THE JOYFUL SOUNDS OF BEING YOUR OWN BLACK SELF

By

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To the Faculty of Washington State University:

The members of the Committee appointed to examine the dissertation of AMIR ASIM GILMORE find it satisfactory and recommend that it be accepted.

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This project has truly been a labor of love, as it takes a village to write a dissertation. I would first like to thank my parents. Without them, none of this would be possible. I would like to thank my dad, Cleveland Gilmore for inviting me into the Black Study through jazz. It is through jazz, I developed the identity of being an Edtiste. I would like to thank my mom, Rosita Faulkner, for showing me how to refuse and what mundane refusal looks like as a daily practice. It was her refusal that helped guide me away from doing traditional social science research. How dope is it to say that your parents made the dissertation? Very dope! While the academy might recognize and acknowledge me as the first Ph.D. in my family, my mom and dad will always be the first doctors in my eyes.

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THE JOYFUL SOUNDS OF BEING YOUR OWN BLACK SELF

Abstract

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Chair: Pamela Jean Bettis

What is Black Boy Joy? Black Boy Joy is a common project, a Black study of unbounded Blackness, the blurring of Blackness, the joys of Blackness, the joy of Black boys. Black Boy Joy emerges from the “bubbling” culmination of multiple Black theories and methodologies in the caldron of the Black Radical Tradition. Essentially, Black Boy Joy is a gumbo of praxis. Descending from the Black Radical Tradition, Black Boy Joy refuses the systems of whiteness and white supremacy by reclaiming Black stories, voices, and identities through the arts and humanities. Black Boy Joy is the quotidian refusal to stay in ones designated “place” and provides a space that gives Black males futures that they want now. As a blurred embodiment of various Black aesthetic expressions, including jazz improvisation, poetry, visual art, and griot culture, Black Boy Joy is a social and spiritual practice of saying no to the terms, codes, rules, and laws of white supremacy that subjugate Black males. Boyhood and joy are concepts that are systematically stolen and denied. Black boys are never fully given the spaces to be where they can explore their masculinity, femininity, sexuality, spirituality, and identity without limits.
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Dedication

This is dedicated to:

The First Black Study
The First Refusal
The Sun Dog

And all the Black lives committed to the common project of Black Liberation

Assemble to the ensemble.
CHAPTER ONE: WHO CAN AFFORD TO IMPROVISE?

A Letter From The Edtiste To The Reader

The important thing in jazz is to feel your music, but really feel it and believe it…And if you feel and believe in your music, that conviction carries over to the public. You can create a very strong emotional bond between yourself and your listener that way (Ray Charles, The Great Ray Charles, 2004, liner notes).

This dissertation is not a traditional dissertation, nor does it read as such. If that bothers you, please stop reading now, as this work was not made for you. This dissertation is about Black aesthetics and the Black sounds of Black Boy Joy. This dissertation is for “the listeners, for those that have an ear for this” this kind of work (Pavlic, 2016, p. 1). If that intrigues you, I invite you into this covenant between the Edtiste and the reader. I am going to improvise on some assumptions. The first being is that you do not know what an Edtiste is. Do not worry, for that answer lies within this text. The second assumption is that you do not know how this dissertation will read. This dissertation is experimental and improvisational. It was written in a “jazzy” state of mind, to be read and heard as jazz. I am asking for you to go beyond the scope of being a reader and re-orientate your ears to hear the sounds that words make. Pavlic (2016) eloquently stated that “Writing should do something – it should produce a pressure that makes something happen in person, in people, and in the world” (p. 42, emphasis mine). I am asking you to do something. I am asking you to become the reader and the listener because this dissertation is about feelings and experience. What are you are currently reading are liner notes to two Black musical albums that proceed after this piece. These albums provide further context for the play that proceeds them.
Liner notes are crucial to understanding the experience of the musician. They create a bond between the artist and the listener, as they provided information and context about the music in relation to the artist. This set of liner notes that I have written, provide context for the music that you are about to read and hear. They explain my aesthetic process; they highlight my tensions and illuminate the condition of Black life. The condition that I trying to illuminate is joy – Black Boy Joy. Not only am I trying to get you to hear the sounds of Black Boy Joy, but I am trying to make sure that the sound “remains in your ears.” I do that through improvisation, as music bears witness to our experience, to our vibrations and answers the questions that white history does not dare to do. Black music answers the universal questions of, “Who am I? What am I doing here?” (Baldwin, 2010, 249). Black music answered those questions for me, for I am an Edtiste and I am here to make you hear the sounds: of unbounded Blackness, the blurring of Blackness, the joys of Blackness, the joy of Black boys. I hope you can hear the sounds, so sit down, pour yourself one, and listen.

The Stakes Are High; We Cannot Afford Not To Improvise

“Go back to Miles, Max, Dizzy, Yardbird, Billie, Coltrane: who were not, as the striking—not to say quaint European phrase would have it, “improvising”: who can afford to improvise, at those prices?” (Baldwin, 2011, 149)

When we talkin' 'bout the
(Vibes, vibrations)
Stakes is high, you know them stakes is high (De La Soul, 1996)

Black life in America is in a precarious position. Black life in America has always been in a precarious position. The stakes of Black life have always been high. Black life has weathered the storms of white supremacy through improvisation. Black life is born out of this improvisation – living life to our beat – but never being on the beat with white supremacy. In a
sense, improvisation is our “mojo,” but also our greatest survival project – the ability to adapt, the ability to change, the ability to make lemonade out of lemons. Black folks are strangers within the world because the institutions were *never* built for us. We were never meant to survive. As Lorde (2007) always reminds me, “For to survive in the mouth of this dragon we call america, we have had to learn this first and most vital lesson — that we were never meant to survive” (p. 46). We survived because we improvised. Our improvisation was the refusal to accept and accommodate white supremacy in our everyday lives. Our survival was *feminist* because we understood that we needed each other to survive, and Black folks collectively shared that *refusal*. It always gives me joy thinking through that notion. Within in our anguish – within our terribleness, there is this joy.

When Baldwin (2011) asked, “who can afford to improvise?” I think it was a rhetorical question because the answer is within the music (p. 149). There is a fine line between the facts of life for white people and the facts of life for Black people. White people can always afford to improvise because when it comes to the price of life, the stakes are never high. White people are never made to be strangers in the world because institutions were created in their image. Those institutions create, bankroll and dividend white privilege. They can afford to fantasize about freedom dreams because they are *free* from doing the work. White people do not improvise because they choose not to. Whiteness is a script; it is about *law and order*. To go off script from whiteness, to improvise, would bankrupt their world, their illusion of reality, and their privilege. To improvise, would mean to accommodate all that improvisation carries out, and white people cannot *afford* to do that.

Black people *cannot afford not to improvise*. Black improvisation is based on necessity because the cost of Black life is high, so Black people must stay *higher*. Malcolm X asked a
question about the precarity of Black life: “If you are a citizen, why do you have to fight for your civil rights? If you are fighting for your civil rights, then that means you are not a citizen” (Baldwin, 2010, p. 235). Our “rights” – civil or legal are always at the whim of the U.S. government (Cooper, 2018). Black people are told “Be patient; we will do better tomorrow,” but the question that lingers is, “You will do what better tomorrow?” (Baldwin, 2010, p. 153). Black folks cannot wait for those freedoms because the alternative is being disenfranchised, being denied equal access and opportunities to institutions, and being profiled and hunted by the police. When Black folks speak of freedom dreams, they cannot afford to have those visions. They must act, they must improvise or be “put to the knives” on the daily. Therefore, Black people must improvise to gain the world, to define their realities and to have rights. Black folks have to be non-negotiable with Black freedom because white supremacy will not accommodate us. We cannot compromise our radical imaginations of Black freedom for a piece of civil society (Dumas, 2018). Black folks must exercise our right to refuse the “deliberate speed” what has been done and what can be done. Our lives depend on it.

As I close, I ruminate on Black life – I think about Black youth. I think about the past, present, and future of their lives. I think about my responsibility to them. In Of the Sorrow Songs: The Cross of Redemption, Baldwin (2018) stated, “History it controls the past, defines the present; and therefore cannot but suppose that the future will prove to be as willing to be brought into captivity” (p. 250, emphasis mine). How do we ensure that Black futurity is not “controlled” or “defined” by the non-Black? Fred Moten has the answer or at least the beginning to that answer. In Mark Anthony Neal’s (2018) Left of Black series, Fred Moten stated, “We need to renew our habits of assembly and recognize that we are part of a common project and that project has been given to us by our ancestors along with the responsibility to pass that project on
to our children.” What I think Moten is saying is, “How do we teach for Black lives?” How do we pass our knowledges down to our children and our children’s children? How do we help Black youth manifest a world that accommodates Black life? As my father did with me – as Baldwin (2010) implied, start with the music because “Life comes out of music” (p. 247). If we want to Black youth to know who we are, our stories, and our traditions, we have to start with the records. We have to teach Black youth to “dig through the crates” to develop a deeper sense of who we are. For music bears witness to our experience, to our vibrations and answers the questions that white history does not dare to do. Black music answers the universal questions of, “Who am I? What am I doing here?” (Baldwin, 2010, p. 249). Black music answered those questions for me, for I am an Edtiste and I am here to make you hear the sounds: of unbounded Blackness, the blurring of Blackness, the joys of Blackness, the joy of Black boys.

**Life As A Failed Ethnographer**

Everything I’m not, made me everything I am (Kanye West, *Everything I Am*, 2007)

And there’s something funny—there’s always something a little funny in all our disasters, if one can face the disaster (Baldwin, 2010, p. 136)

Nikki Giovanni once said, “Once you know who you are, you don’t have to worry anymore” (as cited in Tilford, 2006). I am a failed Critical Ethnographer, there I said it. I am a failure. I failed. Let me tell you how I got to that point. I have never felt comfortable with the term “social science research” or being labeled a “social science researcher.” Labels alone carry weight, and these labels carried the pressure of expectations of how to be. I always thought that it was odd that at this level of “knowledge creation,” there were such rigid notions of how to do research and what constitutes “knowledge.”
Throughout my doctoral studies, my research emphasis has always focused on four things: Black boys, Black masculinity, Black music, and Afrofuturism. I was interested in the lived experiences of Black boys because I was interested in telling their stories and knowing their lives, because, at one point in time, I was a Black boy. I was interested in Black masculinity because understanding what gender is and what gender does is essential to understanding how Black boys move and operate in a white world. Black music: whether it is jazz, R&B, or Hip-Hop has held me down, as the sounds and the lyrics have always nurtured my soul. I always wanted to share that joy with people. Afrofuturism was a new concept for me, as I just read about it during my master’s program in Africana Studies. Afrofuturism opened the door for me to learn, read and be in relation with so many Black literary writers. So Black boys, Black masculinity, Black music, and Afrofuturism. I needed to find a body of research that could fit my passions. I stumbled onto Black Boy Joy because of my advisor during one of our Friday meetings. I would call it an “academic cypher” because we were improvising research topics and ideas that came off the top of the “head.” Let’s just say that my advisor and I spit hot “fiyah.”

So Black Boy Joy, but which academic discipline was I going to use? I was never interested in telling Black stories with a quantitative/positivist analysis because (1) it was never my interest and (2) I feel that numbers struggle to speak to the complexities and nuances of Black life. This is “no shade” to my quantitative folks – it is all love, but numbers and big data ain’t my thang. Qualitative studies – in this regard to Critical Ethnography seemed like a “fit” because it sought to challenge the traditional thinking and traditional views of the world by giving power to the voices of the oppressed. With Critical Ethnography, I felt like I was doing something – I was making a difference because it disrupts the “status quo” by interrogating “unequitable cultural, economic, social, and political systems” (Thomas, 1993, p. 5-6). Black
boys are ethnographers of the world. They are participating, listening, but also observing a complex system where they do not belong. Not only did I want to illuminate the importance of Black Boy Joy, but I wanted to interrogate how white supremacy subjugates, harms, and denies Black boys their joy by highlighting their stories.

As I got ready for the IRB process, I kept thinking to myself, “am I making the right decision?” I could not stop thinking about my participants’ knowledge, and I worried about where it would go. Will it just sit on the shelf like many other studies or will it be privileged like the words of white scholars? Universities are not neutral sites of knowledge production; they too, are made within the image of white men (Ahmed, 2017). Research always has privileged white men at the expense of Black and Brown people. Universities are at the center of dispossessing because they determine what knowledge is. Would the University see Black Boy Joy as a source of knowledge? Moreover, would white social science researchers listen to the sounds of Black boys? Would they know what those sounds mean? Black sounds are “perishable” as they exist in the now; therefore, they cannot be captured for later. Black sounds are not secondhand; they are experienced in the moment. Would social science researchers remake Black boys into a spectacle because they did not listen to or understand their sounds?

The challenge for me became, “How do I speak about a phenomenon, like Black Boy Joy, protect those who partake in it while shifting the academic gaze back to the system that denies them joy? Perhaps I was overthinking. Perhaps I was overprotective, but my spirit told me that, “this does not feel right.” It was the first refusal in a long list of refusals that brought me to this point – to this failure. Moreover, it was the first time in a long time where I trusted the feelings and the knowledge within me. So, I ended my pursuit of doing critical ethnographic work. I failed.
As I look back, I do not worry about this failure anymore. I find humor in the disaster of my attempt of being an Critical Ethnographer. In Mass Culture and the Creative Artist: Some Personal Notes, Baldwin (2010) stated that “art and ideas come out of the passion and torment of experience” (p. 40). What ideas came out of this experience? What did I learn? Within this failure, I learned what I am not, but also what I am. I am not: an Critical Ethnographer. After my failure, I went back to what nurtured my soul: Black music. As I listened to the sounds, the lyrics, the cadence, the beat, the melody, and the chords – I had an “Aha” moment. I understood a way to analyze the complexities and nuances of Black life, and it was through music. Larry Neal (1989) said that “the key to where the black people have to go is in the music. Our music is the most dominant manifestation of what we are and feel” (p. 21). I thought about what made Black music so invigorating for me, and it was the improvisation. I thought about which moment in my doctoral program made me joyous, and it was improvising with my advisor. That is when it finally dawned on me, that it was improvisation that gave me joy. If I was going to write a dissertation on Black Boy Joy, I had to refuse the various methods of qualitative research, how it is supposed to be written and do it my way – to my satisfaction. Traditional social science research could not accommodate all that I am and all that I desire. I learned that I needed to improvise because I understood that I could not afford not to. It is only through failure that we learn where to go, but where not to go. It is through failure that this project is a possibility.

Creating That “Feel” And “Sound”

Puff [Daddy] told me, like, the key to this joint
The key to staying on top of things
Is treat everything like it's your first project, nomsayin’?
Like it's your first day, like, back when you was an intern
A significant portion of my dissertation is written as jazz albums. I wrote them as albums because, as I stated earlier, I have a “jazzy” mind. I love music, especially jazz because it was the first musical genre introduced to me by my father. Jazz is always on my mind; it narrates my life. Jazz is always with me, even during the most mundane actions. I wanted to bring that energy into my research. When I was training to be a Critical Ethnographer, the incorporation of music felt like a real struggle. I felt that I could not make the music fit with the rigid style of writing. I always felt that the music that I wanted to incorporate was left in the margins of the research. This path was incompatible with who I am. I told my advisor that if she wanted a dissertation out of me, that I would have to write it my way, so I did. Out of this fire, two jazz albums were made. *Black Boys Will Never Be For Sale* is an 11-track album that highlights the epistemological, ontological, and methodological origins of Black Boy Joy, emphasizes the importance of jazz, and speaks to the precarity of Black life, especially for Black boys.

The title of the album is a reminder to those that profit off of Black boys, that we will never be for sale. Our beauty, our grace, our feelings, our intelligence, our essence – our joy will never be for sale. You cannot buy our joy, our being from a store; you cannot trade it like a commodity, or auction it at a museum, it is *ours*. This album states to America, “to keep their grubby hands off of us.” It serves as a declaration of protection from the “gaze” of white supremacy. Moreover, the title serves as an exclamation mark to traditional social science writing. It serves as a sign that a Black person fought the academic machine. This album shows students and scholars of color that traditional social writing is not the only way. We can ignore the fork in the road and create our own path. This album was a testament to the fact that I can do it my way. This album is a piece of who I am. It is my protest, my refusal, and my joy. My
writing process is based on the relationship that I have to Black aesthetics, and that process cannot be bought.

*Black Boys Will Never Be For Sale* took a month to write, but the album sat in my mind for at least nine months. Though I cannot bear children; I feel like this album is my “baby.” I carried these ideas, and they were bigger than my wildest dreams. This album will always be special to me, because it was my *first*. I use that concept of “first” and apply to the rest of my work. I treat everything like my first project; it’s what keeps me and my work steady. It showed me that I could do this work, that I belong in the academy. It also gave me the hunger to keep going and keep writing. It ceremented that everything that I think and envision can become a possibility.

*The Black Boy Joy Manifesto*, from the title alone, has a different *sound* than its predecessor. The ten-track album was written in a few weeks, but it also sat in my mind for months. I think that the *sound* and *tone* is blunter and darker than *Black Boys Will Never Be For Sale* because I lost my dog, Jet, during the writing process. The absence of his sounds was heavy for me, so heavy that I dedicated a track to him. Through my creation, Jet now also lives within my work. *The Black Boy Joy Manifesto* is special to me because it is a portal where my sounds and his connect. It is where this *Black boy* can find *joy*. *The Black Boy Joy Manifesto* is more experimental because I wrote it that way. It does not have the same aesthetic flow as *Black Boys Will Never Be For Sale* and that was the point. The album itself was (1) a rejoinder to my doctoral committee’s collective feedback of my preliminary exams, (2) further highlighted the connection between my social theories and my political aesthetics, (3) highlighted my distrust within social science research, and (4) laid out a roadmap to writing a play. The album spoke back to the feedback of my dissertation committee. With their praise and critiques, the question
became, “how do I respond to their feedback while maintaining my ‘aesthetic integrity?’” This album was all about intentionality. My writing was intentional in how I wrote it because I wanted to show the aesthetic process of being “collectively apart.” I see the album as a textual reading of Ornette Coleman’s (1961) Free Jazz. Free Jazz is a two-part album where each musician is improvising with each other. It is not a cohesive album, and it has no intention to do so. It is a reasoned cacophony of music. That is exactly how I see The Black Boy Joy Manifesto. It is a reasoned cacophony of writings that are speaking back to the feedback I received, not only from my dissertation committee but also from my life. Moreover, the album made it possible to highlight the processes and the tensions of my “jazzy” mind. Some of the tracks speak to each other, some tracks speak to tracks on Black Boys Will Never Be For Sale, while others sit within their own tensions. Every track does something, it provides an experience, it gets you talking, and that is the point of art. This collective apart process allows the reader/listener to become an improviser during the reading(s) of my work. The album could be listened to in chronological order, reverse chronological order, or readers could start in the middle. The audience can skip between the tracks or rearrange them and can hear the album differently, each time. If the reader/listener wants to be bold, they could create their album by taking the tracks that they want from each album and making one. These are all possibilities.

The Black Boy Joy Manifesto is a Black manifesto. To manifest something is to give life to something and watch it unfold. I helped give life to Black Boy Joy being a body of knowledge that needs to be recognized within the social science imaginary, as well as the world. Moreover, I helped give life to an aesthetic concept that is inherently Black and unapologetic. I laid out a roadmap for other students and scholars of color to embrace if they choose. In order for Black Boy Joy to blow up the “universality of white supremacy” (Ahmed, 2017), I need it to be at the
forefront of Black people’s minds. I need the concept to survive. So, *The Black Boy Joy*

*Manifesto* is me sharing this concept with the world, as well as inviting Black people to creating their own manifestos. One meaningful way that I invite them in is through my play, *Black Boys Will Never Be For Sale.*

**Enter The Revolutionary Theater**

I have only one solution: to rise above this absurd drama that others have staged around me – Frantz Fanon (as cited in Sanchez, 1995, p. 2)

Not only is this dissertation written as two musical albums, but it also was written as a theatrical piece. I remember the “fearful excitement” on my advisor’s face when I told her that I wanted to write a play to accompany my jazz albums. It was a bold move, but so was improvising to write two jazz albums. I wrote a play because I felt it was the best way to visualize the jazz pieces that I wrote. It addressed the “so what” question that everyone always asks. I needed my writing to do something and playwrighting was the best avenue to “take what you hear, what you access, what you feel, and you distill it” (Nettles, 2019). I wrote a play because Black life is theatrical. Life is a play. Life is a movie. Life is a divine comedy. In Baraka’s (1979) *Black Art*, he stated:

> We want a black poem. And a Black World.  
> Let the world be a Black Poem  
> And Let All Black People Speak This Poem  
> Silently  
> or LOUD – (p.106-7)

If the world is a Black poem, it means that Black performance takes place everywhere Black people are. The world is our “soapbox,” our “podium,” our “corner,” our “Revolutionary Theatre” (Baraka, 1965). The world is our theatre to perform – to make revolutionary change.
Black people are continually making quotidian changes to society, by existing and moving through society. Revolutionary change starts with the mundane, and it builds outward. I wanted to create change, so I started with myself and my writing. The play that I wrote is a covenant between myself and the reader. I wanted to write something that would testify to the human conditions of Black life – from the mundane to the extraordinary. I wanted the reader to feel that. Entitled Black Boys Will Never Be For Sale, this play highlights the feelings of: Black Joy, Black love, Black Rage, and Black pain.

Taking over a year to write, the nine-act play highlights the sounds, languages, and energies of Black people. The play showcases the nuances and complexities of Black life in America. The play is situated in San Francisco because the city has a storied and “checkered” past concerning Black life. Albert S. Broussard’s (1993) Black San Francisco: The Struggle for Racial Equality in the West, 1900-1954 highlighted that the “progressive” image of San Francisco was a façade because there was an underlying racial caste system. San Francisco was outwardly civil to Black people while disenfranchising them. In the documentary Take This Hammer James Baldwin (1963) observed, “At least in the South [racism] is overt, but here, especially in San Francisco, where everyone is so liberal and so civilized and so literate, they throw it under the rug” This is why Black people’s progress in employment, housing, and politics moves at a deliberate speed (Broussard, 1993). Despite this disenfranchisement, San Francisco is the “birthplace” of the Black Studies Program. In 1968, Nathan Hare founded the first Black Studies Program at San Francisco State University (Beeson, 2009). Black Boys Will Never Be For Sale highlights San Francisco’s racial identity problems and creates a conversation about Black life across the country.
The play is based on how I envisioned my life in 20 years. I embodied the social and spiritual practice of becoming and wrote myself into the future. I became a collector of me. In “Set No.1” of *Wounded in the House of a Friend*, Sonia Sanchez (1995) spoke of this in the last lines of her poetry set:

```
I shall become a collector of me.
I shallbecomeacollectorofme.
i Shall become a collector of me.
i shall BECOME a collector of me.
I SHALL BECOME A COLLECTOR of me.
ISHALLBECOMEACOLLECTOROFME.
AND PUT MEAT ON MY SOUL (p. 10).
```

I became a collector of me to put meat on my soul. I wanted to nurture myself, and there is no better way to do that than writing yourself into the future. To manifest yourself into the future creates a survival guide of how you are going to get there. Initially, I wanted to write about Black fatherhood, emphasizing that celestial bridge between Black Fathers and their sons. That joy is beyond words. I wanted to write about Black fatherhood because I know how joyous that relationship is and because the relationship with my father is haunted. I thought by writing about it, I could exorcize those ghosts out of my life, but also create my own survivor’s guide to Black fatherhood. What started as a play between a Black father and a Black son morphed into something more profound, the more that I read Black feminist texts. This play became an illustration of the day-in-the-life of my family – their survival and how they found their joy in an anti-Black society.

I do not see myself as a “playwright” or do I want to be a famous playwright. I want to write and have the work disseminated. I *do* see playwriting as a re-orientation of the knowledge that I possess, as well as the knowledge that exists within literature. Music is like a
rib to playwrighting. Like jazz, playwrighting is improvisational because I am incorporating various authors, scholars, poets, and musicians at different points of a conversation to create a conversation. This is an intimate balance. I treat phrases and quotes from literature as musical lyrics. The play manifests a life of its own through the lyrical improvisations of weaving phrases and quotes together to create conversations. I am deconstructing theory from multiple bodies of literature and reconstructing them as conversations between characters within a nine-act play. This deconstruction/reconstruction is poetic, because I am stitching together a tapestry of Black life. What sounds could be created by pairing Sara Ahmed with James Baldwin; James Baldwin with Audre Lorde; and Audre Lorde and June Jordan? That is my intentionality of what this play should do. These Black scholars and scholars of color may have never spoken to each other in real life, but I am bringing them into the “same room.” For example, when my wife June is speaking in the play, she is speaking as herself, but she is also a whistle. Feminist scholars of color are speaking through her, creating layers of nuances and complexities. June Jordan speaks through her. Audre Lorde speaks through her. Sara Ahmed speaks through her. Even though June is one character, many people speak through her. June’s words are heavy because she is carrying the words and lived experiences of others. How do you bring into conversation the words and the works of the living and the dead? How do you speak to them through a spectrum? It is through a play that it becomes a possibility.

One of the biggest joys of creating this play was the citations. Some might find citations boring, but they are the backbone of any work that is produced. Ahmed (2017) stated, “Citation is feminist memory. Citation is how we acknowledge our debt to those who came before; those who helped us find our way” (p. 15-16). Citations show whom we invited to the ensemble of the Black Study and why. Citations manifest the document – they give it life. Citations become a
teaching tool in my work. Citations are not found at the end of my work but are alongside the main text, through footnoting. Sometimes, I am unable to put certain information into a play. Since playwrighting is jazz improvisation, my lyrics do not “fit” because of the timing. The time is not right. I use footnoting to improvise and add my lyrics to the tapestry of the conversation. Either I further expand upon the citation(s) that are provided, or I provide my commentary to that particular conversation at the moment. Reading the footnotes becomes an active part of the conversation and the play. Footnotes enhance the depth and scope of this Black Study. It is not only a resource but a teaching tool for others on directing them to find these Black scholars and scholars of color. Using the lyrics that I provide of that particular scholar, in addition to the citation allows the reader to reference the original source and connect their work to mine. The reader is allowed to revisit the past, occupy the past, and bring those words and knowledges with them into the present and the future. That is important because plays can be read but plays need to do something – they need to be performed. Without reading where the lyrics came from, you might miss emotions or the feelings that the scholar was writing with. Without reading, you might miss that experience. Without that experience, you might miss how that particular lyric needs to be performed or delivered. Certainly, you can read this play and perform it any way you like, but without reading the citations, you miss how this play was manifested. Without reading, you miss the experience(s) that other scholars and I were trying to illuminate. Without reading, you miss the joy. Surely, this is a very studious endeavor, but as Ahmed (2017) said, “to become a feminist is to stay a student” (p. 11). This is what it means to be within a Black Study. So, will you join me in this covenant—in this Black study, a study with no end?

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CHAPTER TWO:
BLACK BOYS WILL NEVER BE FOR SALE


Dear Reader –

This letter goes out to whoever gonna read it

Please share it with the world ‘cuz I won’t repeat it

So, for you, I wrote this letter

This is my refusal to the way that things have been

This is my refusal to the way that things are now

This is my consent to how things will be

This is not a dissertation, it is a jam session.

What are we jamming out to, Amir?

An album of Black Liberation

Read this paper as tracks to an album

Read this paper as felt sound

As a SoulScript

This assemble to the ensemble

This call of action to get up off yo’ – ahey!

To tear down the structures that keep us down

What is the ethos of this jam session, Amir?

To engage within a Black study

A study to advance a common project
On unbounded Blackness

The Blackness of Blackness

The blurring of Blackness

The joy of Blackness

The joy of Black Boys

This is my protest.

This is my refusal.

This is my joy.

BLACK BOYS ARE NOT FOR SALE.

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Track #1: An Invitation to the Black Study: The Unrepayable Debt

I forgive you as I live through the beautiful present of the past. I'm just thankful that I get all these gifts to unwrap. What were you preparing us…for? – Jay-Z (2017), Adnis

Jay-Z’s album 4:44 is seen by many as his most mature and vulnerable album as it further illuminates Jay-Z’s relationship with his father (Genius, 2017). The track Adnis is an open letter to his late father Adnis “AJ” Reeves, who passed away from liver failure (Genius, 2017). As I listen to the track, I reminisce about my father Cleveland “CW” Gilmore and reflect on the estranged relationship that we had. Though our relationship was always in flux, my father “gifted” me histories, cultures, and traditions that I am just starting to “unwrap” now. One of those gifted “presents” was having a deep appreciation for jazz. Jazz was the first genre of music that I listened to as a child, and it was the only music that was played in my house. Hell, I did not hear rap music until Will Smith’s (1997) Big Willie Style, and I heard that at school. My father lived, breathed, spoke, and embodied jazz. Jazz was everything; it was his mother tongue. Born
on the eve of the Great Depression, my father bore witness to the “birth” of jazz and had the
amazing privilege to watch jazz “grow up” and develop as a piece of popular music. I am
privileged because my father passed on his appreciation of jazz to me. My father was the first
person that invited me into what Moten (2013) called a “Black Study.” This Black study is about
the Black experience in America vis-à-vis jazz. The cultural inheritance of musical storytelling
via the jazz tradition is significant to me because it served as a generational bridge between us, as
it connected the past to the present. I had the honor of listening to Louis Armstrong, Billie
Holiday, Count Basie, Cab Calloway, Miles Davis, Wynton Marsalis, John Coltrane, and
Pharaoh Sanders on cassettes all the while talking to my father about the Black experience
through jazz, instead of reading about it in a textbook. For me, jazz and its traditions were never
dead, as my father kept it alive and now, it is forever a part of me. My father prepared me to live
with this tradition and to be a “student” in this Black study. As I reflect on my life, I (re)member
how vital my father was for getting me to this pivotal point – to this Black study on Black Boy
Joy. It is a debt that can never be repaid.

Fred Moten and Stefano Harney (2013) speak of this unrepayable debt in their series of
essays entitled: The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study. According to Moten and
Harney (2013), debt signifies a promise of ownership but never delivering on that promise (p. 5).
Moreover, debt cannot be repaid or forgiven, it can only be forgotten to be remembered again
(Moten & Harney, p.70). Debt is social, as it is “a mutual transaction between two or more
entities”, while credit is asocial because “it is privatized” (Moten & Harney, p. 68). Riffing on
this idea of debt in relation to my father, I am forever indebted to my father for his invitation into
the Black study. I would not be writing this body of work without him, a man who grew up in
abject poverty and never completed school. The debt cannot be forgiven, but it can be forgotten
to be (re)membered. When people ask me what I owe my father, I shake my head and reply: “it is not about what I owe, it is about the acknowledgment.” To ask: “how much do I owe you”? is to be engaged in the process of disavowing the very idea of “owe” (Moten & Harney, 2013, p. 164). It is the acknowledgment of the unpayable debt that matters, as it the reminder of why you engage in a Black study – a study without an end. Though my father passed away years ago, his spirit is still here and still animating my work. Even within death, this Black study continues to serve as a celestial bridge, from me to him. By acknowledging my father, I honor his presence and what he contributed to the world.

Finishing upon this riff, I am expanding upon this conversation of debt beyond my father and me to focus on the social debt between Black people and white America. America is indebted to Black people, as enslaved Africans built America without repayment (Leon, 2017; Holmes, 2017). Here are a few “debts” that are on America’s “balance sheet of injustice”: the debt of Colonization, the debt of slavery, the debt of Reconstruction, the debt of the U.S. carceral state, the debt of violence and terror of Jim Crow laws, the debt of the “deliberate” speed of civil rights, and the debt of state-sanctioned violence against unarmed Black people. While the debt may never be forgiven, the issue lies with this continual failure to acknowledge the debt. It is that failure that creates a feeling of “brokenness” – a feeling that is irreconcilable. It is out of this brokenness, this irreconcilable difference that the Black Radical Tradition is born:

There is this debt at a distance to a global politics of blackness emerging out of slavery and colonialism, a black radical politics, a politics of debt without payment, without credit, without limit. This debt was built in a struggle with empire before empire, where power was not with institutions or governments alone, where any owner or colonizer had the violent power of a ubiquitous state… The black radical tradition is the movement that works through this debt. The black radical tradition is debt work… The black radical tradition is unconsolidated debt (Moten & Harney, 2013, p. 71-2).
It is the debt work that has prepared us for a global politic of Black radicalism. It the acknowledgment of that debt that aids us in the notion of refusal. It is this debt that fuels our quest for Black Liberation. The acknowledgment of this debt makes us realize that our relationship to white America is irreparable and that the “only thing we can do is tear this shit down completely and build something new” (Moten & Harney, 2013, p. 13). This debt is what animates this study on Black Boy Joy. This debt makes Black Boy Joy is a possibility.

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Track #2: Theorizing Refusal

“The refusal to be refused.” – Moten & Harney (2013, p. 96)

“Refusal to stay in one’s proper place.” – Butler & Athanasiou (2013, p. 21)

“The possibility to live unbounded lives.” – Ruth Gilmore (as cited in Campt, 2017, p. 34)

The path to Black Boy Joy and Black Liberation is paved in refusal. Moten and Harney (2013) said that “refusal [is] the ‘first right’ and it is game-changing [because]… it signals the refusal of the choices as offered” (p. 13). Though genealogically linked to resistance, refusal is a different action. Refusal is a theoretical framework, a methodology, and an analytical tool of political action. McGranahan (2016) stated, “if resistance involves consciously defying or opposing superiors ‘in a context of differential power relationships,’ then refusal rejects this hierarchical relationship (p. 323). Theorizing refusal examines the limits and possibilities of people and institutions, as it can be found in everyday relations and socio-political movements for decolonization and recognition (McGranahan, 2016). Refusal marks the point of a limit being reached and a stoppage of continuing down a current path. Refusal is responsive to what is
needed now, as it explores what people are willing or not willing to relinquish to be compliant with institutions (McDonald, 2016). Refusal is deliberate, intentional, and willful (Simpson, 2016). Refusal is multidimensional, as it is more than a no, as it can be generative; moving from one thing towards another (Simpson, 2016; Tuck, 2014). Refusal is generative because, within the breaking of social relations, there is a creation of new relations, new affiliations, and new communities. Within these new relations, affiliations, and communities, there lies hope and a will for continual transformation and generational social change (McGranahan, 2016). Refusal combined with hope and will makes the probable, possible. Refusal is the first step to making the change that we want to see.

Refusal is a necessity within the social science disciplines of academia. The “academic gaze” of Settler colonialism “has shaped school and educational research in the United States” (Tuck & Wang, 2012, p. 2). Settler Colonialism is not an event, but a structure of violence, dispossession, and erasure (Wolfe, 1999). The permanence of Settler Colonialism is dependent on the destruction and the erasure of indigenous people from their lands, but also the enslavement and subjugation of fungible Black bodies to work those lands (Tuck & Wang, 2012; 2014). Oppression emerges because of this hierarchy of settler perspectives being privileged as knowledge. Academia is an extension of settler colonial knowledge; it privileges what constitutes knowledge and uses settler colonial history as a master narrative to appropriate the voices stories, histories of all Others (Tuck & Wang, 2014). Within social science literature, the pathology of Black people as an inferior “Other” continues (Tuck & Wang, 2014).

Going back to David Walker’s Appeal (1829) and being centralized by Dubois (1903), Black discourses are plagued by the question of, “what’s wrong with black folk?” (Moten, 2009). Black males in America have been and continue to be constructed as a problem in social science
literature and American society writ large. The dominant racial discourses found in the social sciences have resulted in researchers, typically white, attempting to “fix” the problem by modalities of control. Black males are objectified by being ghettoized, questioned, surveilled, criminalized, imprisoned, and some lose their lives (Tuck & Wang, 2012; Armour, 1997). As a result of this continuing racial discrimination, this “Negrophobia,” the concept of Black Boy Joy is not even possible in the social science research imaginary; thus, the dysfunction of Black males is overstudied, while understanding the loss of “Black Boy Joy” is neglected. Black Boy Joy is the quotidian refusal of whiteness and white supremacy. According to Campt (2017) “quotidian practices of refusal” are:

…defined less by opposition or “resistance,” and more by a refusal of the very premises that have reduced the lived experience of blackness to pathology and irreconcilability in the logic of white supremacy. Like the concept of fugitivity, practicing refusal highlights the tense relations between acts of flight and escape, and creative practices of refusal—nimble and strategic practices that undermine the categories of the dominant (p. 34).

This praxis of refusal consists of the “refutations to engage the colonial, ethnographic, and missionary gazes” that racially subordinate Black males (Campt, 2017, p. 59). This project is not a further attempt to problematize Black males but to understand the phenomenon of Black Boy Joy, and illuminate how systems of oppression deny that joy. Black Boy Joy is the refusal to stay in ones designated “place” and provides a space to give Black males a future that they want now. Within this lingering of negation and affirmation, denial and avowal, is the possibility of Black males living in a future as unbounded Black people (Campt, 2017). Black Boy Joy limits the gaze of the settler colonial knowledge by refusing to objectify and commodify Black males (Tuck & Wang, 2014). This quotidian practice of refusal is not a new concept, as it is part of a vast and historical tradition of refusal. This tradition is called the Black Radical Tradition.
Track # 3: The Black Radical Tradition

“The History of Blackness is testament to the fact objects can and do resist”
Moten (2003, p. 1)

“Performance is the resistance of the object” Moten (2017, p. 6)

The Black Radical Tradition is the “call” of the drum that invites us to engage and participate in a Black study. This “call” is a beat that has carried over continents throughout space and time. The call is for refusal; the call is for protest. The Black Radical Tradition is a critical social theory of knowledge and social practices that interrogates and dismantles Black social injustice (Rabaka, 2009). The Black Radical Tradition is organized under the Black intellectual tradition of Black left-wing radicalism (Gordon, 2009). Black radical’s ideas and actions aided in the increasing commitments to gender justice, women’s liberation, and revolutionizing humanist thought (Rabaka, 2009). Black people have always participated in quotidian practices of refusal. Black refusal is conjured, like a magician. It is always a deliberate act of saying no, that we will continue this way no longer. I am indebted to Cedric Robinson (1983) for his groundbreaking text called Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition. Robinson outlined how Black people globally have politically engaged in various notions of refusal. Black radicalism is a Marxist critique that illuminated the convergence of racism and capitalism (Robinson, 1983). This “racial capitalism” produced a modern world “dependent on the permanence of slavery, violence, imperialism and genocide” (Robinson, 1983, p. 13). Black radicals saw this convergence and refuted this exploitation of the Black people. From organized revolts in slave castles and slave ships to the destruction of plantation tools, to the creation of marronage communities, to blocking roads and highways, Black people have refused. These various forms
of refusal were disruptive forms of protests as they caused ruptures in the social relations and hierarchies of racialized capitalism, chattel enslavement, imperialism, white supremacy, and settler colonialism (McCoy, 2016). W.E.B. Du Bois, C. L. R. James, Frantz Fanon, Amilcar Cabral and Angela Davis, Richard Wright, Aimé Césaire Marcus Garvey, Claudia Jones, Ella Baker, Malcolm X, Fannie Lou Hamer, and Audre Lorde, are just a few of the Black radical theorists that have impacted social relations and hierarchies across the world.

Though I use Black Radical Tradition as my call to invite you into this Black study, I do want to note that Black Boy Joy blurs between the Black intellectual traditions of Black Nationalism and contemporary Black thought of Black Existentialism. These transdisciplinary traditions aid in the deconstruction and the reconstruction of Black history and knowledge and halt the advancement of settler colonial knowledge. The Black intellectual tradition of Black Nationalism developed because there was a necessity for Black solidarity for Black liberation; an importance to creating Black institutions (Banks, HBCUs), and highlighting the distinctness of Black people (Gordon, 2009). Black Nationalism was foundational for Black movements such as the Harlem Renaissance (1920s), Black Power (1950s into the 1960s), and the Black Arts Movement (1960s) (Gordon, 2009). These Black movements helped develop and transform Black Boy Joy into what it is today.

Black Existentialism explores the “problems of meaning and its formation under anti-Black conditions, the construction of human standards and dynamics of recognition, problems of agency and social change, conditions of freedom, and problems of justification and method” (Gordon, 2009). Within Black existential thought, there is a “blues” element that derived from the Bebop era of jazz. The blues illuminated the plight of Black suffering but also affirmed the value of Black life (Gordon, 2009). Moreover, Black existential thought significantly influenced
the social sciences and the humanities. For instance, Frantz Fanon's (1967) *Black Skin, White Masks* and *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961) critically examined how racism and colonialism led to the pathologizing of Black people (Gordon, 2009) The work of W. E. B. DuBois' (1903), *The Souls of Black Folk*, explored the contradiction of “double consciousness;” this problematized the “two-ness that Black people faced in a society that espoused notions of “universal freedom” (Gordon, 2009).

We must continue to remember the Black Radical Tradition in contemporary times because of the permanence of settler colonialism and anti-Black racism. Remembering and embracing the tradition allows offers Black people over five hundred years of theory and praxis that can rupture the social and political relationship with white supremacy and settler colonialism. It also provides Black people a space to create and recreate new social thoughts, practices, and tradition(s) of radicalism (Rabaka, 2009). Black Boy Joy emerges from the amalgamation of the Black nationalist tradition of the Black Arts Movement and the Black existentialist project of Afro-pessimism (Wilderson, 2010).

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**The Interlude: The Black Arts Movement: Calling All Black People**

Calling black people
Calling all black people, man woman child
Wherever you are, calling you, urgent, come in
Black People, come in, wherever you are, urgent, calling
You, calling all black people
Calling all black people, come in, black people, come
on in. – SOS, Amiri Baraka

who's gonna make all
that beautiful blk/rhetoric
mean something.

like
I mean
who's gonna take
words
blk/beautiful
and make more of it
than blk/capitalism.
u dig?
i mean
like who's gonna
take all the young/long/haired/
natural/brothers and sisters
and let them
grow till
all that is
imp't is them
selves
moving in straight/
revolutionary/lines/toward the enemy
(and we know who that is)
like. man.
who's gonna give our young
blk people new heros

[. . . .]
(instead of quick/fucks
in the hall/way of
white/amERICA's
mind)
like. this. is an s.o.s.
me. calling. . .
calling…
some/one.
please reply soon. – (Sonia Sanchez, 1970, p. 15-16), blk/rhetoric

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Track # 4: The Origins of Black Boy Joy, Black Freedom & The Avant-Garde Jazz Tradition

What is the call that Baraka and Sanchez speak of? It is the call of a Black study. It is the
call of Blackness and Black people to assemble as an ensemble. It is a call for Black thought,
Black rage, Black pain, Black being, Black love, and Black power. How do I describe Black Boy
Joy in relation to jazz? “Jazz is a memory of our past and a promise of all to come” (Bland, 1959). Jazz carries the instructions of the Black Radical Tradition through music. Jazz is about freedom. As John Coltrane put it in 1962, “we all know that this word which so many seem to fear today, ‘Freedom,’ has a hell of a lot to do with this music” (Hersch, 1995, p. 100). Freedom and identity have always been an issue that Black people have wrestled with and the music was always one of those media to amplify it. A new pioneered style of music called “Avant-garde” or “Free Jazz,” musically-expressed ideas about musical freedom and the prominent struggles of Black people for justice. By the 1960s, the desire for “freedom” was exploding yet again to the forefront socially, politically and economically. Black people and Black musicians “assembled to the ensemble” of Black freedom. Black people wanted to emancipate themselves from anti-Black America, and they refused oppressive structures that came with it. Black musicians wanted to emancipate themselves from the traditional and conventional European musical structures that restricted individual expression. They refused those conventions and began to play their way. This Avant-Garde or Free Jazz style of play was an embodiment of the Black Power and the Black Arts Movement.

The Black Power Movement, as Michele Wallace put it pointedly, “was the ‘black phallus up in America’s face,’ as the Black man came of age in America” (Wallace, 1987). By 1960, the anger of Black people reached a “tipping point” in America, as they were tired of being subjected to violence and oppression by racist whites and the “deliberate speed” of the federal government. Black people refused to use “white suasion,” a political agenda of raising the moral consciousness of White America and switched to “Black suasion,” a political agenda that developed a political consciousness that focused on Black unity, Black power, and Black agency (Kendi, 2012). This rhetoric encouraged a Black enlightenment within the Black community, as
a critical tenet of the Black Power Movement was the “necessity for Black people to define the world in their own terms” (Neal, 1968, p. 29). Black activists and people refused to be unheard, unseen and demanded social, political and economic power, immediately. According to Connor (1995), “the Civil Rights Movement’s message of ‘we shall overcome’ did not speak to the anger and the “fuck you” attitude of the Black Power Movement” (p. 58). It was in the 1960s, where Black people had amplified their voice. Black power activists such as Stokely Carmichael, Angela Davis, Huey P. Newton, H. Rap. Brown, Elridge Cleaver, and Malcolm spoke across the country of Black pride, Black love, self-determination, and Black empowerment. It became cool to self-educate, to know your history, to know your rights and to demand them immediately (Conner, 1995). The Black Power Movement utilized the voice of Black people to interrogate everything in the interest of Black people. Using a “for us, by us” rhetoric, the Black Power Movement put Blackness before anything else.

This rhetoric was evident with the spiritual evolution of jazz. By the 1960s, the Avant-Garde was the leading-edge style of jazz music. This style of music was different from the traditional conventions of the jazz music that had preceded it, thus creating controversy (Baskerville, 1994). One of the powerful ideologies that were adopted by Black musicians at that time was the rejection of white-imposed identifications. As Reed (2014) eloquently said, “blackness is an avant-garde thing . . . and the avant-garde is a black thing” (p. 8.). The Avant-Garde was intrinsically experimental because it was highly improvisational, in a sense that it combined unprecedented individual freedom and expression with group coherence. There was this intimate balance, this synergy often found in African music, between the playing interests of the individual artist and the musical group. The interests of the individual and the group are in constant relation with each other, thus producing unconventional chords and sounds in the music.
This is evident in Ornette Coleman’s (1961) seminal album *Free Jazz*. The album is 37 minutes of improvisation that was recorded in two “takes” and is heard exactly as it was performed in the studio. In *Free Jazz*, all the musicians are playing together simultaneously, while listening closely to one another for flow and direction. They operate in this double bind as they are playing “collectively apart.” This style of music is about collectivity while also giving musicians the freedom to express themselves as individual artists. Coleman explained this philosophy:

“The most important thing was for us to play together; all at the same time, without getting in each other’s way and also to have enough room for each player to ad lib alone and to follow this idea for duration of an album. When the soloist played something that suggested a musical idea or direction, I played that behind him in my style. He continued his own way in his solo, of course” (Hersch, 1995, p.112-113).

Ornette coined the term “harmolodic,” which is defined as a more extreme form of musical style and production. Musicians could play a tune, all starting on different notes, primarily playing in different keys, yet be playing in unison. The individual artist is embraced as each artist shapes their own version of the melody, from one note to the next. The collective is reflected in their doing different versions of the same thing at the same time, albeit loosely in time together if not in lockstep.

The Avant-Garde reflected the pursuit of Black liberation during the 1960s. The improvisational style of the Avant-Garde was both the refusal of Western stylistic conventions and a self-conscious re-articulation of Black diasporic aesthetics. The innovation in the “free” sounds was an, “indication of a double movement away from the white mainstream standards and towards musical styles with Black identifying signifiers such as: the exploration of collective improvisation, a focus on sonic texture and color, attitude over harmonic or melodic statements,
employment of non-Western instrumentation, and the prioritization of rhythmic textures” (Hanson, 2008, p. 349).

Black writer and poet Amiri Baraka speculated that the Avant-Garde style of play was a continuum of Black folk music, African popular culture, and Bebop music. Moreover, Baraka believed that these avant-garde artists were not just cultural alchemists but were having a conversation with all the jazz musicians throughout time (Smethurst, 2003). Music was the bridge or portal that was connecting jazz musicians over space and time. Baraka expressed that sentiment when he wrote about the continuity of Jazz and Black Expressive culture in the Changing Same (1967): “That what will come will be a Unity music. The Black Music which is jazz and blues, religious and secular. Which is New Thing and Rhythm and Blues. The consciousness of social reevaluation and rise, a social spiritualism” (as cited in Smethurst, 2003, p. 266) Jazz was infused with Black Expressive culture which promoted social and spiritual practices of Black consciousness raising and Black unity. Moreover, the Black stylistic progression of this Avant-Garde music represented a sociological image of Black people’s existence in the United States (Smethurst, 2003). Baraka’s understanding was that Black artists struggled with Dubois’ (1903) “double consciousness.” As artists, they had to reconcile two inherited traditions, one African and expressive, the other formal and European. These “roots” forms such as Blues, Bebop, and Avant-Garde emphasized African characteristics, which enhanced the independence of their Black creativity from the mainstream assimilation of white and European traditions. Baraka emphasized this point in Blues People (1963):

What these musicians have done, basically, is to restore jazz its valid separation from, and anarchic disregard of, Western popular forms. They used the music of the forties, with its jagged, exciting rhythms as an initial reference and have restored the hegemony of the blues as the most important basic form of Afro-American music (p. 225).
The Black Arts Movement (BAM) was an extemporized jam session, with sounds that still reverberate today, as it produced a new generation of Black aestheticians. I am indebted to Black aesthetic epistemology and methodology of the Black Arts Movement, which provided the ever-expanding foundation of Black Boy Joy. I do want to note that the Black Arts Movement was not the first time where Black artists developed a political agenda through the arts, as BAM emerged from the *New Negro Movement* of the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s and 1930s (Hutchinson, 2003). The New Negro Movement of the Harlem Renaissance brought together artists, critics, and intellectuals such as Langston Hughes, James Weldon Johnson, and Zora Neal Hurston who used the arts and grounded folk culture to create a fusion of political and cultural thinking (Robinson, 2005; Redmond, 1976). A central project of the Harlem Renaissance was the “elevation” of the folk, or vernacular, to the level of the “classic” established arts. The blues, spirituals and work songs represented the “folk” element of African American culture (Robinson, 2005). The Harlem Renaissance ended in 1929 because of the stock market crash, as “white patronage ended, and the Black writers had not developed a following among the grassroots” (Redmond, 1976, p. 221). Unlike the Harlem Renaissance, the Black Arts Movement did not rely on the integration of white people or white patrons (Hutchinson, 2003). BAM was a generational shift from the *perceived* failure of the Harlem Renaissance.

BAM was the “spiritual sister” of the Black Power Movement. Founded by Amiri Baraka and Larry Neal, the Black Arts Movement began in 1965, shortly after the assassination of Malcolm X and the opening of the Black Arts Repertory Theater and School (BARTS) (Hutchinson, 2003; Crawford, 2017). Being in Harlem, a slew of artists and musicians collaborated in that space such as Archie Shepp, Sun Ra, John Coltrane and Albert Ayler.
BAM was a revolutionary cultural movement that was a collage of Black visual art, Black performative art, and Black literature that was infused with Black political thought and a Black Nationalist agenda (Hutchinson, 2003). BAM was unapologetically Black, as it was a movement that was made by Black people, which amplified the voices of Black people, for Black people (Crawford, 2017). Moreover, BAM was a radical reordering of the function of both art and the artist, as the movement saw the artist integral to the project of Black liberation (Neal, 1968; Hutchinson, 2003). Don L. Lee (Haki R. Madhubuti) (1968), in his essay *Toward A Black Aesthetic*, argued that the black artist is "an integral part of the black community; a guiding force; a walking example...Black poets are culture stabilizers; [that] bring back old values and introduce new ones" (p. 28). Including Lee, at the forefront of this movement were writers such as Amiri Baraka, Addison Gayle, Jr., Hoyt Fuller, Larry Neal, Haki R. Madhubuti, Nikki Giovanni, Sonia Sanchez, Mari Evans, Gwendolyn Brooks, Ishmael Reed, and James Stewart, to name a few. What Baraka and others were trying to do was blur aesthetics and ethics; political activism with art so that the movement spoke directly to the experiences of Black people. In Neal’s (1968) pioneering article, *The Black Arts Movement*, he said:

The Black Arts Movement is radically opposed to any concept of the artist that alienates him from his community. Black Art is the aesthetic and spiritual sister of the Black Power concept. As such, it envisions an art that speaks directly to the needs and aspirations of Black America. In order to perform this task, the Black Arts Movement proposes a radical reordering of the western cultural aesthetic. (Neal, 1968, p. 29)

To address the needs of Black people, Black people need to create a space: a world for Black people. The Black artist is challenged to create a "Black Poem" and a "Black World," In Amiri Baraka’s (1979) Black Art, he states:
We want a black poem. And a
Black World.
Let the world be a Black Poem
And Let All Black People Speak This Poem
Silently
or LOUD – (p.106-7)

Wanting a Black poem and a Black world was a desire that Baraka and other Black artists
wanted. Baraka’s "Black Art" argues two points: (1) that there is a fundamental connection
between artistic expression and social, political and racial identity and (2) that there is no
separation between art and life. To have a world that was all Black everything, Black artists
needed a new way to envision the world and a new way to judge their work without white
influence. This was known as the Black Aesthetic. The Black Aesthetic was a form of artistic
dissent as it refused the conventions of western literature and art and sought a return to Black
culture and Black vernacular expression (Hutchinson, 2003). The Black Aesthetic was a
framework that provided the critical language and the analytical tools for the Black Arts
Movement. It was the “heartbeat” of the Black Arts Movement because it politically made art to
be “for Black people, by and about Black people's experiences and could only be judged by
responsible Black people committed to the Black community” (Hutchinson, 2003, p. 23). This
primary principle of “Blackness” in art or “Black art for Black people” was that Black Arts
activists like Baraka believed that only people empathetic to the “Black” cause could judge
Black works (Hanson, 2008, p.345). Moreover, the Black Aesthetic would promote Black life,
Black history, and Black unity, but above all would stop Black people from seeking approval
through western aesthetic models (Baskerville, 1994). This ideology was reflected in plays, short
stories, but especially within poetry.
Black Arts activist Larry Neal believed that Black literature tied to text must die, as the key to survival was in the music (Neal, 1968). Neal (1968) expanded upon this belief in *Black Fire: An Anthology of Afro-American Writing*:

> There was also a sense that African cultures (and the culture of the black folk in the United States) were essentially oral and musical and that Western cultures were literate—...The dead forms taught most writers in the white man’s schools will have to be destroyed, or, at best, radically altered. We can learn more about what poetry is by listening to the cadences in Malcolm’s speeches than from most of Western poetics. Listen to James Brown scream. Ask yourself, then: Have you ever heard a Negro poet sing like that? Of course not, because we have been tied to the texts, like most white poets. The text could be destroyed and no one would be hurt in the least by it (as cited in Smethurst, 2005, p. 90).

This refusal of western traditions of literature and poetics by Black Arts activists created new structures of Black literature that elevated the oral tradition over the written and spoke to the living reality of Black people (Smethurst, 2005). Within this break, this refusal of western aesthetics, Black arts activists blurred Black literature, Black art, and Black music to form something new. Black Arts activists established was a radical Black canon and a literary tradition that was social, programmatic and, therapeutic for Black people (Hutchinson, 2003). Larry Neal's (2000; 1968) revolutionary essay *And Shine Swam On* was the blueprint for Black writing as it provided instructions for Black writers to create poetry that styled after the improvisation of jazz. As the pre-rap group, *The Last Poets* (1976) eloquently said, “Jazzoerty is poetry.”

Jazzoetry, this fusion of jazz and poetry, was this re-learning of how to communicate beyond the textual limitation of words. Jazzoetry was personal because it sought to elevate the “sound” of Black folklore and spoke to the minds, bodies, and souls of Black people (Hurston, 1934; 2008). Black poets discussed struggles of the Black community and political actions through vivid
imagery of words, and this is evident with poet and musician Gil Scott Heron’s (1970) *Comment* #1:

Does Little Orphan Annie have a natural? Do Sluggo's kinks make him a refugee from Mandingo? What does Webster's say about soul? I say you silly chipe motherfucker, your great grandfather tied a ball and chain to my balls and bounced me through a cotton field while I lived in an unflushable toilet bowl. And now you want me to help you overthrow what?

Heron’s message in these lyrics references white America’s perception of Black people, the enslavement of their ancestors, and Black people’s disenfranchisement within America that affixes them to horrid living conditions. Heron’s lyrics serve as a message and reminder that many Black people in America could feel and understand because many have dealt with racism and felt the effects of slavery and disenfranchisement. His message enthralls the listener and reminds them of the owed debt because of the social injustices that afflicted the Black community.

This blurring created new sounds that encapsulated love, tension, and togetherness. To write Black poetry was an act of survival, but of rebirth and love. These new sounds helped find the love and the joy of being Black; the joy of Black art and the joy of our history (Neal, 2000). Despite our terrible circumstances in America, there is this beauty (Baraka, 1970). Neal (2000) believed that Black Arts Activists were “Black magicians, working juju” on Black people because Black arts integrates the flesh with the spirit (p. 76). The art of our Black ancestors was “a bridge between them and the spirit and a bridge between you and your soul in the progression of a spiritual lineage” (Neal, 2000, p. 76). The Black Arts Movement was not looking for outward integration with white people, but an inward integration between the flesh and the spirit.
Black arts, such as poetry and music became that bridge for healing and a harbinger of future possibilities for Black America.

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**Track #5: Riffing Rift of Blackness**

Something is holding me back! Lawd, is it because I am Black? – Syl Johnson (1970)

Brothers and sisters, my text this morning is the Blackness of Blackness… And a congregation of voices answered: "That blackness is most black brother, most black…Black will make you . . . or black will unmake you. – Ralph Ellison (1952, p. 1), *Invisible Man*

Ellison’s words reframe the origin of humanity as a Black story, that in the beginning that there was Blackness. This reframing makes us (re)consider Blackness not as a thing, but as space itself. Black is Space and Space is Black. Space is primordial, infinite, and omnipresent. Blackness lingers between the paradoxical relationship of Blackness as an affirmation (is) and Blackness as negation (ain’t). Ellison’s (1952), "Black will make you ... and unmake you,” speaks to that relationship because Blackness could be heterogeneous, but its boundless ambiguity destabilizes its own “grounding” (Benston, 2000). This Barakaian “changing same” of (un) grounding is the blueprint for a space clearing that keeps Blackness and Black people experimental. This speaks to Kalamu ya Salaam’s (1969) poem *Food For Thought* which asserts that “blk poetics is / motion” and “nothing is concrete, but blk lives are in a constant state of flux” (p. 4, as cited in Crawford, 2017, p. 129). In this sense Blackness, is not something; it is *nothing*; therefore it is everything (Moten, 2013).

I meditate on Moten’s (2013) aesthetic sociology about thingliness, Blackness, and nothingness. Sociological theorists have no concrete formulation on the definition of Blackness,
despite their attempts to index Blackness within Black life. We spend ample time philosophizing what Black is and what Black is not, as if Blackness is tied to an ontological expectation. The ontological grounding of Blackness has led to binaries that have subjugated Black people. By determining what Black is and what Black is not, I posit the questions of, “Whose voices do we elevate and whose voices do we push to the margins?” “Whose bodies do we make valuable and whose bodies are fungible?” Blackness is policed to produce uniform codes to identify what Blackness should look, act, think, and feel like. These uniform codes establish rules for belonging and exclusion (Campt, 2017).

Frank Wilderson III (2017) in his lecture Irreconcilable Anti-Blackness, stated: “Blackness gives police power, but also disrupts police power.” I want to remix Wilderson’s words to refine this point. It should read: “bounded Blackness gives police power, but unbounded Blackness disrupts police power.” I theorize that Wilderson is describing police power in two ways: (a) police as in governmental agents that maintain “civility” and (b) an ensemble of white people that utilize a system of whiteness to police Black people. Bounded Blackness gives police power, when Blackness is objectified (criminal, thug, nigger, radical). In recent years, this objectification of Blackness has led to a “the relentless rhythm of horrifically similar murders of unarmed black cis, trans, queer, and gender nonconforming youth and the unlawful arrest and brutalization of black folk of all genders by police officers across the U.S” (Campt, 2017, p. 103). Bounded Blackness also gives police power because they have the authority to stop Black movement. If any Black body moves in and out of space, the role of police is to “arrest” the body. Black movement is criminal as “the Negro must be still” (Moten, 2017, p. 62). Unbounded Blackness, however, intimidates a system of interlocking structures predicated on uniformity, violence, hierarchy, and law. Unbounded Blackness can disrupt police
power by stretching those interlocking systems past their limit, causing them to rupture. This collectively breaking of rules is how we make the law bend towards justice (Moten, 2017). Unbounded Blackness dispossesses us from the subjection of whiteness and white supremacy.

I theorize that our way of knowing, feeling, and thinking about Blackness is irreparable because it is continuously felt in a state of “brokenness” by the brutal hands of white supremacy. This brokenness makes it feel like there is something inherently dysfunctional about Black people. It is the reason Dubois’ (1903) question: “How does it feel to be a problem?” continues to hang over our heads. Moreover, this question continues to be fetishized inside and outside academia, as there is an abundance of literature that speaks to the pathology of Blackness and laws that “fix” those problems. To associate Blackness to the concept of “being a problem” is to cement this understanding of what it means to be Black in white America (Yancy, 2005). Black people’s relationship to Blackness is not predicated on a locus of self-definition but from a locus of obvious imposed meaning from white people (Yancy, 2005). I doubt this was Dubois’ intentions when he wrote Souls of Black Folk, but it is indicative of how our “racial experiences” can be reduced to feed and entertain the white imaginary (Yancy, 2005). Blackness has been sullied, maligned, criminalized and condemned by white supremacy.

