world was treated to the end of its first “Great War,” a global pandemic killed about 50 million people (depending on who's counting), and the original “Fascist Manifesto,” which was published in Europe just as the Soviets were building their Comintern—socialism and barbarism both taking advantage of the armistice to begin their world-historical collision course. Meanwhile, the US was suffering another explosion of racialized violence (more than usual, that is—anti-blackness being both foundational and unyielding in that country no matter its particular “quality” at any one time). Responding from New York to these assaults and lynchings during the Red Summer of 1919, a 20-something Claude McKay was inspired to write what would become his most famous poem, “If We Must Die,” now a classic of Black radicalism, which exhorted his fellow people of color: “If we must die, let it not be like hogs” but rather “Pressed to the wall, dying, but fighting back!” (177-78)

Two years on from its publication—and very much fighting back—the Greenwood district of Tulsa (famously known as Black Wall Street) lay in flames and around one hundred of its Black residents, including women and children, had been murdered by the curiously common American marriage of white-supremacist state power with vigilante “justice.” A century on, and this history remains locked in rhyme. Or perhaps it's more accurate to say, cribbing from Jameson, that the above historical anecdotes are still “what hurts.” Today's attacks on journalist Nikole Hannah-Jones's *1619 Project* (2020) is Coates's argument writ large. The attacks against the *1619 Project* reveal the nation's discomfort with confronting its past. Additionally, the attacks signal a cultural pattern of and a dangerous commitment to erasing the material vestiges of slavery, which can be achieved only if one works diligently to scourge any trace of its legacy and its representational existence. These types of material and representational erasures can also be seen in recent attacks on Critical Race Theory and in Florida's pending legislation, SB148, which makes white discomfort a crime (Scully 2022). All of this speaks to America's refusal to claim its Black citizens and acknowledge the full range and complexity of their histories, lives, experiences, and humanity. Equally important, it illustrates how the past continues to haunt the present. Coates continues, “Enslavement was not merely the antiseptic

borrowing of labor—it is not so easy to get a human being to commit their body against its own elemental interest. And so enslavement must be casual wrath and random manglings, the gashing of heads and brains blown out over the river as the body seeks to escape” (103). During the pandemic, we have seen Black bodies subjected to those wraths (the transphobic killing of Barbie Pugh), manglings (the neo-minstrelarity of Jessica Krug), gashings (the massive deportation of Haitians asylum seekers), and blow-outs (the police murder of Amir Locke).

And then in late 2019, of course, word came from Wuhan that a new and especially virulent illness was rapidly starting to spread, taking full advantage of new pathogenic routes offered by industrial food production to make the leap from animal to human, and thereby helping inaugurate a succession of events that reveal history to be neither an arc nor one that inevitably bends toward justice. The subsequent lockdowns in March 2020 felt for many to be pulled straight from a dystopian novel, though the inevitable “resistance” was comprised less by rebel freedom fighters than fascoid whiners who, in their intransigence, helped make a pandemic endemic, prolonging antiviral restrictions that only further fed their beloved and self-perpetuating sense of persecution. But eventually this “certainty” of oppression was turned outward and, like the Red Summer, manifested as violence—social, psychological, and physical. According to the Economic Policy Institute, Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) make up most essential workers in key industries like food services, agriculture, security, medical assistants, and residential facilities aides, making them more likely to experience exposure to COVID-19 and, due to structural racism, less likely to receive proper medical care. Carelessly, medical professionals in European nations, such as French physicians Drs. Jean-Paul Mira and Camille Lochte, bluntly suggested that people of African descent be used as tests subjects for COVID19 vaccine testing. These incidents demonstrate how, in both the national and global imagination, blackness [decide on Blackness or blackness and make consistent throughout—remains disposable. Medical disposability of Black bodies harkens back to America's long history of medical abuse against Black people from as early as 1845 when Dr. John Marion Simms, the father of gynecology, violently experimented on enslaved Black women; to 1951, when Johns Hopkins University medical teams illegally harvested cells belonging to Henrietta Lacks; to as recently as 2020, when U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement was accused of forcibly sterilizing Black and other women of color immigrants. These incidents illustrate how the past continue to reinscribe itself in the present.

Practitioners of Afrofuturism, like contributors Wendy W. Walters and Gisele L. Anatol, understand that critical as well as innovative engagement with the past is important to charting new paths toward a more humane future. More precisely, Walters engages her experiences of simultaneously teaching Afrofuturist courses at a small liberal arts college and a state prison. By focusing on questions of temporality, Walters connects these seemingly disparate spaces by way of Black art and scholarship in order to link the “altered timeframes” caused by both COVID and incarceration. Anatol's essay centers on an exploration of

the ways in which the “past permeates the present” by asking students to consider how history shapes their visions of an inclusive and intersectional future. Anatol “encourage[s] students to consider how the burgeoning field of Afrofuturism allows artists to question the realities and ‘logics’ established by colonial regimes, neo-colonial powers, systemic racism, and other imbalances in contemporary legal, social, and political structures.”

The ways in which America has chosen to engage (or not engage) its past—especially its legacy of racism and subjugation—illustrate how those traditions Coates traces become heritage. Consequently, it is difficult if not impossible to consider the future without reckoning with the past and this failure to do so underscores how we allow these erasures to take palace. Joni Boyd Acuff argues, “Whether intentional or unintentional, acts of erasure secure white power and white property...[E]rasure allow[s] the dominant group to evade the topic of race” and the role of racism in American society (529-30). George Floyd signals our most salient example of literal erasure today. Floyd’s murder in Minneapolis at the hands of yet another gleeful killer cop engendered the largest protest movement in the history of the US, with scenes of endless masked mass? protestors adding to the sense of “End Times.” And the centennial of the Bolshevik Revolution—with its original (if not always practiced) promises of economic, racial, and gender parity—would see self-declared socialist politicians propelled back into the US spotlight after years of screaming from the wastelands of ideological exile. All of this just in time for the world to witness an almost exclusively white male crowd in Virginia chanting slogans such as “blood and soil” (an English translation of the original Nazi mantra for Aryan racial purity) and “Jews will not replace us”—both battle cries perhaps recognizable to Red Army soldiers when they finally entered Berlin.

Unsurprisingly, we now understand these “battle cries” as a violent response to the myriad audible global Black Lives Matters protests that reverberated throughout America and the rest of the world after Floyd’s death. Cities in North America (Minneapolis, Washington, DC, Chicago); Africa (Lagos, Tunis, Pretoria); Asia (Seoul, Tokyo, Hong Kong); Europe (London, Berlin, Pristina); Oceania (Auckland, Sydney, Melbourne), and Latin America (Bogotá, Rio de Janeiro) heard the Virginia chants of “you will not replace us” and answered, “you will not defeat us.” In a more subtle but no less violent response, some segments of the American populace sought to undermine the movement for Black lives with calls of “All Lives Matter,” a sabotage intended to expunge Black people, their lives, and the culture. Christina Friedlaender articulates this erasure when stating, “Many white Americans have taken issue with the [BLM] tagline itself, subverting it in the reply: ‘all lives matter.’ Proponents of this subverted tagline occasionally fail to see why it is a problematic response, regarding it as more morally inclusive. However, this tagline is a racist erasure of the very problems Black Lives Matter is addressing, namely that Black lives are not valued equally compared to white lives, and thus the very use of this subverted tagline constitutes a kind of harm” (5). Friedlaender is correct. Acknowledging the importance of Black lives does not disavow the lives of non-Blacks.

Instead, this proclamation demands we engage Black lives beyond symbolic gestures of diversity or inclusion and intentionally avow said engagement as praxis of one’s humanity.

But in the dystopia of today, we must also consider the dynamic nature of Afrofuturism and its ability to shape a future not only centered on countering erasure but also committed to bringing forth Black agency and empowerment.

So what might an artistic movement, famously (if unfairly, as some of our essay writers and other critics point out) associated with the period of the 1960s-1980s—the music of Sun-Ra, the films of John Akomfrah, the fictions of Octavia Butler—have to offer the first fifth of the twentieth-first century? Well, plenty it turns out. Afrofuturism as a literary genre can be pleasant to digest and easily situated as science fiction’s little (darker) brother, the one who dreams of a better world absent racism and oppression. In an aesthetic context, Afrofuturism can be quite palatable as well as safe because we can limit its impact to literary imaginings. Utopias are unproblematic by design. But in the dystopia of today, we must also consider the dynamic nature of Afrofuturism and its ability to shape a future not only centered on countering erasure but also committed to bringing forth Black agency and empowerment. In doing this work we must also consider the ways in which Afrofuturism makes visible the interconnected nature of social categories (like race, class, and gender) and systems of power (political, economic, and educational, among others). Those who have traversed the thorny terrain of marginalization understand that the “consequences of this redirection are the erasure of issues of power and subordination; thus, there is no questioning of the status quo or racialized inequities” (Acuff 523).

Situating Afrofuturism

Broadly speaking, Afrofuturism is a genre of literature, art, and film that takes up science fiction elements to narrate Black culture and history. More precisely, it speaks to the ways in which literature, film, music, and other forms of art transform science-fiction and fantasy elements—such as advanced technology, space- and time-travel, other worldly settings, and supernatural powers—by incorporating Black culture and history into narratives that have traditionally centered whiteness. As Ytasha Womack argues, Afrofuturism is “both an artistic aesthetic and a framework for critical theory” that, hydra-headed, “combines elements of science fiction, historical fiction, speculative fiction, fantasy, Afrocentricity, and magic realism with non-Western beliefs. In some cases, it’s a total re-envisioning of the past and speculation about the future rife with cultural critiques” (9). Indeed, this movement seems particularly suited to provide much-needed explanatory power to dissect (and more importantly, to suggest a few alternate lines of flight far away from) the contemporary confluence of pandemics,

racist violence, incipient fascism, and environmental catastrophe.

As contributing authors Dalia Davoudi and Kimberly Nichele Brown point out in this special issue, the pasts of Afrofuturism extend well beyond the usual markers that ground the movement in the '60s. Reaching back at least to Martin Delany's *Blake* (1859), and perhaps even to William Wells Brown's *Clotel* from 1853, Afrofuturism is arguably as old as the Civil War and most likely emerges as far back as African American cultural production itself. Davoudi asks us to consider the "culturally diffuse aesthetics" of Afrofuturism at work in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century texts, far earlier than the usual years attached to its emergence. Tracking this movement across centuries along with her students, Davoudi describes the "political and pedagogical potential of teaching the multi-valent histories of Afrofuturist thought in times of Covid." Similarly, Brown shows us how Afrofuturism can be deployed as a praxis to access a "usable past" in her pandemic-era remote classroom. Through what she calls "rehearsing hope," Brown's essay demonstrates how students rehearse hope as a heuristic, therapeutic reading and watching strategy to engage "the imaginative texts primarily of Black women that showcased the apocalypse, contagion, and dystopian presents/futures from an intersectional perspective," thereby confirming survival as the ultimate act of hope.

Nonetheless, those interested in mapping venerable Afrofuturism often cite Derrick Bell's 1992 short story "The Space Traders" as the quintessential if not original Afrofuturistic text—even though the term "Afrofuturism" was not coined until two years later in 1994, in Mark Dery's seminal article, "Black to the Future: Interviews with Samuel R. Delany, Greg Tate, and Tricia Rose." Here Dery defined Afrofuturism as "speculative fiction that treats African-American themes and addresses African-American concerns in the context of twentieth-century technoculture—and, more generally African-American signification that appropriates images of technology and a prosthetically enhanced future" (Dery 1993, 180). An "Afrofuturistic" aesthetic (if not the genre per se) was underway prior to the 1990s, as seen in the literary works of Octavia Butler, Samuel Delany, and Ishmael Reed, as well as in the musical talents of Sun Ra, Jimi Hendrix, and Earth, Wind, and Fire. Many critics today consider W.E.B. Du Bois's aptly titled 1920 short fiction "The Comet" to be the original—in a simulacra kind of way—Afrofuturistic literary text: a story that follows two survivors—a Black man and white woman—as they journey toward rebuilding civilization and redefining humanity in non-racialized terms after the earth is struck by a comet.

And why shouldn't Afrofuturism seek out its apotheosis in the stars, in futures so far off as to be unrecognizable, and therefore fully untethered from the current conjuncture that seems so unable—and at least as unwilling—to conjure anything approaching equality, dignity, and sustained existence for people of color? This, Du Bois tells us, is easier said than done, as the discovery of other survivors results in the return of previous racialized social patterns that had been temporarily overturned in the wake of the comet's arrival and the catastrophe that ensued. But even if Du Bois's vision didn't work out in the end, just a basic

knowledge of US history explains why Black imaginaries might so often look toward the future in order to imagine a place where the rudiments and legacies of slavery, Jim Crow segregation, de jure and de facto second-class status, racialized terror, and mass incarceration might be transcended in the service of *at least* equal rights and privileges. And a cursory glance at contemporary entertainment reveals that the themes and trappings of Afrofuturism not only obtain today but are perhaps the strongest guiding energies behind much cultural production by Black and non-Black artists alike. The "ArchAndroid" and "Dirty Computer" of Janelle Monáe, the unencumbered galactic exploration of Erkyah Badu, or the unparalleled imaginings of artists like Drexciya, whose work—rooted in the origin story of an enslaved woman who gives birth to new Africans called Drexciyans—has inspired numerous actors, musicians, authors, and visual artists to create works that counter America's death drive (David 2021). Black-centered future-oriented films like *See You Yesterday* and *The Girl With All The Gifts*, writers of contemporary Afrofuturist tales such as N.K. Jemison and Tracy Deonn, the prevalence of these themes, images, artists, and artistry imply an inflection point: Afrofuturism seems to be ascendant at the same moment many of us feel—whether thanks to the virus, rapidly fraying social conditions across much of the world, or increasingly imminent environmental collapse—that we have run out of any future at all.

As the aforementioned art and artists suggest, Afrofuturism will have much to say not only about the future but also its creation. Along with Womack, picking up the mantle from early Afrofuturistic scholars like Delany, Rose, and Tate, are critics like Isiah Lavender, De Witt Douglas Kilgore, Lisa Yaszek, Alondra Nelson, Amadine H. Faucheux, Ashley Hall, Lonny Avi Brooks, and Phoenix Alexander, who offer rich understandings of Afrofuturism that speak to the genre's complexity while staying true to its emphasis on resistance. These critics reinvigorate our imagination regarding the myriad ways Black people and culture(s) would and could exist in a technologically advanced future (Brooks 2018). Makeba Lavan's article asks us to imagine and reimagine notions of citizenry that aim for more than what is currently allotted, that breathes life into new futures. In doing this work, Lavan explains how "Afrofuturism allows African diasporic writers to imagine new and alternate cultural elements" in the service of "true citizenship and equity." Using two courses she taught across a full year of Covid education, Lavan explores these imaginaries while providing a narrative arc around her teaching during antiracial uprisings twinned with a global pandemic. These essays and other examples of Afrofuturist cultural production are less interested in "mere" acceptance, representation, and integration—choosing instead, as Kandice Chuh has urged us, to "imagine otherwise" entirely, perhaps a tacit (and sometimes explicit) conviction that reform is less necessary—and most likely less useful—than wholesale reinvention (Chuh 2003). Perhaps this also helps explain some of Afrofuturism's marvelously baggy capaciousness alongside an immanent intersectionality in its tendency to focus on the full and simultaneous constellation of imbricated nightmares at once, spotlighting the foolish impossibility of once again trying to pick apart one existential problem at a time.

January 6, 2021: Watching Men Like Lovecraft

Perhaps nothing so neatly conjoins the Afrofuturist preoccupations of simultaneous environmental and social catastrophe better than the helixing of Covid-19 to the Insurrection of January 6th. Far worse than even Charlottesville and culminating in the first few days of 2021's *annus horribilis*, a bunch of militia-LARPing cowboys converged on the Capitol and tried to rid the place of Indians for good—breaking windows, beating police officers, and looking around for a vice president or at least a House speaker to hang. To compound matters, as Martin Luther King famously worried to Harry Belafonte just before he was assassinated, “I fear I may have integrated my people into a burning house.” Though even a figure as prophetic as MLK couldn't have known how terrifyingly accurate his metaphorical language would turn out to be: While the US continues to smolder socially and environmentally (threatening full eruption on both fronts), the rest of the Earth—or at least large swaths of it that previously housed humans in relative comfort—is variously on fire, threatening to become so, and/or suffering from any number of other concerns, such as floods, droughts, sea-level rise, species decline, crop failures, infestations, etc. Which is to say, we find ourselves trapped in a historical conjuncture chock full of civilization-ending problems but perilously thin on what to do about them.

Our special issue of Afrofuturism engages the role this concatenation of aesthetic practices has offered us before—and very much still does—in the classroom, of course, but also far beyond. The introduction and subsequent essays consider how Afrofuturist themes and imagery might manifest themselves in the 21st century with materials that remark upon our perilous times. For example, before we turn to the classroom for answers—or at least for a few generative Afrofuturist examples that might hopefully point the way—we want to examine two contemporary popular “prestige” television shows that center Afrofuturist themes and imagery at the intersections of global health crises, environmental collapse, histories of racial terror, and the concomitant return of rabid and unapologetic white supremacy. If the most well-known moment of Afrofuturism is the musical explosion of the '60s and '70s, film and television have been just as popular media for the movement at least since the release of *Black Panther* in 2018. Indeed, video is often the way many contributors to this issue offer Afrofuturist objects to their students in class. Add to that the fact that, as January 6th dramatically revealed, the Revolution—or at least the Reaction—will *certainly* be televised. And like so many others fortunate enough to wait out much of the pandemic while employed almost exclusively from home, we have watched a *lot* of TV since March 2020.

Along with all the other fans that read and reread the original *Watchmen* graphic novel with the fervor and reverence of a religious text, we thought the portrayal of a group of edgy problematic white superheroes was an irreverent take on an enduring American myth—so, we waited eagerly for the small-screen adaptation. However, from the very beginning, the show we were offered was not

at all the *Watchmen* faithfully translated from the original page, but an entirely new vision that paid certain homage to the world of the source text—while also taking *full* Afrofuturist flight from many of the initial preoccupations entirely. Indeed, in the televisual *Watchmen* at least, Black erasure itself began to be erased. Premiering two months before the World Health Organization asked officials in Wuhan for more information on a new infection reported there, the first episode of *Watchmen* revealed in minutes that the original all-white cast of desperadoes meting out their vigilante justice was gone. The formidable Regina King was now at the center as Angela Abar and her superhero alter ego, Sister Night (a somewhat unsubtle callout to both her race and gender). Opening with a young boy in 1921 Tulsa watching a silent film about a Black “marshal” who delivers righteousness to white scoundrels before pulling down his own hood to reveal himself to grateful (if surprised) townsfolk, the boy's viewing is soon interrupted by the destruction of “Black Wall Street” unfolding around him. After white mobs (many deputized by police) shoot indiscriminately at Black residents and set fire to their homes and business, the chaotic scene concludes by torpedoing us immediately to the present, wherein a Black police officer is murdered by a member of the Seventh Cavalry, an even larger and more virulent version of the Klan.

By immediately centering race—and interracial violence—above all else, the series intentionally collapses the supposed distance between the burning of Black Tulsa and our current moment. From here the show toggles effortlessly back and forth from the past to the alternate(ish) present, WWI to 2019, indexing through a televisual medium Saidiya Hartman's famously phrased contention about the very long and very active “afterlives of slavery” and the inexorable presence in the present of the past. Like another celebrated example of Afrofuturism, Octavia Butler's *Kindred*, *Watchmen* becomes in a sense a family drama without much of a family—or, rather, an attempt to limn and suture the lineages of Regina King's character, so disfigured by the violences and concomitant social practices of a century of US history, that she becomes the walking-talking embodiment of the Combahee River Collective's contention (itself building upon Claudia Jones and other strands of Black feminist thinking): “If Black women were free, it would mean that everyone else would have to be free since our freedom would necessitate the destruction of all the systems of oppression” (Combahee 1977).

The story just as willingly takes flight from its original characters and thereby demonstrates that inclusivity need not remain merely representational but, rather, that the very *inclusion* of Black bodies within the narrative can transform both the nature of the characters and the show's propulsive focus. For example, while Sister Night is an entirely new character within the *Watchmen* universe, the famous blue glow of Dr. Manhattan has been retrofitted into Angela's husband “Cal,” played by Black actor Yahya Abdul-Mateen II rather than Billy Crudup from the film version. So what was previously Dr. Manhattan's famously blue-glowing chromatic calling card becomes in this recasting at least partly ironic:



LEFT: ACTOR YAHYA ABDUL-MATEEN II IN *WATCHMEN*. CENTER & RIGHT: ABDUL-MATEEN II AS DR. MANHATTAN

In this new *Watchmen*, a “person of color” becomes one of an entirely other kind—and also the most powerful human in the universe. From this bold setup, the show reworks and rewires the plot forward by way of a number of Afrofuturist MacGuffins: Pills called “nostalgia” that literally let Angela relive her grandfather’s memories as a queer superhero after the Tulsa massacres, giving her access to previously lost family histories; Black crusader Hooded Justice becoming a vigilante after being tortured by cops that place the eponymous Klan hood over his face, one of many examples of the ways in which African Americans have critically reworked the objects of racist practice into the subjects of potential liberation; and, of course, the ultimate plan by the Kavalry to capture Dr. Manhattan and harness his infinite atomic energy in order to re-enshrine white supremacy for good—a plot point both speculatively fictional and also about as solid a metaphor for the centuries-long forced extraction of enslaved labor that built white-supremacist modernity in the first place. My catalog here only engages a few of the ways that a show not originally intended as Afrofuturist can nonetheless include such elements to renovate its themes, illuminating the contours of what we might think of as the Tulsa Century, wherein Black resilience, white violence, and environmental precarity spectacularly collide at the intersections of two centuries’ worth of the color line. Most importantly, with new Black characters, older characters recast with Black actors, and, through Tulsa, the centrality of historical erasure being salvaged on screen as *the* engine of the American experiment, *Watchmen* deploys Afrofuturist fixations in the service of erasing Black erasure. We should add to the above a series-finale *deus ex machina* by way of a rainstorm of frozen tiny squids, which refers back not only to the original graphic novel but also links this show by way of the tentacular to one of the founders of “weird literature” himself, H.P. Lovecraft, as well as to the next show on offer.

If *Watchmen* detailed how a thirty-five-year-old graphic novel could be repurposed to address concerns from our own ripped-from-the-headlines moment, *Lovecraft Country* is a show that not only calls back a full century earlier to Lovecraft’s original writings but also more forcefully

demonstrates how the preoccupations of Afrofuturism can spectacularly dismantle and recombine racist primary sources in the service of Black “emancipatory internationalism” (Ortiz 6). Based on the novel of the same name by Matt Ruff, this excursus isn’t intended to champion the work of a white writer *as* an example of Afrofuturism but, rather, to showcase how the raw materials of Black history in the US can be reworked within the cultural productions of Black and white writers alike by way of the liberating openness of Afrofuturist preoccupations. (And talk about excavating horror from dark materials: *Watchmen* show creator Damon Lindelof apparently got the idea to set the opening scenes of *Watchmen* in Tulsa after having read Ta-Nahesi Coates’s magisterial “The Case for Reparations.”) But to properly contextualize *Lovecraft Country*, we need to first briefly place Lovecraft the writer at the intersections of creative renown (he has become what many people—rightly or wrongly—consider the father of “weird literature”) and American racism (he was also famously, venomously, continuously, and unapologetically bigoted against pretty much anyone not from Anglo-Saxon stock).

His execrable 1912 poem “On The Creation Of N-----s,” considered his most racist work (which, frankly, is saying a *lot*) gleefully frames people of African descent as a liminal race between “Man” and “beasts,” a “semi-human figure” who God “fill’d it with vice.” However, reading Lovecraft against his own repugnant grain (not in the service to rehabilitate him, of course, but, borrowing from Gramsci, to renovate and make critical—or at least usable—his breathtaking racial animus), we might engage his other racist works to outline the ways that racisms grounded in anti-blackness diffuse, diffract, and metastasize in order to differentially encompass other non-white (or otherwise othered) groups. For example, in the short story “The Terrible Old Man” (1920), three would-be robbers, “Angelo Ricci and Joe Czaneck and Manuel Silva” bear last names that just happen to flawlessly represent the three ethnic groups—Italians, Austro-Hungarians, and the Portuguese—most heavily represented among those more recently settled in the area Lovecraft called home. They attempt to rob an old man “reputed to be both exceedingly rich and exceedingly

feeble" in the fictional seaside Massachusetts town of Kingsport, one of seven times this imaginary location would serve as a scene of racially interrupted tranquility. In this case, thanks to the intrusion of bodies that Lovecraft (along with much of the race science of the time) considered both non-white and inferior, the "native" inhabitants of this made-up village already knew well enough to stay away from the old man. But the hapless criminals, as if the readers needed more confirmation, "were not of Kingsport blood; they were of that new and heterogeneous alien stock which lies outside the charmed circle of New England life and tradition." Soon to be found dead, of course, all three bodies were "horribly slashed as with many cutlasses, and horribly mangled as by the tread of many cruel boot-heels, which the tide washed in" by a man who many "believed to have been a captain of East India clipper ships in his day." Fondly invoking the trappings of Anglo-Saxon colonization and exploitation, Lovecraft makes a literary argument here about racial hierarchy along with a warning around the possible punishments for any subalterns daring to contest this frame.

What, then, might be the televisual *Lovecraft Country* deserving of his vile name? For the show itself, it's an otherwise gorgeously recreated 1950s Chicago, but also stuffed with the less flattering period details of Jim Crow segregation, militia-like violence, and police brutality. So, aside from the classic cars and period dress, *Lovecraft Country* reaches across the landscape to affectively render the experiences of anti-blackness by those forced to endure it in perhaps its most "accurate" representational ambit, that of abject supernatural horror. The show also tracks some of the legacies and lineages that infused *Watchmen*'s sense of connection between the contemporary and the historical. For example, in the first episode, the main character, a Black man named Atticus Freeman (the nomenclature in *Lovecraft Country* is about as subtle as *Watchmen*) finds a letter from his missing father about a long-secret family legacy linking them to New England. (Again, like Butler's *Kindred*—truly a touchstone of Afrofuturist familial temporality—personal histories and their inevitably racially "impure" pasts spur the plot.) While he is driving through Massachusetts to find his father, a bunch of racist deputies and their sheriff try to lynch Atticus and his friends—only to be murdered themselves in fitting Lovecraftian fashion: torn to pieces in the dark woods by large-toothed creatures called Shoggoths.

From this opening gambit, things only get weirder along similar lines. We arrive at a grand mansion in the woods, constructed by one Titus Braithwaite with funds from his robust nineteenth-century slave trade, and architecturally designed to open the gates of hell in order to give the Sons of Adam (his occult order, natch) eternal life. But thanks to the ubiquity of sexual violence within Titus's peculiar institution, it turns out that Atticus is distantly but directly related to him, and therefore also contains the holy blood that could open this portal to never-ending power. Atticus, of course, will eventually be sacrificed for the benefit of these white Sons (which include at least one white daughter), bringing into stark relief once again the double bind of slavery's afterlives: from the original sin of sexual violence committed against enslaved persons to the

generations of the future, like Atticus, forced to live with this passed-down "curse" that will eventually lead to the end of his own life in a scene of torture that brings to mind nothing so much as the archives of Southern slave "punishments."

From here, *Lovecraft Country* proceeds along these hyperbolically "weird" but also uniquely American lines, with a Second City chock full of Lovecraftian occurrences that nevertheless continually reflect the experiences of various non-white peoples living through the fungible and painful indignities of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries—from the self-estrangement of slavery to de jure and de facto segregation to the racialized policing helping warehouse millions in the age of mass incarceration. We meet Black ghosts of white medical experimentation trapped in a laboratory of death; a Two-Spirit Arawak imprisoned forever in a museum to protect the missing pages of the Book of Names; a Black woman who wakes up white after sleeping with a pale sorcerer (who will eventually turn out to be a woman, gender apparently as easy to slough off in this show as race); Atticus's closeted father covertly dating his Latinx partner, head of a cabal of persecuted but still-cheerily-performing drag queens; a South Korean sex worker confined there during the war who is in fact a "kumiho," a Korean spirit that must kill a hundred predatory men in order to be free; to the main characters attending the memorial for Emmett Till; to the character Hippolyta, who, thanks to an interdimensional portal, serves as a sort of wishlist of Black women's history and Afrofuturism at once, from partying in Paris with Josephine Baker, to leading a tribe of Dahomey Amazons, to a vigilante that kills a group of confederate soldiers—until she arrives far into the future and becomes absorbed into the community of a technological superior and apparently harmoniously multiracial civilization. And then of course the final climactic scene wherein two women of color must unite against their differences to kill the sorceress once and for all (with the Black man at the center of the tale sacrificed for the rest of the world). In other words, tidy entertainment for the *Hamilton* crowd this most certainly is not—which is perhaps why both of these shows are so much weirder, less coherent, and also perhaps far more *generative* in their open-ended messiness than anything lurking within that popular play. We might also think of these two shows as bookends of the pandemic, one ending before its arrival in the States, and the other finishing up at the high point of the racial reckoning that occurred in the summer of 2020. If *Watchmen* took liberties with its source material, then *Lovecraft Country* absolutely takes purposeful flight from its own inspirations—as Lovecraft himself needed far more redemption than the original *Watchmen* ever did, his works so suffused with racial animus that it actually propels the plot. *Lovecraft Country* knows this history intimately; indeed, one might convincingly argue that the shared contexts of the writer with his racism *are* the plot of his *Country*.

Alas, *Lovecraft Country* wasn't renewed for a second season, so unfortunately for Atticus, we'll never get to see the way the writers would've brought him back to life. Though ending the show with the slow execution of a Black man captured on film for everyone to see certainly recalls the murder of George Floyd (among many others), whose nightmarish death galvanized the aforementioned summer

of racial reckonings around the country. So perhaps the US doesn't need another season of *Lovecraft Country* because we've finally *become* an actual Lovecraft country—or, rather, belatedly realizing (for those ever lucky enough to be able to forget) that we've been this kind of country all along, just differentially doled out along various lines. And as we enter 2022, what could possibly be more Lovecraftian, more resolutely contrary to Afrofuturism—and, frankly, more antithetical to Black futurity altogether—than QAnon? Instead of addressing the climate catastrophe or any number of other actual threats, the men and women of this cult spend their time tilting at the windmills of a global cabal of blood-thirsty pedophilic Democrats, Satanists, liberals, and other “monsters” concocted by their right-wing fever dreams. If *Watchmen* and *Lovecraft Country* seem to push the boundaries of believability too far even for a fantasy show, neither of them have a thing on QAnon, which also has the “benefit” of being real—not in actuality of course but in its increasingly terrifying and very material social effects. So if racial shape-shifting seems a tough sell for a *fictional* narrative on TV, imagine the intellectual and ethical contortions QAnon demands from its adherents by way of its faith: Its latest bizarre mutation emerged in the form of a few dozen supporters packing Dallas's Daley Square on November 22nd, 2021—the site and anniversary of JFK's assassination—with the certainty that the murdered president's son (who also died, of course, in a plane crash in 1999) would return from his true redoubt: a hiding place where he and dozens of reportedly deceased celebrities have been living in exile for decades in order to combat the forces of global Satanic pedophilia. This homecoming would mark John-John's joining the Trump 2024 campaign as the Donald's running mate (macabre, sure—but also a nice little swipe at Pence's perceived “betrayal”), and their subsequent win would ensure a return to a terrifying and imaginary past that this time would also be a ceaseless future. This is why QAnon provides such a lively and sadly formidable foil to Afrofuturism: Both are projects centered in the belief that society is irredeemably broken but another world is possible—indeed, possibly already being born. For QAnon, however, the world it envisions after the “inevitable” clash of civilizations will be constructed from various bits of homophobia, sexism, racism, Christian nationalism, white supremacy, antisemitism, et al.—all combined with a millenarian desire for cleansing bloodshed that its adherents no doubt believe would make America—and, by extension, the world—finally great again. As we've learned from horror movies over and over and over again: the call, as usual, is coming from *inside* the house. And here, on the precipice of 2022, we will see if the new year will bring only fresh horrors or perhaps finally something like a new Popular Front that can take yet another stand against the worst of human darkness. In other words, we either choose Afrofuturism—or no future at all.

March 13, 2020: Seeing Yesterday's Future(s)

On Friday, March 13th, 2020, seven weeks after introducing Wormsley's billboard installation to my (Belinda's) undergraduate Afrofuturism class, aptly titled

“Coming of Age in Afrofuturism: Blackness, Erasure, and the Imagination,” three important and distinct “erasures” occurred. The first happened in the early morning -- a literal erasure as Breonna Taylor was murdered by Louisville police, igniting Black Lives Matter protests across the nation that would continue for months, growing ever louder and more powerful. The second erasure occurred by late morning, after I delivered my final lecture centered on the representational erasure of the fictional character Calvin Walker, a young Black man who dies at the hands of police in Stefon Bristol's sci-fi feature *See You Yesterday*. By late afternoon I would encounter a third erasure, this one material, as March 13th marked the last time I would see my students in person. COVID19's arrival would drastically change my students' relationship to our class and to one another. I teach at the nation's only flagship university that is also a Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI). My university is located in the southwest and enrolls nearly 15,000 degree seeking undergraduate students. With an average student age of 22 years and 49% of the student population identifying as Hispanic/Latino, my institution reflects what many US colleges and universities will look like in the near future (Official Enrollment). Problematically, our Black/African-American student population stands at 2% and our indigenous representation is not much better, with American Indian or Alaska Native comprising a mere 5%. Meanwhile, our white non-Hispanic student population is a robust 31%. My state considers itself a “Tri-Cultural State”—that is, Anglo, Hispanic, and Native. This “Tri-Cultural” myth is deployed quite often: I have encountered it at commencement ceremonies, political events, swearing-in ceremonies, athletic competitions, kindergarten graduations, and universities' presidential inaugurations. It is routinely stated as fact and often regurgitated by our general populace. And it is a lie. The absence of historical blackness from southwestern narratives and the marginalization of contemporary blackness from southwestern cultures reveal the “Tri-Cultural State” not only as myth but also as a weapon of racial erasure. Whether or not students were aware of it, they had already negotiated Black erasure prior to enrolling in my class.

The diverse and inclusive nature of my Afrofuturism course is unlike many of the less diverse classes I teach at this institution. In contrast to the statistics given above, my upper-level elective Afrofuturism course is quite varied: Cross-listed under English and Africana Studies, this class attracted students from a broad range: 33% of my students are Black/African American; 21% Hispanic/Latino; 38 % white non-Hispanic; 5% American Indian or Alaska Native; and 3% identified differently from those identities listed here—including Middle Eastern, Multi-Racial, and Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander. In terms of gender, 60% of my students are cisfemale; 38% cismale, and 2% trans and/or nonbinary. Moreover, many of my students are FirstGen, Dreamers, and international. Like our student population in general, the average age of the class is 23 years. (Official Enrollment).

I am a professor who sees immense value in mining knowledge from the quotidian. Accordingly, I use a myriad of nontraditional pedagogies, that, as a shorthand, I call contemplative standpoint. Contemplative pedagogy argues

that learning is enriched when students establish meaningful connections between the course materials and their lived experiences. Similarly, standpoint pedagogy is a positionality that recognizes identities are shaped by socio-cultural, economic, and political experiences. I am committed to establishing a high level of trust with my students so that when I put contemplative standpoint into praxis, they are ready to receive it. In this way I also teach careful consideration and risk-taking—important aspects of critical thinking and (literary) analysis. I am attentive to what my colleague Randi Gray Kristensen described (in a private correspondence) as “throwing a student out of the space of learning and into dissociation.” I know that meeting students where they are is critical to success. This is especially important in my courses, which involve teaching complicated theories and unfamiliar literary texts, typically written by authors who are not included in the Western canon. In such courses, students can be skeptical. I welcome their skepticism because it helps me demonstrate how they are already critical thinkers. I build on their skepticism, helping them to work through discomfort and to expand their frame of reference/minds. This work is just as important as the course content.

Though not forcibly didactic, Wormsley’s installation unapologetically intervenes in the discourse on resistance and asks its viewers/listeners/readers to intently contemplate what it would mean for Black people to live unshackled, empowered, and free? Black people in the United States have a complicated and often exploited relationship to capitalism/consumerism and labor/domesticity. Because of this complexity, I directed the class’s attention to [Wormsley’s domestic items](#): doll, teacup, nail, watch, sunglasses, and sunflower seeds. Embedded in each item are the words, “There are Black People in the Future.” Wormsley’s phrase is evident on most of the items; however, on some items the phrase is barely perceptible. This distinction became an excellent gateway to our primary aim: to engage Wormsley’s collection as a means to read and comprehend differently Black lives, histories, and culture(s) in order to position ourselves to imagine not just a better future but a different one. It is with this understanding that we engaged the film, *See You Yesterday*. An initial reading of *See You Yesterday* reveals a story about the death of another Black man at the hands of yet another trigger-happy police. If we look a bit closer, we can reveal a cloaked narrative layer—one that tells the story of inevitability where Black people can never escape American violence. In this way Calvin becomes not only a symbol of police brutality and Black subjugation but also of white psychosis. While these areas are important and deserving of critical attention, I, however, am interested in CJ’s narrative arc. CJ is Calvin’s younger sister, a budding scientist, and time-traveler. I wanted the class to explore this character as a vector of hope, an avenue for imagining new futures.

To give students a tangible idea of what it means to think differently, we read Rose Eveleth’s essay, “Why Aren’t There More Women Futurists?” This piece is a conversation between a number of women futurists who posit, “The future that gets imagined largely depends on the person doing the imagining. For a long time, the future has belonged to those who have not struggled” (Eveleth 2015). I encouraged

students to consider how are Black women, like Wormsley and the women in Eveleth’s essay, utilizing their voices to bring a different vision to the future? How might a position of struggle lead us to ask different questions? For example, in this same article AfricanFuturist Nnedi Okorafor offers an interesting perspective regarding cyborgs and subjugation: “That whole idea of creating robots that are in service to us has always bothered me...I’ve always sided with the robots. That whole idea of creating these creatures that are human-like and then have them be in servitude to us, that is not my fantasy and I find it highly problematic that it would be anyone’s.” (ibid). Students noted that, with few exceptions, in the science fiction they have read, self-aware robots irrationally destroy mankind; however, the literature often fails to tell the story from the robot’s perspective. Instead robots—self-aware or not—are presented as a warning about the dangers of technology rather than a cautionary tale about the dangers of white supremacy. Okorafor’s perspective demonstrates how marginalized people interpret robot uprisings differently. This viewpoint echoes my desire to use Afrofuturism to ask atypical questions as we imagine differently the future.

So, what does this work look like in an unexpected virtual classroom that has come about due to the pandemic? Breakout rooms. Plans for small group work were already in the making; however, virtual learning allowed me to create small groups and facilitate intimate conversations that complimented the asynchronous aspects of the course. Breakout rooms provided an opportunity to engage the film in a much more intimate way. Each group was asked to utilize one of Wormsley’s everyday/quotidian items as a prism through which to interpret differently *See You Yesterday*. Our discussion was guided by one probing question: How does CJ, like Wormsley, harness the quotidian and fashion it into an optimistic future for Black people? What follows is a snapshot of the discussion generated by the group that selected Wormsley’s [doll](#): Dolls are remarkable quotidian items. Existing under the guise of a child’s toy, dolls are really apparatuses of indoctrination and control that teach us how to love and nurture; whom to love and nurture; which bodies to value; and whose body belongs. Unlike Dr. and Dr. Clark’s famous “Doll Test” of the 1940s, which brought to light the determinantal psychological effects of Jim Crow on Black children’s racial perception and self-esteem, my twenty-first century students came of age when “Uncle Ben’s Rice” was rebranded “Ben’s” and Aunt Jemima brand syrup was mercifully taken out of circulation. They are children of Pulse Nightclub and Stoneman Douglass High School; of Obama’s presidency and Greta’s activism—they are cognizant of the power and harm of institutional racism and this awareness informed their interpretation of the doll.

