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# CLAJOURNAL

OFFICIAL PUBLICATION of THE COLLEGE LANGUAGE ASSOCIATION



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Articles on Language and Literature  
Literary Criticism and Book Reviews  
Association News and Reports

## THE COLLEGE LANGUAGE ASSOCIATION



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# CLA JOURNAL

Official Publication of the College Language Association

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## About *CLAJ*

### I. General Publication Information

The *CLA Journal* (ISSN 0007-8549) is a multilingual peer-reviewed bi-annual publication by the College Language Association. It is issued in March and September of each year. The subscription price for *CLAJ* to non-members and to libraries is \$80.00 yearly in the United States, \$82.50 in Canada, and \$93.00 in other countries. The price of current single copies is \$42.75. The price of single copies of current Special Issues is \$43.75.

### II. *CLAJ* Mission Statement

Established in 1957, *CLAJ* is a multilingual, international publication that fosters socially engaged, innovative, and groundbreaking scholarship in language, literature, linguistics, and pedagogy cultivated by the diverse international membership of CLA. *CLAJ* is the voice of a community of scholars, the first in establishing a forum for intellectual discourse among black scholars in language and literary studies. Articles treating the languages and literatures of all nations will be deemed worthy of careful consideration for publication. In keeping with its desire to develop the study of the languages and literatures of Africa and its global diaspora as an important area of scholarship, *CLAJ* is committed to offering critical perspectives and new developments in the analysis of language, literature, and cultural studies representative of the diverse scholarly interests of its members while privileging the African diaspora and transcultural black identities.

*CLAJ* neither considers previously published material nor manuscripts submitted elsewhere.

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*CLAJ* requires standard formatting for all essays, including those submitted for consideration in special issues. Submissions that do not adhere to these specifications will not be considered for publication. For regular biannual issues, your anonymous manuscript should be submitted as an email attachment to Vershawn Ashanti Young aka dr. vay, *CLAJ* Editor, at [vershawn.young@uwaterloo.ca](mailto:vershawn.young@uwaterloo.ca).

- Manuscripts must be Microsoft Word documents, double spaced, with one-inch margins, and Times New Roman 12 pt. font.
- Manuscripts should be approximately 20-24 pages (7000-8000 words), which exclude footnotes and works cited.
- Formatting and citations should conform to *MLA Handbook* (8th Edition, 2016).
- *CLAJ* requires references in the form of footnotes.



Manuscripts should also be accompanied by a separate additional file that contains

- a cover letter with the author's name, address, email address, telephone number, and professional affiliation.
- an abstract of the essay that does not exceed 250 words formatted as a single-spaced page with the essay title and author's name.
- a biographical sketch of the author in approximately 100 words. (If the work is collaborative, a separate biographical sketch is required for each author.)
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The book review should

- include a brief summary of the book's central argument.
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- provide a frank evaluation of the book's strengths and weaknesses.
- maintain a collegial and constructive tone.
- adhere to MLA style guidelines.
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To propose a special issue, prospective guest editors need to

- submit a 500-word abstract describing the issue and its scholarly significance.
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- provide a timeline of completion.
- note that the special issue has a 100-page minimum.
- alternately, if the guest editor(s) plans an open call for papers (CFP), they should include a draft of the CFP and information regarding the circulation of the CFP.

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- develops and maintains timelines to ensure timely publication.
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- acts as a point of contact for reviewers and authors.
- copyedits the submitted essays.
- ensures each essay adheres to *CLAJ* formatting requirements (see Section IV).
- compiles the table of contents.
- writes an introduction contextualizing the submissions.
- sends all essays as a group in a zip file of individual Microsoft Word documents to *CLAJ* editor at [editor@clascholars.org](mailto:editor@clascholars.org).
- ensures that the required information described in Section IV accompanies the essays.
- provides evidence to the *CLAJ* Editor that all contributors have paid memberships to CLA
- submits their own biographical sketch (100 words), full name and affiliation, telephone number, email address, and mailing address.

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## THE COLLEGE LANGUAGE ASSOCIATION

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### A PROFESSIONAL ORGANIZATION OF COLLEGE TEACHERS OF ENGLISH AND FOREIGN LANGUAGES

The College Language Association, founded in 1937 by a group of Black scholars and educators, is an organization of college teachers of English and foreign languages which serves the academic, scholarly and professional interests of its members and the collegiate communities they represent. Since 1957, the association has published the *CLA Journal*, a peer-reviewed biannual publication featuring scholarly research and reviews of books in the areas of language, literature, linguistics and pedagogy.