What remains is this dangerous trap of “holding Blackness back.” What holds Blackness back? Black people being dispossessed of the freedom to study and explore Blackness. In Black Skin, White Masks, Fanon (2008) speaks of this denial, “Simple enough one has only not to be a nigger... in my case everything takes on a new guise. I am the slave not of an idea others have of me but of my own appearance” (p. 87, also cited Wilderson III, 2010, p. 37). The tension that arises from this is that the ontology of the white/Black position is the “binary of non-niggerness and slavery as niggerness” (Wilderson III, 2010, p. 37). Theorizing from Fanon and Wilderson,
Black people are unable to define themselves beyond being a “nigger” or a “slave” because whiteness is affixed to Blackness. Black people are being held captive from exploring the aesthetics of Blackness. There is so much to explore and study in the ever-expansive space of Blackness. I would rather explore the unexplored than stay within the confines of something narrowly defined by others. We must consent not to be these single beings by letting Blackness blur. “So, what do we do?” Well, let me reintroduce Moten and Harney’s (2013) quote, the “only thing we can do is tear this shit down completely and build something new” (Moten & Harney, 2013, p. 13). We need to tear down the binding that holds Blackness in place and let it be what it is: infinite. This “call” is not for the end of Blackness, but it is a call to end a world that seeks to enclose Blackness. It is to end the world where defining/restricting Blackness makes sense. Who knows what new structures will be replaced with the ones we already have, but Black people will decide. I think about that point vis-à-vis Baraka’s (1969) poem Leroy, “When I die, the consciousness I carry I will to black people. May they pick me apart and take the useful parts, the sweet meat of my feelings. And leave the bitter bullshit rotten white parts alone” (Baraka, 1991, p. 224). Baraka’s offering is (1) reclamation of the Black body as a site of knowledge and expression (Benston, 2000) and (2) a daily call of refusal and consent; negation and affirmation. Theorizing on Baraka’s words, he is “calling” us to pick through useful parts of ourselves that are important to us (individually and collectively) and leave behind the parts that are entangled with the white discourse. This notion also speaks to Mr. Love Supreme himself, John Coltrane in these quotes:

There is never any end. ... There are always new sounds to imagine, new feelings to get at. And always, there is the need to keep purifying these feelings and sounds so that we can really see what we've discovered ... So that we can see more clearly what we are .... But to do that at each stage, we have to keep on cleaning the mirror (as cited in Benston, 2000, p. 171).
The whole question of life itself; my life in which there are many things on which I don't think I've reached a final conclusion; there are matters I don't think I've covered completely, and all these things have to be covered before you make your music sound any way. You have to grow to know. (Valerie Wilmer, "Conversation with Coltrane," 1962, p. 4)

Black aesthetics is the jazz improvisation of not being finished yet (Crawford, 2017). There is no finality because you are constantly “purifying” new thoughts and sounds every day to grow. As a result, Blackness will never be irreducible. Blackness is the Barakaian “changing same,” where Blackness makes us, to unmake us, to be remade again. Its power lies in that it is undefined. By leaving it undefined, Blackness remains infinite, leaving room for every one Black. EVERYONE! It allows us, paraphrasing on Issa Rae’s (2017) words to: “root for every one Black.” Not only are we betting on the multiplicity of Blackness, but we are embracing Black people as they are. Black Boy Joy operates through this quotidian practice of deconstruction and reconstruction –the interplay between refusal and consent. It is through these practices that Black males can find joy. Moreover, by Blackness remaining infinitely unbounded, we can invite more people into the Black study and embrace the Black Radical Tradition. This was evident in a Black collective called BLKARTSOUTH.

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Track # 6: BLKARTSOUTH

In this Black study of Black Boy Joy, one of the Black Arts theaters that I am indebted to is the BLKARTSOUTH. BLKARTSOUTH began as a workshop that grew out of the civil rights era Free Southern Theater and became a site of Black Power (Crawford, 2017). BLKARTSOUTH was a group of emerging Black poets, playwrights, and Black artists that developed and showcased their work throughout the south (Thompson, 2016). The purpose was
to apply a southern orientation to Black aesthetics. BLKARTSOUTH was not a gesture of erasure, but a gesture of space clearing for Blackness. It was a response to the boundedness of Blackness by whiteness. What whiteness sought to contain, BLKARTSOUTH blurred, like a child that colors inside, on, and outside the pre-made lines of an object. BLKARTSOUTH answered Bob Marley’s question (1980) if Blackness could be loved?” Yes, and hell yes.

If the BAM was a Black study, then BLKARTSOUTH was a Black study group. It was a collective of grassroots Black artists who provided a “gumbo-like mix of visual images, poetry, prose poetry, plays, and essays” (Crawford, 2017, p. 127). BLKARTSOUTH used the food metaphor of “gumbo” because (1) there are no strict or fixed recipes for gumbo and (2) the group wanted to treat the Black arts like poetry and other works as ingredients and not the final dish (Crawford, 2017, p. 137). Gumbo is a unique dish because, like Blackness, it is limitless. There is no set recipe so that everyone can make their version of gumbo. Moreover, no matter how many ingredients you add to gumbo, there is always room for more. Added ingredients do not overpower the others because there is space. Continuing this metaphor, BLKARTSOUTH is like a jazz band because they have a “gumbo” element at play. This study group, like a jazz band, simultaneously prides itself on the power of collectively, but also prides itself on working apart. The study group works collectively apart through jazz improvisation. It is okay to do so because space is cleared for this collective “solitude” (Crawford, 2017). Everyone is seen together but heard individually. That is a “gumbo” element at play.

BLKARTSOUTH situated Black people as the form. That life is a work of art, and Black people used themselves as art to critique the cultural capital of white institutions. It was the refusal of being objectified. Alice Walker’s (1973) Everyday Use critiqued dominant institutions that collected and separated Blackness from the “streets and screams of Black folk” (Crawford,
It is the idea that Blackness is NOT FOR SALE because it belongs Black people. It speaks back to the idea that you cannot separate the aesthetics from the ethics. You cannot separate the work of art from the living art form (Crawford, 2017, p. 147). There is no distance between Black artists and Black folk; they are one.

The art from the BLKARTSOUTH was a quotidian performance of “gumbo,” a living dimension that embraced everyone. Within America, there was always a search for identity, as it was continually bubbling. The passion of Black artists created a *break*, which allowed the bubbling identities to emerge to the surface (Crawford, 2017). By clearing space for Blackness, there was room for everyone (Crawford, 2017). It was Black consciousness-raising at the highest levels because there was room for everyone to be an artist and showcase their lived experience. The endless range of Black aesthetics unsettled the very ideas of what Blackness is and how should it be performed. The beauty and joy of BLKARTSOUTH were that it continued to invite Black people into a Black Radical Tradition that was always moving, bouncing, and bending formation. It continued to affirm the notion that there is no singular Black experience or Black aesthetic because Blackness is groundless (Benston, 2000). Black aesthetics is this lingering between what is, what was and what will be. It is the memory of the past, the acknowledgment of the present, and the focus on the future.

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**Track #7: Black Boy Joy: A Love Supreme and the Riffing Rift**

Dear John, Dear Coltrane
Why you so black?
cause I am
why you so funky?
cause I am
why you so black?
cause I am

43
why you sweet?
cause I am
why you so black?
cause I am
a love supreme, a love supreme – (Michael Harper, 1978, p. 74-75)

Being engaged within a Black study, I theorize that Black Boy Joy descends from the intellectual genealogy of the Black Radical Tradition by refusing the systems of whiteness and white supremacy. Black Boy Joy is a cultural aesthetic that seeks the reclamation of Black stories, voices, and identities through the arts and humanities. Black Boy Joy is the quotidian practice of refusing the impossibility and illegibility of Black males. It is saying no to the terms, codes, rules, laws of white supremacy that subjugate us (Campt, 2017). Moreover, Black Boy Joy is the refusal to passively wait for a future that envisions their humanity. It is a refusal to how Black males have been described and objectified; a refusal to the “acceptable” range of emotions that we are supposed to encompass. Within these disavowals, Black males create spaces of affirmation where they are felt, heard, seen, and matter. This premise illuminates the importance of #BlackLivesMatter movement (Garza, Cullors & Tometi, 2013). The movement affirms Black humanity by foregrounding our feltsounds of our voices. It is “the refusal to be refused,” (Moten & Harney (2013, p. 96) the “refusal to stay in one’s proper place,” (Butler & Athanasiou, 2013, p. 21) and “the possibility to live unbounded lives” (Gilmore, 2013, as cited in Campt, 2017, p. 34). Black Boy Joy is a social and spiritual practice that gives Black males the future that they want now!

The incantation of “I am” in Harper’s poem is powerful. It is an internal and external chant; an anthem, a reminder to live and be alive. I am is about the importance of this continuity of writing yourself into existence. It is a “declaration of tenderness” to remind you that your life matters and that despite our “terrible” circumstances that there is a joy about being Black. This is
the social and spiritual practice of Blackness (Moten, 2017). You are always (re)writing yourself into existence to find a love supreme. This is the social and spiritual practice of Black Boy Joy. Black Boy Joy is about this “spiritual freedom” despite the odds you face. It is about “this self-commitment to an exalted state” (Benston, 2000, p.120). This spiritual freedom is the love supreme that Coltrane played to the heavens. A love supreme in an anti-Black world is a Black joy. As a Black male in America, I am reminded that I do not deserve joy – that my Black body is “illegible” (Neal, 2013). I am reminded that the trauma and the legacy of slavery will devour my soul (Charles, 2017). You never hear about joyful Black males, because joy is something that is stolen at the time of boyhood because Black boyhood is “socially unimagined and unimaginable” (Dumas & Nelson, 2016). Black boyhood is denied because Black boys are not seen as children or humans, but as racist caricatures. Black boys are never fully given the spaces to be where they can explore their masculinity, sexuality, spirituality, and identity without limits. In essence, Black boys are not given the freedom to be with their feelings or express them – because they were not supposed to. Lorde (2007) stated, “For within living structures defined by profit, by linear power, by institutional dehumanization, our feelings were not meant to survive” (p. 43). Black feelings were never supposed to survive through white supremacy. Black Boy Joy is revolutionary because it ruptures the structures that make Black boyhood socially unimagined and unimaginable and creates a space for them. Black Boy Joy is the “consent not to be a single being (Moten, 2017). It is the “irreducibility of Blackness” (Moten, 2017, p. 104). It is the negotiation within the double bind of negation and affirmation. Between the margins, between the borders of refusal and consent, within this “break,” is where Black joy lies. It is this “riffing rift,” as Blackness is a giant jazz improvisation. Black Boy Joy is irreducible because it is always
in a state of deconstruction and reconstruction, that keeps Black identities and Black Boy Joy free from the reproduction of whiteness and white supremacy (Moten, 2017).

“Is Black Boy Joy new?” Yes, and no. Black Boy Joy is a part of that “Changing Same” notion that Amiri Baraka (1963) talked about in Blues People. It is this double bind; as the more things change, the more they stay the same. Black Boy Joy is the fluctuation of feelings and identity. It is also the “purification of feelings and new feelings” that John Coltrane discussed (Benston, 2000). It is the purification of finding a “love supreme” – this presiding mode of exaltation (Benston, 2000). Arguably, Black Boy Joy is an endless Black study of finding what activities or actions give us joy and understanding why those thoughts, feelings, or sounds, give us that joy. It is about being in relation to the “erotic.”

When speaking about the erotic, I am not speaking about the Western usage of the erotic, which is pornographic. I am speaking to Audre Lorde’s (2007) usage of the erotic. The erotic is an inner knowledge base that guided by a person’s feelings. The erotic is a spiritual guide to understanding how we feel and desiring what we want. Lorde (2007) stated that “the erotic is not a question only of what we do; it is a question of how acutely and fully we can feel in the doing” (p. 59). Baldwin (2010) stated, “Now joy is a true state, it is a reality; it has nothing to do with what most people have in mind when they talk of happiness, which is not a real state and does not really exist” (p. 132). Joy is innate; it is a feeling or a set of feelings during an experience that is not only connected to the spiritual but to the political. The erotic is political – it is powerful, especially if you want to share any pursuit with another person (Lorde, 2007). As Gina Dent (1992) said, “Joy is a collective experience, or at least provides the possibility of one” (p. 2). Joy is meant to be shared because it serves as a bridge that connects one life to another. Joy is the basis of all deep physical, emotional, psychic, and intellectual relations. By moving from
within outward, joy breaks down the walls the separate the public and private spheres of life, opening both up to the possibility of, as Cornel West emphasized, “love, care, kindness, service, solidarity, the struggle for justice” (Dent, 1992, p. 1). By understanding the erotic and joy, you begin to rethink your daily actions, thoughts, and movements. You begin to improvise based off your internal knowledge. You ask yourself: “will this give me joy?” If the answer is no, then do not do it. How do you recognize joy when you find it? As Lorde (2007) simply stated, “It feels right to me” (p. 61). Joy will never feel wrong; it will never guide you to do wrong. Therefore, Black Boy Joy is not just a feeling, but coexistence with another kind of knowledge. It is a social and spiritual practice that all Black boys have access to. By writing this dissertation, it is my intention that we (re)connect Black boys to the joy that they have inside of them.

Emerging from the Black Arts Movement (BAM), Black Boy Joy has familiar, but unique “sounds” from its predecessor. While BAM focused on Black social and political collectively through the highlights of the Black struggle, Black Boy Joy specifically centers on where and how Black males experience joy in an anti-Black America. It refuses to make the “Black spectator/collaborator” continuously focus on their daily subjection to anti-Black racism, as they are aware of their oppression (Benston, 2000; Crawford, 2017). Black Boy Joy creates a space that simultaneously honors the Black struggle and rids of the fixation of the Black struggle (Crawford, 2017). This does not mean that Black males who engage in the social and spiritual practice of Black Boy Joy do not care about the subjection of anti-Black racism, it denotes a desire to create a space for joy. We cannot have a Black Liberation project without having space where Black people can love and nurture each other. If dismantling the structures that imprison Black people (civil society) is the ultimate goal, we as Black people must take care of ourselves
and our communities until that time. We still have to live, survive, and harness what we can within an anti-Black society.

Moreover, I argue that Black Boy Joy is the embodiment of the “blurring” various Black expressions, such as jazz improvisation, poetry, visual art, and griot culture. Griots are central to Black expression. Griots were the “masters of technique and information,” as they were the storytellers, poets, chroniclers, and artisans of family and national lore (Redmond, 1976, p.17). According to DeFrantz and Gonzalez (2014), “Black expression is a performance springs from the need to communicate beyond the limited events of words alone” (p. 3). It is to be in relation; “to be in dialogue simultaneously with itself, the world around it, and the lives of black people” (DeFrantz & Gonzalez, 2014, p. 3). Black Boy Joy is this “intimacy of shared presence”—this merging of the word with the music (Benston, 2000, p.118; 120). It is what Amiri Baraka called “musicked speech” (Melhem, 1994). In Amiri Baraka’s (1979) Black Art, he states:

We want a black poem. And a
Black World.
Let the world be a Black Poem
And Let All Black People Speak This Poem
Silently
or LOUD – (p.106-7)

Baraka is signifying that the world is a Black poem and that all Black people are the poets. I am expanding on Baraka’s poetic manifesto, adding that Black Boy Joy operates as “poetry in motion” – the wax-poetic in real life. June Jordan (1970) furthers this point in the introduction of her anthology, SoulScript: almost anywhere except the classroom…Afro-Americans are writing poetry…People live a poem every minute they spend in the world…Poetry changes life into a written drama where the words set the stage and where words then act as the characters on that stage…Poems are voiceprints of language (p. xix-xx). Speaking vis-à-vis Baraka (1979) and
Jordan (1970), if the world is a Black world and a Black poem, then everywhere we go is our “soapbox,” our “podium,” our “corner,” our “Revolutionary Theatre” (Baraka, 1965). This Revolutionary Theatre is a fluid social space that is trying to reconcile differences between ‘freedom dreams’ and reality” (Benston, 2000; Baraka, 1965). According to Du Bois (1926) the four guiding principles of the theater are: (1) the works must be about Black people, (2) the works must be by Black people, (3) the works must be for Black audiences, and (4) the works must be near where Black people reside. With Black works being shaped and reshaped by the world, the Revolutionary Theatre forces us to turn dreams into reality by employing our voice (Baraka, 1991). Our voice shapes the air into spoken personality (Jordan, 1970). These notions connected me to Jay-Z’s (2017) track BAM, where he says: “We are vessels, right? We’re whistles, the wind go through us. We make the noise.” The “winds” of social and political change flow through Black people to allow us to create multilayered frequencies of “sound.” It is this improvisatory tradition that continues to blur the distinction between poetry and music and the poetry of music (Moten, 2003, p. 60). These sounds not only emerge from the mouth but from the whole body (Moten, 2003). Dr. Tina Campt calls its “felt sound.” I call it “feltsound” because you cannot separate the experience of hearing and feeling sound. It is experienced together, simultaneously. Created by Black expression, Black Boy Joy is this the spectrum of feltsound. Feltsounds can be heard and felt, as they touch and move people (Campt, 2017). Feltsounds are nearly-silent to loud sounds that hum and vibrate off Black people into the cosmos (Campt, 2017). In relation to Lorde’s (2007) usage of the “erotic,” feltsounds are the movement of joy and knowledge from within, outward. When Black boys experience joy, feltsounds radiate out of them as an invitation to share their joy. By listening to each other’s feltsounds, Black boys can generate a collective knowledge, which is the aim of the erotic.
Majors and Billson (1993) provide a few examples of how the “feltsound” of Black expressiveness is displayed in a multitude of ways:

Speech becomes rapping. Nicknames furnish unique identities. Clothes and hairstyles take on a special panache. Walk, stance, gestures, and handshakes become the distinctive idiom of everyday encounters. Music and sports become stages for the expressive style, from high soprano voices of some black male singers to the personal signature many have affixed to sporting events. Dancing approaches art: The choreographed cool dance steps of soul music are rivaled by the more recent breakdancing and other new dance forms (p. 71).

The poetic expressiveness of Black males produces sounds—songs that tell a feeling, tell a relationship and tell a story (Jordan, 1970). These modalities signify a few examples of how Black expression crafts language, crafts poetry, and crafts sound. Black expression creates a “breath of subjectivity” by illuminating poetic sounds and quotidian practices of Black Boy Joy (DeFrantz & Gonzalez, 2014, p. 5).

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**Track #8: The Case for BlackCrit**

Black Critical Race Theory or BlackCrit descends from a long line of theoretical race-based frameworks, such as Critical Race Theory (CRT). BlackCrit is the ontological understanding of what it means to be Black in an anti-Black world (More, 2012). It is the “Black study” that illuminates on the mode of existence for Black people. Being engaged in this Black study raises the question of, “What does it mean to be a Black person in an anti-Black world?” (More, 2012). BlackCrit is the theorization on the Black condition and explicitly focuses on the Black body and generally how the Black/White paradigm affects Blackness and the lived experience of Black people (Roberts, 1999; Dumas & Ross, 2016). BlackCrit is not essentialist, as it does not name and describe an essential Black identity, but focuses on the identities,
experiences, and aspirations of Black people (Roberts, 1999). BlackCrit embodies Crenshaw’s (1991) theory of *Intersectionality* because the Black experience is not centered on one social location but on the acknowledgment of Black difference across social locations (Dumas & Ross, 2016). BlackCrit speaks to my understandings and appreciation of the BLKARTSOUTH collective, which harkens on the idea that there is room for everybody that is Black. BlackCrit possesses the ability to interrogate the complexities and nuances of Blackness and Black subjugation, as well as, possesses the depth to capture the composite of Black life (Dumas & Ross, 2016). Moreover, BlackCrit provides the context of why Black people engage in actions of resistance and refusal within the Black Radical Tradition. If Black aesthetics explain a desire to build and create a Black world of freedom and joy, BlackCrit explains the Black desire to tear down the structures that imprison and dispossess Black people of freedom and joy. An intellectual project within BlackCrit that critically examines Blackness in the anti-Black world is Afro-Pessimism.

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**Track # 9: Afro-Pessimism & Antiblackness: The Social Death**

What white people have to do is try and find out in their own hearts why it was necessary to have a nigger in the first place, because I'm not a nigger,” he said. “I'm a man, but if you think I'm a nigger, it means you need it… If I'm not a nigger and you invented him -- you, the white people, invented him -- then you've got to find out why. – James Baldwin (Baldwin, 1963, as cited in Anderson, 2017)

“Between me and the other world there is ever an unasked question…How does it feel to be a problem?” – W.E.B. Dubois (Dubois, 1903)

Professor Frank Wilderson (2010) explored the state of Black ontology in contemporary society and set the foundation for the new base of scholarship called Afro-Pessimism (Massa, 2014). It is good to note that not everyone who writes about, Afro-Pessimism, would define
themselves as an Afro-Pessimists. Afro-Pessimism is a Black study within a Black study; a meta-commentary of Black people’s subjection to anti-Black racism. Afro-Pessimists seek the answer to the questions that Wilderson (2010) eloquently stated, “What is a Black? A subject? An object? A former slave? A slave?...“What does it mean to be free?”...“What does it mean to suffer?” (p. xi-xii). Afro-Pessimism is an epistemological and ethical project that produces a political ontology of an anti-Black society (Sexton, 2016). Afro-Pessimism affirms the collective negation of Blackness by formulating a grammar of suffering and of antagonism, which examines the position of the “Black” (Wilderson, 2010, p. 2; 5). According to Wilderson (2010), the Black is, “a subject who is already positioned as a Slave;” a “paradigmatic impossibility,” and “the very antithesis of the Human subject” (p. 7; 9). The Black, because of their position is confronted and subjected to gratuitous psychological, epistemic, intellectual, and physical violence (Sexton, 2016). Afro-Pessimists theorize that the entire world’s semantic field is structured by an anti-Black solidarity and seeks to reframe racism as a “relation grounded in antiblackness rather than white supremacy, as the world is structured on racial slavery” (Wilderson, 2010, p. 58; Sexton, 2016). According to Sexton (2016):

Afro-Pessimism does not only describe the operations of systems, structures and institutions, but also, and perhaps more importantly, the fantasies of murderous hatred and unlimited destruction, of sexual consumption and social availability that animate the realization of such violence (p. 6).

Afro-Pessimism displays how the anti-Black world shapes and structures every aspect of Black existence and how people need to think about Blackness and agency together in an “ethical manner” (Wilderson, 2010, p. 143).

Why are Blackness and Black people problematized? Why are people against the Black? I theorize that these are some of the questions that Dubois (1903) thought about when he asked
about the “problem.” The problem that Dubois (1903) posed in his work *The Souls of Black Folks* was about Blackness and Black people. From the advent of chattel slavery, throughout American history, identity and agency have been a source of frustration, disappointment, and despair for the Black community, especially for Black males (McGuire et al., 2014). Orlando Patterson’s (1982) book *Slavery and Social Death* was the first, full-scale comparative study about the nature of slavery. Slavery was more complicated than property relation, as slavery was an ideology anchored in violence. Patterson discussed the effects that slavery had upon the Black body:

There is an overwhelming concentration of the profound natal alienation of the slave. The slave’s isolation, his strangeness that made him most valuable to the master, but it was his very strangeness that most threatened the community. On the cognitive and mythic level, one dominant theme emerges, which lends an unusually loaded meaning to the act of natal alienation: this is the social death of the slave (Patterson, 1982, p. 38).

Patterson (1982) wrote that slavery “is the permanent, violent domination of natally alienated and generally dishonored persons” (as cited in Wilderson, 2010, p. 14). Slavery is less about forced labor, but more about an affixed position – a power relation between those who are slaves and who are not (Wilderson, 2010). In this Master/Slave dichotomy, the slave is an ontological status for Blackness. The condition of Blackness is to be natally alienated to be accumulated (Wilderson, 2010). From their birth, the enslaved are prevented from having any social relations at all, which is known as “social negation” (Patterson, 1982). This negation is crucial because it denies the enslaved any sense of humanity, kinship, or belonging in the world. They become “socially dead” to the world. Without agency, the Black body became fungible, as enslaved Black males were bought, sold, or traded without their permission. In a lecture entitled *An Ecology of Things*, Fred Moten (2011), said, “Consider that we live within a history of a
double violation. The denigration of things and the coincident devaluation of people.” Black people are affixed to this double violation because Black bodies are “things”; disposable objects. Black Fungibility coupled with social demise, eradicated any subjectivity that Black people once had. They became visible and invisible assets. They became men with no future.

Authors such as Franz Fanon (2008), Hortense Spiller (1987), David Marriott (2007) Jared Sexton (2008; 2017), Saidiya Hartman (1997; 2006), and Lewis Gordon (1995) expanded upon this concept and offered new insights into the experiences of slavery and the Middle Passage. They have all argued in different variations that slavery had left an ontological imprint upon the Black body; an indelible mark; “hieroglyphics of the flesh” (Spiller, 1987) which defined them as less than human (Massa, 2014). Deemed less than human, Black people have been subjected to violence without analog because they are ontologically positioned outside of humanity or civil society (Wilderson, 2010). The grammars of suffering and antagonism explain how the essence of the Black being is to be the captor’s being. This structural adjustment within this carceral continuum is not just a Black experience, but a condition of Black life, even after slavery “ended” after the Civil War. Wilderson examined the dialectic struggle of Blackness during the “afterlife of slavery.” This continuum remained constant throughout Reconstruction, Jim Crow, the Civil Rights Movement, and the prison-industrial complex (Wilderson, 2010). Wilderson asserted that the same conditions of slavery and the social death existed throughout and after chattel slavery because the Middle passage created antiblackness (Massa, 2014, Wilderson, 2017).

Paraphrasing Wilderson (2017), antiblackness is the DNA of civil society because antiblackness is a pre-requisite for world-making. According to Dumas (2016), “antiblackness insists that Black humanity is a paradigmatic impossibility because Black is the very antithesis of
a human subject” (p. 12). Blackness and Black people, through this framework, are not only “other,” but other than human. Violence is directed towards Black people because they are ontologically positioned outside of civil society (Wilderson, 2010). Antiblackness scholarship, is driven by the interrogation of Black suffering, examines the psychosomatic and physical assault on Black flesh, the constant surveillance, mutilation and murder of Black people (Dumas, 2016). Dumas and Ross (2016) contended that Black people are “socially dead,” as they are denied humanity, agency, and citizenship. Black people’s existence is constructed as a problem—for white people, for the public (good), for the nation-state (Dumas, 2016). Antiblackness asserts that Black people can never be a part of civil society, because civil society is predicated on the Black body being the “slave,” to maintain its parasitic habits that are crucial to its survival (Wilderson, 2017). The anti-Black state by necessity feeds and thrives on the plight and murder of Black people. Wilderson (2010) concluded that:

Whiteness is parasitic because it monumentalizes its subjective capacity, its lush cartography, in direct proportion to the wasteland of Black incapacity. By ‘capacity’ I have meant something more than comprehensive than ‘the event’ and it causal elements and something more indeterminate than ‘agency’. We should think of it as a kind of facility or matrix through which possibility itself can be elaborated. Without the Negro, capacity itself is incoherent. (p. 45).

White civil society needs the Black body to be a slave to maintain its subjectivity. By creating the “other,” you maintain your subjectivity by comparing yourself to the other and question their subjectivity. Antiblackness causes Black people to be labeled as “alien” – as a stranger. To be “stranger” as Ahmed (2012) described is, “an experience of not being white…the one who is recognized as ‘out of place,’ the one who does not belong” (p. 2). White people can never be strangers because institutions are created in their “universal” image. Lewis Gordon (1999) said that “White people are universal…and Black people are not” (p. 34). To be white is to be
universal and to be Black is to be particular (Ahmed, 2017). While being Black is surmised as a particular experience, antiblackness feels like it is a *universal experience*. To be Black is not to be a person, but a body in question – existence, becomes a form of political labor (Ahmed, 2017). As Morgan Parker (2019) put it, “My body is an argument I did not start. In a way I am not aware who made me” (p. 22). The Black body is inscribed with meaning that is not our own. It is made and made to be out of place because of whiteness. As a result, the existence of Black life is always in a state of questioning. The “I am” becomes “am I?” as anti-Black racism is the experience of racial gaslighting.

In a country founded on antiblackness, Black people under this structure are not considered subjects and never will be. Black people are “political currency” to be utilized for white people. Subjectivity is a reoccurring theme for Black people, as they are always denied being full subjects under the current conditions. Black people live in a constant state of emergency as civil society is stabilized by their subjugation (Wilderson, 2010). Black people live in a constant of rage. As Baldwin (1961) finely said, “To be a Negro in this country and to be relatively conscious, is to be in a rage almost all the time” (p. 205). Antibilackness is the wall the separates subjects from non-subjects.

**Track # 10: Antibilackness As The Wall**

The walls...They hold up the master’s residence; the family home…If the walls could talk, what would they say? We need the walls to talk. What a story…(Ahmed, 2017, p. 220).

Walls are hard; they can be visible; they can also be invisible. Walls can be perceptions, gestures, and atmospheres (Ahmed, 2017). Walls can be violence. Social science scholars spend a tremendous amount of pathologizing Black children without describing the walls that they face every day. Some scholars could argue that “whiteness is a wall,” but that notion is already a given because institutions are created in the image of “white men” (Ahmed, 2017). What needs to be stressed and is not stressed enough is how antiblackness is the wall. Antiblackness is the wall speaks to the permanence of Black suffering within schools. We cannot ensure the futurity of Black children without addressing how antiblackness is the wall.

Anti-Black violence is structural, but the violence is not always physical. Anti-Black violence can be more insidious than that. Laura S. Brown (1995) mentioned that “insidious trauma,” is a structure of violence where “the traumatogenic effects of oppression that are not necessarily overtly violent or threatening to bodily well-being at the given moment but that do violence to the soul and the spirit” (p. 107). Chanae D. Bazemore (2013) furthered that point by suggesting, “the aspects of [insidious] trauma that are attached to and repeated through cultural, queer, racial, gendered, class, and socio-economic structures. Leaving ontological wounds and scars, “violence” is trafficked towards Black people through various social locations daily. In Nihilism in Black America, Cornel West (1992) stated that:

> These wounds and scars attack black intelligence, black ability, black beauty, and black character daily in subtle and not-so-subtle ways. The accumulated effects of these wounds and scars produces a deep-seated anger, a boiling sense of rage, and a passionate pessimism regarding America’s will to justice (as cited in Dent & Wallace, p. 42).

As an educator, the place you see this questioning, this wounding, and this insidious trauma is in schools.
Within schools, Black boys suffer because antiblackness is the wall, designed to keep Black boys in their “place.” Schools, “revolve around middle-class white norms and expectations” (Majors & Billson, 1994, p. 14). Therefore, upon arrival to school, Black boys are “constructed as wrong, inappropriate, not enough” (Dumas, 2018, p. 39). Dumas (2018) further stated that “antiblackness positions dark bodies as already bad; to be Black is to be always bad, and to be in urgent need of disciplining” (p. 38). To be Black is to be inherently deviant or criminal, and therefore, insidious trauma is trafficked to Black boys. The suffering of Black children is invisible and largely inconsequential because the discursive practices of “racial progress” and “meritocracy” within the context of schooling do not embrace the humanity of Black lives. For Black boys, suffering is ubiquitous; it becomes mundane – it becomes assumed – it becomes invisible. In essence, Black boys cannot be.

When Black boys cannot take the insidious trauma that trafficked their way, what happens? They SNAP! Snapping is the reaction to the pressure applied to Black boys (Ahmed, 2017). Snapping is the refusal to take any more – the breaking of relations, as it is the limit of the pressure that they can endure. Educators should view snapping as a good thing because it shows us that a limit has been reached. Unfortunately, teachers and administrators do not because snapping is not a white expectation or a norm. This is because as Ahmed (2017) eloquently stated, “Pressure is hard to notice unless you are under that pressure. Snap is only the start of something because of what we do not notice” (p. 189). White children do not “snap” because trauma is not trafficked toward them because the white body is not made to be a stranger in school – let alone anywhere. When Black boys snap in school, it is deemed as a sudden outburst, with no acknowledgment of withstanding the pressure. Black boys are punished because they are judged to be violent. Ahmed (2017) said, “When a snap is registered as the origin of violence,
the one who snaps is deemed violent” (p. 189). Some would argue that Black boys need to be more resilient – resilience is what they lack. I would argue that resilience is an anti-Black concept. Resilience, “encourage bodies to strengthen so they will not succumb to pressure; so they can keep taking it” (Ahmed, 2017, p. 189). The question becomes, why do we want Black boys to take more pressure, more trauma? Moreover, resilience erases the pressure that Black boys bared, but also rewards Black boys for taking more pressure. Resilience does not critique the system that continues applies pressure to them. Antiblackness is that the wall.

As educators, as parents, as community members, the question becomes: “how do we attune our ears to hear the sound of the snap and know what it means?” How do we re-describe the world from the views of Black boys? How do we discuss the wall of anti-Black violence without problematizing the lives of Black children? Stopping the flow of anti-black violence directed towards Black boys is part of the mission. Breaking down the anti-Black wall is part of the mission. While my dissertation may not necessarily stop the flow or break down the wall, it does continue to illuminate the scope and magnitude of the perverseness of antiblackness.

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**Track # 11: Help Me I am the Prisoner: The Cry of Jazz**

Help me I'm the prisoner, won't you hear my plea  
I need somebody, yeah, to listen to me  
I beg you, brothers and sisters, I'm counting on you (yeah) – Gil Scot-Heron, “The Prisoner, 1971

Jazz is merely the negro’s cry of joy and suffering. – “Lewis” in The Cry of Jazz, Bland, Hill, Kennedy and Titus (1959, also cited in Dixson & Rousseau, 2006, p. 213)
What walls also do: they create prisoners. Edward Bland’s (1959) film entitled *The Cry of Jazz* explored the felt sounds produced by the grammars of suffering and antagonism. The conversation that held within the film is a microcosm of the Black experience in America. Jazz is unquestionably a product of Black life and Black expressive culture (Bailey, 2017). The film compared jazz to a direct extension of the social realities that Black people experience. The film looks at the joy and suffering of Black life. Moreover, the film poses the ontological question of what is jazz, similar to Wilderson’s (2010) question of what is a Black? Bland’s (1959) film helped me theorize that jazz is the flesh and the body of the Black. In America, jazz is structured as the Black, as the slave; therefore it is captured to be fungible and accumulated. This would explain how jazz and the Black are subjected to suffering and antagonism through the ever-present contradiction of freedom and restraint:

Negro life… as created through jazz, is a contradiction between worship of the present, freedom, and joy, and the realization of the futureless future, restraint, and suffering – which the American way of life has bestowed atop the negro. The cry of joy and suffering in jazz, is then based on the ever-present contradiction between freedom and restraint. The feeling of freedom is based on the negro’s view of what life in America should be, while the feeling of restraint is based on the actual inhuman situation in which the negro finds himself. – “Alex” in the Cry of Jazz (1959)

The sonority of jazz is emblematic of the Black experience, as the sounds signify this tension between freedom and restraint. The restraint in jazz is caused by the way that the jazz form operates. The basic form of jazz is the chorus, as it repeats itself endlessly, without getting anywhere (Bland, 1959). The endless repetition is like a chain around the spirit and reflects the denial of the social life of Black people. Another restraining factor in jazz are the changes. The changes are the harmonies, which are the patterns and the materials that are played through the rhythm section. These pattern of the changes are repeated over and over (Bland, 1959). The form
and the changes repeat over and over in the same way that Black people experienced daily anti-Black racism in American life, which gives them a futureless future. Black people become people with no future.

Black people experience every emotion that every white American else feels but happen to be Black. In America, but also in the world, there is a “hazard of being Negro” (Bland, 1959). This hazard begins before a Black person is birthed and extends beyond death (Trayvon Martin, Eric Garner, Tamir Rice). This is similar to how the Black is structured as a slave and is subjected to natal alienation from birth. It speaks to the social death of Blackness and the structures of antiblackness. The difficulty of being Black is to be aware of the psychological, epistemic, intellectual, and physical violence (Sexton, 2016), but triumphing despite those hazards. It speaks to Baraka’s (1970) “In our terribleness, there is joy in our survival.” Jazz is the musical expression of the triumph of the Negro spirit over those Black hazards (Bland, 1959).

Playing jazz is about embracing the joy in the present moment of life, despite the circumstances. It is the deification of the present. Black joy within the moment is “the Black person’s answer to America’s attempts to obliterate him” (Bland, 1959). Moreover, jazz is Black people’s musical pathway of being in a state of eternal recreation. This speaks to Coltrane’s (1965) *A Love Supreme*, as Black people are constantly recreating themselves to find exaltation and spiritual freedom. This search for joy and recreation is happening through the spontaneity of jazz improvisation. Black people, like jazz musicians, must constantly recreate themselves to be free from the Master/Slave relation. Jazz, in a sense, can be seen as Moten and Harvey’s (2013) *Undercommons*. Jazz as a genre is a space within a space that allows Black people to engage in a Black study. It is a place of refuge or enlightenment, but also a holding pattern until they are the masters of their future and freedom. By being in this holding pattern, jazz musicians are finding
the joy within the moment by the constant reformation of themselves but are waiting to find the path to Black liberation. Like jazz, Black Boy Joy is about playing within the moment to find joy in America.

One of the most important aspects of *The Cry of Jazz* is that jazz is dead and that it is a necessary death. Jazz is dead because of the restraint of how it operates. This relates to my theorization of how Blackness is constrained by how has been defined and operationalized. Blackness and the Black body are policed and constrained of movement. Afro-Pessimists frame the *Black* as socially dead to the world because it is structured as other than human. Jazz is the Black body because it is not positioned to be alive. It is not necessarily the Black body that must die, but the structures that surround the Black body, must die for it to live. It speaks to Moten and Harney’s (2013) tearing down the structures that deny the possibility of Black life. This is why Black musicians wanted to *free jazz*; this is why Black Arts activists wanted to redefine Black aesthetics, and these Afro-Pessimists want to end civil society. The structures must die, for Blackness and Black people to live. Afro-Pessimism as bleak as it can be seeks for the possibility of Black life. Paradoxically, Afro-Pessimism is *Black Optimism* (Moten, 2013).

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**The Epilogue: Joy, Hauntings, and the Margins of the Anti-Black World**

If you are still reading this, a question that you may ask is: “What does studying Black Boy Joy make possible?” Besides capturing and showcasing the joy of Black males; Black Boy Joy makes three other things possible: (1) new frameworks for Black masculinity, (2) the exploration of hauntings (Gordon, 1997) at the margins, and (3) the use of Black experimental writing in social science research. Since Black Boy Joy is the refusal of the appropriating gaze of settler colonialism and white supremacy, it rejects all the stereotypes and caricatures created by
those structures. Slaves desire to be free, and by refusing those stereotypes and caricatures, Black males can create and embody masculinities that they desire. This speaks to Athena Mutua’s (2006) theoretical framework of Progressive Black Masculinities (PBM). Mutua (2006) stated:

Progressive [Black] masculinities...personally eschew and actively stands against social structures of domination and...value, validate, and empower [Black] humanity ... ... at a minimum, [they are] pro-[Black] and antiracist as well as pro-feminist and anti-sexist ... They are decidedly not dependent and or not predicated on the subordination of others (p. 7).

PBM is a pro-feminist, pro-Black, anti-sexist and anti-racist framework that affirms the possibility that alternative masculinities outside of hegemonic masculinity exist and provide a roadmap for Black males to travel. PBM is not an end goal, but a continual guide, like a jazz improvisation. It is the social and spiritual practice of becoming; the social and spiritual practice of I am. It is about (re)writing yourself and your future into existence.

Black Boy Joy explores the marginality of social and political structures because its power of affirmation and negation is situated there. Power is a complex entity because it can simultaneously be “visible and invisible”; “fantastic and dull”; and “systematic and particularistic” (Gordon, 1997, p. 1). Power possesses the ability for dreams to live and die, as it arrives in different forms (i.e., white supremacy, state-sanctioned terror). To study the social life of people, you must confront its ghosts (Gordon, 1997). Analyzing hauntings generates a more complex understanding of social structures throughout time. The permanence of oppressive social structures haunts the Black experience in America. Exploring those hauntings of white supremacy and settler colonialism provides a broader context of the dialectics of violence and hatred that Black people had to endure under its elusive power (Gordon, 1997). These hauntings
occur because of the dialectics between subjection and subjectivity in the social world (Gordon, 1997).

Gordon’s (1997) concept of “complex personhood” puts into perspective that everyone is haunted, even those that haunt our dominant institutions. It speaks to Moten and Harney’s (2013) understanding that the social world causes all of us to suffer and that certain structures must be removed. Moreover, complex personhood helped me understand how my father suffered because of the troubles of his social world. Growing up in an America that openly embraced Jim Crow segregation, my father’s world was haunted by white supremacy and abject poverty. In America, Black people are ghosts and are haunted by ghosts. Through theorizing and utilizing refusal, I am see how my father was invisible to white America as a “ghost,” but was hyper-visible as a Black man whose humanity was denied daily. His wounds became mine, as he began to haunt me. Though my father gave me joy, he also stole the joy of my childhood. I used to have a narrow view of how my father was, but now I understand that he became the man that he was because he was haunted. As an adult, I have wondered what haunted him and how the spaces he lived were haunted by white supremacy. Moreover, I began to wonder how his joy was denied, or if he had any in his lifetime. I continued to wonder if he had the same experience with his father and fathers before them. I came to the understanding that generations of Gilmores could have systematically been haunted and denied joy. What if one of the functions of white supremacy is this denial of joy in a father-son relationship and my relationship with my dad was a microcosm of it? As I theorized about the past, I thought about the future and began to wonder what my relationship with my son would be like. Would I haunt him? I am haunted by the idea that I could haunt him. I am haunted by the idea that I could become like my father. I had to do something about it, I have to break the circle to remake the circle. Exploring hauntings and
writing about the ghost of my father, repairs the “representational mistakes” I had of him because of white supremacy. It contextualizes the conditions under which my memories of him were made and provides a way to form new memories, counter-memories of my father (Gordon, 1997).

Lastly, Black Boy Joy has provided me the “tools” to write the dissertation on my terms. Black experimental writing spoke directly to the Black community because it is the textual performance of capturing the sounds of Black folklore (Crawford, p. 130). These sounds were musical storytelling. Music tells my story, it tells (his)story, (her)story, their(story), and (our)story. In an interview with David Frost, Amiri Baraka (1969) told him, “What is important to me is the ability to talk to black people, not the ability to make you understand. Do you understand that?” (as cited in Reilly, 1994, p. 70). Like Baraka, I am not writing in this style to make white people understand Black people, more specifically Black Boy Joy. I am writing this to speak to the hearts and minds of Black people.

To accomplish that, I had to find my own voice. It is easy to get lost and to lose your voice within academia. I tried my best to be this social science researcher that universities desire, but I realized that it did not work for me. Black Boy Joy has helped me find “my voice” by giving me the freedom to write the way that I want to write. Gloria Naylor believed that in order to have her own voice, it was necessary to clear space for “her own story,” a text among texts (Storhoff, 1995, p. 35). Naylor's quest for her own "voice" is, of course, a central concern for most Black writers, discovered in "the tension between the oral and the written modes of narration that is represented as finding a voice in writing" (Gates, 1988, p. 21). In order to find my voice, I had to refuse. At the highest level of knowledge production, I realized that I could not be anyone else, I could only be me. Norman Jordan’s (1968) poem, Be You spoke of this:
too many good poets/ are killing themselves/ trying to be like/ LeRoi Jones  Jones/ can take care/ of Jones/ Don Lee raps for Don Lee/ Larry Neal and Bill Russell/ create from Larry Neal and Bill Russell/ (and we are all blessed because they do)/ write your poem/ sing your song/ paint your picture/ Be your own Black self/ Be You. (as cited in Vibration, 1968, p. 13)

This dissertation was written as an act of refusal of how research is constructed in academic institutions. This dissertation is the refusal to be reduced to a traditional form of research. My work is the amalgamation of Black arts theorists, writers that came before me. Within in this Black study, there is a debt, a debt that is unrepayable. These Black scholars and scholars of color have paved the way for me to write this, I owe it to them, myself and the future generations, that I continue this act of refusal. The only way to honor the debt is to continue to engage in the work and invite others into the study. I was originally invited by my father through jazz, but I was re-invited through the work of Fred Moten’s (2003) In The Break and (2017) Black & Blur. As Moten has invited me, I wish to invite you in as well, as long as you acknowledge the debt and continue to do the work after. We must continue to push the boundaries and create new spaces to engage in the Black Study. Embracing Blackness has not and will never be a problem. The series of work preceding this will showcase that.

This is my protest.
This is my refusal.
This is my joy.

.......................... This is me.

BLACK BOYS WILL NEVER BE FOR SALE

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CHAPTER THREE:
THE BLACK BOY JOY MANIFESTO

The Prelude

[Inserts CD into the DVD player and the album starts with the opening: “If I do not make it before the completion of this project, please distribute my work(s) to the masses. Please use my work(s) to assemble to the ensemble for the Revolutionary Theatre. My work is for the people and will belong to the people.”]

We are interested in Black music – what it means; music that is Black-oriented and so forth. Actually, that is somewhat of a catchphrase, because we have a tendency to believe that it is all the same thing. But it is not really all the same thing, it is kind of out of the same thing. – The Cannonball Adderley Quintet (1969), Afro-Spanish Omelet

My work(s) speaks to the revolutionary power of Black Boy Joy. Descending from the Black Radical Tradition, Black Boy Joy refuses the systems of whiteness and white supremacy by reclaiming Black stories, voices, and identities through the arts and humanities. Black Boy Joy is the quotidian refusal to stay in ones designated “place” and provides a space that gives Black males futures that they want now. As a blurred embodiment of various Black aesthetic expressions, including jazz improvisation, poetry, visual art, and griot culture, Black Boy Joy is a social and spiritual practice of saying no to the terms, codes, rules, and laws of white supremacy that subjugate Black males (Campt, 2017). It refuses to make Black people continuously focus on their daily subjection to anti-Black racism (Benston, 2000; Crawford, 2017). Black Boy Joy is revolutionary because it ruptures oppressive social structures that make Black boyhoods socially unimaginable and creates a space they are felt, heard, seen, and matter. Black Boy Joy pays,
“specific attention to the ways in which ‘goodness’ rather than pathology are practiced in everyday life” (Ginwright, 2010, p. 20).

Black Boy Joy emerges from the “bubbling” culmination of multiple Black theories and methodologies in the cauldron of the Black Radical Tradition. Essentially, Black Boy Joy is a gumbo of praxis. As I stew on The Cannonball Adderley Quintet’s (1969) Afro-Spanish Omelet, I would also like to ruminate on Louis Chude-Sokei’s (2017) Introduction: Blackness as Method. As an emerging Black scholar, it is important to examine the new and the old articulations of Black methodologies because they are frameworks that highlight “endless gestures of resistance, subversion, radicalism, and refusal” (Chude-Sokei, 2017, p. 1-2). While some might argue that the various Black intellectual and cultural methodologies might lead to fragmentation, it is important to understand that these different methodologies are tied to the differential needs of Black people (Chude-Sokei, 2017, p. 2). Black intellectual and cultural methodologies are not the same thing, but out of the same thing, therefore the articulation of Blackness and Black possibilities are endless. Thus, Black theories and methodologies are always unfinished and always in a state of “becoming.” I see these possibilities as being “collectively apart” in the common project of Black freedom. In this Black study of Black Boy Joy, these understandings are essential ingredients to know.

My last album Black Boys Are Never For Sale, spoke about the importance of Black Boy Joy, its genealogical arc throughout Black socio-political movements, and what Black Experiential writing makes possible within social science research. Upon its review, the album was a great first attempt but did not address certain key elements. This album is (1) a rejoinder to the collective feedback, (2) further highlights the connection between my social theories and my
political aesthetics, (3) highlights my distrust within social science research, and (4) lays out a roadmap to further works. I call this album, *The Black Boy Joy Manifesto.*

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**Track 1: What Black Boy Joy Ain’t: Happiness**

In my last album *Black Boys Will Never Be For Sale*, I spoke at great lengths about what Black Boy Joy *is*, but I have not spoken about what Black Boy Joy *ain’t*. The construction of Black Boy Joy is done with political intentions because joy does not equal happiness. There is no such thing as Black Boy Happiness and even if there was, is it not equivalent to Black Boy Joy. Why I stress this is because *happiness does not equate joy*. *In Living A Feminist Life* Ahmed (2017) stated, “Happiness is often assumed to be an end point: as what we want to reach, as the point of life, the aim of life. The path we should follow is the path that would lead us to happiness” (p. 48). Happiness is not a naturally occurring experience. Throughout life, we are *directed* and *conditioned* to be *happy* and to make everyone else happy. Happiness becomes an expectation – happiness becomes a weight – happiness becomes its own set of pressures. The question becomes, why? Happiness is a global commodified phenomenon – an external feeling, which narrows, shapes, and controls our lives. Ahmed (2017) noted that “happiness is used to justify social norms as social goods” (p. 254). Therefore, happiness is a path that is directed by someone else, for you. In *Eloquent Rage: A Black Feminist Discovers Her Superpowers*, Brittney Cooper (2018) stated, “I have heard countless Black preachers say…happiness is predicated on ‘happenings,’ on what’s occurring, on whether your life is going right, and whether all is well” (p. 274). Well, what happens when your life is not going “well?” What if you want to get off your path? What if nothing is “happening” in your life? Moreover, who
determines what is right in life? From this string of questions alone, happiness becomes such a weighty word.

Through everyday situations, we learn “the unhappiness that happiness can cause” (Ahmed, 2017, p. 258). Happiness separates public life from the private, the individual from the collective. None of these things can be considered as “real” while being in isolation from each other. As a result, there is a void, a hollowness because these entities are never whole. Happiness traps us into commercialism as well. Baldwin (2010) stated that people, “must continue to produce things they do not really admire, still less love, in order to continue buying things they do not really want, still less need” (p. 41). Happiness becomes an experience that you can buy, rather than a feeling that you experience. Society tells us that buying that new stuff will make you happy. Being rich will make you happy. Getting that new job will make you happy. The thing about happiness is that it is never enough. Happiness is fleeting because it is always acquiring the next best thing. Once the appeal has worn off, you will no longer be happy. Therefore, you are continually striving outward to placate the feelings that you have inwards. What happiness does not do is nurture the soul.

Happiness is a façade because it offers an illusion that everything is great (i.e., The American Dream). Institutions sell happiness. It creates an illusion for both the buyer and the seller, so they do not have to face how unhappy this country is. In Mass Culture and the Creative: Some Personal Notes, James Baldwin (2010) eloquently said that “people in general cannot bear very much reality… they prefer fantasy to a truthful re-creation of their experience” (p. 38). Baldwin (2010) further noted, “The American way of life has failed—to make people happier or to make them better. We do not want to admit this, and we do not admit it” (p. 42). Americans do not want to see the reality of this American life: that the racism, the sexism, the violence, the
hatred, and the suffering of Black life is an inescapable part of the “American” social fabric. Americans, specifically white Americans do not want to admit this because they do not want to be robbed of their naivete. In Stranger In The Village, Baldwin (2012) spoke to this point:

There is a great deal of willpower involved in the white man’s naivete. Most people are not naturally reflective any more than they are naturally malicious, and the white man prefers to keep the Black man at a certain human remove because it is easier for him thus to preserve his simplicity and avoid being called to account for crimes committed by his forefathers, or his neighbors. He is inescapably aware, nevertheless, that he is in a better position in the world than black men are, nor can he quite put to death the suspicion that he is hated by black men therefore. He does not wish to be hated, neither does he wish to change places (p. 170)

White Americans do not want to be robbed of their naivete. They would instead evade humanity and the atrocities of Black life because it disrupts their illusion of a post-racial, meritocratic society. Racism and the unpleasant memories of racism get in the way of their happiness. White Americans would rather retreat, forget, and avoid their responsibility for the violence. White Americans are, “cruelly trapped between what [they] would like to be, and what [they] actually are” (Baldwin, 2010, p. 43).

Continuing this rift, Ahmed (2017) noted that happiness is, “a form of emotional labor can be condensed in the formula: making others happy by appearing happy” (p. 58). I ruminated on Ahmed’s quote concerning Black social life. To be Black in an anti-Black society is arduous, but to also to pretend to be happy despite knowing that, is the rub. There is an absurdity that Black people can live life, assimilate to antiblackness, and then, call it a good life? How can Black life be happy if memories of racism are ever-present? How can Black life be happy if racism is the open wound? How can Black life be happy if we are the objects that make white Americans feel good? White America sells the myth of “racial progress” to themselves and to Black people to make everyone be “happy.” In The Uses of The Blues, Baldwin (2010) spoke on this very notion:
They still tell me, to console me, how many Negroes bought Cadillacs, Cutty Sark, Coca-Cola, Schweppes last year; how many more will buy Cadillacs, Cutty Sark, Coca-Cola, and Schweppes next year. To prove to me that things are getting better. Now, of course, I think it is a very sad matter if you suppose that you or I have bled and suffered and died in this country in order to achieve Cadillacs, Cutty Sark, Schweppes, and Coca-Cola (p. 142).

Buying commodities do not tell you anything about the facts of life for Black people. It obscures it, “like a big shiny red apple… it all looks wonderful, but if you actually cut into that apple there’s a rotten core in there and you know that it’s actually all rotting away and it’s not actually being addressed” (Ahmed, 2012, p. 71). Despite this “rot,” Black people are taught and compelled to be happy because happiness requires us to look “the part.” We are taught to smile and always to be smiling. The smile-and-the-world-smiles-with-you routine only goes so far because smiles hide so much (Baldwin, 2012). The act of “smiling” erases the traumas that Black people have endured. The façade of smiling redirects and obscures the violence that Black people have faced. We are told that everything will be alright, when everything is not alright. We are told that “progress” will take time, but once it comes, we will be happy. It is a fallacy as Baldwin (1989) rebuked, “[progress] takes time.’ It’s taken my father’s time, my mother’s time, my uncle’s time, my brothers’ and my sisters’ time… How much time do you want for your progress?” When Black people voice their discontent, we are told that we are being ungrateful. “They say: but look what you have been given. Equality, diversity: they all become gifts for which we are supposed to be grateful; they become compensatory” (Ahmed, 2017, p. 263). The question becomes, what are the costs of being grateful? We are compelled to smile and to be grateful despite being in a system predicated on violence towards us. We are compelled to smile and to be grateful after the violence we have endured through slavery, through reconstruction, through Jim Crow, through the assassinations and jailing of our leaders, through police beatings and killings. Black people will
never be happy or should invest in happiness because Black people are the *strangers in the village* (Baldwin, 2012). Happiness will always be at the expense of Black pain and Black suffering; therefore, it will never adequately address the *feelings* of Black life. The narrative of happiness is a narrative predicated on *bad faith*.

**Track 2: Bad Faith, Blackness, and Authenticity**

A phrase that woven through this album is *bad faith*. According to Gordon (1995), bad faith is, “a displeasing truth for a pleasing falsehood. I must convince myself that a falsehood is in fact true” (p. 8). Acting in bad faith is a premeditated and intentional act of convincing yourself that the falsehood is true. Bad faith is possible when people lie to others in a posture of *good faith*. Gordon (1995) described how bad faith operates:

How is bad faith possible? A lie to others, has at least the duality of the deceiver and the deceived. The deceiver knows the truth or at least believes something to be the case and is hence not fooling himself. The deceived is simply fooled by another. But in the case of bad faith, the deceiver and the deceived are the same person. Since there is no other person who functions as deceiver, the source of deception must be deceived (p. 49).

I lie, people lie, and especially institutions lie and act in bad faith. Institutional bad faith is situated upon the collection of people (us + we) that operate in bad faith in their everyday activities. Political orientations such as white supremacy and settler colonialism are maintained in perpetuity because institutional bad faith maintains those systems (Gordon, 1995). This is how people that benefit from racism and heterosexism maintain their “dividend” from a patriarchal white supremacist culture. Those dividends are derived from bad faith as a reward for peoples’ collective lack of action towards racism or heterosexism.

One facet of bad faith and institutional bad faith that I will rift on is *authenticity*. Authenticity is a representation of “realness” or what an “accurate depiction” of something is.
The issue with authenticity is that once you ontologically define what something is, you simultaneously define what something is not. A great example of this are scholars, cultural critics and everything in-between trying to define what Blackness is. “Authentic Blackness” operates in bad faith because it is a social construct that operates on the falsehoods that there is an ideal Blackness. In an anti-Black society, the Black body is ontologically locked through white subjugation (Gordon, 1997). By creating an idealized Blackness, Black people are policed into false binaries that further subjugate Black communities. The allure of the “real” is nothing new in any era, as the trope of authenticity and the capitalism work in tandem (Karut, 2008). White consumption of Blackness is well-documented since chattel slavery, as white people desired real presentations of Blackness (Karut, 2008). Minstrel shows are the most notable example of this white desire. To feed to white people’s racist imaginations of “real blackness,” Black performers were, “forced to darken their already brown skin and to replicate the stereotypes propagated by their white predecessors” (Karut, 2008, p. 29). Black people were forced to choose between a Black man’s imitation of white impersonators and the imitations of themselves. Both tactics operated in bad faith because they were falsehoods that depicted authentic Black life and further increased the consumption of Black culture. This is one of many “social science trappings” that Black people can fall into when discussing Blackness. Gordon (1995) stated that “the black body is invited to live in such a way that there is no distinction between a particular black body and black bodies. Every black person becomes a limb of an enormous black body: The Black Body. Liberation from the Black body becomes liberation from Blackness” (p. 105). This issue is particularly damaging within academia, as narratives based on authenticity become the social fabric of Black people.
Black people are pathologized with social science research because researchers alleged “authentic research” on the grounds of firsthand collections (Karut, 2008). This convention is similar to white performers observing Black people to understand and mimic Black life. The research will be bad, because the premise is bad, and the premise is bad because it is situated in bad faith. Speaking for others is a risky excursion as, “it does nothing to disrupt the discursive hierarchies that operate in public spaces” (Alcoff, 1995, p. 99). Black academics, speaking from a place of authority about Black communities, can not only further harm those communities but can also cement themselves as the academy’s leading “cultural voice” of those communities (Lakritz, 1995, p. 3). We must always interrogate why the academy would find interest and value in our work. Alcoff (1995) illuminated this point:

As the academy attention turns to Black texts, postcolonial texts, feminist texts, a paradox ensues: ‘while in their own way these texts seek imaginative routes to social change, the structures of authority through which they are channeled and distributed are the very structures against which social change should work’ (p. 151).

A Black academic can quickly write a bestseller for a publisher, create an industry for academic critics, and be the focus of symposia, workshops, classrooms, and research projects, all by hiding behind the claim of authenticity. As a Black academic, I must always recognize how grand claims and claims rooted in authenticity operate in bad faith and move me away further from the common project of Black liberation. I attempt to minimize this dilemma by reconstituting my academic, political, and personal identity.

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**Track 3: What The Hell Is An Edtiste?**

a negro english instructor called her:  
“a fine negro poet.”

a whi-te critic said:
“she’s a credit to the negro race.”
somebody else called her;
“a pure negro writer.” – Haki R. Madhubuti (1969), *Gwendolyn Brooks*

One of the most promising of the young Negro poets said to me once, “I want to be a poet—not a Negro poet,” meaning, I believe, “I want to write like a white poet,” meaning sub-consciously, “I would like to be a white poet,” meaning behind that, “I would like to be white.” And I was sorry the young man said that, for no great poet has ever been afraid of being himself. – Langston Hughes (1926), *The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain*

The two passages above, illuminate the nuances and complexities that Black creatives face in an anti-Black society. Neal (1989) eloquently stated that “every Black writer is engaged in a battle with [themselves] to discover [their] own dynamic vis-à-vis [their] status as an artist and a member of an oppressed group” (p. 27). Black creatives are searching for a “home” in an anti-Black society. Gordon (1995) stated, “in an anti-Black world, Black people are situated in the *what* mode of being instead of a *who* mode” (p. 6). Black people are forced to define themselves as a group instead of an individual constantly. Positioned as superior to *the Black*, white people’s existence is justified and Black people’s existence needs justification (Gordon, 1995). In this trap of justification and distraction, Black people’s existence becomes, as Gordon (1995) stated, “manqué—existence gone wrong. Their mode of being, becomes the “being of no” (p. 98). A Black person can never *be* a person because they are dispossessed of personhood through continual justification. Similarly, a Black creative cannot simply be a writer, an artist, a poet, without continual justification from white people. In essence, Black communities and Black creatives have been, “historically and systematically denied being bestowed ‘having a precise location in time and history’” (Chapman, 1968, p. 40). When Black creatives write about “universal themes” or to a “universal audience,” the criticism is that we do not possess the intellectual and aesthetic “range.” Black people are assumed to be “African Americanists,” as
“Blackness can be the only notable experience that a [Black person] can have” (Roof & Weigman, 1995, p. 93). In this damning ontological (pre)determination, Black creatives only have the “authority” to speak on Blackness, which damns Black creatives to speak as the Other, forever (Roof & Weigman, 1995). This dilemma interlocks with the issue of authenticity. Moreover, when Black creatives’ work(s) are focused on Black lives, it gets reduced to being, “too disturbing”, “too realistic”, “too angry”, or it succumbs to the role of merely providing “entertainment” to white people (Chapman, 1968, p. 26; Neal, 1989).

So, what does a Black creative do? I wrestled with this dilemma and Dr. Eve Ewing (2018) provided me with some clarity on a threaded tweet conversation on Twitter:

What’s interesting is that people who occupy marginal positions within an academic discipline have to understand mainstream/hegemonic/orthodox thinking and be constantly working to generate epistemological and ontological counternarratives to make space for our very being (eveewing, 2018, October 13).

as a result, some of us have to speak two disciplinary languages. the language of power and disciplinary hegemony (which of course in the academic context means language predicated on the resumption of a white male western subjectivity) and our own language (eveewing, 2018, October 13).

“Our own language” meaning, of course, a disciplinary lens and attendant methods, epistemologies, and theories that allow for blackness, disability, feminism queerness, indigeneity, an honest reckoning with colonialism and violent empire, etc etc etc etc (eveewing, 2018, October 13).

Most of our disciplines historically operate under the presumption of whiteness, maleness, cisness, and non-disabled bodies. to make a way, some of us have had to push and prod & challenge rewrite & remix. To paraphrase Kendrick Lamar, I read your sociology and I freaked it (eveewing, 2018, October 13).