Largely, the student group took the doll as a form of resistance. Noting the antebellum period dress, they grounded her in the history of slavery but not as a subjugated woman. Instead they wove a narrative of liberation around her body, arguing that although her people were enslaved and forced to labor in the cotton fields, she subverted this oppression by possessing a cotton dress and lace ribbon, something enslaved woman were rarely afforded. Rather than read these items as a sign of class,

they interpreted them as a sign of freedom and defiance — the doll’s unwillingness to be confined to the picture frame signals a refusal to be relegated to the margins of society. Also situated outside the picture frame but located away from the doll, there appears to be a piece of raw cotton and a rope—items that strongly hint at slavery, Jim Crow, and lynching. I asked the group to discuss the significance of the items’ placement above the doll’s head, blanketing her on either side. Generally, they felt this placement indicated an absence of oppression since the items were not a part of the doll’s body. I, however, wondered if the placement indicated a consciousness where the doll was aware of the items and the ways in which the vestiges of slavery are always already present, even if she isn’t corporeally bound by them?

Curiously, Wormsley’s decision to situate the doll within a gold frame did not conjure images of the Gold Coast, West Africa. Instead, students’ thoughts went to coltan-tantalum, the metal used in nearly 85% of gaming systems and cell phones that is illegally mined by corporations using exploited and subjugated laborers in the Congo. The students astutely noted that past is ever present as African countries continue to be raped of their resources by imperial countries (Ogazi 14). Even more astutely, they noted the pervasive nature of racism in online gaming. Without coltan-tantalum, PS4 and other systems would not exist; yet the very people who make gaming possible are the ones who are excluded from taking part in this pastime. This paradox resonated on a personal level for the group as the conversation came to an awkward halt. I asked the group if their interpretation(s) would change if we came to learn that coltan-tantalum was necessary for CJ’s time machine to work? I encouraged them to consider what the future would look like if coltan-tantalum was used in the service of enhancing and preserving Black life rather than exploiting and destroying it? Additionally, I wanted them to think about the significance of CJ’s time machine being comprised of parts borrowed from non-Black people. Is this a post-racial reading of belonging or an accurate reflection of our nation and communities? A student observed that the word “people” appears across the length of the doll’s skirt and stands alone, separate from the other words, most notably separate from the “There Are Black” portion of the phrase. To this student, the location of “people” indicated both solidarity and dedication—stating matter-of-factly, “if there are no Black people in the future, then there is no future for people.” Conversely, others saw it as an olive branch. They took “people” to mean that the doll would fight for all people—and not just Black people. This push-pull of liberation ideology is always thorny and although the conversation did not devolve into an “all lives matter” debate, it was apparent that some students could not envision blackness in a world absent of whiteness. At times, the students struggled under the weight of these follow-up questions, which made Afrofuturism all the more real. And isn’t that the point?

Although Afropessimism would have been appropriate here, not all students’ insights were pessimistic. Accompanying the doll is an ornament that seems to be a clock, which can symbolize an array of “times,” not just the historical past. Students identified the clock most strongly with CJ, interpreting it as an opportunity not to rewrite the past but rather to author a different future. Time, they

posited, is absolutely necessary to (re)imagine what could be—all other items are replaceable, time is not. Although the group did not articulate this as such, I took their statements on reclaiming time as an attempt to make sense of the ways in which blackness is seen as “frozen in time yet caught in a perpetual state of escape, fugitive movement (Hall 343); thus the dolls ability to “slip out of frame is to pursue an elsewhere that is not the current time and place one is forced to live in” (Hall 345). Inevitably, the conversation turned to time travel, providing the perfect opportunity to discuss the ways in which Black women’s bodies have been erased historically (doll) and contemporarily (CJ).

In *See You Yesterday*, the protagonist CJ must literally disappear in order to save her brother’s life. To preserve the space time continuum and to protect the balance between life and death, CJ cannot be seen as she traverses the past. One student argued that invisibility and erasure are not the same; the former is empowering and the latter, oppressive. Thus reminding us that if CJ were visible, her mission would fail. Here the student remixed invisibility as a superpower necessary for the greater good, noting that the absence of Black bodies is sometimes needed to carve space for other Black bodies to exist. We encountered a hurdle when I asked what happens when the absence is not temporary (like CJ’s) but permanent (like Calvin’s)? Nevertheless, this group of students displayed an advanced understanding of power dynamics—that sometimes things must be hidden in order to be effective. Predictably we ended with more questions than answers: What does it mean for young Black women to have to engage in literal erasure? How do these past events impact our present understanding of Black women? How might they inform a feminist future? In the end, CJ cannot save her brother, so what does that mean for Black people’s future?

If a doll can help us think differently as we imagine a future that does not reify the kinds of discrimination and marginalization we are trying to eradicate, then surely we can find inventive ways to open up avenues of belonging. By asking students to use Afrofuturism as a means to rupture everyday erasures Black people experience, I hope to get them thinking about how they can harness the quotidian and fashion it into something powerfully optimistic.

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RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

Time in Afrofuturism, Classroom Time, and Carceral Time

by Wendy W. Walters



IMAGE BY COTTONBRO VIA PEXELS.COM

Capitalist crisis has tightened up the time of the world: all over, people are in sync in their sense of contingency and social fragility, even if they might have wildly different accounts of it. Sometimes this recognition is unbearable and produces violence: because we know the change and the loss has already happened, and yet it is unbelievable and unbearable, while being borne.

- Lauren Berlant, 2012 (original emphasis)

I have been teaching a course on Afrofuturism at a small liberal arts college since 2004. Emerson is located in downtown Boston and, despite making some recent progress towards increasing diversity, it is still a predominantly white, expensive, private college. Part of the African American and African Diaspora Studies minor, the course is an upper-division literature course which often attracts film students as well. Over the past seventeen years students' responses to the course materials have deepened and shifted, especially since the time of the 45th presidency. Black writers, artists, and critical theorists have a long history of critique of the present via creative thought about the future. Drawing inspiration from Black pasts, they have forged radical visions and actively worked to create more just societies. The course draws on the radical imaginations of past and present struggles for social justice, aiming to envision new worlds. Learning to think outside the status quo's limits is crucial work for undoing oppressions of all kinds, and the course aims to study Afrofuturism and Black Speculative Fiction that leads the way. Hopefully, students finish the course seeing literature's potential to intervene in a dystopic present and offer pathways to a more just future. These days more and more students send emails after graduating, commenting on the ways the texts we read are continuing to influence them. If students entered the class having minimal experience of dystopic conditions in their own lives, then Octavia Butler's 2024 setting for a Southern California aflame in *Parable of the Sower* perhaps felt distantly futuristic back in 2004. In 2020, however, many students readily spoke about packing their "go bag." The ongoing crisis of structural racism is perhaps now *in sync*, to use Berlant's phrase, with the climate crisis, as well as late capitalism's distribution of precarity, which has indeed "tightened up the time of the world." And then there is the time of COVID.

Much Afrofuturist literature, art, and scholarship invites questions about the nature of time. Is time linear, cyclical, or spiral? In this essay I describe teaching Afrofuturism during the time of COVID in two distinct but related spaces, a campus classroom and a prison classroom, hoping to show that Afrofuturist texts enable students to envision and enact creative interventions in multiple dystopic presents. Novels such as Nalo Hopkinson's *Brown Girl in the Ring* feature protagonists who exist at crossroads between past, present, and future. Ti-Jeanne's ability to thrive in the novel's futuristic setting of Toronto is dependent on her learning to adapt her grandmother's Caribbean-based ecological knowledges to her urban setting and carry this wisdom forward in ways that will help her to care for herself and her community. Afrofuturist artworks "decenter whiteness, Eurocentrism, and Western cosmologies and offer new visions of what could come to be" (Jackson & Moody-Freeman 9). This decentering calls into question damaging

social constructs that have been normativized and universalized: a binary conception of gender, species boundaries, racializations and their attendant hierarchies, and the geopolitics of the nation state as an order of social organizing. When viewed through the lens of Diaspora Studies, Afrofuturist literature opens up a space to reconsider other ways of thinking, to imagine otherwise, and to activate creative pathways via a Black radical imagination. As Robin D.G. Kelley notes in the Introduction to his book, *Freedom Dreams*, "There are very few contemporary political spaces where the energies of love and imagination are understood and respected as powerful social forces" (4). We read Kelley's chapter early in the semester, looking toward the course texts in search of the "emancipation of thought" that envisions a "total transformation of society" (5). Part of moving toward that vision is a rejection of forms of Eurocentric thought built upon erasure. Referring to the work of Sylvia Wynter, Françoise Vergès explains that Western liberal humanism is "fundamentally inadequate in comprehending the humanity of late modernity's structurally marginalized and narratively condemned populations" (original emphasis). Afrofuturism is a powerful antidote to these forms of narrative erasure and condemnation. As Reynaldo Anderson notes, Afrofuturism can establish counternarratives to delegitimize the "Eurocentric social contract that institutionalizes and maintains the power of the elite" (179). In this course, students encounter texts that begin from the perspective of the counternarrative, and I hope students leave the course understanding the "Eurocentric social contract" to be a powerful fiction.

Decentering "western" man leads to the decentering of all of that subject's attendant ideologies and teaches us to reject their violence. Learning about other forms of historical consciousness is thus imperative, and we begin with an introduction to the *Sankofa* principle within *Akan* culture, which has been taken up by many diasporic artists, writers, and scholars as translating to, "It is not wrong to go back for that which you have forgotten." In her article, "The Emergence of *Sankofa* Practice in the United States: A Modern History," Christel Temple charts the diasporan use of *sankofa* epistemology, quoting Maulana Karenga's (2001) *Introduction to Black Studies*: "beginning with Black History stresses also the importance of the ongoing project of historical recovery to every field in Black Studies. This process is called *sankofa*, an *Akan* word which means 'to return and recover it.' This involves returning to the rich resource of the African past, or history, and using it as a foundation to improve the present and enhance the future" (Karenga 78, cited in Temple 140). For many students, if they have been raised and educated within "western" institutions, this may necessitate at least a provisional acquisition of what VèVè Amasasa Clark has termed "diaspora literacy," since Karenga's retrieval and reclamation of the past is critical and analytical, seeking "deeper and larger meanings that routine competence cannot provide" (Karenga 555 cited in Temple 141; Clark). *Sankofa* principles inform our reading of Octavia Butler's *Kindred*, for example. What does Dana learn about her ancestors through being abducted into their actual worlds, as opposed to reading about the history of slavery in books? How does she carry that knowledge forward into her

present? Butler's use of actual time travel in the novel allows Dana an emotional understanding of choices made by her direct ancestors. In this sense, literally going back to the past reframes Dana's knowledge about the agency of her enslaved forebears.

While Dana travels backwards in time and moves repeatedly between the past and the present, Nalo Hopkinson's protagonist, Ti-Jeanne, in *Brown Girl in the Ring*, travels out of time and into the spirit world. VèVè Amasasa Clark's discussion of the ways *marasa* consciousness imagines beyond the binary helps frame Ti-Jeanne's dilemma. Ti-Jeanne's initial rejection of her grandmother's knowledge ultimately imperils her, and she can only move forward by reclaiming those knowledges and shaping them to her own needs. Ti-Jeanne's experiences living in a futuristic Toronto place her in multiple spaces, situated between spiritual practices, medicinal and herbal knowledges, and her relationships with her new baby, her estranged mother, and the grandmother who raised her.

Questioning linear historical narratives, we begin talking about time on the first day of class, viewing together John Akomfrah's cinematic essay, *The Last Angel of History*. When students hear Greg Tate pointing out that alien ships already landed on the west coast of Africa over 400 years ago, that any UFO stories they may have heard have already happened, they then read Chapter Two of Olaudah Equiano's narrative from a new perspective. Throughout their educations many students have encountered texts by formerly enslaved people, and they are familiar with the narrative of linear progress from captivity to freedom, a teleology that has been long enshrined in the institutionalization of those texts. To return to Equiano's text then, noting the ways it also reads as a "science fiction" narrative of alien abduction that actually happened, jolts students' sense of what is past and what is futuristic. Since dystopic literature is a popular form of cultural production, perhaps especially as a category of young adult literature, many students are used to thinking about dystopia as future fiction. Equiano's vivid descriptions of the terrors of the Middle Passage show students pre-existing dystopias that have shaped the present.

Samuel Delany's position that science fiction doesn't predict the future, but rather offers a significant distortion of the present, offers a vantage on the present that many privileged students have not before seen. Delany's essay, "Racism and Science Fiction," shows students the ways racism is structural, systemic, and also an everyday occurrence. For some (white privileged) students this awareness of racism as structural may feel like a "revelation." The contingency of "revelation" is something that we discuss: what forms of blindness enable one to benefit from white privilege without recognizing it as such? How have dominant narratives of individualism, economic structures of neoliberalism, historical tales of manifest destiny, in short the myths that bolster the US nation state, erased not only its actual history, but its ongoing violences? When students understand how deeply structural racism is, then they are eager to read and think about ways to undo the structures that support white supremacy. In 2020 students especially wanted to read and discuss literature that presented a way out of these conditions. While students

appreciate the depth and power of Ralph Ellison's writing in *Invisible Man*, some felt that it should not qualify as Afrofuturist literature, as they did not see the narrator's final position as liberatory. Students described feeling triggered by the scenes of overt violence within the novel as well as by scenes of stifling control and suppression of the narrator's own will and desire. Students similarly felt that Octavia Butler's short story, "Bloodchild," should have a content warning for domestic and sexual violence, despite the fact that the characters are not identified as human. Experiences teaching these texts in 2020 have shown me that critical dystopia as a genre that serves to critique present injustice and warn of a future that will flow from it risk inflicting further trauma on students, even when creative resistance and survival are the focus of our discussions about these protagonists.

I was teaching this course on Afrofuturism in spring 2020 when COVID hit. Teaching Afrofuturism and teaching during COVID thus brought certain contingencies *in sync*. COVID seemed to add an exclamation point to Ruth Wilson Gilmore's definition of structural racism: "Racism, specifically, is the state-sanctioned or extralegal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death" (2006 28). COVID showed, for those who had not seen it before, how the health disparities created by structural racism were manifesting Black death. Reading Derrick Bell's "The Space Traders" alongside contemporary articles about racialized "essential workers" facing exposure to the virus, for example, made Bell's critique of Black sacrifice for white interest very immediate. Students could clearly see the ways folks were being asked to sacrifice their own health and that of their families for the sake of a false construct called "the economy" and, more directly, for the convenience of those who had the means to stay at home and order food for delivery, to take one example. For some students in 2020, COVID "lifted the veil" (brown). As adrienne maree brown noted, this invisible virus was "making the wrong structures and systems and beliefs so visible" (brown). Brown's framing is important since it emphasizes conditions that were already extant, but had perhaps been possible for some to ignore. Did COVID stop a form of capitalist time from rushing onward?

In addition to unveiling damaging forms of abandonment, COVID also altered many peoples' experience of time, as routines were upended, movement was curtailed, and days seemed to blend into one another. But here, too, structural inequalities were made visible. Interrogating concepts of time raises important questions about power and social hierarchies. As Michael Hanchard notes, "Time, when linked to relations of dominance and subordination, is another social construct that marks inequality between various social groups" (253). In a virtual conference called "Time for Black Studies," Roderick Ferguson spoke about time as a mechanism of state power: "Think here of the time required for people to wait in line to vote, and to receive a vaccine, and the time meted out by judges in convictions [...] In the context of Black people, it's easy to see how the state uses time to withhold and circumscribe rights and political status. The state's racial project, with regard to Blacks, has time as part of its arsenal." There is perhaps no more destructive part of this arsenal than the prison

industrial complex, the vast container for “the time meted out by judges in convictions,” and the state’s most violent method of withholding and circumscribing rights and political status.

During the early time of COVID, I was also photocopying these Afrofuturism course materials for DOC approval to teach the course in Fall 2020 as part of the Emerson Prison Initiative. Established in 2017, EPI offers Emerson College classes, taught by Emerson faculty and bearing official college credits toward the granting of a BA, to students currently incarcerated at MCI-Concord, a state-run prison. MCI-Concord is a men’s medium security facility located about 45 minutes northwest of Boston, where there has never before been sustained tertiary educational programming inside (Gellman). There were twelve students enrolled in this first cohort, and Afrofuturism was slated for the third year of their degree path. Due to COVID, in-person teaching in the prison was delayed until September 30, so in late August 2020 I introduced the course via old-fashioned paper mail. I wrote that:

the present moment seems entangled in both dystopia and hope. On one hand we are in the middle of a global health pandemic that does not affect everyone equally, and is exacting a toll most heavily on people of color and poor people, many of whom have insufficient access to health care and insurance. We are also in the midst of the ongoing pandemic of structural racism, which continues to unleash all kinds of state-sanctioned violence on African Americans, from police brutality, to environmental injustice, to educational disparities, and more. But at the same time folks are out in the streets protesting and mobilizing against violence and structural inequality. Longtime activist, intellectual, and scholar, Angela Davis, (whom we’ll read in this class) said she has not seen such a widespread global movement of antiracist activism in her life! Grassroots mutual care networks are springing up everywhere, and people are delivering food, planting urban gardens, and creating support systems to check on one another. Everyday people know the power of collective action and use their imagination to envision and create better futures. It is inside this productive space between dystopia and hope that Afrofuturist literature, art, film, and music resides.

I shared with the students Arundhati Roy’s powerful statement from April 2020, in which she described the pandemic as a portal: “Historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew. This one is no different. It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next. We can choose to walk through it, dragging the carcasses of our prejudice and hatred, our avarice, our data banks and dead ideas, our dead rivers and smoky skies behind us. Or we can walk through lightly, with little luggage, ready to imagine another world. And ready to fight for it.” Roy’s words seemed to call for Afrofuturism’s methods of radical imagination, and I hoped that our course, the texts we’d read together, the discussions we might have, could become some sort of a portal, a way to make it through the pandemic and emerge on the other side with a new vision. There are perhaps no doors more solid than those in a prison; and yet it is also true that education in prison can sometimes become a

portal, a literal pathway to a different future for incarcerated students.

When I first entered the prison on the last day of September, students were just coming out of an extended period of modified operations in the prison, with limited internal movement and all the men confined to their cells for up to 23.5 hours per day for weeks at a time, unable to congregate due to social distancing requirements, a situation replicated in many prisons throughout the country. The trauma of this experience, on top of the murder of George Floyd showing on their television screens over and over, created a dystopia not to be imagined. (Though this trauma was later exceeded.) We met face-to-face (masked and socially-distanced) as a class until Thanksgiving, when once again the prison reverted to 23.5 hours/day confinement, as COVID cases began to surge through the population. Many of the students in the class continued to engage with the course materials throughout this period, and we were able to communicate via mail. Finally, teachers were allowed to re-enter the prison on April 6, 2021, compressing the remaining required thirteen hours of classroom time into three days of meetings. The teaching of this fifteen-week course thus followed a unique structure of time, extending across more than seven months. This version of an Afrofuturism course took on an entirely new relationship to time, extending and dilating, constricting and pausing. While I am always concerned for my students’ well-being, that concern took on a whole new meaning and felt like an emergency. Students inside the prison faced physical and mental health challenges that made our coursework seem trivial.

Instructional time in a college course is typically so visible and quantified -- bounded, divided, and laid out within a structure of weeks on a syllabus, meeting days and hours quantified in timeframes standardized by accrediting committees. It is easy to see the ways the state controls time within the prison as a form of violence. How do we identify the ways the state controls the time in non-carceral classrooms? Federal and state student loans are tied to institutional compliance with accreditation standards regulating credit hours and time in class. Because the incarcerated students in this program are enrolled in a four-year degree-granting BA, the institutional time of accreditation extends into and is even laid over the more overtly violent ways that time is structured within daily life inside the prison, where every movement is marked and bounded by the DOC’s control of time. While COVID disrupted the rigidity of academic time, derailing the syllabus plan and creating a suspension of time, the state prison system’s imposition of segregated time created far more difficult challenges for incarcerated students. For teachers, concern for student physical survival and mental health also met up against the provost’s demand for adherence to credit-hour requirements.

During the time from mid-November 2020 to early April 2021, the course texts became a portal, allowing ongoing conversations about Afrofuturism, as well as enabling the continuation of these students’ work towards their BA’s. Through email, scans, and snail mail, I sent in discussion questions, ideas about the texts, new questions placing each new reading in the ever-changing political contexts we were

all experiencing, including the presidential election and the January 6 insurrection at the U.S. Capitol. Our conversations about the stories we were reading, together and yet apart, traveled in through the various levels of transmission. I received pdf scans of handwritten essays in which students communicated their piercing critical analysis of the course material, woven with narratives of their personal histories and immediately lived dystopias. Students also resisted the texts in important ways. A student argued that popular fiction depicting dystopic conditions was not useful to him, as he wrote, "Many speak of and write about dystopias in the future and many enjoy highlighting current social injustices [...] We as a society need to move beyond writing about what is messed up. What are we doing to change things? Dystopia is right here in my face 24-7-365." Students linked moments in their lives before incarceration to scenes in novels we were reading, connecting their own histories to what they were reading. So too did the time of COVID enter their essays, as they documented the physical suffering many experienced with the virus, fears of death, inability to communicate with loved ones, trauma of being confined to a cell, struggles with housing displacement caused by the prison's shifting quarantine measures, loss of access to books and personal property, and on and on.

I wrote wholly insufficient letters to the students expressing my concern for their health and safety and offered detailed comments on students' essays, trying to substitute for the lively and energetic conversations that had previously marked our shared time in the classroom, and mailed the pages back. According to the definitions required by collegiate accreditors, these hours were a quantifiable part of the course time, as we were engaging in *asynchronous* coursework, a legitimate substitute for in-person teaching and learning. I passed the students "reading notes" as a way of creating conversations; and students continued to converse with one another outside the space of the classroom, maintaining in any ways possible the forms of community that sustained them inside. I sometimes heard about these conversations via "reading responses" I'd receive in the mail. Across the time of the pandemic, across carceral time, and across academic institutional credit-hour time, I hoped we were somehow keeping a portal open for a sustained promise of futurity.

Even without COVID, teaching in prison requires a readjustment of the concept of time. People outside prisons talked about how COVID altered their sense of time, as many faced forms of confinement they had not previously experienced. Incarcerated students already knew this, had already reckoned with the need to make an imposed time into something else, to make a forced confinement liveable. They seek to do more than mark time, and instead move through it and make use of it by reading, studying, counseling, mentoring, advocating, and supporting loved ones inside and outside the prison. In this sense incarcerated students are already Afrofuturists. Incarcerated students perceive the ways that enslaved people who nurtured their loved ones, plotted plans to run, and created community under the most oppressive conditions were early Afrofuturists. Those onboard slave ships, experiencing the first alien abduction to a completely unknowable future, who nevertheless envisioned surviving, shared food scraps,

enacted slave ship rebellions across language barriers and community origin relationships were Afrofuturists. Students in the class saw the literature we read as shaping a future of Black agency. An incarcerated student wrote that "Just as stories from the Bible, that some consider literal and others symbolic, influenced the agency of so many enslaved Black people to organize, to run to freedom, and to recognize their right to be, Afrofuturism and the poignant stories being told through this medium can shape minds to think bigger than the present social constructions." Drawing on past knowledges and projecting a future against all odds is clearly an Afrofuturist mode and practice.

Once students recognize the ways that past injustices haunt the present in new forms, they readily question the linear progress narratives they have been told about history. VèVè Clark's discussion of history as spiral resonated most with incarcerated students, who argued that history is not just a loop, but rather it is a repetition with a difference. One student wrote, "It's not the same old thing happening all over again, but the same force with a new twist, and you can get hit in the head with the twist, depending on where you're standing." *Sankofa* principles of looking back to the past while moving forward into the future had specific meaning for incarcerated students. Their writing about the texts often journeyed back to their own pasts, reflecting on these experiences in light of what we were reading and discussing. *Brown Girl in the Ring* was one of the favorite novels of the class, and many students found resonance with the intergenerational family relationships depicted in the novel and in their own lives. Some recognized Hopkinson's depiction of "The Burn" as an example of an under-resourced, over-policed community with similarities to places where they grew up. Others were thrilled to see vodun and Caribbean spiritual practices that they knew well represented in popular literature. This form of representation counters the cultural erasure which is still a part of so many students' educations. At the end of the course one student wrote that Afrofuturism "makes it ordinary to be black. In a white world black is taboo, wild, untamed, etc. Afrofuturism enables black to be/become what it desires rather than become what whites desire. Afrofuturism frees the mind of racialized thoughts and allows individuals to set their own heading. This in my opinion is true agency."

Afrofuturism enables black to be/become what it desires rather than become what whites desire. Afrofuturism frees the mind of racialized thoughts and allows individuals to set their own heading.

In an article about teaching in prison, Anne Dalke and Jody Cohen frame asynchronicity in another mode, beyond the institutional demands of credit hours: with hope, they posit that "class gatherings also include, profoundly, the writers whose work you are reading together. You are all untimely contemporaries, together creating a different 'reality of time,' 'cultivating solidarity with asynchronous

others” (145). Across the multiple temporalities of this course, students connected disparate texts to their own histories and experiences, sometimes concluding that their own sense of agency was greater than that of the characters. Analyzing “Spider the Artist,” a short story by Nnedi Okorafor, one student made a powerful analogy to Okorafor’s discussion of oil pipelines in the Niger Delta, writing, “Eme and I are ‘Pipeline People,’” but adding that “Eme and I are surrounded by the pipeline differently. Eme is affected by the world produced from the product inside the pipeline. I am the product in the pipeline.” Students had read a definition of *critical* dystopia as involving protagonists in the “process of taking control over the means of language, representation, memory and interpellation [as] a crucial weapon and strategy in moving dystopian resistance from an initial consciousness to an action that leads to a climactic event that attempts to change the society” (Baccolini and Moylan 6). In his paper about “Spider the Artist” and *Brown Girl in the Ring*, this student carefully noted the ways Eme and Ti-Jeanne confronted power structures in their worlds and reappropriated language as a strategy of their resistance. He wove his own life histories into his essay, detailing the complex and varied ways he is working towards his liberation -- through legal channels, group leadership, community support, psychological healing and more. His essay concluded, “Whereas both Ti-Jeanne and Eme were unsure of what they were going to do moving forward, I have a multi-lane plan [...] For Ti-Jeanne and Eme the end is written. For me, my end is yet to begin. My life may be a dystopia art can never imitate, but I might have to put it in book form or write the screenplay myself.”

The rights of incarcerated individuals are erased every day in this country, and the crisis of mass incarceration is of course just another site where we see the state’s work to engineer the literal erasure of Black life. While Afrofuturist literature and art has always been about countering this type of erasure, students in different educational settings experience other forms of structural abandonment in different ways. Ruth Wilson Gilmore noted in June 2020:

In the United States, where organized abandonment has happened throughout the country, in urban and rural contexts, for more than forty years, we see that as people have lost the ability to keep their individual selves, their households, and their communities together with adequate income, clean water, reasonable air, reliable shelter, and transportation and communication infrastructure, as those things have gone away, what’s risen up in the crevices of this cracked foundation of security has been policing and prison. (Intercept)

Incarcerated students are living, more acutely than others, directly inside this state of abandonment, are all too well aware of its structural nature, and seek ways to not just survive but thrive despite it. The final assignment for the course invited students to write their own Afrofuturist story, with the hope of activating the pleasures of narrative and creativity, and the potential of the imagination to be both radical and joyful, a portal and a form of transport. Reflecting on Afrofuturist theories we had read, a student wrote that “Using Clark, Kelley, and Eshun, we can see that if we visualize and begin the healing process in the mind (like a surrealist) many good things can evolve. We don’t

have to accept the decayed ideologies that hold most of us subjugated by the wealthy. In fact, we can oppose and develop our own ideas to a better future.”

This is the promise of Afrofuturism, inviting students into this space between dystopia and hope, critique and creativity. When students read texts critiquing the structural conditions that create dystopic pasts, presents, and futures, they want to see the undoing of these conditions. They are eager to read the creative intervention, the ways to think outside of structural abandonment. Creative works that intervene in institutional violence, reimagining a different world, enable the decolonization of the mind necessary to create social change. Prison abolitionist Mariame Kaba notes the way the prison industrial complex has occupied the imaginations of people in this country (25). To undo that mental occupation, Kaba argues that collective art-making is a necessary step towards dismantling the PIC, and that leadership should come from those inside the walls. Incarcerated students have already developed strategies to survive the sentence of time by claiming agency over their future as best they can. In the face of organized abandonment, they create forms of community support and connection, mentorship, and care – as Saidiya Hartman has noted, “care is the antidote to violence.”

Teachers were able to re-enter the prison in April 2021 and, with Bob Marley’s “small axe” in mind, I asked the students whether they wanted to share what “small acts” had allowed them to make it through the time of COVID. People spoke of their music, workouts they could do in a cell, books they read, and any small routines of care for others and self-care that remained possible in the most oppressive conditions of the institution. These acts of resistance and survivance sustained them through experiences of isolation and fear. In those last few days of our time together we wanted to celebrate the conclusion of the course and reflect on the materials that had meant the most to the class. We watched Jenn Nkiru’s beautiful short film, “Rebirth is Necessary,” a project that weaves a wide range of footage from Black film archives and historical documentaries with artistic and stylistic images of liberation and joy. The creativity of this film focuses on a historical thread of love and community, bringing that past into a future of continued agency, empowerment, and creative expression. Students also wanted to re-watch a short TedTalk by Ron Finley about planting gardens in South Central, Los Angeles. Finley’s demonstration of how he turned empty lots and sidewalk margins into plots of vibrant vegetables was seen as a powerful form of social change as well as a committed act of care for the health of the community of South Central, both envisioning and creating a better future. We also spent some class time hearing from the creative pieces some students had written for their final work in the class. They had the option to write an Afrofuturist story of their own, analyzing how it demonstrated their own definition of this creative genre. Introducing his own story, “The Griot’s Genealogy,” one student described the importance of African principles in Afrofuturist works: “*Sankofa*, meaning ‘go back and get it,’ emphasizes the importance of cultural practices rooted in African beliefs. *Ashe*, or ‘the power to make things happen,’ represents the ability to intervene in the future. Thus, Afrofuturism removes the barrier of time for the purpose of

survival, growth, and flourishing. I define Afrofuturism as a portal because it enables the past to speak to the future and uses the future to intervene in the present." Students in both classrooms--on campus and inside the prison--reject texts that make them feel stuck in a repeating wheel of historical traumas. Even when such texts feature protagonists who resist the conditions of their lives and create modes of survival and flourishing, if the text does not offer an intervention, creatively showing how the future can look different from the present, students do not judge it to be a true Afrofuturist text. As an incarcerated student wrote in his comments at the end of class, "A main component of Afrofuturism is envisioning a different future, and part of that envisioned future is changing the present, meaning putting forth the efforts to reveal an alternate narrative to the false narrative perpetuated for centuries by a European lens, which is usually false in nature. So by way of art, poetry, dance, music, writings, films and other forms, we push and teach our truth as we know it [...] thus giving Black people agency and self-realization." Several students were motivated to continue to write Afrofuturist fiction, and several also noted that they now considered themselves Afrofuturists. While some incarcerated students began the semester openly questioning the use-value of reading fiction, ultimately the forms of critique and future visioning that Afrofuturism offers provided many with a sense of creative empowerment. Offering to students this sense of agency and the ability to define what Afrofuturism means to them is what has made this such a rewarding subject to discuss together in classrooms both inside and outside the walls of the prison.

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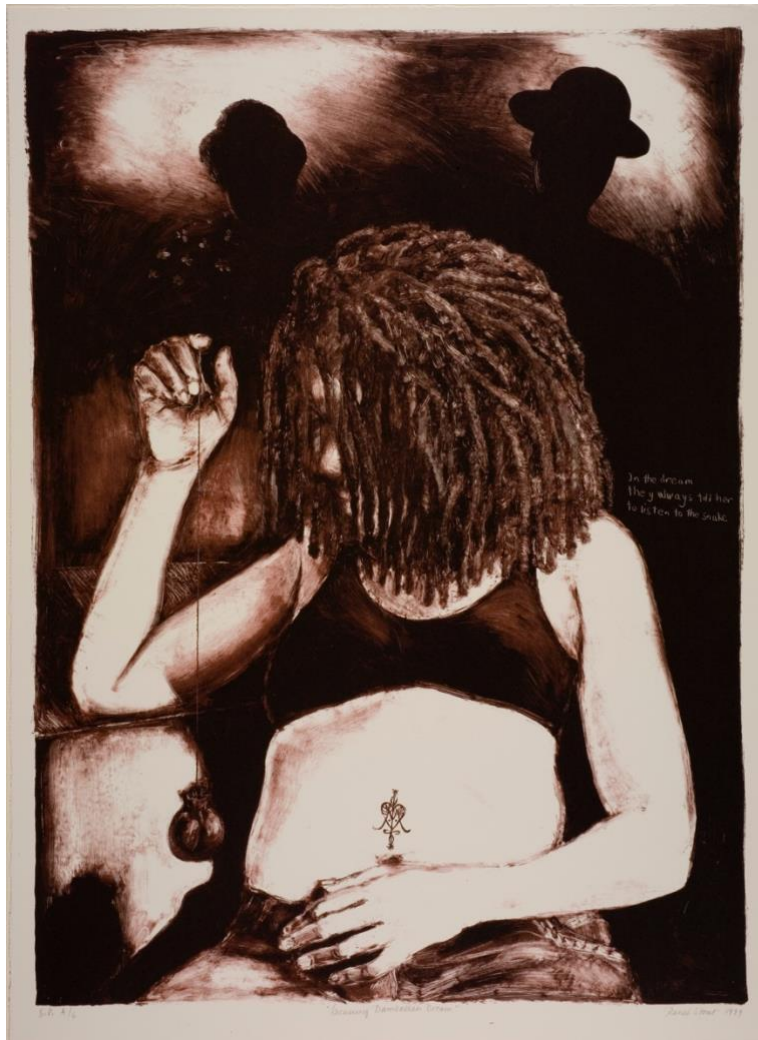
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RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

Visual Art and Fashion as Part of an English Department's Afrofuturism Syllabus

by Giselle Anatol



RENÉE STOUT. RECURRING DAMBALLAH DREAM. SPENCER MUSEUM OF ART, UNIVERSITY OF KANSAS, GIFT OF JOE AND BARB ZANATTA, 2002.0088

W I have taught several incarnations of *Black Speculative Fiction* at the University of Kansas, always excited to introduce a new group of students—from first-year undergraduates to advanced graduate students—to this rich and provocative body of work. As a child of the 1970s and teenager of the 1980s, I had a very narrow understanding of science fiction and fantasy based on the books recommended to me by friends, teachers, and librarians in my suburban New Jersey town. I recall my voracious consumption of texts like L. Frank Baum's *The Wizard of Oz*, C.S. Lewis's *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit*, George Orwell's *Animal Farm*, and Ray Bradbury's *The Illustrated Man* and *The Martian Chronicles* before finding more women writers like Madeleine L'Engle (author of *A Wrinkle in Time* and *A Swiftly Tilting Planet*, among others), including Lois Duncan (*Down a Dark Hall*, *Summer of Fear*, *Stranger with My Face*, *Daughters of Eve*, *Killing Mr. Griffin*, etc.). While L'Engle and Duncan shifted the framework to center the experiences and perspectives of young women, the majority of their characters were white. They didn't reflect my experiences as a brown-skinned subject, or a person of Trinidadian heritage, or the daughter of immigrants. They presented worlds—even when those worlds were out of this one—that seemed firmly ensconced in a white British and Euro-American point of view. My past was invisible; my present—both my individual encounters with the world and my very presence as a reader—was unacknowledged; my future seemed ambiguous, if not nonexistent—even in my own imagination.

Twenty years later, the course I designed challenged this view of the field, its writers, and its readers, countering the Black erasure I had long witnessed in the U.S. educational system and publishing industry. Thirty years after I first recognized the dearth of diversity in the readings of my own childhood, many of my students reported similar experiences in their formal education and quotidian experiences. KU, the state's flagship university, is located in the town of Lawrence in eastern Kansas, less than an hour away from Kansas City, Missouri. Some students attend from small rural communities in the western part of the state, but a large number come from middle- and upper-middle-class suburbs in the Kansas City area, as well as St. Louis, Chicago, and various parts of the U.S. Currently, of approximately 17,000 undergraduates, about 71% identify as white; 8½% as Hispanic; 5% as Asian; 5% as multiracial or multi-ethnic; only 4% as Black or African American; and, even more distressingly, only .3% of the undergraduate student population identifies as American Indian or Alaska Native ("KU Racial/Ethnic Diversity"). The English Department draws one of the highest numbers of majors across the university, but not at rates matching the demographics of the campus at large. In my Fall 2020 incarnation of *Black Speculative Fiction*, for example, seventeen of the eighteen undergraduate enrollees appeared phenotypically white (although, when I taught the course in Fall 2018 as a mixed grad/undergrad offering, seven of the sixteen enrolled students were of color). Of the Fall 2020 cohort, one of them I never saw—he did not have a working camera for Zoom sessions—and one distinguished herself as biracial, of African descent, in email correspondence near the end of the term. We were also joined by an African American graduate student from the

Visual Arts Department for all of our discussions. At the start of that term, some of them had heard of Samuel Delaney or read an Octavia Butler novel, but most were unaware of any non-mimetic fiction by authors of the African diaspora. Dozens had read a single slave narrative, and a few had been taught one of Toni Morrison's works—particularly if they took a high school Advanced Placement (AP) English class—but Afrofuturism was an unfamiliar word. This persistent lacuna in students' exposure severely limits their understanding of people from the African diaspora—as active subjects, as diverse communities, as beings imagining a host of possibilities and striving for speculative futures.

Focusing on "texts"—written works, folktales, film, songs, and visual art—by creators of African descent who contemplate social issues, the workings of time, and their presence in a variety of spaces and places, I encourage students to consider how the burgeoning field of Afrofuturism allows artists to question the realities and "logics" established by colonial regimes, neo-colonial powers, systemic racism, and other imbalances in contemporary legal, social, and political structures. We consider how the selected works explore the ways that the past permeates the present; how they envision the possibilities of Africanist existence in the future; how they represent concepts like the posthuman, the cyborg, and the monstrous; in short, how intersections of gender, class, and race play into reconfigurations of a genre long dominated by white men.

While the majority of texts selected for the class are novels and short fiction, I also incorporate film and a project on the visual arts to highlight how themes traverse era and genre and how attention to details and interpretative skills can be applied to a variety of forms. Images in film, paintings, sketches, and sculpture can drive ideas home in ways that words on the page sometimes do not, prompting visceral reactions and the desire to enact change instead of abstracted analysis. Non-verbal art also inspires some students to be more creative with their research projects, thinking "outside the box"—bending and crossing boundaries in an Afrofuturistic mode as opposed to a mimetic one—to fashion thoughtful work that is critical but does not take the form of the conventional academic essay.

