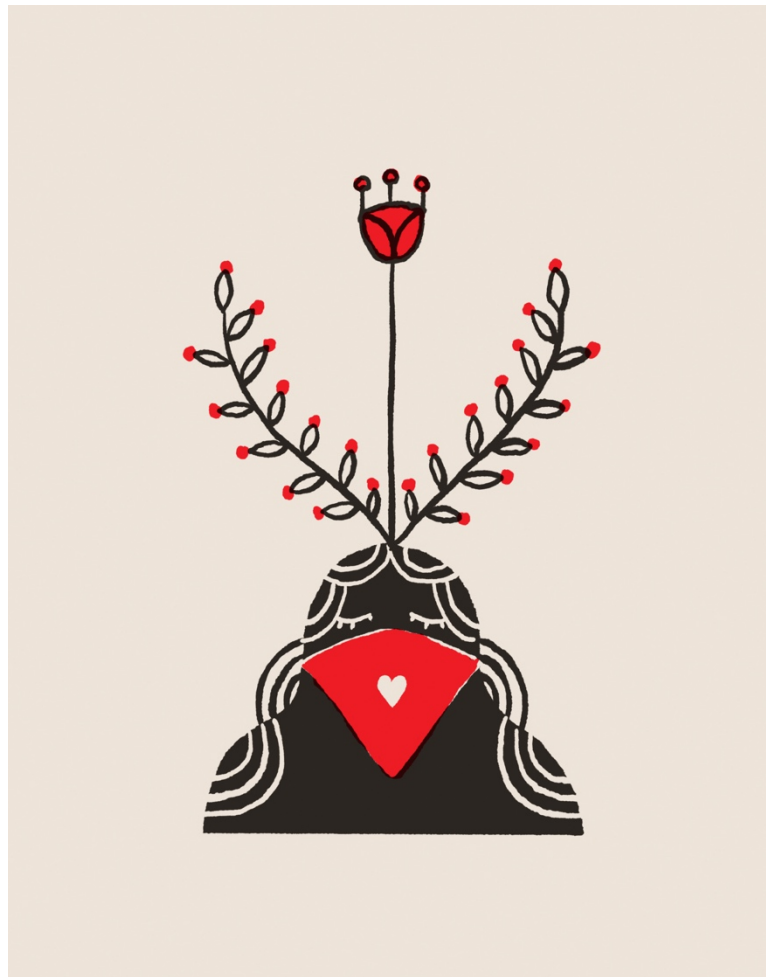


RADICAL TEACHER

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Breath-taking Pedagogy: Self-care & Ethical Pedagogy in the Climate of Anti- Blackness and COVID-19

by Shermaine M. Jones



LONDON SHEELY, CARE PACKAGE #3, JUSTSEEDS COLLABORATION

I've been thinking about what it takes, in the midst of the singularity, the virulent antiblackness everywhere and always remotivated, to keep breath in the Black body.

- Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*

The Precarity of Black Breath

Black breath and life are marked by a state of precarity. The constant threat to Black life manifests in myriad ways that are both embodied and environmental: the stress of racism accumulates in the body, causing and/or exacerbating racial health disparities; institutionally racist practices restrict economic, housing, and educational opportunities, keeping Black people disproportionately impoverished, imprisoned, and imperiled; the (mis) reading of Black bodies as trespassing and threatening in public spaces leads to fatal confrontations with the police or (white) vigilante citizens; the failed state and federal responses to “natural disasters” like Hurricane Katrina unduly impact and devastate Black communities. These examples of premature Black death and the frequent categorization of Black people as “at risk” for any number of diseases, disasters, and discomforts underscore the fragility of Black life.

In 2020, as the mysterious airborne illness spread at alarming rates, news media and popular discourse framed COVID-19 as a great equalizer, presuming indiscriminate impact. Yet, as COVID-19 ravaged Black communities, leaving its most harshly affected victims gasping for air on ventilators, “I Can’t Breathe” gained a new poignancy. “‘I can’t breathe,’ Eric Garner’s last words before his murder at the hands of the NYPD, continue to haunt as hospitals fill up with bodies, an incommensurate number of Black bodies, denied air” (Kennedy, 287). The statistics are sobering. Examining data on mortality rates by race/ethnicity across 45 states, Maritza Vasquez Reyes observes, “These data, while showing an alarming death rate for all races, demonstrate how minorities are hit harder and how, among minority groups, the African American population in many states bears the brunt of the pandemic’s health impact” (300). The mortality rate for COVID-19 among Black people is more than twice that of whites. While rates of morbidity and mortality have shifted throughout the pandemic and varied across the states, they have continued to reflect ongoing racial disproportion. Black people are at higher risk of contracting and dying from COVID-19 due to the historical legacy of discriminatory practices within health care, longstanding health care access and utilization disparities, higher rates of preexisting chronic medical conditions, and, because Black people are more likely to be essential workers, elevated occupational risk. Differential access to clean air, quality housing, health care, and other factors that impact well-being leave Black people vulnerable to what Saidiya Hartman describes as “skewed life chances” (6).