To reconcile my disciplinary languages, to make way for myself and find a place that I call “home,” I had to “freak” how I defined myself. I had to improvise. I had to deconstruct how I saw myself and create something new. So, no, I am not just a Black man who is also a writer/poet/artist/educator – I am an Edtiste. You might be thinking, “Isn’t that just a made up
word?” It is, but all words are made up. An Edtiste is the blurring between an educator and an artist. Edtiste are not confined to false binaries that are constructed and operate under white supremacy (i.e., Writer vs. Black writer, Poet vs. Black Poet). As an Edtiste, I refuse to, “look at [Black people] through the eyes of white America” (Killens, 1965, p. 47). I am not fighting for a place among white people; I am fighting for a place for me and others that will come after me. Without the false binaries and classifications, I feel that I can do anything that I want. Alice Walker (1983) spoke to this:

“In my own work I write not only what I want to read—understanding fully and indelibly that if I don’t do it no one else is so vitally interested, or capable of doing it to my satisfaction—I write all the things I should have been able to read” (p. 13).

I am giving myself space and freedom to write what I want and write it to my satisfaction, without the distraction of others. Who is my audience? Black people (though, white people will eavesdrop). My Black work(s) are addressed to the needs, and the suffering of Black boys and that is vital to mention. Within the creative world, artists can attempt to position their work(s) as apolitical to be universal, forgetting that an apolitical orientation is a political stance. My work(s) are produced to be oriented to Black communities and perform the political function of critiquing anti-Blackness, especially within the context of schooling. (Redding, 1988).

As an educator, I apply my aesthetics into my understandings of Black Critical Race Theory (Black Crit) within education. BlackCrit is a “theoretical race-based framework that provides an ontological understanding of being Black in an anti-Black world” (Dumas & Ross, 2016, p. 416). The pathology of Blackness and Black boys is a part of the anti-Black matrix grounded in the U.S. social fabric. Black boys cannot be because of white supremacy. Black boys are trapped within institutions that do not value them – they are trapped within structures
that are designed to make them “strangers.” Strangers in two ways: (1) being Black in a white world and (2) being a stranger to their feelings. Abu-Jamal (2015) stated, “when is a child not a child? When he is a Black child, apparently…Black children are projected as a dark symbol of social pathology, with little or no hope of [their] renewal” (p. 78-79). Within education, Black boys suffer because as Dumas (2016) stated, they, “struggle against what has always been (and continues to be) a struggle against specific anti-Black ideologies, discourses, representations, (mal)distribution of material resources, and physical and psychic assaults on Black bodies in schools” (p. 15). This occurs because as Neal (1989) pointily said, “the fundamental role of education in a racist society would have to be to keep the niggers in their place” (p. 11). Moreover, Jared Sexton (2008) stated, “the Black is constructed as always already problem—as nonhuman; inherently uneducable, or at very least, unworthy of education; and, even in a multiracial society, always a threat (p. 13). These antagonisms that Black boys experience in school is antiblackness. Dumas (2016) noted that antiblackness, “insists that Black humanity is a paradigmatic impossibility because Black is the very antithesis of a human subject” (p. 12). Black boys suffer within schools because schools, “revolve around middle-class white norms and expectations” (Majors & Billson, 1994, p. 14). The suffering of Black children is invisible and largely inconsequential because the discursive practices of “meritocracy” within schooling do not embrace the humanity of Black lives. Black boyhood is, “socially unimagined and unimaginable,” as Black boys are denied joy and are made to suffer for existing. (Dumas & Nelson, 2016).

You might ask how does all this play out in daily life? How do Black boys lose the joy and become joyless men? Lewis Gordon (1995) speaks to this systematic denial:
A black child learns what to do when he is approached for shoplifting, when he is approached for assaulting another, when he threatens the welfare of white children, when he is stopped by police. For the black adult, this is transformed into DON’T. DON’T jog, for he might be mistaken for a criminal in flight; DON’T walk through areas that appear affluent, for he might be presumed shoplifting or, worse, concealing a weapon; DON’T drive an expensive automobile, for he might be presumed to have stolen it; DON’T even consider behaving ambiguously in public with a white spouse (p. 102).

Boyhood and joy are something that is systematically stolen and denied. Abu-Jamal (2015) stated that, “it is an irony of American history that where once grown Black men were seen as boys, now boys of no matter how tender an age, are seen and treated as men” (p. 79) You never hear about joyful Black men, because joy is stolen during boyhood. Black boys are never fully given the spaces to be where they can explore their masculinity, sexuality, spirituality, and identity without limits. For Black boys, suffering is ubiquitous; it becomes mundane – it becomes assumed – it becomes invisible. In essence, Black boys cannot be.

So, what do I do? I make the invisible, visible. Through my work(s), I call attention to how Black children suffer and implore, Black people, including Black boys to refuse. We must exercise our right to refuse what has been done and what can be done through education reform. Dumas (2018) stated that “justice in education in no way promises an end to Black suffering” as racial justice seeks “not to dismantle or destroy the system, but to seek redress” (p. 30-31). Robin D.G. Kelley (2016) mentioned that “liberal multiculturalism was not to address the historical legacies of racism, dispossession, and injustice but rather to bring some people into the fold of a “society no longer seen as racially unjust.” How do we create an educational system that loves Black life? How do we manifest a world where Black boys are loved? By encouraging Black people to improvise, For improvisation is what makes Black life a possibility. Improvisation is the radical element that is missing within education. We must refuse the “deliberate speed” of
educational policies and programs that harm Black boys. We must refuse racist and heterosexist images of Black boys and listen to the joyful sounds that they create. To do this, I must be visible, but to be visible, I must be accessible. Accessibility humanizes the range of what I am trying to accomplish in this Black study of Black studies. It is essential to ensure that content and content delivery are accessible. So many Black people are outside of the academy, “who never read our books, attend our conferences, or take our classes,” but “those are our folks” (Boyd, 1997, p. 7). To make my work(s) accessible, I need to make it plain. I make it plain, by tuning my work(s) to the grammars and languages within Black music. Neal (1989) pointily stated that “the key to where the black people have to go is in the music. Our music is the most dominant manifestation of what we are and feel” (p. 21). In an interview with Ornette Coleman and Jacques Derrida (1997), Coleman said,

“I’m trying to express a concept according to which you can translate one thing into another. I think that sound has a much more democratic relationship to information, because you don’t need the alphabet to understand music” (as cited in Hobbs, 2017).

In that context, my dissertation operates in two folds: (1) to translate Black social and political thought into Black sounds that are accessible to Black communities, and (2) translate the joyful feltsounds that vibrate off of Black boys into cultural and political knowledge. Ginwright (2010) said that “if we listen closely, we can hear the ways in which Black youth describe a new vision for our society” (p. 149). These conversations occurred within the spaces that Black youth occupy and hearing their collective consciousness is similar to an improvising jazz band (Ginwright, 2010). I hope that you can hear the sounds.

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Track 4: The Process and the Product of the Edtiste

As an Edtiste, my work is supposed to be messy because I choose to be messy. Some social science scholars might consider me to be undisciplined or a charlatan because of how I approach my work, but they are unaware that my discipline(s) is rooted in the “Black Aesthetic.” My work is not undisciplined, but disobedient to how social science scholars want research to be. I am, and my work is due to the sounds of John Coltrane, Cecil Taylor, Ornette Coleman, Max Roach, Herbie Hancock, Sun Ra, and Pharoah Sanders. The majority of these musicians were “classically trained,” but refused to play the way that they were taught. They chose to refuse; they chose to be messy. In their refusals, they created Black art that was in relation to their spirit. Though I trained in social science traditions, I choose to infuse Black aesthetics into my work(s). Understanding that intentionality is paramount. My work is intentional, or should I say in(tension)al. I intentionally formatted my work(s) to be an antithesis of standard social science research structure. I did this to showcase my tension between the process and the product, like in Coltrane’s (2018), Both Directions at Once: The Lost Album. The album derives its title from something that Coltrane told his fellow saxophonist Wayne Shorter about, “starting a sentence in the middle, and then going to the beginning and the end of it at the same time ... both directions at once” (Chinen, 2018). Coltrane’s album is a beautiful Black mess, but it is supposed to be that way. A great example of this process is Coltrane’s (2018) song, Impressions. As one of Coltrane’s signature themes, Impressions is recorded in four separate takes. Analyzing these versions reveals an “imprecise, yet methodical refinement of an idea” (Chinen, 2018). Who knows what Coltrane was refining towards, but it sounded like he was searching for that new thang – he was searching for freedom. As Coltrane (1962) succinctly put, “Freedom has a hell of a lot to do with this music” (as cited in Hersch, 1995, p. 10). Within my work, I refine ideas.
within a track, over multiple tracks, and over multiple work(s). I am searching for that new *thang* within the depth and complexities of Black Boy Joy. Through repetition and revision, my work(s) is a social and spiritual practice because it is constantly in a state of becoming. That is the point of Black experimentation and Black experimental writing. Black experimental writing gives me the freedom to explore, to *be*, but also to *become*. As you are reading, I am becoming – like a jazz improvisation. Black experimental writing gave me a wider lens to investigate the experiences of Black life, but also allows me to be *vulnerable* and *visible*. As Audre Lorde (2007) said, “that visibility which makes us most vulnerable is that which also is the source of our greatest strength” (p. 45).

I used my vulnerability and visibility as a strength to push back against the rigidity of social science writing. Standard social science research structure are organized by terminology such as “Background of the Problem,” “Research questions,” “Theoretical Framework,” “Methodology,” “Methods, Data Analysis,” and “Implications.” I simply said *no* to the organization. I refused to write from the “margins” as a scholar of color. Black experiential writing allowed me to create my world and define my margins. My refusal was generative because it created the possibilities to produce work(s) the way that I wanted. By inverting traditional practices through the Black Aesthetic and applying a *jazz aesthetic*, I was able to create Black art; I was able to create a Black Study of Black studies. All the elements that you would seek from a traditional format are transformed into a Black aesthetic practice – you have to read and hear them differently. You have to find them, that is your job as the listener. This is not a dissertation that you read once and put away. The answers to your questions are within my music; it is your job to figure it out. Like jazz, you have to sit with the music to understand the
meaning. Like jazz, you might re-listen to a track or an album to get the gist, the different inflections, and emphases.

This jazz album is a Black work filled with Black works, a Black study, filled with Black studies. The tracks are collectively apart, as they are not the same thing, but come out of the same thing. The textual album is based on repetition and revision, two elements of the Black Aesthetic Tradition. These tracks are relational to each other but can stand on their own. I did not want to write this to be understood as one cohesive piece, but as a collection of pieces—Black pieces. Some tracks blur, some do not, similarly to how some Black theories and Black methodologies do or do not align with each other. I see sentences as lyrics, bridging discourses and the experience together, becoming the experience itself (Pavlic, 2016). By writing this dissertation as a collection of Black pieces, I enable the audience to engage in a Black study on their terms. Syntactically, it strives to make me and the audience, improvisers. The album could be listened to in chronological order, reverse chronological order, or readers could start in the middle. The audience can skip between the tracks or rearrange them and can hear the album differently, each time. My intention is to showcase tension between the process and the art and to demonstrate that the process is art. This process is not for sale. You cannot buy what I create out of a store or auction it at a museum. As I state in one of my first works, “Black Boys are never for sale.” What I offer is an experience. I am inviting you to experience my joy with me. Will you join me?

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**Track 5: Continuing The Jazz Aesthetic**

I have said before
that the music is the words
and the words are the music
It is all there for you to understand if you can and for you to feel regardless. – Sun Ra (2011, emphasis mine), *This Planet is Doomed: The Science Fiction Poetry*

“…then I freaked it.” – Kendrick Lamar (2018), King’s Dead

How do we ensure that certain sounds “remain in our ears?” By treating music like words, and words like music. By renewing our habits of study, we can treat words and sounds like music. Music has always been tantamount to Black culture because the social life of Black people is tied to the music. “Life comes out of music, and music comes out of life” (Baldwin, 2010, p. 247). As Baldwin (2012) simply stated, “It is only music…that the Negro in America has been able to tell his story. It is a story which otherwise has yet to be told and which no American is prepared to hear” (p. 25). This is because the rich histories and languages of our ancestors were lost in the “fire” of the Middle Passage. Though violence and subjugation of Chattel slavery, Black people were systematically denied the ability to read and write. What has remained through *the fire* and the violence is the possession of sound. Black music began on the auction block, and it has been with us ever since (Baldwin, 2010). For Black folks, “Music is our witness, and our ally. The “beat” is the confession which recognizes, changes, and conquers time.” (Baldwin, 2010, p. 253). Read the lyrics, listen to the sounds of the beat, the reality of Black life is there. Pavlic (2016) stated, “the sound offered a complex and powerful link between words and what they meant in experience, in black American experience first, and, after that, in encounters with human experience radiating around the world” (p. 5). Black music testified to the Black experience without knowing its exact name.

If you read *Black Boys Will Never Be For Sale*, you might have wondered why it was structured the way it was – the incorporation of poetry, the semi-structured, but overlapping album tracks, and long emphasis of specific points (extended solos). What you were reading was
a textual jazz album, an album of Black liberation. The theme of the project was to advance a common project, a study of unbounded Blackness, the blurring of Blackness, the joys of Blackness, the joy of Black boys. Within this dissertation, I attempt to blur the distinction between words and music by meditating on the phonic materiality of written words and by listening to what sounds say. Orality and literacy blur into sound. The words were the music, and the sounds were loud. Within my work, joy begins when you hear words and sounds like music. Surely one could argue that tune recognition of what you read has no physical voice, but voice and sound are created by your imagination (Meta Jones, 2002). I was signifying the “feltsounds” of a jazz album as a dissertation. To accomplish this, I had to (1) refuse how traditional dissertations are written and (2) employ a jazz aesthetic.

The jazz aesthetic derived from Amiri Baraka’s transformation of (1) avant-garde jazz forms into literary forms and (2) white liberal politics into Black Nationalist and Marxist politics (Harris, 1985). The jazz aesthetic was blurring a theory of beauty and a theory of Black political action (Harris, 1985). It drew on Black social life – a life where Black people are dispossessed of citizenship. You might ask, “how is this different from the Black Aesthetic?” It is not the same, but out of the same thing. The jazz aesthetic is out of the Black Aesthetic. The Black Aesthetic was a form of artistic dissent as it refused the conventions of western literature and art and sought a return to Black culture and Black vernacular expression (Hutchinson, 2003). The Black Aesthetic was a framework that provided the critical language and the analytical tools for the Black Arts Movement. The jazz aesthetic specifically examined how Black musicians refused to play Eurocentric models of music and constructed models that corresponded to their realities and spiritual styles (Baskerville, 2004). Some of the great artists that utilized this aesthetic were Sun Ra, Pharoah Sanders, Leon Thomas, but especially John Coltrane.
Baraka believed that John Coltrane epitomized the jazz aesthetic process. In Baraka’s eyes, Coltrane was the destroyer of Western forms (Harris, 1985). Coltrane was an exemplary because he engaged in the act of creative destruction, an apocalyptic art – an art that took the end and made a new beginning. An art that was concerned with ascension and futurity. Baraka (1983) spoke on Coltrane’s destructive style:

He’d play sometimes chorus after chorus, taking the music apart before our ears, splintering the chords and sounding each note, resounding it, playing it backwards and upside down trying to get something else (p. 176)

Coltrane was searching for a new non-west world but creating it at the same time. He was “self-committed to the exalted state” (Benston, 2000, p.120). His destruction of the old was the “purification of feelings and new feelings.” In essence, Coltrane was space clearing for new and expanded modalities of Blackness. It was the purification of finding a “love supreme.” Baraka took this idea of destructive art from Coltrane and applied it to rewriting white texts. Baraka intended to “murder” Western forms. In the wise words of Kendrick Lamar (2018), Baraka “freaked it.” Baraka blurred the forms and ideas that he learned and applied it to his experiences as a Black man in an anti-Black society. “Freaking it” made it Black, which transformed the writing. Harris (1985) stated that “adding the adjective Black transforms a concept. To couple the word Black to an idea makes it dangerous and alien to many white people; conversely, it makes it affirming and communal to many Black people” (p. 17). Baraka parodied and critiqued white America by refusing and re-sounding white academic texts (Harris, 1985). This transformation turned jazz aesthetic into signification. According to Geneva Smitherman (1977), signification is, “a mode of Black discourse, as “the verbal art of insult in which a speaker humorously puts down, talks about, needles—that is, signifies on—the listener” (p. 118). These oral habits are reflected in Black meanings and Black oral lexicon. Through inversion, white
words in Black lexicon become alien to white people. Take for example the word bad. In Black oral lexicon bad means good, which is inverted from the standard meaning of good. This inversion is evident in Sonia Sanchez’s (1970) *We a BaddDDD People*. Sanchez’s title is affirming that Black people are beautiful, Black, and strong people. A reader would not understand that notion without knowing the basics of the Black lexicon. Baraka (1970) pushes that notion further with his usage of terrible, instead of bad, in his work *In Our Terribleness*:

> Our Terribleness is our survival as Beautiful beings, any where. Who can dig that To be bad is one level But to be terrible, is to be Badder dan nat (IOT, unpaginated).

In our terribleness, in our badness, I become me. I am strong. I am beautiful. I am terribly Black.

With Coltrane, Baraka, and Sanchez’s understandings of Black inversion, I applied those methods of refusal to my dissertation. In *Outlaw Culture* (2006), Ice Cube responded to a question from bell hooks, suggesting that some aspects of Black popular culture lie in a refusal to accommodate audiences: “I feel that I’ve gotten the most success by not compromising” (hooks, p. 129). Like Ice Cube, I feel that I have gotten far by not giving in to other people’s demands about my style and form. I am not here to accommodate a universal audience; I am here to write about the terribly Black importance of Black Boy Joy. Through my refusal, I am resounding how a dissertation should be written, seen, and heard, with Black methodologies and theories. I made the instruments of social science literature my own. Neal (1989) stated that “if you can sing through that instrument, you can impose your voice on the world in a heretofore-unthought-of manner” (p. 53). Coltrane freaked it. Baraka freaked it. Sanchez freaked it. Now I freaked it. You cannot stop “the train” of “BaddDDD people.”
By “freaking” my dissertation, I am making it is bad, I am making it terrible, I am making it Black. My work(s) is the fusion of Black vernacular with the formal. Understanding that relationship is important because, for many, the use of Black vernacular was a source of embarrassment – a linguistic and cultural remnant of the African enslavement (Redding, 1988, xxi). Why should I be embarrassed by that notion, when that vernacular and its iterative revisions got me here? That is what I call the “beautiful struggle.” The inclusion of Black orality within my dissertation is revolutionary because it, “challenges the [white]supremacy of the written text, a sacred cow of western tradition” (Harris, 1985, p. 104). Western epistemologies are infatuated with the written word and my writings and my style of writing are divorced from Western literary cultures. Those forms of writing are dead to me. My writings and my writing style is tied to Black music and other Black aesthetics. My refusal has “murdered” how a traditional student should write their dissertation. This murder—this refusal is generative, as it is the breaking of social relations. This attunement – this orientation is ancestral and this dissertation is a recovery and the usage of that ancestral orientation. The Black Aesthetic Tradition was recovered with Benjamin Brawley’s (1918) The Negro Literature and Art in the United States. J. Saunders Redding (1988; 1939) canonized the tradition with the hope that “those who come after may be worthy of the great tradition” (p. 182). Like a chain, great Black artists followed behind, and the revised the field. Coltrane did it in music, Baraka applied Coltrane’s approach to the Black arts, and I am humbly using the jazz aesthetic within social science literature. I am parodying popular white scholarship into a Black composition, like others who came before me. I hope that my writing can be an inspiration and extend the “great chain” to other emerging Black scholars who feel forced to write a certain way because “tradition” said so. I know that they have gifts to share with the world. Be bad, be terrible, be terribly Black. Just “freak it”.
Track 6: Digging Through The Crates Of Black Invisibility Blues

As I was “digging through the crates” of the Black cultural archives, I realized how much of Black women’s cultural production was missing from my work(s). The more that I thought and read, the more I realized how much I missed. One voice that was differently missing from my work(s) was the voice of my mother, Rosita Faulkner. If you know my mother, you know me. My mother is my best friend, but her voice and teachings are invisible in my dissertation. Hortense Spiller’s (1987) *Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: American Grammar Book*, spoke to the important power of Black maternal teachings in the Black community. Spiller (1987) noted that Black men were denied paternal power because of “Father’s name” and “Father’s law” of white supremacy (p. 80). As a result, Black males had the opportunity to learn from the mother:

> The Black man is taught and touched by Black women that he cannot escape. It is the heritage of the mother that the Black male must regain as an aspect of his personhood – to say yes to the “female power within” (p. 80).

My personhood came from the power of my mom. Her wisdom and teachings power this dissertation, especially regarding refusal. Though my father was the first person that invited into a Black study, my mother was the person that showed me the first refusal. I begin with that story.

My first refusal occurred when I was about 8-years old living in New Rochelle, NY. My mother, my brother, and I were on our way to do some Saturday shopping. We got onto the bus, and my brother and I sat down, as my mother went to pay. My mother entered the bus fare for my brother and me. As she was paying for herself, the fare collector malfunctioned. The bus driver accused my mother of fare evasion. My mother refused to pay any more money, and the bus driver shut down the bus. The anger of the passengers grew as minutes went by. Some passengers even offered to pay the fare, but my mom refused because she knew she paid the fare.
The bus driver called the police, and they came to investigate. The police heard each side of the story and demanded to keep the bus going. Despite the circumstances, she refused to give in to authority. My mom and I laugh about the story now, but I realized how powerful that moment was. My mother challenged the mundane; she challenged the status quo. In an anti-Black society, where Black people are arrested and murdered by questioning state authority, our situation on the bus could have ended very differently. As a Black person, every mundane activity carries a risk, but despite that, my mom refused – it was the “quotidian refusal” that Campt (2017) spoke about. My mother has always encouraged me to refuse, to stand up, to speak out. Her teachings are the reason why I am so defiant to write the way I do. I would not have gotten to this point without the mother, without my mother. You will be hearing the sounds of my mother’s teachings within my play.

The omission of my mother’s work and teachings is a silence that is often heard within the cultural production of Black men. What does our silence create? The “invisibility blues” of Black women. In Invisibility Blues: From Pop to Theory, Michelle Wallace (1990) discussed the erasure and the exclusion of Black women from the production of cultural knowledge. Collins (2000) stated that the “seamless web of economy, polity, and ideology function as a highly effective system of social control designed to keep [Black] women in an assigned, subordinate place” (p. 5). Black women who identified as feminist or womanist are denounced for propagating ‘negative images’ of Black people (Wallace, 1990). The questions become, “what makes a critical portrayal of a Black person a ‘negative image’?” and “why is [Black] cultural production by women always seen in some sense as a series of ‘negative images’?” (p. 4). The “negativity” and exclusion of Black woman from cultural production exists because the desires, experiences, and onto-epistemological views of Black women are seen as the least valued in anti-
Black societies. Gordon (1995) stated that in anti-Black societies, which are patriarchal societies, a strange hierarchy of values emerges:

To be most valued means to be valued by someone who is both white and a ‘man.’ To be less valued is to be valued by someone who is white and a woman. To be even less valued is to be valued by someone who is Black and a man. And to be least valued is to be valued by someone who is both black and a woman (p. 100).

The hierarchy positions Black women as the least valued and they are a “presumed desire” because they lack value (i.e., fetishization). In anti-Black societies, Black women are presumed to have nothing to add to Black cultural production and if they do, it is to enhance the “positive image” of the Black man. Wallace (1990) noted that “mainstream culture habitually assumes that the first job of Afro-American mass culture should be to ‘uplift the race,’ or to salvage the denigrated image of blacks in the white American imagination” (p. 1). So, for Black women to reject those presumptions is, “the ultimate insult in an anti-Black world” (Gordon, 1995, p. 101). Usually, when attempting to uplift the Black race, mainstream culture is attempting to uplift the Black male image. Contextually within that image, mainstream culture is attempting to uplift the cisgender heterosexual (cishet) Black male image. This leaves the stories and songs of non-cishet Black people to the wayside. A common discourse in the 1960s was that the image of a Black woman mirrors their men (Salaam, 1994). This premise speaks to Jean Beaudrillard’s (1979) Seduction. “I’ll be your mirror does not signify I’ll be your reflection, but I’ll be your deception” (p. 69). Gordon (1997) translated this to:

Black men (to the other Black men): We’ll be your mirror
The other Black men (to our Black woman): “I am your mirror” (p. 76)

The mirror now talks, and Black men believe that the image was distorted or broken. Black women are testifying to what they experienced standing alongside Black men. Black men can
operate in bad faith by being onto-epistemologically closed and not hearing the *songs* of Black women (Salaam, 1994). Black men’s silences about Black women’s struggles maintain the *status quo*. Black men must *listen*; we must *speak* out, we must *do*. Our silence is silence (in)action. I reflect on the invisibility within the cultural productions of Black aesthetics, a crucial element that powers my dissertation.

Within the invisibility blues, racism and heterosexism normalize Black males as the site of Black cultural production. In the jazz world, we speak about the “genius” of John Coltrane, but we fail to mention how Alice Coltrane Turiyasangitananda’s artistic brilliance impacted him. Biographies of John Coltrane reduce his marriage to Alice as a relationship between a master and an apprentice (Beta, 2017). Jazz gatekeepers dismissed Alice’s music as “soft-headed and incoherent rambling” (Smith, 2017). Alice Coltrane was a genius without her husband John. Her spiritual fusion music reflected, “the borderlessness that is manifested in her open religious philosophy of Universal Consciousness” (Pelly, 2017). It was all about the connection between the individual and the infinite. For Alice and John, it was about being in relation together. Alice was the catalyst for John Coltrane’s most celebrated music, aiding him on his spiritual quest for a universal sound by, freeing himself from the meter and steady tempo (Beta, 2017). John Coltrane’s (1965) paramount album *A Love Supreme* was made after their relationship began. Albums such as *Ascension* (1966), *Om* (1968; recorded in 1965), and *Meditations* (1966), stem from their relationship (Beta, 2017). It is impossible to separate Alice Coltrane and her musical influence from her husband, John.

Staying on that rift about Black women’s jazz omissions, regarding jazz improvisation, there is a lack of emphasis on Black women artists, as Black male artists are centered. We cannot talk about jazz improvisation and even hip-hop music without acknowledging the Black women
that helped pioneer *scatting*. Vitro (2014) stated that scatting is, “vocal improvisation with wordless syllables, combining improvised melodies, motifs and rhythmic patterns using the voice as an instrument, not unlike a trumpet or saxophone. Many people recognize Louis Armstrong, but how many people embrace Ella Fitzgerald, Sarah Vaughn, Betty Carter, Carmen McRae, and Betty Roché? Scatting is Black oral language, as its grammars are rooted in the Black vernacular. The origins of hip-hop are in scatting. Hip-hop artists will use scat singing to create rhythms in their raps. How would the orientation of hip-hop and hip-hop pedagogy change if we situated it on Black woman scatting instead of Run-D.M.C. and Grandmaster Flash? The onto-epistemological understandings of hip-hop would be radically different.

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**Track 7: The Importance of Black Feminism Within Black Boy Joy**

Continuing on this rift about centering Black women within Black cultural production, my understandings of Black Boy Joy has radically changed because of my readings and reflections on Black Feminist Thought. Lorde (2007) inferred that Black men should not, “hide behind the mockeries of separations that have been imposed upon us and which so often we accept as our own” (p. 47). The more that I have engaged in Black studies, the more I have refused accepting false binaries that have kept me from engaging with certain texts. Black men need to continue to read, reflect, and engage with Black feminist texts. Black Feminist Thought expands and complicates our understandings of modern politics our daily interactions with those politics. Too often, Black Feminism is exclusively considered as a form of “identity politics” that is reducible to an empirical investigation, rather than a set of practices with underlying conceptual, theoretical, and epistemological premises. Black Feminism speaks to the events that happened before, the events that are happening now, and the events that have yet to come. I see
Black Feminist Thought as a democratic “call” that invites people to engage and participate in a Black study. Black feminist thought is and continues not to be a reaction to the exclusions of Black male Power, but an orientation of Black Radicalism, and Black Revolt, and their Black lives.

Collins (2000) stated that Black Feminist Thought is, “this task of reclaiming Black women’s subjugated knowledge” (p. 13). By reclaiming this knowledge, Black women can apply the critical social theory that embodies, “knowledge and sets of institutional practices that actively grapple with the central questions facing U.S. Black women as a collectivity” (Collins, 2000, p. 9). Lastly, Collins (2000) stated that embodying this knowledge at the “intersection of oppressions of race, class, and gender provides the stimulus for crafting and passing on the subjugated knowledge of Black women’s critical social theory” (p. 9, as cited in Collins 1998a, 3–10). I utilize Black Feminist Thought to expand further and enhance my understandings of Black boyhoods. It gave me the words to speak to the nuances and complexities of Black life. I employ Black feminist thought because Black feminists’ texts, “oppose gender inequality within Black civil society” (Collins, 2000, p. 7) Black Boy Joy is also rooted against patriarchy and gender inequality, as it rejects codes, laws, and practices that subjugate Black males. Black Boy Joy is the recovery of what is silenced and made strange through white supremacy. I see Black Boy Joy as a reclamation of subjugated knowledge, an application, and embodiment of that knowledge, and then transmission of that knowledge though “felsounds.” I enter into Black Feminism through Black Boy Joy, so Black Boy Joy is a Black Feminist thang.

Moreover, within my study of Black Boy Joy, I employ intersectionality as an analytic tool to further understand the identifying political locations of Black boys and draw from it as, “a source of strength, and intellectual development” (Crenshaw, 1991, p.1242). Coined by legal
scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), intersectionality interrogates how single-issues of structural analyses (i.e., race, gender) are problematic because they erase the nuanced and contextual oppressions of those that are ‘multiply-burdened’” (i.e., Black women) (p. 140). Patricia Hill Collins (2005) built upon Crenshaw’s theory in *Black Sexual Politics*. Not only did Collins (2005) believe that racism and sexism were “deeply intertwined,” but also that Black people must examine how class and sexuality also intersect and “interlock” into that matrix, noting:

> We must employ – intersectionality. Intersectional paradigms view race, class, gender, and sexuality, and ethnicity, age, among others, as mutually constructing systems of power. It is about how seeing frameworks interlock within a system to oppress people (p. 11).

Black Boy Joy is inherently a feminist project because it is about freeing oneself from the interlocking systems of oppression. Black Boy Joy allows for Black boys to embrace their humanity by making space for them. Black Boy Joy is not just for Black cishet males, as “boys” and “boyhoods” are nuanced and socially performed. By using an intersectional lens, you understand where Black boyhoods derive from, operate in, and are oppressed at. Moreover, by utilizing an intersectional lens, Black males can interrogate how racism and heterosexism affect the everyday lives of Black boys. As an Edtiste, I encourage educators and society writ-large to center and incorporate the voices Black males from various social locations to, “disrupt the monolithic accounts of Black males” (Howard, 2013, p. 3). Black Boy Joy, like Blackness, is unbounded and therefore, there is room for us all in this *gumbo* of life. Black Boy Joy cannot be understood as a social and spiritual practice of being without understanding Black Feminist Thought.

> Through the culmination of Black feminist and feminist of color readings and writings that I learned that feminism is all *around me* because feminism is *with me*, and is *within me*. 
During this writing experience, I learned that I too am a feminist and have possibly been a feminist for quite some time. If I had to describe my “feminism” or “feminist thought,” I would see it as a blurring between Roxanne Gay’s (2014) “Bad Feminist” and Sara Ahmed (2017) “Killjoy Feminist.” Gay (2014) embraces the persona of being a Bad Feminist by saying:

I openly embrace the label of bad feminist. I do so because I am flawed and human. I am not terribly well versed in feminist history. I am not as well read in key feminist texts as I would like to be. I have certain . . . interests and personality traits and opinions that may not fall in line with mainstream feminism, but I am still a feminist. I embrace the label of bad feminist because I am human. I am messy. I’m not trying to be an example. I am not trying to be perfect. I am not trying to say I have all the answers. I am not trying to say I’m right. I am just trying—trying to support what I believe in, trying to do some good in this world, trying to make some noise with my writing while also being myself (p. 5).

Gay is making herself vulnerable by letting her flaws be known. Not only do I hear it but I feel it. Reading Gay’s words were liberating for me because it describes who I am as a person and as an Edtiste. I am messy, my scholarship is messy, I am unread in certain feminist texts, but I am here to make a difference in the world for Black boys. I have never wanted to be seen as a part of the mainstream or be placed on a pedestal because I know that those are expectations that I cannot fulfill. I will never be the feminist that people want me to be, I can only be the best feminist that I can be. As Gay (2014) put it simply, “I am a bad feminist. I would rather be a bad feminist than no feminist at all” (p. 297).

Sara Ahmed’s (2017) “feminist killjoy” is an interesting term because my common project is about joy. Feminist killjoys are not about killing joy; it is about killing “happiness.” Happiness is not appealing because we know all the unhappiness that happiness can cause (Ahmed, 2017). A feminist killjoy is about being willing and willful to bring to an end to institutions that create white men (Ahmed, 2017). A feminist killjoy utilizes feminist theory for
world-making (Ahmed, 2017). The “world is shaped by memory,” and as a killjoy, your memory is sharp (Ahmed, 2017, p. 263). Killjoys are willing and willful to bring histories of racism and sexism to the forefront. They are not willing to get over the unpleasant memories of racism, because a killjoy is “not willing to get over histories that are not over” (Ahmed, 2017, p. 262). I see a killjoy feminist as a renegade because we are willing and willful to burst the “bubble” of the universal because “the universal is what needed to be exploded” (Ahmed, 2017, p. 29). We are not interested in appeasing the universal when the universal is racist and sexist. When I think of the term “renegade,” I immediately think of Jay-Z and Eminem’s (2001) Renegade. The hook is what I want to emphasize:

—renegade! Never been afraid to say
What's on my mind at any given time of day
‘Cause I'm a renegade!
Never been afraid to talk about anything
(Anything?) Anything! (Anything)
Renegade! (Never been afraid to say)
(What's on my mind at any given time of day)
(‘Cause I'm a) renegade!
(Never been afraid to holler about anything)
Anything? (Anything) Anything!

By being willing and willful, I see killjoys as never been afraid of what they have to say to burst the bubble of universality. We give problems a name, we are ready to trouble the waters, and we have no qualms of using our voice to “sound the alarm” regarding oppression and violence. Killjoy causes a disturbance. I see my writing(s) as a “disturbance,” a sounding of the alarm to the plight of Black boys.

Circling back world-making, I see world-making as an improvisation of survival. Ahmed (2017) noted that “When you are not supposed to live, as you are, where you are, with whom you are with, then survival is a radical action” (p. 237). To survive, we had to envision worlds that
have us in it. Therefore, we must constantly rethink and revise the world around us. It is not enough to dismantle worlds that do not accommodate us. A killjoy must be willing and willful to manifest a world that accommodates and loves Black life. When I meditate on point, I remember Amiri Baraka’s (1979) *Black Art*, where he stated:

We want a black poem. And a
Black World.
Let the world be a Black Poem
And Let All Black People Speak This Poem
Silently
or LOUD – (p.106-7)

Baraka’s poetic manifesto is manifesting a Black world for Black people through poetry. Lorde (2007) said “Poetry coins the language to express and charter this revolutionary demand, the implementation of that freedom” (p. 42). Baraka is inviting all Black people into this *call* for world-making by signifying that the world is a Black poem and that all Black people are the poets. All Black people have to do is to *speak* this poem into existence, silently or LOUD. In *SoulScript*, June Jordan (1970) spoke to that point in the Introduction:

Almost anywhere except the classroom...Afro-Americans are writing poetry...People live a poem every minute they spend in the world...Poetry changes life into a written drama where the words set the stage and where words then act as the characters on that stage...Poems are voiceprints of language (p. xix-xx).

Jordan emphasized that Black people were world-making through the mundane. Jordan (1970) and Baraka (1979) see world-making as “poetry in motion.” Speaking vis-à-vis Jordan (1970) and Baraka (1979), if the world is a Black poem then, we recreate the world whenever Black life takes up space and occupies it. Black Boy Joy operates in those spaces where feltsounds are expressed. Black Boy Joy is a feminist project, and this dissertation is a Black feminist manifesto.
Track 8: The Illumination of Black Male-centered Writing

Was the Black Panther Party sexist? Yes, without question. – Munia Abu-Jamal (2015, p. 296), *Writing on the Wall*

My readings and reflections upon Black feminist thought illuminated how Black male-centered my work was. Black feminist writings have invited me into a Black study to reflect on how I did not substantially interrogate the male images of Black male writers. Black males are seen as non-allied others of Black feminist discourse. That point is understandable when you look at the history of Black social movements. Sherley Anne Williams (1986) asks Black men in, *Some Implications of Womanist Theory* to do, “a thoroughgoing examination of male images in the works of Black male writers” (p. 307). As the hip kids say, all my “faves” were problematic, as they fell into the traps of sexism and homophobia. Audre Lorde’s (1979) *The Great American Disease* examined the *interlocking nature* of oppressive ideologies of racism and heterosexism:

> The Black male consciousness must be raised so that he realizes that sexism and woman-hating are critically dysfunctional to his liberation as a Black man, because they rise out of the same constellation that engenders racism and homophobia. And until this is done, Black men like [Robert] Staples will view sexism and the destruction of Black women only as tangential to the cause of Black liberation, rather than as central to that struggle (p. 19).

The Civil Rights Movement and the Black Power Movement were powerful movements for Black people, but history honors the Black male leaders who fought for human rights, although it was Black women who made so many victories possible (Dastagir, 2018). Black women formed the core of Black social movements as they were grassroots organizers, educators, strategists, and writers. Despite their radicalism, leadership, and organization, Black women’s accomplishments in Black liberation rarely got reported or made known, because sexism is normalized (Abu-Jamal, 2015). The historiography of Black social protest movements left
largely intact a “leading man” master narrative which minimized the contributions of Black women and cast them as supporting roles (Gore, Theoharis & Woodard, 2009). Collins (2000) eloquently noted that “adhering to a male-defined ethos that far too often equates racial progress with the acquisition of an ill-defined manhood has left much U.S. Black thought with a prominent masculinist bias” (p. 7). As I evaluated the Black intellectual thought of my work(s), I realized that Black women were at the margins – they were indeed “invisible.” Moreover, a majority of the Black male activists that I have read, or I cited over time had issues with sexism and homophobia. This includes Amiri Baraka, Elridge Cleaver, George Jackson, Malcolm X, Stokely Carmichael, Robert Staples, Houston Baker, Jr., Haki Madhubuti, Maulana Ron Karenga. There are certainly more, but the point is made. What does it mean to look past their words and actions? It means that I am complicit as well. So, what can I do? Ironically, I think of Baraka’s (1969) *Leroy*, “When I die, the consciousness I carry I will to black people. May they pick me apart and take the useful parts, the sweet meat of my feelings. And leave the bitter bullshit rotten white parts alone” (as cited in Baraka, 1991, p. 224). Building upon this, Alice Walker (1983) said that, “a people do not throw their geniuses away” and that “if they are thrown away, it is our duty as artists, scholars, and witnesses for the future to collect them again for the sake of our children, . . . if necessary, bone by bone” (p. 92). We must collect the *bones* of our “geniuses” and dissect the *sweet meat* of their thought from the rotten sexist and homophobic parts. This is not about the denial or the erasure of the misdeeds but an acknowledgment that we must *refuse* those languages and actions. Through refusal, we can create new pathways and possibilities from which to speak and to act. It is “Sankofa-esque” because we cannot go forward without acknowledging why we left it behind. As we fly forward, the Sankofa bird reminds us of
where not to return to, and to remind us where the “traps” are. It is our responsibility; it is in our hands. We must listen, we speak, we must do.

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Track 9: The Sounds and Feelings of The Man and Dog Show

***This track was never supposed to be written, but life had another plan. ***

The creator has a master plan
Peace and happiness for every man
The creator makes but one demand
Peace and happiness through all the land – *The Creator Has A Master Plan*, Pharoah Sanders (1969)

People say that life is misery
But in him there is no mystery
So he sends to us his rainbow of love – *Colors*, Pharoah Sanders (1969)

There is no mystery that I love my dog. In all of my ruminations and “riftings rifts” on Black Boy Joy, I never talked about where I found my joy. I found my joy being in relation to my dog, Jet. Jet descended from the spiritual world to replace my misery with joy. Jet just entered the spiritual world again, but this time, he is waiting for me. I will try to talk about Jet in the present tense because he is still with me. In our nearly seven-year rendition of the *Man and Dog Show*, Jet’s master plan was to spread joy and happiness throughout all the land. Jet gives love and the world gave it back to him. He also helped me further understand what it meant to be in relationship with someone other than myself. Two characteristics that I appreciate about Jet are his fearless nature when it comes to people and how he treats the world as his theatre. Jet is a bonafide entertainer, as he thrives off people. Regardless of time or location, Jet always wants to make friends. Dogs are not always friendly, but Jet is. I always joke that Jet would allow a burglar into our house and steal our stuff if he could befriend him. Jet always operates on good faith, something that not every human (including myself) operate on. From the day that I met
him, to the day that he walked into the veterinary hospital for the last time, he always believed in people. Jet expanded my onto-epistemological views on how I should see the world, the importance of people, but most especially the importance of relationships. To be in relation with the world and other people is indeed a joyous thing.

Jet’s performativity and passing made me reflect on performance and the duality of silence in my dissertation on Black Boy Joy. First, I would like to discuss silence (in)action. I reflect on Baraka’s (1965) Revolutionary Theater, and I think about how the world is our theatre to perform – to make revolutionary change. Black people are continually making quotidian changes to society, by existing and moving through society. Revolutionary change starts with the mundane, and it builds outward. The fact that I am Black man existing in an anti-Black society is revolutionary – is change itself. Audre Lorde (2007) states:

[W]e have had to fight, and still do, for that very visibility which also renders us most vulnerable, our Blackness. For to survive in the mouth of this dragon we call America, we have had to learn this first and most vital lesson—that we were never meant to survive (46).

In an anti-Black society, Black people were never supposed to survive, but we did. Black people will continue to survive because we make ourselves visible with our words and our actions. Reflecting on her breast cancer diagnosis, Audre Lorde (2007) ruminated on her life and thought about the power of silence and how she regretted her silences. Lorde (2007) stated that “my silences had not protected me. Your silence will not protect you” (p. 45). In a civil society that oppresses and exploits people, its most commanding accomplishment is the creation of silence. Speaking is action and silence can be inaction. Speaking is action, as it gives visibility to Black people, a group of people deemed invisible through various systems of oppression. Though speaking makes us visible and vulnerable, it is our strength. Lorde (2007) states that:
Because the machine will try to grind you into dust anyway, whether or not we speak. We can sit in our corners mute forever while our sisters and ourselves are wasted, while our children are distorted and destroyed, while our earth is poisoned; we can sit in our safe corners mute as bottles, and we will still be no less afraid (p. 46).

Regardless if we speak or not, systems of oppression and bad faith intuitions will continue to use their “racial calculus” to annihilate Black people. Moreover, we all will die one day. Silence will not save us, as the machine, Lorde (2007) notes, will come for us all. It is important that Black people continue to embrace the principles of Umoja (unity), Kujichangulia (self-determination), and Ujima (collective work and responsibility) so that we can collectively build and maintain our communities, as well as refuse those oppressive systems. We is all we got.

Lorde (2007) continues in her essay to stress the importance of words and language:

What are the words you do not yet have? What do you need to say? What are the tyrannies you swallow day by day and attempt to make your own, until you will sicken and die of them, still in silence? (p. 45)

Lorde is stressing to me (and you) about the power of words and searching for that reclamation of language(s). Lorde is talking about the power of the tongue. As a kid growing up, my mother would always tell me about the power of the tongue and how it needs to be guarded because it can be corrupted. In a conversation with his aunt, G.M. James Gonzalez (1997) stated that “the tongue were among the most damaging tools a person can employ against another. Tongue (language, voice, rhetoric) and thought (ideology) have been among the deadliest instruments of colonialism” (p. 129). Toni Morrison (1993) stated that “language can be looted for subjugation,” and “oppressive language does not represent violence, it is violence (p. 16). In an anti-Black society, dispossessing people of their native tongue(s) is normalized, and this is how language(s) dies. Morrison (1993) also noted that “language as a system, as a living thing. Language can be susceptible to death and erasure. If language dies, we are all responsible”
Language(s) dies by a lack of action – by remaining silent. When a language dies, people die, and so do relationships and organizations. The social fabrics that we expected to exist forever slip away (Salaam, 1994). Salaam (1994) noted that “death is going to claim you, whether you did well or failed miserably. Death makes you think. When death strikes, you start thinking” (p. 44). Death makes you understand that life is short and that we, as Black people must be urgent. We cannot wait as Black people are harmed physically and mentally by state-sanctioned violence. We must speak—act and do. We must engage in a critical praxis for Black liberation, and that starts with retrieving our grammar(s) and mastering our language(s). It is our responsibility as Black people to refuse the words given to us and speak for ourselves. Larry Neal (1989) stated that “[Black people] must remember how to use language as a weapon” (p. 148). Refusing to remain silent does two things: (1) it lets the anti-Black society know that we will no longer go this way and (2) speaking helps us realize the “gaps” in our word-saying process. Sometimes, I have a “loss for words” moment, as I cannot describe an experience. If I talk to an elder, they have the “words,” and they speak them to me. The role of an elder provides me with a greater range to speak for myself. Black language(s) is predicated on Black survival and Black survival is predicated on Black language(s). I end this rift with Salaam’s (1994) Sun Song VIII:

We must survive we must
Survive we
Must survive death
To
The system – (p. 128)

Black people will survive death to the system, through the recovery and reclamation of our grammar(s) and our language(s). This tie of Black survival and Black language is Umoja, Kujichangulia, and Ujima.
My second reflection on silence is the *transformation of silence into a language*. Lorde (2007) argued that “death is the final silence” (p.44). I wonder if death is the final silence. I ask the question, “Are the dead really dead? Because I can still hear them speak. On Kendrick Lamar’s (2015) *Mortal Man*, Lamar has an imagined conversation with Tupac Shakur, talking about music, energy, and vibrations. Near the end of the conversation, Shakur responded, “because it’s spirits, we ain’t even really rappin,’ we just letting our dead homies tell stories for us.” Lamar is conveying to his audience that his words are Shakur’s words and that Shakur’s words come from the spirits of his predecessors. Shakur and Lamar are embodied examples of *whistles*, as they let their homies speak. It is the same way that my father speaks through jazz music, and Jet speaks through me – by the *presence and absence* of sound.

To center this back to Jet, I never realized how much *sound* one dog could take up in your house. He indeed was a whistle, as he amplified sounds of joy. Though his body is gone, I remember his sounds of joy because those sounds are now a part of me and my memories. Moreover, his death is not the final silence, as his death is generative. In this *break*, between man and dog, body and spirit, and body and sound, what are the new sounds that emerge? What sounds are possible in his absence? His absence has helped me *tune* my ears differently, to approach sound from a different orientation. To listen to Jet now, I hear his sounds in a photo book. *The Life and Times of Jet XIV* is an archive of sounds between Jet and me. The book itself is language – a language of sound. As I flip through the book, and I hear his sounds, I feel his presence, and I experience joy. Our pictures not only emanate sound, but they tell stories as they capture moments in time. Jet lives forever through sound.

My ruminations about Jet helped further envision my work(s) on Black Boy Joy. Black boys are (re)creating themselves every day in this social and spiritual practice. Within this
practice, this repetition, this revision, it is essential to listen to the spectrum of “feltsounds” made by Black boys. Feltsounds are nearly-silent to loud sounds that hum and vibrate off Black people into the cosmos (Campt, 2017). These sounds not only emerge from the mouth but from the whole body (Moten, 2003). Moreover, these sounds can be heard and felt, as they touch and move people (Campt, 2017). Those that are unaware will easily miss these sounds because their orientation towards Black males and Blackness is rooted in bad faith. I argue that Black boys craft languages and poetry through these feltsounds, as they move through their daily life. Black boys, like the best jazz improvisers, “have turned life’s mundane moments into intellectual property of the highest order” (Boyd, 1997, p. 15). The questions become, “are we tuning our ears to hear their sounds, their language, their energy?” and “are there apparatuses that embody their joy?” Is there any place that holds the vibrations of our collective energy? Can we make a Black archive of Black joy? As of now, I can only answer the last question, as the others will be answered in future research projects.

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**Track 10: The Revolutionary Theatre**

To help hear the sounds, languages, and energies of Black boys and Black people, I utilize playwriting as an archive of Black joy. My play is entitled, *Black Boys Are Never For Sale* and includes tales of Black Joy, Black love, Black Rage, and Black pain. It is a story of how I envisioned my life in 20 years. I originally wanted to write about Black fatherhood solely. I wanted to emphasize that celestial bridge between Black Fathers and their sons. That joy is beyond words. Black Fatherhood is special and being Black, a man, and a father in modern America is no easy thing. I wanted to write about Black fatherhood because my haunted relationship with my father. By writing about it, I believe that I would exorcise those ghosts out
of my life. To do so, I embodied the social and spiritual practice of *becoming* by writing myself into the future. The play was about my “Freedom Dreams” (Kelley, 2003). What started out as a story about a connection between a Black father and a Black son morphed into something more profound, the more that I read.

Reading provided me with a deeper perspective on the complexities of Black life. For instance, how could I talk about Black Boy Joy, without talking about the teachings of my mom? Reading, writing about Black lives encouraged me to utilize past and present behaviors to envision a world that I want (Butler, 2000). Octavia Butler (2000) noted, “to study history is to study humanity. And to try to foretell the future without studying history is like trying to learn to read without bothering to learn the alphabet.” This writing process has been an act of excavation and retrieval of Black grammars to (re)create our languages for action. Through excavation and retrieval, this play became a tale of how a Black family’s survival in the future and found their joy in an anti-Black society. The Black future is bright because Black people *are change* and because Blackness *is change*. Black dreams speak of a brighter day tomorrow despite the times, which Black people dwell in. Black people will always push towards the future, by using the past as propellant. My play is a “revolutionary theatre” because it is a social space that is in relation to and between ‘freedom dreams’ and reality” (Benston, 2000; Baraka, 1965). It is my sincerest hope that you hear the “feltsounds” of Black lives in this play.

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CHAPTER FOUR:
BLACK BOYS WILL NEVER BE FOR SALE
CAST OF CHARACTERS

The Cast: An all-Black ensemble of a family, who are trying to find their joy in an anti-Black world.

The Stage: San Francisco, California. Though the happenings of this play are occurring in California, the hauntings of anti-Blackness occur all over America and the world.

The Music: The music that accompanies this piece has all been prerecorded by Black musicians throughout the years in America. The music helps further the story of the cast and paints a picture of how anti-Blackness haunts the spaces that Black people occupy within America. To hear the music, follow this link.¹ The only live music is the feltsounds that you, the audience will feel from reading this.

THERE IS NO INTERMISSION

Main Characters

Amiri Gilmore: Amiri is Amir and June’s only child; he is their joy. Amiri was named after the famous Black poet Amiri Baraka because of how revolutionizing Baraka was to the Black community. It was June and Amiri’s hope that their baby boy would do the same. The name Amiri is closely tied to the name Amir, which means, Prince or ruler. Amiri is surely a ruler when it comes to sports and music. At 17, Amiri is dominating in the football world as a heavily recruited 5-star high school quarterback. Kicking ass, and breaking records, there is nothing that Amiri cannot do.

Amir Gilmore: Happily married to his wife June and the father of Amiri. After graduating with his Ph.D. in education from Washington State University, Amir went on to accept a faulty tenure-track position in Africana Studies at San Francisco State University. Teaching Africana Studies classes on the refusal of traditional research methodologies and the Black aesthetic. Currently, a full professor, Amir is sought out by professors, students, teachers, school administrators and media pundits alike for his work on notions of refusal, Black Aesthetics, and Black Boy Joy. He has written a litany of articles, poems on Black Boy Joy, but he is most famous for his groundbreaking book, The Death of the Minstrel Show. His highly anticipated book called, In Search of Black Boy Joy has been submitted to be reviewed.

June Gilmore: Bad-Ass.Woman June is married to Amir and is Amiri’s mother. June was a former college athlete who had dreams of going pro. Her career was cut short after a freak accident led to the complete tear of all four knee ligaments. During her recovery, she found

¹ https://open.spotify.com/user/1219692026/playlist/1rH5dl1rkZZV3F8Bp4JmeO?si=v-wwxrjBRHKK6_zIwUMm3Q.
peace and power within Black feminist scholarship and poetry. She reoriented her life to scholar-activism. As a full professor in the Department of Political Science at San Francisco State University, June is hailed as an activist, educator, and poet that has no problems in using her voice in the name of Black culture, civil rights or liberation for Black women. June was named after the famous poet June Jordan, who was fiercely committed to civil rights, women’s rights, and sexual freedom.² Though happy about her son’s accomplishments, June is fearful of raising a Black son in an anti-Black world.

Rosita “Mommie” Faulkner: Amir’s mother. Confidant and the matriarch of the family. She has done it all and lived it all. Rosita was the first person to introduce Amir to mundane refusal.

Cleveland “Poppy” Gilmore: Amir’s father. Though he has long passed, Poppy still visits Amir’s dreams to send him a message. Cleveland first introduced Amir into the Black Study through jazz.

Michael: Though he is never seen in the play, the premise of the play revolves around what happened to Michael. Michael is Amiri’s childhood friend and teammate on the football team. After being racially profiled by the police, Michael runs and is beaten by the police. His life and Amiri’s life is never the same.

Jetson (Jet’s Son): Jetson is the biological clone of Amir’s first dog, Jet. Jet was Amir’s best friend, though he rarely admits it. Jet and Amir traveled the country together when he was in graduate school. The joke is that Jet knew all of Amir’s secrets, but could not talk because he is a dog. Amir grieved when Jet passed away and wanted to find a way to keep his memory alive. Amir found the Change Same, a research institute that is dedicated to cloning animals and spared no expense to keep Jet’s memory going. Though he looks identical to Jet, Jetson is more spontaneous and spunkier than his originator.

The Plot: Amiri’s friend, Michael was racially profiled by a school resource officer and was savagely beaten by the officer. No disciplinary action has been filed against the officer for his overreach of the law. Amiri saddened and angry by the news decided to protest the way he knew best. During a significant high school football game, Amiri knelt amongst his teammates during the national anthem. He revealed a shirt that read, “Across Cultures Darker People Suffer the Most. Why?”. Chaos ensued as fans threw bottles and hurled racial slurs. Amiri was escorted off the field, where Amir waited for him. Though Amiri is slightly disappointed in himself; he does not realize that he was invoking the Black Radical Tradition.

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ACT I: Black Mother’s To Sons

ACT I, Scene I: The Dream

The Cast: Amir Gilmore, June Gilmore, Rosita Faulkner, Jetson, Cleveland Gilmore

The Scene: Bedroom, Gilmore Family Residence

The Music: None.

The Plot: Amir is visited by his father in a dream after many years. His father is trying to speak to him, but Amir cannot hear the words that his father is saying to him. Trying to make sense of it, he calls his mother. They talk about his father and how Amiri is doing after the police beating of his friend, Michael. His mother stresses to him that freedom must be continually fought for and that Black people must always refuse. As Amir is talking to this mother, June goes to check on Amiri in this room.

[Aside to the audience]: What is a dream? In what ways do dreams haunt? In what ways to dreams serve as a reminder? Amir is currently finding out.

[Scene opens on the street that Amir grew up on – 16 Whitfield Terrace. He is walking home. He walks up to the door and rings the doorbell.]

Amir (Internally): Gosh, the old man is a little slow today… I ain’t got all day.

[Amir hears rumbling behind the door and the sound of keys jingling. A key goes into the door, and the door opens. From behind the door, Poppy3 appears – bright-eyed and smiling]

Poppy: [inaudible]

Amir: Hi Poppy! How are you?

Poppy: [inaudible]

Amir: Poppy, I can’t hear you. What are you saying?

3 Poppy is the nickname that my father was given by some kids wayyyy back in the day. They called him “Pops” because he was so much older than everyone else. He was so old that he could have been everyone’s father. I guess the nickname stuck with him.
Poppy: [inaudible]

Amir (internally): Why can’t he hear me?

[SNAP! Frustrated by his dream, Amir awakens in a cold sweat, with Jetson licking his feet. As he is now awake, his wake-up song begins to play. Big K.R.I.T.’s 8:04 am begins playing.]

Big K.R.I.T: “What a difference a day makes/ What about all the effort that a day takes?/ The winding road of uncertainty/ That undying feeling of urgency/ Did I do all that I could do to ensure my success?/ Did I really give my all, and am I really at my best/...today?4”

Amir: Goddammit Jetson, what I tell you about licking my feet? Get up offa the bed.

[Jetson looks at Amir like he understands and then goes back to licking Amir’s feet. June rolls over and says:]

June: [sarcastically] Sounds like you’re off to a great day. Don’t blame the dog. Another bad dream?

Amir: Yeah…

June: Same bad dream?

Amir: Yeah. I don’t get it June. My dad hasn’t been in my dreams for years…and now he returns…and I can’t hear him. It’s so strange.

June: Hmmm…maybe he is sending you a message somehow…and you gotta figure it out?

Amir: Like what?

June: I duno he’s your dad. Ok—like…why is it that every dream you have, you are always back at the house?5

Amir: I dunno…What are you? Some ghost detective?

June: After all those shows on Netflix and Hulu, yes! Ya know, there is probably something in that house that you need to confront with your father. It is also like time has stood still for you.


5 Every dream with my father has always been at the house we used to own. We had to give up the house in 2004 because we couldn’t keep up with the payments,
Amir: Yeah there is history in that house...

June: “We all have history. You can think you’re over your history. You can think the past is the past. And then something happens, often innocuous, that shows you how far you are from over it. The past is always with you.”

Amir: Yeah, I know…

June: Well I know that you have a lot of things going on, but I really want you to try to remember your dad. Maybe it will awaken something.

Amir: Maybe [smiles]. What do I owe for your work?

June: A kiss…

Amir: Done [Amir kisses June]. Ohhh…morning breath, my favorite [smiles]

[Amir and June start laughing]

June: …and you gotta take Amiri to school today

Amir: Aww man, I thought you were gonna do it?

June: Not anymore [smiles]. Besides, it’ll be a great way for y’all to catch and bond after everything that has happened. He needs you.

Amir: Yeah, I know. These last few weeks have been chaotic. I can’t believe that the school board hasn’t suspended the officer.

June: Are you surprised? Institutional entity investigates itself and finds itself innocent of any wrongdoing. Wash, rinse, and repeat. It’s a “damn near impossibility of having an honest discussion with white people about white racism.”

Amir: This moment – this faux pas for him became a moment of “growth” for him, while lots of other Black folks build their daily routines around the threat of police violence. Whatta time to be alive.

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7 George Yancy, Backlash: What Happens When We Talk Honestly about Racism in America (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018), 4.
June: I wonder if power-walking helped him clear his racist thoughts. How’s anything supposed to get better in this country.

Amir: I dunno.

June: “I’m so tired of waiting, aren't you, for the world to become good and beautiful and kind?”

Amir: “I swear to the Lord/ I still can’t see/ Why Democracy means/ Everybody but me.” “I tire so of hearing people say,/ Let things take their course./ Tomorrow is another day./ I do not need my freedom when I’m dead./ I cannot live on tomorrow’s bread.”

June: “America was never America to me.”

[The phone rings, it’s Amir’s mom. Jetson starts barking.]

June: Did your mom forget which side of the country we live on?

Amir: Some things never change [smiles].

June: Well, if you’re gonna talk to her, I am going to make sure that Amiri is up and ready for school.

Amir: Sounds good.

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8 Briana Ellison, "Trending: Liam, Liam, Liam ....," The Washington Post, February 05, 2019, , accessed March 11, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/express/2019/02/06/trending-liam-liam-liam/?utm_term=.d099e4801fbb. On Good Morning America, Liam Nesson was bold enough to say, “that power walking for two hours every day cured his ‘primal urge’ to kill a black person after learning years ago that a friend was raped by a black man.” This exemplifies the power of white men. It is also happened during Black History Month of 2019, a month that I will always remember.


[June exits, Rosita enters]

[Amir finally answers the phone]

Amir: Hey mommie

Rosita: Hi my Angel –oh oh…what time is it there?

Amir: Mommie, it’s five to six.

Rosita: Oh sorry! Did I wake you?

Amir: No, I’ve been up for a while talking to June. I had another one of those dreams again.

Rosita: Another one?

Amir: Mhmm. Yeah, I still can’t hear him. It’s almost like I forgot the sound of his voice. Has that ever happened to you?

Rosita: No, I’ve never forgotten his voice. It’s as sharp and as crisp like any other day. Hell, it’s probably even sharper. I have never forgotten your father’s voice because I am willful about remembering his words. His words reach me; his words teach me. They go wherever I go. His words guide me as mine does for you. It’s about centering your ancestors.

Amir: I thought I was…

Rosita: But you’re not. Memory is about willfulness. What good are memories if you don’t will them into existence. What good are memories are if you don’t let them manifest into the present day. At the end of the day, all of God’s children are just flesh, blood, sound, and memory. One day we will all be dust – it is about what you remember that matters. Whom we leave our words and sounds with are so important.¹³

Amir: The dead are never dead…

Rosita: That’s right. There is a life after this life and our ancestors, they are watching you – they are watching us to see who will tend to their gardens of memories. “[You] need to renew [y]our habits of assembly and recognize that we are part of a common project and that project has been given to us by our ancestors along with the responsibility to pass that project on to our

¹³ Who tends to the memories of the deceased?
children." You have been neglecting your responsibility to your father’s garden for far too long. Maybe he is sending you a reminder – to go back to where you need to go. Go back to the house – think on his words, and maybe you will hear him again. Re-attune your ears. Make more time to consciously listen.

Amir: Mhm.

Rosita: As we moved into positions of elders, your father and I asked ourselves, what kind of elders do we want to be? Think about how memories are lost from generation to generation through death, with little chance of recovery. The question becomes, how do we preserve our memories and memorialize our ancestors for future generations to reflect and relive?

Amir: By being willful…

Rosita: It is the only way, Boobie. “Black culture is maternal culture.” My grandmother’s words and memories were passed down from her to my mother. My mother passed down those words to me and I have been passing them down to you. I think about my mother a lot, Amir. I don’t remember everything that she said, but the memories that I remember are always with me —her words are always with me. I try my best to always remember them – to hold onto them.