#### The College Language Association . . .

- Fosters high professional standards for teachers of language and literature and promotes productive scholarship among its members;
- Publishes scholarly books of critical essays and bibliographical references;
- Encourages interest in creative writing;
- Holds an annual convention for presentation of scholarly papers, brought in by the association;
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## What's New Bout *CLAJ*?: Introduction to Issue 64.2

Happy holidays as we exit 2021! And welcome to a fresh season of *CLAJ*. As the new editor of *CLAJ*, I offer gratitude to the past editor, the inimitable Dr. Sandra Shannon of Howard University, who took the helm of *CLAJ* from the late Dr. Cason L. Hill of Morehouse College. There is a rich legacy of leadership in editing this journal. I have very big shoes to fill. I am deeply honored that the CLA community and the Executive Committee found me suitable to take on this charge. I promise to do due diligence. Undergirding this diligence is my express commitment to a fierce scholarly, creative, organizational, and social truth-telling.

The previous editors of *CLAJ* were esteemed scholars from highly regarded HBCU's—a wonderful historical fact in the development of *CLAJ*. I, however, have never worked at an HBCU. But this kinda ain't my fault. So, let me briefly connect a personal anecdote about a personal experience with interviewing at an HBCU to a few new directions *CLAJ* will take.

A few years ago, I applied for and was offered a position as English Department Chair at an HBCU. The interview came at a very inopportune time—smack dab in the middle of my yearly family vacation to Disney World in Florida. I explained my already planned vacation to the dean, but she said I must come during that time or lose the opportunity. So, I made the accommodation, leaving my laughing, loving kids to interview mid-week. The interview was wonderful. I loved it. During the exit chat with the dean, I told her I was heading back to Florida for a last full day of vacay with the fam. I distinctly recall saying that I was then making a 28-hour drive from the South back to Canada over the weekend. Well, what had happened was the dean sent the final job offer to me via email (not a phone call) after working hours on Friday and gave me 48 hours to accept. That brought us to Sunday. I didn't check email til Monday morning round 9am. Seeing that I had inadvertently missed the Sunday deadline, I promptly accepted the offer by calling and emailing, but she told me I had missed the window. It was too late. And the job went back to the white male English professor who was the then interim chair.

I am using this episode to express some insight I learned from this experience and to connect that to some perspectives and directions of *CLAJ* under my editorship. I learned, for instance, that all institution types of higher education are flawed in some ways and wonderful in others. Thus, *CLAJ* will remain committed to advancing the work of erudite scholars and authors at two-year colleges, trade schools, four-year colleges, universities, and independent scholars. These include HBCU's and other institution types. In other words, some of us work at predominantly white-serving and Latinx-serving institutions but, as you know, we are no less committed to the prestige and goals of CLA and *CLAJ*. So let my

example signify (double entendre intended) on how HBCU's have been known on occasion to be skittish about hiring certain Blackademics, and have been known to advance certain status quo, mainstream ideals over radical Black ones.

Dismissing the fallacy that HBCU's constitute a righteous Black monolith allows me to announce the erosion of another fallacy—the old-timey, fading one that leads Black people to hate they Black English in academic spaces. Yeah, some folx still sayin that African American language cain't be up in no real and respected academic journal. But Obama said, “Yes, we can!” And he said it with Black swag. So, we sho will too.

And peep this: the other fallacy kicked out is the one that holds creative writing as subordinate to scholarly output. That ain't nothin but alibis!

Gone too is the fallacy that the personal ain't professional. Cuz, yes it is! That's just a jig to keep Black and Brown peoples' experiences, languages, and lives outta scholarly dialogue and public view. If you cain't theorize about the personal, it's like you don't exist. But we do –quite beautifully and boldly. So that fallacy cain't stay here!

Now, let me ask you: What do you think about the fallacy that holds that if it ain't written in English, it cain't be printed in *CLAJ*?

Please don't be worried (my word) if you peep an article in *CLAJ* that is written completely in German, French, or Spanish or any of the world languages, in addition to Black English, that we speak, write, and teach. And don't ignore them if you don't know the languages. It ain't your fault; it's the fault and effects of hegemony and white North American supremacy that advances that only White Standard English (whateva that is) is the dominant world language. But say it ain't so, cuz that straight disrespects the fact that in some African nations kids grow up speaking four or five or more different dialects and languages, with prowess and agility. We probably need to adopt Africological perspectives on languages and language use. (Am I sensing a special issue here?)

All this is to advise you to let your eyes glance over the words and pages written in different languages. Let your mind meditate on cognate phrases that you can decipher in the other language. And maybe seek out a translator for yourself. Do some work as a reader. Learn something new about the work our colleagues in the languages do.

Now, let me get off my soapbox because I believe the best thing an editor can do is to *say* as little as possible in the space of the journal. The internal pages of *CLAJ* belong to you, the CLA members, whose work is accepted for publication. The editor should be bout dat action. In other words, I will not hold forth as if I'm

writing an article in *CLAJ* when I write future introductions. So, switching gears, let me say what is in this issue, what's new and different, and invite both your patience and collaboration with *CLAJ*.

In this, my inaugural issue, you will find:

An essay by Nathaniel Norment—“Some Results of Using Culture-referenced Prompts for Pre and Post-test Writing Examinations at an HBCU.” This is about teaching writing to Black students at an HBCU and the use of writing prompts in doing so.