The creative option for the final assignment works especially well in the 500-level version of the class, offered for junior and senior English majors as a capstone course. Students at this level of study are tasked to gain or refine the ability to integrate knowledge and think creatively as one of the overarching goals of these English Department courses. When students are permitted to submit an original creative work accompanied by an Artist's Statement—one grounded in substantial research, analysis of the work produced, and reflections on class discussions and assigned readings that relate to the development project—they can demonstrate this integration of knowledge and the ability to think across coursework, disciplines, and academic and non-academic experiences quite skillfully.

In my essay for this special issue of *Radical Teacher*, I begin with a description of the "Mini-Art Galleries" assignment that prepares students for more creative

thinking in their final projects. I have chosen to highlight the development of one student's essay and critical thinking skills, particularly for her topic's relevance to thinking about health and wellness in marginalized communities during the COVID-19 pandemic. I then turn to a discussion of the four creative projects submitted by undergraduates in Fall 2020: a drawing, a collage, a painting, and a doll-sized costume. I excerpt from the students' self-analyses and supplement their discussions with a few reflections of my own—especially when those reflections held particular resonance for teaching in the time of the coronavirus.

* * *

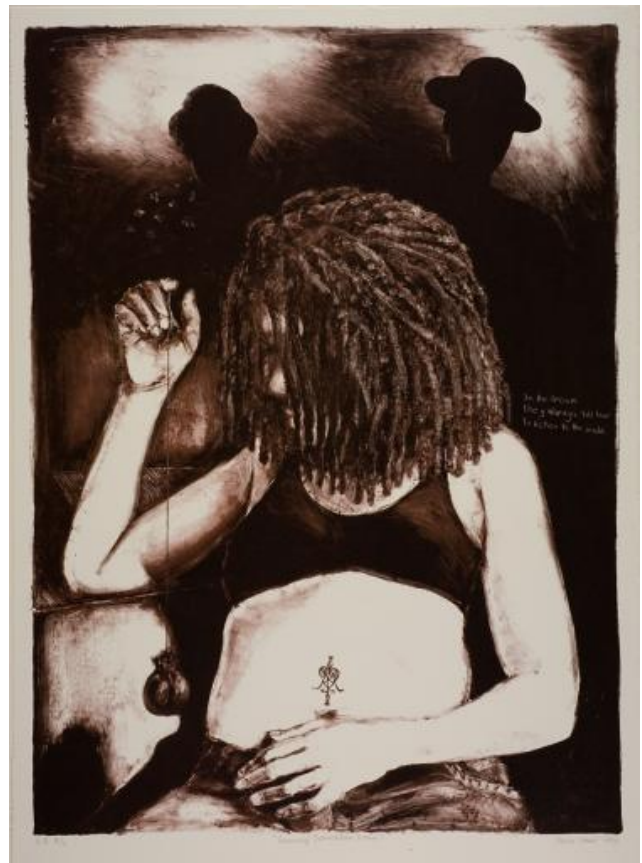
In non-COVID years, I take classes to KU's Spencer Museum of Art to explore its rich holdings and demonstrate how certain works can allow one to consider course themes from different perspectives. To adapt the assignment for remote teaching, I worked with curator Celka Straughn to gather images of a wide assortment of pieces that reflect upon and speculate about concepts such as utopias, the future, extra-planetary travel, "advanced" technologies, and ghosts and hauntings. The artists came from a range of time periods and cultures, and many (but not all) employed an Afrofuturist aesthetic. I arranged students in groups based upon initial indications of "favorite" works, and the groups met independently to create digital mini galleries: four to five images related to a central idea. Students were required to articulate the principle that guided their selections on the first slide of a PowerPoint, and each slide that followed featured a single piece of art, the tombstone (artist, title of work, date), and a sentence or two about how that particular work related to the others in the mini gallery. PowerPoints were presented via Zoom and then put on display on the electronic discussion board for the rest of the class to browse and make comments.

I anticipated that students would gain confidence in their ability to analyze visual texts by working in a group, with each individual contributing initial reactions, offering observations about different details, and generating ideas about the effects and possible significance of those details. I encouraged students to think about dissecting each piece of art in many of the same ways they probed details on the written page (or on the screen when we discussed film as a class). I also recommended that they work collectively and discuss each piece together, not allocating the analysis of each work to a different student. This part of the assignment was crucial for developing the collaborative spirit of the project, where students interacted with and taught each other—especially important during the pandemic when many people felt lonely and isolated. It also prepared them for composing individual analytical essays.

ELIZABETH GRINAGE

In earlier conversations with Grinage, I learned about her love of poetry, and when she came to office hours expressing some anxiety about the individual essay, I urged her to think about her chosen piece of art like she would a lyric poem. While narrative poems, such as ballads and epics, might recount a story with a plot, lyric poems communicate mood, a set of emotions, and/or a state of

mind. Instead of focusing on the denotations and connotations of specific words, I asked her to contemplate how the artist conveyed images and used visual elements—colors, textures, shadows and light, angles and curves, bold strokes vs. feathery lines, space—to evoke particular feelings and reactions. Prompted by a few terms to help guide her search ("vévé," "mojo," "gris gris bag," "hoodoo bag"), Grinage set off to conduct some research and wrote an excellent paper connecting the work of African American visual artist Renée Stout to Afrofuturist conceptualizations of a holistic sense of self: one that allows for the healthy integration of body, mind, and spirit, and past, present, and future. She had selected a lithograph entitled *Recurring Damballah Dream*, weaving her interpretation of it together with an analysis of African diasporic religious and curative practices depicted in the novel *I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem* (1992) by Guadeloupian author Maryse Condé. Grinage argued for U.S. Hoodoo, Caribbean Vodun, and other conjure systems as "complex and unique traditions" that provide not only spiritual guidance and protection, but personal empowerment, healing, and other restorative treatments.



RENÉE STOUT. RECURRING DAMBALLAH DREAM. SPENCER MUSEUM OF ART, UNIVERSITY OF KANSAS, GIFT OF JOE AND BARB ZANATTA, 2002.0088

Reading Grinage's essay helped me, in turn, to clarify some of the foundational questions for a class I was designing for the following semester: *Marginalized Bodies, Illness, and "Medicine" in Literature*. This interdisciplinary course was initially conceived as a way to get more pre-medical students into English classrooms, but became powerfully topical when the pandemic illuminated the

disproportionate impact of certain diseases on the lives of those who live on the “margins” of society. The materials selected—including a few texts from *Black Speculative Fiction*—illustrated several of the themes that Grinage had addressed in her essay: varying definitions of “medicine”; best (and worst) practices for physicians and other healthcare practitioners who favor Western procedures over—and often disparage—folk traditions; bifurcations and tensions between spirituality and science; how disparities like employment opportunities, educational access, housing standards, geographical region, cultural and linguistic bias, racism, and sexism can affect access to adequate care—both physical and mental.

I enjoy teaching Condé’s novel in a variety of courses because it so skillfully pushes readers away from easy categorizations of Vodun practices as about satanic worship, and from classifying references to spirits and witchcraft as solely “magical realism” or “fantasy.” In other words, it rejects colonial hierarchies, refusing to “other” Caribbean cultural practices and beliefs, and brings marginalized subjects from the alleged Periphery to the Center. As Haitian/American writer Edwidge Danticat has claimed, “If things seem out of the ordinary, it is not magical realism, but something that has been in our realities. We wrestle with a shifting reality” (Dance 381). Condé’s project, blending alternative spiritualities, anti-colonial rhetoric, historical fiction, and conventions of the slave narrative, effectively defies easy classification and challenges Western logics of time and reality, making her novel ideal for a class on Afrofuturism.

Grinage extended conversations from class to explore specific depictions of root work and healing in the novel. She noted the ways the character of Mama Yaya teaches Tituba about herbal treatments for a variety of maladies—bark, flowers, roots, and other organic materials serve medicinal purposes, but also maintain law and order in the Barbadian community of enslaved people near which they live. Citing the natural cures “for inducing sleep. Those for healing wounds and ulcers. Those for loosening the tongues of thieves” (Condé 9), Grinage asserted that, rather than presenting such practices as “backwards” superstitions, the book illustrates the superior knowledge of the Black women characters. She showed how these ethnobotanical treatments achieve greater success than those applied by the formally trained, European, male doctors in the narrative. The paper has tremendous relevance for the COVID-19 era: while some contemporary readers might attribute Hoodoo and root medicine to an insufficient education and the superstitious or “backward” behaviors associated with the poor, the pandemic has underscored that deficient access to formalized medical care is an integral part of the equation. Around the Caribbean, where naturopathic therapies have survived since slavery, scant supplies and an imperfect infrastructure meant limited numbers of hospital beds and ventilators, low oxygen stores, and uncertain access to vaccines for the first year of the crisis. Haitian residents turned to folk medicines such as ginger and galanga (sometimes called “Little John” or “Low John” by U.S. Hoodoo practitioners), aloe, and cloves to effectively treat some COVID-19 symptoms. This was not simply the desperation born of worldwide panic: a 2007

survey in Barbados revealed that over ninety plant species were utilized in the pharmacopoeia of rural communities, including “cooling teas” that possessed measurable levels of “bioactive” properties, such as being “antioxidative, antihypertensive, anti-inflammatory, antiproliferative, and anti-thrombogenic” (Peter 286). Hindrances to medical access are just as much of a reality for certain populations in the United States of 2020 and 2021 as they are in the so-called “third world,” making them more vulnerable than others to the dire consequences of infection.

Rather than adhering to Western conceptions of future-facing “progress,” Condé’s novel and Stout’s lithograph exemplify the power of African-diasporic women who symbolically face both backwards, into their cultural past, and forwards, into their oncoming futures. Refusing to adhere to a linear timeline enables Afrofuturist subjects to access robust, productive prospects, rather than being denied a promising future. This idea generated much hope among the students in the class—crucial during the despair engendered by the pandemic and ensuing lockdown.

KATE SCHWALLER

As an aficionado of young adult fiction, undergraduate Kate Schwaller found herself drawn to Nnedi Okorafor’s *Akata Witch* (2011) and its representation of protagonist Sunny Nwazue’s struggles with fitting in—a prominent theme of this body of work. She noted, “I also often felt out of place and separated from others when I was younger. I struggled quite a bit to find a place I felt I truly fit in, so I related deeply to that aspect of Sunny’s character.” Okorafor’s tackling of the topics of alienation and isolation, found in many other works in the Afrofuturist mode, made the novel even more compelling for teaching during the COVID lockdowns of 2020, when students frequently felt isolated from family, friends, and each other.

Notably, Schwaller’s art piece enabled her to push beyond a simplistic reduction of *Akata Witch* to a universalist case of disaffection. She expressed delight with the author’s description of the magical community as “leopard people,” indicating that the name was especially thought-provoking in a narrative about combatting isolation since, besides being powerful and feared, leopards are incredibly solitary animals. She furthered her critical analysis by considering complex definitions of racial identity and colorism. By doing so, Schwaller met the course goal of being able to identify major cultural and political concerns of artists of African descent who employ speculative genres to express themselves. *Akata Witch* engages in intricate world building for the magical “leopard people” that Sunny encounters, but must also weave an urban Nigerian worldscape for Western readers for whom the word “Africa” signifies only mud huts and safaris.

Schwaller began: “In my art piece, [...] I placed Sunny in the center to highlight her place as both the main character in the novel and the [...] focus of the artwork itself.”



ARTWORK BY KATE SCHWALLER. COURTESY OF AUTHOR

She chose not to include any other distinct characters in the drawing in order to emphasize Sunny's feelings of estrangement. At the novel's opening, the protagonist has just moved to Africa after being raised in the U.S. by her Nigerian parents; despite a common culture, she is identified as an outsider by her classmates. Additionally, she is mocked by her brown-skinned adolescent peers for being albino. Even among those with magical abilities, she feels alienated: as a "free agent" she is pitied for not growing up with knowledge of her magical roots, powers, and future potential.

Schwaller decided to draw the leopard's head just below Sunny's instead of side-by-side, further symbolizing Sunny's isolation. For her, the leopard represents Sunny herself and not a companion. She noted that the similarity in size and shape between the two heads signifies how Sunny "finally found her place among the Leopard People, and what that means for her": belonging and acceptance within the magical community. The artistic choice to make both figures look directly out at the viewer alludes to Sunny's confidence in her abilities by the end of the narrative.

The nsibidi marks on Sunny's face are one of Schwaller's creative innovations, not a part of Okorafor's text. They indicate an essential part of her identity—very much like a leopard's spots. This choice reflected one of goals of KU English courses that serve as capstones: the ability to think critically, but also work in imaginative ways that produce innovative expressions and original perspectives. In the novel, Okorafor sprinkles the nsibidi symbols throughout the chapters as keys to the leopard people's written language:

one that stands in sharp opposition to the colonizing language of English. Schwaller's placement of them on Sunny's face draws attention to the protagonist as possessing a type of embodied knowledge, shifting the focus away from conventional academic knowledge and the archives of written documents valued in European traditions. This shift is a key aspect of many Afrofuturist texts; one only need think of Ta-Nehisi Coates's *The Water Dancer* (2019), in which protagonist Hiram Walker realigns his early obsession with Eurocentric standards to pull from an otherworldly inner power in service of the Underground.

Schwaller used pen, markers, and colored pencils on paper, selecting alcohol-based markers for Sunny and the leopard and colored pencils for background. The bright, vivid colors of the markers made the girl and leopard stand out from the muted tones and softer shading of the backdrop. Schwaller described wanting to create an effect that made Sunny and the leopard more vibrant, attractive, and three-dimensional to the viewer, counter to the protagonist's initial failure to value her difference from the larger community. Outlining the heads with thick black marker further separated them from the rest of the page, effectively highlighting the protagonist's sense of isolation as the novel begins. Those thick black lines made me reflect differently upon some of the strategies I had employed for teaching in the time of the coronavirus: Zoom technology, for instance, was embraced for its potential to give students and instructors greater access to each other despite stay-at-home orders; students could see their peers' faces and expressions and hear their voices, even if tuning in from an isolated apartment. The squares around each Zoom participant's face, however, sometimes functioned much like Schwaller's outlines: deceptively difficult to breach. The energy of the classroom space, the ability to "read the room" and interpret body language as well as facial expressions were lost in the virtual landscape.

The idea of a deceptively simple image also came through in Schwaller's artwork in the rounded background shapes, which I initially took for leopard spots. Closer inspection reveals that they are actually heads, representing the communities with whom Sunny does not fit, "whether due to her Albinism, her Nigerian heritage when she is in the United States, her American upbringing when she is in Nigeria, or her magical powers." Schwaller rendered these background faces in varying skin tones, suggesting the diversity of African phenotypes. Her Artist's Statement called attention to the fact that these heads were smaller than Sunny's and the leopard's, and "do not have defining characteristics such as eyes, noses, or mouths. This creates a sense of uniformity among the background faces," allowing the viewer to recognize Sunny and the leopard as truly distinct and "literally larger than life."

TALI HECKER

Undergraduate Tali Hecker decided to capture the religious elements of Butler's *Parable of the Sower* (1993); she was captivated by the spiritual growth of protagonist Lauren Olamina, an African American teenager, over the course of the novel and her ability to appreciate the nature and necessity of change. While the novel unnerved many

students in the course with its disturbingly accurate, dystopian portraits of U.S. social and political turbulence in the mid-2020s, the concept of embracing change for physical, emotional, and psychological survival provided a framework for enduring the uncertainties of the pandemic.

Hecker chose to convert the verses of the "Earthseed" religion into images, conveying "a world beyond words" through "a world of symbolism." She aimed to illustrate Change as power and as necessity, evidenced by the cycles of life, death, and rebirth on the planet Earth; she also wanted to extend notions of life beyond the organic, arguing, "[C]oncepts such as oppressive governance, especially when rooted in a form of capitalism that privileges individuals instead of communities and exploits the weak, also must die and transform." She was especially eager to capture the paradoxical nature of change as a process that is simultaneously dynamic, unpredictable, and constant. When teaching the course again, I may require all students to participate in a creative adaptation of the Earthseed verses; meditating on them provided Hecker with comfort and hope near the end of the semester, when so many of my students stopped coming to class, overwhelmed by the pressures of lockdown, media reports of rising numbers of COVID19 cases and deaths, and their inability to motivate themselves to focus on their assignments and articulate their thoughts in writing.



ARTWORK BY TALI HECKER. COURTESY OF AUTHOR

Butler's protagonist contemplates the meaning of change in her diaries and journals throughout the novel. Hecker was moved by the beauty and emotional reassurance evoked by passages such as this:

God is Change—
Seed to tree,
tree to forest;

Rain to river,
river to sea;
Grubs to bees,
bees to swarm. (315)

One of the central images in her collage is that of the phoenix. The words "the cycle of the phoenix" are not as large as the word "FUTURE," but appear clearly in black and white near the bottom of the artwork. Hecker observed that the mythical bird might be interpreted as a symbol of radical change, from egg/birth to beautiful bird to life-consuming flames and then ashes, where nothing seems to remain. However, despite people's fear of change and attempts to hold onto sameness, the phoenix reveals a certain reliability—a steadiness—a cycle that occurs again and again. Hecker quoted Lauren's words: "In order to rise / From its own ashes / A phoenix / First / Must / Burn" (153). She sought to convey the idea of ascension or transcendence in the collage through multiple images of birds, butterflies, and other things that take flight or exist in the sky, such as stars and lightning.

Hecker chose the following passage to highlight the notion of change as chaos, this time teasing out connections between change and power:

God is Power --
Infinite,
Irresistible,
Inexorable,
Indifferent,
And yet, God is Pliable --
Trickster,
Teacher,
Chaos,
Clay.
God exists to be shaped.
God is Change. (25)

She identified the flexibility required to accept the inescapability of change and brought an Afrofuturist element to the discussion in her Artist's Statement by teasing out the trickster reference in Butler's passage. She asserted that, because Anansi the Spider in West African and Caribbean folklore represents a more fluid concept of morality rather than the rigid good-versus-evil binary of European fairy tales, Anansi stories encourage an enjoyment of the dynamics of unpredictability. These tales condition the listener to acquiesce to change instead of resisting it, protecting one's spirit from being broken. She included a web and several spirals to represent the generation of webs in her artwork, urging "ultimate surrender in accepting the uncontrollable, the 'Chaos' with which humanity is spun together" in the universe. Additionally, a pair of hands to the left of the face on the spider web "holds colorful shapes extending into [...] a spiraled pattern, connected to a model of [...] in our galaxy." The hands appear to sculpt the galaxy

with “the power of grace and [...] ability to transform even the roughest of edges.” Much as God created the earth, Lauren sculpts a new community from the people she gathers along her journey, all in the name of a higher power and the spirit of give and take.

For another of the Earthseed verses—“Any Change may bear seeds of benefit [...] Any Change may bear seeds of harm [...] God is infinitely malleable. / God is Change” (116)—Hecker included another pair of hands, “this time covered in soil, mirroring Lauren’s emphasis on seeds, both literal and metaphorical, and the planting that one must partake in [in] order for anything to be harvested.” She incorporated blue sky with butterflies on either side of these hands to signify the immensity of nature and also the unknown. A gray industrial scene just above the hands symbolizes the post-apocalyptic setting of the novel and the harm to the climate sewn by human hands.

At the bottom right of the collage Hecker placed a person, in what she described as “a post-apocalyptic suit,” planting seeds, along with a bit of script reading “shadows inside seeds of democracy.” With these words, she chose to give name to the shadows haunting modern U.S. society: namely, its foundations in slavery. Taking an optimistic perspective, she posed that present-day society can overcome the system of domination in which it was born. “This is where the symbolism of the phoenix comes to play again: in order to create a new paradigm of social change the old system must first burn down and die so another one can rise from its ashes.” Images of burning lava with a body traced in the molten surface symbolize this idea. “At the knee of the first body are the words ‘die and become’—another representation of the phoenix symbolism, further supporting [the idea] that for change to arise there must first be death and dying, as seen throughout the novel and life.”

In class, I stressed the veneration of the communal as an aspect of African cultures around the world; Hecker synthesized her contemplations on change with this concept, quoting a passage about “bees to swarm. / From one, many; / from many, one” (315). In the collage, she used an abundance of trees to mirror these lines and underscore allusions to seeds and growth.

Finally, Hecker connected “being able to metaphorically sit in the chaos” with a sense of self-reliance—much needed in the face of adversity, and especially poignant during the pandemic. However, she recognized that this self-reliance was not entirely self-generated, and rejected a privileging of the self over others, finding corroboration in the verse, “We must find the rest of what we need / within ourselves, / in one another, / in our Destiny” (245). Like Schwaller and Grinage, she identified a respect for different types of teachers, knowledge, and spaces of learning:

Your teachers
Are all around you.
All that you perceive,
All that you experience,
All that is given to you

or taken from you,
All that you love or hate,
need or fear
Will teach you--
If you will learn. (279)

In the collage, she scattered bits of images around a head. In the Artist Statement, she compellingly argued for incorporating various types of information during the educational process—theoretical and experiential, textual and oral—showing a strong understanding of Afrofuturism’s goal of decolonizing knowledge and learning.

Perhaps most productively for upending conventions of time and history, Hecker pasted a picture of a camera lens, intentionally tilted upward and below the word “future,” to suggest Lauren’s desire for humankind to take root among the stars—both physically and in terms of a spiritual ascension to new planes of enlightenment and growth. Significantly, her focus on spiritual transcendence allows a reading of Butler’s novel that does not replicate the colonial impulse to conquer new territories and engage in the process of empire building in new, extra-planetary realms.

FAITH MADDUX

Senior Faith Maddox was also inspired by Butler’s novel as she developed her end-of-semester project. Deeply moved by the repeated depictions of trauma in the assigned readings, she astutely noted in her critical essay that, although the COVID-19 crisis provided opportunities for all citizens of the world to wrestle with trauma and develop greater compassion for others, distress had disturbingly “become a spectacle” during the pandemic, “easily accessible within seconds, spread across every field of media [... and] presented without consent.” She challenged media outlets’ motivation to demonstrate physical evidence of suffering, “as if to say that any form of justice carries a prerequisite of visible pain”; by implication, audiences were being conditioned to ignore emotional suffering and psychological strain despite ample evidence of these tolls on human health during the lockdown. Maddox also critiqued society’s shift to the sound-bite, snapshot, and penchant for headlines instead of complete news stories, connecting the rapid news cycle to a failure to provide “a space where context and healthy emotional processing can coexist.” She posed speculative fiction as a promising vessel through which to take one’s time exploring and coping with trauma, and asserted that speculative fiction by Black women writers was an ideal genre/mode/aesthetic to convey and condemn the ways that systems of oppression like sexism, racism, classism, and homophobia inflict different kinds of violence upon women of African descent than on other members of U.S. society. In the analytical section of the assignment, Maddox thus demonstrated mastery of one of the core class goals: to grasp theoretical principles of African American thought by way of Afrofuturist texts. I view this an an essential aspect of the course, since speculative fiction is sometimes deemed by students (and readers outside the field) as empty of intellectual rigor. Without using the term,

Maddox explicated how *Parable* illuminated the workings of intersectionality—a term coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in the context of late twentieth-century legal scholarship and addressed as far back as Sojourner Truth’s “Ain’t I a Woman?” speech and Harriet Jacobs’s 1861 *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*.

For Maddox, Butler’s novel depicted trauma in powerful ways without leaving readers devastated by the impact. As opposed to the quick flashes of distress featured in media reports, “[t]ranslating trauma into writing provides clarity and context to experiences that [might] otherwise be obscured by emotional processing.” Maddox researched and applied trauma theory, describing how human beings “remember and store trauma as fragments of experience or sensation, instead of a traditional narrative memory [... A]s a result, even verbally narrating what has happened is a challenge” (Smith). Thus, creating a work of art—whether it is a poem or a novel or sculpture or a song—can function as catharsis for those struggling to articulate their emotions and experiences, and *readers* of fiction portraying traumatic events can gain the same “clarity and context” that might be eclipsed or muddied by strong emotional reactions to superficial reports. Maddox theorized that writing in “alternative and experimental” forms—like Afrofuturism—could help to organize thoughts and process material in ways that more conventional genres fail to accomplish.

Maddox additionally posited that elements of Butler’s narrative—the portrait of the protagonist’s hyperempathy, for instance—effectively address the desensitization to violence and trauma that current news and social media reports often foster. She integrated another assigned text from the course—Sami Schalk’s *Bodyminds Reimagined*—for its discussion of the “bodymind,” which “insists on the inextricability of mind and body and highlights how processes within our being impact one another in such a way that the notion of a physical versus mental process is difficult, if not impossible to clearly discern” (Schalk 5). This theory allows traumatic experience to be recognized as an experience of both mind and body, much like racism’s effects on the psyches and physical health of contemporary African American subjects, who suffer higher rates of hypertension than those in the dominant culture. In Butler’s novel, Lauren’s hyperempathy exists in her mind but has physical side effects: witnessing someone with blood on their hands makes Lauren start to bleed before she learns control (Butler 11). The protagonist notes that physicians call her condition “an ‘organic delusional syndrome,’” but “[i]t hurts [physically], that’s all I know” (12). Maddox found this concept compelling for its potential to combat the widespread desensitization existing in the fictional world and the “real” world that she and her peers occupy. Tying this dynamic to contemporary racism and social structures that sustain inequity, Maddox argued that while Lauren’s hyperempathy “might remedy the violence inflicted by both structural exploitation and everyday civilians” on people of color in the present moment, the fact that she must numb herself to the pain of the dystopian world outside the walls of her community illuminates the emotional labor that is constantly expected of Black women—“desensitizing oneself to systemic oppression in order to move through the world, while simultaneously being required to provide constant

empathy for those who inflict the damage of their misguided wrongdoings.” Maddox labelled this intersectional experience of trauma as “both public and personal, upheld by cultural practices that make violence against Black people a spectacle and normalized (unknowingly or not) in everyday conversations between family and friends.”

The painting Maddox created visually incorporated the ways that she saw Afrofuturism serving as a tool for exploring “nuanced experiences” and “alternative ways of perceiving and understanding.” As per the course goals, she absorbed that literature can put everyday realities of oppression into new contexts, providing points of view and important insights to those who may not experience or recognize these realities. Maddox was also able to articulate the ways that visual art offers “a unique modality through which an ordinary viewer can find new ways of [...] connecting” with ideas, since nonverbal forms of expression have the potential to encourage interpretations that might be difficult to pin down in written language or the spoken word.

Maddox’s minimalist artwork allows a focus on the symbolism imperative to a reader’s full comprehension of *Parable*. Several figures on legs encircle two houses and a tree, representative of Lauren’s Robledo, CA home. Abstract and spectral, Maddox wanted them to evoke the hidden forces perpetuating inequities that shape Butler’s dystopic world, resulting in myriad types of trauma. She wrote: “Their ambivalent appearances are reflective of the mind’s tendency to obscure experiences it views as dangerous or



ARTWORK BY FAITH MADDOX. COURTESY OF AUTHOR

that it is unable to fully process.” This line serves as a way of conceptualizing many Afrofuturist narratives: a thrilling plot and seemingly alien landscape, era, or characters can obfuscate the trauma of real-life persecution, rendering it safer to absorb and process before the true meaning becomes clear.

The figures are surrounded by an outer layer of candles, meant to conjure the repeated fire imagery throughout the novel and convey the idea of something that can function as “both an agent of chaos and a vessel for rebirth.” Similarly, the tree at the painting’s center, captured in a surrealist style, resembles fire and flames as well as the literal tree in Lauren’s walled neighborhood, emblematic of the cycles of life that Butler points to with her frequent references to oaks and acorns.

Maddox also painted two brown hands in her piece, which she identified as Lauren’s, “looming over the fire-contained world in a way that mirrors her role as a godlike or prophetic figure. Her hands have the ability to create change, just as they have the potential to alter the positions of various objects within the painting. While they’re indicative of a surreal presence, they’re also the symbol most grounded in reality.” As such, Maddox successfully portrayed the “opposing narratives of detachment and hyperempathy with which Lauren struggles,” and that she must learn to reconcile.

Maddox concluded her Artist’s Statement with praise for the way Afrofuturist fiction can be used to examine all types of pain, offering new perspectives and a deeper understanding of how systemic violence perpetuates trauma. Impassioned by how the works of authors like Octavia Butler exemplify the damage caused by systemic racism and other “vectors of power” (Schalk 62), she focuses her viewer’s attention on the impact that sociopolitical injustices have on African American existence.

ABBI DOUGHERTY

Abbi Dougherty, a Visual Arts major with an emphasis in textiles, was fascinated by the descriptions of clothing in Nalo Hopkinson’s *Midnight Robber* (2000)—especially the childhood Carnival costume of the book’s protagonist, Tan-Tan, and her adulthood apparel when taking on the Midnight Robber persona in her day-to-day life. Dougherty desired to create a model of the outfit that accurately mirrors aspects of the Caribbean folk culture from which Hopkinson draws, while also incorporating elements of Tan-Tan’s struggles, journeys, and a sense of the physical environments in the novel. She thus confirmed mastery of the course goal that called for a demonstration of the ability to distinguish variations in African diaspora communities, avoiding the collapsing of all populations into a singular culture and experience. Rather than translating Mardi Gras baubles and beads, excessive alcohol consumption, and loss of inhibition onto a Caribbean landscape, she responded flexibly to multiple worldviews and developed a nuanced depiction involving elements of history, the evolution of cultural practices, and Afrofuturist considerations of Time.

Because of time constraints and her own “limitations when it comes to sewing,” Dougherty decided to create a

single garment and scale it down to doll-size instead of fit for a life-sized model. She envisioned the larger version of the project, however, as an entire series in different sizes, materials, and textures, illustrating Tan-Tan’s development from girlhood to womanhood and a sweeping passage of time, similar to that experienced in time travel narratives like Octavia Butler’s *Kindred*. In class, we discussed the flexibility of time and non-linear narratives of many works of speculative fiction from the African diaspora: authors of Yoruba heritage, for example, might refer to the simultaneity of past, present and future, with departed ancestors called to walk among the living in the masquerade / egúngún tradition (*Akata Witch*); characters might anxiously watch out for moments when they could physically walk into a memory of the past (Sethe in *Beloved*); writers might subvert the “rational,” linear notions of time employed in European/Western traditions by having a historical figure from the late 1600s share a jail cell with a character first written about in the nineteenth century who, in turn, speaks of concepts like the feminist separatism of the 1970s (Tituba and Hester Prynne in *I, Tituba*). Multiple costumes existing at once would allow Dougherty to capture Tan-Tan’s essence at different stages of her life, but also suggest a more fluid notion of time and gesture towards elements of time travel.

Dougherty pulled from two of Hopkinson’s descriptions as the foundation for her project. The first: young Tan-Tan’s Jonkanoo costume on the planet of Toussaint:



ARTWORK BY ABBI DOUGHERTY. COURTESY OF AUTHOR

It had a white silk shirt with a high pointy collar, a little black jumbie leather vest with a fringe, all round the bottom, and a pair of wide red leather pants with more fringe down the sides. It even had a double holster go round her waist, with two shiny cap guns sticking out. But the hat was the best part. A wide black sombrero, nearly as big as Tan-Tan herself, with pom poms in different colors all around the brim, to hide her face in the best Robber Queen style. (Hopkinson 27)

Dougherty's rendition included hand-sewn fringed pants and the large black sombrero. She considered the fringe as the most recognizable, and thus essential, detail of her craftsmanship. The hat was made with a piece of cardboard, topped with a bottle cap wrapped in black thread. Her use of "throwaway" items that she found and recycled cleverly invoked the need to consider sustainability in the present to ensure existence in the future. Additionally, she chose to allude to Tan-Tan's future "exile" with her father as she selected other materials; she picked "very durable cotton fabric" for the pants and top since, while "traveling through harsh environments and dense forests, [...] it would be important that her legs be protected from the elements."

The second description from Hopkinson's book was the costume that Melonhead, a tailor and Tan-Tan's future love interest, sews for the protagonist on New Halfway Tree:

He'd pierced together precious ends of black velvet, made style by outlining the joins with iridescent shell buttons. The cape was lined with brightly coloured ribbons, ends left long and fluttering.... [plus] a fine Robber hat from goat wool felt that he'd dyed black and blocked into shape. There was a belt ... with two holsters and sheathes for her knife and machète. (Hopkinson 313)

Dougherty identified the cape and gun holster as crucial elements of this passage. She opted for a simple black cape: "if she were to wear the cape with bright ribbons into the forests, they would get tangled amongst tree branches and other flora that Hopkinson painstakingly describes [...]. Colorful flowing ribbons would not only catch people's notice when she is trying to hide away from the communities, but certainly catch the attention of a predatory mako jumbie bird." I would have loved to see Dougherty consider Hopkinson's attention to other fabric details in the two passages: the "goat wool felt" on the exile planet suggests domesticated animals initially transported from Earth and bred for meat, fur, and pelts, while the "jumbie leather" on Toussaint comes from "genesculpt[ed]" (32) versions of animals—species significantly *not* under human control. The human annihilation of indigenous fauna and destruction of delicate ecosystems serves as a pointed critique of contemporary human behavior.

Dougherty selected a purple sash for the gun holster. Researching color symbology, she noted that purple fabrics often represent "luxury, nobility, and status," and historically could be worn only by those in power: "As scholar Charlene Elliott notes: '[B]y 800–700 BC, the esteem of purple is heralded through the Homeric epics: purple references are associated only with persons of the highest social status' (Elliott 179)." Citing purple robes as markers for members of royal families in Greece, the Roman empire, and Persia, she claimed the color as an appropriate one for Tan-Tan, the daughter of a man who was once an important mayor, and constructed as "my father, Lord Raja, [...] the King of Kings" by the protagonist (Hopkinson 317). These hyperbolic terms match the portrait of Antonio as king of the Taino people in the adapted folktale, "How Tan-Tan Learn to Thief" (78).

Thinking carefully about color, Dougherty also elected to create a yellow shirt instead of a white one for her piece. Tan-Tan claims it as her favorite color, and it is frequently associated with happiness.

Despite the fact that, towards the end of the novel, Tan-Tan states, "Sorrow was my father, my mother. I know sorrow good" (Hopkinson 326), I believe that with the arrival of baby Tubman, with his name signifying her hope for freeing people who are enslaved, joy is about to arrive in Tan-Tan's life. (Dougherty)

This reference to an imminent joy (future) and combination of the childhood costume (past) with Tan-Tan's adult apparel (present) further enmesh principles of non-linear, non-static time into Dougherty's artistic creation.

In a moment when the majority of U.S. high school and college students still associate science fiction with the mid-twentieth-century "Golden Age" of the genre, and their limited classroom exposure leads them to associate the field with white, cis-male writers like Wells, Verne, Bradbury, Heinlein, Asimov, Clarke, and Dick—perhaps even Mary Shelley and Ursula LeGuin—teaching Afrofuturism counters a host of forms of Black erasure: the absence of writers of African descent, complex Black characters, and issues of critical importance to Black communities around the world. My very presence as a brown-skinned professor challenges the erasure of Black readers, enthusiasts, and experts in speculative fiction.

During the peak of the coronavirus epidemic, disparate rates of death and severe illness for African Americans and alarming inconsistencies in the quality of healthcare for different populations could no longer be effaced from the public's awareness. Social media represented one type of outreach, increasing attention to the nation's ills; I would argue that Afrofuturist works represent another type of critical intervention: they have the power to address historical and cultural erasures and to inspire creativity, interdisciplinarity, and change. They can subvert tropes that freeze subjects of African heritage in disempowered pasts, and can provide alternative perspectives of the present and the future in order to—as Nalo Hopkinson so aptly asserts—take up "the meme of colonizing the natives, and, from the experience of the colonize[d], critique it, pervert it, fuck with it" (Burnett 133). The student creations and statements outlined here represent a treasure trove of materials in and of themselves; I look forward to future incarnations of the assignments to give more students outlets for their impressive imaginations and ways to integrate class materials, discussions, and their own research in innovative ways.

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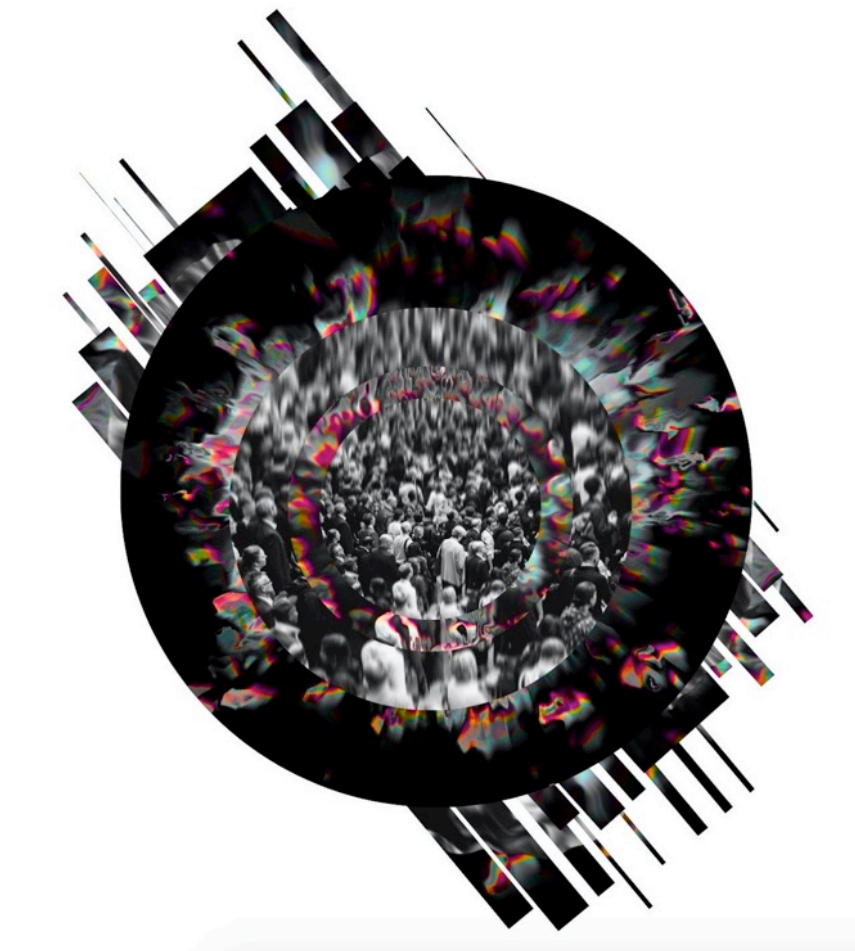
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RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

Time-Sensitive: Teaching Afrofuturism Through the Nineteenth Century

by Dalia Davoudi



ARTWORK BY LUZ VALERIA CHAVEZ (REPRINTED WITH PERMISSION)

"Imagination makes temporality possible."

- Kara Keeling, *Queer Times, Black Futures* (2019)

In May of 2021, when news outlets were reporting that the University of North Carolina had declined Nikole Hannah-Jones's application for tenure, I was putting the finishing touches on the syllabus for a literature course called "Afrofuturism and Its Histories," which was designed to contextualize contemporary Afrofuturist aesthetics within a wide set of Black American literary, political, and philosophical traditions. Part of my mission as a teacher who specializes in nineteenth-century American literature is to combat what I see as a pervasive political presentism and bridge the gap between early American and contemporary histories, whether it's in the context of feminist politics, queer expression, or Black legacies of uprising and political resistance. Efforts like Hannah-Jones's *1619 Project*, with its famous re-examination of the legacy of American slavery, have produced a cultural episteme in which history is understood as a living thing, subject to remediation. At the same time, speculative fiction has become an important genre with which artists return to forgotten or repressed American histories, as in HBO's *Watchmen's* exploration of the Tulsa massacre of 1921, or *Lovecraft Country's* horrors, which are, for instance, set against Emmett Till's memorial in one unforgettable episode. And it's not just Black (science) fiction that features this kind of imaginative approach to history: an article in *Wired* published in November of 2020 catalogues the "extraordinary number of recent novels, films, and shows [that] center on a hero who has to go to the past to save the future, usually from utter destruction," highlighting the ways that these texts reconsider present-day political phenomena (including the rise of Trumpism) through the lens of fascist histories.