Amir: Memories can be fragile though…

Rosita: Oh, they definitely can be and that is the importance of always tending to them – handling them with care. Once a memory is dropped and broken, they are hard to repair. I wish there were a way to remember more...

Amir: Like a machine?

Rosita: Yeah, like a machine…like a machine, that would be cool. To relive things again. To re-see the world differently. To re-live life again in the same body.

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14 Fred Moten, "Left of Black with Fred Moten," interview by Mark Anthony Neal, YouTube, November 5, 2018, accessed March 10, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fFkoZTFd1k. What does it mean to be in relation with our ancestors? To be engaged in a Black Study with them.


16 Boobie is the nickname that my mom gave me.

Amir: Yeah that would be pretty cool.

Rosita: I definitely won’t see it in my day, but maybe you will.

Amir: Hopefully.

Rosita: [switching subjects] So how’s my grandson?

Amir: Which one? The one with four legs or the one with two? [laughs]

Rosita: Oh, stop it! You know that I love them both. It’s just that Jetson and I got a bond. You wouldn’t know about it.

Amir: Jetson is good. He said that he is looking forward to his belly rubs whenever you come out to visit.

Rosita: Tell him that I got a lot saved up for him. And my other grandson?

Amir: He’s okay. He’s still shaken up after everything that has happened.

Rosita: I bet. White supremacy will wake you the hell up.

Amir: Living doesn’t get any easier. Mommie how do you manage?

Rosita: Well I just do. Being on this earth as long as I had, I have seen a lot of things. I feel like I have seen it all. Amir, I was born during the Civil Rights era. I remember where I was when Malcolm X was murdered. I cried when the Kennedys18 were killed. I remember when MLK was shot and the riots that soon followed. I remember when America brought crack to our door and welfare queens and crack babies were all the rage. I remember watching Rodney King being on beaten on camera – thinking that we were gonna get justice. I remember the inauguration of the first Black president, which was undoubtedly followed by the inauguration of the first white president. “It was your generation that was compelled to witness all of the unrelenting violence against Black Americans, enduring “snuffing out of black lives in real time, looped over and over again, until the next murder knocks it off the news.”19 I say all that to say, that life keeps going and Black folks have to continue to find a way to survive.

Amir: Yeah mommie, but we want to do more than survive.

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18 John F. Kennedy and Bobby Kennedy.

Rosita: I feel like youngins underestimate survival. We need to redefine survival, as we have forgotten what it means. “When you are not supposed to live, as you are, where you are, with whom you are with, then survival is a radical action… Sometimes: to survive in a system is to survive a system.”

We wouldn’t be here without our ancestors surviving – passing down their living manifestos to us. “Survival is the greatest gift of love. Sometimes, for Black mothers, it is the only gift possible.” It was through my words, my teachings, my failures, that you knew how to survive. Say what you will about Poppy, but he taught you how to survive as well. “[Your] survival lay in learning how to use the weapons [we] gave [you], also, to fight against those things within [your]self, unnamed. You see, survival is a common shared project. We all depend on each other to survive. Living is about how we manifest of our survival strategies. Survival is the core bond that brings all together. How Amiri survives this moment, will give him the weapons that he needs to live.

Amir: You always know what to say.

Rosita: Of course! I am your momma. When would my words ever steer your wrong?

Amir: Never!

[A Jetson can be heard barking in the background, letting them know that the conversation was over.]

Rosita: Uh-oh! He’s letting us know that time is up! That it is time to go. He’s telling us to write a letter.

[Amir and Rosita laugh]

Amir: We’re gonna have to do this another time.

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24 Basically, it means to wrap it up.
Rosita: Let me let you go! Tell the family that I said hello and I’ll be visiting y’all soon. And give my grandson a kiss.

Amir: That’s never gonna happen [laughing].

Rosita: Okay. Okay, Boobie. I love you.

Amir: I love you too.

[Rosita hangs up the phone]

[Rosita exits]

Amir: Jetson, are you happy now?

[Jetson wags his tail]

Amir: Alright. Are you ready for a walk?

[Jetson jumps up and down out of excitement. Amir puts the lease on Jetson, and they go out for a walk]

[Scene Ends]

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Act I, Scene Two: A Mother’s Words

The Cast: Amiri Gilmore, June Gilmore

The Scene: Amiri’s Bedroom, Gilmore Family Residence

The Music: None.

The Plot: This act is about the connection between a mother and her son. June checks in on Amiri to find out he has been reading tweets and articles that are demonizing Michael’s assault on Twitter. Despite this traumatic event, school administrators and coaches proceed with the status quo and expect Amiri, their star Quarterback to play in a pivotal game. Amiri questions his involvement in football. June talks to her son about the everyday dilemmas of being Black in America. Though she wants to protect Amiri from the harms of racism, June encourages her son to get political – to use his platform to make a stand.
[Aside to the Audience]: The connection that Black mothers have with their sons is eternal. James Baldwin said, “Being Black…It’s a very complex situation when a black boy grows into a man and finds himself in this country…And the only person who really knows anything about that, who knows it most intimately…his mother.”25 There is no fear like worrying about your child”26 and “no method of black mothering is immune from the capriciousness of racism.”27 In “A Love Poem For Michael Brown,” Elisheba Johnson said, “A mother’s love is a unique beautiful gift.”28 She also said, “My love isn’t a bullet proof vest.”29 “How do Black mothers teach their sons about “honesty, loyalty, compassion, faith, responsibility, reciprocity, mutuality, and strength”, all the while protecting them from “society’s hostile forces”30 How do you nurture and protect your Black children in an anti-Black society? Black mothers are confronted with this dilemma every day. June has to navigate the complexities of teaching Amiri how to survive, but also to transcend those obstacles the Black people encounter.

[Scene begins with June knocking on the door]

June: Knock, knock.

Amiri: [slowly] Come in.

June: Good morning! How are you doing this morning?

Amiri: The same as yesterday…

[JJune sits on the bed]

June: Amiri, I know that a lot is going on right there, but you have to get ready for school.


29 Elisheba Johnson, "A Love Poem For Michael Brown,"139.

30 Joyce Elaine King and Carolyn Ann King, "An Afrocentric Way of Kowing," in Black Mothers To Sons: Juxtaposing African American Literature With Social Practice, Revised ed. (New York: Peter Lang, 1995), 6. These were the research questions that King and Mitchell posed in their research stu
Amiri: [distraught] I know…and Twitter ain’t helping…31

June: What I tell you about using social media before school? That thing will ruin your day before it even started.

Amiri: Well everyone is talking about what happened to Michael online. It is kind of hard to avoid it.

June: What are they say—never mind it’s not important.

Amiri: Well they are saying that Michael got what he deserved by running away. Michael shouldn’t have run. If he didn’t run, that wouldn’t have been his experience with the police. He should have respected the law.

June: Well, respectability politics are bullshit. Respectability politics don’t end racism because they are racist. “Racism doesn’t care about respectability, wealth, education, or status.”32 Respectability politics are about keeping you in your designated place. “There can be nothing more dangerous to a body than the social agreement that that body is dangerous.”33 Within the racist and sexist society that we live in, society privileges some bodies over others. To be a Black man in America, your body is instantly “judged as suspicious, or as dangerous, as objects to be feared, a judgment that is lethal…The unarmed black man is seen as armed whether or not he is armed.”34

Amiri: So not running wouldn’t have made a difference?

June: [shaking her head] I don’t think so when being Black is the crime.

Amiri: [scrolling through Twitter] Look, there is even a video of dad on Faux news.35

June: Oh lord, how bad is it?

31 Amiri snapped from the pressure on his shoulders. The weight of being Black in America is heavy. In “Dear Dr. Nigger Professor,” I talk about moral injury and the harm it caused to Amiri and Michael.


35 Faker than Fox, its faux.
Amiri: It’s pretty bad. Take a look.

*[Amiri plays the video for his mom]*

Blankface Commenter: Where was he radicalized folks? That is the question that we are trying to answer today of Professor Ah-meer Ah-sim Gilmore, folks. After his son’s friend was beaten by a cop – which he deserved, might I add, this is what he had to say.

*[Video clip cuts to an interview with Amir talking about the situation]*

Amir: One day I hope that our schools can be a site of Black joy, instead of Black suffering. What happened to Michael the other day shows that we are not there yet. People assume that because we live in “progressive” and “revitalizing” San Francisco, that our lives are supposedly better. Antiblackness is alive and well here. “There is no distance between the facts of life in San Francisco and the facts of life in Birmingham…San Francisco is just another American city, and if you’re a black man, that’s a very bitter thing to say.”36 Racism is not just a southern issue; racism is an American issue. Malcolm X said it best, “There’s no such thing as a Mason-Dixon Line –it’s America. There’s no such thing as the south—it’s America. If one room in your house is dirty, you’ve got a dirty house…Do not say that room is dirty but the rest of house is clean.”37 America is a dirty place to be…

*[Video clip cuts out]*

Blankface Commenter: Malcolm X and a dirty house. Well, maybe Amir should tell his people to get their house in order. “Dear Black America, ‘Let go of your “black victimhood” and bring yourself to the point of admission that “you hoodrats and pavement apes are the ones destroying black lives and communities.” And in closing, “don’t blame Whitey!”38 Amir should tell his people to stop acting a fool and obey the law. Pick up their pants and stop acting like hoodlums. Simple. I’m not racist folks, I just love America and the American dream.39 All people can make it, but you gotta obey the law. It’s simple. You know why Black unemployment is so high, it’s because Black people don’t obey the law and American values. If they just ob—


39 Racism as self-love.
June: Filth.

Amiri: Being Black is hard living…

June: It is, and you got a whole lot of years left, so you best prepare. Listen Amiri, “I’ll tell you:/ Life for me ain’t been no crystal stair./ It’s had tacks in it,/And splinters,/And boards torn up,/And places with no carpet on the floor—/Bare./ But all the time/ I’se been a-climbin’ on,/And reachin’ landin’s,/ And turnin’ corners,/And sometimes goin’ in the dark/ Where there ain’t been no light./ So boy, don’t you turn back. 41

Amiri: Baraka?

June: Not fiery enough to be Baraka. Langston Hughes. Step your game up [smiles]. What I am trying to say is that life tough whichever you slice it. You can’t “turn back” or “sit down on the steps.” 42 We cannot become immobilized by racism; we have to keep going. “You must keep going/ You can’t stop there: World will/waive; will be/ facetious, angry. You can’t stop there./ You have to keep on going.”

Amiri: Urgh. I’m just so angry, ya know? I want to do something for Michael—to show that his life matters, but everyone wants me to pretend like this never existed. How do you get over something like that? School administrators are trying to silence anyone who speaks about it.

June: Asking for white folks to lead on social justice issues is “like asking a dog to meow.”

[June and Amiri laugh]

40 This is a response after Amir went on San Francisco Tonight and defended his friend, Michael. For further understanding, please read “Dear Mr. Nigger Professor.”


44 Michael Bennett and Dave Zirin, "Roots," in Things That Make People Feel Uncomfortable (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2018), 55. Progress seems damn-near impossible with the deliberate speech that it takes.
June: What, I’m serious. That’s why “progress” is so damn slow. We are still waiting for the dog to meow. I’m nearly 50 years old and I probably not going to live another 50 years. As a girl, I was always told that progress—“it takes time. It’s taken my father’s time, my mother’s time, my uncle’s time, my brothers’ and my sisters’ time.” Now as a grown woman, the only thing that I ask white folks is, “How much time do you want for your progress?”

Amiri: We can’t wait for justice.

June: No. We can’t wait. We must be impatient when it comes to equality and justice. Every time that we wait for justice, we are told that we are ungrateful for what we have been given. “Equality, diversity: they all become gifts for which we are supposed to be grateful; they become compensatory. We are not grateful when a system is extended to include us when that system is predicated on inequality and violence.”

[Amiri nods his head]

June: We cannot wait for justice; the stakes are too high. With every injustice, wrongs don’t get righted unless we keep raising our voices again and again.” If you’re unhappy with the status quo, why don’t you make your own path? As an athlete, you have a lot of power Amiri.

Amiri: I don’t think so…

June: People listen to athletes; people look up to athletes.

Amiri: You must be confusing me for someone famous, like Lebron James or something.

June: Well you’d be surprised who’s looking up to you. You could lead the next generation of activists and you wouldn’t even know. You have the chance to make a difference right here, right now. Don’t sell yourself short.

Amiri: So, what should I do?

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46 James Baldwin: The Price of a Ticket.


June: Use that anger! “Rage is a legitimate political emotion.”

Amiri: Whatta mean?

June: June: “Frustration and rage are a simple fact of black life in America.” Despite the difficulties of being Black in America, “I refuse to show white people a tear. Anger is better!” You need anger in your life. “Black rage is not unjustifiable…it is an “a site of being, an affect that refuses to be silenced by white racist threats.” When I was younger, I used to be silent about my anger, and it ate me up inside. In my life Amiri, I have learned two vital things: One: “my fear of anger taught me nothing. Your fear of that anger will teach you nothing.” Two: “My silences had not protected me. Your silence will not protect you.” “Silence about violence is violence.” We have to be unafraid about speaking against the injustices that affect us because we need each other.

Amiri: But won’t I just come off as another angry Black man?

June: We cannot let fear stop us. All the rights that we enjoy came off the backs of people that used their anger for justice. So many things in America would not have gotten done without Black rage – it’s powerful. If we want change, we gotta make folks uncomfortable. Let them feel our presence – take up space. If you want folks to understand where you are coming from – protest.

Amiri: Protest? Are you kidding me?

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52 George Yancy, *Backlash: What Happens When We Talk Honestly about Racism in America*, 89.


55 Sara Ahmed, "Conclusion 2: A Killjoy Manifesto," in *Living A Feminist Life* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 260-1. Ahmed further noted that our silences on violence continue to protect those that benefit from violence. Silence contains the damage, we must speak about the damage.
June [shaking her head] I’m not. A protest is an act of rebellion. It is a refusal to the choices that are presented to us. You don’t have to shut down a street or highway to get attention. “Organize where you stand” and where you stand is on the football field. You could channel your anger without saying a word. You could take a knee for justice. A kneel is silent but so LOUD, can you not hear the sounds?

Amiri: [faded and depleted] I dunno mom, I just…I just…

[Like a pilot light in the oven, June notices that Amiri’s fire has gone out]

June: Oh no, that is never gonna do in our house. Amiri, where is your fire?

Amiri: I dunno…it’s gone.

June: [holding Amiri by the shoulders] “Do you know who you are? Who do you really think you are? Have you looked in a mirror recently…and seen your Blackness for what it is? Do you know what your Blackness means?”

Amiri: …

June: “History belongs to those who can speak for themselves.” “We come out of a history [where] the black people of this country come out of a history that was never written down. The connection between father and son between mother and daughter…we forged ourselves out of this fire” Now the question is – where is your fire? “Where is your fire? I say where is your fire?/ Can’t you smell it coming out of our past?/ The fire of living…/ The fire of loving…/ The fire of


58 Sometimes the light goes out. Nothing can happen without the pilot light.

59 Sonia Sanchez, Wounded in the House of a Friend (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), 52. Sanchez went to rally where Malcolm X was and he said these exact words to her. Sanchez said that the power of his voice shook the ground. Malcolm X lit a fire within, and she became warm again.

60 Michele Wallace, Invisibility Blues: From Pop To Theory (New York: Verso, 2016), 270.

blackness.../catch your fire/hold your fire/learn your fire/be the fire.”

[And just like that, Amiri’s became warm again. He caught fire from his mother’s words. There was a passion burning in his eyes again.]

June: “Know the fire, but never forget how it burns.”

[Amiri nods his head in agreement]

Amiri: But if I kneel won’t that make everyone unhappy?

June: Only those that are personally invested in your silence. “If you don’t live the only life you have, you won’t live some other life, you won’t live any life at all.”

If happiness is your goal, then unhappiness is what you will find.

Amiri: Ugh…I hate when you and Dad do Yoda talk.

June: “Happiness is often assumed to be an end point: as what we want to reach, as the point of life, the aim of life. The path we should follow is the path that would lead us to happiness.”

We are conditioned to be happy and to make everyone else happy, right?

Amiri: Yeah

June: But is playing football gonna make you happy?

Amiri: Maybe

June: Alright. Let me rephrase. Is playing football today gonna make you happy?

Amiri: No.

June: So why do it? Amiri, we are not put on this earth to make others happy. In life, you quickly find out how much happiness can make you unhappy. Happiness in a way becomes a pressure

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point because you are trying to make everyone else happy. Everyone wants you to play, but no one gives a damn about what has happened.

Amiri: I dunno. Football has kind of been my life. I’m not sure what life after football looks like.

June: I can understand that. I mean who knows how long your football career will be. Regardless of how long it is, you will be Black longer than that. Football “might give you fifteen minutes of fame, but what about the rest of your life?”66 “Many Americans refuse to confront the history and ubiquity of racism in this country.”67 They use football as a getaway – a place where they can find happiness.

Amiri: Whatta mean?

June: As an institution, football sells happiness. They “intentionally create this fake feel”—they use the football field to miseducate people with a fictional portrayal of life off the field. The fiction is that because all these white student fans are cheering majority-Black teams, the dynamic is somehow postracial. It creates an illusion for both the fan and the player—the student and the student-athlete—so they don’t have to face how messed-up this country is. You’re not Black on the field. You’re a representative of your school. There’s no New Jim Crow when you’re on the field.”68 “A memory of racism can be what “gets in the way” of [their] happiness.”69 A memory of racism is what is stopping you from playing. People would rather you forget about it that “unpleasant memory” than confront it. To pose the problem of racism would shatter the illusion of being in a post-racial society.

Amiri: Is that why they wanna keep politics out of sports?

June: Yes, and not any kind of politics, Black politics. Black politics disrupt business as usual – they disrupt the status quo. Black politics and Black activism serve as a reminder that we are still here, and we are still willing to get in the way of their happiness.

Amiri: Well if happiness ain’t your thing, then what is?


68 Michael Bennett and Dave Zirin, "The NCAA Will Give You PTSD," in Things That Make People Feel Uncomfortable (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2018), 73. Bennett was spot-on with this analysis.

June: Happiness isn’t appealing to your father and me. We understand the weight that happiness brings. We understand the silences that it brings. We refuse to be happy. We strive to live a life of joy.

Amiri: What’s the difference?

June: Happiness is an external feeling. It was created to be a commodity. “I have heard countless Black preachers say…happiness is predicated on ‘happenings,’ on what’s occurring, on whether your life is going right, and whether all is well.”

Amiri: What happens when the happenings don’t happen? Also, who determines what is right in life?

June: Exactly! Society tells us that buying that new stuff will make you happy. Being rich will make you happy. Getting that new job will make you happy. You see, the thing about happiness is that it is never enough. Happiness is fleeting because it is always acquiring the next best thing. Once the appeal has worn off, you will no longer be happy. What happiness doesn’t do is nurture the soul.

Amiri: And joy does that?

June: Oh absolutely! It took me and your father a long time to say enough with being happy. We want to be joyful. Joy is tied to the erotic…

Amiri: Erotic…like sexual?

June: [laughing] No, not in the sexual sense. “The erotic is not a question only of what we do; it is a question of how acutely and fully we can feel in the doing.” Joy is about the pleasure we receive while doing something. Has something ever just felt right to you?

Amiri: Yeah, acting. I love being on stage.

June And isn’t it special? So why does acting feel right to you?

Amiri: Acting gives me a sense of satisfaction, a sense of completion that not even money can buy. June: Joy cannot be bought, because joy is an internal feeling. “When we begin to live from within outward, in touch with the power of the erotic within ourselves and allowing that power to inform and illuminate our actions upon the world around us, then we begin to be responsible to ourselves.

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in the deepest sense.”

The erotic is knowledge. The erotic is a spiritual guide to understanding how we feel and desiring what we want. The erotic is political—it is powerful, especially if you want to share any pursuit with another person. By being in touch with the erotic, the only question that you have to ask yourself is: “will this give me joy?” If the answer is no, then don’t do it. The motto that I try to live by is “if it don’t touch my soul then I can’t listen to it.”

[Amiri nods]

Amiri: Do you ever get joy from using your anger?

June: Of course. They go hand in hand for me. When your rage and joy combine you get “The Glow.” Understanding joy is about being in a deep relationship with yourself. It is the daily political question that I ask myself.

Amiri: Well, homework doesn’t give me joy, so can I stop doing it?

[June just looks back at Amiri and stares]

Amiri: What? I figure that it was worth asking…

June: Don’t push it.

[June and Amiri both laugh]

June: Joy is always at the forefront of my mind because it is tied to justice and world-making. How do we build and create worlds in which we are all free? “Maintaining the capacity for joy is critical to the struggle for justice… Joy arises from an internal clarity about our purpose. My purpose is justice. And the fight for justice brings me joy.” “This world is white no longer, and it will never

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75 You’ll understand this concept during “The Kneel.”

be white again.”“We can’t let the messed-up state of the world steal our joy… May your rage [and joy] be a force for good.”

Amiri: Thanks, mom.

[Amiri and June hug. Amir knocks at the door]

[Amir enters]

Amir: What are y’all doing?

Amiri: Getting into trouble

Amir: What kind of trouble?

Amiri: Mom and I decided that a player protest would be a great way of making a political statement

Amir: Oh, did y’all? Amiri, can you go downstairs and feed Jetson – he’s a bit hungry.

Amiri: Okay

[Amiri exits]

Amir: Are you crazy? A protest. You can’t be serious.

June: Dead. Serious.

Amir: He’s not ready to get involved, he’s still a kid.

June: Well to the rest of America, he’s a grown man. We can’t protect him forever. No one is ever ready to be an activist, they just do it remember? Maybe you’ve forgotten being stuck in the Ivory Tower.

Amir: We are both in the tower – and the same one, might I add. Amiri has worked hard to get to where he’s at Are we ready to throw it all away? Not every person that protests get their name written in the textbook. There is no fame or glory in this – it is just more work.


June: No one that is doing this work is doing it for fame. For the first time in a long time, Amiri wants to stand up and make a difference. Can’t you see that? I don’t want him to grow up having regrets about something that he should have done.

Amir: If he protests, there is no going back, you know that right? It’s all over.

June: Amir. Black folks cannot afford not to improvise. The stakes are too high not to.

Amir: Well I don’t want my son participating in any protest.

June: He’s our son. And he will get to decide what is best for him.

[Amiri enters]

Amiri: Well in the time that it took to feed Jetson y’all argued, great. Well, I’ll be downstairs waiting in the car. Mom, I’ll see you at the game tonight.

June: I look forward to it.

Amir: [sarcastically] You mean if there is a game tonight.

[Scene Ends]

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ACT II: School As A Site Of Suffering

Act II: School As A Site of Suffering

The Cast: Amiri Gilmore, Trey, South San Francisco Teachers, Blankface Students

The Scene: In Amir’s car/ South San Francisco High School


The Plot: This act draws from Michael Dumas’ work on how schools can be personal hells for Black children. It illuminates on how Black childhood and their futures are socially unimagined and unimaginable. Despite being famous for his “athletic gift” no one appreciates Amiri’s intellect or his appreciation for the arts.

79 Meaning in regard to Black life and Black survival, Black folks must improvise because the systems that are in place aim to send us to our very doom. Protesting, talking back, resisting, and refusing are techniques of going “against the grain” and improvising in a system of white supremacy. To improvise forces the systems that oppress us to accommodate us and that is something that it cannot afford.
Aside to the Audience: In Countering the Conspiracy To Destroy Black Boys, Jawanza Kunjufu says, “something is wrong with the system, not the children.” Under the guise of racial progress, there is a “fondness to dismiss black suffering, because it is presumed to only have occurred in the past.” Without examining the current experiences of black students, black suffering becomes mundane – it becomes assumed – it becomes invisible. Black students are ethnographers within K-12 schooling. Participating, yet observing and recording the sounds of white supremacy. Amiri is the prisoner.

[Scene begins with Amir and Amiri driving to school. Road noise fills the car cabin until a question is asked.]

Amiri: Do you and mom always fight like that?

[The question falls flat, as road noise returns to fill the air]

Amiri: Dad?

Amir: [eyes on the road] …

Amiri: Dad!

Amir: …No, not really – well someti—well yes, yes we do. We’re human beings, Amiri, sometimes we gets messy

Amiri: I get that. Aren’t we all messy? My life is a mess – I wanna get involved in the messiness.


83 This is in reference to the argument that Amir and June had in Act I.

84 Messy refers to social interactions. People are messy. People come with baggage. Messiness refers to getting involved in the fight against white supremacy. At what point do parents, especially Black parents get their children involved? At what point do we have conversations with our children about whiteness and white supremacy? I do not have children but think about the dilemmas it can create.
Amir: I know you do, but once you can get involved you can never go back.

Amiri: What do you mean?

Amir: [snaps his fingers] I’m saying that once you snap, you cause a break in relations. You can never live life the way that you used to…you can never see life the same way. There is a sense of brokenness.

Amiri: But what’s the point? Why stay in relation to something that doesn’t value you anyway? I’d rather live in within the break.

Amir: Boy, you really are our child [smiles]. The thing is Amiri, it doesn’t matter how old you are, you are still our little boy.85 Sometimes it is hard letting go. There is only so much that Black parents can do to protect their children from racism…

Amiri: But you gotta let me go.

Amir: I know, but it’s hard okay. I want you to live your best life. I want you to be joyful. I want you to be fulfilled. These are aspirations that every Black parent dreams about for their children. It is hard because we know how easy it is for dreams to be deferred in America.86 It’s hard because we know how quickly Black boys turn into men in America.87 We want you to be a child as long as possible. We want to protect you, but we want you to experience life. Your mother and I would give up everything in this world to ensure that happens…it is all so hard Amiri.

Amiri: I hear you, but I think that I am ready to confront life the way I want to. I am ready to live out my dreams. If dreams are so often deferred, I have to be ready for what that feels like – and it all starts from letting me go.

85 My mother still tells me that, even as a grown man. Despite my age, the worry that my mom has for me in white America remains the same. Do parents carry that worry until they die? Does that worry continue until the afterlife?

86 “What happens to a dream deferred?” A nod to Langston Hughes 1951 poem, “Harlem.” Side note: Hughes poem was an inspiration for Lorraine Hansberry’s play A Raisin In The Sun. For more information, see Michael Morand, Michael, "Beinecke Library Pop-up Exhibit Celebrates "A Raisin in the Sun" at 60," Voynich Manuscript | Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library, last modified March 05, 2019, https://beinecke.library.yale.edu/article/beinecke-library-pop-exhibit-celebrates-raisin-sun-60.

Amir: [*slightly teary-eyed*]. I know… I know. Just know that we are always here for you…

Amiri: I know [smiles]. I mean, how could you not be, I am your number one son!

*[Amir and Amiri laugh]*

Amir: Well, about your mother and I… I never finished that…

Amiri: Yeah…

Amir: Your mother and I argue, but we are on the same team. Sometimes we just see life differently.

Amiri: How so?

Amir: Well – we both want you to smash the system. I am not ready yet to let that happen, while your mom, on the other hand, is ready for that to happen…

Amiri: Maybe you’ll never be ready

Amir: Probably so. I mean, despite our disagreement, I still love your mom. Black love is nothing without Black joy, and she’s my ride or die. We show up for each other, support each other. She’s calls me out on my shit, as I do her. It’s about being truthful and accountable to each other, our family, and our communities. However, at the end of the day, I know that she has my back and that she has mine. If the world turned on us, it would be us against the world. We protect each other; it’s our credo. She’s “all I need in this life of sin.”

*[Amir and Amiri laugh]*

Amir: Amiri, June and I are Black academics. Sometimes academics take the fun out of everything. I think it is because we wear masks all day long.

Amiri: Masks?

Amir: Black folks wear masks. You wear one too at school. We wear masks for protection and survival. We wear masks to channel our anger. We wear masks to analyze the ways of white

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88 A lyric from Tupac’s “Me and My Girlfriend.”

89 The mask refers to Paul Laurence Dunbar’s “We Wear The Mask.” Connecting this to Sara Ahmed’s theorization about walls in *Living a Feminist Life*, a mask can be a wall, as it protects you and keeps others out. For further insights, please see Sara Ahmed, “Brick Walls” and “Fragile Connections,” In *Living A Feminist Life*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017).
On naiveté, Baldwin noted, “There is a great deal of willpower involved in the white man’s naivete. Most people are not naturally reflective any more than they are naturally malicious, and the white man prefers to keep the Black man at a certain human remove because it is easier for him thus to preserve his simplicity and avoid being called to account for crimes committed by his forefathers, or his neighbors. He is inescapably aware, nevertheless, that he is in a better position in the world than black men are, nor can he quite put to death the suspicion that he is hated by black men therefore. He does not wish to be hated, neither does he wish to change places.”

A nod to Brittney C. Cooper and her work revolving around respectability politics, rage, and Black feminism. Her work is scattered within my work. To know more about her work, check out Brittney C. Cooper, Beyond Respectability the Intellectual Thought of Race Women, (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2017) and Brittney C. Cooper, Eloquent Rage: A Black Feminist Discovers Her Superpower, (New York: St Martin's Press, 2018).

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Savior. It has everything in it that white people love about a movie with racism… like that scene where they're in the bar and the white person sticks up for the black person…”

[Amir and Amiri look at each other and look out at the audience. The trailer continues…]

Movie Narrator: …“That thing where a white person works closely with a black person and is surprised to learn they're smart…There's also the part where the black person very calmly eviscerates a white person in a way that makes white audiences think, that was the day racism was solved, and makes black audiences think, ‘I had to do that same [bleep] last week.’ Don't forget the part where the black person bravely defies racist laws. And then the white guy steps in like he's some sort of Goddamn hero…”

[Amir and Amiri slowly nod their heads]

Movie Narrator: “And one racist who's so cartoonishly racist that other racists watch this movie and say, ‘Well, at least, I'm not that racist.’”

Amir: Gotta have one of those.

Movie Narrator: “People magazine says, ‘This movie is a triumph,’ and the black person it's based on says, ‘This is not at all how it happened.’ Some movies examine the complexities of race relations in America. This movie does not do that. But according to The Root, ‘it does push a black helplessness narrative that paints black people as passive in their own history. Plus it's corny.’… And you know this movie was written by a white person because the black person becomes friends with the racist… Plus, a scene where the white guy is helpful in a way that doesn't advance the cause of all black people...just the one he's friends with… and if you're a black person hoping for the catharsis of watching a black character punch a racist, you'll get the next best thing...[Grunts ] ...the white guy punching a racist.”

White Savior, coming this spring.

Amir: Well…that was interesting.

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92 White Savior: The Movie Trailer, Produced by Seth Meyers, Late Night With Seth Meyers, February 21, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T_RTu1v6U. I don’t even like Seth Myers like that, but this comedy skit is spot on. The skit is poking fun at the corniness of White Savior movies. White Savior movies are films where the white character (real or fictional) saves people of color (usually Black) from despair. For further context, see Taryn Finley, "'White People Won't Save You' And Other Gems From The Mind Of Terence Nance," The Huffington Post, last modified November 09, 2018, https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/terence-nance-random-acts-of-flyness_us_5be1b8dce4b04367a880f9e6.

93 White Savior: The Movie Trailer.

94 White Savior: The Movie Trailer. When the bar for racism is so egregious, a lot of mundane racist actions become invisible. People retort: I am not racist, how can I be racist? Not all racists come in hoods and burn crosses. They are your teachers, lawyers, doctors, police officers, and friends.

95 White Savior: The Movie Trailer.
Amiri: Hey Dad?

Amir: Yeah?

Amiri: Who comes to save us?

Amir: It sure ain’t white folks. White people won’t save you.96

[Amir pulls up to the school]

Amir: Alright here we are.

Amiri: Ugh, do I really have to go to school?

Amir: You don’t have to, but good luck explaining to your mom. Of course, you gotta go to school. The day will be over before you know it.

Amiri: I can’t wait to get out of this school. Dad, from the moment that I leave your car and drive away, I feel “Black and invisible” at school, until it’s over.97 I hate being here. You don’t know what I go through.

Amir: C’mon Amiri.

Amiri: “My [history] teacher can see right through me, all the way to Black History Month.”98 I wish I could give you this feeling…

Amir: Things will get better. They always do and they always will.

96 White People Won’t Save You is a montage of white savior films. Upon visiting the site, you are only given the option to watch the half-hour video from White Savior movies. Backgrounded is the choir that repeatedly sings “White people won’t save you,” in an almost haunting way.

97 Dyan Watson, "A Letter from a Black Mom to Her Son," Rethinking Schools, Spring 2012, https://www.rethinkingschools.org/articles/a-message-from-a-black-mom-to-her-son. Watson’s piece is a letter to her son, Caleb that spoke about the dilemma of sending your Black child to school. In the letter, Watson spoke to her experience of being a Black student in Portland, Oregon. During her K-8 schooling experience, Watson felt Black and invisible, because her Blackness was never acknowledged in any meaningful way. Amiri is experiencing that same rub because, South San Francisco High School’s demographics are largely Latinx (779), Filipino (282), and Asian (128). Out of a school that has over 1388 students, only 21 identify as Black (1.5%). Within the school, one out of the sixty-four teachers are Black, with zero Black administrators. For teacher’s demographic data see, California Department of Education, comp. "Certificated Staff by Ethnicity for 2017-18 South San Francisco Teachers." For student demographic data, see California Department of Education, comp, "2017-18 Enrollment by Ethnicity and Grade South San Francisco High Report (41-69070-4137279)."

98 Morgan Parker, “Who Were Frederick Douglass’s Cousins, and Other Quotidian Black History Facts,” In Magical Negro, (Portland/ Brooklyn: Tin House Books, 2019), 54
[Amiri gets out the car]

Amir: Hey

Amiri: Yeah, Dad?

Amir: Whatever you decide on doing today, just know that your mom and I will be there supporting you – as a family.

Amiri: [smiles] Sounds good. Thanks, Dad.

Amir: Goodbye son.

[Amir drives away, and Amiri heads up the steps of the high school. Hanging above the doorway is a banner that reads: “South San Fran: A Model of Integration and Education.” He opens the door and enters the school. For the next seven hours, Amiri will be on the “conveyor belt of Black suffering.” Shuffling from class to class, location to location, Amiri will experience a hidden curriculum that reproduces social inequality.⁹⁹ A curriculum of anti-Black violence.]

[Warning Bell 8:10 A.M.] *DUN DUN*

[Amiri is at his locker, getting his books for class when a student approaches him.]

Blankface Student # 1: Oh…MA… GOD. Amiri look at your hair.

Amiri: [inaudible]; it looks the same every day.

Blankface Student #1 : Ya, but it’s so nappy and puffy. I want to touch it.

Amiri: Please don’t. Please don’t touch my hair.

[Blankface student does it anyway]

⁹⁹ Ann Arnett Ferguson, Bad Boys: Public Schools In The Making Of Black Masculinity (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001), 50. Ferguson is speaking to radical schooling theory, which theorizes that educational institutions reflect the interests of dominant societal groups. Ferguson further noted on page 51 that, this curriculum, “is affected through the exercise of symbolic violence, the painful, damaging, mortal wounds inflicted by the wielding of words, symbols, standards.” For further reading, see Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron, Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture, (London, Sage Publications, 1990); Basil Bernstein, Towards a Theory of Educational Transmission, (London: Routledge, 2004).

¹⁰⁰ “South San Francisco High School 2018 – 2019 Bell Schedule”, ssfhs.schoolloop.com/file/1211910111505/1156024067618/6076131684472043832.pdf. I based the play off the actual bell schedule. The Dun Dun is the famous sound that you hear in the crime show Law & Order. As the detectives move scene to scene, “dun dun,” transitions the scene. Moreover, I am tying this piece to Law & Order, because schooling is about law and order. DUN DUN.
Amiri (internally): Sigh.

Blankface Student #1: Eew, like what do put into your hair? It’s gross.

Amiri (internally): Sigh.

Blankface Student #2: Love the ‘fro Amiri.

Amiri: It’s the same ‘fro from yesterday.

Blankface Student #2: How the hell do you manage to keep all that hair under your football helmet? If I stuck a pen in your hair, would you feel it?

Amiri (internally): Geez, it’s too early in the morning to be this racist

Amiri: [puzzled] Do you ask anyone else this question?

Blankface Student #2: Of course not, just you [chuckles].

Security Guard: Gentleman, get to class! Or you’ll be stuck in ISS with me.

[Period 1: 8:15 – 9:12 AM “American History Class”*101] *DUN DUN*

[Amiri enters the class and sits down.]

History Teacher: Good Morning class. Today we are going to talk about the origins of the Civil War

Amiri (internally): “When my teacher talks about slaves, I become a slave.”102

Blankface Student: Ugh, slavery again? We “already know this.”103

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101 Roxanne Gay, *Bad Feminist: Essays*. New York: Harper Perennial, 2014), 146. Gay noted, “We all have history. You can think you’re over your history. You can think the past is the past. And then something happens, often innocuous, that shows you how far you are from over it. The past is always with you. Some people want to be protected from this truth.” Watch how the past is always with you in Amiri’s history class.

102 Morgan Parker, “Who Were Frederick Douglass’s Cousins, and Other Quotiduan Black History Facts,” 57.

103 Robin DiAngelo, “White Fragility,” *International Journal of Critical Pedagogy* 3 (2011): 55, https://libjournal.uncg.edu/ijcp/article/viewFile/249/116. DiAngelo noted that, “So-called progressive whites may not respond with anger, but may still insulate themselves via claims that they are beyond the need for engaging with the content because they ‘already had a class on this.’” The privilege of being sick and tired of hearing about histories that your people never experienced.
Blankface Student: Slavery, “that unpleasant memory.”

History Teacher: Learning about slavery is essential to understanding America. Can anyone tell me what was the cause of the Civil War?

Student: Economics?

History Teacher: What else?

Student: States’ Rights?

History Teacher: Yes, actually…

[“A feminist ear can be how you hear what is not being heard.” Amiri blurts out due to frustration]

Amiri: Slavery! The answer is slavery!

History Teacher: Now Amiri, it’s not quite your turn. You need to give other people a chance.

Student: No, the answer is States’ Rights. It says so in the history book.

Amiri: States’ Rights about what? 106

Student: Ummm…

Amiri: Slavery that’s what.

History Teacher: Amiri, I am not going to ask you again about giving other people a chance. Now can anyone tell me, why would someone own slaves?

104 Frantz Fanon, Black Skin, White Masks, (London: Pluto Press, 2008), 86. It becomes impolite to speak about. Slavery becomes forgettable history. History that is backgrounded. Despite white children being a small demographic at South San Francisco High School, they still feel comfortable embodying whiteness because they are not a stranger anywhere in the world. George Yancy adds to that point on page 40 in Black Bodies, White Gazes: The Continuing Significance of Race: “white bodies move in and out of these spaces with ease, paying no particular attention to their numbers or looking for bodies that resemble their own. They are at home.” They are at home because white people created “civilization.” On page 176 of “Stranger in the Village,” Baldwin stated, “the idea of white supremacy rests simply on the fact that white men are the creators of civilization.”


106 Sara Ahmed, “Feminist Snap, 208. Ahmed stated that, “Impatience: when you are not willing to bear.” Amiri is no longer willing to hear this white version of history.
Blankface Student: ‘cuz they were lazy

Student: ‘cuz they wanted to make money…

History Teacher: Amiri, what do you think?

Amiri: [exhausted] Because of racism.

[Instantly the students got defensive, White Fragility was in the air. “To name a problem is to become a problem.”108 “To give a problem a name can change not only how we register an event but whether we register an event… To give the problem a name can be experienced as magnifying the problem; allowing something to acquire a social and physical density by gathering up what otherwise would remain scattered experiences into a tangible thing.”109]

Blankface Student: “Why are you always bringing up racism? Is that all you can see? Are you obsessed?”110

Student: Slavery was a product of the times. I don’t think that every slaveowner was a racist. There were probably some nice ones and some mean ones. They were trying to live their lives and feed their families. Think about the slaveowner—they were trying to make money, by any means necessary. Slavery was an economical means to an end.111

[A student learns over to Amiri and whispers:]

107 On page 62 of Bad Boys: Public Schools In The Making Of Black Masculinity, Ferguson noted, “In the classroom, the teacher controls movement of bodies through space and time. The teacher controls the task, instruction and the time in-between each. The teacher is controlling the depth of analysis in the class by policing Amiri’s answers.


110 Sara Ahmed, “Speaking About Racism,” In On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), 155. Racism becomes paranoia, a form of gaslighting. Ahmed continued her point on 162: “If racism tends to recede from social consciousness, then it appears as if the ones who “bring it up” are bringing it into existence.”

111 Sara Ahmed, “Fragile Connections,” Living A Feminist Life, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 177. Ahmed stated that, “Racism becomes the requirement to think of racism with sympathy, racism as just another view; the racist as the one with feelings, too.” In this regard, Amiri is being insensitive because he’s not taken into account the feelings of the slave-owner.
Blankface Student: “Aren’t you glad you’re free. Your people. What if you lived in the olden days. I’ve seen pictures of slavery, crude charcoals in watered-down history books, and that’s how I know I’m not a slave.”

Amiri: [whispering back] Fuck you [smiles].

History Teacher: Instead of learning about slavery the “old fashioned” way, I thought that we would try something different.

Amiri (internally) Oh no…don’t…Oh no….no.no.no.no.

History Teacher: I thought that as a class, we could learn about slavery through a choose your own adventure book. With three story paths, thirty-seven choices, and sixteen endings, there are different paths for everyone to take.

Amiri (internally): WHAT. THE. FUCK. Slavery is not some Final Fantasy video game. “The history of black people, adapted [by] white people.”

History Teacher: What better way to understand slavery, but to embody it.

[Amiri hears his father’s words: “Son, my hope for you is that your schooling experience will be better than this…I never felt quite right or good. I felt very black and obvious because I knew that my experience was different from that of my peers. But I also felt invisible because this was never acknowledged in any meaningful way… I want your teachers to help you love being in your skin. I want them to make space for you in their curricula, so that you see yourself as integral to this country’s history, to your classroom’s community, to your peers’ learning. I want


113 Allison Lassieur, The Underground Railroad: An Interactive History Adventure, (North Mankato: Capstone Press, 2016). There are actually Choose-Your-Own-Adventure Underground Railroad Books and games. Can’t make this up. Lassieur’s book description on Amazon, “You are a slave in the 1850s, thinking of escaping this harsh life, OR . . . You are slave catcher looking to get rich by chasing escaped slaves, OR . . . You are part of the Underground Railroad, helping slaves escape to freedom. To reduce the complex system of chattel slavery to a simple choose your own adventure book obscures the history, violence, and trauma of slavery. On page 59 of “White Fragility, DiAngelo noted that universalism and individualism “allows whites to view themselves as universal humans who can represent all of human experience.” White privilege allows people to think that they can embody any experience, regardless of its severity. Lastly, in “Black Study, Black Struggle,” Robin D.G. Kelley noted, “Trauma is real. But reading black experience through trauma can lead to thinking of ourselves as victims rather than agents.”

your teachers to select materials where blacks are portrayed in ordinary and extraordinary ways that actively challenge stereotypes and biases.\textsuperscript{115}

Amiri (internally): Well that ain’t happening today in history class.

Student: “I wanna be benevolent master! “Aren’t all masters benevolent?”\textsuperscript{116}

Student: I’m pretty sure some were…

Amiri (internally): How could you be benevolent if you OWNED people.

History Teacher: Sorry, your choices are the slave, slave catcher, and abolitionist. Which will you be?

Amiri (internally): C’mon, at least be the well-meaning white people. Be the abolitionist…

Student: I’ll be the slave catcher, that sounds fun…

Amiri (internally): Son of a bi—

History Teacher: Which will you be Amiri?

Amiri: ‘Cuse me?

History Teacher: Which story will you story: slave, slave catcher, abolitionist?\textsuperscript{117}

[Break 1: 9:13 – 9:16] *DUN DUN*

[As Amiri is walking through the hallway, he overheard these conversations]

“You’re cute for a Black girl.”
“Take that hat off”
“Certain children lack the ability to succeed…”
“You look Puerto Rican, where are you from.”
“I’ve never been with an Asian girl”
“Did he say the N-word with an ‘A’ or a hard ‘er?’”

\textsuperscript{115} Dyan Watson, ”A Letter from a Black Mom to Her Son.” I am weaving Watson’s letter to her son Caleb as memory between father and son. What Amiri is experiencing is what Amir has also experienced. What does it mean to inherit trauma? Look no further than K-12 schooling.

\textsuperscript{116} Morgan Parker, “A Brief History of the Present,” 57.

\textsuperscript{117} Sara Ahmed, “A Phenomenological Practice,” In \textit{On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life}, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), 182-3. I thought that this was powerful way to end this class. By being “over slavery,” racist choose-your-own-adventure books can be entertaining. Enslaved Africans did not have a choice when it came to servitude. The irony.
[Period 2: 9:17 - 10:13 AM “English Class”] *DUN DUN*

[In English, the class is presenting their poems about how they are “Americans.” Amiri is up next.]

English Teacher: Okay Amiri, show us what you got

Amiri [gets up]: My poem is entitled: “I Feel Most Colored When I Am Thrown Against A Sharp White Background."¹¹⁸ “I Feel Most Colored When I Am Thrown Against a Sharp White Background/ “Or, I feel sharp white. Or, colored against. Or, I am thrown. I am against. Or, when white. I sharp. I color.”¹¹⁹ “I feel most colored when I am thrown against the sidewalk. It is the last time I feel colored/.”¹²⁰ "I background my country”¹²¹/ “White bites: I stain the uniform./ I am thrown black typeface in a headline with no name./ Or, no one hears me./ I am thrown bone, “Unarmed.”/ I feel most colored when my weapon is I./ When I get what I deserve./ When I can’t breathe./ When on television I shuffle and widen my eyes./”¹²² “I feel most colored when I am the punchline./ When I am the trigger.”¹²³ “I sharpen them./ I sharpen them again./ Everyone claps.”¹²⁴

[There is a silence in the room]

English Teacher: So, what does everyone think?

Student: I don’t like it. It sounds angry…


¹¹⁹ Morgan Parker, “I Feel Most Colored When I Am Thrown Against A Sharp White Background,” 11.

¹²⁰ Morgan Parker, “I Feel Most Colored When I Am Thrown Against A Sharp White Background,” 11.

¹²¹ Morgan Parker, “I Feel Most Colored When I Am Thrown Against A Sharp White Background,” 12.

¹²² Morgan Parker, “I Feel Most Colored When I Am Thrown Against A Sharp White Background,” 12.

¹²³ Morgan Parker, “I Feel Most Colored When I Am Thrown Against A Sharp White Background,” 12.

¹²⁴ Morgan Parker, “I Feel Most Colored When I Am Thrown Against A Sharp White Background,” 13. A poem like this coincides with how Amiri is feeling after his friend Michael was beaten by the School Resource Officer. You stand out because you are coloring the background of whiteness. You provide color for them – you provide a perspective, but it takes violence to be inflicted upon you to be seen by others.
Blankface Student: It doesn’t really speak to my experience. It’s not “universal” enough.\textsuperscript{125} Can you explain it?

Amiri: My poem is speaking about being Black against the white background in America.

Blankface Student: I think that it is racist to bring up race. Aren’t we all American? I want to be judged by the content of my character, not my skin color.

\textit{[Frustrated, Amiri pulls himself back into this seat]}

English Teacher: Well, even though we are progressing to be a better country, I think \textit{now more than ever}, Black people are subjected to racism and discrimination.\textsuperscript{126} I mean look what happened to Michael a few weeks ago. He was minding his business, and our own Resource Officer accosted him because he looked suspicious. He was what you were called “racially profiled.” It’s sad.

Blankface Student: Aha, I get it now.\textsuperscript{127}

\textit{[Class ends and Amiri approaches the teacher]}

Amiri: Hey [inaudible], can I talk to you for a sec?

English Teacher: Sure Amiri, what’s up?

\begin{quotation}
\textsuperscript{125} Lewis R. Gordon, "Fanon, Philosophy, Racism," In \textit{Racism and Philosophy}, edited by Susan E. Babbitt and Sue Campbell (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999) 32-49. On page 34 of “Fanon, Philosophy, Racism,” Gordon spoke about universality and whiteness: “White people are universal, it is said and Black people are not.” Writing about Black experiences is universal but particular. On page 134, in “On Being Directed,” Ahmed noted, “Black: not universal. Not universal: particular. Not white: particular. To be particular can be to inherit a requirement to tell your particular story.” To finish this rift, on page 59 in “White Fragility,” DiAngelo said, “whites are taught to see their interests and perspectives as universal, they are also taught to value the individual and to see themselves as individuals rather than as part of a racially socialized group.” Students cannot see Amiri’s experience because they are taught to believe that there is no collective racialized experience.

\textsuperscript{126} Morgan Parker, “Now More Than Ever,” In \textit{Magical Negro}, (Portland/ Brooklyn: Tin House Books, 2019), 45. “Now More Than Ever” is a phrase that is used for willful forgetting of the legacies of trauma that Black people have endured. Parker stated, “This is a phrase used by Whites to express their surprise and disapproval of social or political conditions which, to the Negro, are devastatingly usual. Often accompanied by an unsolicited touch on the forearm or shoulder, this expression is a favorite among the most politically liberal but socially comfortable of Whites. Its origins and implications are necessarily vague and undefined… In some cases it is also accompanied by a solicitation for unpaid labor from the Negro, often in the form of time, art, or an intimate and lengthy explanation of the Negro’s life experiences.”

\textsuperscript{127} Because the experience is not universal, it needs to be justified and explained. On page 120, in “On Being Directed,” Ahmed stated, “[Your experience [is] a requirement to justify your existence in the manner of your existence.” While being Black is surmised as a particular experience, as a Black person, it feels like antiblackness is a universal experience.
\end{quotation}
Amiri: Every time we talk about Black people in America, I always feel singled out. I always have to explain myself. It is really awkward. Can you stop?

English Teacher: [Confused] I do not know what you mean? I thought you would be happy to be able to share because you’re so knowledgeable.

Amiri: You know that I am only the Black person in the class, right? You literally can’t miss me.

English Teacher: The only Black person? That can’t be true. “Well, just a minute. Let me check.” [After looking through the class roster, the teacher said] “You know, you’re right. I never noticed that…I guess that’s a good thing.”

Amiri: …

English Teacher: Look, I’m an ally alright. I go to Black Lives Matter rallies, I follow Black activists on Twitter. I know the struggle. I understand that this is hard for you…

Amiri: Do you?

English Teacher: “I know what it's like for you. And there's nothing worse than feeling like an outsider. Like, one time...when I was in junior high, I got some toilet paper stuck to the bottom of my shoe, and the other kids, well...you know how kids can be. They called me ‘Mr. Poop Shoe.’ I felt like it went on for weeks, but it was actually probably only about five minutes before someone told me, and I took it off, but, yeah. I understand racism.”

[Amiri grabs his bags and walks away]


[As Amiri is walking through the hallway, he overhears…]

“Is that how you’re supposed to behave in the halls?... Look at me when I’m talking to you. Stop that dancing. Okay, you can spend the day in my office.”

128 Janet Ward Schofield, *Black and White in School: Trust, Tension, or Tolerance?* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1989), 50. Schofield’s ethnographic study examined Black-white racial tensions at Wexler Middle School. Wexler’s faculty subscribed to a colorblind approach to give all children a fair chance, because even taking note of race could be seen as a possible prejudice. The teacher’s failure to account for race, causes Amiri to be the ambassador for Black people in his class.

129 *White Savior: The Movie Trailer.*

130 Janet Ward Schofield, *Black and White in School: Trust, Tension, or Tolerance?*, 65. A teacher said this to a student. Students are punished if they do not behave appropriately. On 42 in *Bad Boys*, Ann Arnett Ferguson stated that behavior is defined by, “societal values, manners, presentation of dress, posture, tone of voice, eye contact, facial expressions.” Based on these policing methods, a child can be labeled as good, bad, gifted, showing potential, bad, troubled, and troublesome.
“You can talk Polish at home, or ghetto language in the street…but when you are out there in the world you have to be able to read and write what everyone else does, the majority. That happens to be English and that happens to be…spoken by the majority, which is white. That’s just the way it is.”

[Amiri continues his walk and hears…]

“Man, the class was tough today. I spent the whole 56 minutes, and I don’t know if they got it. I swear, I think that they are unteachable. There is no hope for them.

Well, remember, some of these kids come from “bad” neighborhoods. They just don’t care. They’re not interested in being saved.

“Quite frankly… the kids who are the poorest readers and the poorest academic students are the same children that are always being suspended…I am not saying that they are mentally retarded, but their achievement is very low.”

[Period 3: 10:22 - 11:18 AM “Pre-calculus Class”]*DUN DUN*

[The math teacher presents a math question to the class and is meet with awkward silence]

Math Teacher: “Craig is saving to buy a vacation home. He inherits some money from a wealthy uncle, then combines this with the $22,000 he has already saved and doubles the total in a lucky investment. He ends up with $134,000, just enough to buy a cabin on the lake. How much did he inherit?” Does anyone know the answer to the question? How much did Craig inherit?

131 Janet Ward Schofield, *Black and White in School: Trust, Tension, or Tolerance?*, 50. This quote is from Mr. Dunne, the white language arts teacher.

132 Janet Ward Schofield, *Black and White in School: Trust, Tension, or Tolerance?*, 41. This quote is from Ms. Shore, a white teacher.

133 At South San Francisco High School, 66% of the students are between basic, below basic, or far below basic math proficiency. For further information, see "How Does South San Francisco High Perform on Tests?" U.S. News & World Report, https://www.usnews.com/education/best-high-schools/california/districts/south-san-francisco-unified/south-san-francisco-high-3487/test-scores.

134 James Stewart, Lothar Redlin, and Saleem Watson, *Precalculus: Mathematics for Calculus (5th Ed)*, (Brooks/Cole, 2005). The assumption that math is value-free—that it is neutral. This question in this textbook is mired in class privilege. How many students of color in public schools have (1) enough money to buy a vacation home, (2) have a rich family member from whom they can inherit money from. A situation like this is not applicable to the lives of many students. If textbooks are biased, so will be the instruction. If the instruction is biased, how will students learn and be embraced within class.

[Silence]

Math Teacher: C’mon Tommy! You’re studious. What’s the answer?

Tommy: [panics] I dunno.

[Classmates murmur: Tommy’s Asian, he’s supposed to be good at math!]

Math Teacher: Jesus Christ! Forget it. [Sees Amiri]. Amiri, is anything functioning in that head of yours besides football? What’s the answer?

Amiri (internally): I must be living in the wrong world. How normal is it that people can just purchase vacation homes? My parents are still paying off their student loans…

Math Teacher: Amiri, what’s the answer?

Amiri: Ummm…[gives the wrong answer].

Math Teacher: I’m not surprised that you would give me the wrong answer. Perhaps if you spent less time on the football field and more time in the books, you would know the answer.

[Amiri is slightly embarrassed]

Blankface Student: [whispers to Amiri] Why are you so dumb? Stop wasting the teacher’s time

Math Teacher: Alright, someone please tell me the answer!

excludes others. In education, questions can be walls. Math questions can be barriers for student’s confidence and success in math. There needs to be more critical inquiry about how math questions are biased towards students of color.

136 A damaging stereotype stemming from the “Model Minorities Myth.” The myth flattens the identities of Asian Americans. Model Minority Myth is the notion that Asian Americans are the model for success because they are highly skilled and successful. A characteristic of the myth is that “all Asians are good at math.” If that is the expectation, what happens if children fail that expectation. For further context, see Dandan Zou, “Asian-Americans struggle to find sense of self in Midwest,” Vox Magazine, last modified July 31, 2014, https://www.voxmagazine.com/news/features/asian-americans-struggle-to-find-sense-of-self-in-midwest/article_8a0c4f72-c234-5d81-8123-14e7e9b0b14d.html.

137 Melinda D. Anderson, “How Does Race Affect a Student’s Math Education,” The Atlantic, last modified April 25, 2017, https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2017/04/racist-math-education/524199/. The article showcases how “math achievement is linked to racially differential treatment in math classrooms.” Within education, there is an expectation that Black students are supposed to struggle in math. Called the racial hierarchy of mathematical ability, the concept explains, “how math teachers view these students, attributing achievement differences to their innate ability to succeed in math.”
[Blankface Student raises their hand]

Blankface Student: [gives the right answer] Correct! You’re so smart. A lot of y’all could learn a lot from [inaudible] if you just understood how to apply yourselves.

Amiri (internally): Maybe I wouldn’t get the question wrong if I get help in the class. Maybe I would seek math help if my teacher was approachable. Man let’s face it, he thinks you’re a dumbass. Amiri, maybe you’re just not good at math anymore.

[Period 4: 11:23 – 11:27 AM “Announcements”] *DUN DUN*

[AFTER THE PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE, THE VICE PRINCIPAL STARTS THE MORNING ANNOUNCEMENTS OVER THE PA SYSTEM]

Vice Principal: Good Morning Warriors! Today is Friday, September 22nd. I hope that everyone is having a fun and productive day. Here are a few announcements for the day. Smoking is not allowed on school premises. If you are caught smoking on school grounds, you will be suspended. Congratulations to our newest staff member, Mr. Rodriguez, who will be South San Fran High as a School Resource Officer. Please welcome when you see him. This announcement goes out to Faculty. Please make sure that you submit your progress reports by next week. Graduating this year? Please make sure to submit your senior photos and senior quotes to your guidance counselor. Tonight at 7 pm, come root for our football team as we take on our bitter rivals. Pregame starts 6 pm. Tickets are $5 for students and $10 for parents. Well, that’s it for today. Just remember that you can’t hide that Warrior Pride!

[Period 5: 11:27 - 12:23 PM “Science Class”] *DUN DUN*

[There is a substitute teacher for class. Let’s just say that he’s more of a warm body rather than an actual teacher]

Substitute Teacher: [lackadaisical] My name is Mr. [inaudible]. I taught in inner city schools for the last twenty years, so don’t even think about messing with me. Your teacher is out sick today or something like that…so I will be your teacher for this period.

[Mostly an unremarkable class period, here are some of the greatest highlights from the class]

“Crap, how do I pronounce this name?”
“I don’t get paid enough for this.”
“These kids are way too crazy for me today.”
“I really want to send this kid to the office”
“I really don’t want to do the paperwork to send this kid to the office.”

138 For a real laugh, watch Substitute Teacher, Produced by Keegan-Michael Key and Jordan Peele, Key & Peele, October 17, 2012, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dd7FixvoKBw. It is the epitome of student-substitute teacher experience.
“Please just do your work and leave me alone”
“Is it lunch time yet?”

[Lunch: 12:28 - 12:58 PM\textsuperscript{139}] *DUN DUN*

Trey: Sup Amiri?

Amiri: Nothing much, man. Sup with you?

Trey: Just counting down the hours to get out of this school.

Amiri: I hear that.

Trey: Yo! You hear what happened to Ricky?

Amiri: Nah man, what happened? Ricky ain’t the type to blow up for no reason.

Trey: He snapped cuz. You know his teacher in English class?

Amiri: Yeah, she is mean as hell.

Trey: Well she started talking to him wild crazy like every other day and he snapped. He went off on her. Started cursing and throwing things in class. His teacher called security and security got the School Resource Officers. They dragged him outta class. We’ll probably never see him again at this school.\textsuperscript{140}

Amiri: Damn, that’s crazy. I mean, I’m not surprised. “When you don’t take it, when you can’t take any more of it, [this is] what happens.”\textsuperscript{141}

Trey: You see the teachers talk about us having an attitude problem, but then they do have one too.

Amiri: They do. They be bugging man.

\textsuperscript{139} It scares me that children at South San Francisco High School only have an half-hour for lunch. That is not a lot of time to unwind and socialize with friends. Not giving students enough leisure time is reason alone, why students snap.

\textsuperscript{140} Sara Ahmed, “Feminist Snap,” In Living A Feminist Life, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 189. Ahmed noted, “When a snap is registered as the origin of violence, the one who snaps is deemed violent…You can hear the snap in the sound of [their] voice. Sharp, brittle, loud; perhaps it is like the volume has suddenly been turned up, for no reason; [the] snap is not the starting point.” Society rarely examines why students snap, but generally react based off their snapping.

\textsuperscript{141} Sara Ahmed, “Feminist Snap,” In Living A Feminist Life, 189. Snaps are not sudden, it is pressure that is built up over time
Trey: “They think that just because we’re younger than them, they’re older – they can have an attitude with us or something. They think it’s all right to treat us anyway they want.”

Amiri: Like the way they talk to us.

Trey: “Like they yelling up in your face and pointing at you – and you want to do that back and you get in trouble. But they don’t want that done to them.”

Amiri: They think that they’re tha shit.

Trey: These teachers really be blowing ma shit. If my teachers and guidance counselor tells me once more time, to be resilient underneath all this pressure, I am going to lose it.

[Period 6: 1:03 - 1:59 PM “Physical Education”] *DUN DUN*

[Amiri and the rest of the class is stretching getting ready to play football]

Classmate: Amiri, you ready to play some football man?

Amiri: Hell yeah! Been ready. This arm needs a workout.

Classmate: I hear that! I am just glad to play a regular sport again. Do you remember last month when the gym teacher made us pretend to be runaway slaves…and we had to avoid “obstacles” to get our “freedom”

142 Ann Arnett Ferguson, Bad Boys: Public Schools In The Making Of Black Masculinity, 69. Ferguson interviews a student named Trey. Trey is telling her about how school teachers do not respect students but teachers demand respect from the students.

143 Ann Arnett Ferguson, Bad Boys: Public Schools In The Making Of Black Masculinity, 69.

144 Sara Ahmed, “Feminist Snap,” 189. Resilience is a term that I often hear when we talk about “urban” schools. Students of color need to be more resilient despite the pressure that they face. I am using Ahmed’s metaphor of a twig to describe students. “If the twig was a stronger twig, if the twig was more resilient, it would take more pressure before it snapped.” She further noted that, “resilience becomes a deeply conservative technique, one especially well suited to governance: you encourage bodies to strengthen so they will not succumb to pressure; so they can keep taking it; so they can take more of it. Resilience is the requirement to take more pressure; such that the pressure can be gradually increased.” How do we re-orient the world to see life from the twig’s point of view?