An article on three giant Black writers: “One Must Say Yes: Poetic Acts of Affirmation in Works by Baldwin, Fanon, and Ellison” by Jacob Pagano.

An introduction to creative writing in *CLAJ* by Dr. Doris Davenport. This piece highlights several poems published in this issue of *CLAJ*: “Done Dem Bones” and “Ms. Betty's Fro” by Sandy Govan; the regional and place-based poems “Gary, Indiana: A Poem” and “Augusta, Georgia” and also another called “Monroe” all by Seretha Williams.

An autobiographical essay “Testament” by Angelou Robinson on coming into his own sexual identity.

“Commentary on Why Pedagogy Attention Is Needed in *CLAJ*” by Dr. Monique Akassi.

As to our book review section, you will find three insightful reviews:

*Transcendence and the Africana Literary Enterprise* by Christel Temple. Reviewed by Inte'a DeShields.

*White Rage: The Unspoken Truth of Our Racial Divide* by Carol Anderson. Reviewed by Reginald Bess.

*The Tradition* by poet Jericho Brown. Reviewed by Reginald Bess.

By now, you probably peeped what's different: *CLAJ* will also publish high-quality, peer-juried, creative writing under the guidance of *CLAJ* Assistant Editor, Dr. Doris Davenport. *CLAJ* will also publish articles on pedagogy and teaching, which may include lesson and unit plans, teaching tips, and more under the insightful eye of *CLAJ* Assistant Editor, Dr. Monique Akassi. *CLAJ* will also reprint one historical and influential article from a past issue. In this regard, *CLAJ* also extends the invitation to you to suggest reprints of past *CLAJ* articles. What would you like for us to read again? I also extend the invitation to experiment with and publish in the languages or languages mixed with English, something like the writings of Gloria Anzaldua as shown in her *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987). Let's try it. If CLA is bout languages, then let's be bout it in *CLAJ*.

Look, *CLAJ* needs you. You notice that this issue is dominated by writings from cis-gendered men, even though at least of us is “out.” We need more voices. More from and about women. More from and about trans. More from and about you!

I just got started back in April 2021, and I’m honestly already behind the 8-ball. *CLAJ* needs CLA members to step up and show up to review articles. Message me if you can and want to review articles. Otherwise, your and other members’ work will languish as I struggle to find reviewers to keep our high mark of double-blind peer review. I am really having trouble finding reviewers. Our board of reviewers are taxed and maxed. We need others to join this work.

Also, if you have an article submitted, it will get reviewed. But, as I said, I am having serious difficulty securing two qualified reviewers for each article. And sometimes a third is needed. That said, keep sending them in. *CLAJ* thrives and only survives through your writings and scholarship.

The next few issues of *CLAJ* will be guest-edited issues. You can look for the Afrofuturism issue to be guest-edited by the talented Dr. Terrence Tucker and the sophisticated Dr. Shelby Crosby. You also will be treated to two—yes, I said two—guest-edited issues by the incomparable Dr. Dana Williams on Black literary heritages. After these, we return to the general constellation of writings from you. And, let me just say this: we need a guest-edited issue on trans. So, who gone step up and show out?

And lastly, I wish to thank *CLAJ*’s two new freelance copy editors that worked on this issue: Mr. Chris Colvin of Clark Atlanta University and Ms. Regina Blackwell of Hampton, Virginia.

Enjoy this first issue of the new *CLAJ*.

Ashé,

dr. vay

## Commentary on Why Pedagogy Attention Is Needed in *CLAJ*

Monique Akassi

In 2021, many educators and students of African descent have faced invisible barriers. These include whether critical race theory should be taught in schools during the novel Covid-19. Additionally, the #BlackLivesMatter movement responds to the ongoing routine of African Americans losing their lives during a time that mimics W.E.B. Du Bois’ declaration that “the problem of the twentieth century is the color line.” While the debates continue in higher education, a plethora of pedagogues have become disconnected with students of African descent due to a lack of effective Africana pedagogies to cultivate pupils’ authentic voices through critical thinking, writing, oral communication, and research skills.

Indeed, many pedagogues have been trained to apply mainstream pedagogical frameworks to all students as a one-size-fits-all approach. At the same time, little attention is focused on the rhetorical situation, such as the target audience. Indeed, a one size fits all approach is often results in many mainstream students benefiting from high-impact teaching methodologies that intersect with their Western culture. However, there is a disconnection for many marginalized students of African descent. Systemic racism is on the rise, and the colonizer is often in the classroom during these unprecedented times. Furthermore, the politics of diversity, inclusion, and critical race theory are in conversation with Stanley Fish’s arguments. He contends in his controversial book, *Save The World On Your Own Time*, “[i]t is a question finally of what business we are in, and we are in the education business, not the democracy business.” In comparison, bell hooks suggests in her work, *Teaching To Transgress*, that “[t]o dispel the notion” that the college writing class “should always be a safe, harmonious space” remains problematic for students silenced and ostracized in the academy.