Amidst the darkness of the isolation and anxiety of the pandemic, there was a racial reckoning. The sense of insecurity about the future that COVID-19 created combined with a “fierce urgency of now” as Black Lives Matter activists galvanized nationally and internationally, channeling the

(out)rage over the horrific murders of Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, and George Floyd into protests against police brutality, white vigilante violence, and disregard for Black life and humanity. On a local level, students and community members in Richmond, Virginia marshaled this fervor and momentum to insist on the removal of the Confederate monuments on Monument Avenue—symbols of white supremacy and antagonism.

As a Black literary scholar working and living at the intersection of these urgent matters, I felt a sense of despondency and disillusionment about the kind of work I could and should be doing and what its impact would be. Racial fatigue weighed heavily on my mind and spirit. I questioned, how does literature help us to better understand the concerns of our moment and imagine a more equitable future? What does ethical and engaged pedagogy look like in this moment? “Breath-taking Pedagogy” examines my concerns and anxieties while navigating these coinciding threats to Black breath and the ways this experience informed a radical shift in my approach to teaching and public scholarship. Specifically, I detail how I have tried to reconcile my role and contribution through community engaged scholarship that demonstrates the transformative potential of literature and through an ethical teaching practice that privileges equity, empathy, and self-care.

Moreover, the experience of living during a pandemic gave me a fresh perspective on the material for my Black Women Writers course. Specifically, I read Toni Morrison’s *Sula* with a new attunement to its references to the Tuberculosis epidemic. Eva’s description of the bleakness and despair of 1895 as “[n]iggers was dying like flies” (68) underscores how the threat of death permeated Black life, as Black people died at alarmingly higher rates than their white counterparts with similar symptoms. This text provided an opportunity for me to pose deeply relevant and urgent questions about how race continues to inform healthcare-seeking behavior, treatment, and outcomes. Through these reflections, I theorize an ethical practice of teaching that centers “Black breath” and intentional “breath-taking” in a time of COVID-19 and anti-Blackness.

Ethical Considerations & Interventions in the Transition to Online Learning

I had only recently returned to teaching from maternity leave when the threat of COVID-19 caused my university (Virginia Commonwealth University) to institute remote learning for the remainder of the Spring 2020 semester. At the start of the pandemic, I was offering two classes: Black Women Writers, with 30 students, and (with the assistance of a graduate student) African American Literature: Beginnings Through the Harlem Renaissance, which enrolled 47 students. With very little notice or preparation, we were expected to offer the same rigorous instruction and engaged pedagogy in an online format. I had never taught online before, and certainly not under these conditions.

The pedagogical alterations I made in the wake of the pandemic and racial turmoil reflect my efforts to create space for intentional “breath-taking” at a time of great anxiety, both about COVID-19’s threat to respiratory

function as well as about the resonance of “I Can’t Breathe” as a cry of racial protest. “‘I Can’t Breathe’ captured the sense of a psychic chokehold ... the condition of affective asphyxia, that characterizes black life lived in the precarious state between life and death” (Jones 38). Specifically, COVID-19 forced me to radically transform my approach to teaching ethically, especially with regard to my expectations for student participation, productivity, and performance. Working at an institution like VCU, where my diverse student population consists of parents, caretakers, essential workers, students with limited Internet access or home environments that make them reluctant to be on camera, meant really questioning how to encourage student engagement without requiring students to be on camera. Preparing for remote learning, I surveyed my students regarding potential impediments the new format might pose to their learning. These concerns included, but were not limited to: living conditions; financial constraints; and restrictions to Internet access that might impact their educational experience, participation, and performance. Responses revealed that some students had moved back to rural places with unreliable Internet access; others had returned home to NYC, the epicenter of the virus at the time, to care for ill family members. Additionally, students with school-aged children were expected to homeschool while completing their assignments. Understanding the unique challenges my students faced was essential in preparing an equitable learning environment for the remainder of the semester.