Teaching into this cultural momentum allows students to see the many ways that Black histories can be told and retold and to recognize the ways that various American histories are continuous with contemporary American concerns; we are in a unique historical moment in which college students are primed to think about history in complicated, layered, and non-linear ways—and the ongoing controversy around figures like Hannah-Jones is a reminder that these new historiographies pose overt threats to structures of power. I argue that teaching radically requires us to reframe the notion of history itself for our students by refusing the sense that history is a story we are witnessing from our position at its end. In designing "Afrofuturism and Its Histories," I attempted to "lose the plot" (to use Tavia Nyong'o's phrase) by refusing a linear or progressive historical narrative and showing my students that they are not just subject to but also participants in the ongoing creation of history and the future.

Devoting a full semester to teaching Afrofuturism is its own historiographical argument: the existence of the course itself proposes that what can be perceived as an aesthetic "of the moment" is in fact worth studying through a wide historical lens. I designed this class as a part-time lecturer

at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, where I taught literature, film, and composition. As in many of my classes for non-majors, the concept for the course began with what I imagined to be a familiar, contemporary cultural object that would give students an anchor to explore a broader set of historical and theoretical concerns. Afrofuturism as an aesthetic is culturally diffuse and familiar in 2021, and *Black Panther* – which, as I predicted, almost all of my students had seen prior to the start of our course—is only the most famous of its instantiations. Even if students haven't read N.K. Jemisin novels, they have undoubtedly encountered techno-cultural tropes in Janelle Monáe's *The ArchAndroid* (2010) and *Dirty Computer* (2018), while interplanetary aesthetics and Egyptological iconography show up in music videos by Rihanna, SZA, and Solange. My students are also surrounded by Chicago's living Afrofuturist legacies, with artists like Angel Bat Dawid; the faculty features artists like Nick Cave, who is famous for his otherworldly *Soundsuits* and is the director of the school's fashion program, and D. Denenge Duyst-Akpem, an Afrofuturist performance and installation artist, who teaches multi-disciplinary Afrofuturism courses to our undergraduates. But while my students had a sense of Afrofuturism in the here and now, I wanted them to see that the wave of new Afrofuturist creative production is an instance of what Tavia Nyong'o describes as "the persistent reappearance of that which was never meant to appear, but was instead meant to be kept outside or below representation" (3). Teaching this way challenges the widespread assumption among students that pop-cultural forms are trivial or self-explanatory—a particularly pervasive attitude at art schools. (In fact, the glossing of Afrofuturism as a mass-cultural phenomenon is linked to the ways that Americans have become habituated toward and often inured to expressions of Black pain. I will never forget the experience of watching Moor Mother perform her scalding, raw, spoken-word poetry and music during sunset at Brooklyn Bridge Park while park-goers barely spared a curious glance; one runner simply pulled out his phone to film without breaking his stride.) My goal in teaching a long history of Afrofuturism was to suggest that the kinds of aesthetics we see in contemporary Afrofuturist literature, television, and film have a compelling and important tradition in Black American literary history, and also to show that it has deep roots in Black political history.

I taught two versions of this course. I initially designed it to move slowly back from twenty-first century examples of Afrofuturism, which is essentially how I taught a longer sixteen-week version of the course, looping back to the twenty-first century in the last two weeks of the semester. But the majority of this essay reflects on the more condensed six-week version during which I experimented with a more conceptually organized approach to the material that would emphasize continuities between the nineteenth and twenty-first centuries. This historiographically experimental version of the course borrowed from the logic of Afrofuturism itself. Afrofuturism is many things—a literary genre, a cultural aesthetic, a political sensibility—but it's also a philosophy of history that offers non-linear, non-teleological models for thinking about the past, present, and future. This essay reports on the experiment of teaching Afrofuturism in a non-linear, non-progressive way.

In the following pages, I outline five sets of textual and theoretical clusters that represent five weeks of the summer course, and draw from student work, reflecting on the ways that student demographics played a role in classroom discussions. I hope to offer other teachers of contemporary Black literature, film, and music a set of nineteenth-century American Black writers, speakers, and activists that can be incorporated into syllabi to deepen students' understanding of legacies of Black activism and speculative thought, and a set of conceptual nodes with which to ground the works theoretically. But as much as this essay explores a pedagogical and historiographical approach, it's impossible to detach the object of the course from its conditions and context, which finally defined—and in some ways mirrored—its content. Of course, the most salient backdrops to our discussions were the massive BLM protests that were coincidental with the pressures of COVID. During both semesters of teaching "Afrofuturism and Its Histories," most of my students were students of color and represented many different relationships to the topics of the course (among them Afrofuturism, science fiction, Black political activism, radicalism). As always, teaching is time-sensitive—it is necessarily shaped by shifting historical conditions and interrupted by events of all kinds. At least half of my thirteen students in this summer section were there because they had to take a leave of absence or drop the course mid-semester (mostly because of COVID-related issues). Everyone was exhausted. Sometimes this was quite literal, because exactly half of them were taking the course from another continent—that's simply where they had to be during this wave of COVID—which meant that we were all on a different clock. Some of my students were in countries that were still suffering spikes in COVID deaths while many people based in the U.S. began to return to business as usual. In the following, then, I report on this course as an event.

There are two major historical nodes that cover canonical Afrofuturism: the 1960s/70s and the 2010s. The first cluster wasn't named as such until Mark Dery's influential essay was published in the '90s, but it clearly features Sun Ra, Samuel Delany, George Clinton, and Octavia Butler as the musical and literary creators of the Black science-fictional, inter-planetary thinkers of the '60s, '70s, and '80s. The current node of Afrofuturist cultural production has gone much more mainstream than the last, at least in its form as a cultural aesthetic (though, as I've argued, its philosophy of history has also made its way into the public imagination), but both have prominent positions in literary and musical Black cultural histories.

However, the conversation around Black science fiction has changed considerably in the past two decades, becoming more expansive in its historical, generic, theoretical, and formal purviews. Black science-fiction anthologies like Sheree R. Thomas's *Dark Matter* (2000) have moved to extend the canon back, perhaps most influentially with the inclusion of W.E.B. DuBois's "The Comet" (1920). Scholars increasingly cite turn-of-the-century texts like Charles Chesnut's "The Goophered Grapevine" (1899) and Pauline Hopkins's *Of One Blood* (1902) as literary precursors to the speculative philosophies of Afrofuturist texts. Alex Zamalin's *Black Utopia* (2019)—a

recent study of Black nationalist politics and utopian expressions as they appear in American speculative literature of the last two hundred years—opens with Martin Delany, a Black emigrationist born in 1812. Literary scholars now consider Delany's *Blake: or, the Huts of America* (1859)—a novel about transnational slave insurrection and a retelling of Pan-American history—to be a nineteenth-century iteration of the kind of fabulated histories and speculative futurity that defines more contemporary Black science fiction and specifically Afrofuturism. In my own work, I make a case for William Wells Brown's *Clotel: or, The President's Daughter* (1853) as a key novel in this nineteenth-century tradition: though the novel is not overtly science fictional—rather, it fits with a tradition of revisional, and alternate histories (most centrally, reexamining the legacy of Thomas Jefferson's relationship with Sally Hemings)—it imagines and performs a Black futurity, theorizing invention and speculation as strategies for attaining large-scale liberation. All of this effort to reframe the work of Black science fiction is compounded by theoretical and methodological innovations of scholars like Jayna Brown, Kara Keeling, Tavia N'yongo, C. Riley Snorton, Ruha Benjamin, and Zakiyyah Iman Jackson, who—invoking queer and posthuman notions of change, futurity, and utopia—compose alternative timelines and temporalities for thinking about Black history. All of these thinkers were central to my conceptualization of this course, and several of them were assigned as secondary sources.

So, the course: In an effort to span a wide Black history of speculative philosophy, politics, and aesthetics, I initially came up with this description:

In this course, we will hone key literary-analytical strategies and begin cultivating more advanced independent research skills as we study the history of Afrofuturist aesthetics. The term "Afrofuturism," coined in the 1990s, describes a literary, musical, and visual aesthetic that draws on futuristic tropes to explore visions of utopia, alienation, and Black history. Afrofuturism is now widely recognized as a genre: though developed by literary and musical figures in the 1960s, contemporary films like Black Panther and artists like Solange and FKA Twigs reach popular audiences. In this course we will study foundational Afrofuturist works from the 1960s to the present, but we will also hit rewind, studying lesser-known invocations of planetary time, speculative futures, and alternative worlds by Black writers of the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. In doing so, we will explore the ways that planetary aesthetics in turn literalize social alienation, explore notions of belonging and possibility, and articulate a revolutionary inevitability. Among the artists we will encounter are Sun Ra, Lizzie Borden, Samuel Delany, Octavia Butler, Monique Walton, Frances Harper, Charles Chesnut, Pauline Hopkins, and W.E.B. DuBois; our goal will be to trace a history of Afrofuturist thought across different forms of cultural production. As this is a writing-intensive course, students should expect to write essays, give presentations, and complete homework in which you practice analytical strategies; assignments will be geared towards developing strong organization,

clarity, and voice in your writing. The final unit of the course will center on developing your research skills.

In the first draft of my syllabus for “Afrofuturism and Its Histories,” then, the plan was to begin with the most contemporary pieces of Afrofuturism and then slowly move back into the nineteenth century. This would establish the roots of Afrofuturism as a literary or generic tradition, and also as a political one, and it fulfilled my abiding desire to bridge the cultural work of Black Lives Matter with Black abolitionist movements of the nineteenth century. But as I planned the six-week summer course, it increasingly seemed to me that a more thematic structure would serve the condensed, faster pace of the course, and also allow us to unravel the various philosophical ideas that underpinned Afrofuturist aesthetics.

My revision of the syllabus was inspired by Nyong’o’s invitation to “lose the plot” as a trans-disciplinary method. In *Afro-Fabulations: The Queer Drama of Black Life* (2019), Nyong’o explains that:

The model of collective memory I employ is one in which recollection gathers up the past with its present in disjunctive synthesis. By “disjunctive,” I mean the fabulative process by which every act of recollection branches off in all directions, foiling any effort to cohere the narrative of the past into a single, stable, and linear history. I will be interested in showing how, in the process of recollecting the story of the past, we repeatedly lose the plot. (99)

When we lose the plot in telling Black histories, Nyong’o argues, we are able to see Black life as tense-less, always, and multiple. In 2021, losing the plot was a way for me to imagine teaching in a way that didn’t only historicize Afrofuturism so that it seemed to appear and reappear throughout the last centuries, but to produce a sense of intimacy and ongoing relation *between* historical periods. That is, in a moment where alienation and pessimism abound, showing a trans-historical or cross-historical solidarity would highlight the work of radical politics as an endlessly possible one, always reappearing.

I decided to design the syllabus around philosophical and political clusters found in Afrofuturist texts, working anachronistically or, to use Nyong’o’s preferred term, anachaeologically. I took it as an opportunity to unite the course’s content with its form and to create a truly Afrofuturist course—to the extent that I could as a non-Black, Iranian scholar—rather than a course *about* Afrofuturism. There was, of course, a necessity for limits and structure. For one thing, the fact that this was a writing-intensive course meant that we were balancing readings and lectures with writing instruction; this was not an upper-level literature course. Because of my training as an Americanist, the syllabus centered on texts produced in the United States (though the concept of national borders would come apart as we read). In the final form of the syllabus, the readings and lectures followed five major clusters: the planetary/Black nationalism; Black cosmopolitanism; queer posthumanism; race and technology/race as technology; and music and mysticism. (I’ve italicized the texts that echoed from previous clusters.)

1. **The planetary/Black nationalism:** *Black Panther* (2018), *Space is the Place* (1972), Martin Delany (1852)
2. **Black cosmopolitanism:** Samuel Delany (1967), Grace Jones (1982-6), William Wells Brown (1852)
3. **Queer posthumanism:** *Samuel Delany* (1967), Octavia Butler (1984), Lizzie Borden (1983), Janelle Monáe (2010)
4. **Race and technology/Race as technology:** *Lizzie Borden* (1983), Pauline Hopkins (1902), DJ Spooky (2004), *Janelle Monáe* (2010)
5. **Music and mysticism/spirituality:** *Space is the Place* (1972), Alice Coltrane (1971), Erykah Badu (2000), Sojourner Truth (1843), Janaya “Future” Khan (2021)

In addition to privileging conceptual issues, this new telos allowed me to quickly move through masculinist Afrofuturism that centers figures like Sun Ra and instead focus on the rich feminist and queer histories embedded in Afrofuturism’s history. Still, we began with some familiar figures. Before moving to reflect on the experience of actually teaching with this methodology, I’ll talk through Unit 1 on planetary aesthetics and Black nationalism. I started there because I suspected that even without knowing much about Afrofuturism as a genre, my students would recognize *Black Panther* as a seminal moment in contemporary Hollywood history, and because I hoped to offer this as an immediate example—and also quickly challenge the film as a not-especially radical version of Afrofuturist politics. (I screened a few clips from the film on the first day of class. As I anticipated, my students had a lot of criticisms to offer, suggesting in turn that it was reductive, colonialist, and even frustratingly invested in respectability.) Sun Ra’s *Space is the Place* (dir. John Coney) would help us understand *Black Panther’s* investment in *place*, about the desire for a Black utopia, and about the relevance of science fiction as a tool for speculative hope. These two texts offer a fairly straightforward—if also somewhat fundamentally oppositional—way to think about Afrofuturism as a political and cultural aesthetic. As students encountered these foundational films, they also read secondary texts that aimed to define Afrofuturism.

On the third day of class, we triangulated the cluster with a nineteenth-century piece by Martin Delany entitled “Political Destiny of the Colored Race on the American Continent.” Delany, born in Virginia in 1812, was a vocal, prolific abolitionist and a staunch Black nationalist. Although he explored various possibilities for a Black state, he pushed for a settlement in Liberia during the antebellum period. His “Political Destiny” speech, delivered in 1854 at the National Emigration Convention of Colored People in Cleveland, Ohio, makes an impassioned case for Black emigration as the only solution to the problem of slavery. I had my students take turns reading long sections of the manifesto out loud. Three passages drove our conversation:

No people can be free who themselves do not constitute an essential part of the ruling element of the country in which they live... The liberty of no man is secure, who controls not his own political destiny... A people, to be free, must necessarily be *their own rulers*... (247)

Our friends in this and other countries, anxious for our elevation, have for years been erroneously urging us to lose our identity as a distinct race, declaring that we were the same as other people; while at the very same time their own representative was traversing the world and propagating the doctrine in favor of a *universal Anglo-Saxon predominance*...The truth is, we are not identical with the Anglo-Saxon or any other race of the Caucasian or pure white type of the human family, and the sooner we know and acknowledge this truth, the better for ourselves and posterity...We have then inherent traits, attributes—so to speak—and native characteristics, peculiar to our race—whether pure or mixed blood—and all that is required of us is to cultivate these and develop them in their purity, to make them desirable and emulated by the rest of the world. (252)

Should we encounter an enemy with artillery, a prayer will not stay the cannon shot; neither will the kind words nor smiles of philanthropy shield his spear from piercing us through the heart. We must meet mankind, then, as they meet us—prepared for the worst, though we may hope for the best. Our submission does not gain for us an increase of friends nor respectability—as the white race will only respect those who oppose their usurpation, and acknowledge as equals those who will not submit to their rule. (253)

Americanist scholars often compare Delany to figures like Frederick Douglass, but Douglass is granted far more orthodoxy by contemporary mainstream narratives about nineteenth-century Black abolitionism, while Martin Delany is notably absent from most accounts of Black political leadership of the period. This is undoubtedly because of their differing relationship to whiteness: Where Douglass, with the goal of social integration, was more willing to make the case for a Black American citizenship to slaveowners, separatist Delany rejected the impulse to make any pleas to whites, insisting that Black abolitionists in the United States should recognize their global history and embrace Pan-African solidarity.

Delany's Black nationalism, his embrace of Pan-Africanism, and his rejection of assimilationism as they appear in "The Political Destiny of Colored People on the American Continent" all resonate philosophically and politically with the cultural work of texts like *Space is the Place* and *Black Panther*. But Delany also helped us reframe our conversations about respectability versus radicalism: I used this third day to highlight how Delany's rejection of sentimental political pleas echoed Sun Ra's conflicts with the Black Panther Party in the 1970s (Sun Ra saw the Black Panthers as overly invested in American Blackness), and we were able to return to the more contemporary *Black Panther* film and rethink its relationship to respectability. Reframing *Black Panther* in these multiple contexts, however, makes it difficult to place it as *either* radical in its case for Black nationalism or as a reductive, pop-y cultural text overly

invested in being generically palatable. Putting these three thinkers in conversation with one-another opened up the relationship between radicalism and assimilationism as a non-binary one. It helped us lose the plot—at least for a moment—and linger in the multidimensional political valences and potentialities of Afrofuturism. As I'll narrate in a moment, I ended this unit/week by pointing to Black feminist critiques of the masculinist nationalism of figures like Sun Ra and Delany, which set the agenda for the rest of this semester: to explore feminist and queer visions of utopia, community, and liberation.

Like unit 1, each of the other four clusters were similarly designed to produce a set of questions that built on the previous collection of readings and incorporated different kinds of media—among them films, music, short stories, speeches, Instagram videos. My hope was that as we routed and rerouted throughout the semester, my students would be able to see that there is no way to reduce or commodify Afrofuturism into the logic of a "trend"; it had too many relationships to too many artistic traditions, political formations, and canons.

Although the bulk of major assignments for this course involved formal analytical writing (including comparative analysis, close reading, and research papers), our smaller weekly assignments and in-class prompts were aimed to have students process the significance of our studies. To draw from an example from our first unit: when we read Martin Delany's speech near the end of our first week, I proposed a thought experiment in the spirit of Afrofuturist speculation. As we began to unpack the social implications of an emigrationist political view, I asked my students to freewrite a carefully considered response to the following prompt, highlighting that students would *not* be required to share their responses with me or the class:

Take a moment to consider an element of your identity that is marginalized or invisible in our society—it could be (an intersection in) your race, ethnicity, gender identity, sexuality, religion, or disability—and think about what would happen if someone created an entire nation-state based on that identity. How do you think such a society would function? Would you be interested in moving to a place like this? What would be the upside, and what would be the downside? Does it sound like a utopia to you?

I gave them ten minutes to write and think and then asked if anyone wanted to share their reflections. One student cracked a joke about her crew of queer friends, and the class laughed (silently, on mute, because COVID meant we couldn't even laugh together properly). A more earnest student raised their hand to describe their image of a trans and nonbinary utopia, and we spent some time exploring the ways that a society without fixed or binary gender would function: would people be liberated from oppressive social expectations or would this society develop a different way to assign normative roles? Do societies have to be hierarchical? Do societies inevitably develop biologically reductive or arbitrarily assigned roles to function well? (I confessed that I thought that yes, under capitalism, divisions of labor would always be enforced through some kind of biologism—but then also summarized the Shulamith Firestone pitch for

them just in case.) I asked: How might racial formations change in a trans or nonbinary nation? (We were not quite ready to answer that question in unit 1.) A final student raised his hand to say that the idea of Black emigration didn't appeal to him in the least—that no nation founded on identity politics would suit him—and that those societies would just create a different set of ways to discriminate against one another. We slowed down here, exploring potential problems (would colorism persist?)

This was the same student who, on the first day of class, argued that *Black Panther's* vision for the future was inherently colonialist, so I used this moment as an opportunity to summarize a feminist critique of figures like Sun Ra and Delany as representative of a kind of masculinist futurism, which is precisely, as Jayna Brown writes, that it reproduces settler colonial logic and "fused to the sovereignty of the male individual landowner" (27). We would close the semester with a week on Black feminist futurist activism, which began with Brown's chapter on "Black Women Mystics and Utopias of the Ecstatic" on Sojourner Truth's "provisional utopian enclaves" (Brown 11) and ended with that week's "Sunday sermon" from Janaya "Future" Khan, a nonbinary activist and co-founder of BLM-Toronto who hosts weekly "sermons" on Instagram live to unpack current issues for her followers. I gestured to this for my students, but also returned to my students themselves, looping us back to the first commentator's joke about her queer friends and asking what it would be like to see utopia as a practice of community building. What did community look like for them? What would it mean to think about utopia as an everyday practice, rather than a place?

Exercises like this, which ask students to bring their own identities and orientations into the classroom, always require time to talk through carefully. These tend to work well at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, where students possess the skill to speak directly to everyone in the room (including their instructors), likely because of the students' habituation to critique of one another's work in the context of art schools. But although different student bodies require different kinds of framing for such prompts, they are typically fruitful and even essential for connecting the dots between concept and praxis and moving from interpretation to ideology (which is to my mind the principle goal of radical teaching).

Homework that experiments with medium for conceptual work always proves exciting, generative, and fun. In one version of "Afrofuturism and Its Histories," I gave students the following open-ended prompt:

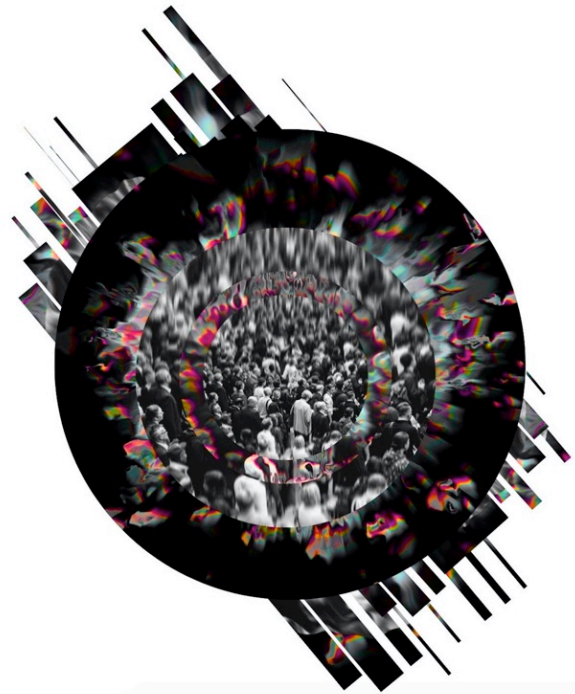
Choose one moment, scene, or character from DuBois's story, "The Comet," to represent visually. Choose an element of the story that relates to an Afrofuturist aesthetic, theme, or figure that we've encountered in Unit 1 of the semester.

Draw, paint, sketch, animate, or otherwise illustrate a piece of "The Comet." You can be as creative as you'd like—perhaps even fabulating parts of the story—but I want you to have one other Afrofuturist text in mind as you work. This can be a visual text, another story, or a

piece of theory that you will use as conceptual or aesthetic inspiration for your illustration.

After you complete this assignment, write a paragraph explaining which visual/literary/theoretical text you used, how it felt to animate the text, and what you learned from animating the story (5-10 sentences). Submit both the illustration and the paragraph.

I've used many similar assignments in other classes, including with students that did not have especially remarkable artistic abilities; it is *always* this assignment that students report, at the end of the semester, as one of their favorites, and I find it to be an important strategy for teaching at SAIC, whose student body includes a high percentage of international students (more than 30% in 2020); these kinds of multimodal compositions can be extremely useful for drawing out students who struggle with formal writing, speak English as a second language, or simply have a hard time "connecting" with nineteenth- and early-twentieth century literature. In this case, I brought a handful of submissions into the following meeting for us to think through. There were many generative submissions, but the examples I've included below highlight the creativity and skill of students at the Art Institute, the conceptual work that's made possible by this practice, and the ways that these assignments open up conversations of medium and form:



ARTWORK BY LUZ VALERIA CHAVEZ (REPRINTED WITH PERMISSION)

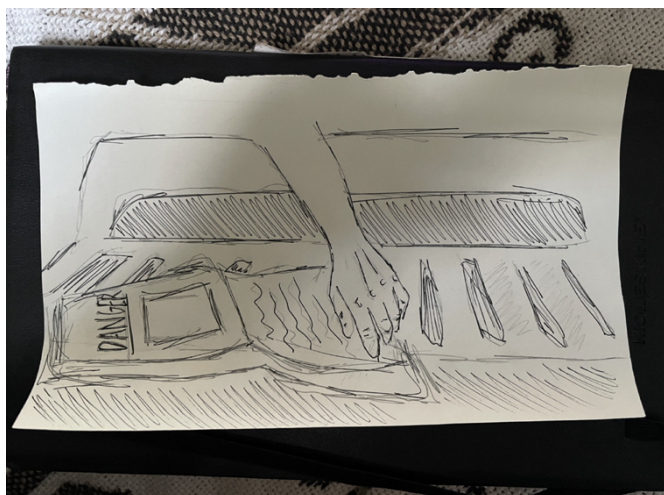
*When configuring my digital collage, I thought about Sun Ra's *Space is the Place* and how power structures are dissolved on a global scale when black people decide to leave Earth's social dynamics and thrive in a new time and place. I related this notion of the racial issue being not only addressed locally or within an immediate location but something that can only be confronted*

globally, even cosmically. I used repetitive circular forms and straight lines to allude to this notion of the "global scale" and New York's architectural aesthetics. Within the circular shape, points to the metaphor implied in Jim's words on the first passage of the story, "Human River", which refers to the masses that will be destroyed in the story. I think reproducing my ideas visually is an excellent exercise to reflect and further understand the central afrofuturistic tropes we can find by comparing different narratives we've studied along the course.



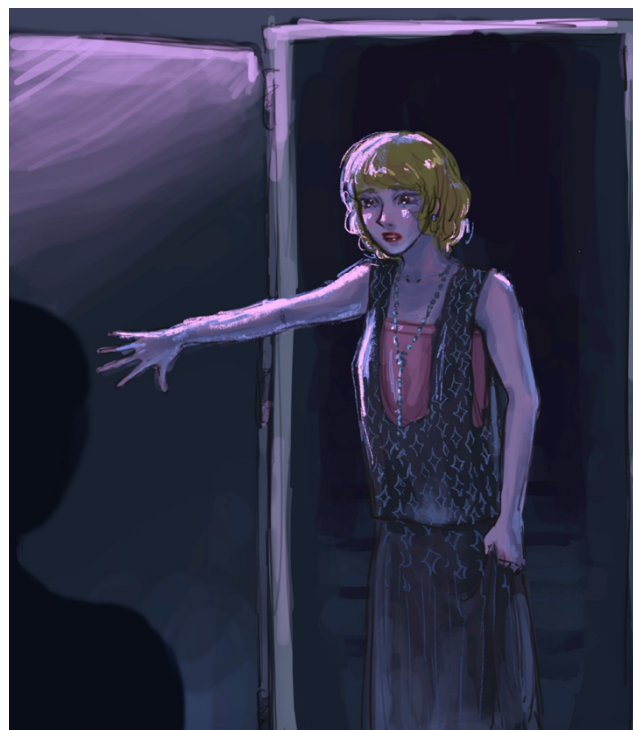
ARTWORK BY XIANG LUO (REPRINTED WITH PERMISSION)

In "The Comet", the conversations and interactions between the black man and the white woman shows a discussion about race and gender. This reminds me of the conversation between Spacer and Freik in "Aye, and Gomorrah." This piece shows that even though after the comet dropped into earth, the white woman still remembers the racial discrimination. The space station and satellite in the piece represent Spacers. Through painting, I feel the picture that the author imagined and why he expressed it in this way.



ARTWORK BY EZRA AGUSTÍN TIZCARENO (REPRINTED WITH PERMISSION)

A grimy newsboy sat in the gutter with the "last edition" in his uplifted hand: "Danger!" screamed its black headlines. "Warnings wired around the world. The Comet's tail sweeps past us at noon. Deadly gases expected. Close doors and windows. Seek the cellar." I used this scene because it stuck out to me a lot upon the first reading of the story. It was sort of a gruesome and depressing depiction of the scene, but also the way DuBois characterized the "black headlines" to be reminded me a lot of Nyong'o's essay on Afrofabulation. This wasn't the easiest to create, I started over a couple of times as I'm not an illustrator in any form. If I were to have more time to recreate this scene I would create a photo collage. It was hard to visualize exactly what was being depicted, as I couldn't understand how the newsboy was still sitting on the gutter with an uplifted hand, so I instead drew a drooping hand with a newspaper over the gutter. Drawing this out made me focus more on the emotional and gruesome aspects of the scene and how emotionally distraught Jim was in the story.



ARTWORK BY MOON (REPRINTED WITH PERMISSION)

I illustrated the scene where Julia and Jim meet. The descriptions of Julia are quite plentiful, especially in comparison to Jim's. The other afrofuturist text I had in mind was Delaney's "Aye and Gomorrah". I think I've become very attached to this short story. The colors I associate with A+G are cool colors in the range of blue and purple. Both

stories are attached to some sort of galactic theme and I just really enjoy anything related to space; visuals, theories, and all. It felt cathartic putting what I envisioned in my head into a visual format. For me some emotions just aren't as easily translated into words as it is in artwork. Doing this made me think of how I could visually integrate the time period in which the story was published. I looked up general 1920s fashion and tried my best within an hour and a half (lol).

These assignments were designed to have students see themselves in conversation with our texts rather than as commentators. Although these examples of multimodal interpretive submissions demonstrate that the prompt helped them think through complex ideas, they are also works of art and ideas in and of themselves, and represent a bridge between analytical writing and creative expression; they evince the fact that the production and analysis of art are continuous projects. These kinds of assignments were useful in both versions of "Afrofuturism and Its Histories," but were most meaningful in the anarchaeological version of the course: teaching in conceptual clusters let us encounter the texts as being in touch with one another around enduring questions, and meant that we were regularly discussing the nineteenth century in conversation with our own moment, so that students often saw themselves as thinking *with* our various texts rather than about them.

In the end, the summer course turned out a few different ways. The non-linear historiographical structure worked well to highlight conceptual issues, and although more advanced undergraduates would be able to engage more deeply with our theorists, I found that the structure of the course, which positioned texts in conversation about specific issues, gave dimension to our topics. I was surprised to find that students were very willing to jump across multiple historical periods and make connections between texts that can seem quite different every week, and I realized early on that because of the anarchaeological structure, my lectures in fact had to *especially* highlight historical context, so that their work of connecting conceptual dots could also be sensitive to important differences between the politics and goals of our various texts. This was, of course, also necessary for their ability to see the ways that writers engaged with and work against prevalent ideas of their times. (Pauline Hopkins's *Of One Blood*, for example, which utilizes but warps a one-drop concept of race so prevalent in the early twentieth-century into a psychologized model for identity, required a lot of framing.)

I could see that they did come to regular revelations about our present during discussions, linking representations of surveillance technologies in texts like *Born in Flames* to those of racist policing but also seeing the film's reclamation of television and radio for queer Black women echoed in the "hacking" of social media platforms by BLM activists. This logic of hacking in turn framed our conversation of Sojourner Truth's activism, which for me revealed the potential of anachronistic theoretical frameworks: it allows us to see the nineteenth century in a new way *and* makes Truth conversant with contemporary

figures like Janaya "Future" Khan. Images of catastrophe and concomitant social breakdowns led us to use COVID as a testing ground and reflect on the ways that COVID revealed the fragility of some social structures and the endurance of others. Afrofuturism's disruption of received notions about racial identity, its immense history of *queering* identity, and even its examination of the category of the human provoked some of the most interesting conversations I've participated in as a teacher; at the same time, it meant that some of the work we did raised more questions than answers about contemporary social justice issues. But their final papers were fantastic, and many showed an understanding of the ideological consequences and possibilities of Afrofuturist politics, thinking through global issues around race, gender, nationality, and especially sexual orientation that defined 2021. Many were invested in intersectional queer readings that drew from Nyong'o, Kara Keeling, and Clayton Colmon. At the end of the semester, one student wrote a beautiful essay on play as a queer aesthetic in Afrofuturism, and another convincingly reclaimed Samuel Delany's "Aye, and Gomorrah" as a text about asexuality. Another reflected on "trans" as a metaphorical or literal modifier in many kinds of Afrofuturist ideation. Others built on conversations about form and medium; one particularly successful essay explored multimodality as an Afrofuturist aesthetic, centering on music and sound in Afrofuturist literature and music from the nineteenth to the twenty-first century. In classroom thought experiments, students (often enthusiastically) explored the multivalent possibilities of identity.

The first year of COVID took a visible toll on everyone: despite our increased Zoom literacy and despite everyone's creative efforts to make it work, sometimes it just didn't. Internet connections would fail, students had to Zoom in from awkward places, and despite my efforts to move more in-class work to asynchronous assignments after realizing that so many of my students were in different countries, several international students had to drop the course because of the difficulties over time differences. Where I would normally introduce variety into our schedule by taking field trips to the Art Institute or other local exhibits, sitting on Zoom for three days a week, two hours a day, became repetitive. A lot of the content in our week on "race as technology" had to be scrapped because we were simply short on time. I was spread thin. The lectures and exercises took an enormous amount of time to put together, and on top of historical and theoretical grounding, I was giving them writing instruction and grading their writing. I was also preparing to be on the academic job market for the first time. This was the somewhat painful timeliness of teaching Afrofuturist themes under the conditions of COVID: technologies help us come together despite geographical distance; speculative images of the future, dystopian and utopian, abound; alienation and precarity feel all too real for some of us.

At the same time, these resonances gave our work dimension, and my efforts to teach a history of the present were aided by a few different major coincidental occurrences. In the fall of 2021, during the more protracted and linear semester of "Afrofuturism and Its Histories," an exhibit called "Before Yesterday We Could Fly: An

Afrofuturist Period Room” opened at The Met. The exhibition collects historical fragments from homes in nineteenth-century Seneca Village, whose residents and landowners were predominantly Black, and explicitly frames its archival-historical methodology as “[p]owered by Afrofuturism—a transdisciplinary creative move that centers Black imagination, excellence, and self-determination” and uses speculation based on historical fragments to construct a world: “Like other period rooms throughout the Museum, this installation is a fabrication of a domestic space that assembles furnishings to create an illusion of authenticity. Unlike these other spaces, this room rejects the notion of one historical period and embraces the African and African American diasporic belief that the past, present, and future are interconnected and that informed speculation may uncover many possibilities.” As much as this event in the art world enlivened our discussion of Afrofuturism-as-methodology, it also made it clear that our work in the classroom had stakes—that our work as a class was part of ongoing, unfinished historical business.

During week four of our summer session, Lauren Berlant died. In *Cruel Optimism*, they write that “a situation is a genre of living that one knows one’s in but that one has to find out about, a circumstance embedded in one’s life but not in one’s control. A situation is a disturbance, a sense genre of animated suspension—not suspended animation” (195). Many of us are familiar with this experience of animated suspension, and austerity measures have only worsened under COVID. But as Berlant insists, the outcome of a situation is inherently uncertain; we simply don’t how it will turn out. During week six, the last week of our summer session, Lil Nas X gave us the Afrofuturist gift that was his 2021 BET performance. Against a backdrop of spinning pyramids and donning Egyptian garb, Lil Nas ended his performance of “Montero: Call Me by Your Name” with a passionate kiss with one of his dancers. A few days later, I closed our semester with a screening and discussion of the performance. I think it made us all time-sensitive—aware that the uncanniness of the present belies the queerness of time.



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RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

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

by Kimberly Nichele Brown



"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 bourgeois 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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RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

Teaching Afrofuturisms as American Cultural Studies

by Makeba Lavan



IMAGE COURTESY OF AUTHOR. GRINELL COLLEGE, IOWA

I want a Black world where the matter of mattering matters indisputably, where Black mattering is beyond expression. I want to read and study in the orientation of a Black world.

- Kevin Quashie, *Black Aliveness, Or A Poetics of Being*, 2021

I started as an Assistant Professor in the English Department at Grinnell College in 2019. The first six months was an exciting whirlwind as I got to know my students and colleagues in person. But the end of spring and all of fall 2020 meant an initially frenzied and then more intentional pivot to online seven-week instruction. The stress and uncertainty of the pandemic—combined with the tense, frenetic, and seemingly never-ending summer tutorials for learning how to teach online and in truncated time frames—left me with the steepest, rockiest learning curve of my career. Ultimately, it meant paring down and simplifying.

I spent untold hours over the summer reading and thinking about ways to keep morale and participation high; how do I translate the classroom community rapport to a digital space? How do I teach and facilitate at a time when we all feared for our lives as well as the lives of our loved ones? How do we read, think, and write together in a way that holds space for grief, uncertainty, and death? Is it even ethical to do so? In these times, I am reminded of an integral fact I used to relay to my Lehman College students: college is real life. What we do here matters. In the midst of multiple pandemics and the Information Age's rampant anti-intellectualism, now more than ever, thinking, reading, and writing critically *matter*. As such, this article examines three Afrofuturisms courses taught during the pandemic to highlight the necessity of Black-centered teaching and learning in the fight against fascism and historical erasure. I also provide practical syllabi and assignments for other instructors to consider.

Critical Pedagogy and Centering Blackness

In the wake of the novel coronavirus and my seventh year of teaching, I have learned more about critical/socially conscious pedagogies than ever before. At Lehman College (CUNY), my previous institution, most of my students were Black or Latinx and first-generation. Many were older with families and careers. A good portion also identified as LGBTQIA+ and/or disabled. For most of these students, the literature we studied was the literature of their cultures and/or life experience. At my current institution, Grinnell College, the vast majority of my students are not Black or people of color. Much of the intellectual heavy lifting necessitates frankness regarding historical and cultural context, interrogation of social location, and, as one of my students, Bethany, said on the first day of ENG 329 this semester, acknowledging "the elephants in the room."

To aid in this process, I collaborate with students to establish community guidelines that foster mutual enthusiasm and respect. In class, we read the syllabus's

note on offensive language and we discuss what it means, leaving time for questions. By the end of the first class period, I invite them to think of guidelines that would help build and maintain a respectful collaborative learning community for everyone. Over the next two class periods, we hone the guidelines until we all verbally agree. During the course of the semester, we refer back to them on an as-needed basis. I have been doing this since I started teaching and find that most students contribute more because these guidelines are in place. They are invaluable given the often contentious nature of teaching and learning African American history and culture in a mostly white space.

As students learn Black Radical/liberatory frameworks and use them to interrogate their social location, the dire consequences that exist as a result of the dearth of Black history and culture taught in schools reveal themselves. In her article "Ending Curriculum Violence," my colleague Dr. Stephanie P. Jones addresses this:

Our failure to educate students on this subject means there is also a lapse in student understanding of racial inequality, past and present. Not only is slavery being mistaught; it's also the only thing some students are learning about Black history at school. The transatlantic slave trade and its resulting horror within the American slavery system are often essentialized as all Black history itself.

White students in my courses are earnest and often naïve regarding the wide-reaching tendrils of racial capitalism. Even more so, I have found that many students, regardless of race or ethnicity, have rarely ever read books that do not center white people, and the protagonist their envision in their minds is usually white unless explicitly stated otherwise (as Toni Morrison brilliantly unpacks in *Playing in the Dark*). When students do read books by or about Black people, many of these narratives are trauma-based and focus solely on the perceived deficit of marginalized identity.

But as bell hooks states, marginality is "much more than a site of deprivation...it is also a site of radical possibility, a space of resistance." This marginality is embraced as a gift, one that allows for the imagining and ultimately the creation of better, more inclusive futures and worlds. The lived experience at the margins allows us to truly see the cracks and fissures in our current white supremacist regime. Many of these cracks are the same ones Black people have been highlighting for centuries. The writers that we examine in my Afrofuturisms courses not only point them out, they also often offer solutions.