In *Post-Colonial Composition Pedagogy: Using The Culture of Marginalized Students To Teach Writing*, I challenge English composition educators committed to preventing a cultural underclass of English language writers to disrupt, interrogate, investigate, and publish more scholarship on research that helps shape high-impact practices for marginalized pupils. Using Africana based cultural practices to connect and identify with minority students will simultaneously build bridges to promote more cross-cultural connections through ongoing learning and teaching through an Africana gaze.

Moreover, while students continue to be oppressed for using their own languages in schools and on the streets, Vershawn Ashanti Young and Aja Y.



Martinez acknowledge in *Code-Meshing as World English: Pedagogy, Policy, Performance* “the difficulties in implementing a code-meshing pedagogy” but argue that “all writers and speakers benefit when we demystify academic language and encourage students to explore the plurality of the English language in both unofficial and official spaces.”

Therefore, the need for more pedagogical attention in the CLAJ is more relevant now than ever before. During this moment in history where systemic racism in academia needs dismantling, educators can become liberators to assist minority students in changing from invisible to visible, unheard to heard, and alienated to appreciated. Ultimately, CLA members can consider contributing to this innovative pedagogical inclusion by implementing scholarly works in pedagogy, such as innovative lessons, lesson plans, unit plans, teaching ideas, articles, etc. In the words of James Baldwin, “[t]he paradox of education is precisely this— that as one begins to become conscious, one begins to examine the society in which he is being educated.” As CLA members, let us raise pedagogical consciousnesses together and examine our society through insightful lenses.

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## Some Results of Using Culture-referenced Prompts for Pre and Post-test Writing Examinations at an HBCU

**Nathaniel Norment, Jr.**  
Morehouse College

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*Culture is the totality of [Black] people's thought and practice by which they celebrate themselves, recreate themselves, and introduce themselves to history, and [to] humanity.*

—Maulana Karenga

*A people without the knowledge of their past history, origin, and culture is like a tree without roots.*

—Marcus Garvey

*[O]ne could argue that the kind and degree of writing ability assessed by a specific prompt may be determined by the nature of that prompt, particularly by its cognitive, linguistic, and rhetorical demands and by the nature of the social [cultural] context in which the prompt places the writer.*

—Karen L. Greenberg

*What you learn at an HBCU is you do not have to fit into somebody's limited perspective on what it means to be young, gifted, and [B]lack.*

—Kamala Harris

*HBCUs are unique sites of inquiry and poised to be at the forefront of conversations about race and writing because of our institutional contexts and the student populations with whom we work each day.*

—Karen Keaton Jackson, Hope Jackson, and Dawn N. Hicks Tafari

#### Abstract

Over the past decades, much of the research in composition has focused on students' writing proficiency and writing performance. Yet considerably few studies have examined the effects of essay prompts or topics on students' writing performance. This study analyzes the effects of culture-referenced essay prompts on the writing quality of four hundred and eleven African American male students enrolled at Morehouse College. The population of subjects for this study includes students required to register for freshman English composition 101, freshman English composition 102, or freshman English composition 103. The pre-tests and post-test results reported a decrease in the number of students writing at the Novice level and an increase in the number of students' essays at the Intermediate, Advanced, and Proficient levels. Writings samples of each proficiency level of Novice, Intermediate, Proficient, and Advanced are included.

## Introduction

A recent book edited by Staci M. Perryman-Clark and Collin Lamont Craig, *Black Perspectives in Writing Program Administration: From the Margins to the Center*, focuses on Black students, Black faculty, Black Writing Program Administrators, and Black experiences in higher education. They present a framework that incorporates three principles that represent a Black perspective in Writing Program Administration (WPA) work: (1) African-centered pedagogical materials are placed at the center of the curriculum; (2) programmatic assessment measures are designed with Black student success in mind; and (3) successful writing programs understand that they can implement African-centered pedagogy and antiracist writing assessment practices and still support all students. Several chapters in the book point to the advantages of centering the teaching of writing to African American students from an African-centered point of view. Writing curricula must provide African American students with content that facilitates critical thinking skills and enhance their written language skills in all types of writing. Furthermore, the goal of assessing African American students should be to accurately test the stylistic devices, syntactic, knowledge, and organizational structures that may be linguistically and culturally specific for African American students.

For example, in 1969, I made site visits to Clark Atlanta, Fisk, Howard, and Morehouse to review their writing curricula and learn their strategies and pedagogy for teaching writing to Black students. That same year, I was hired by Mina Shaughnessy to teach English in the Search for Education, Elevation, and Knowledge (SEEK) Program at The City College of New York (CCNY). Thereafter, the CCNY's SEEK English Program developed curricula that incorporated readings such as poetry from the likes of Langston Hughes, June Jordan, Gwendolyn Brooks, Audre Lorde, and Amiri Baraka; Richard Wright's *Black Boy*, Zora Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*; James Baldwin's *Go Tell It On the Mountain*, poetry from the likes of Langston Hughes, June Jordan, Gwendolyn Brooks, Audre Lorde, and Amiri Baraka, and other Black writings into the SEEK English curriculum. Back then, many faculty members at PWIs did not have the experience of teaching writing to Black students. From my own experiences working at Morehouse, however, I believe that HBCUs had, and continue to have, a long-established history of improving the writing skills of Black students.