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Considering the many challenges my students faced transitioning to online learning, I chose not to meet via Zoom but rather to assign and collect work asynchronously via Blackboard. I relied heavily on the discussion board to promote continued engagement and dynamic discussion without rigid time constraints. This reflected a commitment to “intentional breath-taking,” allowing students more agency (“breathing room”) in direct opposition to the pressure of rigid time constraints, a pressure that can stifle breathing. I informed students that my objective was to continue the thoughtful and rigorous engagement with the readings, themes, and concerns of the course as well as to provide meaningful opportunities for them to demonstrate their knowledge. I assured them of continued instructional support through detailed reading guides for the novels which highlighted specific passages, made connections between texts, posed additional questions for reflection, and recommended additional resources for continued engagement. I also recorded mini-lectures contextualizing readings, and posted PowerPoint presentations and video links providing definitions, biographies, interviews, and other supporting resources. This multifaceted and multimodal approach also created a diversity of

opportunities for breathing room by opening up space to learn, with students having a lot of agency in terms of how much to engage, what to engage, and when to engage.

Blackboard became the primary resource for engagement and submission of assignments. Rather than the usual open-ended discussion where students reflected on the readings, I posed specific questions and prompts that often included short assignments. For example, I asked students to watch a TED Talk defining intersectionality and then apply the theory to close read a passage. To encourage students to continue to engage each other online, I divided the class into two groups: Group A was responsible for engaging 2-3 of the questions or prompts, while Group B was responsible for responding to Group A’s original posts, and then the roles would alternate. Everyone was responsible for reading all of the threads and I also participated by responding directly to students’ posts. I provided students with a rubric for engaging with the material and with each other in a meaningful way. The dynamic learning environment students and I co-created encouraged students to: make connections between texts in the course and current/historical events; make connections between the text and other art forms like photography, drama, film, etc.; and engage a theoretical framework in their analysis of readings.

In Fall 2020, as students adjusted to remote learning, I moved to a model featuring one asynchronous and one synchronous meeting weekly, which permitted me to continue to support student engagement by offering flexibility and multiple modes of participation. Still, the ethical question of requiring students to be on camera remained. Though staring into a screen of empty black boxes labeled with names feels alienating as an instructor, I felt uncomfortable making cameras mandatory in my online courses because of the ways that this requirement reproduces certain forms of privilege as well as shame. While I encouraged students to participate and be on camera if they felt comfortable, I ultimately did not require it. Margaret Finders and Joaquin Muñoz provide instructive insights on how insistence on camera presence can be culturally insensitive as well as characteristic of racist, sexist, and classist expectations of presentation and professionalism. They assert, “Consciously or unconsciously, the need to have cameras on -- while considered by many instructors as pedagogically sound -- is actually indicative of an attitude toward teaching that positions students as docile bodies in need of constant surveillance” (n.pg). They encourage instructors to scrutinize our desire to monitor students visually to ensure their attentive listening and active engagement. Moreover, they urge instructors to consider the classed, raced, and gendered expectations implicit in this expectation. Instead they suggest, “We have multiple ways as instructors to create structures for students to demonstrate their learning. Rather than force old practices of face-to-face interactions into virtual spaces, each of us needs to understand the discomfort and demands that our students encounter when forced to turn cameras on” (n.pg). My appreciation of the unique lives of my students, as well as my own experience as a first-generation college student from a working-class immigrant background, influenced my decision about camera use in the virtual

classroom. As a college student, I would have felt immense anxiety about having to be on camera in my one-bedroom apartment in the Bronx amongst my largely privileged Dartmouth classmates. As a result, I consciously resisted requiring on-camera presence for my undergraduate students, who were navigating both the unprecedented difficulties of the pandemic and an unexpected turn to virtual instruction.

As an alternative to insisting on being on camera, I asked students who did not choose to be on camera to use a profile picture—be it of themselves, a pet, or a favorite author—to offer some personality and a means of connection without intruding in their homes or shaming them into appearing on camera. Some students felt more comfortable being on camera during the smaller group breakout sessions, which I used regularly to facilitate vibrant discussions.