My favorite definition of Afrofuturism comes from famed sociologist Dr. Alondra Nelson. In an interview, Nelson defines Afrofuturism as "an epistemology that is thinking about the subject position of Black people; aspirations for modernity, having a place in modernity, the resilience of black culture and black life is about imagining the impossible, imagining a better place, a different world." This definition wonderfully explains the necessity for centering Blackness in order to move past a world plagued by institutional racism. In our classroom community, we privilege non-dominating voices and, as a result, students

gain a more complete view of literature, history, and their relation to our contemporary moment.

Afrofuturism excavates lost identities and cultural ties, but it also celebrates present-day diasporan culture, even as it looks to the future. In this way, it is important to acknowledge and take charge of what stories non-dominating cultures are able to tell/have told about themselves.

We often talk about African American literature and culture in terms of pain and we erase the joy, even as the dominating culture is always stealing the representations of our joy and selling it back to us. As such, the representations of our joy (digital fellowship, entertainment, food, speech, fashion, swag) becomes American, even as we are still disenfranchised. Part of what we saw with the texts and art we reviewed this semester is that Black people have always resisted cultural flattening/erasure but these resistances are aggressively rewritten or expunged.

Pandemic Pedagogy Across Three Courses

Spring 2020-Afrofuturisms

In late January 2020, I started teaching my first Afrofuturisms course at Grinnell College. I wanted to provide experiences for the class, mainly because I recall how immersion helped me retain historical and cultural lessons during my own college experience. As a result, in the beginning of the semester the students attended my short lecture at the Grinnell College Museum of Art where I discussed the visual artist Damon Davis's new exhibit within the context of Afrofuturism. This museum visit served several purposes: it got the students into the museum and out of the classroom and they were also introduced to Afrofuturistic visual art as text. After the 20-minute lecture, the class perused the exhibit and discussed their favorite pieces.

Two months later, we gleefully piled into a comfortable college-provided vehicle and rode for an hour to explore and create zines at the Center for Afrofuturist Studies in Iowa City. Prior to the visit, the students, all juniors and seniors, were surprised to learn that there was a center dedicated to Afrofuturism in Iowa, and only a little over an hour away at that. We talked about the erased/buried/little known history of Black people in the Midwest. We also discussed the purpose of zines, and the students expressed excitement that their art would be donated to the center. At the center, we learned about Martine Syms's "Mundane Afrofuturist Manifesto," a call to creatives to stop relying heavily on tired tropes and easy otherworldly answers when creating Afrofuturist art. Her manifesto became the backbone for the final project in which I would ask the class to describe their own afrofuturity.

However, the following week, the college announced that we were moving ahead with distance learning and everyone geared up to help students get home safely, and then spring break saw us scrambling to figure out how to adapt our classes for online instruction. We moved on, kept going, even in the midst of our terror. Most of the days from

mid-March to May 2020 are hazy but I remember the final in-person meeting with the students. We sat in our classroom in a circle and discussed our concerns: What would the rest of the semester look like? How would we all stay safe? As a group, we decided to drop the largest book on the syllabus and moved forward with one synchronous meeting a week to discuss the reading. I also dropped the final paper assignment and asked the students to submit some thoughts about the readings instead. This was all any of us had the bandwidth for. The coronavirus robbed us of our final weeks together.

Spring 2021- "Bodyminds Reimagined" in Black Women's Speculative Fiction

By spring 2021, we were meeting online and classes were only seven weeks long. It felt like such a daunting task to create a practical, impactful syllabus in seven weeks. Nevertheless, I taught a new Afrofuturisms course titled, "Bodyminds Reimagined in Black Women's Speculative Fiction." Named after Sami Schalk's amazing book, we explored the questions she provides for us:

What might it mean to imagine disability differently? Differently from the stereotypical stories of pity, helplessness, and victimhood, of evil, bitterness, and abjection, of nonsexuality and isolation, of overcoming and supercrips? What would it mean to imagine disability differently than these dominant cultural narratives we typically encounter? What might it mean to imagine blackness differently? Womanhood differently? Sexuality differently? (2)

These questions, especially relevant now, were the guiding questions for the course wherein we focused heavily on disability and the ways it is portrayed in a society where many people are becoming disabled as a result of COVID-19. As with many examples of privilege, how we think and talk about disability changed during the quarantine year. We watched as able-bodied people with power rolled out innovative responses to the pandemic that were based on things that disabled people have been requesting for years, such as the ability to work and learn from home.

As a result, disability came up in class time and again because Afrofuturism centers Blackness in all its intersections while recovering erasures and imagining futures devoid of the overwhelming oppression of white terrorism. The conversations around disability were mostly focused on Octavia Butler's *Mind of My Mind* and Nnedi Okorafor's *The Book of Phoenix*. The way students discuss disability represents its own type of excavation or negation of erasure.

For example, one student, Gabe, states that "Butler's works frequently force readers to reconsider how they define 'human'." In his paper, which analyzes *Mind of My Mind* alongside Butler's short story, "The Evening and The Morning and the Night," Gabe asks: "what social implications does Butler's portrayal of interdependence carry...and how does this interdependence affect future understandings of (dis)ability?" Using Sami Schalk's definition of "a socially constructed concept that deems certain bodyminds and

behaviors acceptable and others pathologically nonnormative and deviant” (Disability Metaphor, 149) and Kafer’s political/relational model of disability, in which “the problem of disability no longer resides in the minds or bodies of individuals but in built environments and social patterns that exclude or stigmatize particular kinds of bodies” (6), Gabe reads the “latents” in Butler’s novel and the DGDs in the short story as disabled. This was particularly fascinating because of the mental rather than physical natures of the disabilities.

There were also conversations about the so-called “invisibly” disabled and the treatment they receive in society. Another student, Oona, makes a similar argument to Gabe’s. She agrees that the latent psychics have limited and uncontrollable power that can be read as disability (Butler 17) but she also connects the novel’s discussion of disability to the complicated relationship that Black people have with western medicine in real life. She uses Therí Alyce Pickens’s book, *Black Madness :: Mad Blackness*, to discuss “the historical distrust between medical personnel and Black communities [which?] tends to calcify an intracultural dictum that disability be taken care of within families or local enclaves” (51). Therefore, Oona connects the experience of latents’ mental disability in the novel with the taboo of mental illness in the current U.S. She writes, “Octavia Butler’s *Mind of My Mind* urges readers to reimagine society, as Mary has in her utopia, to create systems of mental health care that actually support people with mental disorders. Her novel reminds us that locking people away in prisons and hospitals is harmful and that people deserve to have a community where they feel supported.”

Lisette, also writing about Butler’s *Mind of My Mind*, juxtaposes it with Okorafor’s *The Book of Phoenix*. She argues that “speculative fiction is a playground in which Black, queer, and disabled bodies become the forefront of storytelling, and the vessel for interrogating what we deem ‘unnatural’.” Lisette sees the novels, and Black women’s speculative fiction as a whole, as a genre that subverts and rejects Eurocentric beauty standards and bodily notions, allowing bodies that have been shunned by a eugenicist society to wield the most power. They are reborn in new forms, both psychic and mythical, reinventing what it means to have a body and queering the colonialist rhetoric that has long defined them.

Allison’s discussion of “disability transmission” really hit home. Prior to the novel coronavirus—the first global pandemic of my students’ lives—many of them did not think of disability as something that can be transmitted. Allison writes about the ways that “characters transmit the label and reality of disability onto others. Through the transmission of disability, these speculative fiction novels explore imagined futures for Black and disabled characters and the imagined consequences for continued exploitation of people within these categories.” Using crip theory, she engaged deeply with Alison Kafer’s *Feminist, Queer, Crip* and Sami Schalk’s *Bodyminds Reimagined* to analyze the ways in which the medical industry ignores, denigrates and punishes “those who lack a ‘proper’ (read: medically acceptable, doctor-provided, and insurer-approved) diagnosis for their symptoms” under the realm of disability and departs “from the social model’s assumption that

‘disabled’ and ‘nondisabled’ are discrete, self-evident categories, choosing instead to explore the creation of such categories and the moments in which they fail to hold” (Kafer 36, 18).” Allison astutely remarks upon the ways that Butler and Okorafor eschew both the traditional utopias free of diversity and disability as well as the dystopian futures overrun by the previously abled who become miserably disabled.

The “imagined futures in both *Mind of My Mind* and *The Book of Phoenix* offer plots wherein the main characters, both Black and disabled, work to create better futures for themselves where their identities are not exploited. They work with preestablished tropes in science fiction, such as the cyborg and ‘supercrip,’ in order to actively alter negative depictions” (Isztok 8). The conversations we had regarding Blackness, speculative fiction/Afrofuturism, and disability would not have happened without the coronavirus pandemic. For one, we are living through a mass disabling event. The students recognized that and were able to process and provide intersectional analysis of the texts because they are seeing many of the themes play out in real time. At the end of the course, we left more knowledgeable about the dangers of ableism in the U.S. and the role that Afrofuturism can have in creating more inclusive futures for all.

Fall 2021-Early Afrofutures

After a year and a half of virtual learning and teaching, by fall 2021 we taught and learned in person with vaccine and mask mandates. One of the most interesting things about the Early Afrofutures course in which we focused on the late nineteenth/early twentieth century as opposed to the late twentieth and early twenty-first, was grappling with the so-called “Negro Problem.” Early Afrofutures situates Black people not as a problem but as a solution. It is similar to the Black feminist ideological statement in the Combahee River Collective that if Black women are lifted up, so is everyone else. Early African American writers knew they had to imagine a way forward and through racial capitalism. My goal with this class was to show that the (sub)genre we call Afrofuturism is not new and, in fact, the need to situate blackness and imagine better futures is the root of the African American literary tradition. Black writers in the nineteenth and early twentieth century wrote mostly to claim African humanity and culture within the dominant society, and to create paths to full enfranchisement and citizenship in a post-emancipation world.

The first assignment was to research Afrofuturism definitions and analyze the one they liked most. With this assignment, I wanted students to see how wide-ranging and far-reaching the definitions and definers are. Here are a few excerpts and analyses from that assignment:

Paddy: According to Michael Bennett, Afrofuturism describes “new plausible social arrangements, political structures, and technological systems” (Bennett 92). In many ways, this initial definition reads very similarly to that of science or speculative fiction, without offering an example of how Afrofuturism differs. But Bennett elaborates, discussing how Afrofuturism “estranges” the

reader from the idea that "life must be as it currently is" (Bennett 92).

Sam: In the case of Afrofuturism, however, power comes from imagining worlds where people do not struggle with structural oppression and instead live outside of the constraints of our current, real history. The focus on hope is extremely important. These are not stories about disasters and trauma and pain, or stories where the trauma is based around stereotypes or twisted tellings of history. This is not to say that Afrofuturism cannot contain disasters, trauma, pain, or truth, but the objective of the story is to uplift and create new futures, where it is possible for Black people to "thrive in [their] own culture, where [they] imagine [themselves] achieving greatness without external influence" (Fields).

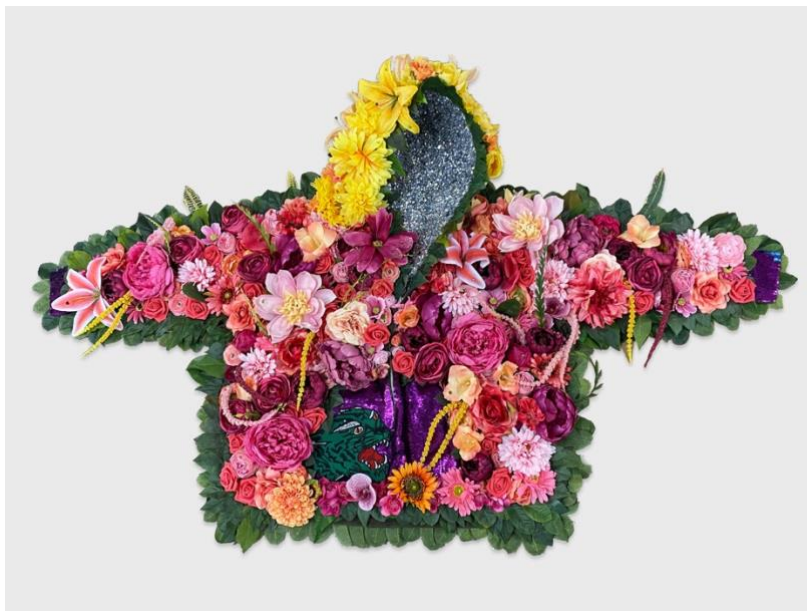
Bethany: Initially, I saw technology in Afrofuturism's definition as a limiting factor until I understood how Blackness, Black diasporic culture, and Black survival techniques can all be interpreted as technology. Now, I see common practices of Black culture and survival to be technology. For instance, the tool of improvisation is technology. Continuously, being able to cultivate culture and adapt it to your surrounding circumstances is a technologically advanced skill. And communicating through cultural codes demonstrates how self-preservation and Black creativity are both technologies.

Keir: I love the activist spark in (Dr. Grace) Gipson's definition. It reminds me that radical imagination is always necessary for change—whether in the classroom, the justice system, community organizing, or anywhere else... Gipson's analysis focuses primarily on Afrofuturist ideas spread on Twitter. I would also argue that Black Twitter, as a driver of culture, education, and radical imagination that takes place with the assistance of technology, is a form of Afrofuturism in action. I think of the Noname book club, which has facilitated discussions of race, racism, and abolition on Twitter, in person and even between incarcerated people and book club members.

The students articulated and analyzed well-rounded complex definitions that expanded their thought process regarding Black history and current cultural expressions.

With multiple definition in their consciousness, I took advantage of our in-person status and coordinated a class trip to the Grinnell Museum of Art and Burling Library in hopes that the juxtaposition of modern art and historical writing would provide tangible connections between the past and present. At the museum, Curator of Academic and

Community Outreach Tilly Woodward led the class through the new exhibit *Queer/Dialogue*. The show theme was actually suggested by an alum who happened to be in my spring 2020 Afrofuturisms course, and it featured three exquisitely poignant pieces by Devan Shimoyama:



DEVAN SHIMOYAMA, *UNTITLED (FOR TRAYVON)*, 2020, SILK FLOWERS, BEADS, AND RHINESTONES ON FABRIC WITH STEEL MOUNT AND FRAME, 48 X 76 IN. COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND KAVI GUPTA. PHOTOGRAPHER JOHN LUSIS.



DEVAN SHIMOYAMA, *UNTITLED (FOR TAMIR)*, 2019, CHAINS, SILK FLOWERS, RHINESTONES, BEADS, AND FABRIC ON SWING SEATS, INDUSTRIAL STEEL SWING SET, MIRRORED PLEXI PLATFORM, AND WOOD 96 X 82 X 158 IN. COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND KAVI GUPTA. PHOTOGRAPHER JOHN LUSIS.]

Shimoyama is very clear about his motivations for art: "I don't depict Black figures in pain. I'm not interested in seeing more of those images circulate throughout the world...in works like *Untitled (For Tamir)* it's a way for me to celebrate their life."

One of the students, Abraham, connected Shimoyama's art with the ideas presented in Martine Syms's "Mundane Afrofuturist Manifesto" in his post-museum reflection:

Both “Untitled (For Trayvon)” and “Untitled (For Tamir)” evoked a reaction from me that felt surprisingly joyful, forward-looking, or optimistic, while still honoring the reality of the current and past moments that led to these pieces. Because the pieces are memorials connected to real people and historical moments, it might not have been my first instinct to categorize them as Afrofuturist, but their aesthetics were provocatively futuristic. Both pieces surpass the brutality and injustice of these children’s murders with the vibrance and joy in their composition, while still honoring and amplifying the vacant spaces left by white supremacist violence. Something about these pieces really resonated with Martine Syms’ “Mundane Afrofuturist Manifesto” for me. These pieces can dream or urge a future where this joy continues to live, where these childhood spaces continue to be occupied by life, without relying on the science fiction tropes that Syms criticizes. The subject, the murder of Black children, is often treated as shockingly and disturbingly mundane. By delving into and physically filling the mundane objects linked to Trayvon and Tamir’s deaths with imagery representing joy, there is a sense of urgency and resonance that couldn’t be evoked by more explicitly futuristic tropes.

After a lengthy discussion of *Queer/Dialogue*, Tilly led us out of the museum and next door to Burling Library. Downstairs in the hall outside of the Print Study room are thirteen of the fifteen prints from Jacob Lawrence’s *Toussaint L’Ouverture* series. As we reflected on the prints, one of the students, Keir, wrote:

The prints of Toussaint Louverture connected as well: I had never heard of him before Tuesday’s class. I have been returning again and again to the Afrofuturist idea that the struggle for liberation and dismantling of white supremacy transcends time. It seems that reimagining the past and the present is just as crucial to Afrofuturism as reimagining the future – especially when white supremacist narratives dominate the past and the present.

Another student, Maya, reflected: “I also noticed how in the series of paintings we see the whole of L’Ouverture’s life: I think often when we learn about historical figures, we only learn about their ‘big’ moments, not necessarily who they are and where they came from.”

The week before fall break we returned to the library, this time to peruse archival materials related to Black life in Grinnell. I arranged the session because archives are cool and students rarely interact with them. Many students were beyond excited to realize that Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Ralph Ellison, and Louis Armstrong were all present for 1967’s Convocation: The Liberal Arts College in a World of Change. Ironically, several students sadly but astutely remarked on the nearly identical nature of Concerned Black Students’ (CBS) demands in the 1960s and today.

Bethany, a current member of CBS, delighted in all the material from the ‘60s about the organization. She took pics that highlighted events and organizing strategies, happy to



DEVAN SHIMOYAMA, *POTTED*, 2018. OIL, COLOR PENCIL, FLASHE, RHINESTONES, ACRYLIC, COLLAGE AND GLITTER ON CANVAS STRETCHED OVER PANEL. 72 X 84 IN

be able to bring them back to the organization. She also talked about helping resurrect the student newspaper/journal, *Black Voices*. The session was a perfect example of the reasons Black history deserves to be remembered and centered. These outings were designed to stimulate creativity as students began drafting their final assignments.

As a callback to that first semester teaching Afrofuturisms at Grinnell, I assigned Martine Syms again as a leadup to the revamped final essay assignment. Instead of asking the students to imagine and describe an afrofuture (an assignment that I have come to realize is too broad), I created the following:

- In many dominating-culture/mainstream futures, BIPOC, queer, and disabled people are erased.
- Part 1: Choose a text from the syllabus and articulate 1-2 specific ways the author fought against this erasure.
- Part 2: Choose one institution and highlight the characteristics and benchmarks of white supremacy within. Be sure to use archival/legal sources. Then describe how the institution might function in a future devoid of white supremacist characteristics and benchmarks.

This assignment is the culmination of teaching 2.5 Afrofuturisms courses at Grinnell. What I have come to

realize is that students are very good at historicizing African American literature and culture. As a result, the class had no problem with part one of the final essay. However, part two is a struggle. Most students are being asked to center Black people for the first time in their lives and actively investigate how racism remains embedded in all institutions. Once I realized that most of the class struggled with part two, we worked in pairs to help each person choose an institution and discuss concrete ways that institutional racism rears its ugly head as well as real life alternatives that are being practiced. From there, they were able to start thinking critically and creatively about what institutions devoid of baked-in racism would look like. I look forward to reading their freedom dreams.

Conclusion

And so, I return to Nelson's definition. For me, it is no coincidence that Afrofuturism has exploded during this stage of late capitalism. In the midst of a global pandemic where world leaders are doubling down on nationalism and racial capitalism, "an epistemology that is thinking about the subject position of Black people" is one that focuses on global community solutions, the likes of which we have yet to see. And so often, in class or during office hours, students come to a difficult and inconvenient truth: Our world is exactly as we continue to make it. Part of my charge in teaching Afrofuturism is to aid students in this realization and help them identify concrete ways that they can help society reach critical mass for change. The Black artists/activists we study invite us to eschew the current world order and imagine otherwise because, for most of us, we do not wish to continue integrating into a burning building when we can just decide to do something different, better.

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Appendix:
ENGLISH-329: Studies in African American Literature
"Afrofuturisms"
Spring 2020



COVER ART FIGURE BY ELIZA LAZO FOR ARCANGEL IMAGES. ART BURNING FIELD BY HARALD SUND FOR GETTY IMAGES.

A Note on Hate Speech and Offensive Language

Hate speech and slurs such as the n-word and f-word will not be tolerated. While you may see it in print or hear it in film, if you need to discuss these terms in class, you will say the n-/f- or whichever other non-explicit term. The same thing applies while writing your papers. Further, while writing your papers, please do not use the words "whites" or "Blacks" while describing people. We're discussing people, not laundry. The same goes for "females." A person who identifies as a female human is either a girl or a woman. Since we already have these terms, please use them. Finally, remember to privilege the person. People are not slaves, ex-cons, collateral damage, infidels, etc. They are enslaved PEOPLE, formerly incarcerated PEOPLE, murdered PEOPLE, PEOPLE who are either nonreligious or have other religious beliefs. Terms that dehumanize others allow bigotry to continue and the community we build during the semester will be built upon mutual respect. Unlearning deep-seated/subconscious bigotry is an active, life-long process. One must be prepared to examine oneself and let go of harmful/hateful ideas. And while conscious harm will not be tolerated, we will not engage in a cancelling/pitchfork carrying castigation if someone in our classroom community falters in speech or behavior. Undoing bigotry is messy work, and we must leave space for growth.

Course Schedule*

	Monday	Wednesday
Week 1:		Introduction/Course Overview/What is African American Literature?

Jan 22, 24		
Week 2: Jan 27, 29	Damon Davis Exhibit + 20 minutes @11	<i>Dark Matter</i> excerpts, Sheree Thomas Walter Mosley, "Black to the Future;" Octavia Butler, "The Monophobic Response"
Week 3: Feb 3, 5	This American Life, "We Are In The Future" Drexciya	<i>The Deep, Rivers Solomon</i> "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation", Toni Morrison
Week 4: Feb 10, 12	<i>The Deep, Rivers Solomon</i> Excerpts, <i>In the Wake</i> , Christina Sharpe	Excerpts: <i>How Long Til Black Future Month?</i> , N.K. Jemisin <i>Dirty Computer: An Emotion Picture</i> , Janelle Monae <i>Response paper #1 due.</i>
Week 5: Feb 17, 19	<i>Black No More</i> , George Schuyler	<i>Black No More</i> , George Schuyler Samuel Delany, "Racism and Science Fiction"
Week 6: Feb 24, 26	"The Comet", W.E.B. Du Bois "Lex Talionis", Robert Bagnall	Library Visit.
SPRING BREAK SPRING BREAK SPRING BREAK SPRING BREAK		
Week 7: March 2, 4	Watch: <i>Fast Color</i> Hortense Spillers "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book"	Class visit: The Center for Afrofuturist Studies, Iowa City.
Week 8: March 9, 11	Flex period.	<i>American Gods</i> Episode <i>Response paper #2 due.</i>
SPRING BREAK SPRING BREAK SPRING BREAK SPRING BREAK		
Week 9: March 30, April 1	<i>Children of Blood and Bone</i> , Tomi Adeyemi (to pg. 268)	<i>Children of Blood and Bone</i> , Tomi Adeyemi (to 347)
Week 10: April 6, 8	<i>Children of Blood and Bone</i> , Tomi Adeyemi (end of novel)	Film selection.

Week 11: April 13, 15	<i>Mind of My Mind</i> , Octavia Butler	<i>Mind of My Mind</i> , Octavia Butler <i>Response paper #3 due.</i>
Week 12: April 20, 22	<i>Electric Arches</i> , Eve L. Ewing	<i>Electric Arches</i> , Eve L. Ewing
Week 13: April 27, 29	Art selections.	Flex period.
Week 14: May 4, 6	<i>Shuri: The Search for Black Panther</i> , Nnedi Okorafor Robin D.G. Kelley, <i>Freedom Dreams</i> (excerpt)	<i>Lemonade</i> , Beyonce Celebration and reflection. <i>Final Project due.</i>

*this is the proposed schedule which was altered by the global pandemic. Post spring break, the class elected to end the semester with *Mind of My Mind*, *Electric Arches*, and *Lemonade*.

ENGLISH 329: "Bodyminds Reimagined" in Black Women's Speculative Fiction

Spring 2021

Week 1:

T, 2/2	<p>Introduction/Who are we in the world today?</p> <p>Course Overview/What is Black Speculative Fiction?</p> <p>Amanda Gorman's Inauguration poem: https://www.cnn.com/2021/01/20/politics/amanda-gorman-inaugural-poem-transcript/index.html https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/19/books/amanda-gorman-inauguration-hill-we-climb.html https://edition.cnn.com/2021/01/23/politics/amanda-gorman-inauguration-james-baldwin/index.html</p>
Th, 2/4	<p><i>Mind of My Mind</i>, Foreword to the end of chapter 6.</p> <p><i>Bodyminds Reimagined</i>, (Introduction) Sami Schalk</p> <p>Robin D.G. Kelley. <i>Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination</i>, "Introduction"</p>

Week 2:

T, 2/9	<p><i>Mind of My Mind</i>, conclusion</p> <p>Excerpt from: Chapter 3, "Afrofuturist Entanglements of Gender, Eugenics, and Queer Possibility (pp. 99-128)", <i>Old Futures: Speculative Fiction and Queer Possibility</i>, Alexis Lothian</p>
Th, 2/11	<p><i>The Book of Phoenix</i>, Nnedi Okorafor (foreword to the end of chapter 6)</p>
AGM:	<p><i>Dirty Computer</i>, Janelle Monae (YouTube) Or <i>Black is King</i>, Beyonce (Disney+).</p>

Week 3:

T, 2/16	<p><i>The Book of Phoenix</i>, Nnedi Okorafor (chapter 7-the end of chapter 19)</p> <p>"Making Monstrous Subjects", <i>Monstrous Intimacies</i>, Christina Sharpe</p> <p>Thesis/Abstract Submission.</p>
Th, 2/18	<p><i>The Book of Phoenix</i>, Nnedi Okorafor, conclusion</p> <p>Ruha Benjamin, "Black Afterlives Matter"</p> <p>Nnedi Okorafor TED Talk</p>
AGM:	<p>Avant-Guardians, Episodes 1-7:</p> <p>https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCYWU0UC2zIk-c9k7pxm42Vg</p>

Week 4:

T, 2/23	<i>The Deep</i> "The Wake", In the Wake: On Blackness and Being, Christina Sharpe Annotated Bibliography due.
Th, 2/25	<i>The Deep</i> <i>Notanda</i> , M. NourbeSe Philip Midterm recap and reflections. Be prepared to share your thoughts in small groups!
AGM:	Pumzi by Wanuri Kahiu: https://vimeo.com/46891859 Lovecraft Country, "I Am"

Week 5:

T, 3/2	Creating Contemporary Mythologies in Black Art: Session 1 Black to Techno Screening with Jessica Care Moore's class Materials Forthcoming.
Th, 3/4	Creating Contemporary mythologies in Black Art: Session 2 Jessica Care Moore's Afrofuturistic Techno Choreopoem "Salt City" Screening and Discussion Materials Forthcoming.
AGM:	Research Paper draft due. Peer Review: Submit your worksheets by Thursday at noon.

Week 6:

T, 3/9	Short stories: "The Book of Martha", Octavia Butler "The Ones Who Stay and Fight", N.K. Jemisin Octavia Butler, "The Monophobic Response"
Th, 3/11	Research Presentations.
F, 3/12	Research Paper due.

Week 7:

T, 3/16	Research Presentations.
Th, 3/18	Research Presentations. <i>We made it!</i>

* This schedule is a work in progress and subject to approval by the classroom community.



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RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

Systemic racism, a prime minister, and the remote Australian school system

by Karen Cornelius and Aidan Cornelius-Bell



BUILDING A MOVEMENT, NOT JUST A MOMENT BY THEA GAHR VIA JUSTSEEDS.ORG

The Remote Context

Remote Australian schools face complex contextual issues due to systemic and enduring disadvantage. Rich Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures¹ persist. However, in remote spaces, with deep privileging of anglophone culture, the structures and systems put in place to support and provide *advantage* for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people continually fail to meet their mark. Australian education is a colonial structure, originated in the late 1800s, following, largely, colonial British schooling patterns (Tregenza, 1996). As with Australia's universities, its schools were not prioritized by early colonial government (Cornelius-Bell & Bell, 2020). The priority afforded to schools in Australia's remote and rural regions has not substantially shifted since colonization, despite successive government gestures towards innovation, renovation, and support. While schools are, now, under governmental authority and considered public institutions, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander 'schools' and Christian missions of recent history in Australia are still in contemporary memory. Indeed, for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, the relatively recent acts of colonial government still sit 'front of mind', and inform their relationships with governmental authorities (Read, 2020; Schaffer, 2002; Terszak, 2015). In South Australia, the context of this paper, systemic disadvantage still disproportionately affects Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and in regional areas this increases by distance from major cities, affecting health, education, and policy decisions (Coory et al., 2013; Gething, 1997; Guenther, 2013b; Hunter, 2008; Minutjukur et al., 2014). Remote Australian schools, bound in this context of vast distance from major cities, relatively difficult access to services, and systemic racism, privileging and disadvantage create unique conditions for young people's educations. From the specific disadvantage of Australian colonialism and structural racism, issues of teaching and learning in remote contexts proliferate (Altman & Fogarty, 2010; Lloyd et al., 2015). This article explores the contemporary colonial landscape of a remote school context, provides background on the colonial institutions which shape the interactions and services provided to people in remote Australian areas, and provides two empirical examples of the contemporary, structural, and harmful influence of policy and political figures in a remote school. By examining the politics of being a school leader, the policy background for remote Australian schools, and the unique challenges of *position* both in policy and physical terms, we show how contemporary racism structures and conditions the lives of young people in remote contexts today.

In remote South Australia, more than 800 km from Adelaide, lies a dusty red town, a formerly booming mining community, colonized in 1915 and situated on the lands of the Antakirinja, Matu, and Yankunytjatjara people. Here rich quantities of opal were found buried in the earth, attracting great numbers of white men with the prospect of fast riches. The countryside is now pock marked with thousands of open mine shafts, abandoned as the international price of opals diminished, and mining prospects dwindled. In this region only one school stands, a comprehensive preschool to year 12 school, situated in the heart of a town carrying a

government classification of 'very remote'. The student population includes over 65% Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, some local, but families also from central Australia, rural and urban areas. The remaining student body comes largely from diverse Eastern and Western European and Asian backgrounds. Almost 75% of students are eligible for government financial assistance for school costs, based on parental income. The school's distribution of Socio-Educational Advantage (SEA), as classified by the Australian Government's MySchool website (ACARA, 2017), points to a very low Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA), situating 80% of the population on the lowest quartile and 1% on the highest. Against this backdrop of widespread poverty, the staff reflected on the percentages of students dealing with trauma, grief, and health issues, and thought that this was the vast majority (Field notes) (Hickling-Hudson, 2004; Lalvani, 2013).

Research Methods

While principal of the school from 2017 to 2019, one author employed interpretive methods in support of an autoethnography, drawing on three years of lived remote school experience. The research was inspired by commitment to curriculum justice for students and agency for teachers (Connell, 2013; Reid, 2003; Smyth, 2001). Based on accepted ethnographic field work practices, such as journaling/field notes and audio diary, the researcher undertook reflexive self-study (Belbase et al., 2013; Denzin, 2014). In addition, interviews were conducted with other school leaders, post- their employment at the school, to avoid ethical and possible power relations conflicts (Spradley, 1979; Yeo et al., 2014). Documents and policies were examined using discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2013; Krzyżanowski, 2011). The research was conducted with ethics approval from Flinders University (SBREC Approval 7996). The authors here reproduce and examine selected excerpts of the data to provide insights into the lived experience of those engaged in leading and teaching in this remote context, providing them with a voice.

A New School Leader – Learning One's Way In

Beginning a tenure as a school leader is challenging in any context, and finding the best way to lead within the setting, crucial (Wilkinson & Kemmis, 2015). Listening is more important than telling (Back, 2007). Meeting the community, listening to as many voices as possible is always an excellent starting point (Macdonald et al., 2016).

The school community greeted me with a chorus of, 'How long are you here miss?' and an outpouring of grievances and disappointments. Some of these messages came quietly on doorsteps, others at volume in my office. Arriving as the seventh principal in five years, unsurprisingly, it was made clear there was little faith in the education system and that there were wide ranging and competing demands. I was met with little hope that anything would change (Leader's journal reflection, 2017).

Staffing challenges and human resource policies paid lip service to the enormity of life and work in such a remote setting. When the new school leader arrived, the staff was made up of local community members, largely in temporary support roles, and mostly early career teachers seeking permanent positions, and a leadership team in their first ever leadership roles (Hickling-Hudson, 2004). The deepest experience was situated with locals casually employed as support staff. Graduate teachers, many away from home for the first time, needed more than rent subsidy and a remote allowance to find their way in a complex and demanding site, faced with conflict and contradictory needs².

For the principal/researcher, one obvious gap on arrival was the lack of shared understanding of the school's direction. South Australia's Department for Education uses triannual school reviews as a key element to monitoring school improvement, progress, and outcomes and provides advice on future directions (Department for Education, 2020). As part of the review process, *at risk* schools are allocated as 'one-year-return', meaning that the external school review process occurred annually. The new leader's office held review reports from three previous annual reviews. Each report outlined recommendations based on insights garnered during fly-in/fly-out overnight visits. Some 19 recommendations outlined improvement directions to be implemented by a group of largely graduate teachers, struggling to build their craft and establish themselves in the context and overwhelmed by the complexity of their classrooms. A case was made that the insights of an experienced leader on the ground were ultimately going to be more valuable than the planned 2017 review that would bring additional recommendations. Agreement came from state office, creating space for prioritization based on a deepening understanding of individual student's learning needs (Connell, 2013). Extensive staff, student, and community consultation led to the creation of a collectively owned improvement plan with strategies to address the huge literacy gaps, adopt trauma informed practices, and strengthen cultural input into the curriculum.

We'd started work on our collaboratively developed and 'owned' improvement plan when, in 2018, I sat with hundreds of colleagues, all government school principals from across South Australia, in a huge auditorium, to hear the minister for education and chief executive's annual addresses. We were regaled with the positive outcomes of some of the new government's initiatives, a litany of issues still to be addressed and a promise of improvement to come. Both spoke of a new approach to improvement, as if the audience, many with decades of leadership experience, had never considered that improvement might be a good idea. That leaders and teachers hadn't been constantly working to improve school's processes, student experience and learning outcomes would be a safe assumption to make, given the tone of the presentations. September, we were promised, all would be revealed (Leader's journal reflection, 2018).

Inevitably, politicians expect constituents to attend to what is working well, to join them in the celebration of their impact, based on the *evidence* they present (Feldman, 2021; Geys & Mause, 2018). And yet, in return, this positive

orientation is rarely seen from politicians when seeking to identify the *source* of problems. Inevitably the blame for policy failures, in the education arena, is placed with teachers, schools, or communities (Feldman, 2021; Vass, 2012). Among other things, the leaders' day speech themes included: falling literacy and numeracy levels, as evidenced by national testing regimes and international assessment rankings, appalling data for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student outcomes, and the need to 'fix' these problems and become a 'world class system' (Department for Education, 2019a, 2019b, 2019c).

Typical political rhetoric can be seen in a 2018 report in the statewide newspaper, *The Advertiser*, where former Australian Prime Minister, Mr. Abbott, told parliament that amid the 'generally depressing' indicators on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people of Australia, one factor stood out: 'Indigenous³ people who finish school and who do complete a degree have much the same employment outcomes and life expectancies as other comparable Australians. It stands to reason that to have a decent life you've got to have a job, and to have a job you've got to have a reasonable education' (Holderhead, 2018, para. 12). Guenther (2013a) challenges the description of remote education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students as *problematic, failing, intractable*, and 'in terms of gaps that need closing' (p. 2). In fact, the data is not problematic. The challenge is the application of a western lens to the data and the deficit thinking this brings about (Fogarty et al., 2018). Many students *failing* in literacy assessments have a language background other than English, yet they are judged and found wanting as if their primary language is English. Similarly, the expectation that schools have *failed* and need to improve comes from the application of a narrow set of measures deeply embedded in colonialism (Bishop et al., 2021; Strakosch, 2019). This was to become even more evident in the implementation of the new improvement process announced in September that year.

As promised, in September 2018, schools received a package of improvement materials (Department for Education, 2019a) - 'focused and deep' was the mantra. New plans were to be created on a predetermined template (Department for Education, 2020). Each school was allocated a level of improvement, based on a complex algorithm that considered national literacy and numeracy test results and centrally held data sets. The levels of improvement had 5 stages: from the lowest, 'build foundations', through 'shift gear', 'stretch', 'maintain momentum', and 'inspire'. The allocated stage dictated school improvement priorities and strategies. Concomitantly the creep of corporate discourses have reframed the thinking about what *improvement* might look like, focussing on narrow indicators of 'success' rooted in neoliberalism (Connell, 2013). A leadership team meeting, called to discuss these 'new' expectations included a comment, 'No prizes for guessing which stage we're at. Of course: building foundations' (Field notes). This was the same for most very remote, remote, regional, and rural schools. Principals were instructed by the chief executive and minister for education to create a new improvement plan that was to reflect the required strategies in the allocated level. Drafts were due

in 5 weeks, to be scrutinized by the local education team before being submitted to central office.

Overnight, all schools' collaboratively developed improvement plans were to be put aside. Despite most schools already using improvement planning principles that included consultation, professional conversations about needs and directions, learning needs assessments, reference to literature, and making informed choices for their own context, existing improvement plans were to be replaced. The new plan was expected to implement predetermined strategies based on the school's allocated level and within timeframes too short for consultation. The school leader's reflection at the end of this first round of plan production follows:

What was to evolve over was a singular focus on each school's implementation of the allocated level's improvement strategies. No-one outside the school would entertain the idea that there were likely to be different priorities in schools like ours. Not the local education director with many years connected to remote schools, not the improvement support officers sent to provide the required professional learning, not the review teams sent to monitor improvement. Insistence that the actions were right, they had been researched after all, became the closed door to any local initiatives and ideas about what engaged the most vulnerable of learners or that responded to the voices of Indigenous Elders⁴ and cultural priorities. Staff described the new improvement processes as silencing their voices and the imperatives as demanding compliance. The one-size-fits-all approach, accompanied by an expectation that the answers sat with people outside the school had just begun (Field notes).

Since 2020, the next principal has fully adopted the department expectations, to the extent that the only teaching strategies allowed are those in the Improvement Guide Books (Government of South Australia, 2018). A leader shared their perspective on this blind compliance with department directives:

A third of the school day is assigned to explicit literacy instruction and a third to explicit numeracy instruction. Everyone participating together. It leaves little time for accommodating different needs, cultural learning or even the other six learning areas in the Australian Curriculum. No other innovations are allowed. Guest speakers and alternate programs are seen as distractions from the mandated core business, the improvement guide books (Interview data).

In their introduction, the guidebooks claim they 'support school improvement planning processes by providing leaders with a limited menu of evidence-informed literacy and numeracy practices aimed at improving learner growth and achievement' (Government of South Australia, 2018). Nowhere is there a written edict that the strategies in the guidebooks are the only thing that should be taught. Yet many staff in schools, especially rural, remote, and those in low socioeconomic settings, describe expectations from their education directors and visiting support staff that they comply with the guidebooks.