Many colleges and universities have some system to assess and place their students into writing courses at the entry level. Others have instituted Direct Self Placement (DSP), which permits students to select the course they think they need to improve their writing. Placement and pre-tests measure students' readiness for writing instruction within a composition curricular sequence. Writing-placement systems are established to protect the academic level of the course, support

retention into the second year, and maintain and enrich faculty conversation about writing instruction. In 2018, all first-time freshmen and transfer students at Morehouse College took an English placement or pre-test examination. Based on their test results, students are placed into English 101 and English 102, a two-semester freshman composition writing sequence. Writing and analytical skills are enhanced through extensive work in expository, argumentative, and documented essays. Course activities require exploring a variety of perspectives in different disciplines and cultures, emphasizing works by African American authors and scholars.

The purpose of a writing prompt is to invite students to think about, develop a perspective about, and write about a topic. Writing prompts introduce and focus the writing topic and stimulate learners to write. It may be an open-ended sentence, a question, a topic, or a scenario that generates the writing. Any prompt or topic used to elicit writing samples will give some students an advantage. No one prompt or topic significantly influences students' writing performance at different levels. In different modes of discourse, topics designed to incorporate positive culture-referenced references may develop and enhance self-esteem and self-efficacy, thus build confidence in African American college students to produce highly proficient writing samples. The term "culture-referenced" describes any topic or prompt incorporating values, attitudes, and information relevant to African American culture.

Furthermore, culture-referenced includes culturally, socially, linguistically, and historically determined aspects of African American life. Some of the topics used in this study included: (1) "Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced"-James Baldwin; (2) "Education is our passport to the future, for tomorrow belongs to the people who prepare for it today"-Malcolm X; (3) "When you control a man's thinking, you do not have to worry about his actions"-Carter G. Woodson; (4) "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere"-Martin Luther King, Jr.; (5) "Say it loud. I'm Black, and I'm proud"-James Brown; (6) "Oppression makes a wise man mad"- Frederick Douglass; and (7) "A people without the knowledge of their past history, origin, and culture is like a tree without roots"- Marcus Garvey (See Appendix A).

The importance of topics and prompts to the writing performance of students has been emphasized by many composition theorists and researchers (Brown, Hilgers and Marsella, 1991; Gabrielson, Gordon, and Engelhard, 1995; Greenberg, 1981, 1982, 1993; Hoetker, 1982; Hoetker and Brossell, 1989; Huot, 1990, 1996; Keech, 1979; Norment, 1997; Reid, 1990; Ruth and Murphy, 1988; and Smith, Hull, Land, Moore, Ball, Durham, Hickey, and Ruzich, 1985). In addition, some researchers have suggested that the modes of discourse and rhetorical specifications

in essay prompts affect students' writing performance (Brossell, 1982; Engelhard, Gordon, and Gabrielson, 1992; Murphy and Ruth, 1993; Oliver, 1995; Prater and Padia, 1983; Quellmalz, Copell and Chou, 1982; and Ruth and Murphy, 1988). Oliver suggests that writing topics may also affect students in ways that are often challenging to predict or control. Furthermore, ethnic or racial background may influence the writers' perspective of the writing task (426). However, the way writing assessments affect specific groups is not at all clear.

Several researchers have questioned the "incongruences between the communicative behavior or language (context and content) of the [tests] and test constructor and the students who take the tests" (Brown, 1986; Fox, 1990; Hoover and Politzer, 1982; Taylor and Payne, 1983; Taylor and Lee, 1991; and Vaughn-Cooke, 1983). These results suggest that the writing performance of African American students may be affected by specific language and communicative incongruencies in the writing tasks. Taylor and Lee describe five possible sources of culturally based communication and language bias in standardized tests: situational bias, linguistic bias, communicative style bias, cognitive style bias, and interpretation bias (68). They further point out that African American students face a two-fold challenge: performing required tasks and demonstrating abilities on the tasks by manipulating communicative and language codes, which are frequently different from their indigenous systems. The study of language within the social context in which it occurs (i.e., the communicative (cultural) environment) led to the identification of variances in how information is imparted among and within cultural groups. Taylor and Lee note that "[t]he manner of imparting information is often referred to as communicative style. The communicative style used by an individual ...results from a combination of socially and culturally determined factors such as values, interactional rules, and perceptions of events. Such differences in communicative style may interfere with the standardized testing process" (7172). Because of these language and communicative incongruences, African American students are frequently assessed invalidly. Either they fail to demonstrate the desired cognitive, social, or linguistic behavior because of flawed [or low] expectations or of their misinterpretations, or they fail to demonstrate the desired behavior within the communication and language frameworks demanded by the tests (80). The production of written texts is psycholinguistic and sociolinguistic act. It has four distinct steps: prewriting, drafting, revising, and editing. To generate ideas to develop his point of view, the writer draws upon life experiences in cultural and social content. Misguidedly, some researchers have posited that mastery of language is associated with cognitive abilities and concluded that African American learners are at a disadvantage engaging in the writing process. Designing culturally relevant writing prompts, writing programs, and assessments acknowledge culture's importance for academic success.