145 It is based on the racist event that occurred at the Madison’s Trust Elementary School in Ashburn, Virginia. The gym class activity instructed students to play the role of a runaway slave on the underground railroad. For further context, please see Salvador Hernandez, “An Elementary School Apologized After Students Were Instructed To Play A "Runaway Slave" Game, Buzzfeed News, February 22, 2019, https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/salvadorhernandez/virginia-school-runaway-slave-game-apology?bftwnews&utm_term=4ldqpgc#4ldqpgc.
Amiri: [puts his hand up] Man…don’t remind me. I don’t know why teachers think that reenacting slavery is a good thing. [Amiri turns to the audience and yells: MESSAGE.] Thankfully the school fired that coach after getting enough angry phone calls from parents.

[Period 6: 2:04 - 3:00 PM “Drama Class”] *DUN DUN*

[In drama class students are presenting story pitches that they would later turn into plays. Amiri is up next]

Drama Teacher: Okay, next up, Amiri

Amiri: Aight, check it. My story pitch is on reinventing the archetype, the Magical Negro. The Magical Negro usually complements The White Savior, and I wanted to disrupt that.

[The class mutters to themselves; half excited, half shocked]

Amiri: “I wrote a very very short story titled "The Magical Negro." It [is] a parody of the self-sacrificing Magical Negro who gets a clue in the middle of things and decides to save himself and move on to things he wants to do instead of dying for a white stranger, who was supposedly the main character…Part of my point was that Magical Negroes have the power that, if harnessed for personal intent, would change the story greatly. The answer: the stories would have been more complex, the characters more human, less lapdog.”

[The class continues to mutter but is now looking towards the teacher for approval]

Drama Teacher: I…I…LOVE it! [smiles] Amiri this is brilliant! I think that you really have a knack for this type of work! Good job! Let’s talk after class. I wanna hear more about your vision and how you would put this play together.

[The classroom applauds. For the first time in a while, Amiri felt like this work was embraced and supported. As Amiri sat down, he heard his father’s words: “What teachers see out of the child is what they produce out of the child.” Teachers are cultural gatekeepers. I hope they understand the power they hold and work to discover your talents, seek out your dreams and fan them, rather than smother them.” My teacher – “she saw something in me an encouraged me

146 For an analysis about Magical Negroes, read “I am Not Your Magical Negro.”


148 Jawanza Kunjufu, Countering The Conspiracy To Destroy Black Boys, 23.

149 Dyan Watson, "A Letter from a Black Mom to Her Son."
to develop my passion... That, my son, is my hope for you. I hope your teachers will love you for who you are and the promise of what you’ll be.”

[Scene Ends]

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ACT III: D.W.B (DRIVING WHILE BLACK)

Act III: Driving While Black (D.W.B.)

The Cast: Amir Gilmore, Officer Due

The Scene: On I-280 (Junipero Serra Freeway)

The Music: Smile (Living My Best Life) by Lil’ Duval

The Plot: This act showcases the everyday fear that Black people endure in an anti-Black society. One of those fears is driving while Black. Amir is pulled over on his way to work as a “routine traffic stop.” This act draws on the experiences of Black people that encounter racial profiling and terror from police officers. Moreover, this act will draw on my experience being racially profiled by the police. Lastly, this act will highlight the tension of refusal with the police.

Aside [to the audience]: Have you ever been face-to-face with a police officer and wondered, ‘is he about to kick my ass?’ Well, wonder no more… If you follow these simple pointers, you’ll won’t get your ass kicked by police:

Obey the law. Use common sense. Stop immediately. Turn that shit [rap music] off. Be polite. Shut the fuck up. Get a white friend. Don’t ride with a mad woman.

[creates dramatic pause and proceeds]

150 Dyan Watson, "A Letter from a Black Mom to Her Son."

151 I do not remember the name of the officer that stopped me, but I decided to name this Officer, Due – after due process of the law. The thing that Black people rarely receive in the criminal justice system.

152 The Chris Rock Show, 51, “How Not To Get Your Ass Kicked by the Police,” created by Chris Rock, aired October 21, 2000, on HBO. You can watch the skit at: youtube.com/watch?v=uj0mtxXE8EGE8. Rock’s comedy skit highlights the respectability politics that Black people have to perform in order not to be beaten by police. Despite these “tips”, Black people have still lost their lives at the hands of police. There is nothing routine between Black people and traffic stops.
Aside: Claudia Rankine says that the condition of Black life is a state of mourning because the fear of death is commonplace within the Black community. Black people are killed for just being Black, period. Here is Rankine’s list of mundane occurrences, which may prove to be lethal to Black folks:

No hands in your pockets. No playing music. No sudden movements. No driving your car. No walking at night. No walking in the day. No turning onto this street. No entering this building. No standing your ground. No standing here. No standing there. No talking back. No playing with toy guns. No living while Black.

[creates dramatic pause and proceeds]

Aside: [gravely speaking] Your respectability politics will not save you. Amir made the mistake of mundane occurrence number four, driving his car – or as Black folks say: Driving while Black.

[Scene begins with Amir jumping onto I-280 to get to work at San Francisco State University. As usual, he is blasting his music as he drives to work.]

Radio Announcer: Awww yeah baby, we takin’ you back to Summer’ 18 with Lil Duval, Snoop Dogg, and Ball Greezy’s hit track – SMILE. Make sure that you are living yo best life. Fo’ sho!

Amir: Ayyyyyyyyyyyyyye! [turns up the volume]

[Amir begins to rap, but is way off key, like always. Amir checks his rearview mirror and sees a police car driving behind him in his lane. Amir begins to panic as the squad car is approaching him.]

Amir (internally): Damn, he must got somewhere to be – or someone to catch. Well, it ain’t gonna be me!


154 Claudia Rankine, “The Condition of Black Life Is One Of Mourning.”

155 Driving while Black”, or DWB is a phrase that refers to the racial profiling of Black drivers. Black motorists are assumed to be stopped by police, not because they may have violated the law, but because of racial bias. For more information, see German Lopez, “Sandra Bland and “driving while black”: Federal data shows big racial gap in traffic stops”, Vox, July 23, 2015, vox.com/2015/7/22/9014837/sandra-bland-driving-while-black.

156 Roland Powell, “Smile (Living My Best Life)”, recorded July 2018, MP3. Not the lyrically strongest song, but it definitely gives me joy.
Amir quickly changes lanes to let the police officer pass him with ease. His panic level begins to rise, as the cop moves over to Amir’s lane and turns on the siren behind him.

Amir (internally): Damn! What the hell did I do? I was obeying the law. Be cool, be cool. Remember – stop immediately.

Frustrated, Amir pulls his car over to the shoulder, and the police officer follows suit. Seconds feel like hours, as the cop is taking his time getting out of his car. Amir pulls his wallet out of his pants pocket and puts it on the dashboard.

Amir (internally): Remember, Amir – hands on the wheel. 10 and 2. Be calm, remain calm and this should be over with quick. I’m just trying to make it to work – I just want to make it back home.

Officer Due finally gets out of his car and strolls with confidence and authority, as he walks to Amir’s car.

Amir (internally): Here he comes. Just be cool. Fuck – the music, turn the music off Amir. You don’t want him to feel threatened.

Amir turns off the music. Officer Due approaches the driver side door, with his hand on his gun and taps on the glass. Amir rolls down the window, praying that the officer is having a good day.

Amir (internally): Just be cool. Be polite.

Amir: [slightly nervous] Good morning Officer. How are you doing today?

Officer Due: Fine. License and registration, please.

Amir (internally): No sudden movements. Reach for the wallet slowly on the dashboard

Amir: Okay, officer. I am going to grab my license out of my wallet that is on the dashboard, is that okay?

[Officer Due says nothing but is staring at Amir – anticipating that he’ll to reach for something. With his left hand on the wheel, Amir takes his right hand off the steering wheel and grabs his wallet off the dashboard. He slowly takes his driver’s license out of his wallet and shows it to Officer Due.]

Officer Due: And your registration?

Amir (internally): Shitttttt! It’s still in the glovebox. Okay, we can do this. Just be polite…and no sudden movements.
Amir: Officer, my regis—

Officer Due: [sharply] Due. Officer Due.

Amir (internally): Officer Asshole.

Amir: Officer Due, my registration is still in the glovebox. I am going to reach over and get it. Is that okay?

[Officer Due says nothing but is staring at Amir – again, anticipating that he’ll to reach for something. Amir slowly but surely leans over to the passenger seat, opens the glovebox and retrieves the registration.]

Officer Due: Do you know why I pulled you over?

Amir (internally): No. But I bet you’re gonna tell me, ain'tcha?

Amir: No, sir.

Officer Due: You improperly changed lanes without giving enough signal distance.

Amir (internally): Negative. I did. I was getting out of the way for yo ass. You were speeding up, so I moved over, and then you stopped me. [Sighs] Amir, don’t talk back – just obey the law and be polite.

Amir: I did not know. Sorry, sir.

[Awaiting his fate, he hands the driver’s license and registration to Officer Due.]

Officer Due: [quickly looking at the documents] Sir, I am gonna ask to step out the car.

Amir (internally): Oh, fuck me! I did everything he asked me to do. Why do I have to get outta the car? No. No. I gotta leave the safety of my car to step out onto the freeway with him for no reason?

Officer Due: Step out of the car. Comply, or I will put you in cuffs.

Amir (internally): No. No. That is not how any of this works. I’m not gonna do that.

Officer Due: Sir, step out of the car right now, or I will light you up.

Amir (internally): Just do what he says. Use your common sense; just obey the law.

Amir: Okay.
[Amir shuts off the car. Slowly unbuckles his seatbelt, opens the car door and gets out of the car.]

Officer Due: Please stand behind your car and place your hands on the trunk.

[Amir complies and is patted down by the officer.]

Officer Due: Do you have guns, knives, or drugs on you?

Amir (internally): You just patted me down, does it look like have any of that on me? Oh, that’s right, I left it in my other pants pocket at home. Asshole.

Amir: No, sir.

Officer Due: Okay, well I am going to run your stuff in my car. Come sit in the back of my car.

Amir (internally): Nope. I don’t know what he is trying to pull, but all I know is I ain’t got to do shit ‘cause I ain’t done shit! But what other choice do I have? Not comply and get my ass kicked? Where is a white ally when I need them? [Sighs] Just obey the law.

Amir: Yes, sir.

[Amir hops into the back of Officer Due’s squad car and awaits what is going to happen next.]

Officer Due: That’s a nice car that you got there. How does someone like you get a car like that?¹⁵⁷

Amir (internally): I wonder how often he asks this question.

Amir: Yes, sir. Thank you, sir. I work for it. Like every American.

Officer Due: Interesting. What do you do?

Amir: I’m a professor.

Officer Due: [surprised] Oh, really. Where?

Amir: At a university.

¹⁵⁷ Raced and classed discourse is an everyday experience of Black people. In George Yancy’s “Whiteness And The Return Of The Black Body”, Yancy notes, “Because I was Black, I had to settle for an occupation suitable for my Black body. The assumption is that Black people do not deserve to drive luxury cars because a high-paying job is not a possibility for them. For further reading on this, see George Yancy, “Whiteness And The Return Of The Black Body”, Journal of Speculative Philosophy 19, No. 4 (2005): 219.
Officer Due: Which university?
Amir: San Francisco State University.
Officer Due: Oh, you’re a Gator.¹⁵⁸
Amir (internally): Can you just hurry the hell up!
Amir: Yes, sir.
Officer Due: Well, what do you study at this university?
Amir: Africana Studies.
Officer Due: Afri—what? What is that?
Amir: Black Studies.
Officer Due: Oh, you teach that Black shit. That’s not even a real program. Easiest A’s I’ve ever received in college. Say, you don’t mind if I look you up – just to verify your claims?
Amir (internally): It’s not like I can stop you.
Amir: Sure.

[Officer Due is searching for Amir’s credentials and verifying his driver information. The only sounds that Amir hears are intense key-clicking from Officer Due. Onlookers drive by to see what is happening and what is going to happen next.]

Officer Due: Hmmmm…well…it seems likes everything checks out with you
Amir (internally): Phew…
Amir: So, I am free to go?
Officer Due: Y—yeah.

[Amir and Officer Due both exit the squad car and the meet in-between the two vehicles.]

Officer Due: You know Amir, my job as a police officer is tough. It is all about law and order. I have to protect and serve the community…

¹⁵⁸ The Gator is the mascot for San Francisco State University since 1931. For more information, please see Johnathan Morales, “Drawn to scales: New Gator unveiled”, SF State News, August 2014, news.sfsu.edu/drawn-scales-new-gator-unveiled.
Amir (internally): Mmmhmmm. Whom do you protect and serve?

[Amir nods]

Officer Due: Drugs are pouring into our communities. I-80 is a popular drug route, and I-280 feeds into that. Many drug traffickers push their drugs from the east, through Nebraska to California. You matched the description of a drug trafficker.

Amir (internally): What does a drug dealer even look like? So did this cop pull me over ‘cause of a traffic infraction or because I was Bla—

Amir: I understand.

Officer Due: You are free to go, but I am going to issue you a warning. Remember 100 feet to change lanes – that’s five seconds, ya got it?

Amir: Yes, sir.

Officer Due: You know Amir, not all cops are assholes [puts out his hand for a handshake.]

Amir (internally): After everything he has put me through, I gotta shake this mofo’s hand? I don’t want to shake your fucking hand…but I need to get to work.

[Amir shakes Officer Due’s hand and goes back to his car. Amir gets in the car and tries to calm down from the stressful moment. He can’t calm down because Officer Due is sitting behind, waiting for Amir to clear the shoulder. Adding to the humiliation, Officer Due gets on the loudspeaker.]

Officer Due [using the loudspeaker]: Motorist, please move your vehicle from the shoulder.

Amir (internally): I’M GOING! GIMME A MOMENT!

[Trying to collect his thought, Amir is humiliated again as Officer Due uses the loudspeaker again.]

Officer Due [using the loudspeaker]: Motorist, I will not ask you again, move your vehicle from the shoulder.

[Amir finally collects himself, starts the car, and drives away. Tense, angry, and hurt, Amir manages to make it to work – but his joy was interrupted. He was niggerized for the whole world]
to see. Amir’s rage begins to simmer after sitting in the parking lot for 15 minutes. He exits his car and bumps into a Blankface professor.

[Blankface Professor enters.]

Blankface Professor: [waving] Hi Amir!

Amir: Ummm, hi.

Blankface Professor: [cheeky] Just coming to campus? Someone must’ve had a slow start to their morning. Trouble on the 280?

Amir: Yeah, you could say that.

Blankface Professor: Well did you see the news?

Amir: No.

Blankface Professor: [whimsically] Of course you didn’t. Well, a Black man was shot on 280 South. He fit the description of a drug trafficker.

Amir: [puzzled] What does a drug trafficker look like?

[awkward silence.]

Blankface Professor: I mean you know what I am talking about. Anyways, the guy got taken to the hospital for treatment. He brought it on himself…

Amir: [bothered] What do you mean… he brought it on himself. No Black person wakes up and thinks, ‘gee, I really want my ass kicked today by the police.’

Blankface Professor: Yeah. Definitely. ‘Cause Black Lives Matter…but he should have just complied with law enforcement. It’s a no-brainer. Comply and you won’t die. C’mon, you’ve

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159 To be niggerized is ritual where a Black person is sought to be an object under of white gaze; to be made inferior and internalized that inferiority. For more information, see George Yancy, “Whiteness And The Return Of The Black Body”, Journal of Speculative Philosophy 19, No. 4 (2005): 217. In Manning Marble’s “A Conversation with Ossie Davis”, Davis notes: “The culture had already told me what this was and what my reaction to this should be: not to be surprised; to expect it; to accommodate it; to live with it.” For more information, see Manning Marble, “A Conversation with Ossie Davis”, Souls: A Critical Journal of Black Politics, Culture, and Society 2, No. 3 (2000): 9.

160 In this play, blank-face means a person that is a stranger. At San Francisco State University, Amir sees a lot of faceless individuals.
seen that Chris Rock skit, right? Obey the law. Use common sense. Stop immediately. Turn that shit [rap music] off. Be polite. Shut the fuck up. Get a whi—.161

Amir: Let me stop you right there. You don’t know anything about being Black in this country. To be Black in America is to exist in a haunting, mundane proximity to death at all moments.162 Fear and anxiety fill my mind from the moment I leave my house until I return home. How do I tell my son that everything will be alright, when death is aimed down on our backs? I have a dream that one day I can drive my car without fear of being killed for changing lanes or reaching for my wallet. I just want Black to be fucking normal, okay?

Blank Face: Woah…woah…but Amir, why are you are pressed? You’re one of the good ones. Don’t worry, that would never happen to you.

Amir: [confuddled] Won’t happen to me? Respectability politics won’t say—listen, man, I gotta go. I got emails to get to.

[Amir walks away, Blankface Professor exits.]

[Right before Amir enters his department building, he pauses. Before he walks inside, he puts on his mask that maintains his pride and dignity.164 The mask that grins and lies. The mask that hides the fear and anxiety of living in a society that doesn’t value Black lives. He enters the building and gets to his office. He sits in his chair and gets a notification from his wife June.]

June’s Text: Hey. Did you make it to work alright?

Amir’s Text: Hey. Yeah, I did. Just another day.

[Scene ends]

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161 The Chris Rock Show, 51, “How Not To Get Your Ass Kicked by the Police.” Tips on how Black people should engage with police officers. Though a comedy skit, the tips are marred in respectability politics. For more information on respectability politics, please see Mychal Denzel Smith, “Chris Rock’s poisonous legacy: How to get rich and exalted chastising “bad blacks” Salon, November 13, 2013, salon.com/2014/11/12/chris_rocks_poisonous_legacy_how_to_get_rich_and_exalted_chastising_bad_blacks/.


164 Paul Laurence Dunbar, “We Wear the Mask” in The Complete Poems of Paul Laurence Dunbar: With the Introduction to “Lyrics of Lowly Life”, edited by Paul Laurence Dunbar, (New York: Dodd, Mead and Co., 1913, 71. The mask that I describe references to Dunbar poem. Black people have to don a mask to protect themselves from the daily horrors of living in an anti-Black society. Donning the mask is Black survival.
ACT IV: Dear Mr. Nigger Professor

Act IV, Scene I: The Gift

The Cast: Amir Gilmore, Blankface Host, Blankface Guests

The Scene: On the set of San Francisco Tonight!

The Music: None.

The Plot: The name of this act comes from the malicious and racist backlash that Professor George Yancy received after publishing *Dear White America* for *The Stone*. The racist remarks questioned Yancy’s status as a philosopher because he’s a Black man. Yancy notes, “The implications of those messages was that to be black *and* a philosopher was a contradiction, because “niggers” can’t be philosophers. Decades after Yancy’s call to white America to “unsuture themselves” to examine their whiteness, Amir is repeating that call on a television show called *San Francisco Tonight*. Has white America changed? Will they listen to the call this time?

Aside [To the audience]: In *Faces At The Bottom Of The Well*, legal scholar Derrick Bell states, “Black people are the magical faces at the bottom of society’s well. Even the poorest whites, those who must live their lives only a few levels above, gain their self-esteem by gazing down on us. Surely, they must know that their deliverance depends on letting down their ropes. Only by working together is escape possible. Over time, many reach out, but most simply watch, mesmerized into maintaining their unspoken commitment to keeping us where we are, at whatever cost to them or to us.”

[Scene opens with Amir on the set of San Francisco Tonight with the Blank Face Host.]

Blankface Host: [enthusiastically] WELCOME BACK SAN FRANCISCO! Thank you for tuning into the townhall special of San Francisco Tonight, with me your fearless host, [inaudible]. We are going to get into the “truth” this hour. Our special guest tonight is Amir Asim Gilmore. Amir is an Africana Studies professor at San Francisco State University. Author


167 Blank faces have no identifiers.

[audience applause]

BFH: Thanks for joining us tonight.

Amir: Thanks for the invite. I am here for Black boys.

BFH: Right…Now Amir, before we jump into your “truth” tonight, I wanted to talk about your new book coming out.

Amir: Sure. I’m sure my publisher will be happy with the free promo.

[Everyone laughs.]

BFH: So, tell me and the audience what the book is about?

Amir: *In Search of Black Boy Joy* is a manifesto for Black boys on how to get free. Despite my attempts, Black Boy Joy is a phenomenon that is understudied in the academy. Black Boy Joy is the daily refusal to stay in ones designated “place” and provides a space that gives Black males the futures that they want now. It is a social and spiritual practice of “saying no to the terms, codes, rules, and laws of white supremacy that subjugate Black males.”168 Black Boy Joy is revolutionary because it ruptures oppressive social structures that make Black boyhoods socially unimaginable. Within in this break, spaces are created where Black boys are felt, heard, seen, and matter. Black Boy Joy, I feel, “pays specific attention to the ways in which goodness rather than pathology are practiced in everyday life.”169

BFH: Sounds fascinating and radical. Why do you think that Black Boy Joy is understudied?

Amir: As an academic, it’s much more lucrative to publish Black pathology. Listen, an academic can be a bestselling author and a leading expert on Black pathology because they allege that their research is *authentic*. The pathology of Blackness is an argument predicated on *bad faith*.170 Black pathology is a consumable good because it fuels racist expectations, imaginations, and fears. A researcher can allege that Black boys are angry, violent, uneducable, unworthy of education, and a menace to society, based on their firsthand accounts. But the questions are, who set the norms? Who sets the expectations? Who created the curriculum? Who sets the policies?

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170 For a refresher on bad faith, please read Track 2 on the *Black Boy Joy Manifesto*.  

164
Who decides the discipline? The deeper you look, you quickly realize that Black boys suffer within schools because they, “revolve around middle-class white norms and expectations.”

BFH: Got an example?

Amir: Yeah. Colorblindness. If white innocence is the tree, colorblindness is the root. James Baldwin reminds us, “People who shut their eyes to reality simply invite their own destruction, and anyone who insists on remaining in a state of innocence long after that innocence is dead turns himself into a monster.” Colorblindness is destructive because it allows white people to harm Black folks while maintaining their innocence. How many are y’all in the crowd were raised to be colorblind?

[Everyone in the audience raises their hand.]

Amir: Not surprised. You “I don’t see color folks” drive me up a wall. Y’all the same folks that shout All Lives Matter whenever a person shouts Black Lives Matter.

[Someone from the audience blurts out: “All Lives Matter though!”]

Amir: “All lives matter, but that proposition only works if all Black lives are included.” So “for all Black lives to matter, we all have to be willing to refuse complicity in a system that says that only certain experiences are worthy of protection.” When we are talking about race in America, white folks have to get uncomfortable with their racism. They have to get uncomfortable living in a colorblind – color-evasive world. Colorblindness is an anti-Black discourse. White people have been raised to believe that they are no better than anyone else but fail to discuss how whiteness, power, and privilege operate in this country.

BFH: I don’t believe that is necessarily true.

Amir: Of course, ya don’t. Listen man, whiteness allows white folks to walk into stores unfollowed and access bank loans. Whiteness allows you to evade “the talk,” something that


173 They definitely see color when they don Blackface.


175 I recommend reading Robin J. DiAngelo, What Does it Mean to be White?: Developing White Racial Literacy (NY: Peter Lang, 2016) and Robin J. DiAngelo, White Fragility: Why It’s So Hard for White People to Talk About Racism (Boston: Beacon Press, 2018).

176 Intergenerational racism does not “die” because white parents used colorblind and color-evasive discourses to muddy the reality of racism. This muddiness shifts the blame onto Black people.
other Black families and I must do so that their children might live for another day. Your whiteness provides you comfort at the expense of Black suffering. Colorblindness plays a crucial role in the school to prison pipeline. The “mythology around colorblindness leads people to imagine that if poor kids of color are failing or getting locked up in large numbers, it must be something wrong with them. It leads young kids of color to look around and say: There must be something wrong with me.” “The only thing wrong with Black people is that we think something is wrong with Black people.” Within schools, the minds and bodies of Black boys are under attack because white teachers, administrators, and school resource officers constructed Black boys as problems – constructed as troublemakers that need to be prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law.

BFH: Is that what happened to Michael?

Amir: Yes. Michael was beaten because the school resource officer – a cop… did not see him as a child, but as a criminal. The problem in America is that white folks do not see Black children as children. “A child is not a child when he is a Black child.” “It is an irony of American history that where once grown Black men were seen as boys, now boys of no matter how tender an age, are seen and treated as men.”

BFH: Can you describe precisely what happened?

Amir: It was another case of racial profiling. Michael was walking home from school, and the school resource officer believed that he matched the description of a suspect – of a drug dealer. When the cop approached, Michael panicked and ran. Everything that transpired after, you saw on the video.

BFH: I mean why do you think that he ran? Innocent people do not run from the police. He should have never run. All of this could have been avo—

Amir: Man what! Perhaps you are unaware of the terror that a police officer can invoke for a Black person. The fear that Michael had, is a fear that every Black person knows. It is the fear of turning from a man into a memory. Perhaps you’ve gotten too familiar seeing Black suffering on video. Perhaps your privilege insulates from the truth. Every police interaction that goes wrong

177 George Yancy, Backlash: What Happens When We Talk Honestly about Racism in America, 11.


179 Ibram X. Kendi, Stamped from the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America, (New York: Nation Books, 2017), 10-12. I highly recommend this book to read as it catalogues how racism has been built over centuries.


becomes a cautionary tale for Black people. Though Michael survived, he is no longer a person in a sense. He is now a hashtag on social media, generating likes and retweets. How can people be so comfortable reposting Black suffering? Black suffering becomes political currency for casual conversations and philosophical debates. It is a shame. [Amir turns to the audience and yells “MESSAGE.”]

BFH: So, how is Michael doing? I know that you and his family are close.

Amir: Yeah. Michael and Amiri are childhood friends. That’s his brotha man. They were on the football team together. Amiri was there when the incident happened. Neither of them will ever be the same. An experience of such leaves an indelible mark on the body. Have you ever heard of the phrase moral injury?

BFH: It’s a military term, is it not?

Amir: Correct. “It’s when a soldier goes into war, goes into battle—and the things that they’re forced to do, the things that they’re forced to see, don’t line up with who they are as human beings. And so they experience a break in themselves. That’s what’s called the moral injury: their moral idea of how they are in the world has been broken, and they’ve become broken because of it.”182 Michael and Amiri were morally injured that day. Their bodies marked. Their boyhood joy, stolen. How they saw the world is gone. How many Black children are broken because of the things that they’ve seen and experienced. “What limit must be exceeded in order that the violence directed at the black body be made legible in the law?”183

BFH: [stunned by the questions] I’m not even sure…

Amir: “I, too, sing America. I am your darker brother.”184 As long as Black people are constructed as problems; Black lives will not matter to white folks in this country. White racism is a problem in this country. “Because you don’t see it, fail to see it, or refuse to see it, or see it and just don’t give a damn, we suffer, we fail to breathe, and many of us stop breathing, literally.”185 I have something that will awake you from your ethical ineffectiveness, a gift.

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182 Emily Temple, “Claudia Rankine: I think We Need To Be Frightened.” While Rankine speaks of moral injury within war, it is applicable to apply moral injury to Black lives. How are Black lives broken because of the things that they’ve seen and experienced.


185 George Yancy, Backlash: What Happens When We Talk Honestly about Racism in America. (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2018), 56.
BFH: A gift for America? What’s the gift? Can you speak on that?

Amir: This gift is a powerful one. Yah see…[takes a sip of water] the gift comes from Black folks knowing white folks better than white folks knowing white folks. Since slavery Black folks have “shared in conversations with one another ‘special’ knowledge of whiteness gleaned from close scrutiny of white people.”\textsuperscript{186} “Black survival is based our willingness to study white people, their impulses, their hard expressions, their laughter, their gifts, and their lies. Black survival means “being endlessly obsessed with figuring out the depths to which white folks will fall to maintain a position of white dominance.”\textsuperscript{187} Black survival, at its essence, stubbornly haunts white America.

BFH: This gift doesn’t sound so good? What do you mean?

Amir: Hear me out. White America is haunted by its centuries’ old refusal to collectively face its racism and change the course of white brutality toward Black folks.\textsuperscript{188} As a result, this country has abysmally failed to have an honest and critical conversation about race.\textsuperscript{189} Black existence is that reminder to do so; therefore, it haunts white people. The forgetfulness of the racist past and the denial of present-day racism keeps white folks them up at night. Your denial and forgetfulness subjects Black folks to violence. Every generation, white people realize how wrong their racist white parents were, and they want to do something about it. Every generation, Black folks have offered this gift to white America, only to be met with white refusal. That gift is a mirror, but George Yancy would call it a scalpel.

BFH: What are y’all, surgeons? \textit{[awkward laugh]}.  

\textit{[audience laughs.]}

Amir: We aren’t the ones doing the cutting…you are… into yourselves to become undone from your whiteness!

\textit{[audience panics and mutters to themselves.]}

Amir: 23 years ago, George Yancy offered this gift in his letter \textit{Dear White America}. Yancy’s letter was from the heart. It was a letter that made him vulnerable. Yancy aimed to get white people to be self-critical of their every day, deep-seated existential racism. The letter “exposed the deep roots of American white supremacy and the subtle ways in which so many white people go about their daily lives, oblivious to the gravity and violence of white racism in this country


\textsuperscript{188} George Yancy, \textit{Backlash: What Happens When We Talk Honestly about Racism in America}, 68.

\textsuperscript{189} George Yancy, \textit{Backlash: What Happens When We Talk Honestly about Racism in America}, 11.
and the ways in which they simultaneously benefit from and contribute to that racism.”190 This gift is a repeated call, an invitation to un-suture yourself from whiteness. White people wish to be sutured—they wished to be sealed off from the harm that they have inflicted.191 Suturing is an active process of closure, to seek protection from “white normative disruption.” To un-suture, is an active process to be cut open, to be exposed to the toxicity of whiteness and how it impacts Black life.192

BFH: Oh, I remember this letter. It didn’t go over so well…

Amir: No. Like most invitations for white people to examine their racism, they are often met with backlash. Yancy was met with white violence. The letter that was written with love manifested into foul and nasty voice messages, sickening email messages, vulgar letters, and racist comments on many conservative and white supremacist websites. Yancy was critiqued and vilified on various forms of media.193 He became a spectacle of the white gaze. I am here to continue Yancy’s work of creating a postwhite humanity.194

BFH: [panicked] A world with white people? Are you serious? Do you hear yourself?

Amir: Sir, I said what I said. I look forward to a postwhite world. Imagine if you [inaudible] told the world that, “I, too, am racist. And while not part of the KKK, I, too, perpetuate white supremacy because I benefit from a white racist systemic structure to which I’m embedded and in terms of which Black people and people of color suffer.”195 That is the daring risk that we are asking white people to embark on – to be undone. What you fail to realize is that whiteness and “white people are not a color but an attitude. You’re as white as you think you are. Whiteness is a state of mind.”196 Whiteness is a choice. We are asking you to stop being white.

BFH: [coy] Whiteness is a choice, interesting. So, is Black a state of mind, too?

[The audience is eager, waiting for his answer.]

190 George Yancy, Backlash: What Happens When We Talk Honestly about Racism in America, 2.

191 White Self-Critically beyond Anti-racism, eds by George Yancy, xv.

192 White Self-Critically beyond Anti-racism, eds by George Yancy, xvi.

193 George Yancy, Backlash: What Happens When We Talk Honestly about Racism in America, 1; 5-6.

194 George Yancy, Backlash: What Happens When We Talk Honestly about Racism in America, 14.

195 George Yancy, Backlash: What Happens When We Talk Honestly about Racism in America, 13.

196 James Baldwin, “How Can We Get the Black People To Cool it.” Esquire, July 1968, 52. Written after Martin Luther King’s assassination, Baldwin discussed race relations in the country. The print article was republished online at: classic.esquire.com/article/1968/7/1/how-can-we-get-the-black-people-to-cool-it!&pid=52.
Amir: [smiles] “No, Black is a condition.” To be Black is to be born with a preexisting condition in this society, with a set of stressors that you can’t understand without living in our skin. To be Black is to be the strange fruit in this country. “To be Black is to know that you are being watched at all times.” It is to live in this double bind of fear.

BFH: How so?

Amir: Black folks have to tiptoe around white feelings. “To be Black is to grow up in a world where white feelings can become a dangerous weapon – white fear is frequently lethal.” “White fears rest on the presumption that they are rooted in fact and the fear of Black people is one of the grandest delusions of white supremacy.” A big fear that white folks have of Black folks is that we are criminals. I have learned “to understand white people’s fantasies because tomorrow there will be legislation.” We didn’t get the Jim Crow without white fear. We didn’t get the War on Drugs without white fear. We didn’t get the School to Prison pipeline without white fear. The legislation is driven by white fear and because white folks can’t police their own imagination, Black lives are being snatched. We fear the reality of your manifestations. It’s the fear that you’ll be the next James Byrd or Trayvon Martin or Sandra Bland.

BFH: Hmm, I don’t know…this sounds like a lot of “blame the white man” rhetoric here, Amir.

[Audience member yells: You tell him, [inaudible]. He keeps talking like that, he gonna be next. A ruckus ensues as the Blankface is carried out of the room.]

Amir: I did not create racism in America, but I will not be silent about it. I just ask you to listen, to listen with love. No white person in this country aspires to be the Black condition. “Every white person in this country, I don’t care what [they say], knows one thing. They may not know, as they put it, ‘what I want,’ but they know they would not like to be black here. If they know

197 See note above.


200 Brittney C. Cooper, Eloquent Rage: A Black Feminist Discover Her Superpower, 204. Cooper noted that her Sunday school teacher described F.E.A.R as “fantasies, expecting a reality” and “false expectations appearing real.” See more on page 207.

201 Brittney C. Cooper, Eloquent Rage: A Black Feminist Discover Her Superpower, 204; 211.

202 Frank B. Wilderson III, “Irreconcilable Anti-Blackness: A Conversation With Dr. Frank Wilderson III.” Wilderson is quoting Dr. Jared Sexton.

203 Michael Bennett and Dave Zirin, Things that Make White People Uncomfortable, 48. James Byrd was murdered in 1998 as he was tied to the back of a pickup truck and dragged for three miles. Sandra Bland was found hanged in a county jail, three days after being arrested during a “routine” traffic stop. Trayvon Martin was shot to death by a neighborhood watch captain, George Zimmerman.
that, they know ev-ery-thing they need to know.\textsuperscript{204} As a Black person, I know who I am, I know what I am. As a white person, do you know who and what you are?

\textit{[A long pause ensues. The audience mutters.]}

BFH: Hmmm, gripping. \textit{[changing topics]} Let’s take some questions from the audience, shall we? Yes, you in the blue shirt.

Blankface Guest #1: Dr. Gilmore, thank you for coming tonight.

Amir: Please, call me Amir [smiles].

BFG #1: I’m so moved by your work. I just want to apologize for my race and what they have done to your people. “I think that you are right about injustice, police brutality and everything else. My question is, what can I do for you?”\textsuperscript{205}

Amir: Well, nothing. You can do nothing for me, as your individual white action will not save me or Black folks from anti-Black violence. I do need you to understand that all of this stuff is killing you, too. No magic bullet will fix whiteness and white supremacy. Even after this talk, white supremacy will continue. What is needed is your labor, your activism – your anti-racist activism. That starts with accepting the gift, to remain an open wound.

BFG #1: Thank you.

Amir: Thank you.

BFH: \textit{[looking around the room]} You there in the purple. What is your question?

Blankface Guest #2: Do you think that having more cops of color will change policing and police brutality?

Amir: No. Black cops will not stop police brutality. Nothing will save Black people from police brutality.

BFG #2: \textit{[puzzled]} Why not?

Amir: Anti-blackness is the DNA of civil society and world-making.\textsuperscript{206} Did the integration of Black children into white schools increase the quality of their education? Did anti-Black racism

\textsuperscript{204} “UC Berkeley Speech,” The James Baldwin Anthology, directed by Claire Burch and Christopher Sorrenti (Regents Press, 2008), DVD.

\textsuperscript{205} Emily Temple, “Claudia Rankine: I think We Need To Be Frightened,” Literary Hub, May 11, 2017, https://lithub.com/claudia-rankine-i-think-we-need-to-be-frightened/. A white person’s assumption is that their individual action will dismantle the fixed position of Blackness under white supremacy. Is whiteness irredeemable? Are there “good white people?”

stop with the inclusion of Black college students at white universities? Did affirmative action fix anti-Black employment practices? Did having a Black president give us a post-racial future? What do these changes mean? “The fallacy that America’s problems are not structural but performative. You have to see violence as a structure. It is a regime of violence.”

No liberal reform will save Black folks from gittin’ whooped by the police. If you want to end police brutality, end policing. End civil society.

[The audience is stunned. You can hear someone in the audience saying “what…the…fuck?” Another says, “this Black man lost his damn mind.”]

BFG #2: I don’t believe that. Think about all the progress that America has made. There are good cops out in the world.

Amir: The gift does not care about what you believe. American progress is a post-racial myth. It is a feel-good story for whites to clear their conscience. “We have not ended the racial caste system” – it has merely been redesigned. No matter how much education, wealth, social respectability, class standing, or authority, I am positioned as a nigger in this country. It is like ‘Ye said, “even if you in a Benz, you still a nigga in a coupe.”

[The host mouths to his producer, “can he say that?” The producer mouths back, “keep rolling.”]

Amir: I am not a nigger, as it not my name. “What white people have to do is try and find out in their own hearts why it was necessary to have a ‘nigger’ in the first place, because I’m not a nigger, I’m a man. But if you think I’m a nigger, it means you need him…you the white people invented him, then you’ve got to find out why. And the future of the country depends on that, whether or not it is able to ask that question.”

BFG #2: “Well, if you’re going to answer questions like that, you’re gonna shut down everybody else here.”

207 Frank B. Wilderson III, “Irreconcilable Anti-Blackness: A Conversation With Dr. Frank Wilderson III”.


209 George Yancy, Backlash: What Happens When We Talk Honestly about Racism in America, 26. Yancy ends his sentence actually saying, “I am a nigger.” To clarify, I do not think that Yancy believes that he is a nigger, but he believes that as a Black man, his social position is fixed to as a nigger by the white gaze of white supremacy.


Amir: “I come with a gift. You’re already rejecting the gift that I have to offer. This letter is about you.”

[The next guest does not wait for the host to call on them. Angrily, he blurts out:]

Blankface Guest #3: This is not fair! There are a lot of hard-working white people that are good people. Do not lump us good white people with those bad white people. To judge all white people the same is racist. You, sir, are a racist!

Amir: The gift is not interested in “fairness.” “I’m asking for you to tarry, to linger, with the ways in which you perpetuate a racist society, the ways in which you are racist.” The gift is interested in whether you wish to receive it or not. May I ask you, what does it mean to be a good white person?

BFG #3: [confidently] As a devout believer in King’s Dream, I think that I am a good white person – I’m an ally. I’ve never own slaves. I don’t believe in segregation. I donate to NAACP. I’ve watched Roots. I’ve never used the N-word. I love Black people – my best friends are Black. Hell, I would have even voted for Obama for a third term, if I could. I am not a racist.

Amir: Hmm, interesting [takes a sip of water]. So I would assume that you think “bad” whites are the right-wing conservatives…and members of white supremacist groups?

[audience member blurts out, “what’s the difference?”]

BFG #3: Exactly! They are the problem in this country. You need to be speaking to them.

Amir: White privilege is the ability to retreat to individuality to avoid your responsibility for racism. The gift is not interested in the fact that you are a “good” white person. The gift is not interested in your good deeds. The gift is not interested to know if you owned slaves or supported segregation. The gift is not interested in knowing how if you used the N-word, or how many Black friends you got. The gift is fo’ damn sure, not interested in knowing that you would have voted for Obama for a third term. The gift is only interested in you becoming undone. Still, don’t think that you’re a white problem?

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212 George Yancy, Backlash: What Happens When We Talk Honestly about Racism in America, 22.

213 George Yancy, Backlash: What Happens When We Talk Honestly about Racism in America, 24.

214 The famous line from Martin Luther King Jr. that white people love to appropriate: “I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character. For the full speech, see Martin Luther King Jr., “I Have A Dream”, Speech March on Washington, Washington, D.C., August 28, 1963. kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/i-have-dream-address-delivered-march-washington-jobs-and-freedom.

215 From the backlash Yancy received, he noted that, “the white reader’s desire that there should be a clear distinction between ‘good white people’ and the ‘bad ones’” (i.e. the KKK).
Amir: Okay. Imagine entering into your favorite store at the same time as a Black person. That Black person is followed by a white security guard, while you’re continued to shop. You might contend that the Black person being profiled by the white security guard in no way makes you the racist. Rather, it is the white security guard, that is the racist. For they are one who initiates the actual following, they are one who holds the actual racist stereotype; they are the one who is the actual racist. If this is your argument, you like others in the audience are overlooking how you are still the actual recipient and actual perpetrator of racial dominance. What is difficult for white folks to understand is how they are implicated in a complex network of racist power relationships – a mesh of white practices to which you are linked both as a beneficiary and as a co-contributor to such practices.

BFG #3: But I didn’t create the system; this is not my fault!

[audience mutters to themselves. One audience member blurts out, “that’s right, it ain’t our fault.”]

Amir: I understand that you did not create the white supremacy, but the gift is not interested in your white guilt or your white abolitionism. The gift that Yancy brought forward is interested in the responsibility of white thoughts and actions. White guilt does not free you from your maintenance of white racism. I need white folks to reexamine “the distinction between spectacular and mundane racist events, because both have destructive and detrimental implications for Black folks.” I need you to see that white ignorance and presumed white innocence is what is harming Black folks. The gift of un-suturing is an important one because it

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216 George Yancy, *Backlash: What Happens When We Talk Honestly about Racism in America*, 74. This scenario is tantamount for white people to understand how white power moves and operates. White power can be a very invisible thing.

217 George Yancy, *Backlash: What Happens When We Talk Honestly about Racism in America*, 75.

218 Yancy notes that whiteness is a structural sin. White people are embedded into a system that they didn’t chose, but the system continues to hail them in ways that have violent implications for people of color. For more information, see *White Self-Critically beyond Anti-racism*, eds by George Yancy, (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2015), xviii-xxii.


220 George Yancy, *Backlash: What Happens When We Talk Honestly about Racism in America*, 78. To clarify, Yancy describes a spectacular racist event such a lynching. Mundane racist events are being profiled while shopping. I am curious where Yancy would see police shootings. Police shootings are both spectacular and mundane.
is about rupturing your relations to whiteness. Un-suturing makes yourself vulnerable to the world, centers yourselves as the problem, and allows you to rearrange yourself to see the actual world. Un-suturing is truth-telling. Don’t seek shelter; don’t hide from your responsibility. Remove the mask and embrace the truth. The only question that I have left is: “white America, are you prepared to be at war with yourself, your white identity, your white power, your white privilege?”

[The audience is silent. Silence turns to white rage, as the audience rejects the gift]

Audience Member: “Another uppity nigger thinks it has the right to lecture Whites.” “Blame your parents who made you Black. White America had nothing to do with it.”

Audience Member: “He should fuck off to Africa if he doesn’t like living in a white country.”

Audience Member: “FUCK you. Hater. Dr. King would be ashamed of you and your kind.”

Audience Member: “You’re the racist. Why don’t you stop wasting your time on this race baiting bullshit and go be a hero and save your ghetto neighborhoods where blacks are shooting each other by the hundreds.”

Audience Member: BOO THIS MAN! GITT’EM OFF THE STAGE!

[White rage disrupts the conversation, and the Q&A portion is cut short. Security comes onto the stage to escort the host and Amir off.]

BFH: This is [inaudible] from San Francisco Tonight, signing off. Stay classy America.

[Blank Face Host and Amir exit.]

[Scene ends.]

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Act IV, Scene II: The Backlash

The Cast: Amir Gilmore, Shawn, Blank Professor

221 George Yancy, Backlash: What Happens When We Talk Honestly about Racism in America, 23.

222 George Yancy, Backlash: What Happens When We Talk Honestly about Racism in America, 8. This comment and the comments below are some of the racist messages that Yancy received.

223 George Yancy, Backlash: What Happens When We Talk Honestly about Racism in America, 53.

224 George Yancy, Backlash: What Happens When We Talk Honestly about Racism in America, 70.

225 George Yancy, Backlash: What Happens When We Talk Honestly about Racism in America, 7.
The Scene: San Francisco State University

The Music: None.

The Plot: After appearing on San Francisco Tonight, Amir, like Georgy Yancy and others before him are terrorized with white violence. This act highlights the complexities of being Black in academia and the threat of violence that surrounds our everyday life.

Aside [To the Audience]: Years ago, Malcolm X asked, "What does a white man call a black man with a Ph.D.?" He answered: "A nigger with a Ph.D." At 91, W.E.B. DuBois gave a speech that spoke to the precariousness of Black life in America: “In my own country for nearly a century I have been nothing but a nigger.” With two great Black philosophers describing the fixed position of “nigger” in Black social life, Yancy questioned, “if to be Black in white America is, in fact, to be nothing but a nigger?”

[dramatic pause]

Racist white violence is not always physical – it can be verbal. So, let me begin with three words. “Dear Nigger Professor.” That was the beginning of a message that George Yancy received. Yancy made himself vulnerable – offering a letter, a gift to white America to go off “script” to examine its whiteness and its anti-Black racism. America, as Yancy noted, “suffers from a pervasively malignant and malicious systemic illness.” White America responded to Yancy with a script that it knows all too well: anti-Black violence. bell hooks eloquently stated that “All black people in the United States, irrespective of their class status or polit live with the possibility that they will be terrorized by whiteness.” Despite this fact of Blackness, Black folks are supposed to live and assimilate to this and call it the “good life.”

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226 George Yancy, “The Ugly Truth Of Being A Black Professor In America,” The Chronicle Review, April 29, 2018, chronicle.com/article/The-Ugly-Truth-of-Being-a/243234. Malcolm X’s quote continues to speak LOUDLY about the violence that Black academics face. The messages that I will be using in the play are actual messages that Yancy received.


228 George Yancy, Backlash: What Happens When We Talk Honestly about Racism in America, 46.

229 George Yancy, Backlash: What Happens When We Talk Honestly about Racism in America, 1.


231 The fact of Blackness is a nod to Franz Fanon’s chapter in Black Skin, White Masks. In the chapter, Fanon demonstrates how “Black subjectively” is a fixed image, created by the racist imagination of white people. Black people are not subjects, but objects to be utilized for subjects. For a deeper discussion, please see Franz Fanon, Black Skin, White Masks (Sidmouth: Pluto Press, 2008).
[Scene starts with Amir in his office, checking his email. He receives a knock at the door.]  

[Security guard enters.]  

Security Guard: Hey Doc’, how you doin’?  

Amir: Hey Shawn, I’ve been better. I tell you what; I’ve never been called a nigger so many times in my life. It’s like watching a Quentin Tarantino film.  

Shawn: [curious] With or without Sam Jackson?  

Amir: Oh…definitely with Sam Jackson [smiles]. How are you?  

Shawn: Besides the bullshit, life’s great.  

Amir: I hear it!  

Shawn: Well, I’m just here to check up on ya. Have you seen anything out of the ordinary today?  

Amir: Like white men with tiki torches? Nah, not today…  

[A long pause. Both men begin to laugh.]  

Shawn: Shhhhhhhhhiiiiiiitttte. White people are a trip. They dun lost their damn minds after your talk on San Francisco Tonight. Have you seen [inaudible]’s response to your talk on Faux News?  

Amir: Nah, I stopped watchin’ the news a few days ago. I am pretty sure it was very colorful.  

Shawn: Yeah man, it was a lot. [inaudible] wanted to know where you were radicalized at?  

Amir: The irony. Cuz “American’s favorite pastime is the brutalization of Black people.”  

Shawn: You ain’t lyin’. Hey Doc’, I got a question?  

Amir: Yeah, Shawn?  

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233 Faux News is a parody of Fox News. It’s faker Fox, it’s faux (ba-dum ching).  

234 To ask that question to assume that the person is a terrorist. This racist question is usually reserved for brown folks. The assumption is that Amir is a domestic terrorist.  

235 George Yancy, Backlash: What Happens When We Talk Honestly about Racism in America, 34.
Shawn: Is it worth it? Like, why do it? You know white folks don’t give a damn about us. “Why talk about race with white people when at the end of the day everything remains the same—that is, their racism continues?” “Why teach courses on race and whiteness?”

Amir: Shawn, if Black people gave into those questions and said to hell with everything, we wouldn’t exist. We are only here because of our collective actions. It is our job to make the invisible, visible. Black people cannot be because Black suffering is mundane – it is assumed. Our silence on Black suffering will not save us. Audre Lorde once said, “[We] have had to fight, and still do, for that very visibility which also renders us most vulnerable, our Blackness. For to survive in the mouth of this dragon we call America, we have had to learn this first and most vital lesson—that we were never meant to survive.” Black change starts with the mundane and it builds self-outward. Our existence in this very moment is change itself, don’t let anyone tell you otherwise. “No activist or changemaker is truly an activist or changemaker if they don’t believe change is possible.”

Shawn: [chuckles] You sound like a Black optimist.

Amir: [smiles] Baldwin teaches us that, “I can’t be a pessimist, because I’m alive. To be a pessimist means you have agreed that human life is an academic matter, so I’m forced to be an optimist. I’m forced to believe that we can survive whatever we must survive…the future of Black people in this country is precisely as bright or as dark as the future of the country.”

Shawn: You’re full of quote Doc’. Aight…well lemme get out of your hair. If they see us chattin’ for any longer, they might think that a conspiracy is brewing.


[Shawn exits]

Amir (internally): I can do this.

[Amir opens his email inbox and see a bevy of angry emails. The first one reads:]
11:00 am Email: “Dear Nigger Professor. You are a fucking racist. You are a piece of shit destroying the youth of this country. You are neither African nor American. You are pure, 100 percent Nigger. You would never marry outside of your Nigger race. That’s a fact. You’re a fucking smug Nigger. You are uneducated with education. You are a fucking animal. Just like all Black people in the United States of America. Including that Nigger Kenyan that was born in fucking Kenya that has usurped the white house. Yes. It is called the white house for a reason because white people made this country great you fucking Nigger.”

Amir (internally): What a nice way to start my day.

[Amir responds.]

11:05 A.M. Email: “Hello. Why are you so angry? Who hurt you? I don’t know if anyone told you this, but Black people built the White House. Obama was reclaiming what is ours. Have a blessed day. Sincerely – Black people in the United States of America.

10:45 A.M. Email: “Dear nigger . . . fuck you, I am racist, I’m ok with that now thanks to your nigger community and their actions over the last few years.”

Amir (internally): Damn, the internet got these white folks real comfortable with their racism.

[Amir responds.]

11:10 A.M. Email: Hello. Thank you for confessing your racism. I am glad that you are now “okay”. How long were you keeping that vitriol in? Please keep that same energy when you notify your employer. I’d doubt that they would be “ok” with your racism. Have a blessed day. Sincerely – The Black community.

10:37 A.M. Email: “The concept of there being an intellectual Negro is a joke.”

[Amir responds.]

11:17 A.M. Email: Oh, no. I have been had. Someone, please alert my employer of this bamboozlement, of this travesty. Let me tell the other Black intellectuals that the “jig” is up. Have a blessed day. Sincerely – An actual BLACK intellectual.

10: 30 A.M. Email: “I’ll admit to the imaginary racism you think white people are guilty of when you admit that [you’re] a race card playing obamalicking insane retard.”

240 George Yancy, Backlash: What Happens When We Talk Honestly about Racism in America, 36. “Nigger Professor”, a contradiction. Yancy notes the contradiction on page 28, “a “nigger professor” is an oxymoron, something pointedly foolish. And since I am allegedly a nigger, I damn sure cannot be a professor.”

241 George Yancy, Backlash: What Happens When We Talk Honestly about Racism in America, 29.

242 See note above.

243 George Yancy, Backlash: What Happens When We Talk Honestly about Racism in America, 64.
[Amir responds.]

11:30 A.M. Email: Hello. Clearly, my “card” must not be working to be subjected to your white privilege and racism. Whom do I call to get new a race card? Also, does it come with frequent flyer miles? Have a blessed day. Sincerely – A defunct race card member.

10:00 A.M. Email: Dear professor, I am a white American citizen. You are the one who is the racist against white people, evidently. A professor—I bet you got it [your PhD] through a mail order.²⁴⁴

[Amir responds.]

11:45 A.M. Email: Hello. I am a Black American citizen. Reverse racism isn’t real. Please come get yourself, your people, and your racism. While my Ph.D. was not mail ordered, it did come from my university through the mail [wink emoji]. Have a blessed day. Sincerely – A Black man with a Ph.D.

9:55 A.M. Email: “STFU [shut the fuck up], and be thankful for your birth in America, because tomorrow morning when you wake up you’ll STILL just be another whining, begging, gimme-dat, nigger. But here you are at least by law a protected and coddled 2nd class citizen. Anywhere else, you would be dead.”²⁴⁵

[Amir responds.]

12:01 P.M. Email: The caucasy of your email. I wanted to send you something smart and witty, so these lyrics from Gil Scot-Heron will do:

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In 1600 I was a darkie
And until 1865 a slave
In 1900 I was a nigger
Or at least that was my name
In 1960 I was a negro
And then Malcolm came along
Yes, but some nigger shot Malcolm down
Though the bitter truth lives on
Well now I am a black man
And though I still go second-class
Whereas once I wanted the white man's love
Now he can kiss my ass²⁴⁶
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²⁴⁴ George Yancy, Backlash: What Happens When We Talk Honestly about Racism in America, 30.

²⁴⁵ George Yancy, Backlash: What Happens When We Talk Honestly about Racism in America, 29.

Have a blessed day. Sincerely, A BLACK MAN.

9:30 A.M. Email: “This coon is a philosopher in the same way Martin King was a PHD and the same way that Jesse Jackson and Al Sharpton are ‘Reverends’: Just another jive assed nigger with a new way to pimp.”

[Amir responds.]

12:10 P.M Email: Hello. You got us all figured out. Black people have been pimpin’ the WHITE man so that we can buy our civil rights, who knew? If that is the case, where’s our reparations money at? We are still waiting. Have a blessed day. Sincerely – an eager reparations recipient.

[Amir was moving through his vile emails until one email stopped him in his tracks. The email was not from angry racist; it is from the Office of the President. Entitled “Standing For Our Core Values,” Amir was caught off-guard by what he had just read.]

Standing for Our Core Values

[BlankFace]

PRESIDENT

Earlier this week, San Francisco State University was thrust into the media spotlight after the remarks of one of our faculty, Amir Asim Gilmore, during his townhall talk on San Francisco Tonight.

His commentary during the interview featured disturbing commentary about race and policing, which sparked some disturbing responses from those who were offended by his language. I have spoken with some; I have heard their concerns, and understand their reactions to the “postwhite” reference. It is a question that many perceive as a threat. Professor Gilmore’s comments stand in stark contrast to Gators core values – most notably those of respect, excellence, leadership, and integrity – values that we hold true toward all of humanity.

Let me be unequivocally clear: Professor Gilmore does not represent San Francisco State University, and his views are his own. Further, Professor Gilmore’s right to express his opinion is protected by the Constitution, no matter how reprehensible those views may be. It also protects our right to freedom of speech which I am exercising now.

We stand for equality.

247 George Yancy, Backlash: What Happens When We Talk Honestly about Racism in America, 30.

248 This letter was created by merging Temple’s “Statement of Temple’s Values” and Texas A&M’s “Standing For Our Core Values”. Temple’s letter was addressed to backlash of Dr. Marc Lamont Hill’s remarks at the United Nations. Texas A&M was addressed to the backlash of Dr. Tommy Curry for remarks that he made in a podcast in 2013. Both universities denounced their professors.
We stand against the advocacy of violence, hate, and killing.

We firmly commit to the success, not the destruction, of each other.

This afternoon, I write to you, our beloved Gators. It is vitally important to remember our values: San Francisco State University condemns the racist or incendiary language, hate speech, calls to violence, and the disparagement of any person or persons based on religion, nationality, race, gender, sexual orientation or identity. The university, in the best interest of its community, will take necessary and proper action to protect these values when they are threatened. At the same time, we pride ourselves on our diversity, in all its forms. We will always be a place where divergent points of view will find a home. These are the values the San Francisco community embraces.

Thank you for your commitment to San Francisco State’s ideals, which have withstood the tests of time and will continue to do so. And thank you for all you do to make San Francisco State the welcoming community it is.

Sincerely,

[Blankface]

President

Amir (internally): What the actual fuck is this? Offended? Incendiary? Of course, pointing out racism in America makes me a racist. I guess that this is the price to be paid for “for reaching out, in love, to white America to face its racism.”

[Amir’s twitter begins to blow up. His mentions are in shambles with racist messages.]

Twitter: @amir_asim: “Another uppity Nigger. Calling a Nigger a professor is like calling White Black and Wet Dry.”

Twitter: @amir_asim: “Even the most sophisticated nigger will revert back to their jungle bunny behavior when excited.”

Twitter: @amir_asim: “You can dress a Nigger up in a suit and tie and they’ll still be Niggers.”

Twitter: @amir_asim: Niggas are largely uncivilized savages who have been ruined by food stamps, welfare, [and] affirmative action.

249 George Yancy, Backlash: What Happens When We Talk Honestly about Racism in America, 36.

250 George Yancy, “The Ugly Truth of Being a Black Professor in America.”

251 George Yancy, “The Ugly Truth of Being a Black Professor in America.”

252 George Yancy, Backlash: What Happens When We Talk Honestly about Racism in America, 28.
Twitter: @amir_asim: “Because you say that I’m a racist, I might as well be the best racist that I can be.”

Twitter: @amir_asim: “In a sane world, this ugly nigger would be just beheaded ISIS style. Make America WHITE Again.”

Twitter: @amir_asim: “Kill Yourself. Do it Immediately.”

Twitter: I am glad that his university put this nigger in check @amir_asim.

[One tweet shook Amir to his core. It read:]

Twitter: @amir_asim: Fucking nigger. It should have been your son that got fucking beat.

[Flattened by the racist messages, Amir distraught, sick to the stomach with trepidation about his life and the lives of his loved ones.]

[A knock at the door]

Amir: WHAT?

[Blankface Professor enters]

Blankface Professor: Whoa, hello to you too, Champ.

Amir: Sorry. It has been a rough few days.

BFP: I bet. I just saw the letter from the President. What the fuck, amirite?

Amir: Yeah. So much for academic freedom.

BFP: Yeah, but you should have known better.

Amir: [stares motherfuckerly] ‘cuse me?

BFP: Oh c’mon. You had to have known that this was going to happen.

Amir: [sarcastically] You got me! I’m a masochist. I love being subjected to racist comments. I did this for clicks and retweets. Get the fuck outta here. You have no idea of what is to be Black in America. Damned if I do, damned if I don’t…just damned.

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253 George Yancy, Backlash: What Happens When We Talk Honestly about Racism in America, 44.

254 See note above.

255 George Yancy, Backlash: What Happens When We Talk Honestly about Racism in America, 51.

256 George Yancy, Backlash: What Happens When We Talk Honestly about Racism in America, 52.
BF: [Snarky] Perhaps the world wouldn’t have shut you down if you didn’t call everyone a racist?

Amir: “But what would I gain? Do I really have time for a placated white ally, a white ally who agrees with me just as long as [their] sensibilities are not offended?” Do you believe that I asked for this? Please remind the last time silence helped Black folks? “At the end of the day, we are seen as niggers, nothing more, nothing less.” Lemme ask you somthin’.

BFP: Sure.

Amir: With the stakes this high, “who can afford to improvise, at [these] prices?”

BFP: I know I can’t.

Amir: As a Black man in America, I cannot afford not to improvise. “If freedom to travel and freedom to be happy are civil rights or legal rights, they exist entirely at the whim and fancy of the U.S. government.” I cannot wait for those freedoms; the stakes are too high. White Americans can’t improvise, not because of necessity, but because of choice. Whiteness is a script; it’s about law and order. To go off script from whiteness, to improvise, would bankrupt your world, your privilege, and your illusion of reality. To improvise, would mean to accommodate all that improvisation carries out, and you cannot afford that. Now, git the fuck outta my office.

[Scene ends.]

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ACT V: I am NOT Your Magical Negro

Act IV: I am Not Your Magical Negro

The Cast: June Gilmore, Blankface Co-Hosts, Blankface Committee Members, Blankface Colleague, Angela

257 George Yancy, Backlash: What Happens When We Talk Honestly about Racism in America, 68.

258 George Yancy, Backlash: What Happens When We Talk Honestly about Racism in America, 32. Yancy’s analysis of silence is spot-on. His words remind me of Audre Lorde’s words on silence. On page 42 of “The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action”, Lorde notes: “my silences had not protected me. Your silence will not protect you.”

259 James Baldwin, “Of the Sorrow Songs” in The Cross of Redemption, (New York: Pantheon Books, 2010), 149. This essay connected Black music to the Black social life in America. Baldwin argued that, “Life comes out of music, and music comes out of life.” Music has been an ally to Black people because it bears witness to our confessions and conquers time; something that has been owned by white history. Music gave Black people a way to improvise, to invent their own future. Black people cannot afford not to improvise.

The Scene: San Francisco State University

The Music: None.

The Plot: This act is coined after what filmmaker Spike Lee once called “a Black person who arrives on the scene from out of nowhere and has some inexplicable knowledge, wisdom, or a superpower. This trope—invented by white artists requires that Black person be willing to do anything, including die, to transform white people.” 261 This act highlights the complexities that June faces as a Black woman in academia. The act draws on the American fantasy that a Black woman’s purpose is to save white people or white America from its shit. Being one of few Black women professors at San Francisco State University, June always feels burdened to do equity work, because no else will do it. Because of her expertise, her colleagues overly rely on her to do equity work.

[Scene Begins with June driving to work, listening to the radio. June stumbles onto a radio talk show discussing the “dysfunction” of Black women262]

Blankface Co-Host #1: …Bay Area! Thank you for joining us today on this bright sunny day.

Blankface Co-Host # 2: Yes, yes. Thank you for joining us today. Today we are going to talk about America’s favorite scapegoat…Black women.