Creative Projects: Student Agency & Innovative Approaches to Student Assessment

I also confronted how to assess student learning in ways that are meaningful and feasible. I wanted students to be able to examine the key concerns of the course outside of the traditional expectations of exams and essays. I wanted them to be able to see themselves in the work and also to be able to use these projects to introduce and continue conversations about race, class, gender, sexuality, and privilege with their loved ones and communities. I wanted to encourage their autonomy and innovation. These reflections led me to implement creative assignments that allowed students to demonstrate their mastery of course content in a format that they desired. My courses often attract students from a range of majors who are seeking to engage deeply with Black literature, often for the first time in their coursework. I employ an interdisciplinary approach in my pedagogy, so I encourage students to mine their respective disciplinary training, artistic abilities, and personal interests in choosing how to present their work. Student projects included podcasts, poetry, paintings, photography, and more.

Students' identities and positionalities informed their approaches to the creative projects. They demonstrated a willingness to lean into discomfort and interrogate central themes of the course in deeply meaningful and innovative ways that required great vulnerability. Students produced self-portraits interrogating race, identity, and double consciousness; podcasts exploring transgenerational trauma; and spoken word pieces examining the fraught nature of Black citizenship. In one particularly memorable case, a visual art major painted his interpretation of the final scene of Nella Larsen's *Quicksand*, in which Helga languished in bed under the weight and despair of another pregnancy. The student's attention to detail, especially the forlorn look in Helga's eyes, made this a masterful depiction of his understanding of Larsen's critique of the toll of motherhood on Helga Crane's personhood. Another student, a musician, collaborated with two other artists to record a rendition of a ragtime piece to explore the significance of music and

aesthetics in James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*. In the poem cited here, my student Khalil R. Houston explores themes of racial terror, asphyxiation, and breath:

"Grandpa's Neck"

Grandpa told me about this.

That there was a time when men could swing from their necks

Rather dead or alive, you swung.

You remained there.

Hoping for breath

Hoping for a chance for your feet to touch ground

It never came.

You just swung, until the rope became still

While God's men watched you transform into black angel

Grandpa says,

That in the eyes of the rope, black angels don't have wings.

That a rope proved, that wings are only tied arms.

We didn't have wings, he said

We could only dream of flying away to save our necks

We only swung, and prayed that our wives remember more, than just our necks.

That a broken neck doesn't mean, we weren't strong.

Even as the poem explores the horror of the legacy of lynching, there are moments of imagined breath-taking, "hoping for breath." Whether in "I Can't Breathe" posters and protest art or in quiet meditations on the work of the breath, breath and breathing were a common theme in the final projects, exemplifying the impact of my intentional focus on breath-taking, pathways for resuscitation, and resisting affective asphyxia on my students. This assignment, like so many others, gives students an opportunity to deeply engage the works of the course outside of the traditional essay or exam, which evaluates comprehension and completion of the readings but does not always invite the kind of deep meditation and engagement that impacts students well beyond the bounds of the course.

In honor and celebration of the thoughtful work my students submit, I offer an opportunity for students to share

their creative projects as a culminating experience for the class. This creates a space of reflection, community, and healing, as many of the projects are so profoundly personal and therapeutic. It is a way for students to observe the various ways they might theoretically and stylistically engage the readings, inquiries, and themes of the course. This has been some of the most transformative work my students have produced. Most significantly, students expressed joy at being able to share their projects with loved ones and friends and thereby continue the discussions of race, class, sexuality, gender, and privilege outside the traditional classroom.

Breath-Taking & Self-Care: Pedagogy and Practice

In an effort to support my students' mental health, I became more intentional about teaching self-care strategies. I questioned how to equip students with self-care practices even as I struggled to cope amidst significant mental strain. Specifically, how do I attend to my students, particularly those students of color who are daily confronted with the vulnerability of their bodies in public spaces, now compounded by their vulnerability to COVID-19 as caretakers and essential workers? I invested class time to talk about ways we can care for ourselves, including therapy resources, journaling, breathing exercises, walks, accountability groups, etc. Moreover, I highlighted how Black women writers like Audre Lorde and Alice Walker challenge us to think about the radical ethic of self-care in the midst of the virulent attack on Black life. I also asked students to consider their engagement with spectacles of violence against Black and Brown bodies. As images and recordings of brutalized Black bodies surface daily, unarmed Black men and women dying at the hands of police in real time, we must confront the ways that we engage with the mundane nature of Black trauma. Sometimes self-care may require refusing to watch the gratuitous circulation and dissemination of Black trauma in news and popular media. I invited students to consider the radical potential of Black joy and how to find spaces for this. This focus reflected my ethical commitment to encouraging students to prioritize their wellness and that of their families and communities as I struggled with my own isolation and anxiety.