Greenberg reports that the research evidence did not clarify the connections between specific features or dimensions of writing prompts and students' writing performance. Researchers and practitioners have relatively little consensus about what constitutes an effective writing prompt—for either instruction or assessment (5). The effect of the cultural reference or the cultural context of essay topics has not been investigated. Consequently, this study is designed to examine directly whether (and how) culture-referenced topics affect the writing of African American students. Kroll and Reid discovered that the number of required tasks was related to the difficulty of a prompt. However, while Ruth and Murphy specifically suggest that the topic functions as a springboard—a prompt. Thus the "meaning potential" of any given task is relative to linguistic, cognitive, and social (cultural) reverberations set off in the respondents (413). Since writing prompts affect an essay's content, proficiency, and rhetorical style, writing prompts must be culture-referenced. Therefore, in designing prompts, HBCUs and PWIs writing programs must consider students' culture and linguistic background.

James proposes that "the writing instruction at historically Black colleges and universities should reflect African American students' voices, experiences, and heritage" (35). Essay topics associated with Black cultural history and cultural identity may develop positive self-esteem and self-image "through cues embedded in the text of the topics" that can affect the writing performance of African American students (Norment 37). Research by composition specialists and linguists confirms the observation that aspects of African American culture are reflected in the grammatical, stylistic, and discourse features of African American students' written prose and written language performance (Ball, 1992; Cunningham, 1995; Fowler, 1985; Linn, 1978; and Norment, 1990, 1995). Cooper reports that cultural and dialectical differences affect the writing styles of African American college students in several ways. Culturally based stylistic aspects of their writing may be indicative of cultural knowledge and values. Ladson-Billing posits that culturally relevant teaching [that] uses student culture in order to maintain it and to transcend the adverse effects of the dominant culture" (19). Culturally relevant pedagogy engages African American students in critical thinking about their culture and history. It also helps them develop self-worth about themselves and self-awareness about their families, communities, and society.

### Research on Effects of Essay Prompts

Much of the research in composition over past decades has focused on some aspects of students' writing proficiency and writing performance; yet, considerably few studies have examined the effects of essay prompts or topics on the writing performance of students (Brossell and Ash, 1984; Conlan and Chambers, 1987;

Greenberg, 1981, 1982 and 1993; Hoetker and Brossell, 1986, 1989; Hoetker, 1982; Murphy and Ruth, 1993; Ruth and Murphy, 1984 and 1988; Smith et al., 1985) and the rhetorical specifications in topics (Brossell, 1982; Engelhard, et al. 1992; Oliver 1995; Prater, 1985; Quellmalz, et al., 1982). This research has been influenced by the large-scale writing assessments used to place students into basic writing and freshman composition courses. Millward notes that while acknowledging the need to place students in their proper courses, many remain concerned about how the testing situation affects writing performance; there is also a concern that these exams have a more significant impact than simply determining proficiency levels (100). Even though various studies have examined the writing performance of African American students (Ball, 1992, 2009; Chaplin, 1987; Cooper, 1977; Cunningham, 1995; Fowler, 1985; Norment, 1990, 1995, 1997; Scott, 1981; Smitherman and Wright, 1984; Wilson, 1985; and Zeni and Thomas, 1990), only one (i.e., Norment 1997) has investigated the direct effects of culture-referenced essay prompts or topics on their writing. Writing assignments on different prompts provide teachers and researchers material to assess better the effectiveness of curricula content, instruction, pedagogy, and student's writing performance at different proficiency levels.