Blankface Co-Host #1: Ah yes, Black women. Umm [inaudible], tell me what is wrong with Black women?

Blankface Co-Host # 2: I dunno. What’s right with Black women?

[Both co-hosts laugh]

Blankface Co-Host # 2: What’s wrong with Black women? I dunno, EVERYTHING. In America, Black women are to blame for “urban violence, the welfare state, and the disintegration of the black family.”263 I mean seriously, just go back to the Moynihan Report, the truth is there.264


262 I open this skit with talk radio to show how hateful and narrow the perceptions and representations of Black women in America.

263 Tamara Winfrey Harris, The Sisters Are Alright: Changing the Broken Narrative of Black Women in America (Oakland: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2015), 15. Black women are framed as “problems” and are literally blamed for everything.

264 Even in the future, the Moynihan report continues to haunt Black people.
Blankface Co-Host # 1: I mean what does it say?

Blankface Co-Host # 2: Moynihan says, *[clears throat]* “In essence, the Negro community has been forced into a matriarchal structure which, because it is out of line with the rest of the American society, seriously retards the progress of the group as a whole, and imposes a crushing burden on the Negro male and, in consequence, on a great many Negro women as well.”²⁶⁵

Blankface Co-Host # 1: Whoa, so, what you’re saying is that Black women have destroyed the social fabric of the Black household. For decades.

Blankface Co-Host # 2: Correct. If you are talking about the failure of the Black family – Black boys and men in this country, Blame Black women. It is as simple as that.

Blankface Co-Host # 1: Mhm. They certainly can’t hold down the household, nor a marriage…

*[Both co-hosts laugh]*

Blankface Co-Host # 1: *[mocking]* Maybe if they weren’t “chasing away Black men with their “independence…”²⁶⁶

Blankface Co-Host # 2: …or “dropping stacks of cash on weaves and wigs, making Korean beauty-store owners rich while their own bills stay due and their children’s college funds stay empty…”²⁶⁷

Both Co-Host: They…could…find…A MAN!

*[Both co-hosts laugh]*

Blankface Co-Host # 1: You wanna know what the real issue with Black women is?

Blankface Co-Host # 2: What?

Blankface Co-Host # 1: Their anger. Black women are always angry. “I’ve never met an angrier group of people. Like black women are angry just in general. Angry all the time.”²⁶⁸ Hey


²⁶⁷ Tamara Winfrey Harris, *The Sisters Are Alright: Changing the Broken Narrative of Black Women in America*, 15.
[inaudible] wanna hear a joke? What do you call a wildly successful writer, director, producer, and mother of three, who also happens to be a black woman…you call her “angry.”

[Both co-hosts laugh]

Blankface Co-Host # 2: Alright, enough of the chatter, joining this morning is [insert name here]. Welcome to the show [insert name here]. Now tell us, what’s wrong with Black women? Why are y’all so angry?

Black Woman: [breathes]

Blankface Co-Host # 1: [angrily] Alright, that’s enough! We ain’t trying to hear any more from you.

Blankface Co-Host # 2: Gosh, why are you so LOUD?

[June turns off the radio and drives to work in silence. June arrives at the university. First stop on June’s busy day, the university café to pick up some breakfast. June’s peaceful breakfast is interrupted by a colleague]

Blankface Colleague: [waving] Hey June! Hey girrrrrlll. How are you?

June: [not remembering her name] Hey…hey! I’m great. How are you? How was your weekend?

Blankface Colleague: It was great. The hubby and I went to the beach for the weekend. It was a nice weekend getaway. Had some drinks, got a tan.

June: [slowly nodding] I see. It sounds like you had some fun.

Blankface Colleague: Oh, I did. Girl! Do you see my tan? I am so dark. I’m as dark as you. We could be sisters. [laughs].

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269 Tamara Winfrey Harris, 75.

270 Just the mere existence of Black women, unsettles white people. Black women are made to feel like strangers. When Black women are demanded to provide a perspective, they are positioned to defend themselves from the antagonism.
[Everything stops, as everyone else in the café heard the joke. People stop and stare to see what June’s next reaction is going to be]

June: [deadpan] That’s not funny. That’s racist.

Blankface Colleague: [affect flattened] Aww, c’mon. It was just a joke. You know that I didn’t mean anything by it.

June: “What privilege it is to be able to forget that you live in a particular body.”

Do you think that racism is a joke? Do you think that becoming brown is a joke?

[“[They] both experience this cut, which she keeps insisting is a joke, a joke stuck in her throat, and like any other injury, you watch it rupture along its suddenly exposed suture.”]

Blankface Colleague: Lighten up, it was just a joke. Stop being so sensitive.

June: No.

June (internally): Days without feeling like a stranger: zero.

[Angry but not surprised, June continues her day by going to the next thing on her calendar: a diversity and equity committee meeting. Being in that room “is like walking into a sea of whiteness.” Despite it being a meeting based on diversity and equity, June feels the white gaze within the room, always on; always watching. The meeting is going well until it hits a wall.]

June: …As a response to hateful incidents that happen on campus, we are all charged here today to renew our commitments to making San Francisco State University a more diverse and


272 Peak whiteness is when skin color is something that can be acquired. What does it mean to become brown without being brown?

273 Claudine Rankine, Citizen, An American Lyric, (Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2014), 39. On page 261 in “Conclusion 2: Killjoy Manifesto,” Ahmed noted, “humor is such a crucial technique for reproducing inequality and injustice…by laughing about what they repeat, they repeat what they laugh about. This about becomes the butt of the joke. It is no laughing matter. When it is no laughing matter, laughter matters.

274 The Refusal to get over something that is not over: Racism.

275 Just because people are on a committee that is centered on diversity and equity, does not mean that they support it.

equitable institution. We start by doing that as a committee by learning “how not to reproduce what we inherit.”

[Blankface committee members nod, as it’s typical polite university speech]

June: …and what we reproduce on this campus are RACISM and SEXISM.

[SNAP! And just like that June got everyone’s immediate attention, as well as their hostility]

Blankface Committee Member # 1: [confidently] Well actually… I want to chime in here, but I think that you’re wrong. We don’t have a problem with racism; we are a global campus. “We are diverse because we embrace diversity. I mean look at our student body; it is extremely diverse.”

June: Wrong? “I am not wrong: Wrong is not my name.” You realize that “diversity can be a method of protecting whiteness,” right? Diversity quickly becomes about “changing perceptions of whiteness rather than changing the whiteness of the organization. Changing perceptions of whiteness can be how [this] institution can reproduce whiteness…” What we need to accomplish is how we “talk about whiteness as an institutional problem.”

[Blankface Committee Member # 1 rolls their eyes]


278 On page 6 of “Bringing Feminist Theory Home”, Ahmed noted that, “Even to describe something as sexist and racist here and now can get you into trouble.” Within institutions and organizations, racism is heard as an accusation. To talk about the problem, makes you the problem. Problem doesn’t exist unless you will it into existence.

279 Sara Ahmed, “The Language of Diversity,” In On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), 55; 57-8. Diversity is used as discourse in “feel good” politics because not only does it provide lip service for the university, but also deflects and obscures how the university perpetuates racism and sexism. On page 69, Ahmed also notes that “Diversity evokes the pleasures of consumption… Diversity can be celebrated, consumed, and eaten.” For further context on diversity as consumption, see bell hooks, Black Looks: Race and Representation, (London: Turnaround, 1992), 21.


283 A gesture can be a wall. An eye roll is a wall.
Blankface Committee Member # 2: [Boldly] Whiteness as the problem? I disagree. I think that we have enough of this “diversity and equity” on this campus. I mean let’s call it what it is: Affirmative Action. It is reverse discrimination.

[The air in the room becomes tense]

June: “Oh, is it? No one had a problem with inclusion “when Black people were valued primarily as property, the legal subordinates of those who used black bodies to create and maintain wealth and dominance.”284 No one cared about equity and inclusion, “when we broke this crazy land into farms/ when we planted and harvested the crops/ when we dug into earth for water/ when we carried that water into the big house and bedrooms.”285 Come to find out decades later, “we never got invited to the party/ we never got included in ‘the people’/ we never got no kind of affirmative action worth/ more than the spit in the wind.”286

[The air in the room becomes tense]

June: I am fine sitting in this tension. I live within this tension. I want you all to sit in it as well.

[There is a break in the pause]

Blankface Committee Member # 3: [heavy sigh]…sometimes June, doing this work feels like “banging your head against a brick wall.”287

June (internally): This meeting feels like banging your head against a brick wall…

June: Why do you feel that way?

Blankface Committee Member # 3: Talking about racism is too difficult. It feels like “coming up against something that does not move, something solid and tangible.”288 It feels like it never ends.

June: “Saying that race is ‘too difficult’ is how racism gets reproduced…the belief that racism is inevitable is how racism becomes inevitable.”289 We need to be willing and willful to manifest this work to go through the entire university. You have to understand that non-white people experience who attend this university experience the whiteness of this institution everyday.290

[Blankface Committee Member # 2 rolls their eyes]

Blankface Committee Member # 2: …and I need you to understand that you cannot reduce everything to race and racism.291

June: We are literally here because of racism.

Blankface Committee Member # 2: Well, I don’t see it that way. I think that the university is being overly sensitive to the issues at hand.292 We have become so triggered nowadays.

June: Our memories are willful. Students of color are not oversensitive because they cannot handle discomfort; they are oversensitive because they don’t want “histories that are violent to be repeated…we need to be oversensitive…we are sensitive to what is not over…we are sensitive because it is not over.”293

Blankface Committee Member #1: Well this meeting is…

[The one-hour mark hits. The meeting is over. Relief, is what June is thinking, or is it? After the meeting June is approached by a committee member]

Blankface Committee Member # 3: Thank you so much for doing what you do for this university. I do not know where we would be without your hard efforts. Sometimes as a white person, this race talk gets so stressful for me. I become paralyzed. Trust me, sweetie, it is hard for white people to talk about this work too [smiles].


291 Sara Ahmed, “Speaking About Racism,” 155. WALL. On page 162, Ahmed noted that, “to talk about racism is to occupy a space saturated with tension.” These tensions raises WALLS.

292 The committee member does not see the university as an institution but as an individual – an individual that is emotional


June: One. Don’t call me sweetie. Two, I am not here to massage your white guilt. “I have no creative use for guilt, yours or my own. Guilt is only another way of avoiding informed action, of buying time out of the pressing need to make clear choices…guilt is just another name for impotence, for defensiveness destructive of communication; it becomes a device to protect ignorance and the continuation of things the way they are, the ultimate protection for changelessness.” 294

[Blankface Committee Member # 3 faces turns from a smile to a scowl]

Blankface Committee Member # 3: You should be careful, as you come off as angry and forceful. If you want people to see where you are coming from, you need to soften your tone. Stop being so angry, smile more. 295

June: No, you’re just going to have to learn how to accommodate my speech [smiles]. 296

[June finally gets out of the room. As June leaves the meeting, the sounds of relief radiate outta her body because she knows she’s leaving a white space. She begins to recompose herself, as she moves onto the next endeavor: emails. June gets to her office and begins to check her emails. The first email she sees:]

10:37 P.M. Email: Hi June! Thank you for attending the week-long forum on “Women, Politics, and Solidarity” in Political Science. Talking about race and racism was stressful, but I got through it. I remember during the closing ceremony, you had asked what this week had given me? “I think I’ve gotten a lot. I feel Black women really understand me a lot better now; they have a better idea of where I’m coming from.” 297

[June replies:]


295 In a white world, non-white assertiveness is seen as hostility. Ahmed spoke to this experience on page 159-60 of “Speaking About Racism:” “Aggression and forcefulness are a discourse of racial baggage… Being careful is about softening the form of your appearance so you do not appear ‘aggressive’ because you are already assumed to be aggressive before you appear.

296 Refusal. Willful disobedience. A deliberate smile. Words cut, but so does a smile.

10:30 A.M. Email: Dear [inaudible], it is Dr. J. to you. Black women understanding you doesn’t “lay at the core of the racist problem.” Your racism does. P.S.: Your white fragility is showing. Sincerely, Not Your Magical Negro.

[Next email]

8:50 P.M. Email: Hello Dr. J. Thank you for attending the forum last week. While I thought that your definition of racism which acknowledged how white people “hold social and institutional power over people of color” was appropriate your tone was overall distracting. It was intimidating at times; you sounded angry. Here is some advice for you, “Tell me how you feel but don’t say it too harshly or I cannot hear you.”

[June replies:]

10:45 A.M. Email: Dear [inaudible], I sound angry, because I am angry, and I have plenty of more from which it came. Here is some advice for you, please examine your fragile white feelings. Your fragility and “defensiveness are bricks in a wall against which we all flounder; they serve none of our futures.” Lastly, a question for you: “[was] it my manner that keeps [you] from hearing, or the threat of a message that [your] life may change?” [insert smile emoji] Sincerely, Not Your Magical Negro.

[Next email]

298 Blankfaces have no names or identifiers.


300 According to Robin DiAngelo, “White Fragility” is a state in which even a minimum amount of racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves. Speaking about racism causes damage. As Sara Ahmed said on page 177 in Living A Feminist Life, “Racism becomes the requirement to think of racism with sympathy, racism as just another view; the racist as the one with feelings, too.” Talking about racism can be stressful, but so is dealing with the material, physical, and psychological effects of racism. For more information on White Fragility, see Robin DiAngelo, “White Fragility,” International Journal of Critical Pedagogy 3, no. 3 (2011): 54-70, libjournal.uncg.edu/ijcp/article/viewFile/249/116.


303 In “The Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism,” Lorde noted that “Every woman has a well-stocked arsenal of anger potentially useful against those oppressions, personal and institutional, which brought that anger into being. June is using her anger via email because racism, silence, defensiveness, exclusion, and stereotyping happen in that space. See page 139 for more details.


305 Audre Lorde, “The Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism,” 136. I love that line. I had to edited to address it as a personal question.
8:30 P.M. Email: Hi Dr. J. It is was great to see you at the forum. Quick question. I teach at a rural location and we don’t have many faculty of color. “How do we address the issues of racism? …We have no one in our department “equipped” to teach their work?”

[June replies:]

11:00 A.M. Email: Dear [inaudible]. This is not “quick” question, nor will my answer be quick. Racism is not just a Black women’s or a woman of color’s problem. You have been cordially invited to read our work and discuss racism with us. I promise that we won’t bite [eye wink emoji]. I believe that “one of the reasons white women have such difficulty reading Black women’s work is because of their reluctance to see Black women as women and different from themselves.”

“All too often, the excuse given is that the literatures of women of Color can only be taught by Colored women, or that they are too difficult to understand, or that classes cannot ‘get into’ them.” White women of your class and status, “seem to have no trouble at all teaching and reviewing work that comes out of the vastly different experiences of Shakespeare, Molière, Dostoyefsky, and Aristophanes. You should have no problems teaching about Black women and women of color’s experiences…Black women’s literature effectively requires that we be seen as whole people in our actual complexities — as individuals, as women, as human — rather than as one of those problematic but familiar stereotypes provided in this society in place of genuine images of Black women.” It is not our job to teach white women about their mistakes and their evasion to being held accountable. I am NOT YOUR MAGICAL NEGRO. We are NOT YOUR MAGICAL NEGROES. Sincerely, NOT YOUR MAGICAL NEGRO [insert smile emoji].

[June receives a knock at the door. It is her first-year Ph.D. student, Angela]

[Angela enters]

June: Hey Angela, right on time. How are you?

| 306 | Audre Lorde, “The Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism,” 137. Their work is pertaining to women of color and Black women scholarship. Quotation and italics are mine. |
| 310 | Angela is named after the activist, philosopher, writer and educator, Angela Davis. Thought Davis never got her Ph.D. in political science her writings and teachings have reshaped and renamed political science to address to racism, Black political thought, Black feminism, prison abolition, and violence against women. Davis was a “stone that the builder refused” and eventually became a “cornerstone.” |
Angela: [sighs] Oh, you know?

June: That first year is a doozie, ain’t it?

Angela: It is. From the reading to the writing, to understanding theory. [makes mind blown gesture]

June: I hear that. However, you’ll be fine. Remember that you are here for a reason and our department wanted you here for a reason.

Angela: I know, but sometimes it just doesn’t feel right here, ya know?

June: What do you mean?

Angela: Well…

[June gets up, gets to the doorway, looks both ways and closes the door]

June: So what’s up?

Angela: I feel like I am also struggling in this program because it wasn’t made for me, ya know. I feel like a stranger here. “I remain as much as a stranger today as I was the first day I arrived.”

June: Oh, I can understand the feeling. I remember when Amir and I moved out here and we felt like strangers in a place we call home – we became “the one[s] who [are] recognized as “out of place,” the one[s] who does not belong.” The experience was surreal. The “position of being the guest, or the stranger, the one who receives hospitality, allows an act of inclusion to maintain the form of exclusion. Amir and I were thrilled to receive all this attention from people that we didn’t know. We got a lot of the “where are you from?” often followed by “where are you really from?” At first, we thought that it was cute and trivial. However, after a while, it made us feel like a spectacle – like we didn’t belong.

311 James Baldwin, "Stranger In The Village," In Notes of a Native Son, (Boston: Beacon Press, 2012), 165. To be a stranger means to be refused and rejected by the in-group. That in-group would be whiteness and white people.


Angela: Mhmm. “I think a lot about how we're born into an experience, into a stereotype. How there is already all these things written into one's body, and it makes it really superchallenging to then build an identity on top of that. I often say that we're not starting at zero. We're starting at -100. When we're born, our experience is half the time spent undoing these ideas that were placed onto our body since birth and then building a personal identity on top of that.”

June: “[It’s] a heavy way to walk through the world.”

Angela: Heavy is the word. “I feel most colored when I am thrown against a sharp white background.” Dr. J., I am the only Black woman Ph.D. student in the Political Science Department. I also stick out during class. “I have to pretend that I am not here because I don’t want to stick out too much because everybody knows I am the only black person here.”

June: Yeah…universities can be very white spaces…they can easily make you into a stranger – into an alien and then blame you for feeling like you were alienated. Universities are shaped “by some bodies and not others.” I remember going to a conference and four Black feminists arrived. They all walked into the room at the same time, and the “gaze” was upon them, as the room noticed that they arrived. “The fact that we notice them tells us more about what is already in place than about “who” arrives.”

Angela: Whiteness is the norm.

June: “God-given male white supremacy.” Yup. As a Black woman, it is hard not to be noticeable. It is like we are always being watched no what we do. Always on, always watching.

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315 In Chapter 2 of Living A Feminist Life, Ahmed further speaks on this stranger-making, “When you are a stranger—maybe you are a tourist, or just newly arrived, and you don’t know these unwritten rules (How can you? There is nothing to consult)—you can become quite an imposition, a burden, a thing.” Stranger-making is a very structural and institutional. For further context see, Sara Ahmed, “On Being Directed,” in Living a Feminist Life (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 43-65.


317 Mary Louise Kelly, ’’Magical Negro’ Carries The Weight Of History.”


Angela: Exactly!

June: Now I’ve been working at San Fran State for over a decade, and people are still shocked to see a Black woman. There are meetings where “I enter the room there is a shock on people’s faces because they are expecting a white person to come in.”

Angela: Are you serious?

June: Hell yeah! The look of disappointment that is on their faces when I walk in is indescribable. They are disappointed because they are not expecting me. I cannot “pass” because I am a Black woman and administrators can’t get “pass” their disappointment because I am a Black woman. What an awkward pickle. I used to be mad, but I take joy in their disappointment. Imagine that my mere presence can fuck up someone’s day…Phew chile, the fragility.

[Angela laughs]

June: Mind you…these are the same people that tell me that we live in a post-racial society because “I’m a professor– as if to say when people of color become professors then the whiteness of the world recedes. The visibility of a few successful Black women academics completely obscures the challenge of Black women’s scholarship against the cultural hegemony of white men. Guess who is the only person of color employed on a full-time permanent basis in our department?”

Angela: Lemme guess, you. How does that feel?

June: Tough, some days, great, on others. So much of my day is spent convincing my colleagues and peers that racism and sexism have not ended. It is hard to get over something that has not ended. Despite these difficulties, one thing that I don’t let the institution do is to allow them to make me their honorary Negro. I am NOT their Magical Negro.

Angela: What do ya mean?

June: I ain’t here to save these white folks. The Magical Negro is a racial archetype in literature and cinema where the Black character is “usually depicted as wiser and spiritually deeper than

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the white protagonist—whose purpose in the plot was to help the protagonist get out of trouble, to help the protagonist realize his own faults and overcome them.”

Angela: Sounds more laborious than magical.

June: Exactly. Think of The Green Mile, The Legend of Baggar Vance, The Matrix, Dogma, Bruce Almighty, Hitch, Sex and the City, and [turns to the audience with a deadpan affect] The Green Book. I can go on and go forever, but you kinda get my point. The Token.

Angela: [shaking their head] Yeah, especially with Green Book. I’m always left wondering about their actions in movies.

June: Right, ‘cuz, despite great power and wisdom, the Magical Negro “only uses it to help the white main character; [they are not] threatening because [they] only [seek] to help, never hurt. The white main character's well-being comes before the Magical Negro's because the main character is of more value, more importance.”

Angela: Why does the Magical Negro exist?

June: [turns to the audience] Because America is RACIST. No one knows why the Magical Negro exists, but many scholars surmise that the archetype was created because that “was simply how the writers of the stories viewed black people.” The best summation that I heard was from Damon Lee. He said “The white community has been taught not to listen to black people. I truly feel that white people are more comfortable with black people telling them what to do when they are cast in a magical role. They can't seem to process the information in any other way.”

Does any of this sound familiar?

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325 Nnedi Okorafor, “Stephen King’s Super-Duper Magical Negroes,” Strange Horizons, October 25, 2004, http://strangehorizons.com/non-fiction/articles/stephen-kings-super-duper-magical-negroes/. Okorafor first heard the term Magical Negro from Black novelist, Steve Barnes, during a Clarion East Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers' Workshop discussion in 2001. Okorafor says the five most common attributes are: (1) [They] are a person of color, typically black, often Native American, in a story about predominantly white characters, (2) [They seem] to have nothing better to do than help the white protagonist, who is often a stranger to the Magical Negro at first, (3) [They] disappear, die, or sacrifice something of great value after or while helping the white protagonist, (4) [They are] uneducated, mentally handicapped, in a low position in life, or all of the above, and (5) [They are] wise, patient, and spiritually in touch. Closer to the earth, one might say. [They] often literally have magical powers.

326 Nnedi Okorafor, “Stephen King’s Super-Duper Magical Negroes.”

327 Nnedi Okorafor, “Stephen King’s Super-Duper Magical Negroes.”

Angela: Sounds the life of a Black woman in academia.

June: Universities can treat Black women as Magical Negroes. White academics never want to listen to Black women until they need us for the “magical diversity role.” Black women are supposedly only knowledgeable when it comes to diversity—child, please! White folks think that I am radical— that I am some superwoman for tackling issues of equity and diversity, but I am human like all the rest. “[I want] to be loved and to be recognized just like anybody else. Pain hurts [me] just like it hurts anybody else.”

Angela: Somehow Black women have all the magical answers to solve racism and sexism?

June: Right. Systems that whites created and perpetuated. The irony of this is that Black feminist epistemologies are maligned and marginalized in the academy but are the knowledge systems that provide this emotional and intellectual labor to provide diversity, equity, and inclusion at the university.

Angela: So why continue to do it?

June: If I stopped today, who would do this work? “If we were all white, it would be possible to “do nothing. That would be enough.” White folks can afford not to do this work. I do it, not to save white people, but to save myself, our families, and our communities. If I do not do the work, the work ceases to exist, but if I do the work, all the intellectual and emotional labor falls on me because I am the only one who knows how to do the work. “Becoming the race person means you are the one who is turned to when race turns up. The very fact of your existence can allow others not to turn up.” Once a racial incident happens, I am always invited to chair on a university committee—or a taskforce—or a working group—or whatever the hell they want to call it.

Angela: This work can be rewarding, no?

June: It can be, but the “responsibility for diversity and equality is unevenly distributed… “There are pitfalls in becoming a diversity person as a person of color…” No one wants to be the only one doing this work. Not only am I doing diversity, but “[I] already embody diversity by

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329 Michele Wallace, “For Colored Girls, the Rainbow is Not Enough,” In Invisibility Blues: From Pop to Theory, (New York: Verso Books, 2016), 276. Wallace was writing on the work of Ntozake Shange’s For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/When the Rainbow is Enuf. Shange wrote on the vulnerability of Black women. On page 280, Wallace writes about her conversation with Shange: “Her first words could come from my own mouth: ‘I was tired of being mistaken for the heroine. I was tired of being expected to be strong. I think that people say that black women are strong because it is a good way to make us feel alienated and hostile. Whatever happens, you must shut up and stand up again. We’ve been so busy being strong, we haven’t had time to find out about ourselves.”


providing an institution of whiteness with color.”

I don’t wanna be “the diversity poster child.” I refuse to be a stereotype. I refuse to be another plot device for a white person. I refuse to let white people feel comfortable about their racism. I refuse to be their Magical Negro. Nope. Ain’t gonna happen.

Angela: It’s all gotta be hard some days.

June: Academia is a fine line to walk, but feminism walks with me. Feminism is with me. Feminism is me.

Angela: Has feminism been foundational to your life?

June: Feminism got me through my toughest times, as it is about reshaping and renaming the world to accommodate all of us. I bring feminism everywhere I go because it needs to be everywhere to challenge the ordinary in our lives. The ordinary racism, the ordinary sexism, the ordinary classism. It can give names to problems and power to my words. Feminism provides a certain crispness to my memory – of knowing the fire and never forgetting how it burns. I love feminism – I love it because it allowed me to be fluid within my own body.

Angela: What do you mean?

June: Living a feminist life allows me to re-inhabit my own body. I am able to redefine myself for yourself. Not only through my body, but through my tongue.

Angela: The tongue is mighty powerful…

June: Especially if you’re a white man with an opinion.

[Angela and June laugh]

June: The issue is that they do not want Black people, especially Black women speaking up about racism and sexism in the academy. “When we give an account of something as sexist or racist, we are often dismissed as having a faulty perception, as not receiving the intentions or

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332 Sara Ahmed, “On Arrival,” 4. Ahmed further notes this dilemma on page 49, asking “What does it mean to have a body that provides an institution with diversity?”

333 I think of Frantz Fanon’s “look a Negro” line.

334 I do want to note that when I speak of feminism, I am not speaking about white feminism. The feminism that Ahmed describes is intersectional – because if it ain’t intersectional, it’s not feminism, period.


actions of others fairly or properly… When [we] talk about sexism and racism, [we] are heard as damaging the reputation of an individual or an organization.”

Angela: And you don’t want to damage the image of the university. It’s all optics, ain’t it?

June: It is, [sarcastically] You never want to hurt the reputation of the university. You encounter all people that wish to silence you. When a Black woman exists to describe and define her life, “white male and female and black male expertise may persist in silencing her.” We are silenced and dismissed as emotional. It is frustrating to be heard as emotional…

Angela: … as the angry Black woman…

June: … because the degrees of violence that affects us are made invisible. Institutions blame the victim for victimization, but when Black women speak up, we are hushed to the background.

Angela: Damned if you, damned if you don’t – just damned.

June: Many days, I left the institution, angry – but silent. Feminism showed me how to channel my anger for righteousness—for judgment. I could not be silent about my anger – I could not be silent about the injustices harming us. Audre Lorde taught us that, “Your silence will not protect you.” “Becoming a feminist was about becoming audible, feminism as screaming in order to be heard; screaming as making violence visible; feminism as acquiring a voice.” Finding and using my voice was a willful act of disobedience. “So much you are supposed not to say, to do, to be, in order to preserve that we.”

Angela: And who is that we?

June: Exactly ’cuz that we ain’t us. I exist and persist in disobeying. A refusal of stasis – a refusal of the status quo. All in all, I like fucking shit up here.

[Angela and June laugh]


341 Sara Ahmed, “Feminism is Sensational,” 37.
June: Well, tell me more about classes.

Angela: Ugh. When I look out in class, I don’t see me. I see blankfaces – I see a “sea of whiteness.” I police myself a lot in class because I am a Black woman in Polsci. I try my best not to “rock the boat,” especially when it comes to discussions centered on race and gender. I want to be less noticeable, so I try my best to build rapport with my colleagues.

June: Hmmm. “The political labor that it takes to have spaces of relief from whiteness.”

Angela: Yes, it is exhausting, gotdamn!

June: That is why I shut the door most times.

[June and Angela both laugh]

June: So, how’s that going? I know it can be challenging at times.

Angela: Well yeah… that’s the hard part. “Do I do that by being a member of the black-and-white minstrel show, or do I do that by trying to earn respect with my knowledge? Do I do it by being friendly, or do I do it by being cold, aloof, and detached?”

June: [sarcastically] Well whatever you do, you better not appear to be angry… cuz you already know how that goes…

[Angela laughs]

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342 Sara Ahmed, “Institutional Life,” in On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), 42. This is where I got the idea of blankfaces. Blankfaces are ordinary people that blend into the sea of whiteness. They cannot be described as they are a part of the sea. It speaks to the idea that some people can pass and pass through life, while others cannot.

343 Ahmed would define this as institutional passing. Institutional passing is a way of “avoiding the necessity of explaining your existence. Institutional passing might include the effort not to stand out or stand apart.” For further context, see Sara Ahmed, “Being in Question,” in Living A Feminist Life (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 127.


345 Closing the door is June’s relief from institutional racism. It is a wall that gives her a space to think and to decompress.

Angela: I do. “I always have to question if I am being too aggressive. I spend a lot of my day being careful of what I do, what I say, and how I appear to give distance between myself and my colleagues idea of me. I wonder if “I belong here? Will I be caught out? Do I fit in here?”

June: The “I am becomes am I?” The body becomes a question mark. Our “existence…becomes a form of political labor.” So our existence is always on guard.

Angela: mhhmm. So Dr. J., like how do you deal? How do you deal with all this whiteness?

June: Well, I remember reading in a book somewhere, and it said, “The world will tell you who you are, until you tell the world who you are.” One day I realized that I only had “one solution: to rise above this absurd drama that others have staged around me.” I realized that I am not here to make people comfortable. I am here to kill their joy – I am a killjoy.

Angela: Well, what’s a killjoy?

June: A killjoy is a shared feminist project based on survival. Survival is a “life struggle and a political struggle.” Audre Lorde teaches us that, “to survive in the mouth of this dragon we call america, we have had to learn this first and most vital lesson — that we were never meant to survive.” “We need each other to survive; we need to be part of each other’s survival.” “When you are not supposed to live, as you are, where you are, with whom you are with, then survival is a radical action.” We must resist and refuse the spaces and places that we are

350 Tamara Winfrey Harris, 24.
351 Sonia Sanchez, Wounded in the House of a Friend, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), 2. On a unpaginated page, Sanchez included this quote from Franz Fanon. I’ve come to understand Fanon’s quote as that whiteness and racism is a drama that is set by others. Black people must do our best to rise above and separate ourselves from racism in order to re-center and re-define ourselves.
subjugated to. It is a refusal of how things were, how things are, but a willingness to show how things will be.

[Angela nods her head]

June: Through this willful refusal, a killjoy is a person that manifests a world that they want to see. It is about world-making. To be a killjoy, a person must willfully recognize a few principles. A killjoy needs to be willing “to start with [their] own complicity.” A killjoy is willing to recognize that “inequalities exist.” A killjoy is willing to call for the “end of institutions that make white men.” “A killjoy is willing to get into trouble.” A killjoy is willing to expose violence. A killjoy is willing to bring history up. A killjoy needs to be willing to snap bonds that are damaging to myself and others. A killjoy needs to be willing to “expose the happiness of neoliberalism and global capitalism.”357

Angela: But why be willing to kill happiness? It sounds counterintuitive?

June: Well, “when I was a child I never wanted to grow up because it was obvious that grownups were these really unhappy people. All the time they did things they didn’t want to do. They went to work. They woke up early. They pretended to like neighbors. They stayed married.”358 Somehow, for some reason, we trap and silence ourselves in the name of happiness.

Angela: Sounds like you’ve been a killjoy since childhood.

[Angela and June laugh]

June: Perhaps! I just know that I am not “willing to make happiness my cause.”359 “Happiness is such a weighty word, a moral word...happiness is used to justify social norms as social goods.”360 In my mind, happiness is a political struggle. Happiness is a global commodified phenomenon, which narrows, shapes, and controls our lives.361 Institutions demand us always to be happy or to strive for happiness. Society says that you’ll be happy if you get that new job, new kicks, new car, new phones, but happiness is a fleeting emotion. Through everyday

357 Sara Ahmed, “Conclusion 1: A Killjoy Survival Kit,” 263; 252; 253; 255; 257; 262; 266; 257. Ahmed has ten principles of being a killjoy. I cited these pages together to show the reader a broad vision of Ahmed’s killjoy. I do wish to note that there are different ways to be a killjoy as everyone has a different manifesto accomplishing their goals. I do think that at the core, to be a killjoy, is to be willing and willful to create change.


361 On page 58 in “On Being Directed,” Ahmed notes “Happiness as a form of emotional labor can be condensed in the formula: making others happy by appearing happy.”
situations, we learn “the unhappiness that happiness can cause.” Through unhappiness, we learn the heartaches and disasters that happiness can cause. Ever been unhappy with something in life?

Angela: Of course,…more times than I can remember.

June: And what are the options that are usually presented to you?

Angela: To smile…or…get over it…or to get used to it.

June: Right because happiness requires us to look the part. We are taught to smile and to always be smiling. To “fake it until you make it,” but how many of us fake it and never make it? What do smiles hide?

Angela: [playfully] “Smile, love, it could be worse.”

June: And that right there is the rub because that phrase erases the trauma that we’ve endured. The façade of smiling redirects and obscures the violence that Black folks have faced. Black people in America and across the globe are taught to smile to hide the injustices that they face. We are told that everything will be alright, when everything is not alright. We have been told to smile and to be grateful for what we got despite the violence we’ve endured through slavery, through reconstruction, through Jim Crow, through the assassinations and jailing of our leaders, through police beatings and killings. Well, I am tired of smiling. “Feminism is full of stories like this: of women who are not made happy by what is supposed to make them happy.”

“I don’t wanna be happy. I want to live. I want justice. I want joy.

Angela: So, as a killjoy what does it mean to live a life of unhappiness?

June: The assumption is that as a killjoy, we are against life because we are against happiness. Killjoys do not find “the appeal of happiness appealing as a life principle.” Just because we are willing to cause unhappiness doesn’t make unhappiness our aim. Our work is political. The question becomes, “whose unhappiness are we willing to cause?”

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362 “Conclusion 1: A Killjoy Survival Kit,” 258.

363 The smile-and-the-world-smiles-with-you routine. How often do we here this rhetoric?


institutional unhappiness if the institution is unhappy because we speak about sexual harassment. We are willing to cause feminist unhappiness if feminists are unhappy because we speak about racism. This means that: We are unhappy with what causes unhappiness.”

Angela: How do I start becoming a feminist killjoy?

June: I would start by renewing your habits of study. Feminism is an “active and ongoing commitment to live one’s life in a feminist way.” To be a feminist “is to stay a student…feminism is homework.” Texts can be our worlds. You gotta read up, you gotta write, and you gotta exist to be in relationship with other women. Through your readings, writings, and relations, your life will become a manifesto. You will manifest your own manifesto of how you want to see the world.

Angela: So, being a killjoy is personal?

June: Yes. It is personal, but it is also shared. It is a collective project of survival. It is a collective project of world-making. Each killjoy has their own manifesto to unfold into action. Some of us are politicians. Some of us are educators. Some of us are laborers. Some of us are organizers. All of us are brave. At the core, killjoys understand that “no road whatever will lead Americans back to the simplicity…where white men still have the luxury of looking [at us] as a stranger.” “This world is white no longer, and it will never be white again.” We belong here and we ain’t going nowhere. I embrace my presence to unseat and unsettle people’s expectations and feelings. That’s the space that I occupy. I take up SPACE, and that is something that I take joy in. You are taking up space too, did you know that?

Angela: Am I? It doesn’t feel like that…

June: Of course it doesn’t, but you are. Your presence here alone is reshaping the world, chip by chip. You are a part of this world-making process. A world without white walls. Our actions may

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368 Sara Ahmed, “Conclusion # 2: A Killjoy Manifesto,” 258.


372 The end of the world. The end of certain systems. The beginnings of something new.

373 James Baldwin, "Stranger In The Village," 179.

374 James Baldwin, "Stranger In The Village," 179. This quote by Baldwin needs to be everywhere. The power in making that declaration is beautiful. Connecting it to Ahmed work, white in this instance, refers to white male making institutions.
seem small, but they accumulate over time. Though our persistent chipping, a stone becomes stones – a piece of pieces. Within these ruptures – within these breaks, what kind of worlds can we create by rearranging the pieces?

Angela: Black ones.

[Angela and June laugh. Angela checks her smartwatch and gets up]

June: Gotta go?

Angela: Yeah, I got class in a few.

June: Well let me not the delay the revolution [smiles]. I’ll let you be on your way.

[Angela gets up, opens the door and begins to walk out]

June: Wait!

Angela: Yeah Dr. J.?

June: Before you go, I want to gift you one more nugget. As you journey on your path of being a feminist killjoy, remember to be sweethoneyintherock.

Angela: [puzzled] A what?

June: A sweethoneyintherock are women who keep us alive, “showing us how to be tough and soft as we walk toward love and liberation.” Audre Lorde taught that this type of work can harden us – it can weather us. The hardness of the world can harm yourself but also the relation you have with other Black women. We have to be careful about how social oppressions weather us and each other. On your journey, remember to take breaks. Remember to nurture yourself – remember to love yourself. But most of all [smiles], remember to be sweet to yourself

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375 Within the break, the stone becomes something new. That is the power and joy of feminism. The power to reshape, remake, and rename. The embrace of the vulnerable – the embrace of the fragile.

376 This is a name of a Sonia Sanchez poem in Wounded in the House of a Friend. When I think of June’s character, I think of her as sweethoneyintherock. When I think about my mom, I think of her as sweethoneyintherock.


378 On page 160 In Zami: A New Spelling of My Name, Audre Lorde noted that, “In order to survive the weather we had to become stone… We bruise ourselves upon the other who is closest.” For further see Audre Lorde, Zami: A New Spelling of My Name, (London: Sheba Feminist Publishers, 1984), 160.
– be sweet to others, like honey. Remember to be *sweethoneyintherock*, because we need each other.

Angela: *smiles* Thanks Dr. J. I’ll see you later.

June: Sounds good. See you later.

*As Angela leaves, pulls out a note from her office desk. She unfolds it, and it says: “PRINCIPLE 10: I AM WILLING TO PARTICIPATE IN A KILLJOY MOVEMENT.”*

*Scene Ends*

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**ACT VI: The Kneel**

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**The Cast:** Amiri Gilmore, June Gilmore, Amir Gilmore, Coach Sho’nuff

**The Scene:** South San Francisco High School locker room/ football field

**The Music:** The Glow by Willie Hutch and The Last Dragon by Dwight David

**The Plot:** This act is fitting for times that we live in currently with Colin Kaepernick, who is being blackballed by the league by kneeling during NFL games. Like social activists before him, Amiri kneels on the biggest stage of his life to protest the Black social injustices. Amiri is subjected to white backlash as he is booed off the field. Amir rushes to the field to get Amiri and they drive home.

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380 Sho’nuff in *The Last Dragon* is the “Shogun of Harlem.” He bullies his opponents using intimidation and violence. Though Sho’nuff is Black in the movie, he is sho’nuff a white guy in this play. See what I did there. I asked myself, “what if Sho’nuff was a football coach, instead of a fighter, who would he be.” Viola, wonder no more.

381 Two awesome songs off the *Last Dragon Soundtrack*. Give it a listen when you have the chance. Moreover, before you read any further, I would recommend that you watch *The Last Dragon*. You can watch the highlights on YouTube or watch the full movie on Netflix.

382 At the time of this writing, Colin Kaepernick reached an agreement with the NFL and dropped his collusion suit against the league. It is alleged that he dropped the suit and was compensated. See Merrit Kennedy, “Colin Kaepernick Reaches Deal With The NFL To Settle Collusion Allegations”, NPR, February 15, 2019, https://www.npr.org/2019/02/15/695213705/colin-kaepernick-reaches-agreement-with-the-nfl-his-lawyer-says.
Aside [To the audience]: Keep “politics” out of sports, is a discourse that many people hear today in America. What is critical to understand is that sports have always been political because they “walk hand in hand through our lives and historical time in which we live.” The social life of Black life has always coincided with sports. Black athletes offer hope because Black athletes have a storied history of protesting social injustices – it’s in their DNA (*Kendrick Lamar voice*). Using their platform, Black athletes question the “status quo” to create change and as a result, they are often silenced and told that their activism has no place on the field. With the Black Lives Matter Movement (BLM), we are once again seeing Black athletes refusing to be silent about injustices affecting Black people across the diaspora. Moreover, the movement has provided spaces for youth to be included and to speak up. Youth protests are crucial to BLM. Kaepernick said, “We have a younger generation that sees these issues and want to be able to correct them. I think that’s amazing. I think it shows the strength, the character, and the courage of our youth. Ultimately, they’re going to be needed to help make this change.”

[Scene begins in the high school locker room with the South San Francisco High School football team and Coach Sho’nuff. The Coach is about to deliver his pep talk before the big game.]

Coach Sho’nuff: “Am I the meanest?”

Football Team: “Sho’nuff!”

Coach Sho’nuff: “Am I the prettiest?”

Football Team: “Sho’nuff!”

Coach Sho’nuff: “Am I the baddest mofo low down around this town?”

Football Team: “Sho’nuff!”

Coach Sho’nuff: “Well who am I?”

Football Team: “Sho’nuff!”

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384 Kaepernick’s comments were in reference to the Garfield High School football team that refused to stand for the pledge anymore. See Jayda Evans, “Garfield football team takes knee during national anthem prior to game Friday night”, Seattle Times, updated September 17, 2016, https://www.seattletimes.com/sports/high-school/garfield-football-team-takes-knee-prior-to-game-friday-night/.

385 This call and response is from The Last Dragon, directed by Michael Schultz (1985; New York: Delphi III Productions, 2001), DVD. Gang Boss Sho’nuff and his squad, while they are at the movie theater. The squad is hyping him up to the crowd to announce that the Shogun of Harlem is back in town. If you have Netflix, start watching at 00:08:45.
Sho’nuff: [lowering his shades] “I can't hear you...”

Football Team: “Sho’nuff!”

Coach Sho’nuff: Alright boys, bring it in. Bring it in. Hurry up.

[The players gather around Sho’nuff and huddle into a circle.]

Coach Sho’nuff: I know that morale is low after everything that has happened. But this game. This game is huge for us – for the school, the boosters, and the media. I got a lot riding on this game, so don’t let me down, dammit. I don’t accept losses because I don’t coach losers. Beat our rivals and we are in the national spotlight. I mean, forget about the Time Warner deal – imagine a deal with ESPN? Imagine stadium naming rights, interviews, name recognition, and riches beyond your wildest imagination...

Justice: But we don’t get paid tho...

Coach Sho’nuff: Who said that? It is a privilege to play this game. Listen, there ain’t gonna be no funny business in MY locker room. [Glaring at Amiri] If you EV-EN think about doing any funny business, any protestin’ out on the field – I’m gonna yank you so fast off that field and your playing days will be over. I will make sure that you will never play football EVER again, is that clear?

Football Team: Sho’nuff!

Coach Sho’nuff: I am not going to have “inmates running the prison.” You know why? Cuz I am the coach, I am the warden, I am yo master! Is that clear?

386 There has been an emphasis to turn high school athletics into an economic juggernaut similarly to the NFL and the NCAA. In 2012, the California Interscholastic Federation signed a 15-year/$8 million-dollar deal with Time Warner Cable to broadcast high school football games. Read more at: Mark Koba, “High School Sports Have Turned Into Big Business”, CNBC, updated December 11, 2012, https://www.cnbc.com/id/100001024.

387 Justice raises a point, but it is quickly silenced similarly to how Black athletes are silenced when it comes to social justice.

388 On page 36 of “Students Athletes Kneel to Level the Playing Field”, Jesse Hagopian noted that, “protests expose the great contradiction of a country that professes to be the freest on earth and yet has always brutalized Black people… team owners and school officials worry that protest will disrupt the branding of their sports and cut into the bottom line…protests threaten more than sensibilities, profit margins, but the very deceit which oppression and exploitation rest.” For further analysis see Jesse Hagopian, “Students Athletes Kneel to Level the Playing Field” in Teaching For Black Lives edited by Dyan Watson, Jesse Hagopian, and Wayne Au, (Milwaukee: Rethinking Schools, 2018), 32-38.

389 This was in reference to the late Houston Texans Owner Bob McNair’s comments in regard to NFL players protests during the national anthem. See further context at: Jason Reid, “Bob McNair shows that some owners have no idea where players are coming from”, Undefeated, October 28, 2017,
Football Team: Sho’nuff!

Coach Sho’nuff: Good!

Coach Sho’nuff: This game…“it’s about flesh and blood. It’s about a heart beat that beats strong. It’s about a passion. That is unyielding. And I want you men to know today. It is your time. It is your hour. It is your moment. Go take it.”

Football Team: Sho’nuff!

[The team cheers and begins to walk out of the locker room into the field tunnel. Amiri stays behind.]

Coach Sho’nuff: Amiri, come here. I want to talk to you.

[Amiri walks over.]

Amiri: Yeah, coach?

Coach Sho’nuff: You got NFL ambitions don’t ya? Just like your daddy?

Amiri: I do.

Coach Sho’nuff: Well, you got a lot of college scouts out there and they are all here for you. Think of some of the greats. Warren Moon, Randall Cunningham, Michael Vick, Donavon McNabb, Steve McNair, Cam Newton, Russell Wilson, Lamar Jackson, Patrick Mahomes. You can be the next one of them.

Amiri: [snarky] Or I can be the next me...

Coach Sho’nuff: Whoa, whoa, whoa. Just hear me out for a second. I mean c’mon. Amiri, you’re exceptional. You’re a star. You’re a stud. Let them see you shine. Show them what you can bring

theundefeated.com/features/nfl-houston-texans-bob-mcnair-shows-that-some-owners-have-no-idea-where-players-are-coming-from/.

390 Lyrics from The Roots song, “Stomp”. The lyrics are actually a sample from a pregame warmup speech by Georgia Tech Pastor Derrick Moore. To watch the full video, see CaptainAmerica2006, "Georgia Tech Pregame Speech before Notre Dame Game", YouTube, September 07, 2007, youtube.com/watch?time_continue=69&v=cK5cTFHc_9E.

391 I am writing into the future that Lamar Jackson and Patrick Mahomes will be great NFL quarterbacks. At the time of this writing both quarterbacks have spent less than two years in the league.
to the table. Don’t fumble the bag protesting; it ain’t worth it. Leave all that political bullshit at the door. This is all strictly business. Make your brand on the field tonight. 392

Amiri: It’s personal, it’s political and it’s far from bullshit. “There is too much oppression, too much pain, and too much hate throughout this country, and we can no longer afford to be silent.” 393

Coach Sho’nuff: We?

Amiri: Athletes! Black athletes!

Coach Sho’nuff: There ain’t no we in this business, son. You think that the world is gonna care after you pull this stunt? You’ll go back to being a nobody. Are you ready to give all this shit up? Are you ready to say no to the devil? Are you ready to go up against the machine? 394 You’ll lose.

Amiri: I’ll never lose if I am on the side of justice! To be silent is to make a choice and I refuse to be on that side. I refuse to give up my speech to make you comfortable. “There is no partial commitment to justice. You are either in or you’re out.” 395 Well, I’m in. “Black athletes cannot afford to be silent no more. This helmet and these pads won’t protect me from racism. “I can’t hide behind the glamour and glitz of football and fame. The reality is that I’m a Black man in America and I’m going to be a Black man in America long after [this game].” 396

392 Respectability politics force Black people to choose between integrity and money. Coach wants Amiri to choose between being a brand vs being a Black man. This is the same struggle that Colin Kaepernick had to choose between. Kneel for justice or keep quiet and be a marketable athlete.


395 Michael Bennett and Dave Zirin, *Things that Make White People Uncomfortable*, (Chicago: Haymarket Books), 203. Olympian John Carlos said this. Michael Bennett is in, so is Amiri.

396 Michael Bennett and Dave Zirin, *Things that Make White People Uncomfortable*, 22. To expand upon this, on page 27 of *The John Carlos Story*, John Carlos noted, “A lot of the [black] athletes thought that winning [Olympic] medals would supercede or protect them from racism. But even if you won a medal, it ain’t going to save your momma. It ain’t going to save your sister or children. It might give you fifteen minutes of fame, but what about the rest of your life?”
Coach Sho’nuff: Yeah and you’ll be another Black man in America with no future. Look, son, you’re being selfish. Are you ready to let down your whole team that worked their butts off to get here? Our sponsors? Our alumni? You gonna let down the whole school?

Amiri: Let down? Nah. “I don’t fear losing sponsors or friends or partners…When you step out like this, you can tell who your real friends are and who truly cares about you. If there are people in my life who don’t believe in justice and equality, it probably means that I shouldn’t even be messing with them, and that’s fine.”

Coach Sho’nuff: All this protesting all over one person?

Amiri: Yes.

Coach Sho’nuff: You think Michael give a damn if it happened to you? You think the world would?

Amiri: That’s not the point! If it can happen to Michael, it can happen to me – it can happen to any Black person. There is no exception to Black oppression. As a Black person, “I have to… stand for those that won’t stand for themselves…I have to [stand] for those that can’t stand for themselves.” Even if this fails, I am fighting for a better world. Even if this fails, Black youth will read about this one day…about how the tortoise took on the leopard.

[Coach grabs Amiri by the shoulder pads and gets into his face.]

Coach Sho’nuff: Enough of this protesting nonsense! “Playtime's over boy.” You better get out on that field and play! “When I say, who is the faster, you say Sho’nuff… who’s the master?”

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397 Michael Bennett and Dave Zirin, Things that Make White People Uncomfortable, 37.

398 John Carlos, The John Carlos Story, 111. Martin Luther King Jr. said to this John Carlos after Carlos asked MLK Jr. why he is going back to Memphis even though people are threatening his life.

399 This a parable that Chinua Achebe tells in Anthills of Savannah about a tortoise and a leopard. The leopard is out to kill the tortoise. The tortoise pleads with the leopard to give it a minute to mentally prepare for death. The leopard approves and then the tortoise starts to kick, rove, and throw dust in different directions. The leopard questions the actions of the tortoise and the tortoise replied: “Because even after I am dead I would want anyone passing by this spot to say, yes, a fellow and his match struggled here.” Amiri understands that the protest may not be effective, but people will look back and see that someone went against the machine. To read the parable see Chinua Achebe, “Views of Struggle”, in Anthills of Savannah (London: Penguin Classics, 2001) and Chinua Achebe, “Remembering Chinua Achebe And The Importance Of Struggle”, interview by Terry Gross, NPR, March 25, 2013, npr.org/2013/03/25/175259568/remembering-chinua-achebe-and-the-importance-of-struggle.

400 In Last Dragon Sho’nuff said this to Bruce Leroi as he was over with Bruce Leroi’s antics. Sho’nuff was ready to destroy him. If you have Netflix, seek until 1:32:26. The dialogue below mimics the fight sequence in The Last Dragon.
Coach Sho’nuff: “I’m going to ask you one more time. Who is the master…huh? Huh!

Coach Sho’nuff: Who’s the master? I can’t hear you, Amiri.

Coach Sho’nuff: Who is the master? I said who is the master? I can’t hear you. Who is the master?

[June words echo in Amiri’s mind: “Know the fire, but never forget how it burns.” Our collective rage and joy are critical to the struggle for justice. Let your rage build things and be a force for good.]

Coach Sho’nuff: [angry] Alright Amiri, who’s the one and only master?

Amiri: [confident] I AM.

[Amiri begins to radiate a yellow aura, a golden glow].

Amiri: I AM

[Amiri pushes his coach to the ground. Coach Sho’nuff is in shock that this has happened.]

Coach Sho’nuff: You—you’ve ga-ga-got the glow.402

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401 Ralph Ellison, *The Invisible Man*, (New York: Vintage, 1972), 249. Mary Rambo said this to the Invisible Man. It is serves as a reminder to anchor Black survival, Black joy, and Black freedom in the chaos of slavery and its afterlives.

402 According to Bruce Leroi’s master in *The Last Dragon*, “The Glow” is the upper level where the mind, body, and soul are one. The Glow is embracing all facets; vengeance, fear, and love as a way of life. The master is within. I argue that the “Glow” is the culmination between Brittney Cooper’s *Eloquent Rage* and Black Joy. Rage and joy work in tandem to provide clarity and purpose in life. If you have Netflix, watch *The Last Dragon*, from 0:03:31 – 0:05:31.
Amiri: The rage and joy within “tell us what kind of world we want to see, not just what kind of things we want to get rid of.”

“My purpose is justice. And the fight for justice brings me joy.”

You’re not gonna steal my joy. “You have forty-eight hours to take care of [this].”

Coach Sho’nuff: Is that a threat?

Amiri: “No, that’s not a threat, but a money-back guarantee. If you don’t handle it, I will.”

[Amiri puts on his helmet and walks out of the locker room towards the field tunnel. As he is walking out of the tunnel, he looks up at a sign that reads: “I know you have the skills. But do you have the guts?”]

[Meanwhile, in the stands, Amir and June find seating.]

Amir: Phew, Honey, it…has…been…a day.

June: You ain’t lying and it’s even over yet. Hey, you think that he’s gonna do it?

Amir: I dunno. But whatever happens, we got him.

June: [smiles] We got us.

[The high school band begins to play music]

Announcer: Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to tonight’s football game! Let’s give a big, loud welcome to the HOOOOOOOOOMMMMMMME team, the South San Fran Warr-iiii-orrrrrrssssss!


404 Brittney C. Cooper, Eloquent Rage: A Black Feminist Discovers Her Superpower, 273-74. As Cooper says, “May we have joy and let our rage be a force for good.”

405 John Carlos, The John Carlos Story, 64. That was Carlos’ favorite thing to say to someone when he demanded change. Amiri is evoking that same energy. Amiri is demanding that the coach do something to reconcile what has happened to Michael.

406 See note above.

407 Dave Zirin, “Jackie Robinson and the Politics of Stealing Home”, in What’s My Name Fool (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2005), 53. Brooklyn Dodgers general manager and part owner Branch Rickey asked that question to Jackie Robinson to see if he was willing to take the torment of racial abuse and “turn the other cheek.” Breaking the “color line” was not about skill but having the “guts” not to protest. For Amiri’s situation, I am flipping it. He has the skills, but does he have the “guts” to protest. Answer: Hell yes!

408 The mascot of the actual South San Francisco High School is an Indigenous man in a ceremonial headdress. I am not making this up. Google: South San Francisco High School.
[With the crowd roaring, the Warriors bust through the banner and take the field.]

Announcer: WIIIIIITTTTTTHHHH their coach Sho’nuff!

[The crowd chanting: Sho’nuff, Sho’nuff, Sho’nuff]

Announcer: Annnnnnnnd last but not least, the GOLLLLLLLDEEEEEEN BOOOOY, AHHH-MEEEERR-REEEE

[The crowd erupts chanting Amiri’s name. He runs out of the tunnel fully in uniform and is noticeably different. He’s got a radiant, golden glow to him. The crowd is staring in disbelief, assuming that it is part of the pre-game act.]

June: [nudging Amir] Do you see that?

Amir: He’s got “The Glow.” He’s gonna do it.

Announcer: Now please all rise for the National Anthem.

[The National Anthem begins to play. June and Amir do anything else besides reciting the anthem. Amiri walks from the sideline to the middle of the field. He takes off his helmet, exposing his afro and drops it carelessly on the ground. Amiri takes off his shoulder pads which exposes his black shirt in white lettering that reads: “Across cultures, darker people suffer the most, why?”409]

Amir: [nudging June] Ahhh shit, he’s doing it.

June: He surely is. “The Revolt of the Black Athlete.” There is no going back now.

Amir: Football is just a game, but family is forever [smiles].

June: Mhmmmm.

Amir: Aye, is that my t-shirt from out the closet?

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409 Andre 3000 wore this message on a jumpsuit during the Outkast 20th anniversary reunion tour. It is definitely a conversation starter. On the jumpsuit, Andre 3000 had a red price tag that read “sold.” 3000 is making the case of why anti-Blackness and Black suffering is a global phenomenon, because Black people are objects to be bought. In Amiri’s case, he is refusing to be a fetishized sports object. Integrity > money. For the imagery, check out Eric D. Berry, “Andre 3000: I Didn’t Want To Do Outkast Reunion Tour”, HipHopHollywood, December 14, 2014, https://www.hiphollywood.com/2014/12/andre-3000-i-didnt-want-to-do-reunion-tour/.
June: Well you weren’t gonna wear it? I let him borrow it. Now hush and watch our sun be great.

[As the anthem continues to play, Amiri kneels down in centerfield, doing the “fist of freedom.” Justice kneels beside Amiri and also puts his fist into the air. Though the demonstration was silent it was quite LOUD. As the silence wore on, more students began to kneel – from cheerleaders to teammates, to players on the opposing team. Students refused to play the game. A black student jumps into announcer’s booth, grabs the microphone and starts chanting.]

Student: Warriors, repeat after me. We shall!

Warriors: We shall.

Student: Overcome.

Warriors: Overcome.

Student: We shall.

Warriors: We shall.

Student: Overcome.

Warriors: Overcome.

Student: Deep down.

Warriors: Deep down.

Student: We do believe.

Warriors: We do believe.

Student: We shall.

Warriors: We shall.

Student: Overcome.

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410 Son is purposely misplaced for sun, as currently is the center of their universe and the center of this protest. He is also radiating because he got “The Glow.” He is the sun, son!

411 The fist of freedom is what the historic moment is called when John Carlos and Tommie Smith made the Black Power fist on the victory stand at the 1968 Summer Games in Mexico City.
Warriors: Overcome.
Student: Soul Power.
Warriors: Soul Power.
Student: Soul Power.
Warriors: Soul Power.
Student: I am.
Warriors: I am.
Student: Somebody.
Warriors: Somebody.
Student: Sock it to—

School administrators cut the power to the mic, and the student is wrestled to the ground by security. The crowd is silent yet again. Soon, the radiance of “The Glow” was eclipsed by white rage. Parents and fans began to throw anything that they could find at the players and the cheerleaders.

Blankface Fan: “Get that son of a bitch off the field right now.”
Blankface Parent: “Oh, you anti-American sons of bitches. We’re going to shove this shit down your throat!”

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413 Donald Trump said this during a rally for Alabama Senate Candidate Luther Strange. NFL protests were always about race and with a league that is comprised of majority Black players, this remark was about silencing Black players. To learn more, see Sean Illing, “Race and football: why NFL owners are so scared of Colin Kaepernick”, Vox, updated September 6, 2018, vox.com/2018/4/25/17257978/kaepernick-nfl-nike-protest-race-football.

414 John Carlos and David Zirin, The John Carlos Story, 170. This is what a fan in a stand yelled at John Carlos and Tommie Smith at the 1968 Olympic games. The protesting is the most the “American” thing that you can do.
Blankface Fan: Just up and play!\(^{415}\)

Blankface Fan: You “Niggers need to go back to Africa!”\(^{416}\)

Blankface Parent: “I can’t believe this is how you niggers treat us after we let you [play] in our games.”\(^{417}\)

*Pandemonium erupts on the field, as white folks could not embrace The Glow. People are scattering for safety. The police are called to secure the scene – that means it’s time to leave.*

Amir: This is America.

June: This still is America. Ima head back to the house and make sure everything is safe. Get our son and bring him back home, will ya?

Amir: Yeah. We’ll take the scenic route. I know we’ll have a lot to discuss on the car ride home. I’ll see you soon.

June: Okay. See you soon. Don’t tarry. I love you.

Amir: I love you too.

*June exits*

*Amir runs down onto the field and finds Amiri. He escorts him off the field safely. As they walk to the car, Amir puts his arm around Amiri to cheer him up. They get in the car, breathe and begin the long car ride home.*

*[Scene ends]*

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\(^{415}\) This reminded me when NBA Superstar Lebron James was told to “Shut up and dribble” by “journalist” Laura Loomer for “talking politics” during an interview. “Turning lemons into lemonade”, Lebron James took that rebuke and turned it into a documentary series called *Shut Up and Dribble* on Showtime. The three-part docuseries “three-part documentary series provides a powerful inside look at the changing role of athletes in our fraught cultural and political environment, through the lens of the NBA. For further information, read Melanie McFarland, ““Shut Up and Dribble” hits its shot: A powerful rebuttal to Laura Ingraham — and so much more”, *Salon*, November 4, 2018, salon.com/2018/11/04/shut-up-and-dribble-hits-its-shot-a-powerful-rebuttal-to-laura-ingraham-and-so-much-more/.


Aside [To the audience]: This act is dedicated to:

Muhammad Ali
Ricky Williams
Serena Williams
1973 Northern Illinois University Cheerleaders
Misty Copeland
Gabby Douglas
John Carlos
Tommie Smith
Colin Kaepernick
Jackie Robinson
2017 Kennesaw State Cheerleaders
2017 Howard Cheerleaders
Darius Moore
Gyree Durante
Kareem Abdul Jabar
Ethan Thomas
Toni Smith
Marshawn Lynch
Mahmoud Abdul-Rauf
Craig Hodges
Bill Russell
2016 Minnesota Lynx
2016 New York Liberty
2016 Indiana Fever
2016 Washington Mystics
2017 Los Angeles Spark
Megan Rapinoe
Lebron James
Dwayne Wade
Carmelo Anthony
2010 Phoenix Suns
2012 Miami Heat
Bruce Maxwell
J.T. Brown
Malcolm Jenkins
Eric Reid
Chris Long
Seth DeValve
Jim Brown
Etan Thomas
Tony McGee and The Black 14
Steph Curry
Andrew Hawkins
Paul Robeson
Kayla Morris
C. Vivian Stringer

…to all the other athletes and allies that are involved in the futurity of Black Lives.