In their submission to the Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education, Guenther and Ober (2017) point out that success and the purpose of schooling are not necessarily the same in our most remote schools as they are in urban contexts. The application of one-size-fits-all approaches does little to meet the diverse needs of learners (Dillon, 2019; Guenther, 2013a). We contend that this applies to all contexts but is noticeably evident in the very remote areas of Australia. Having explored the impact of government improvement planning policies, we now turn attention to exploration of policy responses to school attendance, challenges and lost opportunities.

Conflicting Approaches to Improving Attendance

Attendance is a unique challenge in remote schools. As indicated in the earlier quote from former Prime Minister, Mr. Abbott, schooling is a 'pathway to success'. However, this success is identified from an anglophone standpoint and is in need of cautionary attention (Bishop et al., 2021; Burgess & Lowe, 2019; Daniels-Mayes, 2017; Strakosch, 2019). There is not a singular reason for poor school attendance (Dillon, 2019; Dreise et al., 2016; Vinson et al., 2015). Poor attendance was historical and over the five years leading up to the principal/researcher's arrival, had been in decline (Departmentally held data)⁵. Many reasons for low school attendance are intractable and often outside a school's remit. A few examples include: family members not having had a successful experience of schooling, and resultant long-term unemployment, low literacy and numeracy skills, and a lower value being put on school attendance (Comber, 2011). This meant that many students did not have working family members as role models, and did not experience the boundaries, routines, and understandings that this brings. The prevalence of drug and alcohol problems and domestic violence, their impacts on children, and the considerable number of older children taking up care responsibilities are also significant factors on attendance. Conversations with parents brought to light the issue of unwillingness to 'let go' of younger students so that they could attend school. Often children did not attend school regularly until 12-18 months after their peers and they were then faced with daunting academic and experience gaps to close.

Government responses to attendance improvement have had variable impact (Dillon, 2019; Dreise et al., 2016). Political deputations to consult and understand attendance (and other) issues occur frequently. Late in 2018, a former Prime Minister visited the remote town at the center of this article, as part of his 'special envoy' parliamentary role, to address attendance issues in remote schools. This visit was planned to *help* schools (and other services) in remote locations. The irony of yet another white man arriving to help was not missed by many. As with all *visits*, time on the ground was limited and, in this case, carefully managed by Commonwealth education policy and media staff. In the days leading up to the visit, organizational emails and phone calls dominated the workload of leaders. The imperative of preparing the visit hosts was apparent. At the same time, staff were engaged in a 'school clean up', to put a 'shiny new face on the school for the important visitor' (Interview data).

The attitude that one can visit, see, hear, and decide on behalf of others is institutionalized in Australia. Whiteness is the 'norm' and is privileged in practice and policies (Altman & Fogarty, 2010; Durey & Thompson, 2012; Stanley et al., 2003). This visit was cloaked in *making a difference to attendance* messages. On 10/9/2018 Holderhead reported in *The Advertiser* that former Prime Minister, Mr. Abbott, acting as a 'special envoy', was given authority to function as 'a fierce independent advocate for indigenous (sic) education'. The news report goes on to say that the special envoy would not be 'hamstrung by government policy' and that the current Prime Minister, Mr. Morrison, was expecting Mr. Abbott to 'engage across communities affected by poor school attendance' and provide 'an honest assessment of where things are at' and present 'game changers' to cabinet (Holderhead, 2018, para. 3,5).

Political strategy, detached from the lived reality of those being 'managed', is often disconnected. Having little warning of the upcoming visit, there was not time for community agencies and the school to discuss strategy or hear each other's ideas, to create shared priorities or understand and support others' views. The visit then, was disjointed and not strategically managed. Different, and at times contradictory, perspectives were offered at each stop, according to an accompanying federal government 'staffer' as the delegation left town (Field notes).

The school's leadership team had a long conversation, the night before the visit, as a last-minute attempt to gain some strategic leverage. Their prepared speaking notes included the school's perspective on roadblocks to attendance and recommendations. The team was conscious that their recommendations be framed by recognition of privilege, as they were increasingly aware that many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students railed against practices and expectations they saw as assimilation (Daniels-Mayes, 2017; Daniels-Mayes et al., 2019). There was a distinct power imbalance in this analysis and the staff understood that they needed to be mindful of and review their own beliefs and practices (Bishop et al., 2021; Durey & Thompson, 2012).

With experience, consultation, implementation, and systematic reflection, on what worked and did not, staff developed confidence about useful strategies in their remote context:

The agreement with community members and Elders that learning to read was a valuable skill had made a positive difference to attendance. No matter how badly school was perceived, or the pathway young people might take, like traditional life or tertiary education ... we think most families got how important reading is and were willing to send their children to school for this (Interview data).

The staff learned the importance of relationships with Elders and leaders in the community and the need to develop partnerships with the local community services. These relationships contributed to greater understanding of the local community, and helped to establish the relevance of the school in this community (Dudgeon et al., 2014; Fogarty et al., 2018, 2018).

The school's first improvement plan, developed the year before, was solidly built on data and consultation. School data suggested that at least 200 of the 240+ students required additional literacy support. Extensive work was done to increase the effectiveness of classroom literacy instruction, but with a low starting point, progress was slow. One new Year 8 teacher described her dilemma, illustrating the challenges teachers faced. She arrived at the school with the expectation that secondary students could read and that they read to learn. Instead, she explained, 'I have three students on track for university. Five others are doing okay. The other 16 cannot read what I write on the board or hand out to them. I just don't know where to start' (Field notes). All were taught in one classroom as a whole group, by mostly early career teachers learning their craft. Innovative approaches to curriculum delivery, with pairs of teachers working in cross disciplinary subjects, were implemented to address the 'seeming impossibility of differentiating across ten or more years of skill development in a single classroom' (Interview data).

Delayed literacy skill development was identified by staff as a major contributor to uneven attendance (Lloyd et al., 2015). To address this, the school used more than their allocated resources to employ local staff to help. Locals with expertise were recruited into permanent positions and learned literacy teaching skills alongside the new teachers. They worked one-to-one and with small groups to provide the explicit support many students needed. The highly celebrated success of one 10-year-old Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student was a 'game changer'. Bobby (pseudonym) had learned to read in 18 months of almost daily attendance, receiving one-on-one reading instruction every time he attended. Images of him with two novels under each arm, a proud reader, reached many thousand Facebook users on the school's account, drawing comments from over 500 relatives, community members, and supporters. What was obvious, was that the more success Bobby experienced, the keener he was to be at school. Building momentum and willingness of others to participate required success stories. This early breakthrough, provided a mentor for younger students struggling to read, evidence that it was possible, and gave Bobby a much-needed leadership role in the community (Field notes). The school's learnings about 'success building on success' aligned with Guenther and Ober's (2017) findings that outcomes for remote students are improving but success 'should be recognized in its own right - not always in comparison with urban Australians' (p. 4).

Despite the pressure to conform with the new improvement priorities previously described, staff continued to focus on goals established for each individual student and to respect community wishes for their children. Experience had shown staff that early intervention was the most effective process in realizing the previous year's 'Everybody reads' goal. In just one year, 17 of the 23 students in the junior primary reading intervention program closed the gap to 'age-appropriate' or better reading levels. Over 2 years, there was a 500% increase in the number of 5- to 13-year-olds reading competently (School data). This was an expensive, staff intensive process, with students needing daily small group and one-to-one, skilled and tailored

support, and the staff were keen to share these successes with the special envoy.

In remote areas, access to teaching and support staff, skilled in this work, required careful recruitment and extensive training. With 30-50% annual staff turnover, training and replacing qualified staff was an ongoing expense and priority (School data). It was not just a case of recruiting a teacher, as Guenther and Ober (2017) point out; the qualities a teacher needs in a remote location are not necessarily those required in urban schools. Willingness to live remotely, cultural and context responsiveness, and a high degree of reflexivity were excellent starting points. As the staff learned about processes and tailored support that worked, insights came more quickly, and successes followed.

Staff recognized that success with these strengths-based, tailored interventions was accompanied by increased attendance. The school leadership team identified the 'pull' potential of success and prepared to share literacy strategies and other observations about actions that were acting to 'pull' and improve attendance with the special envoy. Under the visiting ex-prime minister's 5-year, remote school's attendance program, multiple millions of dollars were spent on buses, drivers, lunches, incentives, and other strategies to 'push' students into school. This was always destined to fail if teachers were not adequately prepared – quality pedagogy, ability to differentiate across enormous skill differences, cultural responsiveness, and inclusive approaches were essential (Casey et al., 2016; Fogarty et al., 2015; Fogarty & Schwab, 2012; Lloyd et al., 2015). Many extraordinary efforts to bring children into the school fell over within days, if not hours, if teachers were unable, unready, or unwilling to engage in practices that ensured engagement (Interview data). 'Falling over' looked different in almost every case. On occasions it was as simple as a highly anxious student leaving the classroom when not the given the required stationery (Field notes). Support staff were assigned to accompany returning and new students to manage the transition into classrooms to address this issue. The school supported all staff to understand that using language that is judgmental or which someone does not understand creates a power imbalance (Jennings et al., 2018). Most staff understood that minimizing the power differential showed care and respect, but some new to the context, overwhelmed by the remoteness and complexity or less reflexive, found this challenging. It took one verbal slip to see a vulnerable student walk out of the school.

Where teachers learned culturally appropriate practices, accessed curriculum designed for Aboriginal learners, built relationships, and connected with students over time, there were dramatic increases in attendance and, in parallel, learning outcomes. The progress and achievements were described to the special envoy, in the hope that some of his discretionary funding might be redirected to allocate the time required for staff to learn their way into the school, community, and culture. Effective professional learning is responsive to each staff member's challenges and goals, not a pre-packaged set of materials (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, 2020; Dinham, 2013). Again, the turnover in staff meant that this was not an easy fix. It required ongoing attention and time, intensively for

new recruits and developmentally for ongoing staff, but its 'pull' potential was clear.

Teachers reported that their best cultural learning happened with Elders in the classroom with their students. The approaches, strategies, and knowledge used by community members and Elders could be drawn upon and connected to the classroom. Volunteer run sessions were well received but were not prioritized by community members with busy lives to live, with jobs and other commitments. Higher attendance was recorded each time there was a cultural learning experience. A useful 'pull' attendance strategy would have increased the budget to pay community members or to access more local staff. The policy requiring police screening, for suitability to work with children, was a necessary but challenging roadblock to several school and community initiatives. As teachers participated in professional learning and joined community run sessions, their cultural understanding, pedagogic skills, and reflexivity improved. The most successful teachers were more critically aware of their own culture and could honestly reflect on their own biases and prejudices and how they interact with the world (Bennett et al., 2011; Green & Baldry, 2008). This awareness enabled genuine curiosity, openness, and willingness to learn more about the cultures of others, and not surprisingly, made classrooms safer for all students (Bishop et al., 2021; Casey et al., 2016).

Trials of small group, Aboriginal Languages instruction proved highly engaging and effective in attendance 'pull'. With more than 250 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages spoken on this continent prior to colonization and around half of those languages still accessible, the decision to introduce an Aboriginal language was not straight forward. The schools' Aboriginal staff had a variety of backgrounds, not necessarily connected to the local community, and not all were proficient in their own, let alone the local languages, nor skilled in teaching them. Finding appropriate providers was a challenge. While reading in English was important, we knew that using an Aboriginal language was a powerful connector for many students (Guenther et al., 2014; Guenther & Ober, 2017). Relocation expenses, accommodation support and remote site loadings were not available to casual staff. The level of financial resourcing to bring in language expertise or to engage community members was beyond the school's capacity. Without salary, training, and resources, community members could only provide short term experiences. Yet another place for the special envoy to fund a strategy that would 'help' increase attendance:

Pull looked quite different with older students who could be convinced that there was value in re-engaging with school, at least to learn to read. Many of these students had very little experience of classroom learning and few literacy skills. Often, they would be brought to school by the attendance team and walk into a classroom, only to leave almost immediately. Sadly, this process cemented prevalent 'school is not for me' beliefs and it was clear that something different was needed (Interview data).

With the support of federal representatives of the National Indigenous Australians Agency the school successfully established an Alternate Learning Centre (ALC).

Funding supported a new space, and staff dedicated to responding individually to older students' aspirations. Young people, like one 15-year-old Aboriginal student, Mark (Pseudonym), returned from men's cultural and ceremonial commitments keen to find a trade, and engaged in the ALC. This young man, like many, had attended school for a handful of days over the previous five years and was unable to read or to write his name. Every participant in the ALC had huge, but different academic gaps and many social, emotional, and health issues to overcome (Field notes). The ALC moved away from a classroom model, providing reading lessons one-on-one, support with life essentials -- for example obtaining driver's licenses or opening bank accounts -- on a 'drop in' and 'at need' basis and connected young people to community support services where possible. Many, including Mark, came frequently, usually for half an hour each day, and experienced academic success for the first time. Mark went on to successfully complete a welding course and a TAFE Barista certificate and found some work in a local café during tourist season. A 2020 independent review of the ALC highlighted its effectiveness as young people engaged with an intensive reading program, and were supported by skilled teachers, Commonwealth funded Aboriginal youth workers, and other community agencies, such as Aboriginal Family Support Services. Resource intensive, but the ALC was highly effective in engaging disenfranchised young people in learning. The message to the special envoy was one of individualized support, student-led goal setting, coordination of services for the therapeutic and educational to come together, and, most importantly, a commitment to ongoing funding. Changing funding priorities and ending programs had left many in the town with only short-term access to valuable support. The school staff were keen for the special envoy to value this federal support and continue it.

Another focus during discussions with the special envoy was employment opportunities, for local people, in the school and other government agencies. In recognition of government policy to increase Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employment, the proposal was for funding of new ongoing positions, to support classroom teachers with cultural connections and language teaching.

Despite the school leaders' clear agenda, strategies that worked, and ways to make them happen, the special envoy was more interested in discussing his remote schools' attendance strategy than new insights from those in the field. The federally funded attendance strategy aimed to employ more Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff. There was agreement: 'That was great. Much needed in fact, as there were few Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workers in the town outside of Aboriginal organisations' (Interview data). The challenge was that little consideration was given to building the strategy staff's skills and understanding of the school or classroom context. In fact, the attendance team worked in an office across town. Another leader explained in his interview:

Not often in school, the team had little opportunity to share their skills, interests, and knowledge or to work shadow our team, or to inform us about stuff or learn along with our staff. We often couldn't reach them

because they had assigned jobs, set by outsiders, and did them in the office. ... Where it would have been impactful was to have them in the office every morning so teachers reported absences and one of the team could immediately contact the family to understand what was happening and, if needed, collect the child. We couldn't get this happening. So many missed opportunities (Interview data).

The one concession from the special envoy's visit was that a management committee was established. This did provide a forum for discussion about alternative ways of operating, but most often the funding criteria allowed little creativity or trialing of new ideas.

One's cynicism must be stirred when a senior politician can tell the school's leader that he knew there'd been little impact from *his* attendance program but that he would recommend its continuation (Field notes). There is an obvious incongruity between the 'green light to lift attendance' media discourse (Holderhead, 2018, para. 2), and the special envoy's understanding that the strategy had failed. On his return to Canberra, the continuation of the program was announced, with accompanying celebration of its successes across many media platforms.

After the visit, the leadership team involved in this special envoy visit met to consider what had been learned and achieved. The scant attention given to the undeniable data showing that attendance had decreased over the five years of his strategy was worrying. One asked skeptically, 'Did he help?' and another, 'Will he help?' Questions on everyone's lips (Field notes). Team members were appalled by this example of the superficial nature of contemporary political figures' agendas and priorities.

Conclusion

Policymakers and policy tend to 'assume the best possible environments' (Ball, 2021; Ball et al., 2011, p. 6). In illustrating the impact of neo-conservative policy, based on school improvement, and political agendas around attendance, this article has highlighted how blindness to the varied needs and priorities of students and community members in remote locations cannot be *fixed* from white perspectives, overnight visits, and externally generated *one-size-fits-all* solutions. By the end of their tenure, the staff from this site had a great deal of insight into the needs, ways of working, and approaches that could support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to successfully engage with western expectations. There remain questions about how systems, like the education department, can capture these insights to successfully support staff in remote contexts to be mindful of their privilege and willing to interrogate their assumptions, and avoid the use of deficit language. Prospective staff should be prepared for complexity, bring some knowledge of Australia's history, the impact of colonialism and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's resistance to assimilation, and be willing to share power and set goals with individual students and their families. Also important are cultural curiosity and respect, and willingness to grow relationships with Elders

and community leaders and learn alongside students, valuing cultural learning as a learner and teacher.

To *fix* remote education, our education and broader systems must give up their one-size-fits-all solutions and narrow measures for the problems they *read* into data when using western perspectives and urban metrics. Blame is not helpful, and it is time to measure success, not in comparison to urban students. It is time to listen to local expertise, community and professional, and allow well trained and well-meaning staff to see, hear, and share decision making with the young people we all want the best for, and their families.

Notes

1. The authors wish to acknowledge the continuing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander care for country, their connection to lands and waters, and Elders past and present. This article was written on Kurna land, sovereignty for which was never ceded.

2. Indeed, while teachers themselves live with precarious employment, their teaching context is equally impacted by students' precarity (Dovemark & Beach, 2016; Walsh & Gleeson, 2021). This uncomfortable *being in* education creates felt effects across teachers, students, and community (Standing, 2014). Moreover, the cycles of precarity deeply impact the education systems through which pre-service teachers travel on their way to precarious employment (Cornelius-Bell & Bell, 2021).

3. Australia's first people are referred to in several ways, some more acceptable than others in different regions. 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people' has been identified as appropriate for this article, but voices used 'Indigenous'; this has not been changed. No offense is intended in the language chosen.

4. Elders refers to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples recognized as holders of local wisdom by their peers.

5. All government schools enter wide ranging data into a central repository. Children's information, family details, socio-economic details, local curriculum testing results, behaviour reports, disabilities information, and attendance are examples of data sets collected. Attendance is recorded daily, and historical data is accessible for decades.

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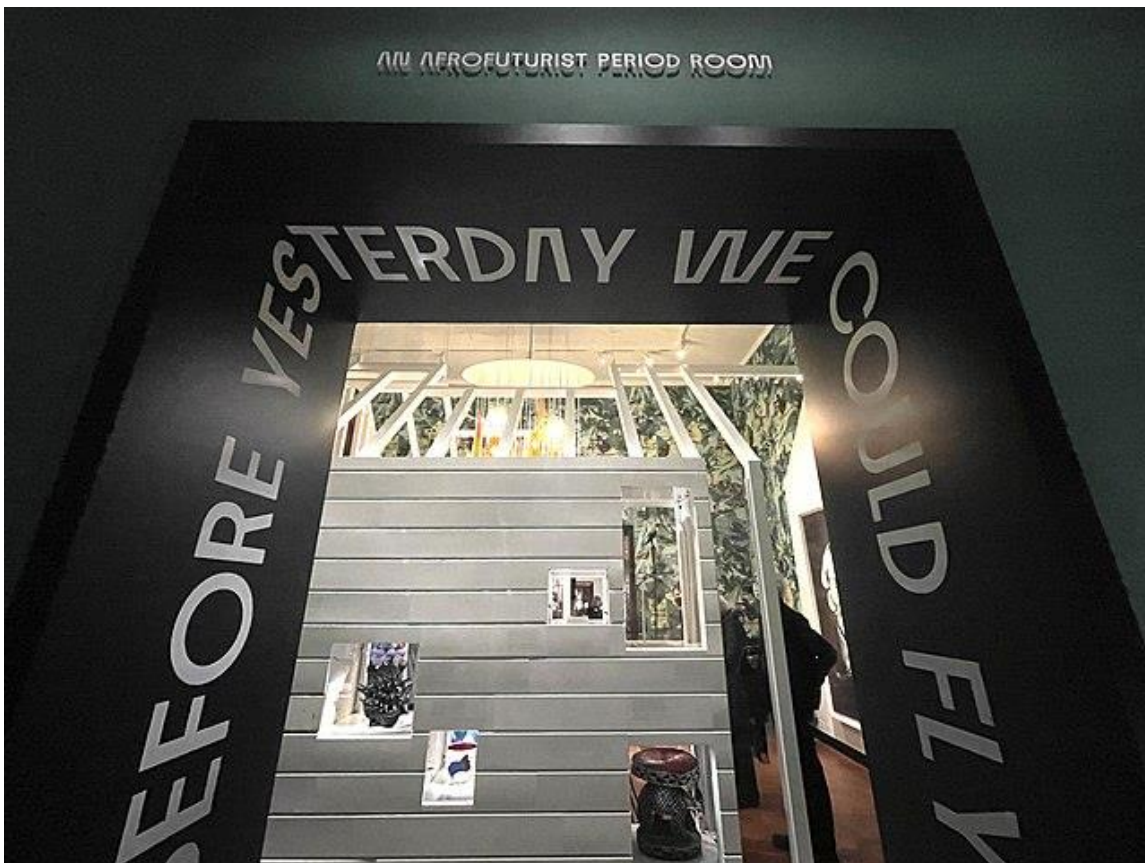
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RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

Weird/Black/Play: Turning Racial Authenticity and Professorial Performance on its Head in the Black Studies Classroom

by Wendy M. Thompson



BEFORE YESTERDAY WE COULD FLY: AN AFROFUTURIST PERIOD ROOM, METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART, 2022. WIKIMEDIA

What happens when things get weird in the classroom?

What tools or strategies can black professors use when faced with the added task of responding to student expectations of an authentic racial performance?

How is teaching while black different in the black studies classroom?

Is there room to play when topics and lectures are meant to be serious?

As a black mixed race professor who is short, appears youngish, wears glasses, is female, prefers dressing casual in professional settings, and can be categorized as nerdy, I am constantly thinking about what it means to show up authentically to class and for my students, and how to strategically navigate the layered expectations students have of me as their professor. One current strategy I have come to rely on is weird/black/play, a concept and framework that embodies transformative pedagogy and allows me to be my most authentic self in the classroom. Weird/black/play centers the use of (black)¹ humor, performance play, and “geeking out” which sets up the classroom dynamic in such a way that black faculty and their students are empowered to interact differently with course texts and get vulnerable through play while learning collectively and acknowledging the creative labor of black faculty who are constantly confronted with the blurred lines between racial performance and teaching.

Attempting to combat the myriad of challenges within academia, black faculty already work to buffer themselves from harm and exploitation: making themselves valuable to the institution to avoid disposability, standing firm with boundaries to resist aggressive encroachment of their time, and engaging in meticulous documentation to combat accusations and provide receipts. But where some of the strategies black faculty use to fortify themselves from student provocation and defiance in the classroom meet the different needs and desires of students in the black studies classroom, how do we black instructors balance students’ desire to humanize and make instructors legible with our need to guard the intimate parts of our identities that tend to count against black (women) faculty? How do we teach and perform on our own terms without becoming the entertainment?

Reflecting on this and the shifts that have occurred in my own pedagogy, from teaching solely from the text and attempting to position myself as an outsider to engaging in self-reflection and teaching from the position as an insider, I think about how performance, knowability, authenticity, and the role of the black instructor come together (oftentimes messily) in the black studies classroom. Specifically, I consider how each part of myself that I willingly, reluctantly, suddenly, and accidentally share with my students forces me to grapple with tender personal things: what my presence and my body represent socially, culturally, and politically in the classroom; what it means to

be authentic as a black mixed race person; what a professional black woman looks and acts like; and the difficulties of commanding authority as a physically small and young appearing professor.

This is where weird/black/play as effective and transformative pedagogy comes in. Here I’m thinking about pedagogy that incorporates, amplifies, and analyzes the less emphasized aspects of black life—the awkward, obsessive, strange, erratic, quirky, and imaginative—while still making plain the structuring apparatuses of settler colonialism, heteropatriarchy, white supremacy, and capitalism under which, Iyko Day argues, black people continue to be “subject to a logic of exclusion where the only means of disposal is death” (Day 29). Weird/black/play matters now more than ever as cries for justice and the insistence on recognizing the value of black life thunder across the country despite being met with white conservative backlash. How we understand structures that boundary and obliterate black life should also include looking at and seeing black aliveness and black life in motion, in resistance, in pleasure, in the everyday. And it is by creating a classroom space, by choosing texts and exercises, by teaching students to see and get excited about the range of black expression of aliveness—through play, humor, geeking out, and the weird—that black faculty might also find pleasure and teach through their authentic self in institutions where they are already tasked with doing and being so much.

This essay, produced from deep reflection on how my teaching has evolved over time, discusses the pedagogical framework and strategy I currently use (and have found success with) in my classroom as an assistant professor who teaches African American studies. It is based on a concept I call the black weird from which black/weird/play emerges, and I offer it both as a resource and a reprieve while holding close the words of bell hooks, who writes that while “[m]ost of us are not inclined to see discussion of pedagogy as central to our academic work and intellectual growth,” it is indeed “the mutual interplay of thinking, writing[,] and sharing ideas” that informs the potential and extent of our bodies of intellectual and creative work (hooks 204-205).

Black Weird

What does it mean to be black and weird?²

Being the first black professor that some of my students have ever had has been both empowering and challenging. Every time I teach, I seek to create a classroom space that is big enough to contain the galaxy of our experiences, centering our voices, our visions, our maps, our resistance, our pain, our pleasure, our futures, our power. I view the learning that happens between us as reciprocal, nourishing, and affirming. I teach students to honor the texts we read for what they reveal and hide. Together, we build up a body of knowledge over a semester that moves with us well after the class ends. We can and do push against the elasticity of identity markers and calculate the cost of social death and the debt of racial wealth. But sometimes the classroom dynamics and actors are resistant to these efforts. Sometimes there is open hostility towards me or other students or the texts and what they represent. Sometimes

there is destruction and waste or silence or paralysis. Sometimes there is glee or gossip. Other times, boredom. Occasionally, a breakthrough. In a classroom where blackness is centered in texts and discussions, anything can happen, including students straying from the text and redirecting the discussion toward me.

When this happens, students usually devote an incredible amount of energy and effort to craft and ask that touch in personal, private places. It is almost like a game: sussing out my racial and ethnic identity, marital status, or age (which, as I've gotten older in the profession, I have inadvertently disclosed when mentioning historic events I was old enough to witness and live through). Oftentimes this student effort revolves around a test, a challenge, or demonstration of some kind. Asking me to pronounce a word or name my favorite music group or wear my hair down in class (which is always worn up in a bun or single butterfly whorl) when there's unfamiliarity. Asking questions about the race of my spouse (when they find out I have children) or the ages of my children (when I share that I'm a mother) when things are more familiar.

With most professors, there is a "feel[ing for] the need to insert some sort of personal narrative into their pedagogical methodology...[in order] to invigorate student discussion, to prove course materials have a living correlation to experience, or sometimes to present themselves as three-dimensional actors with historical roots" (DeSoto 213). But for some of us who teach race-based courses, sharing our personal narrative can sometimes leave us vulnerable and further fuel student speculation about our authenticity and authority on the subject matter. Because of this, I often found this line of student questioning threatening and invasive, interpreting it as a distraction from the lesson plan and subject matter, allowing students to hold entire class periods hostage until they got the kind of response and information they were looking for. And while, as an instructor, I recognized that students needed a space to work through their assumptions, expectations, and desires, I was adamant about not becoming the text.

So I put up boundaries based on my own desire to be read as professional and to maintain control over the classroom, disclosing only the things that I wanted them to know: that I love zombie and post-apocalyptic films, that I listen primarily to melancholy film scores and ambient soundscapes, that I garden, that I believe in the abolition of prisons and the police and the dismantling of the settler colonial state, that I adore birds (egrets!) and being in nature. I have found that my refusal and selective sharing allows me to avoid potential scrutiny about the deeper and meaningful crevices of my personal life. But it has also led students to think I'm weird and I do nothing to change their minds.

What does it mean to be black and alive during a weird and violent time?

Today, many of the black students I encounter in my classes are the children and grandchildren of people who experienced "the immense gains achieved by the Civil Rights

Movement and the cultural, political, and psychological fallout from these benefits" (Weheliye 213). Their parents and grandparents weathered mass scarcity, municipal abandonment, urban renewal, and economic restructuring in the sixties and seventies, some firsthand. My students, who are alive now, with some confronting housing insecurity, all expect to enter an uncertain economy with some debt that they will have to expunge with stagnant wages and minimal benefits at a job that will require a BA degree at minimum. They are the Obama generation, born during a time of mass capital accumulation and ongoing black displacement, young people whose childhoods were played out against a backdrop of black life coming apart under increased policing and incarceration. Additionally, more and more of these students are the beneficiaries of childhoods spent in suburbia where they were the only or one of the few black students in their classes, and as a result have developed a cynical view or passé attitude about being black in the here and now.

In some ways I understand their perspective. Their views and attitudes are responses to the major changes that have occurred in cities where aggressive gentrification has led to the "incorporation and appropriation of...blackness-as-taste, blackness-as-style, blackness-as-struggle, and blackness-as-nostalgia ...[while] conceal[ing] the violence of [black] dispossession" (Summers 3). In so many urban metro areas like the one I currently teach in, blackness has been reduced to a commodity or a sign, signaling the "wokeness" of white and other nonblack consumers and "highlight[ing] the illusion of inclusion within the culture of modern capital" (3). All the while, actual black people continue to be pushed out of communities that were once vibrantly, predominantly, and visibly black as part of the process of corporate reinvestment and capital reaccumulation in the inner city.

To live in a place where one is part of a shrinking black population surrounded by an ever-present black aesthetic that is "disarticulated from the complex, nuanced histories of [b]lack life, and is instead used as a site to celebrate difference" (3) is, for many of my black students, just plain weird.

What does it mean to be peripherally, conditionally, or part black?

That I am black but obviously "mixed with something else" positions me in relation to both blackness and nonblackness, an "and/or" embodiment that has made many students curious about my identity in the classroom. Among students whose racial assumptions drive classroom interactions and instructor expectations, my body is the most visible part of me and becomes the site where students (black students in particular) attempt to work out their ideas of what is and isn't authentic blackness.

Naomi Pabst suggests that to even "state that a mixed-race subject is black or the reverse is to reference the joint realities of both mixedness and blackness" (179). But in the long afterlife of slavery, black people largely came to symbolize danger, contamination, surplus, and waste and prompted personal and institutional decisions to contain or

divest from black people, spaces, schools and facilities, neighborhoods, communities, and dreams. This resulted in our present society, one where proximity to whiteness continues to ensure heightened privileges and value, and where a proximity to blackness strips those all away. As a by-product, black mixed race identity has been loaded with the weight of cultural, political, and economic “distinctions made between mixed-race blacks and black blacks” (181) and many continue to find it difficult to situate black mixed race identity within a framework of blackness that otherwise makes room for differences along lines of “gender, sexuality, class, and (trans)nationality” (180).

E. Patrick Johnson reasons that “blackness is not always self-constituting. Indeed, blackness, like performance, often defies categorization” (*Appropriating Blackness*, 2). But in the black studies classroom where the instructor’s body is highly political, imbued with layers of meaning, and treated as a separate text onto which black and nonblack students project their own desires, there can be suspicion and mistrust when the instructor’s blackness defies categorization. Being read as mixed race (“black and”) or racially ambiguous (“black but”) in the classroom space can also create pause and the need for clarity. I’ve experienced this need for clarity as it erupted somewhere between the careful curation of course texts, prepared lectures, and my attempt to control my image while facilitating discussions. The constant nagging, the sudden question, the demand for proof happening while I stand in front of the classroom (on stage) at which point the entire class stops and waits for my response; all my students, silent and suddenly attentive, as I confront one of their black peers’ sometimes direct, sometimes indirect charge to make myself racially legible.

So much of this ask, this ultimatum, is about kinship and belonging.

Having taught black studies at different institutions across the Northeast and Midwest, where my body represented both blackness and difference, I became hyperaware whenever students positioned me outside of their vision of normative blackness. Initially, when my blackness was othered, seen as suspect or inauthentic or weird, or held up by black students as a mirror, I would immediately engage in performative rote blackness, going through the motions of verifying authenticity and legibility (dipping into a Southern patrilineal archive that included gestures, behaviors, and places I had heard before, an authenticity spread across my childhood by way of my father and his Louisiana-born parents) and enhancing our sense of connectedness by deploying the collective “we.” But then it happened over and over and my responses became defensive, deflecting student inquiry with repeated instructions to go back to the syllabus or burying their curiosity in excessive course lectures and dense texts.

One thing that these performative racial exercises—either those demanded by students on the spot or preemptively enacted by me at the beginning of the semester—made clear was that what it meant, what it means, to be black and how one’s blackness registers to other black people differs, sometimes wildly, across the

United States, with most black students hungry and needing to unpack (their own) black racial identity, “a category of self-identity” that Brandi Thompson Summers underscores as being “ [externally] imposed and resisted” with “salience across different time periods and geographies” (3).

The three scenarios I present above simultaneously answer and do not answer the question of what it means to be black and weird in this moment, in this profession, in this body, and in the classroom. Additionally, in California where I teach and where black residents currently comprise just 6% of the state’s population and have seen the worst of urban renewal projects, deindustrialization, and now gentrification which has displaced families and shuttered cultural institutions, I find myself teaching the children of those who left or were displaced from historically black urban neighborhoods. Their families, having left Los Angeles and Bay Area cities in the 1980s and 1990s for suburban townhome communities, did so to ensure that their children would have different (always better) futures. And their choices have resulted in complex lived experiences among my students—somewhere between privileged and othered in once all-white middle-class spaces—that serve as a common ground for talking about racist policies and urban planning in cities, environmental racism, black erasure, and the white supremacist roots of land ownership.

Once I share with students that I too come from a family that moved to the suburbs and that to come of age in middle-class suburbs while black is deeply weird (among other things), we are able to work together connecting local histories to family stories of migration, immigration, capital, middle-class status, and survival. For non-black students, hearing their professor talk about suburbia and their black classmates echo the strangeness, the isolation, the violence of tokenism, the resources, the opportunities, they begin to reshape how they have experienced and think about race and place in both the suburbs and our ever-changing cities and the structural processes that have led this change. In California, where almost all of my students are familiar with gentrification—the visible and accelerated loss of black populations and the human cost of skyrocketing real estate and tech prosperity—I remind them there is nothing normal or new about these conditions.

In this way, the black weird is simultaneously a tool, a strategy, a position, a mood, a query, an articulation, an intellectual jump-off that allows us to differently examine racial, class, gender, and citizenship social givens and further expand and complicate these identities as ambiguous, fluid, non-normative, and problematic. By bringing the black weird as a pedagogical strategy into the classroom where it is not just a subject to be analyzed or a cliché or a stereotype or genre, I am better able to navigate the gap between my authentic self and the black/professional/classroom performance in a space where black faculty frequently find themselves challenged by an audience of students, some eager, some resistant, who have come for some kind of show and could use a playful dosage of black weird.

Black/Weird/Play

In the classroom where my lessons and activities are designed around students taking risks, I encourage black/weird/play, an activity that emits from and expands the framework of the black weird, in which students step into unfamiliar and strange territory and learn through centering and engaging with the unexpected, odd, fantastic, and aberrant while working toward a collective learning “win.” For this reason, we use a range of “texts” and topics—freak shows, horror film scenes, blood (and not) kinship ties, literal and figurative magic, the abolition of all structures, freedom in its wildest iterations, nature and the capacity of oceans, breastfeeding as nutrition and titillation, expressions of ratchetness as empowering and fearless—to open and give context and texture to our discussions on structures of white supremacy and heteropatriarchy, capitalism, eugenics, scientific racism, xenophobia, black imagination, empire building, the racialization of bodies, and social class.

Together, we have waded knee-deep into the violence of settler colonialism, slavery, and their afterlives. Relying heavily on texts, we peel back the layers of land ownership, extraction, genocide, and enslavement. But sometimes these texts are so jargon-filled and conceptually removed from student grasp that it requires a different kind of engagement. This happened in my introduction to African American history course while reading David Martin’s “The Birth of Jim Crow in Alabama, 1865-1896,” an article that examined the uneven implementation of black codes in Alabama. The purpose was to give students some legal footing for understanding the criminalization of black mobility and convict leasing, but students had a difficult time and grew frustrated with unfamiliar concepts like vagrancy. There was also pronounced fatigue being that this was an afternoon class.

Midway between a dry discussion and a boring lecture, I told students that we would role play it. Pulling from the introduction, I asked for students to volunteer to play the parts of individuals presented in two cases of black men who were arrested for vagrancy, fined, then jailed before being lent out to white planters. Before telling student performers that they had ten minutes to look over the “script” and give us a scene, I set the tone, instructing student performers to stay true to the text, to respect each other, and to respect the real-life individuals who were victimized by the Jim Crow system. I then instructed other students (the audience) to get into small groups and go over the “scene” they were going to watch.

Students attempted to balance being in the spotlight of the classroom and engaging playfully with each other, while bringing the text to life. As they did this, I continued to stress the importance of connecting to the original point of the role play: to illustrate how fraudulent and putative anti-black laws, a racist legal system, and an exploitative economic system led to the deliberate conviction of black people over labor contract violations and the life consequences that followed. Completing this exercise, students were able to relate Jim Crow era black codes, convict leasing, and the precarity of black mobility during Reconstruction to crooked legal systems, opportunistic

judges, and a broader racist system designed to entrap black people. With better understanding and renewed attention to the text, I was able to finish my lecture about race, labor, law, and property, and incorporate contemporary apparatuses and incidents that students had heard about like stop and frisk policies and the incarceration of Kalief Browder, signaling the longevity of legal violence, state surveillance, and the endurance of punishment apparatuses.

Being well aware of the many cases in which racialized roleplay and simulations in classrooms or at summer camps enable nonblack students or participants to participate in slavery reenactments while positioning black students in the role of an enslaved person to give dimension to their white peers’ experience, I am always cognizant about the racial politics in the classroom. I do not automatically assume every group of students can benefit from role playing and I am very careful not to turn my black students or blackness itself into a spectacle. I always ask for consent and, with willing volunteers, choose what roles I will assign to students beforehand, limiting which students can play which characters in relation to the classroom racial dynamics. I also find that having a running classroom dialogue and incorporating visual readings provide additional sites ripe for play and working through initial or unanticipated moments of weirdness.

As far as setting the classroom tone, I often plant the seeds for a running dialogue at the beginning of the semester and keep it going until the end. I do this for two reasons: to lighten the mood by infusing a small semblance of humor, knowing that I will be loading students with the heaviness of state-sanctioned violence, containment, contamination, and death, and to create a learning environment formatted to many of my students’ expectations. These are young people who grew up in the age of binge-watching, reality TV series, streaming platforms, and social media. In some ways by turning each class into an episode and incorporating the performative features of a TV series, I am able to keep students “hooked” to the class content while giving them the agency and pleasure of acting as television audience and interlocutors.

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Through our interrogation of contemporary tropes and historical images we played with notions of white violence and safety, of American citizenship, and of authentic black looks. Notably, this included a long-running punchline about the fragility of white people every time a new 911 call by a white woman reporting black people went viral. Students would go on to make the connection between these contemporary “Karens” and the neighborhood watch

captains of racially restricted all-white suburbs in the 1950s. These references got students to pay attention to the frequency with which white women deployed the police on black people while applying a media studies lens to discussions on why racial scripts and stereotypes make “good memes” and what leads them to go viral.

With images, we take the analysis of race, meaning, and public interpretation further. Arranging students into groups of four or five, I usually give students one or multiple images to work with. I then ask them to look at the images and tell me what they see. Sometimes the exercise is a bit more specific like when I gave students an assortment of images of apparel and accessories and asked them to create a description of the person who might wear or use the items pictured. These items were contemporary and relatable, easily associated with specific social groups, and sometimes worn or used by some of the students in the class: the water flask, the Starbucks drink, Nike slides, the man bun, hoop earrings. What began as a slow and quiet discussion eventually progressed to boisterous laughter as students created the profile and brought the person to life. When asked to share, students gave an incredible amount of detail about the person’s life: what they ate, what shows they watched, where they lived, what classes they took, their names.