Teaching during the pandemic not only made me more attentive to and critical of my pedagogical approaches and expectations, but it also brought fresh awareness to material I had taught repeatedly, like Toni Morrison's *Sula*. Specifically, I pointed our attention to passages about the Tuberculosis epidemic as we attempted to make sense of our own pandemic experience. When Hannah confronts her mother, Eva, about whether or not Eva ever loved her children, Eva responds to this indictment by detailing the horrors of 1895. Eva insists, "1895 was a killer, girl. Things was bad. Niggers was dying like flies" (68). She emphasizes the disproportionate impact of Tuberculosis on the Black community. She describes her desperation to survive and preserve the lives of her children despite their father abandoning the family and poverty greatly limiting life chances and opportunities for Eva and her children. When

Hannah insists there must have been some time for affectionate play, Eva maintains:

No time. They wasn't no time. Not none. Soon as I got one day done here come a night. With you all coughin' and me watchin' so TB wouldn't take you off and if you was sleepin' quiet I thought, O Lord, they dead and put my hand over your moth *to feel if the breath was comin'* what you talkin' 'bout did I love you girl I stayed alive for you ... (69, italics mine)

I asked my students to be attentive to the ways that Morrison meditates on the anxiety over Black breath and how it resonates with the sobering statistics regarding the twin threats to Black breath: COVID-19 and racial terror. We connected it to the varied iterations of "I Can't Breathe," the final words of Eric Garner and so many others slain by police brutality. We traced the ways that "I Can't Breathe" has become the lament of so many Black people feeling the exhaustion and emotional suffocation of racism, as well as a galvanizing cry of protest.

I asked students to consider the ways that Black women writers may offer not only critiques of structural inequalities but also spaces for healing and hope. In a meditation on the various ways in which Black life is imperiled, Morrison writes,

What was taken by outsiders to be a slackness, slovenliness or even generosity was in fact a full recognition of the legitimacy of forces other than good ones. They did not believe doctors could heal—for them, none ever had done so. They did not believe death was accidental—life might be, but death was deliberate. They did not believe Nature was ever askew—only inconvenient. Plague and drought were as "natural" as springtime. If milk could curdle, God knows that robins could fall. The purpose of evil was to survive it and they determined (without ever knowing they had made up their minds to do it) to survive floods, white people, tuberculosis, famine and ignorance. They knew anger well but not despair ... (90)

Documenting the environmental, economic, and structural forces that cause premature Black death, Morrison asserts that "death was deliberate" (90). She notes Black people's distrust of doctors and the medical field in general, their familiarity with death and mourning, and their insistence on living with hope rather than despair despite the constant assault on Black life and humanity. She offers here a Black theology rooted in resilience and determination to salvage and survive. Her listing of floods, famine, and the epidemic of tuberculosis along with white people and ignorance is instructive, as it enumerates what Angela Hume describes as "a long history of environmental subjugation in which nature is contaminated by past acts of racial violence" (108). Natural disasters and epidemics thereby reveal and exacerbate historical systemic racial inequities that leave Black people vulnerable to premature death. Beverly Foulks McGuire observes,

...Toni Morrison's vision in *Sula*, portray[s] a similar bodily, emotional, and material response to natural disasters ... natural disasters underscore the importance of living fully in the wake of such suffering, emphasizing the important role of the emotions (the "feeling") and

the material experience (the “tasting”) for those living in the wake of such disasters. (125)

Morrison’s meditations offer an opportunity for us to consider what it means to live in the wake of such disaster, death, and despair. Where are the spaces of hope and resilience?

My pedagogical approach and ethics are deeply informed by my positionality as a Black feminist scholar, immigrant, first generation college graduate, and single mother. As a scholar of affect and Black feelings specifically, I have written about the ways that Black emotions have been historically invalidated and policed as a means of denying Black humanity and citizenship. I attend to the emotional lives of my students with care and dignity, but I also ask my students to lean into discomfort and put under analysis their emotional responses to the materials we engage, be it white guilt or Black rage. In particular, our reading of Claudia Rankine’s *Citizen: An American Lyric* in the midst of the uprising for racial justice and reckoning felt timely and offered a critical lens through which students could examine their own positionality and even their bodily responses to racism and microaggressions.