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ACT VII: The Car Ride

I am forever indebted to George C. Wolfe’s *The Colored Museum* for pushing me to write my dissertation in a way that is rooted and legible for everyday Black folk.

Acknowledgment: An Ode to The Beautiful Struggle

This is the price that I pay for this music/And every word that I write is a testament to it/ And if I had to go back, I wouldn't change a thing/ Wouldn't re-cut it, re-edit, or change a frame/ Cause it would not be fair, to turn my back on the struggle/ When that exact same hustle got me here – Little Brother, “Beautiful Morning”

ACT VII, Scene I: The Aftermath

The Cast: Amir Gilmore and Amiri Gilmore

The Scene: Amir’s Car

The Music: Beautiful Morning (2005) by Little Brother

The Plot: After Amiri’s friend was racially profiled and beaten by a school resource officer, Amiri decided to protest the way he knew best. During a major high school football game, Amiri knelt amongst his teammates during the national anthem. He revealed a shirt that read, “Across Cultures Darker People Suffer the Most. Why?” Chaos ensued as fans threw bottles and hurled racial slurs. Amiri was escorted off the field by his father. Though Amiri is slightly disappointed in the outcome; he was invoking the Black Radical Tradition.

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419 Little Brother, “Beautiful Morning,” recorded 2005, Atlantic, track 2 on *The Minstrel Show*, 2005, MP3. Little Brother was a hip-hop group from Durham, North Carolina. Consisting of Phonte, Rapper Big Pooh, and 9th Wonder, the group was, arguably, the most prominent underground rap group to emerge in the first decade of the 21st century. Beautiful Morning is one of my favorite tracks of *The Minstrel Show*. It reminds me to never forget the struggle that we all endure.
Scene Opens in the High School parking lot. After the fiasco that ensued on the football field, Amir and Amiri quietly walk to the car. Amir and Amiri enter the car. Amir starts the car and begins to pull out of the parking spot. To break the tension, Amir turns on some music.

[Amir nervously skipping tracks]

Amiri: Dad...

[Amir still nervously skipping tracks]

Amiri: Dad...

[Amir still nervously skipping tracks]

Amiri: DAD! Let the damn music play sheesh!

Amir: Okay, okay! Sorry. I was just trying to fi—

Amiri: I know what you were trying to do. I just want to hear some music. You’re killing my vibe.

[Amir finally lets a song play. Welcome to the Minstrel Show by Little Brother starts playing]

Song: You are wa- U, Beeeep, Nnnnnnnnnnnn. U Black Niggas Network, Channel 94. Raleigh, Durham, Chapel Hill.

[*Artist YahZarah harmonizes for a bit over background music*]

YahZarah: We'd like to welcome you to everything there is to know/This is our life, this is our music, it's our Minstrel Show/ We'd like to welcome you to everything there is to know/This is our life, this is our music, it's our Minstrel Show.421

[Amiri confused and intrigued by the opening of the song, puts down his phone and turns to Amir]

Amiri: [sarcastically] So…this is what you listen to when no one is looking. Does mom know?

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421 Little Brother, “Welcome to the Minstrel Show.” Opening lyrics to the song.
Amir: Child, please. This is MUSSSACK! You know nothing about this. Also, I’d have you know that your mom is ample listener of Little Brother. The Minstrel Show was a staple back in ’05.

Amiri: Ain’t that what your first book is about? …A minstrel… show?

Amir: [sarcastically] Oh!... you remember something that I wrote? Is Amiri actually interested in his father’s passion? Oh, do tell…

Amiri: …

Amir: …

Amiri: [mumbles softly] … yeah

Amir: [pointing to this right ear] I’m sorry, I can’t hear you. I am a bit deaf in this ear…

Amiri: YES! Sheesh! I can see where I get my ego from.

Amir: [chokes throat in confidence] You dayyyum right!

Amiri: [rolls eyes] …so about this minstrel show. Like what is it?

Amir: Minstrels were performances that blurred the boundary of acceptable racial humor and demeaning racist stereotypes. White people would pretend to be Black by painting their face, Black. While in Blackface, performers would then portray Black people as lazy, stupid, carefree.⁴²²

Amiri: Sounds like a terrible idea…

Amir: Yeah it was, and it still is. It didn’t get much better when Black people donned Blackface as their contribution did little to alter the racist tradition of Black stereotypes that are ingrained into theater and society.⁴²³ Some of these stereotypes we still wrestle with til this day.

Amiri: So how did all this relate to Little Brother and your book?

Amir: Well Little Brother’s album was satirical as it aimed to illuminate the minstrel-like nature of certain aspects of hip-hop. The album was well-received by fans that liked it, but many critics hated the album because it was [grumbles] poorly promoted…⁴²⁴

⁴²² Ken Padgett, “History of Minstrel Shows,” http://black-face.com/minstrel-shows.htm. Blackface is something that does not seem to die. Politicians and higher education institutions are facing a reckoning with their usage of Blackface.

Amiri: What’s that?

Amir: It wasn’t well received because some folks felt that the album re-problematized Blackness. Others thought that it was “too intelligent.” Avoiding stereotypes in America is like walking a tight rope.

Amiri: So, what did your book say?

Amir: Well, The Death of the Minstrel Show called for the end of a world that bounded Blackness, but especially to stereotypes. Blackness became tied to criminality because of stereotypes that were manufactured by misconceptions and prejudices. Words like “brute, thug, suspect” keep stereotypes alive and further criminalize Black youth, especially Black males.

Amiri: [inquisitively] So, you wanted to end the world?

Amir: Yes and no. I wanted to end the world that bounded Blackness to racist stereotypes. You see Amiri, the principle that I believe in about Blackness is that it is grounded on being groundless.

Amiri: Sounds like academic talk…

Amir: Blackness is uncontainable because it’s so fluid. How many Black people are there in America?

Amiri: Millions!

Amir: That is how many versions of Blackness there are. Imagine Blackness as a giant improvisation, a jam session. Sounds are moving all over the place. Some sounds blur; some sounds rupture to create new sounds. Regardless you will need new ways to listening and

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understanding the music, you heard? Blackness is like music, constantly changing, so it is pretty silly to reduce it and make it static.

Amiri: Oh, I see. But why do people do it anyway?

Amir: That is the million-dollar question. One reason is for control. It is easier to police something when you can identify what it is.

Amiri: So, what is your next book about? You know the one that you cannot stop talking about…

Amir: [boastfully] Oh you mean In Search of Black Boy Joy?

Amiri: Yeah that!

Amir: I mean, I guess I can give you a snippet of the book…since you’re my son and all…

Amiri: [rolls eyes] Annoying… [motions to Amir to get on with it]

Amir: So, the book is a manifesto for Black males to get free from an anti-Black society. In the book, I try to answer these questions: “What does the future hold for Black children? Why are schools a site of Black suffering? Why are the childhoods of Black children “socially unimaginable”? Why are Black people and Blackness problematized? How and why are the spaces that Black people occupy haunted?

Amiri: Haunted. Like ghosts?

Amir: Duh! What other kind of haunting is there?

[Amiri rolls his eyes]

Amir: You know Grandma would say something if you kept rolling your eyes, they gonna get stuck like that.

Amiri: Well Grandma is not here right now…soo! [sucks teeth]

Amir: Well, I’m going to let her know the next time I talk to her…

Amiri: No wait! I was just kidding…

Amir: Well alright…now, where were we?

Amiri: You were talking about hauntings

Amir: Yeah…hauntings. So, a haunting is an event where a person sees ghosts. So Black people in America are haunted because of how whiteness and white supremacy operate.
Amiri: Huh? Dear academic Yoda… break it down for me.

Amir: Oh, sorry, this is what happens when you spend too much time in academia! Alright, let me break it down for you using football terms. You’re a quarterback, right?

Amiri: Yes dad.

Amir: …and your job is to get your team into the end zone to score. Your job is about assessing, breaking down coverages, and keeping your teammates tackle-free.

Amiri: Yeah.

Amir: So that is my job as an educator. It is about reading the coverages that prevent Black people from reaching the end zone. I want Black people to reach the end zone. The end zone can be jobs, wealth, health, education, and housing …the list is endless.

Amiri: mhhhhmmm.

Amir: I want Black people to have the same access getting to the end zone as white people. Some white people wish to stop that from happening. White supremacy is the attempt to permanently secure the endzone for white people – specifically white men. Imagine white supremacy as the most robust defense that you face as a quarterback because of all the strategies they will employ to get you. White supremacy’s job is never to allow you to have access to the end zone. Hell, it would be happy if you never made it onto the field. White supremacy continues to morph as time progresses, so I study how daily social practices aim to keep you off the field and out of the end zone. These practices controlled by white people aim to keep “Black people subordinated to a designated place.”

Like all defenses, its power lies in analyzing, surveilling, and restricting your mobility. If a defense knows how to restrict how your body moves and operates in certain spaces, that defense has significant power over you. White supremacy’s effectiveness is using various forms of surveillance to control and restrict your mobility.

Amiri: 4/5 out the analogy…by the way [smiles].

Amir: Now you know defenses has multiple ways to get to you. They can hurry a quarterback to mess up your timing with your receivers. They can hit you to remind you that they are there.

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428 Like the panopticon.

They can knock you out to permanently remove you from the game or end your career. Amiri, why do defenses do all that?

Amiri: To terrorize you…

Amir: To…

Amiri: To haunt you…to make you see…

Amir & Amiri: Ghosts!

Amir: Exactly. White supremacy’s job is to terrorize you enough to make you question what you see. To distort your reality. White supremacy is magical in a sense because its power lies in its complexity of moving in-between the visible and the invisible; illusion and reality.

Amiri: Kind of like gaslighting.

Amir: Yes, I like where you are going with that. The stability of white supremacy is based on its elusive power within oppressive structures. White supremacy is baked into systematic policing procedures such as stop and frisk, educational policies like zero tolerance, colorblindness, multicultural education, educational research such as the achievement gap, deficit thinking, and even normal particular social practices like microaggressions. You get it now? Because white supremacy is fluid, it’s omnipresent – so it kind of pops up on you like a ghost. Kinda hard to report a ghost, ain’t it?

Amiri: Yeah, so what the hell do we do?

Amir: Well, we run. We run away from the spaces that haunt us.

Amir: Like fugitives?

Amir: [tongue in cheek] Like fugitive slaves that run away from massa’. Money and material objects won’t save us from the oppression of white supremacy. It won’t lead us to freedom; we gotta find a new strategy, a new roadmap to freedom. Kanye West said: “Even if you in a Benz, you still a nigga in a coupe…” Hell, not even the respectability from my Ph.D. can save me

430 Like extralegal violence, such as chokeholds and police shootings.

431 There needs to be more focus on the fluidity of power in regard to white supremacy. Parents do not teach children how power, especially white power operates in this country.

432 The fluidity of white supremacy will have question what you are experiencing is real.

433 White supremacy is embedded into multiple structures, which creates interlocking oppression.

434 Kanye West and Syleena Johnson, “All Falls Down,” recorded 2005, Def Jam, track 4 on The College Dropout, 2005, CD. This lyric is repeated throughout the entirety of the play.
from the permanence of racism. As the old saying goes: “What does a white man call a Black man with a Ph.D.”

[Amir looks dead-pan at Amiri]

Amiri: What?

Amir: “A nigger with a Ph.D.” You get what I am saying, Amiri? White supremacy does not care what accolades you achieve, what kind of car you drive, or how well-mannered you become. It only cares about putting you in place. That’s why all those folks in the stands were mad. You were uppity. You were refusing your place, your role. Their reaction to you, was to put you back in your place. Their job was to break you, to wound your “Black spirit but you remained resilient.” This is why I study joy…

Amiri: Why?

Amir: Black Boy Joy is about this “spiritual freedom” despite the terribleness that we face. Reverend Sharpton said, “We took the worst crap in the history of the world and made it anyway. It’s a great feeling: we are not victims, we’re victors.” It is about “this self-commitment to an exalted state.” Black Joy in an anti-Black society is a love supreme. As a Black male in America, I am reminded that I do not deserve joy – that my Black body is “illegible.” I am reminded that “the trauma and the legacy of slavery will devour my soul.”


436 George Yancy, “The Ugly Truth of Being a Black Professor in America.”


440 Reference to John Coltrane’s 1965 album, A Love Supreme. The album was a spiritual declaration to this faith in God through jazz. The album is a part of that spiritual quest to find God despite the personal troubles that you may face.


Amiri: Okay, but why the focus on Black boys? Why isn’t it Black Male Joy?

Amir: Good question! You never hear about joyful Black males, because joy is something that is stolen at the time of boyhood because Black boyhood is “socially unimagined and unimaginable.” Black boyhoods are denied because Black boys are not seen as children or humans, but as a dehumanized Other – something undeserving of any recognition. Black boys are never entirely given the spaces to be where they can explore their masculinity, sexuality, spirituality, and identity without limits. It is like when your teacher disciplined you by sending you to the principal’s office because she didn’t understand the game that you and your friends were playing.

Amiri: Oh yeahh! I remember that. She nearly got me sent to ISS [shaking his head].

Amir: Well not every adolescent is so lucky. Tamir Rice was 12 years old when he was shot and killed by police for playing with a toy gun in his local park. Cops thought Rice was a grown man with a gun.

Amiri: How the hell did they mistake a 12-year-old boy as a man?

Amir: Because under white supremacy, there is no real place for Black boyhood. “The paradox of Black boys’ experiences in school and society is that mainstream perceptions of them move between making them babies and making them men.” Black boys go from basically infants, regarded as adorable to adolescent troublemakers. In essence, by as early as second or third grade, Black boys are criminalized and are constructed as a problem and threat in need of control.

Amiri: So it’s a miracle that we are still alive. It is a miracle to escape our childhoods.

Amir: In a way, yes. There is a reason why ‘Ye said on We Don’t Care, “We wasn't s'posed to make it past 25/Joke's on you, we still alive.” There is a reason why On Mortal Man, Kendrick

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445 Michael J. Dumas and Joseph Derrick Nelson, 27.


Lamar spoke to 2Pac and he said back to him, “In this country a black man only have like 5 years we can exhibit maximum strength, and that’s right now while you a teenager, while you still strong or while you still wanna lift weights, while you still wanna shoot back. Cause once you turn 30 it’s like they take the heart and soul out of a man, out of a black man in this country. And you don’t wanna fight no more…”

Amiri: … “And if you don’t believe me you can look around, you don’t see no loud mouth 30-year old muthafuckas”

Amir: Exac—how do you know about that song?

Amiri: Mom and I listen to Kendrick Lamar all the time. Mortal Man is one of her favorite songs. Is that how you feel sometimes? That America has taken the heart and soul out of you.

Amir: …

Amiri: …

Amir: [Reluctantly answers] I do. These structures are designed to wound, to take the heart and soul out of Black people. I remember going through my Ph.D. program having those feelings. The feeling of trying to save the world with the time that I had left, because we ain’t supposed to be alive after 30. I had this fear of living beyond 30 and being powerless.

Amiri: I would have never guessed that, coming from a man like you.

Amir: I know. You’d be surprised about the stuff that haunts me till this day…

Amiri: Humph. [Pensive] So how did you even theorize Black Boy Joy?

Amir: Well, this also might sound far-fetched, but as I got older, I started to think about my life and having children. I began to think about the type of life that I wanted for my kids and it couldn’t be the childhood that I already had. We needed a “radical (re)imagination of Black boyhoods,” that also included Black gender-nonconforming, Black gay, Black queer, and Black questioning boys. All Black males needed a boyhood [Amir and Amiri turn towards the audience and yell MESSAGE].

448 Kanye West, “We Don’t Care,” recorded 2005, Def Jam, track 1 on The College Dropout, 2005, CD.

449 Kendrick Lamar, “Mortal Man,” recorded 2015, TDE, track 16 on To Pimp A Butterfly, 2015, MP3. Gotta be one of my favorite songs, hands down. As I approach 30, I definitely feel what Pac is talking about. You feel the mortality of your life and the fragility of everything surrounding you. It puts you in your place. You don’t want to do too much or you’ll fear breaking something.

450 Kendrick Lamar, “Mortal Man.” Amiri is finishing the lyrics.

451 Michael J. Dumas and Joseph Derrick Nelson, 39.
Amiri: I hear that…

Amir: Black Boy Joy is the refusal to the way that things have been, the refusal to the way that things are now, and the consent to how things will be. Black Boy Joy is revolutionary because creates spaces for Black boyhoods. Black Boy Joy is the “consent not to be a single being.” It is the “irreducibility of Blackness.” It is the negotiation within the double bind of negation and affirmation. Between the margins, between the borders of refusal and consent, within this “break,” is where Black joy lies. Black Boy Joy is irreducible because it is fluid – always in a state of deconstruction and reconstruction, that keeps Black identities and Black Boy Joy free from the control of whiteness and white supremacy. Does that make sense?

Amiri: I think so…Okay, so how does this tie into music?

Amir: Music is all around us through sound. It tells a story, it tells (his)story, (her)story, their(story), our story. Music has always archived our history, our pain, our joy, our refusal of whiteness and white supremacy. Black cultural movements like the Harlem Renaissance, Negritude, Black Power, and the Black Arts Movement affirmed Black humanity by foregrounding the feltsounds of our voices.

Amiri: Feltsound?

Amir: Everyday Black expression creates multilayered frequencies of sound that is on a spectrum. That is feltsound. Feltsounds are sounds can be heard and be felt, as it touches and moves people. Feltsounds are nearly-silent to loud sounds that hum and vibrate off Black people into the cosmos.

Amiri: That’s dope! You got an example?


Siri: Certainly.

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452 This is a nod to Fred Moten’s “Consent Not To Being A Single Being Trilogy.” These works include, Black and Blur, Stolen Life, and The Universal Machine. The phrase speaks to the fluidity of Blackness and Black social life.


454 Tina Campt, Listening to Images (Durham, Duke University Press, 2017), 11-2. While Campt calls it “felt sound”, I call it “feltsound” because you cannot separate the feeling from sound and the sound from feeling. They are in relation to each other.

455 Abbey Lincoln, ”Triptych: Prayer/Protest/Peace,” by Max Roach's Freedom Now Suite, recorded 1960, Candid Records, track 3 on We Insist!, 1960. This song always hits me in a different way, each time that I listen to the song.
Amir: Now Amiri, close your eyes and really listen to the sounds that Lincoln is trying to make. What is the message that she is trying to convey without audible words? How do these sounds make you feel?

Amiri: Got it.

Aside: Dear Audience, please partake in this listening experience as well. Follow along as Amir and Amiri listen to the sweet sounds of protest music.

[Song ends, the car is silent as the feltsounds linger in the cabin of the car.]

Amiri: Wow. I don’t even know where to begin.

Amir: I know. Every time I listen to the song, I have to sit for a while and bear witness to the sounds that Lincoln was making.

Amiri: So much anger…hurt…despair, but a beauty, a joy. All from one woman.

Amir: Exactly! Nothing about that was artificial. It was spoken from her soul, straight to ours. Her sounds were trying to convey a message…a message about the Black experience in America. Her message is encoded in refusal. Her message is not for everyone to understand, but it was made for Black people to feel and understand. Does that make sense?

Amiri: Yeah.

Amir: It’s intense but so are our lives. Tying this back to Black Boys…Black Boy Joy is a social and spiritual practice of writing ourselves and our future into existence. It is an encoded message that lays out how to give Black males the future that they want now. It is all about listening to the feltsounds of Black expressions.

Amiri: Okay, so what does Black Boy Joy sound like to you?

Amir: To me? Umm, Black Boy Joy is everywhere Black males are. It is about listening to sounds that Black males make. Some are silent; some are loud. Black Boy Joy is an endless study of finding what activities or actions give us joy. Whether it be reading a book, chanting Black Lives Matter, playing the saxophone, rapping, reciting poetry…or kneeling in front of a crowd of white people, it is all music. The sounds not only emerge from your mouth but from

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456 Because of dissertation formatting, I cannot hyperlink music. The link is here: https://open.spotify.com/track/4BuA25YQoG85Hdn0ZjJlak8?si=KfJaxfcdTwm8LSdFZ-pgQQ.

457 If the music holds memories and stories, what does it mean to bear witness to the sounds that it makes?
your whole body. Amiri, “we are merely whistles, the wind goes through us. We make the
noise.”

[Amiri nods his head]

Amir: I know a perfect example of what Black Boy Joy sounds like!

Amiri: Oh yeah? What is it?

Amir: You got chops. You should know a little something about Pharoah Sanders?

Amiri: Who?

Amir. Pharoah Sanders! One of the most distinctive tenor saxophone players. In. The. World. Ever. What the hell is your saxophone instructor teaching you?

[Amiri shrugs his shoulders]

Amir: Hey Siri!

Siri: Yes, Amir?

Amir: Remind me to fire Amiri’s saxophone instructor tomorrow at 9 am.

Siri: Certainly.

Amiri: Well I am pretty sure that after today, no one will want to be associated with me.

Amir: Boy…. hush. Now, where was I? Oh yes, Pharoah Sanders. His song You’ve Got To Have Freedom perfectly shows what Black Boy Joy sounds like. Hey Siri, play You’ve Got To Have Freedom by Pharoah Sanders.

Siri: On it.

[You’ve Got To Have Freedom by Pharoah Sanders starts playing]
Aside: Dear Audience, please partake in this learning experience as well.461 Follow along as Amir talks to Amiri.

[As Amir and Amiri are listening to the song]

Amir: Listen to the chords that the musicians have created within the first 30 seconds, but listen to the sounds that Sanders is making. Once you have a virtual memory of the song, let me know.

Amiri: Ight, I got it, dad.

[Amir skips the song ahead to 6:00.] Amir: Alright Amiri, now listen to the sounds that Sanders is making with his saxophone.

[Amiri listens to the next 25 seconds of the song].

Amiri: What. Was. That?

Amir: FREEDOM! SPIRITUAL EXALTATION! A LOVE SUPREME! Son that is Black Boy Joy. Sanders is carrying the sounds of the saxophone to the heavens. It sounds like everything is breaking around the saxophone – the air, the notes, hell even the saxophone itself. It feels like Sanders is trying to break the saxophone to produce something new, something unheard, something unbounded.

Amiri: Freedom…

Amir: Yeah, sweet freedom. Sanders is defying the conventional sounds of the saxophone to make something new and be something new. What those 25 seconds are, is something that words cannot describe or possess. It is merely in a different state. Black Boy Joy lies in the break.462

Amiri: The break?

Amir: The break is the rupture of social relations or social hierarchies. By ending or refusing that specific relation – like Sanders refusing to play the same chord from the beginning of the piece, you are generating something new.

461 Because of dissertation formatting, I cannot hyperlink the song. It is here: https://open.spotify.com/track/1rD9sQqlSlzvLHpueW4El?si=1Ks6Q9BUrtCRkwiOfgpMmg.

462 A nod to Fred Moten’s In The Break. The book connects the Black Radical Tradition to the jazz and Black social life. Moten explores the links between aurality of words and jazz. It is within the break of the music, sounds, words, and Black life does something new emerge. For further context, read Fred Moten, In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003).
Amiri: Black Boy Joy emerges out of that break. Black Boy Joy defies the conventions of what Black maleness should be and does its own thing. Black Boy Joy is about creating new sounds of Blackness to express ourselves. It is a daily practice of recreating ourselves to be new again. That is what makes Blackness so powerful, its infinite ability to never be contained.

Amiri: I think that I get it now.

Amir: Good. It is our job to listen to those sounds and try to make meaning of those sounds. What are those sounds trying to convey? What stories are those sounds trying to tell us?

Amiri: So, what felt sounds did you hear during my protest? What images did I create?

Amir: I heard you. I heard your pain, I felt your anger. I felt your courageous spirit after seeing you kneel in front of all those white people.

Amiri: You did?

Amir: Hell yeah! Boy, you had “The Glow.” You told those people that a limit has been reached. That you will go no further…that we will continue this way no longer. You told them that you ain’t with the shits anymore…

Amiri: [laughing] Dad…

Amir: Amiri what you did was powerful. Refusal is the “first right” and it is a game-changing kind of refusal in that “it signals the refusal of the choices as offered.” You refused to entertain them. You refused to just shut up and play. You radically disrupted their image of what a Black football player should be…and it was great! The best part of living in the digital age is that I can replay that moment forever. OOOOuuuuWEEEEe, dem white folks were mad…they were BIG mad.

Amiri & Amir: [laughing]

Amir: You reminded me of the other Black athletes that did what you did. [sarcasm implied] “Those troublemakers.”

Amiri: Like who?

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463 The Glow is a phenomenon where rage and joy meet. For further information, please refer back to ACT VI: The Kneel.


465 For a suggestive list of Black athletes that protested, see ACT: The Kneel.
Amir: “Float Like A Butterfly, Sting Like A Bee.” Muhammad Ali helped revolutionize how Black athletes should utilize their political voice in sports. I mean Ali was charismatic and outspoken on Black injustices in America. He had a swagger that can never be copied.

Amiri: So, what did he do?

Amir: Well instead of fighting in the Vietnam War because he was drafted, he refused to serve in the United State Army.

Amiri: He what!? 

Amir: That’s right. He said no, to Uncle Sam. He was a conscientious objector! Ali had a problem with Black people going overseas to kill the Vietnamese because they never did anything to Black people. Ali was trying to expose the hypocrisy of the government because America still denied Black people our unamiable rights. The government did not take too kindly to that. They stripped Ali of his accolades, banned him from boxing for three years, and tried to put him in prison…for FIVE YEARS.

[Amiri motioning with his hands for Amir to continue]

Amir: Despite all that. Ali made a comeback, whooped ass, and proved to the world, why he was the Greatest!

Amiri: Who else?

Amir: Does John Carlos, Tommie Smith and the fists of freedom ring a bell?

Amiri: I think I read about them in a history textbook…

Amir: Well let me fill you in about those two. It was the 1968 Summer Olympics in Mexico City and U.S. Olympians Tommie Smith and John Carlos just won in the 200-meter sprint – Smith won gold and Carlos won bronze. Instead of taking a knee like Kaepernick and other football players did 50 years later, Smith and Carlos rose their fist in the air as a silent protest.

Amiri: Woah…like a Black Power fist?


Amir: Yeah. It became one of the most iconic sports image in the 20th century and still reverberates today. I mean their protest was carefully planned. As they walked to the podium, they wore Black socks and no shoes to protest poverty. They wore beads and a scarf to protest lynching.\textsuperscript{469} They risked it all. It was indeed a moment of truth for them and the world.

Amiri: I take it that it didn’t go over smoothly?

Amir: Oh hell no. They were booed at the stadium and were ordered to leave. Once they returned to the United States, both Carlos and Smith were barred from the track team. They received death threats for merely illuminating the injustices that Black people faced in America. How wild is that? Sounds remarkably similar to you.

Amiri: That is pretty wild. Did Black athletes protest when you were young?

Amir: [side eye glances toward Amiri] You better watch it...this old man still got the juice.

Amiri: Surreee dad.

Amir: To answer your question, yes. Umm... look at Hall of Fame NBA Superstar Lebron James. He was actively affirming that Black Lives Matter and calling out the horrors of police brutality. He told some reporter on Faux News that he wouldn’t just shut up and play.\textsuperscript{470} He had a voice and exercised it every day. He also called President Hot Cheeto a bum!\textsuperscript{471}

Amiri: Who?

Amir: President 45. You know the one after Obama.

Amiri: Ohhhhhh...that one. The one thou shalt be named.

Amir: Yeah. Don’t forget about Colin Kaepernick. He made the 49ers relevant in the 2010s, even took them to the Super Bowl. He spoke about against police brutality and kneeled during the national anthem...kind of like...\textsuperscript{469}

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\textsuperscript{470} I am parodying Fox News. Faux News is faker than Fox News. James was told to “shut up and dribble” after he spoke out against injustice. James turned lemons to lemonades by turning that phrase into a ShowTime documentary. For further context, google: “Lebron James Shut and Dribble.”
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\end{flushright}
Amiri: Me?

Amir: Yeah, like you. He protested for two whole seasons, and the league was never the same.

Amiri: Is that a good thing or a bad thing?

Amir: Well…perspective is everything, ain’t it? The league lost millions of dollars through lost ad revenue. Fans, Black and white, boycotted the league. League owners were in a tight position of whom to support: their employees who are majority Black, or their wallets.

Amiri: So what was the outcome?

Amir: Well you are still playing football, so the league didn’t implode, but it evidently felt like it was. What did it cause? A conversation about police brutality, white supremacy, and the Black experience. It made the NFL listen to their Black players, acknowledge that they had a voice and that it mattered. It made them acknowledge that Black Lives Matter and have always mattered.

Amiri: So, what happened to Kaepernick?

Amir: I knew you would ask that. Well, he sacrificed his career to make a stand for Black people against injustices. Despite his resume, no one signed Kaep because that’s how whiteness works. He was blackballed from the league. That didn’t stop him from still making an impact within Black communities. He did social activism with Black communities and other communities of color. He still had a career, just not the one that you may expect.472

Amiri: So, what do you think is going to happen to me?

Amir: Well you probably pissed off some people, but you started a conversation, which is essential. You are taking part in a tradition that is over 500 years old.

Amiri: Which tradition is that?

Amir: The Black Radical Tradition. It is the tradition of evoking refusal against whiteness and white supremacy. From slave rebellions aboard ships to the destruction of massa’s crops, to refusing to give up a seat on a bus, Amiri. You are a part of that unified tradition. It takes vision, courage, and sacrifice to make a bold statement like that. Michael would be honored by what you did today. Change is not about you, the individual, but it’s about us, the collective. It is about

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472 When I originally wrote this, Kaepernick was suing the NFL for collusion. As of February 2019, he dismissed with the suit for an undisclosed amount. For more information, see "Colin Kaepernick, Eric Reid Settle Grievances against NFL," ESPN, last modified February 16, 2019, accessed February 25, 2019, http://www.espn.com/nfl/story/_/id/26004715/colin-kaepernick-eric-reid-settle-grievance-case-nfl. Who knows how the rest of Kaepernick’s career goes, but I do wish him well.
reminding people about the need for equity in an inequitable society. It is about alerting people to the about the dangers of living in anti-Black society. We are the canary in the coal mine.\footnote{Pedro Noguera, The Trouble with Black Boys: And Other Reflections on Race, Equity, and the Future of Public Education, (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2009), xxv.}

Amiri: [rolls eyes] Yeah…

Amir: I’m serious. The canary has an important role. The distress of the canary is the first sign of danger that threatens us all. – and when I mean us, I am talking about Black folk. Black folks have always dictated how humanity will proceed forward because we are denied our humanity. “We see, feel, and experience humanity from a different vantage point. We hear humanity in a different sound.”\footnote{"Dr. Lewis Gordon: Afropessimism, Africana Philosophy and Theory," interview by Jared Ball and Lewis R. Gordon, YouTube, published March 2, 2018, accessed February 25, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FrIhjbNanH0.} James Baldwin once said, “The future of the Negro in this country…is precisely as bright or dark as the future of the country.”\footnote{Raoul Peck, “The Negro And The American Promise-1963-,” in I am Not Your Negro, (New York: Vintage Books, 2017), 170.} You want to examine “American progress,” look no further than the Black experience in America.

Amiri: Humph…

Amir: An example of this during my adolescence was in wake of Hurricane Katrina in 2005. NBC had this telethon for Hurricane Katrina to raise money and awareness and allthat.\footnote{You can watch the clip on Shockroc1’s YouTube Channel. Or google search “George Bush Doesn’t Care About Black People.”} Mike Myers is on stage with Jesus Walks Kanye West – not Kimye Kanye, or Yeezus Kanye…Jesus Walks Kanye.

Amiri: There’s levels to Kanye?

Amir: Ohhh yeah, he was a different Kanye. He was raw! That rawness came from his laser focus on the social life of Black folks. Anyway, Myers is reading from the teleprompter as most actors do. Kanye’s speech was messy and unrehersed. He spoke about grief; he spoke about the plight of Black people in Louisiana. Black people in Louisiana were scavenging for food but were being reported as “looters” and “criminals.” He said, “I hate the way they portray us in the media” – the they are white people.\footnote{Morgan Parker, “I Think About This a Lot: Kanye West at the Katrina Telethon,” The Cut, last modified March 12, 2018, accessed February 25, 2019, https://www.thecut.com/2018/03/i-think-about-this-a-lot-kanye-west-at-the-katrina-telethon.html.}

Amiri: Dad, I know.
Amir: Kanye spoke about being a complicit race-blind, corporatized Black celebrity. The moment of fuckery or clarity, depending on how you see it is when Mike Myers is speaking and off script Kanye blurts out: “George Bush doesn’t care about Black people.”

[Amiri raises his eyebrows in disbelief]

Amir: Amiri, the shit was wild. It was funny because so many white people were so uncomfortable about hearing the truth in America. I could replay that moment over and over again because where was the lie? It was a moment of rupture and refusal as Kanye disturbed the natural order of race relations, as he spoke the truth into mainstream existence.

Amiri: I am assuming that did not go over well, either?

Amir: SHHHHHHHHHHHHEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEETTTTTTTT…hell no. White folks were mad as hell. In the eyes of white folks, Kanye was painted as a villain, as an antagonist, but to Black folks, Kanye was a hero. You know why? Because he was the canary in the coal mine. Sheeetttt, Kanye is still receiving the dividends off that moment.

Amiri: I hear that, but it does it matter?

Amir: Of course, it does! It has always mattered and will continue to do so. History always remembers. James Baldwin eloquently said: “People are trapped in history and history is trapped in them.” Sure, some people will remember you negatively, but your name will always matter to the people that needed you. At the biggest stage of your life, you used your platform to amplify the plight of others to the world. I mean at the end of the day Amiri, you got to ask yourself, why action? Why did you act?

Amiri: Because it was the right thing to do.

Amir: Exactly! You acted because of commitment. Commitment is a political action. I mean why did Martin Luther King Jr. act? Why did Malcolm X? Why did Rosa Parks? Why did our ancestors act despite knowing the odds were against them? Why did Black people write about their experience in the world without knowing that people would read it? It all comes back to commitment. You are committed to doing the right thing. You are committed to showing the world that Black Lives have and continue to matter. You are committed to fighting against the

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478 Morgan Parker, “I Think About This a Lot: Kanye West at the Katrina Telethon.”

479 I assume that it will run out one day…probably not. He also made “Jesus Walks.”

impositions of whiteness and white supremacy.\footnote{“Dr. Lewis Gordon: Afropessimism, Africana Philosophy and Theory”} Maybe all of this is hard to take today because it is all still fresh, but one day you are going to be old like me and be thankful that you did it.

[Amiri smiles]

Amir: I am not going to lie, it takes guts to do what you did. If you asked me at 17 to do what you did, I would have said Hell to the no. I am proud of you. In a moment of terribleness, there was joy.

Amiri: [smiling] Dad, I am not going to lie, that is pretty damn cool.

Amir: I know. That’s why I am writing about it [a smirk appears across Amir’s face].

Amiri: [sighs]. You cannot even take a compliment in stride, can you? How does mom even deal with you?

Amir: At this point, God only knows. I mean, it is me that we are talking about.

[The car is quiet for a minute.]

Amir: Son, I just want to let you know, that you are one of my greatest joys. I know that I don’t tell you enough. Whatever path you choose in life, I will always be there to support you. You’re my son; you’re my pride.

Amiri: Thanks, Dad…I love you.

Amir: I love you too, son.

[As the car turns onto the street where they live, there is a sea of white lights from the news vans in front of the Gilmore residence].

Amir: Shhhhhhhheeeet, they are here.

Amiri: Who?

Amir: [sarcastically] My favorite people. News reporters. Now remember Amiri, you don’t have to say anything to them. They are just here to sensationalize this and get their ratings up.

Amiri: Dad, I know.

[As Amir pulls into the driveway, news reporters scramble to do what they get paid to do:(1) take a colorblind approach of sucking the living the soul out of Black people and (2) problematizing Blackness and Black people. Amir and Amiri step out of the car.]
Reporters: AMIR! AMIRI! AMIR! DR. GILMORE! WE GOT QUESTIONS


Blankface Reporter #1: Amiri, if there is anything that you want to tell the world, what would it be?

[The front yard falls silent, as the reporters are anxiously awaiting his reply]

Amiri: That Black Lives Matter and will always matter!

[Amiri, mimicking John Carlos, places his Black fist into the sky. The crowd of reporters mutter to themselves.]

Blankface Reporter #2: What do you say to all the colleges that are scouting you? Aren’t you hurting your value by protesting?

[Once again, the front yard falls quiet.]

Amiri: I will say this once and never again. This is my refusal to the way that things have been. This is my refusal to the way that things are now. This is my consent to how things will be. BLACK BOYS ARE NOT FOR SALE! Any college that wants me, is going have to take all of me. I am somebody. Now if you excuse, I have homework to do.

Blankface Reporters: AMIRI! AMIRI! WE HAVE MORE QUESTIONS!

Amir: I don’t care. [Amiri goes inside, exits the scene].

Blankface Reporters: AMIR! AMIR! DR. GILMORE! WE GOT SOME QUESTIONS!

Amir: [under this breath] somethings never change…

Blankface Reporter #1: Any comment on what your son had to say?

Amir: Besides a father being proud of his son, no…not really. What you saw is a testimony to the fact Amiri is not an object. He is refusing to abide by the rules that police his Blackness. I hope his kneel alerts people that America is still broken.482

Blankface Reporter #2: Did you have any problem with your son kneeling?

482 The kneel is the whistle. Amiri is sounding the alarm.
Amir: No, why would I? Now what I do have a problem with is anti-Black why violence. This country is governed by bad faith and antiblackness. Institutions of bad faith such as our government, our educational systems, our economic systems, scientific systems are rooted in identifying human beings and convincing others that they are not human beings. Our institutions are built off of lies. Institutionalized = institutions lie. They lie and claim that Black people are not humans and Black people have always fought against that narrative for over 500 years.

Blankface Reporter #2: So, to reiterate, you have no problems with your son kneeling?

Amir: Hell no! I have a problem with you asking the same question again. What you are not going to do is problematize my son because he knelt for justice. The question that I ask you and the rest of y’all out here is, what is so wrong about my son kneeling for justice? Is it because he is trying to expose what y’all are trying to hide? I just wish that America as a country would admit that it has a “love-hate relationship with Black males.”

Blankface Reporters: …

Amir: God forbid Black folks command enough social power to challenge white authority. Y’all had no problem with Amiri when he was quietly scoring touchdowns and generating fame for the South San Fran, but as soon as he addresses racial injustice, it is a problem. You see the problem is that America loves Black culture but hates Black people. Write on that, folks. If white people could buy Blackness from EBay…Amazon…or Walmart, y’all would. To echo Amiri’s words, BLACK BOYS ARE NOT FOR SALE.

Blankface Reporter # 3: Are you worried that Amiri’s kneeling will hurt his brand?

[Amir stares motherfuckerly at the reporter]

Amir: His brand? Sir, which agency are you from?

Blankface Reporter #3: Faux News.

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483 Please refer to track 2 on The Black Boy Joy Manifesto, if you forgot.

484 Dr. Lewis Gordon: Afropessimism, Africana Philosophy and Theory.”


Amir: I am not surprised, because you are not listening to me. But why should I be surprised, because when does America ever listen to Black people? What is the definition of madness? I could answer and say it is being Black in America, but who would believe me?

Blankface Reporter #3: …sooooo, his brand?

Amir: Again, Amiri doesn’t have a brand, “he cannot be bought; he is not a slave.”487 Amiri’s Blackness is not for sale. Amiri is not a trading card, a consumable good or an empty vessel; he is a person. He is a human being with a full range of emotions. Michael was beaten by a police officer, and you are outside of my house asking how kneeling affects his brand? Why aren’t you outside asking questions to the police officer that beat Michael.

Blankface Reporter # 4: Will Amiri kneel for Black on Black crime?

[Amir stares motherfuckerly at the reporter.]

Amir: Next question.

Blankface Reporter #5: Amir! Amir!

Amir: [evidently annoyed] WHAT!

Blankface Reporter #6: Do Black Lives Matter? If, so how much?

Amir: Let me rephrase the question. To whom do Black lives matter? They matter to me. Black lives have always mattered. They mattered yesterday, they matter today, and they will matter tomorrow. They do not matter to y’all with the line of questioning that I had to endure. You will not further criminalize our Black boy. BLACK BOYS ARE NOT FOR SALE! Goodnight and get the hell off my property, colonizers.

[Amir goes inside, the scene ends]

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Act VII, Scene II: The Mask

The Cast: Amiri Gilmore, June Gilmore, Amir Gilmore, Jetson

The Scene: The Gilmore residence

The Music: None.

The Plot: As Amir is outside talking to reporters, June is catching up with Amiri about the day. June speaks to Amiri about the mask that Black people have to wear to survive.

[Door opens, Amiri enters. As the door closes behind Amiri, you can hear Amir’s voice, “BLACK BOYS ARE NOT FOR SALE!”]

[Jetson runs to the door barking]

Jetson: [barking]

Amiri: Hey Jetson, hey Papa! How was your day?

[Jetson excitedly turns over for some hard-earned belly rubs; Jetson is blissed out].

June: [Excitedly] My number one son is home!

Amiri: Mommie, I am your only son.

June: Yeah, that you know about!

Amiri: [rolls eyes]

June: What I tell you about rolling those eyes? Do I have to call your grandmother?

Amiri: What is with y’all trying to call grandma? I don’t want no smoke. You see all the stuff that is happening outside?

June: Yeah, your father is out giving those reporters a good talking to…

Amiri: Yeah, mommie, why aren’t you out there?

June: Honey, I don’t want no parts of that [chuckles]. Your father is better than me with that nonsense. He always feels the need to teach people. I ain’t with that bullshit. I always refuse to speak to the press.488 Enough about that…how are you? How are you feeling about today?

Amiri: It has been a lot. I’m feeling a lot better after the car ride with dad. I’m glad that we got to talk. We bonded over music and Black advocacy.

June: Oh? Well, that’s good…you know he loves you…

Amiri: Yeah, I know…it was interesting. For the first time in a while, it seems like he opened up to me.

488 June is about refusing the advancement settler colonial knowledge.
June: Haha! I know what you mean. Your father can be very guarded, and, in this world, he has to be.

Amiri: What do you mean?

June: Amiri, your father wears a mask outside to protect himself from the horrors of white supremacy. It ain’t easy being Black in America, tuh! Being Black in America, you are “always in a state of discomfort, as you worry that some racist cop or some ‘domestic terrorist’ is gonna blow you away.” That is just a typical day…shiiiiitttttee…We are so used to being on a permanent alert. It didn’t change in the 1960s with the Civil Rights Movement, it didn’t change after 9/11 when the towers fell, it didn’t change when we had a Black President, and it has not changed now. You can’t reveal too much of yourself because being Black can get you killed. Wearing the mask helps mitigate that, you understand?

Amiri: [Nods his head]

June: Wearing the mask is all about Black survival! I would rather Amir wear the mask and live, then die out on the street. Your dignity may be shaken, but you are alive.

Amiri: But how does that change anything?

June: Life is complicated, Amiri. Some days it doesn’t. Some days it is just about making it home alive. We can’t have a Black Liberation project if none of us are alive. So, we do a delicate dance every day in America of just trying to survive and fighting for freedom. Every day, all three of us leave this house with a target on our backs. I mean driving while Black is a real thing! So, “every day when we leave for work, we kiss each other goodbye and remind ourselves who we need to come home to. I remind him to drive under the speed limit, signal at every turn, don’t reach or dig for anything, and keep the license on the dash. The last thing and the most important thing that I tell him is to wear the mask that grins and lies.”

Amiri: So, when does he take it off?

489 The mask refers to the mask in Paul Laurence Dunbar’s poem “We Wear The Mask.” To read the poem, see Paul Laurence Dunbar, “We Wear The Mask,” Poetry Foundation, https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44203/we-wear-the-mask

490 After a while, it puts you on a certain kind of edge.


492 So real, that I have an act named after it. Please see ACT III: Driving While Black (D.W.B.).

June: Whenever white supremacy takes a coffee break. It is hard to take it off or know when to take it off when you actively fighting for your rights and the freedoms of your people. Activism isn’t always glamorous. Combating racism daily, wears on you, ya know? Racism takes the life out of you; it affects your health. If white supremacy doesn’t kill out in the street, it will kill you slowly with its toxicity. We need to focus on our health, as much as our fight for Black Liberation, cuz you can’t do shit when you’re dead Amiri.

Amiri: So, what do we do?

June: We need to create spaces of hope and healing, baby. Racism is toxic. Think about all the things that you are exposed to. That stuff is terrible for your physical and emotional health. If you are to take down the system, we have to take care of ourselves until then. I’ve known so many friends and activists that left this earth too soon because they did not have the space to heal.494 We put our bodies on the line every day because our communities are suffering.495 Babies are slicing off parts of their humanity to live in the world. They are living dead.

Amiri: So how does this tie into Dad’s Black Boy Joy?

June: I don’t want to toot his horn because we know how his ego is, but his scholarship is necessary nowadays. Joy is radical, joy is powerful, joy is healing. Somedays, it is all you need to get through your day.

Amiri: I hear that.

[Door opens, enters an angry Amir. Pissed from answering the questions of those reporters].

June: We’ll chat later…

[Jetson hears Amir enter and runs to him]

[Amir’s mood instantly changes]

Amir: Hi Papa! How was your day? [Amir begins to rub Jetson’s belly]

June: Amiri, look at the power of joy. He walked in angry and is now a joyous man.

Amir: I mean yeah, that’s my dog, dawg!496

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494 Shawn A. Ginwright, Hope and healing in urban education: How urban activists and teachers are reclaiming matters of the heart, New York: Routledge, 2016, 2.

495 Shawn A. Ginwright, Hope and healing in urban education: How urban activists and teachers are reclaiming matters of the heart, 145.

496 Rest in peace to the Sun Dog, Jet.
Amiri: Alright y’all, I am going to leave you two lovebirds to it. I have some homework to catch up on.

Amir: You goddayum right! I want nothing but A’s from my number son!

Amiri: I am your only son!

Amir: That you know about! [laughing]

Amiri: I am your only son!

Amir: Tha that you know about! [laughing]

Amiri exits, leaves scene

June: So how was that situation outside?

Amir: Oh, you know, bullshit as usual. How was the situation inside?

June: He seemed okay. A little shaken, but I think he will rebound with a great dad [smiles].

Amir: Oh yeah?

June: Yeah! Amir, talk to him more. He’s yearning for it.

Amir: I will, I know the best way. Don’t worry; I’ll handle it [smiles]. I am going to head upstairs to handle some stuff.

June: Okay, I’ll wait up for you [winks].

Amir: Sounds good!

June and Amir kiss and Amir heads upstairs

[Amir exits, the scene ends]

ACT VIII: In Tension (Intention)

Acknowledgment: The Breaker of Sounds, Pharoah Sanders

I am forever indebted to Pharoah Sanders’ (1969) The Creator Has A Master Plan, which is one of my favorite songs that give me joy. This song got me through the tensions of writing the dissertation. It is also the song that reminds me of the Sun Dog, Jet. Music evokes memory.
There is a place where love forever shines  
And rainbows are the shadows of a presence so divine  
And the glow of that love lights the heavens above  
And it's free, can't you see, come with me  

The creator has a master plan  
Peace and happiness for every man  
The creator has a working plan  
Peace and happiness for every man  
The creator makes but one demand  
Happiness through all the land⁴⁹⁷  

Act VII: In Tension (Intention)  

The Cast: Amir Gilmore and Jetson  

The Scene: Amir’s Office  

The Plot: After speaking to June downstairs, Amir heads upstairs for some therapeutic writing. There are some things that he feels he must write into existence.  

The Music: The Creator Has A Master Plan  

[Scene opens with Amir walking up the stairs to the office, Jetson quickly following behind him. Amir opens the door, and Jetson stops in the doorway]  

Amir: Well c’mon now, you are either in or out?  

[Jetson slowly slants his head to the side as if he is thinking]  

Amir: What will it be?  
Jetson: …  

Amir: Alright, let’s get to work, eh?  

[Amir starts to write]  

Amir: I can’t write like this! I need some music. Hey Siri?  

Siri: Yes, Amir?  

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⁴⁹⁷ Pharoah Sanders and Leon Thomas, “The Creator Has A Master Plan,” recorded February 19, 1969, RCA, track 1 on Karma, 1969, MP3. These are some of the lyrics to the song. Mediating on them gives me joy.
Amir: Play *The Creator Has A Master Plan* by Pharoah Sanders. ⁴⁹⁸

Siri: You got it, Amir.

Amir: You damn skippy Siri!

Aside: Dear Audience, please partake in this learning experience as well. ⁴⁹⁹ Follow along as Amir journeys through himself to speak to these three tensions.

*[The Creator Has a Master Plan* starts playing]*

Dear Academia,

“The only possible relationship to the university today is a criminal one.” ⁵⁰⁰

Historically, “social science disciplines have their origins in studying ‘the other.’” ⁵⁰¹

“Research is a dirty word among many marginalized communities, as they have become overstudied Others.” ⁵⁰² Scholarly research is haunted by subjecting people to violence and genocide. ⁵⁰³ The history of qualitative research has been examined to reveal the field has been a racist tool to produce and dispossess the other. ⁵⁰⁴ Despite the best efforts of myself and others, the field of research has not changed. Hear me out, will you?

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⁴⁹⁸ Pharoah Sanders and Leon Thomas, “The Creator Has A Master Plan.”

⁴⁹⁹ Because of how dissertations are formatted, I cannot hyperlink. Here is the link: https://open.spotify.com/track/0VtW9kU97Le5SQ0ml4nFzO?si=pdcOxg6gQFy9SyJuEvMmCw.

⁵⁰⁰ Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study* (Wivenhoe: Minor Compositions, 2013), 42.


⁵⁰⁴ Eve Tuck, Mistinguette Smith, Allison M. Guess, Tavia Benjamin, and Brian K. Jones, 53.
How did we get to this point? I remember when I thought critical ethnography would save the world. I quickly realized that I was wrong.\textsuperscript{505} Over 20 years ago, I accepted the invitation into the Black Study to explore the futurity of Black Boys. I knew about the horrors of social science research as Dubois’ question haunted and continues to haunt academic research on Black boys.\textsuperscript{506} Due to this Negrophobia, Blackness and particularly Black males, have been and continue to be constructed as a problem in the social sciences and American society at-large. The dominant racial discourses found in the social sciences have resulted in researchers, typically white, attempting to “fix” the problem. As a result, Black males are questioned, surveilled, criminalized, and some lose their lives.\textsuperscript{507} The concept of Black Boy Joy is not even possible in the American social science research imaginary because of this continuing racial discrimination. The dysfunction of Black males continues to be overstudied, while understanding Black Boy Joy is neglected. To counter this, I refused to participate in anti-Black pathology. It is a “refusal to tell the internal story of their struggle, but it consents to tell the story of their constraint.”\textsuperscript{508} I decided to only write about the goodness of Black boys. My project

\textsuperscript{505} For more information on Critical Ethnography see, D. Soyini Madison, *Critical Ethnography: Method, Ethics, and Performance*, (Los Angeles: Sage, 2004) and Jim Thomas, *Doing Critical Ethnography*, (Newbury park: Sage, 1993). Critical ethnography is an ethnography with a political purpose that is oriented towards freedom and equity, emancipation and democratic goals. Critical ethnography challenges discourses from “master narratives” and utilizes the “counter-narrative” of the oppressed. It refuses the “status quo” and the research paradigm of “what is” and shifts the paradigm to “what could be.” I originally wanted to do a study on a group of Black males and find out what gave them joy in the world and find out what denied them joy. I struggled with the idea, that these narratives would be trapped within the university.

\textsuperscript{506} Dubois’ question of “what does it mean to be a problem?”


sought the reclamation of Black Boy Joy, through the stories, voices, and identities of Black males.

As an Edtiste, my research has always been deeply vested in addressing and improving the lives of Black males within the educational system. My writings on Black Boy Joy sought to understand the identities and lived experiences of Black males, the joy they possessed, and to comprehend why they were denied joy. Constrained by discourses surrounding race, gender, sexuality, behavior, ability, and educational achievement, Black males are maligned as “problems.” Despite the claim that Americans live in a meritocratic society, there are ways in which educational institutions have advanced “colorblind” theories and approaches to educational achievement, rather than equitable, socially just approaches that it sought to cultivate. My writings focused on shifting the “academic gaze” from Black males onto the systems, policies, and barriers that create these inequities.

I had theorized as a young man that this line of inquiry will serve as a guide to help researchers “break” the process of turning people into objects, their stories into grand claims and observe how the spaces surrounding them objectify them. These methods were created to illuminate the complexities of Black male lives without victimizing, problematizing, and commodifying their lived experience. In my naivety, I

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509 For writings on being an Edtiste, see track 3 and 4 of The Black Boy Manifesto.

510 See ACT II: “School As A Site For Suffering”

511 Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, "R-Words: Refusing Research."
thought that if social science research could better understand: (1) the importance of joy in a Black males’ life and (2) the systems, the social practices, and the inherent assumptions that subjugate their livelihood, we could create more socio-justice-orientated opportunities for Black males and community building. This is what I get for having faith within social science.\footnote{I speak about good faith, bad faith, and social science trappings in track 1 in the Black Boy Manifesto.}

There is a tension with my relationship to academia and scholarly research. Currently, I ask myself, what has changed? Twenty years later, no action. You hoard all this information and do nothing with it. You feast upon pain narratives like a snack. Social science researchers still publish volumes on the pathology of Black males. How is this still possible? Gluttony. You cannot stop eating, can you? Researchers still objectify Black males and problematize them by making “grand claims” about their identity and their communities, without exploring systemic social conditions. This is not research; this is theft. This is more years of deficit theories and fixing Blackness. Well, there isn’t a damn thing wrong with Blackness or Black people. These grand claims have real-world implications as Black males are denied joy through persistent questioning, surveillance, criminalization, and extralegal violence. Is there any project that you built on goodness rather than pathology? “Research is still a dirty word.” I spend every day, trying to purify, but your taint is so deep.

As a man of color, “the university is not a place of refuge or enlightenment.”\footnote{Harney and Moten, 26.} It is not a safe space, but more of a holding pattern that allows me and others to engage in a
Black study. My relationship with academia has been tumultuous, as it stems from the precarity and marginality of my positions as a graduate student, a teaching assistant, and as a professor. Within academia, I occupy a space of belonging and exclusion, as I am a professor amongst your ranks, but I feel that the research I do makes me invisible. The academy has deepened my political consciousness through my reading of Critical Race Theory, Post-Colonial Theory, Black Feminist Thought and others, but I am in the ironic position of teaching students to think critically about structures of power while being trapped in the very structures that continue to disempower, oppresses, and exploits others. It sounds like a divine comedy.514

Within your space, my work and I reside at a “place within a place;” a place that locates and dislocates ourselves. I and others like myself reside at the “Undercommons.”515 The Undercommons is a conceptual space, as well as a relationship that I seek to practice. It is not sufficient to be the “critical” academic within the ivory tower because that alone does not challenge or reject the institutional structures. The undercommons are different because its aim is not to critique the institution but to refuse it altogether. The “undercommoners” refuse and reject the hierarchical relationship within the institution and aim to reconfigure it. It is a refusal of the terms and conditions that are offered as our only options or choices.516

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514 Or perhaps a sad tragic play.
515 Harney and Moten, 156.
516 Jack Halberstam, “The Wild Beyond: With and For The Undercommons,” in The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study by Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, (Wivenhoe: Minor Compositions, 2013), 6. Halberstam noted that, “We cannot be satisfied with the recognition and acknowledgement generated by the very
To question this site of “enlightenment” and desire to tear down the structures that uphold it makes me a criminal. It is okay, you won’t miss me, nor do I intend to stay. I am a member of the fugitive academic community. As fugitives, we do not seek to return to the places which we came from, nor do we seek to stay in the same place for long because I am not free. I take what I can get in these spaces and continue to move along, on this path towards Black liberation. The Undercommons is a space within a space that provides me the opportunity to engage in a Black study so that we can liberate ourselves. I am so tired of waiting for you to liberate the world. The jig is up! We see through your ruse, and we are coming for you.

I think about the double entendre of criminality vis-à-vis the university. It means that: (a) the anti-Black research produced at the University is criminal and (b) the refusal to produce such research makes me a criminal under the governance of the University. The University is criminal because it fails to acknowledge how its knowledge production is a site of dispossession. Universities are at the center of dispossession. “Damage narratives are the only stories told about me and my people, unless I am the one doing the telling”¹⁵¹⁷ I am the invisible man because my research is not damaged-centered. I think about all the people that made full careers on telling damaged-centered stories about Black people. Think about all racist ideas that were normalized through the institution:

(1) Black masculinity and criminality are synonymous\textsuperscript{518}, (2) teaching Black males is a daunting challenge,\textsuperscript{519} (3) that racism, especially anti-Back racism is no longer the norm in schools,\textsuperscript{520} (4) that Black males are disinterested in education, and they are misguided in their pursuit of careers in hip hop and professional sports.\textsuperscript{521} I literally could continue forever, as it seems to be a “rap sheet” with no immediate end. It is madness, but who would listen to the faint whispers of a ghost?\textsuperscript{522}

It is criminal how academic institutions are in denial about the social reproduction of Black pathology. Shame on you. Shame on me for nearly being a participant in the exploitation of pain narratives and Black pathology within academia. Refusal is a daily practice of saying no to engaging in the colonial, ethnographic, and missionary gazes.\textsuperscript{523} I will never feed the beast of Settler Colonialism. Academia needs a Truth and Reconciliation committee, so that people can speak to the horrors of social science research. Your power is in forgetting, our power is in haunting, as ghosts never forget. Acknowledge the debt.


\textsuperscript{522} I am the invisible man.

\textsuperscript{523} Tina M. Campt, \textit{Listening to Images} (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017). Refusal is not a one-time thing. Refusal needs to be a part of the mundane to be effective.
Acknowledge your failure of not making Black Boy Joy a legible research project. Black Boy Joy does not exist in social science literature and continues to be an unlikelihood within social science imaginary because researchers do not know how to listen to the “felt sounds” that Black males produce. The sounds that Black males create are “perishable” as they exist in the now and they are not something that cannot be “captured” later. Our sounds are not made to be captured, but to be heard, to be embodied. Attune your ears to hear our sounds. As Gil-Scott Heron said, “The revolution will not be televised…There will be no re-run brothers/The revolution will be live.”

Researchers may hear the sounds, but hearing and listening are not mutually exclusive. Hearing is more of a passive activity, while listening is an active and focused activity, as you are in relation to the sounds of the words. Social science researchers, who are predominately white, only hear the sounds because they are not engaged within a Black study. A Black study requires the researcher to be actively engaged; to be in relationship to their work and the people centered within that work. As a result, a majority of the research that could be studied goes largely unheard.

This failure to not listen to the “sounds” of Black people, falls squarely upon the fact that white America is not interested in understanding Black social life. If white people had to

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525 Amiri Baraka, Stewart Smith, and Peter Thorn, “An Interview With LeRoi Jones,” in Conversations with Amiri Baraka, edited by Charlie Reilly, by Amiri Baraka, (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1994), 12-19. On page 15-6 in An Interview With LeRoi Jones, as Baraka said, “No, no, no - it's not a question of that. You see, the white man tries to separate art from social protest simply because he has no real interest in hearing the protest. . . Literature has to deal with men, with men's lives, with men's souls, with the way men live and are forced to live. These are crucial questions...it's a question of who is doing the looking.
listen to the sounds of Black people, they would be forced to confront their racism and name their part in shaping civil society into what it is. It is much easier not to listen, to pathologize Black people and affix the white gaze on them.\textsuperscript{526} Black Boy Joy will continue to be understudied because it specifically focuses on the joys of Blackness and does not seek to pathologize Blackness as social science literature has done. You do not need to fix Blackness or Black people because there is no inherent problem with Blackness or Black people to fix. Black Boy Joy is not interested in “selling” or fetishizing “pain narratives” for the academy, nor is it a further attempt to problematize Black males. It is the refusal to the ways that things have been by rejecting the white gaze; rupturing the Black-Object paradigm. It is about listening to and embracing the social and spiritual practice of Black Boy Joy and how systems of oppression within civil society deny that joy. If social science researchers studied Black Boy Joy at the same pace that they problematize Blackness and Black people, we would start to begin the “end of the world.”

The jig is up! We have seen through your ruse, and we are coming for you. I am a future ghost in the making, ready to haunt. Now, what are the felt sounds that ghosts make?

Sincerely an Angry & Tired Black Man,
Amir

\textit{[After writing a letter to the academy, Amir gets up, rubs Jetson’s belly and gets back to writing the second letter. This letter is addressed to this son, Amiri. It reads:]}
Dear Amiri,

Welcome to the ensemble. Welcome to the Black Radical Tradition. Welcome to the Revolutionary Theater.

Black Boy Joy is the desire to be seen, to be visible and to be heard. In claiming joy for ourselves, we create a rupture. Within that break, we create all new possibilities for ourselves. Black Boy Joy is the daily reminder that we exist—that Black boys are still here and still alive. We have to listen to the felt sounds of their music—of their poetic sounds. Remember Amiri; Blackness is “action engaged to enlarge capacity, confirm presence, to dare.”\footnote{Thomas DeFrantz and Anita Gonzalez, \textit{Black Performance Theory} (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 5.} Dare to act, be actionable against the system, and revel in your active refusal of it. There is nothing wrong with Black people; we happen to live in a world that has constructed us as a problem. We are not the negative things that they say we are. Every day, we must fight against the impositions of whiteness and white supremacy. We as a people must change this society or build a new one from the ground up. To fix yourself or to want to be fixed by society, puts you \textit{out of} relation with the world. It is a \textit{social death} because you are not acting; you are complying with the status quo. Be cognizant of those who comply and do not act against injustice. To know that there is a problem puts you \textit{into} relation with the world. It creates a call of action to do something – to fix the relationships surrounding power. Never forget that! Always be actionable!
The power of Black Boy Joy is in its reflexivity. Reflexivity is the process of reflecting critically on yourself, as an instrument.\textsuperscript{528} It is like when I mentioned in the car ride with us being the whistles and the air of social change moving through us. Amiri, not only are we bringing ourselves into the ensemble, but we are creating ourselves within the ensemble. Our identity is always in a state of flux. That might scare you and others, but I love it. Fluidity is power. You are always shaping, diverging, and emerging different parts of yourself. I am never one identity at a time, but multiple.\textsuperscript{529} That is unbounded Blackness; it is primordial space.