Together, we laughed at the results, at the precision of students’ effort and creativity, and at the absurdity and exactness of stereotypes. But I also made sure to ground this exercise in a brief lecture about how clothing and accessories, how we stylize our bodies and the way our bodies are seen by others in public, are always racialized, always gendered, and always classed.

In another instance of having students read images, I introduced photographs of white passing or racially ambiguous individuals when discussing slavery, reconstruction, and who was categorized as black and therefore required to abide by Jim Crow laws and customs. One postcard image that I used to teach was a photograph taken by Myron H. Kimball in December of 1863 of a group of adults and children standing together in a scene titled “Emancipated Slaves Brought from Louisiana by Colonel George H. Banks.” Each individual is named. Wilson Chinn. Mary Johnson. Robert Whitehead. Charles Taylor. Augusta Broujet. Isaac White. Rebecca Huger. Rosina Downs. Rebecca and Rosina who stand next to each other at the far-right foreground, arms linked, are the whitest presenting, with brown wavy hair, along with Charles Taylor to the far-left foreground, blonde with a hand tucked into his dark buttoned jacket. The three would appear together in a different postcard image taken by Charles Paxson, titled “Our Protection,” all three draped in American flags, their citizenship and the nation their protectors, and the necessary racial identifier, text at the bottom that read: “Slave Children from New Orleans.”

Showing these images to students, I tell them I want them to sharpen their visual literacy and to read the images. I set it up by telling them vaguely it’s about slavery, abolition, and the importance of effective propaganda. I then ask them, “What do you see here?” I point to the three adults, visibly black and standing to the rear of the five

children. In front, a lone black child is flanked by a row of white children. “Who are these people?” I ask them, urging them to tell me the story. “What is their relationship to each other?” I let the students go on guessing before reading the photographer’s title. I pause and say nothing more, letting students react. There is always a mix of gasping, quizzical expressions, questions about how, and a refusal to accept. A million separate comments and side conversations suddenly electrify the room. The title again reads: “Emancipated slaves brought from Louisiana by Col. George H. Hanks.”

“How are they black?” a black student asks, clearly referring to Charles, Rebecca, and Rosina.

I add context: that these cartes de visite were produced to raise money for schools to educate formerly enslaved children in New Orleans. Rosa, Rebecca, and Charles were the whitest presenting, and would appeal most to the sympathies of white Northerners who would take one look at the children and be horrified that children who looked like their own could be enslaved. It was a strategic especially during a time when morale was low and white Northerners had become tired of the issue of slavery. The white passing children were included along with visibly black adults and children in the images, as if to say, “If you don’t care to support our effort to educate emancipated black folks, look at these children who were also emancipated, even if they don’t look discernibly black.”

I then ask: What does it mean to look black? What does it afford you to not look black?

Some black students now remark that there are people in their families who look like Augusta: milky skin, hair dark and pulled back. *You can see the black in her, right there, in the nose, the eyes.* Others, still analyzing, scanning the images intently, still insist: “They don’t even look black.” In that instant, in their simultaneous refusal and acknowledgement, blackness in its ambiguous form, its versions, its wideness, comes into view. The responses are the same when I show a studio portrait of P. B. S. Pinchback, his hair straight, smoothed and parted, mustache and beard slightly gray and textured over his black bow necktie, the first black person to be appointed governor in the state of Louisiana.

“He looks white,” students exclaim.

I counter, “What does it mean for him to look white but be elected as the first black state representative?”

“What does black look like? And how can we tell?”

“How do we know who’s black?”

These questions set us up for rich discussions about race, phenotype, scientific racism, interracial relationships, mixed race people, racial passing, black cultural markers, the one-drop rule, and the extensiveness and detailed nature of Jim Crow.

Using ambiguous images allows us to play with the “truth” of what we see. While all images require us to trust our instincts, the racial ambiguity of sitters in these images forces us to see deeper and to sometimes be okay with our visual “misreadings.” This is where black/weird/play comes

into the picture, making space for racial confusion, slippage, and glitches. It encourages students to go off-script and leap into the impossible or yet unimagined, as the act of play and playing are connected to imagination, fantasy, performance, and creativity. And I push them to continue with this method of learning, encouraging them to add elements of curiosity and play to the otherwise formal assignments and exercises I give them.

When foregrounding weird as a fluid space in which we can re/examine and re/interrogate black racial identity, cultural productions, histories, and experiences, one should expect some degree of student resistance rooted in existing social pressures to solely exhibit and engage with normative thoughts, behaviors, and approaches. But by encouraging students to explore and “play,” an activity that many of us were encouraged to leave behind in childhood, I am able to ease some of these tensions and directly connect learning with pleasure. Incorporating a play-oriented strategy, in which we roleplay and sing and draw what we understand or don’t understand and use other two- and three- dimensional resources and our bodies to animate the texture and evidence of black stories, songs, photographs, rituals, practices, and political thought and action, allows the me to step in and get messy with students rather than remaining in the moderating sidelines. I use play to agitate and disrupt, subverting the traditional expectations and norms of the classroom space, while reminding students that there are still some (flexible) ground rules and respecting that not all students are always ready or willing to play.

Thinking about the place of play in the classroom, a study by Torko, McMorris, and Lin found that perspectives on the use of humor as a teaching tool have shifted over time, evolving from “virtually useless and a major source of distraction that reduced classroom morale and efficiency” to a contemporary acceptance of humor as an effective, if not necessary, teaching tool that “has a substantial place in classroom lectures and testing” (14). Together they argue that in our present academic climate, the “[i]ncorporation of humor is encouraged across all academic levels” (14), noting that among students, humor has “the power to make teachers more likeable, facilitate understanding of course material, lower tension, boost student morale, and increase student attentiveness” (18).

Keeping in mind the tensions that black faculty face when they are told to be relatable and humorous only to have their professionalism questioned when they seemingly embody the deeply problematic racialized trope of the entertainer, I turn to McGee and Kazembe who echo the value of humor in the classroom, stating “smart and critical humor that unpacks issues of race, racism, and bias...has provided a novel forum for meaningful discourse among black academic professionals” (101). Considering that humor and play are also subversive, I use it to guide students to engage in critical work amidst the fun: playing with texts, concepts, and ideas at the same time that we play with each other. Playing, in this respect, should be thought of not as nonintellectual or a passive activity but one that is political, integral to the pedagogical mission, and requires significant personal investment on the part of

students. It is also a practice that is grounded in the long tradition of black play or performance, used by everyday black folks who consciously assessed their opponents and strategized about the rules in order to make calculated moves to subvert agents and structures of white supremacy, patriarchy, and the life stealing system of capitalism.

At the same time, as much as I try to integrate play and humor into the classroom, I also recognize that there are limitations to play. Aside from play having the capability of being dangerous, both in the sense of what one can gain if one “wins” against their oppressor/opponent (and what the oppressor/opponent loses) and what can be learned and applied that empowers and transforms a student, too much playing can sometimes get out of hand. For those of us who have been a little too extra or made jokes at the wrong time around other black folks, we know what it means to be told “you play too much,” a cultural expression that seeks to curb the humor of a jokester who disregards the boundaries of others, offering a sharp criticism of their lack of seriousness. Given that students have different boundaries and levels of tolerance for what they consider play-worthy, there is always the chance of “playing too much” in the classroom, which is why I anchor our inquiries and play in the texts, returning back to them frequently in class to ground our learning.

One added personal benefit of encouraging black/weird/play in the classroom is having the space to create a professional identity outside of the dominant racial and gendered stereotypes and controlling expectations projected onto black faculty such as the “mammy”³ or comedian.⁴ Oftentimes, this identity bleeds into the domain of the black nerd (“blerd”) or black geek. While the nerd emerged as a “product of postwar modernism...as a way of distinguishing, and discrediting, a particular expression of nonhegemonic masculinity” (Quail 461), the geek evolved in “relation to its twin [the] ‘nerd,’” with the difference between the two being that “the nerd relates compulsively to the technological and/or scientific, while the geek obsesses over information/knowledge; both are intelligent and socially discomfited to varying degrees” (Weheliye 219).

With nerds traditionally associated with middle-class suburban “[w]hite, socially awkward, tech-savvy maleness” (Herrera, 308), Alexander Weheliye points out that black nerds and geeks “appropriate and recast a specific type of white identity that is both racially marked (‘normal’ whiteness generally functions by not calling attention to itself) and tied to educational and economic upward mobility” (221), a gesture that places them on the periphery of hegemonic black cultural expression and performance and squarely in the center of black weird. In this way, they share a similar ancestry as ChicaNerds, young Chicanas who Cristina Herrera defines as usually young, nonwhite, and possessing the “nerdy’ traits of bookishness, math intelligence, poetic talents, and love of learning” (307). Rather than treating it as stigmatized or shameful, this remixing of nerd identity in both cases affords black and Latinx youth “an empowered subjectivity in stark contrast to...stereotypes of the fumbling, rejected ([w]hite male) nerd in popular culture” (308).

Fueled by the rise of consumer computing technology in the late 1990s and into the 2000s, the blerd evolved alongside idealized concepts like “[g]eek chic” and “technosexual” (Quail 465), becoming an increasingly normalized and trendy identity. As an instructor, being perceived as a black and nerdy by students allows me to feel more comfortable in my own body and skin which students regularly read as a short, black, mixed race, middle-aged, tomboyish, female professor who is both deeply knowledgeable and passionate about black culture and history down to the way it smells and feels. Being read as such works as both a shield and a ploy, allowing me to assert facts about black life in an undisputed authoritative voice while gathering black and nonblack students, the latter of whom are already anxious about being in a black studies class, and taking them with me as we “go there” in the texts and discussions.

By channeling black nerd energy and engaging in black weird play I am able to model what it means to “geek out” in the classroom. While “geeking out” generally refers to “an intense commitment or engagement with media or technology” (Ito et al. 65), it does not exclusively pertain to these things as “one can geek out on topics that are not culturally marked as ‘geeky’” (66). As “a genre of participation—a way of understanding, interacting, and orienting” (66) and as an expression of black/weird/play, geeking out has allowed me to model to students how to deep dive into black history and culture, pushing back against a prevailing belief that to enjoy the exploration or analysis of certain types of data or information—black data and information—is excessive, uncool, or abnormal. It also embodies what bell hooks has emphasized as a primary paradigm that influenced her pedagogy: “that the classroom should be an exciting place, never boring” (hooks 7).

As a side door to curiosity and excitement, black/weird/play challenges the terms of boredom in its capacity to “intervene, alter, even disrupt the atmosphere” (7), leaving room for new discovery, authentic knowing, and a pleasure for learning that stays with students long after we end our class.

Context and Conclusion

Every day, as black faculty in academia show up to provide various forms of visible and invisible labor as racialized, gendered, and minoritized colleagues, we are expected to present ourselves professionally, as good and trusted “safe” black folks, and expert teachers to our students. The expectations are clear: to be responsive to student, peer, and administrative demands, to be visible, and to be productive while only being valued for the ability to perform and follow particular roles and scripts. This contradiction follows us into the classroom where we are expected to be experts in our fields, teaching both the cannon, new departures, and the margins, while making sure students feel comfortable by avoiding issues that are “too political” or “too personal.” We are expected to do our best at our jobs while being evaluated by those who already doubt our competence.

This constant negotiation has meant balancing the desire to be authentic to ourselves and the need to be nonthreateningly black in the presence of nonblack folks across campus. But there is an additional cost we assume when we are teaching while black in “courses focused on race [in which we disproportionately] face consequences, such as racial battle fatigue, threat of safety, and questioning of authority” (Closson, Bowman, Merriweather 83). Aureliano DeSoto elaborates on this unique experience, noting that while instructors “tend to be regarded as apolitical instruments of knowledge,” there is a disconnect that is expressed by “students [who] tend to have the opposite expectations of courses that address race and gender” that are also taught by instructors with multiple marginalized (minoritized) social identities (211).

This means that unlike white instructors, those of us who teach African American studies and also present as black, face an added expectation that we should act not only as conduits of knowledge but as conduits of black knowledge that has been cultivated from our firsthand experiences. In this setting, black instructors become the target of confrontation when failing to live up to students’ demand for an authentic black performance. This also sets a high standard for black faculty who are teaching in classrooms that double as a stage and whose critics and audience are both black and nonblack students, each with their own overlapping and different expectations of the professor and the performance.

As black faculty find themselves positioned on stages that have become more restrictive at institutions that increasingly hold FTEs and good evaluations over their heads and make decisions to abandon or downsize programs and departments when faculty agitate, garner political attacks, or are seen as no longer profitable, there is a growing need for an infrastructure of strategies and tools that will support us as we teach while remaining emotionally whole. bell hooks reminds us that “[t]eaching is a performative act” (11). However, with current student expectations of black faculty placing a premium on good performance in the classroom, we must not forget that this racialized expectation is embedded in “the historical tendency to situate the black body as a source of entertainment, amusement, and spectacle” (McGee and Kazembe 99) in a society where “African Americans are often more revered for their entertainment value than their intellectual acumen” (98).

As personalizing courses, turning the classroom into an “experience,” and making oneself even more accessible to students have all become normalized parts of undergraduate education, black faculty face a complicated task, a double bind, really: how do we teach well and remain authentic while doing so in an institutional context of student-consumer demand for good black performance and black professorial knowability and a world context where oversharing is common and the average person spends time curating ideal versions of their lives on social media?

For me, employing black/weird/play in the classroom has allowed me to do both, marking the classroom as an already weird space that students will have to navigate throughout the course of the semester, and situating black

histories and experiences as intimately related to and born from the weird, having been shaped by the weird and violent contexts and structures of European colonialism, Atlantic slavery, racial capitalism, biological annihilation, and mass extinction. Transformative, critical, and just pedagogy requires us to use unconventional approaches, emergent strategies, and radical methods to engage our students and turn them into interlocutors, actors, and collaborators in institutions that were never intended to serve and protect us and where to be a black is to perpetually inhabit a precarious place.

Returning to bell hooks, who encourages us to recognize that “our capacity to generate excitement is deeply affected by our interest in one another, in hearing one another’s voices, in recognizing one another’s presence” (8), I wonder in what other ways can we energize, nurture, and feed our students and each other in institutions that, in the words of Robin D. G. Kelley, “are incapable of loving [us]...of loving anyone, perhaps” (154).

As I encounter more and more students who come to my classroom overworked, unimpressed, defensive, and deprived, but curious and expressing a deep underlying desire to connect, to share personal experiences with each other, to give and receive validation in a society where we are overwhelmed by information yet live publicly staged anonymous lives on social media, I know I’m in the right place. We need black/weird/play now more than ever to make sense of our place in the world because where we are now, in this moment, at this time, when the unexpected, the odd, the fantastic, and the aberrant are not just common occurrences, but in some sense, already completely normal—we are already here.

Notes

1. Here I’m referring to a particular black comedic tradition developed during slavery that directly and indirectly subverts antiblack racism while empowering and giving pleasure to the joke teller and their interlocutors. This tradition relies on parody, animal tales, rhymes, the dozens, satire, proverbs, riffs, toasts, stand-up sketches, snaps, and jokes to sustain generations of black folks who through bitter loss, precarious movements, and brutal violence, have relied on humor to define their collective experience.

2. As I ask this question, I’m thinking about black folks who love alt rock music, anime and cosplay, queer gender nonconforming black folks, all the black folks who were told they weren’t black because the way they talked or acted or the things they loved or did was considered “white” or weird.

3. See Manya Whitaker, “The Color of Teaching: Expectations of Mammy in the Classroom,” *The Feminist Wire*, November 6, 2013.

4. See Ebony O. McGee & Lasana Kazembe, “Entertainers or education researchers? The challenges associated with presenting while black,” *Race Ethnicity and Education*, vol. 19, is. 1, 2016.

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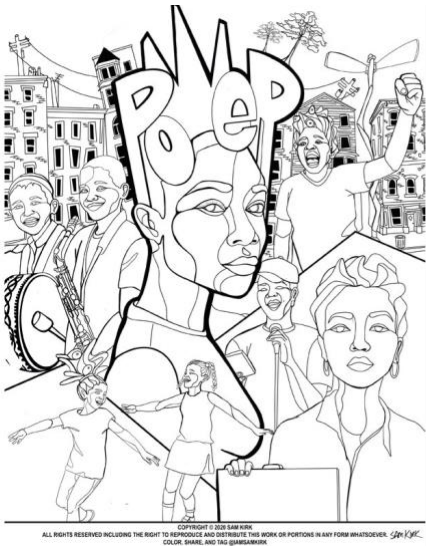
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RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

Speaking Back to the Neoliberal Community College

by Emily Schnee



ELOTERA, BORICUA, & POWER, COLORING PAGES BY SAM KIRK

As protests for racial justice explode across our country and calls to re-direct funding from law enforcement to education hit the pages of the mainstream press, the pivotal role that community colleges could play in the struggle for racial equity for Black and Latino men is clear. Yet this mission has been hijacked by neoliberal policy imperatives that rarely allow the voices of these men to be heard. This study privileges those voices in speaking back to the neoliberal community college, its discourses and policies, in the hopes that institutions of higher education will face this moment of reckoning and take note.

- Research note, 6/21/2020

As an English professor at Kingsborough Community College of the City University of New York (KCC), for too many semesters I had watched intelligent, curious, committed Black and Latino men disappear from my own classrooms, despite multiple efforts to retain them. According to the plethora of research on what has come to be called “community college success,” I was doing many of the right things: teaching in a first semester learning community, providing personalized early warnings at the first sign of absenteeism or academic distress, attempting to connect students to proactive advisement, and implementing an anti-racist, multicultural curriculum. Yet still the Black and Latino men disappeared from my classrooms, and KCC, at an alarming rate: Just 9% of Black men and 11.6% of Latino men who began at KCC in fall 2018 graduated in two years (“Graduation Rate by Ethnicity and Gender,” 2020).

At the same time, KCC, where in fall 2015 I began a qualitative, longitudinal study aimed at understanding fifteen Black and Latino men’s faltering academic achievement, seemed to be turning into a poster child for neoliberal educational reform. Policies intended to shorten time-to-degree and increase the college’s graduation rate began to take precedence over nearly everything else, with each and every policy rationalized with discourses of concern for racial equity. As the definition of student success became ever narrower, to exclusively mean two-year graduation, and equity became a ubiquitous buzzword, the focus of my study evolved to explore how neoliberal educational policies were *implicated* in the academic challenges faced by this cohort of Black and Latino men. The conventional wisdom on community colleges, as articulated by influential national organizations such as Complete College America (CCA), assumes that the implementation of more and better neoliberal policies will lead to improved outcomes for students, especially those who are most educationally disenfranchised. This study complicates that perspective by illustrating how specific neoliberal policies that are at the heart of the college completion agenda were lived out in the day-to-day community college experiences of Black and Latino men with detrimental educational effects.

Neoliberalism and the College Completion Agenda

Over the past four decades, the global growth and spread of neoliberalism has led to a steady privatization of the public domain, a subordination of the common good to the benefit of the market, and a conflation of support for individual freedoms with the promotion of the free market (Harvey, 2005). Proponents of neoliberalism have managed to tie the much vaunted political ideals of human dignity and individual freedom to the expansion and consolidation of global capitalism to such an extent that it makes it appear as if neoliberal policies are common sense and inevitable (Boyd, 2011; Centeno & Cohen, 2012; Giroux, 2011, 2015). Yet, as Harvey (2005) and others point out, this common sense notion can be “profoundly misleading, obfuscating or disguising real problems” (p. 39). Most relevant to this study is how the slow and steady neoliberal restructuring of community colleges over the past few decades has come to be widely seen as reasonable and pragmatic, even rationalized as promoting equity for the very student populations who have been most disenfranchised by decades of policies that allowed the exigencies of the market to supplant a commitment to the common good.

As has been widely documented, including in the pages of this journal, neoliberalism has become the dominant political, economic, and ideological force shaping public higher education in the United States (Harvey, 2005; Newfield, 2016; Slaughter & Leslie, 1997; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004). Neoliberal policies have resulted in a dramatic decrease in public funding for higher education; an increased reliance on tuition dollars to cover college budgets; a conceptualization of students as consumers and education as a commodity; the subjugation of faculty governance to centralized administrative decision-making; a loss of academic freedom; a diminished role for the liberal arts; and an overall restructuring of colleges and universities, in the image of corporations, to emphasize the efficient achievement of measurable outcomes (Newfield, 2016; Slaughter & Leslie, 1997; Slaughter & Rhodes, 2004; Ward, 2015). The public university is no longer primarily a place to think or explore but to prepare students for competition in the global economy (Giroux, 2011).

Neoliberalism is nowhere more prevalent than the 21st century community college (Ayers, 2005, 2009; Boyd, 2011; Levin, 2007; Sullivan, 2017). Once dedicated to serving local communities and considered the most egalitarian institutions of higher education, community colleges have been fundamentally reshaped by the imperatives of the global economy. What were once considered colleges for the common good have become institutions in which completion takes precedence over learning, and students are seen as consumers and education a commodity to be measured using industrial paradigms focused on efficiency and outputs (Ayers, 2005, 2009; Boyd, 2011; Levin, 2007). As Sullivan (2017) contends, the neoliberal agenda for community colleges is “quietly undoing basic elements of democracy” (p. 165).

Given the place of community colleges at the bottom rungs of the stratified higher education arena, this tight

linkage between education and the economy only serves to reproduce existing inequalities (Ayers, 2005; Carnevale & Stroh, 2013; Levin, 2007). Thus, it is deeply ironic that the very neoliberal policies that have caused massive social, economic, and educational inequality are now being packaged as the solution for those students who have been most deeply disenfranchised by them. As Boyd (2011) argues, the discourse employed by many community colleges, which “embed[s] neoliberal principles in a perceived democratic language,” makes the adoption of this paradigm seem to be “a result of common sense, [one that] is good for students, is good for the community, and an inevitable and proper development. But the perception may be different from the reality” (p. 247).

Neoliberal policies have invaded all aspects of higher education, but one organization that serves to exemplify the breadth and pervasiveness of this agenda is Complete College America (CCA, 2020; Ward, 2015). Founded in 2009, CCA is funded by large corporate philanthropists such as the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and has forged “alliances” with policymakers in 47 states and many large U.S. cities, including New York, with the goal of transforming higher education (“Our work,” 2020). The depth and reach of CCA’s legislative impact can be measured, for example, in the profound changes to state policies on remediation that have led to the wholesale dismantling of developmental education in public colleges and universities across the U.S. (“Spanning the Divide,” 2021). CCA locates college completion “at the center of a movement to restore the promise of higher education as the most powerful way to advance social mobility, economic opportunity, and racial justice” – a mission that is difficult to contest (“Our work,” 2020). The four pillars of CCA’s work are summed up in the clever and catchy slogan: “Purpose, Momentum, Structure, Support.” Upon closer scrutiny, these catchwords are defined in ways that unmistakably illuminate the neoliberal premise of its work: “Purpose” involves the close alignment of college to occupational goals ensuring that there is “a clear connection between learning taking place in the classroom and the competencies associated with careers.” “Momentum” entails rapid progression to degree completion through continuous full-time college enrollment. “Structure” ensures that colleges implement tight curricular roadmaps – also known as guided pathways – that “make the path to a degree or valued workplace credential clear.” “Support” rationalizes the ballooning investment in student services with the aim of achieving the vague goal of “remov[ing] barriers to academic success” (“Strategies,” 2020). Further, CCA, in conjunction with its legislative allies, advocates to make state funding for public colleges and universities contingent on increases in colleges’ graduation rates, a clear example of its reliance on quantitative metrics to determine an institution’s worth. Yet despite its close partnerships with legislatures in nearly every state, CCA seems to have *no* position on tuition as a primary revenue stream for public colleges; a search of the CCA website for the word “tuition” yielded no results.

In a clear appeal to neoliberal inevitability, CCA pitches its policy agenda as a “win-win for students and the schools they attend” (“Partners,” 2020). Its website unabashedly states that CCA’s primary goal is to “shift policy” to make

college completion the “# 1 priority of colleges and universities” (CCA, 2020). By explicitly linking this policy goal to equity for historically underrepresented students, with specific references to closing “achievement” and “equity” gaps, CCA appeals to the “common-sense” aspects of its neoliberal policy agenda (“Metro Momentum,” 2020). CCA’s and its allies’ tremendous success in making the tenets it promulgates both widespread and virtually uncontested must be seen in the context of forty years of neoliberal ideology that has, as Harvey (2005) explains, had “...pervasive effects on ways of thought to the point where it has become incorporated into the common-sense way many of us interpret, live in, and understand the world” (p. 3). What follows, in this piece, is a deep exploration of how these very policies were lived out in the community college experiences of a small cohort of Black and Latino men enrolled at Kingsborough Community College.

Troubling the Neoliberal Narrative

The Study

Through ethnographic interviews, conducted once per semester over a three-year period, this study explored the impact of the policies that represent the cornerstones of current thinking on community college completion: decreasing time-to-degree, implementing guided curricular pathways, and expanding student services – or as CCA would call these reforms, “momentum, support, structure, and purpose” – all in the context of increased reliance on tuition to fund college budgets.

First, it is important to note that Black and Latino men represent just a thin demographic slice of the student population at KCC. In fall 2018, Black students made up 33.9% and Latinx students 17.7% of KCC’s student population; men represented approximately 43% of students (“KCC fall 2018: At a glance,” 2019; “Percent enrollment by ethnicity,” 2018). Yet the fifteen Black and Latino men who participated in this research represent a tremendously diverse group of students, one for whom one-size-fits-all educational policies are being prescribed with deleterious effects. The study participants, who were recruited from three first-semester learning communities in fall 2015, all self-identified as either Black or Latino men and ranged in age from eighteen to fifty-two. Ten had just graduated from high school, two were adults who had been out of school for decades, and three were in their early twenties with a few years of full-time work experience under their belts. While all of the participants were full-time students when the study began, half of them worked 30 or more hours per week and were entirely, or mostly, financially independent; one-third of the participants held part-time or seasonal jobs and were mostly supported by their parents while in college. A couple of the participants were minimally or sporadically employed during the study period. The study participants came from families with a range of educational backgrounds. Though the vast majority were first generation college students, several had one parent who did some college without completing a degree. The participants themselves entered KCC with a range of academic preparedness (and were intentionally recruited to reflect this diversity): Eight placed directly into college level

English composition, while seven placed into the lowest level of developmental English and took more than one semester to exit the developmental sequence.

Further, the participants and their families came from a variety of countries and language backgrounds, and held a range of immigration statuses. Ten were U.S. citizens, though half of these were the children of immigrants. Two were Legal Permanent Residents, one had Temporary Protected Status (TPS), and two were undocumented. Those born out of the United States came from Colombia, Ecuador, Haiti, Mexico, and Trinidad. Though the vast majority of the participants were native or dominant speakers of English, several were raised in bilingual households, and three were English Language Learners who struggled with the demands of academic English.

This diversity, which is corroborated in other studies of Black and Latino community college men, goes against the standardizing grain of neoliberal educational policies which prioritize efficiency and productivity over individuality and tend to see all community college students as benefitting from the same interventions, namely those that emphasize continuous full-time enrollment and on-time degree completion as equivalent to college success (CCA, 2020; Gardenhire-Crooks et al, 2010). Despite their differences, the study participants held many experiences in common, all of which revealed troubling complexities and contradictions to the neoliberal college completion narrative, the focus of this essay.

Momentum I: Financial Challenges to Continuous College Enrollment

"If financial aid had accepted me, I would have definitely gone back."

Unsurprisingly, financial concerns were the most significant obstacle the vast majority of study participants faced in college, though these challenges took a variety of forms. Eight of the participants were ineligible for financial aid (or *believed* they were ineligible for financial aid) due to their immigration status or because their parents made marginally more than the cut off for state and federal financial aid. This was a particularly bitter pill to swallow for those students who worked full time and were, for all intents and purposes, financially independent of their parents, but for whom parental income was considered the basis for financial aid eligibility because they were not yet 24 years old. During the study period, six of the study participants left college intermittently, or permanently, due to issues with finances and financial aid.

Anthony (all names are pseudonyms), who exemplified students in this predicament, was placed into developmental English when he entered KCC after a several year hiatus from formal education. He was working full-time at a supermarket stocking shelves overnight and often went straight to class without sleeping. He passed all of his classes that first semester and did so well in developmental English that he was able to skip one level in the remedial sequence. Anthony was poised to return for a second semester when he discovered that he owed the college money and that this barred him from registering for classes. For Anthony the rationale for leaving college was clear:

I didn't go back because I had to pay out-of-pocket. I was 23 years old and I wasn't making that much. If it wasn't for that, I would have gone back... I couldn't pay out of pocket... if financial aid had accepted me, I would have definitely gone back.

Anthony, who never returned to KCC after his first semester, despite his 3.4 GPA, illustrates the predicament of financially independent young adults whose parents' income bars them from receiving financial aid and for whom even the relatively low community college tuition charged at KCC (currently \$4800 per academic year for full-time study) represented an insurmountable hurdle.

Several other participants who were eligible for financial aid had problems getting their aid in a smooth and timely fashion due to the bureaucratic exigencies of the financial aid application process. This was the straw that broke the camel's back for several frustrated participants who lost semesters of study because of delays and disruptions to their financial aid.

Giovanny was typical of this group of students. At the end of the first semester, Giovanny discovered that:

Something was wrong with my financial aid and I still haven't received it yet. I'm still figuring out what was wrong... There was a correction I had to do, because I think I put a wrong number in a wrong category. They were like, you got to re-do it, your mom's got to bring in all these papers, you got to bring in your mom's documents, taxes and everything.

After many visits to the college bursar's office that semester, Giovanny gave up on understanding what went awry and resigned himself to quitting college and working at a grocery store for a year in order to pay what he owed KCC. He described a meticulous process of giving his mother money to hold every pay period until he had amassed the several thousand dollars he owed KCC. Looking back on this time period, even after Giovanni returned to KCC, reapplied for and received financial aid, he said, "It was just a spiral." He was never able to understand exactly what had gone wrong.

Giovanny was not at all unique in this experience, which was echoed by several other study participants who missed semesters of college due to problems with their applications for financial aid. According to internal college data, more Latinx and African-American students fail to complete the financial aid process than White or Asian students. While in fall 2016 African American students made up 34.4% of the college population, and Latinx students represented 17.9% of the college population, respectively, they comprised 37.7% and 19.3% of the students who didn't complete their financial aid applications ("Percent Enrollment by Ethnicity," 2019). Study participants in both groups – those attempting to pay for college on their own and those eligible for financial aid but who faced bureaucratic obstacles that prevented them from receiving it – lost semesters of study, or left college altogether, because of finances.

The much touted New York State Excelsior Scholarship was rolled out midway through this study, in spring 2017, but did not prove to be a panacea for the study participants.

In the end, there were just too many strings attached to the Excelsior Scholarship – such as the demand for continuous, full-time, “on track” enrollment – that did not take into account the realities of these students’ lives (“Excelsior Scholarship Program,” 2020). Gabriel, the one student in the study who did take advantage of the Excelsior program after transferring to a four year college, ended up sticking with a major that he didn’t like because he would lose the Excelsior Scholarship if he didn’t graduate on time. Gabriel embodied the disjuncture between “doing well” academically, as defined by neoliberal policy imperatives, and the pursuit of one’s educational dreams. “I’m doing really well, but I’m not really interested, to be honest with you...I just want to get my work done and get good grades,” he confessed in our final interview. Gabriel felt that the scholarship did not allow him any time for intellectual or career exploration, as he couldn’t fail “even one class” or he would lose the scholarship that made attending college financially feasible for him. This represented a perilous contradiction for a low-income student from an immigrant family who believed a college degree would be pivotal to his future life chances.

The challenges the men faced in figuring out how to pay for college, and the negative impact this had on their ability to maintain “academic momentum,” highlight a fundamental incongruity in the neoliberal paradigm. The focus on efficiency and outcomes, which prioritizes on-time graduation above all else, is undercut by the model’s dependence on students’ (ever increasing) tuition dollars to fund public college budgets. The reliance on tuition made the path to graduation much more complicated for many of the study participants and illuminates one of the troubling contradictions of the neoliberal paradigm. It is notable that Complete College America is silent on the issue of free tuition and fails to advocate for full state funding of public higher education as part of its policy agenda. The men’s experiences clearly support a move away from tuition-based higher education funding and, at the very least, the urgent need to simplify cumbersome, outdated financial aid requirements, which acted as deterrents to timely college completion and added much stress, anxiety, and frustration to the men’s lives.

Momentum II: Impact of Employment on Continuous College Enrollment

Work: “It is as bad as it sounds.”

The deleterious impact of paid employment on almost every participant’s academic momentum also flies in the face of the push for continuous full-time enrollment and on-time graduation that is at the center of the college completion agenda and illustrates another contradiction between neoliberal policy mandates and the study participants’ lived experiences. The push for on-time graduation is most clearly manifested at KCC in the national “15 to Finish” campaign, which was found, pre-pandemic, plastered all over the campus (in the form of glossy posters with the vaguely menacing message “The Longer You Stay, The More You Pay”). This initiative, which is a pillar of CCA’s platform, pushes all students to complete five academic courses per semester in order to graduate with 60 credits in

two years. This heavy course load proved to be extremely challenging for most of the study participants.

As mentioned previously, the vast majority of study participants were employed while also attending college full time. Half worked 30 or more hours per week; one-third of the participants held substantial part-time jobs (roughly 20 hours per week), and only two were sporadically employed during the study period. Not only did the many hours the study participants devoted to paid employment detract from their schoolwork (as corroborated by many other studies), but many of the participants described their employment as stressful, deadening, and even outright dangerous (Wood et al, 2011; Palacios, Wood & Harris, 2015). Over several semesters of interviews, Kenya described his more than full-time employment with a cellular company as not only the number one obstacle to his academic momentum, but as antithetical to what drew him to higher education. Kenya was an elite runner while in high school who hoped to get an athletic scholarship to a four-year college. His dreams were dashed by a knee injury, but at the start of the study period he still savored the idea of attending a residential college and one day having a “real” college experience that allowed him the time and freedom to explore and grow intellectually. Kenya believed that his on again-off again college enrollment was solely attributable to his demanding work schedule. When queried about the challenges he faced in college, he explained:

Work! Work is the one thing that’s messing me up. I wish I had the means to not work and just go to school, but that’s not the case...I’m working 48 hours per week and they’re working me like a dog... it ruins my mood, stunts my creativity. When I come to school, my mind is wandering, I have a chance to really think about things, [but] the day-to-day really stunts creativity.

Miguel was another of the study participants who worked full-time and paid his tuition entirely out of pocket due to his undocumented immigration status. He described his job as a delivery worker for a fast food restaurant which involved riding an electric scooter that did not have functioning brakes, often late at night and in all kinds of weather, in order to cover a large delivery area. When explaining why he stuck with this job, at first he rationalized: “You need the money, you know. It’s not as bad as it sounds.” But, on second thought, he admitted how much this work threatened his well-being and sense of personal security. “No, it *is* as bad as it sounds,” he corrected himself. Only his steadfast commitment to higher education as a way out of his undocumented immigration status and his passion for his art major kept him moving steadily towards his degree.

Kaleb attributed his decision to leave college to his work in various retail stores: “It started burning me out. I think that’s one of the reasons people drop out when they are working and going to school and they have a really stressful schedule.” Kenya concurred and explained how being in college can quickly become secondary when working full-time: “It’s really easy not to go to class... [when] I’m working 10 hour shifts,” he admitted. Although Brandon did not attribute his decision to leave college to the demands of his full-time job as a personal trainer at a local gym, he depicts

his daily routine as an endless, draining cycle of work-school-family: "It's pretty much cut and dried. If I'm not here [at KCC], I'm working, or with my family," he explained.

The push to increase the college's graduation rate through continuous full-time student enrollment took a heavy toll on the study participants and ultimately led several of them to drop out. This finding is not novel; much prior research confirms that Black and Latino male students with heavy workloads are less likely to persist in college and more likely to see their employment as an impediment to their academics (Gardenhire-Crooks et al, 2010; Wood et al, 2011). Ironically, even a decade old report funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation on why students fail to graduate from college acknowledges the devastating impact of work on college completion (Johnson & Rochkind, 2009). Yet, the emphasis on academic momentum remains a central feature of the college completion agenda despite the harmful repercussions of it for this student population.

Support: Resistance to College Services

"I don't like to get help, even though I need it."

Like most colleges, KCC has experienced a rapid expansion in student services in recent years. This is a well-documented feature of the neoliberal university (Newfield, 2016). The fact that almost none of the study participants accessed *any* support services during their tenure at KCC, or were even aware of the array of support services available on campus, calls into question the extensive investment in these areas of college life in terms of increasing equity for Black and Latino men. This contradiction is of special concern in that the ballooning of administrative and student service positions comes at a time of dramatically decreasing state investment in public higher education. Thus, funds spent on the reorganization of advisement academies and counseling services come at the expense of full-time faculty jobs and other interventions – such as the free tuition, books, and transit fare that are the backbone of the Accelerated Studies in Associates Program, for instance – that have been demonstrated to have strong positive outcomes for community college students (Scrivener et al, 2015).

An overwhelming majority of the study participants – 12 out of 15 – reported *never* accessing any supportive services or participating in *any* co-curricular programs or activities at the college, despite the fact that several recognized that they might be helpful to them. As Stanley, a recent immigrant from Haiti who left the college after his first year when he was placed on academic probation, willingly recognized, "I don't like to get help, even though I need it." This resistance, common among the study participants, led him to rebuff his professors' suggestions that he visit the writing center and access other academic support services and had a direct impact on his academic failure and ensuing dismissal from the college.

A common refrain among the study participants when queried about their use of college support services was a) that they had no time and b) that men don't like to ask for help. Almost every study participant reported a daily routine

that involved hours on public transportation to travel from home or work to school and back again, leaving them little time on campus beyond what they spent in classes. Going to tutoring or seeking other support was almost never factored into the experience of college for these men, a finding that is corroborated by other studies (Bukowski & Hatch, 2015; Gardenhire-Crooks et al, 2010; Ingram & Gonzalez-Matthews, 2013).

Many of the participants underscored Palacios, Wood, and Harris's finding that "help-seeking can be erroneously associated with weakness and femininity," which leads to conflict between men's identities and the behaviors expected of "successful" college students (2015, p. 189). Giovanni is one of the many study participants who attributed his reluctance to access the many supportive services available on campus to gender:

For guys, what I know is like, guys don't want to take help. They have a stereotype saying that "guys don't need help, guys can do things on their own," that's why they have the mentality that, "oh, we don't need the help, we can do this thing on our own."

Manny, an adult student in his 50s, concurred with this analysis of why he does not access support services at the college. He explained that "men feel embarrassed and their pride comes into play, they don't want to feel that they are less smart than somebody" so they remain silent and don't ask for help.

Other study participants described a lack of familiarity with help-seeking behaviors that emanated from their families and was reinforced by negative experiences seeking help at the college. When queried, several of the study participants sheepishly acknowledged that they *should* be accessing support services, though this verbal recognition did not change *any* of the participants' behavior during the course of this three-year study. After describing some of his protracted academic struggles to pass courses in his major, Manny stated outright:

I should be asking for more help, but I am so used to doing things for myself... coming home [as a kid] there was no one to help me study, so I did it for myself. This is why it is hard for me to go to tutoring... I don't know what people's attitude is going to be.... I avoid putting myself in a position where I am going to feel uncomfortable.