Melzer observes that "few composition researchers have made [writing assignments] the focus of significant study" despite their ability to reveal "a great deal about their [instructors'] goals and values, as well as the goals and values of their disciplines" (3). Research on writing assignments has typically discussed assignments in two ways: descriptions of assignments and prescriptions of effective design. Much of the early research on assignments were studies that sought to describe broader practices of writing instruction in university contexts. Melzer's research on assignments across the disciplines draws on 2,101 writing assignments from 100 post-secondary institutions across the United States. This research provides a large-scale description of the purposes, audiences, and genres faculty assign in academic writing contexts (6). Melzer also reports that faculty design assignments with limited purposes and frequently prompt students to write to the teacher-as-examiner. In other words, faculty most frequently "ask students to display the 'right' answer or the 'correct' definition to the instructor through a recall of facts" (90). Gardner suggests that writing assignments should "define the writing task, explore the expectations, [and] provide the supporting materials and activities" (36). Any prompt or topic used to elicit writing samples will give some students an advantage. However, no one prompt or topic significantly influences the writing performance of students at different grade levels. In other modes of discourse, this researcher proposes that topics designed to incorporate positive culturally oriented references may develop and enhance self-esteem and build

confidence in African American students to produce highly proficient writing samples. Throughout this paper, the term "culture-referenced" describes any topic or prompt that incorporates values, attitudes, perspectives, and information relevant to African American culture. Furthermore, culture-referenced includes culturally, socially, linguistically, and historically determined aspects of African American culture.

### Culturally Unfamiliar Writing Prompts

Student writers will not necessarily come to an exam with the same cultural and linguistic frame of reference. Differing cultural backgrounds can potentially cause different interpretations of writing prompts and lead to unexpected responses. Ruth and Murphy claim that the meaning of any particular writing prompt depends on the "linguistic, cognitive, and social reverberations set off in the respondents" (413). They further note that "the language of the topic and the general knowledge of the participants interact in a writing test to determine what meanings the topic may elicit." The intended meaning of the prompt may not be the same as the understood meaning of the test taker. The understood meaning will be dependent upon a range of test taker factors such as, "inadequate control of linguistic and semantic knowledge, weak commitment to succeeding on the test, inadequate world knowledge, and inexperience with testing contexts and conventions" (415). Reed similarly contends that the prompt topic "should be about a subject that all potential test takers have enough relevant information on, or opinions of, to be able to write to the best of their ability" (110). Kroll and Reid state that "cultural interference could cause test takers to misconstrue or even miss the point of writing prompts. Those without the assumed cultural reference could be disadvantaged by specific writing prompts, especially those who assume Western cultural values" (236). At many PWIs and HBCUs, the writing prompts used on placement examinations are often unrelated to and unrelated to African American students' life experiences and circumstances. Consequently, they do not engage students in critical intellectual thought that demonstrate their knowledge of academic knowledge.

### The Rationale for Culture-referenced Prompts

Although there may be some difficulty in determining how linguistic patterns correlate with culture, the Whorf hypothesis suggests that languages not only report information but shape our perceptions of reality. It suggests that linguistic communities differ in their perceptual environmental experiences and that language functions like a filter that molds one's perception of reality and determines thought. According to Geertz, culture is a historically transmitted pattern of meanings



embodied in symbols of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic form. People communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge and attitudes toward life. He writes that every culture provides an unexamined and mostly unconscious set of beliefs, attitudes, and labels through which we judge the world. There are at least three major views about the nature of culture. One is that culture is knowledge or the accumulation of information, values, and experiences (89). According to this view, culture can and does accumulate collective and ancestry memory, and that the distribution of knowledge is such that "linking understandings" are maintained. A second view is that culture consists of "conceptual structures that create the central reality of a people so that they inhabit the world they imagine" (Geertz 89). Culture is inter-subjectively shared so that everyone assumes that others in the cultural group see and interpret the same things they experience. A third concept views culture as knowledge and hence culture as a constructed reality. Culture is a set of learned systems of meaning, is communicated through natural language and other symbolic systems, has representational, directive, and effectual functions, and can create specific senses of reality. Kirkland notes that "all writing practices are evocatively tied to culture and society" (86). Writing prompts are only effective if they invite students to construct meaning from their cultural center and write in the language of who they are and from where they come. Therefore, writing teachers and evaluators must grant students the right to express themselves in ways that honor their culture, history, community, and personal experiences to fulfill the requirements of the writing assignment. In this way, writing prompts can be reliable means by which writers from different linguistic backgrounds can enhance their writing skills.

Nobles defines culture as "the process that gives people a general design for living and patterns for interpreting their reality; it implies that there are cultural laws consistent with the requirements of the people's cultural deep structure" (52). Nobles further claims that aspects of culture "are ideology, ethos, and worldview; its 'factors' are ontology, cosmology, and axiology; and its 'manifestations' consist of behavior, values, and attitudes. Hence, the African worldview comprises the fundamental assumptions, beliefs, and attitudes toward life, toward all of nature, and toward the universe that characterizes African (American) people, and thus constitutes the philosophical--ideological basis of African [American] culture" (53). He further states that culture is the process that "gives people a general design for living and patterns for interpreting their reality. Culture implies that there are cultural laws consistent with the requirements of the people's cultural deep structure" (54). Kaplan further suggests that the "organization of a paragraph written in any language by individuals will carry the dominant imprint of those individuals' culturally coded orientations to the phenomenological world" (1).