Our reflexivity is based on an aesthetic of unbounded Blackness. Some scholars call this \textit{aesthetic reflectivity}. Unbounded Blackness is all about constructing new ways of living and engaging within a society. It is about creating (re)visions and new visions of the world that we want to live in. That is activism. “Activism stands proudly on the shoulders of movements that came before us, to make our voices loud and clear, so they can no longer ignore us.”\textsuperscript{530} The Black Radical Tradition is a social movement that contains social movements of refusal. Refusal of the way things have been, refusal to how things are, and consent to how things will be. All Black social movements, regardless if it was the Harlem Renaissance, the Black Power movement, the Civil Rights


\textsuperscript{529} The multiplicity of Blackness.

Movement, the Black Arts movement, or even Black Lives Matter, were grounded on being ungrounded. What I am saying, is that these movements were about freedom; they were about being unbound. Every movement sought to create a world, where Black people were liberated. What we see now is that “social movements are furthering their autonomy being leaderless, decentralized, non-hierarchical.” There are some tensions surrounding that. Tensions are vital to the movements and life because they can never be truly resolved, but they reveal the limits of the individual and the collective. On this journey of freedom and social justice, tensions reveal where you might need to turn away from, where you need to break through, or where you may need help (It is always okay to ask for help). “Living with these tensions are a fundamental part of political activism; celebrate them, as they are a source of creativity” in Black spaces. Being aesthetically reflexive is necessary to be able to think through the tensions. It refuses the external gaze of whiteness and white supremacy allowing us to think within.

**Embrace the Tensions**

You’re probably thinking, “what the hell are these tensions?” I got you covered. The three tensions within social movements are autonomy vs. the collective; operationalization vs. institutionalization of the principles; and evasion of vs. subjection to mainstream authorities. It sounds like a lot because it is. These are the tensions that you will take on and think through as you study within the Black Radical Tradition.

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The first tension is between autonomy and collective activism. “How do you balance the wants and needs of yourself, the individual, with the wants and needs of the collective movement? Can you be autonomous in solidarity?” To answer that question, look no further than to jazz musicians. Jazz musicians have been finding that balance between the individual and the collective for nearly a century. Snooty academics like myself call this “relational autonomy.” It is about how the individual and collective complement each other in a relationship. As my Ph.D. advisor would say, “it is about being in relation.”

Relational autonomy is decentered space that allows for communication and coordination between ourselves and others to ensure that everyone participates – and I mean everyone. Look at the Avant-Garde era of jazz. The Avant-Garde era was experimental because it rejected centralization and white-imposed identifications. It combined unprecedented individual freedom and expression with group coherence. There was this intimate balance, this synergy often found in African music, between the playing interests of the individual artist and the musical group. The interests of the individual and the group are in constant relation with each other, thus producing unconventional chords and sounds in the music. This is evident in Ornette Coleman’s (1961) album Free Jazz. The album is 36 minutes of improvisation that was recorded in two “takes” and is heard exactly as it was performed in the studio. In Free Jazz, all

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533 Ann Deslandes and Debra King, 315.

534 I do not know how many times I’ve heard that phrase from my advisor, but now it is a part of my life.

535 Listen to it here: open.spotify.com/album/7zE4RadAWa8lYSvAZkGtFw.

536 There is something very powerful about that. The integrity of the song is preserved by allowing it to remain as is. I wish that this was something that academics explored with their writing. Let your writing be messy! Embrace the joy of the mess.
the musicians are playing together simultaneously, while listening closely to one another for flow and direction. They operate in this double bind as they are playing “collectively apart.” This style of music is about collectivity while also giving musicians the freedom to express themselves as individual artists. Musicians could play a tune, all starting on different notes, primarily playing in different keys, yet be playing in unison. The individual artist is embraced as each artist shapes their version of the melody, from one note to the next. The collective is reflected in their doing different versions of the same thing at the same time, albeit maybe loosely in time together if not in lockstep. Musicians were highly reflexive because they had to balance their freedom with the freedom of the group. Musicians, like social movements, understood that freedom is an idea that all must partake in. No one is free if they all are not free. It takes a tremendous level of thought, communication, and collaboration to make a space participatory and democratic. Jazz musicians had mastered this tension well before academics discovered it.

The second tension that social movement struggled with finding was “the balance between having principles and avoiding imposing them.”537 Despite people wanting freedom, no one wants structurelessness. Sometimes, people want guiding principles. This is a sticking point for a lot of social movements as this tension relates to monitoring its members. Once you monitor folks, you are merely fighting within your movement. This tension raised the questions: Who has the power? Who decides that the principles are? Who enforces them? Whose voices do we include and whose voices do we exclude?

537 Ann Deslandes and Debra King, 317.
Whose bodies are deemed valuable and whose bodies are deemed disposable? Whose voices are pushed to the center and whose gets pushed to the margin? This tension creates a power imbalance between individuals and the collective. A great example is Blackness and the policing of Blackness. Who is Black? Can Blackness be revoked? How does one embody Blackness? Amiri, you can spend an eternity arguing those questions, or you can do what I did two decades ago and dive into Blackness and devote yourself to an endless study. Blackness is not a state of being, as being has created binaries that oppress others. Blackness is thingliness; Blackness is nothing but infinite space. A space that makes you, to unmake you, to only remake you again. You can be anything in this space and many times during the day is where I situate my mind, body, and soul. In this space, I can re-write myself every day. I can keep the parts of me that I like and write off the parts that I do not like. Blackness is a reflexive space to dwell in. Because Blackness is not something, it is nothing; therefore it is everything. Blackness is the gumbo that grandma makes! It is a collection of everything because there is room for everything and everyone. Get you some of this gumbo!

The last tension is a crucial one. It is the evasion of vs. subjection to mainstream authorities. Pigs. Feds. Five-0. 12. Flat Foot. Vics. The man. There are so many names for government authorities because of their permanence and pervasiveness in society. As a Black man in America, ignoring this tension can be life or death. We live in an anti-Black society where Black death is commonplace; never forget that. A black protest is bound to ruffle the feathers of white people because Black people are stepping out of our

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538 For further context, please refer to track 5 on “Black Boys Will Never Be For Sale.”
This movement, “this stepping out of place is illegal, which subjects us to physical assault, arrest, court proceedings, criminal records, imprisonment and sometimes death.” Moreover, “activists are actively targeted by the state through laws that increasingly designate their activities as criminal and then through police intervention in their activities, which, in many cases, has arguably constituted blatant harassment.”

The other option is for us to evade the authorities and become fugitives. In this novel *Fire Next Time*, Baldwin poses the question, “Do I really want to be integrated into a burning house?” Fugitivity is the breaking of social relations; it is jumping into that fire. It lets the government know that you cannot continue down this path and we must go a different way. “Fugitivity is not freedom, or not yet.” We have to stay alive long enough to liberate ourselves. Staying alive is the main objective. While we might think of fugitivity of criminals literally on the run, “fugitivity is practiced every day through refusal.”

Ask yourself every day how you can refuse the system, while not being subjected to it. One thing that I want emphasis on regarding evasion and subjection is health. It is not talked about enough. There is much focus on the critical work that activists do, but there

539 We are stepping out of a place we never asked to be. We are occupying space, making ourselves large, bumping into and rubbing elbows with people that wish to keep us down.

540 Ann Deslandes and Debra King, 318.

541 Ann Deslandes and Debra King, 318.


is not enough focus on the health of the people that put their bodies on the line daily. Regardless if you evade or are subject to government authorities, it takes a toll on you. Remember to love yourself, care for yourself, and take time to heal.

**The Social & Spiritual Practice of I am**

Amiri, writing yourself into existence is a powerful *thang!* It is a daily spiritual and social practice of becoming. Our, writing is neither fixed or neutral, as its value comes directly from the people to the people. Black people have been writing ourselves into existence for generations through our music. Our music is an archive of our collective experience across the diaspora. Think of "Black music as a “trans-historical racial project.” If you ever get lost, always make sure that you return back to the essence – to the music. Our lives, our stories, our dreams are in the music. You see Amiri, Black art, “Black music is one of the most experimental ways of knowing and writing.” “Blackness is an avant-garde thing… and avant-garde is a Black thing.” "Black experimental writing is the art of saying the impossible." It is a practice of inquiry, discovery, and analysis. Writing as performance is “simply beyond telling about the social world, it is making those worlds your home place.” Not only are you engaging, but you are striving to *become*. Amiri Baraka and other Black Arts activists

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548 Anthony Reed, 2.

like him believed in making the world into a Black poem. They were literally (re)shaping the world in their image, but also living in it. They are doing as they are performing. If the world is a Black poem, that means that Black people are poets and that we are performing our poetry everywhere. Everyone we go, everywhere we are, Black people are performing within a theater of revolution and Black Liberation. From white suburbia to the hood, Black people are living in a world that they are constantly writing themselves into. “Our visual performance became another form of narration – of storytelling.” Our stories were a rallying cry, a call to action, an assemble to the ensemble of Black Liberation. Our storied performances have always pushed the boundaries to make sure that our lives were included in the futurity of this country. That is powerful, but it is important to recognize that we must constantly do it. After today, it is visible to see what we are up against as a people. We live in a world that was shaped by anti-Black racism and bad faith. We live in a society that is against us – a society that does not want us to exist. We must always write ourselves into existence because what other choice do we have as a people? There will always be white people that want ensure that these structures exist for the next 500 years; therefore we must always act – we must be actionable.


551 For further context, see track 2 on the Black Boy Joy Manifesto.

It’s okay to be upset by the way things are in America because WE ARE HUMAN. The problem lies with white society which treats us other than human. “The greatest trick ever pulled was convincing the world that Black people were inferior to white people and that we are not humans.” As a result, the progress in America is slow, deliberate, and painful but what should we expect from a society that was structured to disempower Black people? This society, this country was built by us but was never built for us. In the construction of whiteness, Black people have been forced to only see themselves as negative, in comparison to white people. “We are seen as a criminal, lazy, intellectually deficient, but to whose benefit”? Disempowerment is state-sanctioned violence and terror against Black people to control us. Examples of Black disempowerment are the Prison Industrial Complex, chattel slavery, and lynching as justice. The Prison Industrial Complex operates on a grand scale to demonstrate that it owns your life. Chattel slavery demonstrated that Black people do not own their body, as white people owned them. Lynching operated to instill fear in Black folk. “Lynching demonstrated to the Black communities that you may be able to keep your body, but the state takes your life.” All three things were legally justified in America. Ironically “justice” in America has operated to disempower Black people and “injustice” has operated to empower Black people. Black Power and Black radicalism are met with

553 Lewis Gordon, “Afropessimism, Africana Philosophy and Theory.”

554 I mean society, I am talking about civil society.

555 Lewis Gordon, “Afropessimism, Africana Philosophy and Theory.”

556 Lewis Gordon, “Afropessimism, Africana Philosophy and Theory.”

violence and degradation. If that was not clear to you before today, it is clear now. Be wary of those that defend the justness of institutions. Always ask, “for whom do they serve?”

**What Haunts Me?**

I know that you asked your mom about what haunts me? It is a question that I seldom answer because some knowledge should remain private. If I am to introduce you into a tradition, I feel that it is fair to let you know the truth, some truth. One thing that haunts me and it will until I die is fatherhood. Fatherhood is scary! I never thought that I would be a father, especially to a son that is as kick-ass as you. I spent a lot of my life not existing in the world or thinking about my existence. In a way, I was socially dead, as I just aimlessly lingered. I never thought about writing myself or my future into existence. One of those reasons is because of my father. My father had a tremendous impact on my life, in a multitude of ways. Though my dad was in my life until he passed when I was 14, he was still absent because he was never emotionally available in the ways that I needed. My father was emotionally distant, prideful, and angry at times. He shielded many his emotions because…I am not sure why. I never had the opportunity to ask him. I theorize that he did not want to confront the *wounds* that were inflicted upon him in his life. I learned so much about my dad after his death; it was like I did not know him at all. I do not want that to be our relationship. It is amazing how many secrets that one man can keep. He spent much time running from his “ghosts.” It was never something that I could talk to him about, because he, like me, was a very private man. My father’s wounds: some were self-inflicted; others he had inherited from his childhood. I hated my father for the distance that he put between us, as it wounded me as a child. I always thought that
there was something wrong with me. I still struggle with that today. As I continue to experience life and love, I have realized that a lot of the father’s wounds became my wounds, as I have run from ghosts in my past. I have been emotionally distant to those that claim that they love me. I tune them all out because of my hurt. I grew up angry, thinking that I would never be like my dad, but memories are misleading, as I also became him. Every day, I attempt to bring those walls down; most days I fail, but I continue to try. I work every day to purify myself of the hurt that has haunted me.

Amiri, it is called Black Boy Joy, because that is when joy is denied or stolen. Though my father gave me joy and invited me into the Black Radical Tradition, he also stole the joy of my childhood. I never got the experience of hanging out with friends or playing with others. I used to think that he was a mean old man, but now I understand that he became the man he was because he was haunted. Systems of oppression left him as *pieces of a man*558. Black people are ghosts and are haunted by ghosts. Through theorizing Black Boy Joy and utilizing refusal, I can see how my father was invisible to white America as a “ghost,” but was hyper-visible as a Black man whose humanity was denied daily. His wounds became mine, as he began to haunt me. As an adult, I have wondered what haunted him and how the spaces he lived were haunted by white supremacy. Moreover, I began to wonder how his joy was denied, or if he had any in his lifetime. I continued to wonder if he had the same experience with his father and fathers before them. I came to the understanding that generations of Gilmore’s could have systematically been haunted and denied joy. What if one of the functions of white

558 Title of Gil Scot-Heron song and album.
supremacy is this denial of joy in a father-son relationship? As I theorized about the past, I thought about the future and began to wonder what my relationship with you would be like. Would I haunt you? I am haunted by the idea that I could haunt you. I am haunted by the idea that I could become like my father. One thing that I was sure about was that these hauntings refuse to stop and I had to do something about it; I had to break the circle to remake the circle. I had to act. Music has been the healing and the bridge to the repair the relationship with my father. Music helped repair the memories by revealing his hauntings.

Amiri, I love you son! “You have now received the wisdom of your elder. What you do with it is on you.” I look forward to engaging with you again in a Black study.

To A Love Supreme,
Dad

[The Creator of a Master Plan stops playing. Amir stretches, sits for a minute and get to his last tension, his father “CW.” Jay-Z’s Adnis starts playing in the background.]

Jay-Z: [rapping] Uh, letter to my dad that I never wrote/ Speeches I prepared that I never spoke/ Words on a paper that I never read/ Proses never penned, they stayed in my head/ Jotted on dotted lines, "I'ma fight you, nigga"/ From stories that I heard, I'm just like you, nigga.

[Amir writes:]

Dear Poppy,

This letter is to you. For all the times that I never wrote to you. For all the times I had words for you but never said. So many thoughts have stayed in my head. I would like to start with a poem that I wrote for you. I will share it with you now:

559 Fred Moten, Black and Blur, (Durham, University of Duke Press, 2017), 204.

560 CW stands for Cleveland William. That was my dad’s nickname.
Oh, isn’t it amazing
the things that you can inherit
Money, status, beliefs, identity
I, for one
Inherited my father’s wounds
ones that were buried deep
ones that kept him from sleep
ones that
Kept him away
From being the dad, I needed
Yesterday

Oh, how I grew angry
For the fact
That you couldn’t maintain
Chasing ghosts of your past
I vowed
To never be like you
But damn
Our memories can be so deceiving
I look to myself to see our history repeating

Oh, I don’t remember
When I became like my old man
But through life and love
I came to realize
That his wounds became mine
Ones that were buried deep
Ones that kept me from sleep
Ones that
Kept me away
From being the man, I needed
Today

I wrote *Your Wounds, My Wounds* angry, as most of my writing back then was. It was
based on the pain you caused me, the wounds that you gave me. But, the more I read
about our history, the more that I wondered about what pained you.

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561 I wrote this as a class project. Using the arts allowed me the vulnerable – to writing about myself in a
way that I don’t normally do. It is through the arts that I find salvation. It is through the arts that I find wholeness. It
is through the arts that I find me.
Jay-Z [rapping]: Must've been some pain in your past, too/ Must've been a karma that was past due/Must it be the energy that passed through/ Must've been a past of, many snafus  

[Amir writes:]

I have humanized our relationship, the older that I have gotten. I have come to understand that you were wounded as well. Pained from your past, pained from your memories, pained with living in a society that did not value your humanity. I do not pity you because pity does nothing good. I will never forget the pain that you caused because pain is a bad memory that lingers. I will forgive you because I have realized that everyone and everything is haunted. Suffering is embedded in our social institutions. Studying Black Boy Joy helped me understand how you suffered because of the troubles of your social world. Your world was haunted from growing up in an America that openly embraced Jim Crow segregation, left you impoverished. America wounded you in ways that I cannot even imagine.

Jay-Z [rapping]: What was you preparing us... for?/ Did you see the runt as the front-runner/ Leader of the pack, you see that in your youngins/ What ancestors did you summon to the summit/ To give me what I needed, what you need to take from 'em/ The tsunamis that I swum in to become in/ Had the cable with the anchor for the places that I sunk in.

[Amir writes:]

Sometimes, I sit back and wonder, did you purposely prepare me for this? Did you prepare me for this life that I live in now? Did you know? Did you speak to our

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562 Lyrics from verse 1 of Jay-Z's “Adnis.” If you have 4 minutes, watch the video here to get a deep sense of the song in relation to my words: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0_jUUKaT9M0.


564 Lyrics from verse 2 of Jay-Z’s “Adnis.”
ancestors, like I am speaking to you now? How did you even know that I would like jazz, let alone play musicians that I would come to like? When you died, I had access to your cassette tape recordings of jazz. It was an archive of Black music that I had the privilege of perusing. My Black study came from listening to your music. Some would say that this was all coincidence, all part of life’s tapestry, but I think it was magical. It is magical to think that the music that you introduced me to when I was a boy is the same music that I am mentioning in my writings as a man. Our love for jazz is what is getting me published, giving me fame, providing for my family. Growing up, it always seemed like you had all the answers. Hell, you had the answers before I had the questions—it was magical. You were like a Black magician, evoking Black magic to answer my whims. Life is chaos, but music has always been an anchor in my life. Music has always been there to help me weather the storms of life, especially jazz. Jazz is soul music. All of the feltsounds and energies that emanate from jazz speak directly to the soul, like a personal encrypted message. Jazz always has a master plan.

Jay-Z [rapping]: Who would've thought I'd be the dad I never had/ Be the husband I've become, usually nothing come from that/ I forgive you as I live through the beautiful present of the past, I'm just thankful that I get all these gifts to unwrap.565

[Amir writes:] I never thought that I would ever be in this position. Despite our terribleness, there is a joy. I would not be here without you and the gifts that you gave me when I was young. There is no amount of words that can ever thank you. I am forever indebted to

565 Lyrics from verse 2 of Jay-Z’s “Adnis.”
you. The only thing that I can do is acknowledge the debt and hopefully invite others into a Black study with me.

I love you Dad!

Amir

[Amir gets up, winks at Jetson, and they both proceed to head to bed]

[Scene Ends]

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ACT IX: Both Directions At Once

Act IX, Scene I: Joy and Pain

The Cast: Amir Gilmore, Cleveland “Poppy” Gilmore

The Scene: In Amir’s mind.

The Music: Joy and Pain (1980) by Maze and Frankie Beverley

The Plot: Amir is currently in the Sankofa Hospital. Awaiting death, Amir is transferring his memories into the dream machine called the Animus, 566 so that they can be given to his granddaughter Amina. Stuck between the dream state and present, Amir is transported back to a dream that he had with his father 25 years ago. 567 Amir finally hears and understand what his father said to him.

THERE IS NO INTERMISSION

[Scene opens on the street that Amir grew up on 16 Whitfield Terrace. He is walking home, possibly for the last time. He walks up to the door and rings the doorbell.]

Amir (Internally): Gosh, the old man is a little slow today… I ain’t got all day.

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566 “Genetic Memory,” Assassin's Creed Wiki | FANDOM Powered by Wikia, accessed March 12, 2019, http://assassinscreed.wikia.com/wiki/Genetic_memory. The Animus comes from the video game series called Assassin’s Creed and one of my favorite games growing up. The Animus is a virtual machine that can explicitly decode and render memories, allowing the reliving of past events and unforgotten memories. Also see the movie Assassin’s Creed to see how it works.

567 This dream takes place in Act I, Scene I, entitled The Dream.
[Amir hears rumbling behind the door and the sound of keys jingling. A key goes into the door and the door opens. From behind the door, Poppy appears – bright-eyed and smiling]

Poppy: [enthusiastically] HELLLOOOO!

Amir: Hi Poppy! How are you?

Poppy: Oh me? You know, I’m fine – I’m just fine. I can’t complain. How are you Hommy?

Amir: I’m go-I’m great, now that I can hear you.

Poppy: You couldn’t hear me before?

Amir: Yeah, I couldn’t hear your voice. It was like watching a show on mute.

Poppy: [laughing] It was probably because you weren’t listening at the time.

Amir: [confused] What?

Poppy: Hom, sometimes you do not like to listen. Sometimes you tune people out. You couldn’t hear me because you weren’t listening. You weren’t focused. You stopped listening to the sounds of your ancestors. You had forgotten…

Amir: Forgotten?

Poppy: Memories of me…memories of us…memories of this house. You forgot about this house! Hommy, you must always remember this house.

Amir: [puzzled]…So why can I hear you now?

Poppy: Hommy, I…don’t…know. Probably because you are old like me now [laughing], it is because of after all these years; you remember our family’s house – our history – our joy – our pain. Not only do you remember them, but you also value them.

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568 My father never called me by my first name, Amir. He always called me Hommy, which was short for Mohmmad, which means praiseworthy. I have no idea, why he called me Hommy, but he did. It is another Black story that is lost because of time.

569 Remember This House, by James Baldwin is the unfinished memoir of his personal recollections of assassinated civil rights leaders Medgar Evers, Malcolm X, and Martin Luther King Jr. The manuscript was turned into the 2017 documentary I Am Not Your Negro by Raoul Peck. Baldwin’s words in the documentary reminded me to remember the power and value of stories, learning from those stories, and using your stories to guide you through the struggles of living in an anti-Black society.
Amir: I do, and I will never forget much Black afterlives matter.570

Poppy: [smiles] Good. Hom, sit with me on the steps.

[They both leave the doorway and then proceed to sit on the porch steps. The sun is shining on them, like any other hot summer afternoon. Maze & Frankie Beverly’s Joy and Pain571 begins to play in the background]

Poppy: [grabs the toothpick behind his ear, putting it in the corner of his mouth] As we move from parent to elder, elder to ancestor, we must explain to our children that the past is important, Hom. The “future is shaped by pasts that could have been.”572 “Our history is not the past. It is the present. We carry out history with us. We are our history. If we pretend otherwise, we literally are criminals.”573

Amir: [shrugs] I guess I’ve been a criminal…

Poppy: Haven’t we all? [smiles] It is never too late to return home – to retrieve what you thought you’ve lost.

Amir: Black history – our family history is all too painful though. Our rifting relationship, your death, the selling of our house… “it was a rupture in history, a rupture in the quality of being. It was also a physical rupture, a rupture of geography.”574 At times it felt best to forget, ya know – to become estranged to the place I called home. [puts his head on Poppy’s shoulder]

Poppy: [remorseful, he put his arm around Amir] I can understand that. However, remember that Black history –“our history is not only about pain, but also about shared knowledge, joy, and humor that are integral to those experiences.”575 That house had more than pain – you forgot

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571 Not only is this song perfect for this scene, but my father could get down to some Maze. The song literally brings back memories.


574 Dionne Brand, A Map to the Door of No Return: Notes to Belonging (Toronto: Vintage Canada, 2001), 5. For further context, read Brand’s “A Circumstantial Account of a State of Things.”

about the joy, you forgot about the music. Look, I know that it is difficult to keep feelings of depression and defeat at bay in these trying times, but our histories, perceived in all their dynamism, their resistance, and resilience, can give us heart and direction. Our pasts are not dead—"why else are there repeated attempts to bury them, to erase or forget them?"576

Amir: The past isn’t necessarily the past. The dead are never dead.

Poppy: That’s right! Don’t call us dead; we’re just resting our eyes. We wait for you to call on us. Hommy, we forever live through story, through song – generation to generation. “We never get everything right in this one life…there is always something more to learn.”577

Amir: Why didn’t you share more of your stories with me? Despite living with you, I did not know a lot about you. I spent a lot of my life trying to figure out who you were. You felt pressured to hold a lot of trauma in, and I watched it all bubble to the surface.

Poppy: I did, and it is one of my regrets in life. I held a lot in, and it affected you. I am sorry…Parents, try as we may…we don’t get many things right, but we do the best that we can with what we got…to get you out in the world before the world takes over. At the time, I did not know how to show you the love that you needed. I showed you how to be tough in this world. I showed you how to survive and look at you now…hell, Black parenthood is hard, and you know that!

[Amir and Poppy laugh]

Amir: mannn ain’t that the truth.

Poppy: I bet you learned a lot of from my mistakes...

Amir: Well, somethings I messed up myself, but one thing that I meditated on was Black fatherhood and Black elderhood.

Poppy: [raises eyebrow] Oh yeah?

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577 Celeste Henery, "Recognizing Black Elderhood," AAIHS, January 4, 2019, , accessed March 12, 2019, https://www.aaihs.org/recognizing-black-elderhood/#. This was a great article that spoke about the importance of passing down generational history. It highlighted that Black people needed a new model of caring to build intergenerational emotional intelligence.
Amir: Yeah… “you know as children, we are told to stay out of grown folk business… but why? What if children were in more “grown folk” conversations? How could we better prepare children for the world through our elders?”

Poppy: Like a framework…of care

Amir: “yes, a framework of love and togetherness that is centered on caring, accountability, reciprocity and listening. It is important that we center Black eldership because elders can help us recognize what we may lose and what we should not forget.” “This doesn’t mean you have to agree with what the elder says, but the respect the elder…for surviving.”

Poppy: I like that, especially the listening part, because you never like to listen [smiles].

[Amir rolls his eyes]

Poppy: Listen…no matter how hard it gets, remember that “our shared past is precious, not for itself, but because it is the basis of consciousness, of knowing, of being.” The power of our people is in our multiplicity. If you erase one of us, you’ve erased the other. Without people singing our songs and telling our stories, who are we? “We are because they are. That is the principle of collectivity.” Continue our story that is Black eldership.

[Amir gets up from the steps and begins to walk away.] Amir: Poppy, I gotta go.

Poppy: [confused] Shitttt…already? Where are you going? Aren’t you coming home?

Amir: I am…but someone has to continue my story first…ya know?

Poppy: [smiles] I understand. Well, we’ll be waiting around for you.

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578 Amber Butts, "To Deal with Intergenerational Black Trauma, We Must Care for Our Elders," The Black Youth Project, October 08, 2018, , accessed March 12, 2019, http://blackyouthproject.com/to-deal-with-intergenerational-black-trauma-we-must-care-for-our-elders/. This piece provides a great discussion of how we connect the youth to Black elders and center them as a site of knowledge production.

579 Amber Butts, "To Deal with Intergenerational Black Trauma, We Must Care for Our Elders."

580 Joe Berlinger, dir., "Dave Chappelle & Maya Angelou," in Iconoclasts, Sundance Channel, 2006. Maya Angelou says this to Dave Chappelle as they discuss Black elderhood and Black survival.


Amir: We?

Poppy: Yeah! Shawty\(^{583}\) and Bones\(^{584}\) are here waiting for you. They’re around – getting things ready for you.

Amir: [smiles]…well alright. I’ll see y’all soon.

[Amir turns his back and walks away]

Poppy: Hommy!

[Amir turns around]

Poppy: I love you [smiles].

Amir: I love you too [smiles].

[Poppy and the environment begin to fade to white as Amir begins to awaken from the Animus]

[Scene ends; Poppy and Amir exit]

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**Act IX, Scene II: “From dust to digital.”**

"Our DNA functions as an archive. It contains not only genetic instructions passed down from previous generations, but memories as well. The memories of our ancestors."\(^{585}\) —Warren Vidic from *Assassin’s Creed*, 2012

**The Cast:** Amir Gilmore, June Gilmore, Amiri Gilmore, Amina\(^{586}\) Gilmore, Doctor X, Shadowy Man/Charlie “Chaz” Roswell

**The Scene:** In the Sankofa hospital

**The Music:** “I Shall Be Released” Nina Simone (1969)

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\(^{583}\) Shawty is the nickname that my dad had for my mom, Rosita Faulkner.

\(^{584}\) Bones is the nickname for my brother, Avery Gilmore.

\(^{585}\) Warren Vidic is a fictional character and a pioneer in genetic research in the video game *Assassin’s Creed*.

\(^{586}\) I got Amina’s name from Amina Baraka. She was, poet, singer, actress, and activist. She was also the wife of Amiri Baraka. Amina means honest and trustworthy. I thought the name is fitting as Amir is entrusting Amina with the family memories. For information about Amina Baraka, please see poetryfoundation.org/poets/amina-baraka.
The Plot: Amir awakes from his dream and is surrounded by his family – the ultimate joy. Amir, June, and Amiri explain to Amina what happened to them after that eventful day. They also explain to Amina the purpose of Operation of Kitchen Table.

(Scene starts with Amir still being synchronized to the Animus. Amiri and June Jordan have disconnected from the Animus after animating a rememory for Amina to watch. Amina and doctor X check on Amiri, June, and Amir)

Amina: Dad! Grandma! Are you okay?

Amiri: [slowly] I’m okay.

June: [dazed] That was a doozie on the old body, but I am alright. Is Amir up yet?

Amina: [Shakes her head] No.

[Amiri, June, and Amina rush over to Amir]

June: What’s wrong with my husband? Why isn’t he waking up?

Doctor X: Your husband isn’t waking up from the Animus because he does want to wake up. He is refusing to come out…

June: What do you mean?

Doctor X: [pushing up glasses]…meaning that he isn’t done yet. He is going through his memories over and over again, searching for meaning, searching for joy. Sometimes patients navigate through their memories to find things in their lives that were unresolved. It is a common side effect of the Animus…we call this both directions at once.588

Amina: Both…directions…at once?

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587 In Toni Morrison’s 1987 novel Beloved, “rememory,” is introduced as the process of remembering memories. Through rememory a person can confront the dark memories of their past and build a new life in the future. Featuring Erykah Badu, Donnie Trumpet & The Social Experiment play with this idea on “Rememory.” Listen to it here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uB2ELSdR2ok.

588 Nate Chinen, "John Coltrane's 'Lost Album' Is A Window Into His Pursuit Of The Impossible," NPR, June 27, 2018, accessed March 12, 2019, https://www.npr.org/2018/06/27/623611557/john-coltranes-lost-album-is-a-window-into-his-pursuit-of-the-impossible. Title of John Coltrane’s lost and latest album. The album derives its title from something that Coltrane told his fellow saxophonist Wayne Shorter about, “starting a sentence in the middle, and then going to the beginning and the end of it at the same time … both directions at once.” Read the article for further context.
Doctor X: As elders begin their voyage into the spiritual world, they are currently in the middle—the present day. As Amir is inching towards death, he is progressing back deeper and deeper into his life—into his memories.

Amiri: Do you know how long he will be in there?

Doctor X: That is tough to say…could be hours, could be days. Remember, some of your father’s memories have not been accessed for decades. Who is to say when he will be ready—only he knows when he is ready.

[The family nervously awaits Amir’s awakening by playing games, singing songs, and sharing stories about him. Hours go by until the Doctor X comes into the waiting room and says:]

Doctor X: He’s back.

[The family rushes into the room, eager to see Amir awake]

Amir: [gleefully] Hey y’all

June: [ticked] what took you so long?

Amir: Well…exccccccsussee me! I was reliving a dream [smiles].

Amina: Grandpa, all those memories between you, grandma, and Daddy happened in a day?

Amir: Hell yeah! You thought I was fibbin’? To be Black in America is always a challenge. Three things that you can bet your bottom dollar on is death, taxes, and racism. Racism is so regular in this country—it’s the same shit every day

June: Amir, language!

Amir: [turns to and Amina] Your grandmother never lets me have some fun [laughs]. Amina, what I am trying to sa—my old man used to tell me that racism is like a Cadillac, they bring out a new model every year. And the thing about old Cadillacs is that they never die. With each new generation, Black dreamers are born, dreaming Black dreams and telling stories of our ancestors! And with each new generation, Black dreams are under a constant threat from racist systems. We must be forever watchful of those that deny us to sing our songs, tell our stories, and dream our dreams.

[Amina nods in agreement]

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Amir: Black dreams are important Amina; they are what keep us alive and give us hope. “As we continually watch so many police and white vigilantes go unpunished for murdering unarmed Black children, the ability of Black people to survive and tell stories of ourselves in the future is a form of resistance.”

Amina: [nods] Grandpa, so what happened after that day?

Amir: After the knee? Well…

Amiri: Well I lost it all. Scholarships were pulled, I was vilified in all media outlets, and I never got to play again. It was a huge sacrifice, but we must always strive to do what we feel is right. “I loved football. I loved the idea of playing in the NFL, but not at the expense of my dignity.”

June: mmmhhhhmmm! Ain’t that the truth. Well, they got what they deserved, didn’t they?

Amina: What do you mean grandma?

June: Amiri’s refusal to play football created something that would have never happened if he played that day. His refusal sparked national outrage that resonated with a lot of Black athletes – high school, college, pro, and retired. Black athletes protested. They just stopped playing – it became a national movement. There is no football without Black labor. When Black people organize as a collective, white people across the country had to hear our voice.

Amiri: And they surely did! Black people once again had to remind America that civil rights weren’t a “bad business” problem, but a moral issue for the country. How could Americans root for us on the field but not support us in the streets and in our schools? We brought the heat to the man’s doorstep for the world to see.

Amina: Soooooooooo…what happened then?

Amiri: The problem didn’t go away, but neither did we. Black high school athletes didn’t play. They protested, they spoke out. Some refused to play collegiate sports and gave their scholarships. Without a significant amount of Black labor entering collegiate sports, college athletic programs took a big hit. So that hit trickled up to the NFL…and boy did they feel it.

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591 Amber Butts, "To Deal with Intergenerational Black Trauma, We Must Care for Our Elders."


Amina: So, that’s what killed off football?

June: Ah nah darling it was from all the lawsuits revolving around CTE.\footnote{Christie Aschwanden, "Why We Still Don't Know How Many NFL Players Have CTE," FiveThirtyEight, December 17, 2018, accessed March 13, 2019, https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/why-we-still-dont-know-how-many-nfl-players-have-cte/. CTE stands for Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy. It is a degenerative brain disease found in people with brain trauma, such as athletes and military veterans. See the concussionfoundation.org for more information.}

Amina: Oh…

\[Amir, June, Amina, and Amiri turn to the audience with a dead-pan stare and scream MESSAGE!\]

Amiri: With my football career being over, I decided to re-pursue something that gave me more joy than football…Black performance! I love dancing – I love acting – I love satire.

Amir: [boastful] My son is an Edtiste!

Amina: [puzzled] ...is that French?

Amir: An Edtiste, nah child! That is our word.

Amina: But grandpa, that is not even a real word – you made that up.

Amir: All words are made up…it is about what we speak into existence which makes it real. “Fiction are not falsehoods, but refashionings – creating new values and possibilities for constructing more livable worlds.”\footnote{Ruha Benjamin, "Black AfterLives Matter."} You have to imagine it possible before you can see it. That is the real joy. I created something that encompasses who we are and what we do!

Amina: Okay, so what is an Edtiste?

Amir: An Edtiste is the blurring between an educator and an artist.

Amina: Dassit?

Amir: No! An Edtiste is all about Black experimentation. It is about using your imagination to give you the freedom to explore – to be—to become. An Edtiste is also political…

Amina: How so?
Amir: An Edtiste is unapologetically Black. We are not confined to false binaries created by white folks—meaning that our art does not care about catering to the patronage of white folks. Our history, our lives, our thoughts cannot be bought, because they are never for sale.

June: It is also political because it makes the invisible, vulnerable and visible. Our work is about illuminating the sufferings of Black communities by critiquing various oppressions! It is truth-telling. “To tell the truth is to become beautiful, to love yourself, and value yourself. And that’s political, in its most profound way.”

By telling the truth—by refusing to be invisible and minimized—we make the personal political. With calls for truth and accountability, we make our politics possible.

We are political agitators.

Amina: So, what are our politics?

[Amir and June turn to each other and smile.]

Amir: “Our politics are about creating a world—a utopia is where the Black body is believed to be human—treated as a human being and protected like other humans. Our utopia is a place where the Black body is loved and free.”

Amina: Daddy, how do you do that within performance?

Amiri: As an Edtiste, I am committed to the fundamental process of changing our position in the world through a Black aesthetic. Amina, “we are not simply the receivers of aesthetics, but the makers of it.” The Black theatre is revolutionary because it is opposed to the cultural hierarchy

596 Examples: Writer vs Black writer, Poet vs Black Poet. No more binaries embrace the blur.


599 Ingrid LaFleur, Twitter Post, May 14, 2018, 10:22 AM, https://twitter.com/ingridlafleur/status/996078243634704385?s=21. LaFleur is an artist, curator, activist, and Afrofuturist. LaFleur speaks of Afrotopia. Afrotopia is the synthesis of science fiction, Black history, technology, social change, and enough imaginative power to move a world out of orbit. The concept is based in Detroit but is international in its aesthetic and outreach. The ultimate goal of AFROTOPIA is to shift the perspective of Detroit into one that imagines the indefinite possibilities for prosperous growth stimulated by the cultural legacy of Black American radical thought and experimentation. For more information, check out ingridlafleur.com/afrotopia.

of white folks. “We center Black people as the prime movers and determiners of their lives by telling their stories through performance.”  

June: ummhmmm. That’s why some people be mad at us. They want [us] to remember/ but they want [us] to remember/ their memories/ but we keep on remembering/ [ours]. By reliving our memories – our Black past and retelling our stories, Black folks will never forget – and we damn make sure that white folks never forget either. “We don’t’ tell our stories to put people to sleep, we want to scare the shit out of them and wake them up.”

Amiri: My role on the stage is vital “because through performance I educate the audience on how Black culture is narrated, constructed, learned, performed, and handed down.” “Within Black life, jail is a symbol that Black people know too well – I am not just talking about physical containment, but psychological and spiritual enchainment. I wake people up from their jails but utilizing the jails as performative space of resistance. I show Black folks how to contest the power of oppression within jail.”

June: “We’re not locked in America with white folks, they’re locked in America with us.”

Amiri: My dancing, acting, and singing is a rebellion against stasis, control, and white supremacy. We cannot separate our bodies from our politics, nor our art – they are tied together. Our bodies create art through movement. We are speaking to our communities and our ancestors but speaking back to our oppressors.

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602 Chinua Achebe, Anthills of Savannah (Johannesburg: Heinemann, 1989), 141.

603 Lucille Clifton, "Why Some People Be Mad at Me Sometimes," in Next: New Poems (BOA Editions, 1989). I modified the poem to make it fit in this particular context.

604 Helen Gilbert and Joanne Tompkins, Post-colonial Drama: Theory, Practice, Politics (London: Routledge, 1994), 137. This is a quote from Fatima Dike’s keynote address at the International Women Playwright’s Conference, Adelaide, Australia, July 4, 1994.


607 I modified this line from the 2009 movie, Watchmen. The line is from the superhero character, Rorschach, who is locked in prison. The prisoners attempt to kill Rorschach as he has locked up many of the inmates in the prison. As he is fighting back, Rorschach is letting them what the “deal” is. When it comes to America, white people are locked into this nationhood with Black people because we were put here. Amiri is showing folks how to subvert power structures in America by using performance.
Amina pauses and stews on these thoughts. A few minutes pass by.

Amina: Okay…okay…so how do I become an Edtiste?

Amir: “You have to be humble in the face of the task you have assumed. You’re imparting ideas. These ideas affect people.” You must be aware of and accountable for the art that you put out for the world to consume. You also have to be unapologetic about the Black political art that you make! I hear that you like to read and write poetry like your grandma, is that true?

Amina: Yeah, but my teachers don’t like it because it makes me sound angry.

Amir: So? “Our anger is not wasteful—it’s useful to dismantling the systems that keep us down.” Those who tell you “Do not put too much politics in your art’ are not being honest. If you look very carefully, you will see that they are the same people who are quite happy with the situation as it is…What they are saying is not to introduce politics, but don’t upset the system. They are just as political as any of us.” Don’t stop using your anger and never stop writing.

Amina smiles. Amir takes a few moments to catch his breath.

Amina: Grandpa…I know what happened to Daddy, but what happened to you and grandma after that day?

Amir [removes oxygen mask and sighs] A lot.

June: Amina, your grandfather and I are Black radicals. Our university colleagues never truly embraced us because we didn’t cater to their politics and Amiri’s protest made us political enemies at the university.

Amir: [coy, turns to June] Was I public enemy #1 or was it you?

June: Me.


609 A nod to Audre Lorde’s “The Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism.” It is powerful piece detailing how Black people (specifically Black women) should be using utilizing their anger in the face of racism in America. Lorde reminds us that our anger is “loaded with information and energy.” Lorde’s work has been instrumental to me as an Edtiste. Understanding the importance of your anger and channeling it have transformed me but also my writing. For more information see Audre Lorde, “The Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism,” in Sister Outsider: Essays & Speeches by Audre Lorde (Berkeley: Crossing Press, 2007), 124-133.

610 Maria Popova, "James Baldwin and Chinua Achebe's Forgotten Conversation About Beauty, Morality, and the Political Power of Art." Achebe was speaking about critics who chastise artists for making their work political.
Amir: [shrugs] Well, June and I decided to leave the university…

June: Best decision ever! We didn’t miss it. We got everything we needed for our next project.

Amir: [boastfully] Operation Kitchen Table!

Amina: Grandma, what is he talking about?

June: The Black Archive. This hospital. The Animus. It all came from Operation Kitchen Table.

Amina: So, what is it?

Amir: Amina, what do you hear when I say the Black Radical Tradition?


Amir: Exactly! The Black Radical Tradition holds centuries-old beliefs and practices that Black folks have a stake in the world and the world beyond through Black resistance. “Our resistance comes from the generational collective intelligence gathered from the struggle of white supremacy.”611 This claim of Black freedom, Black survival, and a Black future surely terrify some folks [smiles].

June: Our tradition is displayed, imagined, and practiced through sound.

Amina: What do you mean by that?

June: Much of Black culture is oral. Our intelligence—our resistance is all passed down through sound. There were times where Black folks did not know how to read or write, but they did not forget how to speak. Freedom Day is not yet a lived reality, but it is whispered through the grapevine. It is all about listening to the sounds of Black folks…

Amir:…but also understanding the noise of white supremacy.612 Noise resolves itself into information. What are the noises of white supremacy today? We have to understand those noises because they are dog whistles of oppression.613 These sounds and noises are ever-present.

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612 Cedric Robinson asks us to record the sounds of white supremacy. To achieve justice, to get freedom, Black people have to know what they are up against. They have to know and understand the sounds of white supremacy. Sometimes they are near-silent like white noise and sometimes they are LOUD like a crash.

613 Dog whistle politics are coded terms, phrases, and messages that appeal to people that uphold and support white supremacy. For a deep understanding of how dog whistle politics are tied to whiteness and white supremacy, see Ian Haney-Lopez, Dog Whistle Politics: How Coded Racial Appeals Have Reinvented Racism and Wrecked the Middle Class (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).
teachers in our lives because they invoke collective memories – of sadness, of joy, of relation, of action.

June:…but personal and political memories can be fragile. As we moved into positions of elders, your grandfather and I asked ourselves, “what kind of elders do we want to be?” We thought about how memories are lost from generation to generation through death, with little chance of recovery. The question became how do we preserve our memories and memorialize our ancestors for future generations to reflect and relive – how do we go from dust to digital? With that in mind, we took whatever savings that we had, went to AfroTech, and invested in a Black tech company called BLKTHOUGHT. With crowdfunding from Black communities, the Animus and the Sankofa Hospital became real. Operation Kitchen Table went from a dream to reality.

Amina: But why a kitchen table?

Amir: It’s named after the publishing company called the Kitchen Table Press. Created by a collective of radical feminists of color, this grassroots effort made visible the writing, culture, and history of women of color. These publications provided sustenance for those women, their families, and their communities.

June: The kitchen table is also the center of the Black household. Think about all the stories told at the kitchen table – it holds wisdom and memories. The kitchen table is what brings Black families together and provides families with sustenance. Amina, we hope that this Black archive – our kitchen table will bring you substance as you dive into a Black study – a study with no end.

Amir: Operation Kitchen Table is a Black feminist project. We never want you to forget the radical resistance, refusal, and self-care practices that came from Black feminism. Our feminism is passed down from generation to generation. We see this kitchen table – this Black archive as


615 Afrotech is the biggest Black tech conference and it is held in the Bay area. I named the company BLKTHOUGHT after The Roots rapper Black Thought. The Roots at this point in my life are my favorite band. They just make music and its BLACK AF. In my opinion, a lot of their work revolves around Black existentialism and their albums have been instrumental to my dissertation.

“a gather place. A cypher. A collection of peoples, ideas, experiences, and feelings that, if shared and grappled with in community, can help us get closer to being free.”617

June: We believe in time travel – we believe in the past. We believe in being in relation to the past for “remembrances of resistance in order to reimagine a just future.”618 This is the principle of Sankofa.

Amina: Sankofa?

June: Se wo were fi na wosan kofa a yenki. “Sankofa is derived from the Akan people of West Africa. The concept expressed in the Akan language means that it is not taboo to go back and fetch what you forgot. Sankofa teaches us that we must go back to our roots in order to move forward – that we should go back and gather the best of what our past has to teach us so that we can build a better future. Whatever we have lost, forgotten,forgone, or been stripped of can be reclaimed, revived, preserved, and perpetuated.”619 We named the hospital after this concept.

Amir: “One of the major fallacies of modern thought is that traditions are static and exist back there – that they can’t resolve modern issues. The opposite is true.”620 We want you to use our past, with your present, to power your future. Revel in our joy, understand our pains, examine our failures. Use us as a guide – take from us what you need but know you can always return if you forget.

Amina: [nodding] So how does this all work with the Animus?

Dr. X: “Scientist say that our DNA contains the memories of our ancestors and those memories have taught us how to survive.”621 Unfortunately, we are not there yet with technology to access genetic memories from our DNA. However, with our brains, that’s a different story. Our brains are unique – they remember everything. This current version of the Animus is a virtual machine that can decode and render our memories, allowing you to relive the past and discover memories


619 "Sankofa," University of Illinois Springfield, accessed March 13, 2019, https://www.uis.edu/africanamericanstudies/students/sankofa/. Sankofa is the guiding principle of the Black Student Union of UIS. The concept of Sankofa has been used in afrofuturistic works.

620 Josh Myers, Twitter Post, July 29, 2018, 8:17 AM, https://twitter.com/ddehewty/status/1023588420935770114?s=21. Myers is the literary journal editor of a gathering together. Read more about it at agatheringtogether.com/about/.

that even Amir has long forgotten. Once the memories are extracted, they can be viewed and even synchronized to you.

Amina: So, Grandpa’s memories will be a part of me?

Dr. X: [pushes up glasses] Precisely…but! Reliving ancestral memories can prove to be difficult as family members can subconsciously reject external memories…

June: …as well as traumatic memories…it takes time and patience to be in sync with our memories. Reliving memories in itself is a Black study.

Amina: Can white people be in sync with their memories?

Dr. X: Some can, most aren’t.

Amina: Why?

June: A lot of white folks do not see reality – meaning that they do not see America for what it is – a nightmare. White folks struggle with accessing memories because their realities are distorted because they practice in the willful forgetting of the past. Their future is a future that avoids history, historicity, and the understanding of Black suffering. When most white folks access their ancestor’s memories, their mind withdraws. They lack the confidence to step into their ancestor’s body – their fragile reality is distorted when they see how their elders treated Black folks. “What has happened and what continues to happen in this country is that brother has murdered brother knowing it was his brother. White men have lynched Black folks knowing them to be their sons. White women have had Black folks burned knowing them to be their lovers.” The problem is that they don’t want to be held responsible for it – so now it haunts them.

Amir: The past can be painful, but they choose to maintain their fragile reality, so they are forever haunted by slavery, genocide, and violence. “Haunting doesn’t hope to change people’s perceptions, nor does it hope for reconciliation. Haunting lies precisely in its refusal to stop.”

It is entirely up to white folks “whether or not they are going to face and deal with it and embrace this stranger who they have maligned so long.”

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624 Eve Tuck, C. Ree, and Carolyn Ellis, "A Glossary of Haunting," ed. Tony E. Adams, in Handbook of Ethnography, ed. Stacy Holman Jones (Left Coast Press, 2013), 642. For ghosts, the haunting is the resolving, it is not what needs to be resolved. For more information on haunting, see Avery F. Gordon, Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011).

625 James Baldwin, I Am Not Your Negro, 170.
June: Instead of dealing, white folks would rather have access to our memories to sell and exploit. Black folks are never allowed to own things. Even within death, Black folks cannot even own our memories without the intrusion of others. Amina, always remember that this Black archive is for Black folks. It can never be for sale. This inheritance of memories is more valuable than anyone could ever offer.

Amina: [nodding] mhmm, yes grandma.

[Dr. X walks over to Amir and whispers something to him, and Amir nods]

Amir: It’s about that time…

Amina: Do you really have to go?

Amir: [turns to Amina] Sadly, I do. This body is old.626 We are together in this moment and that is all that matters. Don’t see death as the end, but as a beginning — a beginning to a new beginning. “Nobody ever comes back, but memories do. The challenge is to hear me in the present and know that I am there, even though you can’t see me.”627 “This is why our stories of what is and what is possible matter. They produce meaning and material with which to build and destroy the real world.”628 “All social justice work is science fiction. We are imagining a world free of injustice, a world that doesn’t yet exist.”629 Let our stories become portals to creating the world that you need.

Amir: [turns towards Amiri] To my number one son…

Amiri: [rolls eyes] I’m your only son…some things never change

Amir: They don’t! [smiles]. Amiri, never forget the importance of family. I was there when you took your first breath and you will be there for me to take my last one. Seeing you, I think about my father a lot. For a majority of his life, my father held a lot of himself in, and our family paid for it. For years, I watched him unravel and crack from the pressure…I saw him go to pieces…he

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626 There is never any mention on Amir’s ailments, as I leave the prognosis up to the reader. I will mention that on page 238 in “Conclusion 1: A Killjoy Survival Kit,” Sara Ahmed discussed about how anti-Black racism puts your life at risk. “Racism can be an attack on the cells of the body, her body, her black body, an attack on the body’s immune system; the way in which your own body experiences what is outside itself as inside itself; death from the outside in.”

627 Celeste Henery, "Recognizing Black Elderhood."

628 Ruha Benjamin, "Black AfterLives Matter."

was pieces of a man. Don’t make the same mistakes that my father made. Remember to be vulnerable, especially with Amina. Being vulnerable is like a portal that connects your world and her world together. “When we open ourselves up to the world, we create a deeper loving space that allows everyone to be their full selves, without fear of shame, judgement and conflict.” Be comfortable to be in your feelings. Our feelings have knowledge, let that knowledge guide you.

[Amiri nods]

Amir: Black fatherhood is special, don’t let anyone tell you otherwise. “To be both black and a father, is to be seen by much of the world through a haze of stereotypes and half-truths; to be damned by the faint praise of people who expect so little that merely showing up is regarded as a minor miracle.” I think about the importance of understanding Black fatherhood like an archival project. “One day someone will ask, what kind of fathers were we? When future generations, or civilizations look back, if they look at our media, our newspapers, what will they know of us? Will they know that we, Black folks, Black fathers in this case, lived and loved?”

It is through this project; I know that they will [smiles].

[Turns to June and the stare intensely into each other’s eyes. June begins to recite a poem that he likes.]

June: “Why you so Black?”

Amir: Cause I am. Why you so funky?

June: Cause I am. Why you so Black?

Amir: Cause I am. Why you so sweet?

June: Cause I am. Why you so Black?

Amir: Cause I am.

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630 A nod to Gil Scott Heron’s 1971 song and album *Pieces Of A man*. Hearing this song invokes memories of my father, of all the struggles he went through, of all the struggles that he kept in.

631 Amber Butts, “To Deal with Intergenerational Black Trauma, We Must Care for Our Elders.”


Amir and June: A love supreme, a love supreme.”

Amir: They say that a Black study is patient, long, thoughtful, and forever, but so is Black love [smiles]. Junebug, you are my love supreme. You have always shared the explorations, the trials, and the harvest with me – what more could any man ask for. Our love is like John and Alice – raw, beautiful, and purifying. We sought to build a place through sound and memory – to create a world that plays by a different note. A Black world, a free world. “We’ve got some difficult days ahead, but haven’t we always? I know that I will not get there with you, but I am not worried, because I know one day, we’ll get there [smiles].”

June: From dust to digital, I love you.

Amir: From dust to digital, I love you. I’ll be waiting for you. Alright doc, I’m ready, I got some dogs to walk [smiles]. June…ehh…can you sing some Nina for me, one last time?

June: [kisses Amir’s forehead] Anything for you…

[Dr. X administers the drug. The family gathers around him, and they begin to sing Nina Simone’s I Shall Be Released. June leads with the first verse.]

June: “They say everything can be replaced/ They say every distance is not near/ So I remember every face/ Of every man who put me here”

June, Amiri, & Amina: [singing the chorus] “I see my light come shining/ From the west unto the east/ Any day now any day now/ I shall be released”


635 A nod to John Coltrane’s song and album, A Love Supreme.


637 The common phrase is dust to dust, emphasizes that people come from dust and will return to the dust. Instead of returning to the dust, Amir will be heading to the digital space.

638 Nina Simone, "I Shall Be Released," in To Love Somebody, 1969, accessed March 13, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XYCn8IC5pE. Although this is cover of Bob Dylan’s (1967) song, Nina Simone (1969) gives the song a soul—the song becomes a freedom song. Free from sin, free from pain, free from the body. Like other great Black artists, Simone re-sounded the song and made it her song. See “freaked” the song. To understand this more, please see Track 4 on Black Boy Joy Manifesto. I invite you all to listen to the song with the link included in the note.

639 First verse of “I Shall Be Released.”

640 The chorus of “I Shall Be Released.”
Amiri: “They say every man needs protection/ They say every man must fall/ So I swear I see my reflection/ Some where instead these walls”641

June, Amiri, & Amina: [singing the chorus.]

Amina: “Yonder stands a man in this lonely crowd/ A man who swears he's not to blame/ All day long I hear him hollering so loud/ Just crying out that he's not to blame”642

June, Amiri, & Amina: [singing the chorus.]

[Amir came and went like a breeze in the night. The room becomes silent, as there is always a void in death. The calm before the storm. Tears begin to fall like rain. Wailing sounds like thunder, and pain rips through them like lightning. Amir was gone. The family sat in the room with Amir, holding his hands until they cooled. Like all storms that come to past, so did this one, as the family began to reminiscence about Amir and the joy that he gave them all. Things became to normalize until Doctor X came back into the room.]

Doctor X: Hi, all, I know that is has been a very tough day – but it’s ready

Amina: What is?

Doctor X: His memories. They have been compiled and are ready for you to access Amina. You will be the keeper of your grandfather’s secrets – the holder of his knowledge and his stories. His wisdom will sit with you. All you have to do is lay down in the Animus, and the process shall begin. Are you ready to continue the story?

Amina: [reluctant] Ahhh…

Doctor X: Seems like you need some time to decide…

June: It seems that way…excuse us doctor

Doctor X: But of course

[Doctor X exits, Shadowy man enters]

Shadowy Man: Perhaps, I can be of some help?

June: And who in the hell are you?

641 Second verse of Simone’s “I Shall Be Released.”

642 Third verse of Simone’s “I Shall Be Released.”
Shadowy Man: My name is Charlie Roswell⁶⁴³, but my friends call me Chaz, grandma

June: [Distraught] Grandma? Who the hell you calling Grandma, you pale-face motherfuc-

Amiri: Ma-mama, it’s okay. Just calm down, let’s see what this MAN wants.

June: Ain’t no calming me down…so what do you want?

Chaz: My apologies, but you shouldn’t have been rude in the first place [ahem]. I am a one of many—a middleman of sorts. I work with the United States Government to broaden our intellectual proper—I mean history of respectable African Americans. [smiles]

June: [rolls eyes] Mhmmm. My baby hasn’t been dead for a day, and here you are buzzing around him like a vulture. I think you should leave.

Chaz [Sweating] …well just hear me out…throughout the years, our company has been instrumental in getting African Americans the national recognition that they deserve. Malcolm X on a stamp, us. Martin Luther King on a Dodge RAM commercial, us. Tupac as a hologram at Coachella, us. An airport named after Muhammad Ali, us. Look, I could go on and on…

Amina: …but don’t we already have the NMAAH⁶⁴⁴ for this?

Chaz: True, but whom do you think helps fund the NMAAH? Us. As I am a tech proprietor, I want our company to move into a new direction, a fresh direction – VR and digital memories. We want to build a Black Museum, dedicated to Black Afterlives, a Black Archive of great Black leaders and I want to start with your dad, Amina.

Amiri: Why are you so interested in theorizing and understanding Black people? Why are you so interested in my dad?

Chaz: Your father was instrumental in getting this Black archival project started by funding the Animus and the Sankofa hospital…

[June death glares at Chaz]

Chaz:…with his wonderful and beautiful June, of course [nervously laughs].

Amiri: I still don’t understand why you need my dad’s memories

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⁶⁴³ Charlie “Chaz” Roswell is based on the character Rolo Haynes from the Netflix’s TV show Black Mirror. Like Rolo, Chaz has a background in neural research and technology company and is a proprietor. See season 4, episode 6 of Black Mirror for more information.

⁶⁴⁴ Stands for the National Museum of African American History, which is located in Washington D.C.
Chaz: Imagine if people knew who your father was! People would know of his joys, his sorrows— they wouldn’t just read about him, they would watch his life through his eyes—they could be him! How cool is that?

Amiri: [Tensely] Everyone wants our rhythm, but no one wants our blues… sorry, Chaz… we are not interested… we ain’t letting everybody in our family business.

Chaz: Well, you are not of my concern, Amina is. Amina, imagine millions of people around the world, knowing who your dad is. Imagine being richer than your wildest dreams. You would never have to work a day in your life.

Amina: Not a day?

Chaz: Not… a… day! All you have to do is cede the rights of your grandfather – or what is left of him to me, and we can wire the money. What do you say? [puts out his hand for a shake]

June: Amina, don’t do-

Amiri: Mom, it isn’t our decision to make, it’s hers. Let her decide. Dad entrusted her to make the right decision, so let her make it.

[The room falls silent as a storm is brewing within Amina. Which decision does she make? After a long pause, she makes her decision]

Amina: [slapping Chaz’s hand] NO! I refuse.

[Amiri and June smile in the background]

Chaz: [shocked] …perhaps you can reconsider?

Amina: No… “we can be, but someone else gets to tell us what we mean.”645 I am tired of people – people like you seeing me, seeing us as some sort of sacred text – as an object. I am because they are. We are not objects, we are people – and people can object, people can refuse. “It is our right and responsibility to write ourselves into the future, not yours.”646

Chaz: Amina, I think that you are making a mistake…

Amina: The only mistake that I made was allowing you to waste my time. “You’re a vulture of the worst kind – a culture vulture of Black thought. I do not accept your invitation to participate


My grandfather’s work – our family’s work is a Black study, a study without end. “There are some parts of Blackness you just cannot have or imagine or grasp.” None of those parts are for sale, Mr. Roswell. “We are unbought and unbossed.”

Chaz: Amina…please…

Amina: [defiantly raising a Black Power fist in the air] MR. ROSWELL…BLACK GIRLS WILL NEVER BE FOR SALE!…Now, please leave.

Chaz: [Angered] Fine! I don’t need you or your family anyway. In my line of work, they will always be another. We coulda made millions, but you blew it. What a shame…

[With his pride hurt, Chaz angrily brushes past the family and heads out the room.]

[Chaz exits; Dr. X enters.]

Dr. X: Well I’m back, did I miss anything?

June: Just another day…

Dr. X: Okay. Well, Amina…have you decided – are you ready?

Amina: [smiling] Yes, I’m ready.

June: Baby, are you sure? You can wait…our memories will always be here when you are ready…

Amina: Yeah, grandma…I’m ready. I know that I hesitated earlier, but I now know that “we are the ones we’ve been waiting for.” Our future lies in our connection to Black history, past and present…I am ready to understand our freedom dreams.

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647 Katherine McKittrick, Twitter Post, April 4, 2018, 8:13 AM, https://mobile.twitter.com/demonicground/status/981550428927164416. This is a partial tweet from Dr. Katherine McKittrick. Dr. McKittrick is a Gender Studies Professor that explores the areas of diasporic and colonial histories; cultural geographies; black studies; theories of race; the arts.

648 McKittrick, Katherine McKittrick, Twitter Post, June 27, 2018, 9:31 AM, https://mobile.twitter.com/demonicground/status/1012010518985535488. This is another partial tweet from Dr. Katherine McKittrick.


650 June Jordan, "Poem for South African Women," in Passion New Poems 1977-1980 (Boston: Beacon Press, 1980). This line is in the last stanza of the poem. The poem was presented at the United Nations. That stanza also became the title of Alice Walker’s We Are the Ones We Have Been Waiting For: Inner Light in a Time of
[Amina walks over and lays down in the Animus. Dr. X. uploads the family memories to the
Animus to prepare for synchronization. Holding the hands of her father and grandmother, Amina
turns her head to the doctor and says:]

Amina: From dust to digital, let’s continue our story.

[Dr. X begins synchronization and Amina’s consciousness is transported within the Animus. The
beginning of a new beginning has begun.]

[Scene ends.]

FIN.

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Darkness. Walker’s book encourages its reader to believe that despite the daunting predicaments we find ourselves
in, we are prepared to create positive change.
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