Alongside *Citizen: An American Lyric*, students read Shannon Sullivan’s “Inheriting Racist Disparities in Health: Epigenetics and the Transgenerational Effects of White Racism” in order to interrogate the way that racism inhabits the Black body. Sullivan asserts:

The effects of white racism include physiological changes for the people who are confronted by it, changes that typically are very damaging to their physical (as well as psychological) health. The sociopolitical phenomenon of white racism can be and often is a physiological, biological phenomenon, in other words. Nonmaterial things that are “outside” the body can get “inside” and help compose it. (193)

Rankine illustrates this phenomenon when she states, “You can’t put the past behind you. It’s buried in you; it’s turned your flesh into its own cupboard” (63). The past takes up residence in the Black body and makes demands for both physiological and psychic space, “cupboards” meant to house and contain. Rankine also details the fatigue and exhaustion of being daily confronted with racism and racial microaggressions. Students of color often express how much they identify with the anecdotes she documents in *Citizen: An American Lyric* as well as the affective dimensions the text explores. All of my students experienced palpable fatigue and weariness as they navigated the pandemic alongside the ubiquitous assault on Black lives, the growing incidence of violence towards Asian Americans on a national level, and the very pressing fight to remove monuments locally.

(Re)Moving Monuments: Community Engaged Scholarship in an Urgent Moment

In September 2020, VCU News invited me to participate in a conversation with three other VCU scholars about what

should happen next on Monument Avenue. At the time, the Robert E. Lee Confederate monument had become contested space, a site of activism and Black memorialization of those slain by police and white vigilante violence. This was an opportunity for community engaged scholarship and teaching that gave my work tangible meaning at a time when writing itself seemed like it was not enough. I reproduce my response because I believe it is an example of public scholarship and teaching in an urgent moment:

In thinking about this question of what should happen on Monument Avenue following the removal of the Confederate statues, I am reminded of a compelling and pedagogically rich moment in a work of poetry that I often teach. In “Citizen: An American Lyric,” Claudia Rankine reproduces the hauntingly familiar photograph “Public Lynching,” depicting the Aug. 7, 1930, lynching of J. Thomas Shipp and Abram S. Smith by a white mob in Marion, Indiana.

However, Rankine removes the hanging bodies of the young Black men turning the eye of the viewer away from the spectacle of violence unto the crowd of onlookers pointing to an empty space in the sky. Confronting the spectators, the viewer wonders what made lynching such a mundane occurrence that this photograph could have easily been a depiction of a harmless community social. I believe a similar work of drawing our attention to the empty space in the sky may be an appropriate approach to reimagining Monument Avenue.

There is power in keeping the *absence* of these Confederate statues *present* on Monument Avenue. In maintaining the empty pedestals that once upheld these monuments of white supremacy, we commemorate the decades long struggle to have them removed. These pedestals, decorated with colorful Black Lives Matter graffiti and other cogent messages that confront and contextualize the history of the statues, must be preserved in their current form as a testament to the fact that these spaces were always contested.

This time we turn our eyes to a different crowd, not an angry white mob but the thousands of Black and brown people with their white allies who peacefully gathered and protested; the people who reclaimed the space of the Robert E. Lee statue as Marcus-David Peters Circle. Let the remnants of the confrontation remain; that is a story worth venerating.

While this was a short piece and not a publication in a peer-reviewed journal or edited anthology, it centers how a Black woman writer’s intervention in past historical trauma and spectacles of violence against the Black body can both inform the way we choose to understand our moment and offer guidance in how we imagine and create the future. My students appreciated my participation in this conversation and expressed how my response informed their thinking on the topic that engrossed so many of their lives.

The Robert E. Lee statue has since been removed from its pedestal on Monument Avenue, but the November 2021 gubernatorial election of Republican Glenn Youngkin reinvigorated the remnants of white rage and

antagonism. Of particular significance are Youngkin's antagonism towards Critical Race Theory and his targeting Toni Morrison's *Beloved* for censorship under the guise of empowering parents to make decisions on the content of their children's curriculum. Classrooms and curriculums are contested spaces which can silence and stifle Black voices and breath. In theorizing pedagogical approaches and practices for teaching race in our climate of ubiquitous anti-Blackness, insurrection, and global pandemic, I am ever more committed to an ethical and engaged teaching practice that centers the lives and worth of Black people in my classroom.

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Shermaine M. Jones is an Assistant Professor of African American Literature in the English Department at Virginia Commonwealth University. Her research is concerned with race, affect, and the politics of mourning. Her publications include, "I CAN'T BREATHE!" Affective Asphyxia in Claudia Rankine's *Citizen: An American Lyric* in *South Journal*.



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