When Kelvin reflected on the problems he faced with his financial aid application, which caused him to cut back to part-time attendance for a couple of semesters, he acknowledged that "trying to do it on my own and doing it wrong" had not served him well.

Other study participants attributed their reluctance to seek help from college offices to the quality of the services offered. William, one of the students who successfully transferred to a four-year college, offered a harsh appraisal of the support services available at KCC and an alternate explanation as to why students may not make use of them. William was blunt in his assessment of the transfer advisement office, for instance, a sentiment that was echoed by other participants seeking advisement: "They're useless."

90% of the time they don't know what they are talking about ... they are so unhelpful it's kind of ridiculous." Miguel also resisted accessing support services at the college after experiencing bias in his encounters with the financial aid office. Miguel was initially charged out-of-state tuition because of his undocumented immigration status and when he went to the financial aid office to correct this, he was loudly rebuked by a staff person who told him, incorrectly, that he wasn't eligible for in-state tuition. He felt that he had been both publicly shamed and put at risk by having his immigration status revealed to the many students and staff present in the office. Understandably, he never went back.

Another participant, Alex, eschewed any advisement at the college after failing all of his classes in the first semester. He invented a complex and creative system for determining which classes to take based on identifying easy graders through Rate My Professor reviews and balancing that with the cost of required texts and the class schedule. He believed this approach served him in good stead as he was able to raise his GPA to a 3.5 and ultimately transfer to a four-year college. Kaleb too had a negative perceptiveness of college supports, which he saw as unhelpful and undermining. He explained his strong mistrust of those in a position to help at the college:

You're by yourself, you're by yourself... I'm talking about anyone in the school that's an authority, that has any type of authority... I don't feel that I can go to you and you'll help me in any way. I feel like I am by myself and anything that I have to learn, I'll have to learn it on my own.

The constellation of experiences and attitudes that led almost every study participant to reject the college's growing web of support services – services that were ostensibly designed and funded to improve college completion for precisely these students – reveals another troubling contradiction in the neoliberal funding paradigm. The fact that the college rationalizes the expansion of such services, in a moment of budgetary crisis, as part and parcel of its commitment to increasing racial equity only compounds this contradiction.

Structure: College as Obstacle

"The school doesn't change policy for you. I learned that the hard way."

Not only did the research participants eschew supports intended to bolster their college completion, this study revealed many instances in which the participants felt their academic progress was stymied by the college itself. Despite the investment in more staff and services, despite the rhetorical commitment to educational equity for this particular student population, to many study participants the college often felt like one more obstacle they had to work around to get a college degree. Interestingly, this was particularly the case for students in highly structured occupationally-oriented majors, those which most closely resemble the "guided pathways" approach to community college education advocated by CCA and many other community college reform agents, in which students' trajectory through college is mapped out for them in a tight

sequence of required courses (Bailey, 2017; Jenkins & Cho, 2014).

Kaleb, an academically strong student from Trinidad, left KCC in utter frustration after getting an "unofficial withdrawal" grade in a required course that was a prerequisite for his major. Though he admitted to missing a fair number of classes due to health issues, Kaleb contended that the attendance policy was not clearly articulated, and that he did not learn he had no chance of passing the course until the very end of the semester when the professor told him not to worry about missing the final exam. The unofficial withdrawal (which converts to an F) made him ineligible to apply to his intended major for an entire academic year as there is only one annual admissions cycle. After repeated, unsuccessful efforts on his part to negotiate a different outcome, he dropped out. Many months later, Kaleb was still bitter about this experience and KCC in general:

I learned that it doesn't matter your circumstances, if there is a certain policy in place, there is no way to get around that. It doesn't matter if that's your last class to graduate or if that's your last class to apply into another program. I learned that ... the school doesn't change policy for you. I learned that the hard way... It was a complete turn off. I really did not want to come back to this school.

Brandon, an adult student in his 40s, also experienced insurmountable obstacles in his chosen allied health major. Despite doing exceedingly well in his liberal arts and general education courses, Brandon struggled with the academic expectations of this occupational program which he described as both opaque and overly reliant on high stakes multiple choice exams for which he felt the classes did not adequately prepare him. After getting a C-minus in a foundational course, he found himself in a bureaucratic labyrinth of requirements about which he felt he was never properly advised. When he received an email telling him that he had been dismissed from the program and must find a new major, he was shocked and dismayed. Brandon approached the program to understand what had happened and was told that this information "was in the handbook. 'Didn't you read the handbook?' Of course I didn't read the handbook," Brandon explained. "I was bothered for a really good time," he revealed. Brandon left KCC rather than choose another major. He recounted that he felt like the college had a "corporate mentality" and had told him, "thanks a lot for your money. Get out."

Several study participants who excelled in their liberal arts classes strained under the prescribed curriculum of the occupational majors they had come to KCC to study. Of the six study participants with occupationally oriented majors, two dropped out of KCC early in their academic careers; two experienced the devastating academic setbacks described above; one was struggling to pass required courses in his major at the time the study concluded; and just one had successfully transferred to a four-year college to pursue his chosen major. These students' experiences fly in the face of the guided pathways philosophy which has come to predominate thinking on community college success and call into question the emphasis neoliberal reforms place on preparation for occupational attainment as the definition of

student success (Bailey, 2017; CCA, 2020; Jenkins & Cho, 2014). Setbacks that the study participants perceived to be minor, such as failing a particular class, proved to have devastating consequences when they disrupted the flow of tightly structured programs and led students to leave KCC in anger and disappointment. These findings are in line with other studies that show that community colleges themselves often have policies, practices, and procedures that negatively impact low-income students, many of whom are also Black and Latinx (Long, 2016; Harper & Kuykendall; 2012). The much touted, and pervasive, guided pathways approach to community college education – which calls for curricular “road maps” in the form of tight sequences of required courses – left little room for “snags in the road,” as Brandon called them, and ultimately proved detrimental to participants’ motivation to complete their college degrees. Though they did not work for many participants in this study, calls for guided pathways remain a core fixture of the community college completion agenda (Bailey, 2017; CCA, 2020; Jenkins & Cho, 2014).

Purpose: Mobility, Learning, and Growth

“I love school....it creates the person you come to be.”

Though pursuit of higher education was absolutely connected to their aspirations for upward mobility, for many of the study participants college was also a source of deep personal fulfillment and human growth. These parallel motivations for college attendance are too often left out of the neoliberal paradigm. Many participants’ beliefs about higher education are in tension with policies that view educational equity reductively as equivalent only to degree completion and occupational advancement, with little consideration for intellectual growth and student learning. Several of the most intellectually curious and academically engaged participants in the study changed their majors several times and faced their most serious academic challenges in lockstep vocational majors rather than in liberal arts courses. Though all of the study participants did aspire to upward mobility through higher education, this was not their only or primary source of motivation to attend college, especially on a day-to-day basis. Several of the participants were clear that long-term aspirations for economic mobility were not enough to get them up in the morning after working the night shift.

Miguel, for example, desperately hoped that a college degree would lead him on a path to a professional career and help him legalize his immigration status. Yet he also pursued his passion for art in college, despite his own father’s objections to this major as impractical and unworthy of study. Miguel defended his choice of major and students’ right to their educational ambitions as ultimately essential to their long-term academic success:

A lot of people are just studying things because they think there’s going to be money, but they don’t even like it. I remember I asked this kid once, “what’s your dream, what do you want to do?” He was like, “construction worker....” I was like, “Bro, what’s your passion?” And he was like, “I wanna be a DJ” and I was like, “study for that.”

Alex, a recent immigrant from Colombia who was also undocumented, echoed this commitment to college as being about personal growth and exploration not simply social mobility. For him, college was the process not just the end goal. Alex expressed disappointment in what he perceived as an overly instrumental attitude towards higher education at KCC, arguing, “Students come here just to pass a class, not to explore, not to learn, but life is about learning.”

When work compelled Kenya to take a semester off from college he described feeling what he called “an itch,” the feeling that “I really, really want to come back to school.” His rationale was deep and personal and in great contrast to his full-time work which he described as deadening. He explained, “I love school....90% of the person you become is from school... it creates the person you come to be.” Manny, a Puerto Rican man in his 50s who entered KCC after a period of incarceration, never expected to attend college. He was overjoyed at the opportunity KCC gave him to read, write, and learn. His motivation for remaining in college was simple: “The feeling I get when I leave here is happy. Tremendously happy.”

Of course, there was no unanimity among the study participants as to the purpose of college. A couple admitted outright that they saw little use for what Evens called “bullshit classes.” When asked what he would most like to change about KCC, Evens responded:

Don’t have no bullshit classes... I understand English and math, you need math to do your budget, but what the hell do you need history for? Sociology, biology for? You don’t need none of these classes that don’t focus on the major.

Hector, an African American young man, who dropped out of both KCC and the study after the second semester, put it plainly: “I don’t like school.” But the vast majority of participants were passionate about learning, a reminder that college completion for Black and Latino men must be about more than preparation for the job market.

Concluding Thoughts

One small study is not going to stem the inexorable tide of neoliberal educational reform which has washed across all facets of public education in the United States. However, I do believe that these findings provide strong evidence that the college completion agenda – with its laser focus on efficiency and outcomes – exacerbated the educational inequalities faced by the Black and Latino men who participated in this study. Not only did the implementation of neoliberal policies *not* lead to improved outcomes for the study participants, they were, in fact, often implicated in their educational struggles. Policies, like those promoted by CCA and explored in this study, that focus exclusively on time-to-degree and college completion while ignoring the massive obstacle of tuition-based funding formulas, served to reinforce and deepen long standing educational disparities.

My hope is that these findings inspire other qualitative studies that look beyond the numbers to students’ lived experience of neoliberal reforms. Perhaps a corpus of such

studies, if combined in meta-analysis, might begin to make some small chinks in the armor of college completion dogma. These studies must be part of a structural analysis of neoliberal reforms that moves beyond penalizing public colleges and their students for their poverty all the while replicating inequities that are hard baked into our economic and educational systems. If we really want to make college completion our “#1 priority,” as CCA claims, then we must take seriously the impact of years of austerity budgets that lay the responsibility for funding public higher education on individual students and their tuition dollars. What would likely have had the most profound and positive impact on the study participants’ abilities to remain in college is a shift from a tuition-based funding model to one that not only funds free college tuition as a public good, but provides other material supports to students (such as books and free transit passes).

Data collection for this study ended before the COVID-19 pandemic and the move to remote instruction upended higher education. The crisis that the pandemic has sparked will likely have lasting implications for community colleges. As of early 2021, first-time community college enrollment nationally had dropped 21%, with first-time enrollment for Black, Latinx, and Native American students down by about 29% (Lanahan). Thus, community colleges find themselves in a moment of reckoning. Either the current crisis will serve to deepen the trends noted in this analysis – an increased reliance on tuition to make up for state budget deficits; continued emphasis on increasing graduation rates through continuous full-time enrollment; and the implementation of rigid, occupationally oriented curricular pathways – or, more hopefully, will spark a new approach, one that reassesses what educational equity means and proposes varied and flexible paths for how to achieve it for all students, including and in conversation with Black and Latino men.

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RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

Teaching Note

Speaking 7 Days of Garbage: Raising Awareness of Sustainability in the Classroom

by José-Víctor Rodríguez, Aránzazu Elizondo-Moreno, Ignacio Rodríguez-Rodríguez, Víctor Calderón-Fajardo, and Domingo Pardo-Quiles



7 DAYS OF GARBAGE, GREGG SEGAL (SEGAL, 2016).

For several decades, the depletion of natural resources as a consequence of the aggressive and irresponsible behavior of our species has been a major problem facing society (Brown, 2004). There has been no shortage of voices warning that this depletion of planetary resources could result in the collapse of civilization (Diamond, 2006). In response to this, the United Nations proclaimed 2005-2014 as the Decade of Education for a Sustainable Future, urging UNESCO to promote, in all educational institutions, the fostering of attitudes targeting sustainable development (Combes, 2006).

Classroom activities aimed at raising awareness of sustainability should therefore be an essential part of the curriculum to foster values and habits that generate an attitude of respect for the environment. The education system should bear in mind that appropriate environmental education will foster the next generation's commitment towards our planet and an awareness of the need to care for it, thereby offering the benefit of a better future for all. The inculcation of environmental awareness among students is an indispensable element for the creation of ethically committed professionals who, across disciplinary fields, will build a new reality for sustainable development – far from the current overexploitation of resources and in harmony with nature, of which we are a part.

As science teachers (from Universidad Politécnica de Cartagena and Universidad de Málaga, Spain), we were invited to propose and hold a classroom activity in a secondary school in Cartagena to celebrate World Environment Day as part of a program of informational activities planned by the school. Thus, we developed an activity that could be integrated within the framework of any subject in environmental sciences or as a cross-curricular exercise of any educational program. The students were 14 years old (third year of Enseñanza Secundaria Obligatoria, ESO, Compulsory Secondary Education), middle class, 60% boys and 40% girls, and had the following origins: 85% Spanish, 10% Latin American, and 5% Moroccan. The objective of the activity was to get students to reflect on the huge amount of waste we generate. To this end, we considered the recent work by photographer Gregg Segal (Segal, 2016) entitled "7 Days of Garbage," which shows families surrounded by the garbage they have produced over a week. (The first photograph in this teaching note depicts the photographer with his family.)

Through the visceral power of his disconcerting photographs, Segal's project aims not only to raise awareness of the immense volume of waste that we generate, but also to highlight how unaware we are of this fact. In this sense, he is forcing us to confront our unbridled consumerist excess and its most prevalent direct negative impact on the environment, namely our generation of substantial quantities of waste (several kilograms per person per week), including a significant proportion of non-degradable packaging.

Segal's photographs, in which this mere week's worth of waste is practically swamping its human generators, relentlessly transmit the essence of the ruthless anthropocentrism that is using nature and its resources – justified through an offensive assumption of human supremacy – to aggressively and unsustainably satiate our short-term desires for comfort and pleasure.

After viewing Segal's provocative work, the students' first reaction was one of incredulity. Specifically, some (perhaps due to an instinctive defensive reaction) asserted that it was not possible for so much garbage to have been generated in just one week. However, after they were assured of the veracity of the photographs, their disbelief eventually gave way to general astonishment at what the images were revealing. Following the short debate



7 DAYS OF GARBAGE, GREGG SEGAL (SEGAL, 2016).

generated by this first impression, we asked the students (after dividing them into groups) to answer a series of questions related to environmental sustainability: What is our responsibility as a society? What can we do to contribute to a more sustainable world? How can we consume responsibly? Is it possible to reverse the situation?

But first, to stimulate their critical thinking and introduce them to some of the concepts in environmental education, we the teachers commented that, as perpetrators of this anthropocentrism, humankind seems to have forgotten its interdependence and equality with the other species on Earth. We assume that the environment is here to serve us, thereby disregarding our status as simple

members of the biotic community, as proposed by Arnold Leopold (Leopold, 1949), wherein respect for the beings that live alongside us should be the most significant sign of our identity. In addition, the extreme consumption reflected in Segal's images, which feature citizens of the most developed countries in the world, including the United States, shows how we not only undervalue other species, but also – within our own species – arrogantly assume the right to exploit collective resources at the expense of the misery of the most underprivileged.

After floating the above ideas, we gave the groups twenty minutes to discuss the issues raised and write down their reflections. The conclusions reached by each group were then shared and an enriching and constructive debate ensued. The following main ideas emerged.

Concerning our responsibility as a society, it was suggested we should implement, at least initially, a so-called "weak" anthropocentrism that screens the omnipresent desires of our species, aiming to fulfill only those that – after thorough consideration and based on long-term biosphere sustainability – are truly necessary. In this sense, we should mention that although the vast majority of students supported the previous proposal, a few voices propounded the idea that we should be less concerned about conserving our planet. Their reasoning was that, in the future, once the Earth's resources have been exhausted, our intelligence and technology will allow us to migrate to new and unexploited worlds, thereby perpetuating an endless cycle of successive planetary colonization (and destruction). This premise gave rise to the issue of whether ethics has any value in the face of such a utilitarian and predatory vision. In any case, following the notion of "weak" anthropocentrism mentioned above, it was concluded that a next and definitive step should be the tautological recognition of the human species as part of nature itself to ensure (in line with the inherent value of life postulated by Paul Taylor; Taylor, 1983) that every decision made contributes to the conservation of the integrity of Leopold's biotic community; in other words, if we are protecting it, we will be protecting ourselves.

Another idea that emerged is that legislators must act ethically and in the aforementioned direction when drafting regulatory frameworks. Moreover, manufacturers must respect the established rules of sustainability, and consumers must act responsibly as they are the first to uphold the philosophy of respect for the environment by rejecting those products that threaten the integrity of nature. Keeping this idea in mind will make us more aware that we are part of an organic whole, as Arne Naess (Naess, 1988) asserts with his concept of "deep ecology." However, this does not mean that we, as individual consumers, have the same responsibility as the political class or large corporations. Obviously, these two actors (often intertwined by their common selfish interests) hold the power, respectively, to establish mandatory regulations for sustainability or to abandon aggressive advertising campaigns, among others. In other words, they are the ones with the means to ensure a more realistically hopeful future.

In addition, it also became clear that the message in Segal's project, although crude, highlights how, from a systemic point of view, it is clearly incomprehensible that in

the closed and finite system of Earth, incapable of growing beyond its limits, the unsustainable use of non-reusable packaging has become normalized. To understand this persistent and pernicious contradiction, we must ask ourselves what underlying interests may be at work in perpetuating and even intensifying such behavior. At this point, we must become aware that the so-called "developed world," which exists through the exploitation of a planetary North-South dichotomy that is maintained with ulterior motives, is the main beneficiary of the whole perverse economic cycle. Sustained by a myopic and contradictory "market," this cycle does not hesitate to grab the resources of the most disadvantaged 80% of the population to satisfy the rampant consumerist desires of the remaining 20%. This incontestable fact is not only undermining the inter-species respect that we owe as mere terrestrial citizens (with dire ecological consequences) but is also fostering a lack of intra-species respect that is instigating uncounted abuses at the social level, with no sign of stopping.

On the other hand, when asked whether it is possible to reverse the situation, the classroom debate revealed that to move away from naïve approaches, it is necessary to have an awareness of the complexity of this problem, including its deep-rooted inertias and the numerous agents involved. This will necessitate a profound revolution in the sense that it is a matter not only of consuming less, but also of consuming better. Hence, the necessary change should include not just the welcome recycling of waste – in itself a stopgap since it assumes that the first stage of waste generation is inevitable – but also a progressive transformation of society and the economy. Thus, based on unwavering respect for nature and a fraternal consideration towards all beings inhabiting our planet, it is necessary to ensure that the quality of life can improve on a global scale – including radical changes in the North-South dynamics and always under the principle of equity – to change the access to resources (with a fair distribution of the costs and benefits). Meanwhile, new forms of exercising politics must emerge, ones that are constantly watched over by the citizenry to counteract the threat of the dictatorship of the markets.

In short, the activity conducted here, using the stimulating context for reflection provided by the work of photographer Gregg Segal, fostered a series of ideas that led to an enriching and reflective debate by the students. This served to raise awareness of the importance of caring for our environment to ensure a sustainable future for the planet.

In summary, this teaching activity, based on Segal's photographs, attempts to address a reality that is not only unsustainable from the anthropocentric point of view of guaranteeing the ability to meet the resource needs of future generations, but that also emerges as a dynamic that is unacceptable from the biocentric perspective of ensuring the respect for and preservation of life-hosting systems. After all, the change that our planet needs demands an elevation of the emotional maturity of our species, leading us not only to the knowledge that we need for this profound revolution, but above all to the wisdom to, once and for all, actually bring it about.

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RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

Teaching Note

Reflections on Online Education during the COVID-19 Pandemic: Vignettes from an Indian Classroom

by V. Neethi Alexander



IMAGE BY AUGUST-DE-RICHELIEU VIA PEXELS.COM

This account is written at the conclusion of a year of online teaching at a private educational institute in India. Taking stock of the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic would require both distance and clarity—privileges that are possible perhaps only with the passage of time and the assurance of safety. While neither of these are fully available to us yet, the glow of the proverbial ‘light at the end of the tunnel’ seems not too distant either. After a year and many months of waiting, the country is now sputtering back to an appearance of normalcy as vaccination drives have enabled the reopening of businesses, and educational institutes.

Despite the ravages and uncertainty of these times, educational institutions in the country have attempted to maintain a semblance of continuity in the academic progress of its students. Of course, this continuity has been the fortune of a very select portion of the nation’s populace: one that has had the luxuries of internet connectivity and the financial capacity to afford education in the first place, among other privileges. This article dwells on the experiences of online teaching in a higher educational institute where most students belong to such a select demographic. The courses taught were on English language and literature for first-year undergraduate students.

Some of the most significant roadblocks in effective online classroom discussions were poor internet connectivity and large class strengths ranging from 40 to 90 and even 120 students per class. This resulted in minimal back and forth communication during classes. Students were allowed to switch off their cameras to accommodate sub-par internet connections, but teachers mostly kept their cameras on. With a one-sided dynamic such as this, classroom discussions were understandably far from optimum. These limitations were heightened especially during table-readings of plays, and debates or discussions. Many students who wished to speak could not do so because of poor internet connectivity. Others typed furiously in chat boxes, but messages appeared long after the classroom conversation had moved on. Synchronous communication, whenever it did occur, was often a stroke of good fortune.

Some discussions, however, had surprising if short-lived results. In a session about the concept of the panopticon, students were asked to think of real-life examples and they came up with instances of surveillance states and the internet. I remarked that the very “classroom” we were sitting in instantiated a reversal of the panopticon where, instead of the student being observed at all times, the teacher was monitored by faceless students and perhaps even parents. In response, my screen slowly lit up with video images of smiling students who joined in on the joke and turned on their cameras. Although fleeting, this rare instance of a completed feedback loop redeemed the usual isolation and awkwardness of online classrooms.

However, more often than not, teachers had little or no means of accessing the visual cues of students’ reactions and modulating the tone of the discussion accordingly. In such cases, written assignments and follow-up discussions were some of the few ways through which communication was (partially) established. This particularly stood out in sessions where we discussed texts like William

Shakespeare’s *Measure for Measure* shortly followed by discussions on an Indian film titled *Section 375*. Both are prescribed texts in the university syllabus. While readings of *Measure for Measure* focused on the play’s relevance to the contemporary context of feminism, especially the #MeToo movement, discussions of *Section 375* centred around the theme of sexual harassment trials within India.

Section 375 is an Indian film directed by the film-maker Ajay Bahl and is a story about an unpopular film director who is accused and convicted of raping a junior designer on his film set. This in itself did not particularly complicate interpretations of the text. However, the film presents a Rashomon-inspired “he-said/she-said” plot with the final revelation being that the victim had confabulated the entire accusation and that the director was, in fact, innocent. Despite my personal dislike for many aspects of the film, I believed it would serve as a useful point of discussion about issues such as the appropriateness of the timing of the film’s release, the film’s conceptions of feminism as a rabid movement of mob-justice, and issues concerning sexual harassment.

Once class sessions on the film commenced, many students chose to do their written assignments on the film. Considering that I heard from very few students during class, owing to the internet connection or other reasons, their written assignments were my only point of access to their thoughts, and I was very excited to be able to finally see what they had to say. What I first found was that most students, barring a select few, weren’t interested in discussions on Bollywood’s representations of sexual harassment, or the issue of the timing of the film’s release at a cultural moment when victims in real life were just beginning to speak out. They were more enthused by the “suspense” and “mystery” of the narrative, the charismatic delivery of the protagonist, and the grandeur with which he made declarations such as: “We are in the business of law, not justice.” Others pointed to how justice is a by-product of the law and ultimately a very different thing from law itself. The cynicism of some of these statements was hard to swallow, especially since these students were so young and more so because they were prospective lawyers.

When nudged later on about the appropriateness or justification for such declarations, some students agreed in class that such statements made the film’s politics questionable. But many also affirmed their view that it presented what they called “important” and “very common” occurrences of false accusations of sexual harassment by victims. In later submissions of some essays, I noticed the gradual fine-tuning of some opinions. Some students shifted from gushing over the film, and making sweeping statements about the abstractness of justice, to adopting a more distant perspective as they submitted their essays. Some argued that the casting couch was to blame, and yet others mentioned in their essays that it was unfortunate that justice was not always served, but that the law was all we had. A few students also admitted in class that they did not find the exercise of examining the film easy, but that they liked to be challenged. These changes were few and rarely spotted of course, but it was mostly only through their written submissions that I could sense how much the discussion had gotten across.

One can't help but wonder how different things could have been had these discussions happened in an offline classroom. I couldn't see or hear from most other students, and so I could never know for sure what they thought. I refrained from probing far enough not only because of concerns of fairness and neutrality, but also because I simply couldn't communicate with them face to face. The queasy sense of a task inadequately accomplished, of crucial teachable moments lost, has continued to linger on.

The difficulties of rarely knowing what students thought, of gauging whether a moment was working or not, of having little or no feedback during class discussions were only a few of the many limitations of online learning. It was mostly through their writing that I uninterruptedly "heard" from my students. Admittedly, this is a risk embedded within the scope of a live-classroom as well. But these risks were experienced far more acutely this past year, and teachers weren't the only ones who felt this way. For their argumentative essays in the final exams, many students—even from engineering programs—expressed their disenchantment with online education. One student essay nostalgically reminisced about ancient educational models of the Indian Gurukul tradition where teachers and students taught and learnt while sitting under the shade of a Banyan tree. These student-responses testified to the limitations of the online classroom, but more importantly, they reaffirmed the irreplaceability of real-time communication and the tangible, embodied experiences of shared learning in an offline classroom. Unless safer times return or seamless internet connectivity becomes a reality for all, asynchronous written assignments and collaborative writing exercises might be one of the few reliable options through which to hear student-voices. Until then, we are importuned to make do with monologues into black windows on MS Teams and pixelated images streaming through cyberspace.



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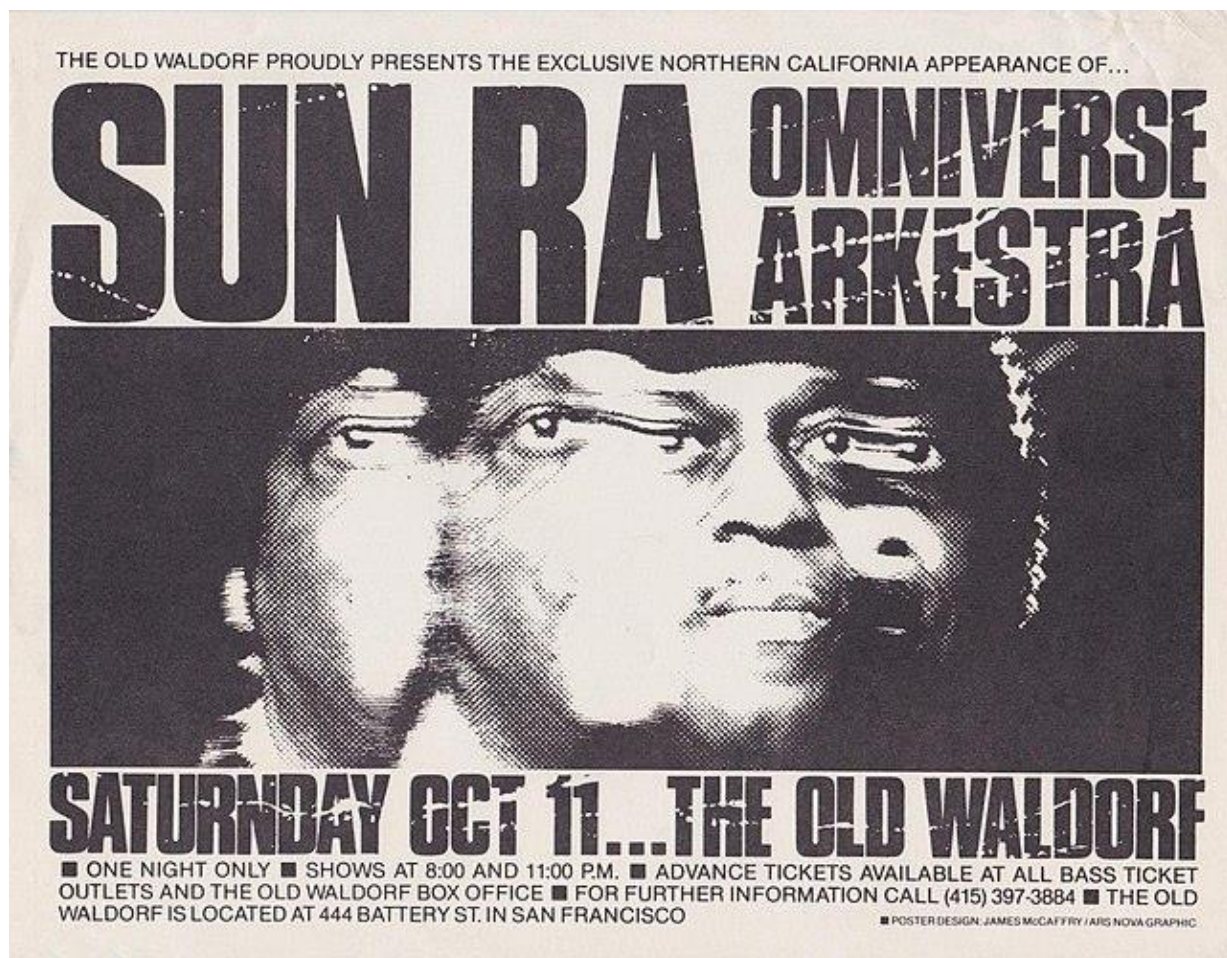
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RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

Poetry
Skin

by Willa Schneberg



SUN RA OMNIVERSE ARKESTRA (1980 CONCERT POSTER, SAN FRANCISCO). WIKIMEDIA

Skin

A black woman loans me her skin.
It doesn't fit like a bodystocking
or wetsuit. It becomes mine,
sepia and smooth.

I notice a puncture
on the left side of my torso.
There is blood. My thumb
fits in the slit and finds muscle.

The Band-Aids are the wrong color
and too small.

I must do something:

smash the leg irons,
shoot the master,
cut down the lynching tree.

Now the woman is in the hallway
wearing her skin. She says,
don't worry yourself, you
got your own: inked numbers,
yellow star

always there;

this wound
is mine.



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RADICAL TEACHER

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Poetry
Judge/Hate

by Tony Vick



PHOTO BY UNCOVEREDLENS VIA PEXELS.COM

Judge/Hate

I never wanted to be here
but then again who does?

Accepting your own misdeeds
is harder than condemning others
for their failures

Judge Them

My sin is nowhere as horrible
and disgusting as theirs.

Hate them

The concrete walls and rolls
of razor wire don't keep out
judgement and hate—but trap
it and allow it to grow
into groups, clichés, gangs
that can hate together.

Love cannot grow in
fields of despair.



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RADICAL TEACHER

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Poetry
Chaos Theory

by Prartho Sereno

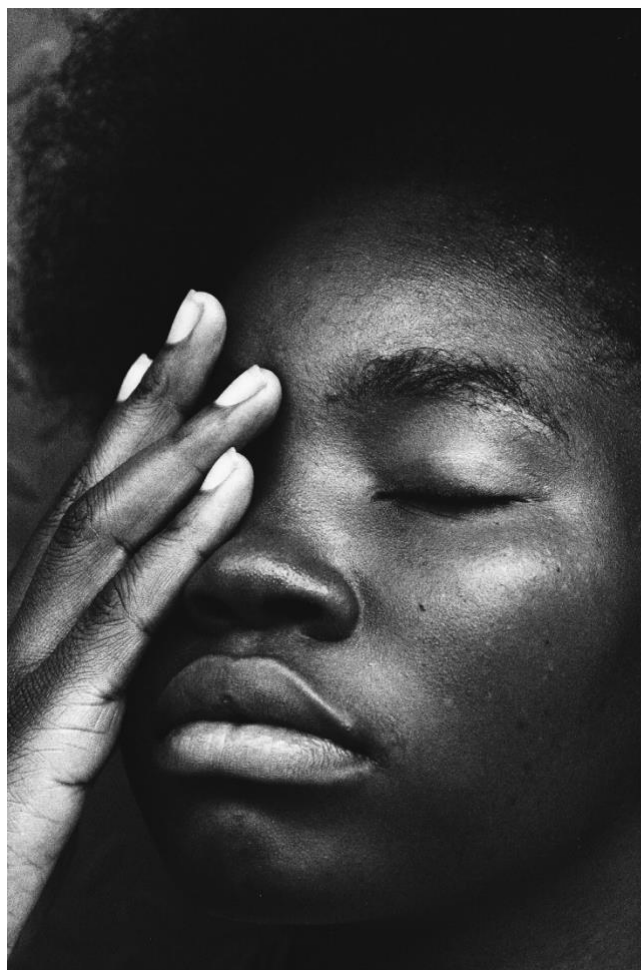


PHOTO BY MUHAMMADTAHA IBRAHIM MA'AJI VIA PEXELS.COM

Chaos Theory

When the unkempt girl whose eyes
are always fixed on something
the rest of us can't see leaps up
midway through the day's poem
to wildly swivel her arms
does the breeze she becomes

touch the heads of the peonies
and bring their tight buds
to unwind and let go
a perfumed eddy so dense

it draws in the disbelievers
and shipwrecked sailors
the unhappy housewives
and long-lost heralds of dawn

so that when she arrives home to drop
her heavy pack on the floor and search
the vacant lots of her mother's eyes

does she find at last a gardener whistling in
with his wheelbarrow and trowel
come to shape the clouds into polar bears
and possums, put in a patch of sweetgrass,
rows of wild peas?



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Contributors' Notes

Teaching Afrofuturism: Race, Erasure, and Corona



"BO BO," DIGITAL, BY LAURYNMB

Giselle Liza Anatol is a professor of English at the University of Kansas, specializing in Caribbean and African American literature and multicultural works for young readers. She has edited three collections of scholarly essays on popular fantasy literature for children and young adults: *Reading Harry Potter* (Greenwood, 2003), a follow-up volume published in 2009 (*Reading Harry Potter Again*), and *Bringing Light to Twilight: Perspectives on the Pop Culture Phenomenon* (Palgrave, 2011). She is also the author of *The Things That Fly in the Night: Female Vampires in Literature of the Circum-Caribbean and African Diaspora* (Rutgers University Press, 2015). This book explores the skin-shedding, bloodsucking soucouyant figure from Trinidadian folklore and found in various children's stories, travel writing, and contemporary fiction for adults. Anatol is currently the director of the J. Wayne & Elsie M. Gunn Center for the Study of Science Fiction.

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Kimberly Nichele Brown is an associate professor of Gender, Sexuality and Women's Studies at Virginia Commonwealth University. Her areas of specialization include contemporary African American women's literature and culture, black feminist theory, Africana film, Afrofuturism, and twentieth-century American and Africana literatures. Professor Brown is the author of *Writing the Black Revolutionary Diva: Women's Subjectivity and the Decolonizing Text*, published by Indiana University Press in 2010. She is currently working on two book-length manuscripts, *IncogNegro Stances: Cross-racial Espionage in Contemporary Literature and Film* (under contract with University of Mississippi Press) and *Through Ebony Eyes: A Black Feminist and Ethical Praxis of Viewing Contemporary Film*.

Currently a PhD candidate at James Cook University, **Karen Cornelius** has had extensive metropolitan, rural and remote Australian and overseas educational leadership experience in schools, regional offices, and state office. Her interests include: policy, social justice, leadership and remote schools.

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Joseph Entin is a Professor in the English Department and the American Studies program at Brooklyn College, as well as an editor for *Radical Teacher*.

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Dalia Davoudi is an NEH Postdoctoral Fellow in American Studies at Montclair State University and holds a PhD. in English from Indiana University. Her research focuses on nineteenth-century American literature, queer temporality, and experimental modes of knowledge production. She also serves on the short film selection committee for the Chicago Latino Film Festival.

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Willa Schneberg's poem "Skin" is from a recently completed manuscript from the collection, "The Naked Room," a true synthesis of her life as a psychotherapist, (one not exempt from angst), and life as a poet. These are poems of the unconscious, the dreamscape, the despondent, the unmoored and the mortal.

Emily Schnee is Associate Professor of English at Kingsborough Community College of the City University of New York.

Prartho Sereno served as fourth Poet Laureate of Marin County, 2015–17. She has taught poem-making to children as a Poet in the Schools since 1999 and for over 12 years to adults at the College of Marin. Her four prizewinning poetry collections include *Indian Rope Trick*, *Elephant Raga*, *Call from Paris*, and her illustrated collection, *Causing a Stir: The Secret Lives and Loves of Kitchen Utensils*.

Jesse W. Schwartz is an Associate Professor of English and Director of the Writing & Literature Major at LaGuardia Community College (CUNY) in Queens, NY. He has held fellowships with the Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst (DAAD) in Osnabrück, Germany, as well as at the National Endowment for the Humanities. Some of his interests include radical American history and literature, periodical studies, Marxism, critical race and ethnic studies, and Russian-American relations before the Cold War. His current project traces American cultural responses to transnational socialism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries at the intersection of racialization and radical politics, with a particular focus on representations of the Bolshevik Revolution within US print cultures. A member of the editorial board of *Radical Teacher*, his work can be found there as well as in *Nineteenth-Century Literature* and *English Language Notes*. He is also currently co-editing an essay collection on new directions in print

culture studies forthcoming from Bloomsbury Academic in the summer of 2022.

Wendy M. Thompson is an Assistant Professor of African American Studies at San José State University. The coeditor of *Sparked: George Floyd, Racism, and the Progressive Illusion*, she is currently working on a book titled *Chasing the Sun: Staging Life, Belonging, and Displacement in the Black Bay Area*. Both a poet and a scholar, her creative work has most recently appeared in *Sheepshead Review*, *The Account*, *Funicular Magazine*, *Palaver*, and *Gulf Stream Lit*. She has two essays, one on black displacement and real estate in the Bay Area and the other on black women's othermothering practices, forthcoming in *Urban Transcripts Journal* and *Women's Studies Quarterly*.

Dr. Belinda Deneen Wallace (she/her) is an Assistant Professor in the Department of English Language and Literature at the University of New Mexico. She is a post-colonialist whose research is rooted in Caribbean Literary and Cultural Studies; her research branches, however, are diasporic and best understood as an on-going conversation between blackness and queerness. Her research is informed by intersectional feminists' standpoints, new social history, and queer of color critique. Her writings have appeared in several journals, including *Cultural Dynamics*, *Journal of Canadian Studies*, *Women, Gender, and Families of Color* and *ProudFlesh: New Afrikan Journal of Culture, Politics, and Consciousness*. Presently, she is completing her forthcoming manuscript that centers on historical metafiction and queering literary reimaginings of Caribbean slave rebellions, political revolutions, and cultural resistance movements (under contract with SUNY Press).

Wendy W. Walters is a Professor in the department of Writing, Literature, and Publishing, and the Director of the Honors Program at Emerson College, Boston. She is the author of two books, *Archives of the Black Atlantic: Reading Between Literature and History* (Routledge, 2013), and *At Home in Diaspora: Black International Literature* (University of Minnesota Press, 2005). She has also published essays in *Callaloo*, *African American Review*, *American Literature*, *Novel*, and in other edited collections.

Tony Vick, 59 years old, has served 24 years on a life sentence in Tennessee. In 2018, his essays and poems, *Secrets From A Prison Cell* was published by Cascade Books. His works have been included in multiple venue, most recently in *Pensive: A Global Journal of Spirituality and the Arts* and in the poetry anthology, *A 21ST Century Plague: Poetry from a Pandemic*, edited by Elayne Clift.



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