This research suggests that written language maps the individuals' experiences in culture—or denotative meaning—and expresses the aroused qualities of such experiences (such as feelings, images, and relationships to words and symbols)—or connotative meaning. Written language is shaped by the cultural and linguistic background of an individual. Writing assignments that respond to culture-referenced prompts construct ways African American students can express their aspirations, thoughts, and feelings about themselves and their communities using the symbols and signals of their cultural and linguistic background.

Essay topics aligned toward cultural heritage and cultural identity may develop positive self-esteem and self-image through cues embedded in the text of the topics that can affect the writing performance of African American students. Research by linguists and composition specialists confirms the observation that aspects of African American culture in the grammatical, stylistic, and discourse features of African American students' written prose and written language performance (Ball, 1992; Chaplin, 1987; Cooper, 1977; Cunningham, 1995; Fowler, 1985; Linn, 1978; Lipscomb, 1978; Norment, 1990, 1995; Smitherman and Wright, 1984; Scott, 1981; Wilson, 1985; and Zeni and Thomas, 1990). Culturally determined differences within a language occur at phonology, syntax, vocabulary, or referential context levels. The variables that account consistently and predictably for these differences include social status, age, sex, ethnicity, and written language proficiencies (Wolfram and Fasold 372). Cooper reports that cultural and dialectical differences affect the writing styles of African American college students in several ways. Culturally based stylistic aspects of their writing are indicative of cultural history and values (7). Redd writes that "there is some evidence that having students read and write about African American texts develops more positive attitudes toward writing" (99-100). Incorporating African American cultural readings in the writing curricula provides African American students with content that facilitates critical thinking skills and enhances analytical thinking in their writing.

### The Present Study

While researchers have examined the educational experiences of African American male students at historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs), researchers have neglected the writing skills experiences of African American male students at these institutions. Studies reporting their reading experiences usually call attention to African American male students' lack of reading preparation. This qualitative study highlights the importance of HBCUs in enhancing African American male-written language skills. Findings provide evidence that culturally relevant writing prompts contribute to the improvement of African American male writing.

The present study differs from previous research on the writing ability of African American students in that it addresses the gap in both qualitative and quantitative research. For example, although research has been conducted on the effects of African American English (AAE) dialect on the quality of African American students' writing, almost no research has been conducted on the effects of culture/ethnicity referenced essay topics contributing to their written language performance. Cooper suggests that cultural and dialect differences affect the writing styles of African American writers in several different ways. Some stylistic features involve confusing word choice, grammatical deviation, or incorrect word order. Other culturally based stylistic aspects of writing include extensive use of imagery in expository and argumentative writing. Second, much of the research on the characteristics of African American students' writing has focused on the effects of grammar/mechanical errors (7). Most linguists acknowledge the legitimacy of African American English (AAE), African American Language (AAL), Black English (BE), Black English Vernacular (BEV), or Black English Dialect (BED) as a correct, grammatical, standard model of communicating African American culture. Third, most research has classified African American students as basic, remedial, or inexperienced writers.

The purpose of this study is to examine the effects that culture-referenced essay topics have on the quality of writing produced by African American male college students within the context of Morehouse College's writing program. It should be noted that some colleges and universities have been moving away from administering placement examinations and are permitting students to select directed self-placement (DSP). Results of college placement exams assign students to the appropriate composition course designed to improve their writing skills. In contrast, DSP permits students to select the course they think they need to improve their writing. Culture-referenced topics establish a context framework for African American students' responses in which a "common linguistic, cultural, and social frame of reference is shared." This study examines two specific characteristics: (1) the overall quality of writing produced by the students (e.g., development, content, usage, and mechanics) and (2) the content, structure, and task of the topic. This study presents the effects of culture-referenced topics on the quality of writing produced by the 2018 cohorts of students at Morehouse College, an all-male liberal arts college. Culture-referenced topics establish a context framework for African American students' responses in which a common linguistic, cultural, and social frame of reference is shared. We developed two specific research questions as follows:

**Question 1:** Are there interactions among the prompts and topics that incorporate African American culture-referenced content and the quality of students' writing samples elicited within the college pre-test and post-test examinations?

**Question 2:** Is there a relationship between the prompts and topics that incorporate African American culture-referenced content and the syntactic complexity, coherence, fluency, organization, and length of essay in male college students' writing elicited within the college pre-test and post-test examinations?

**Hypotheses 1:** Culture-referenced prompts will enhance the writing performance of African American males.

**Hypotheses 2:** Writing prompts and topics that incorporate African American culture-referenced content will affect the syntactic complexity, coherence, fluency, organization, and length of essay of male college students' writing.

Based on the research on the writing abilities of African American students, it was expected that the quality of writing would be different for each proficiency level, and students would receive higher ratings on each of the variables. It was also expected that the levels for writing quality on the college's placement topics would range from novice to advanced. The culture-referenced writing prompt would elicit better writing from the students, and these essays would receive higher scores. Finally, it was expected that the students would receive higher ratings on the post-test than they received on the pre-test regardless of the writing prompt.

## Subjects

This study involves 411 African American male students selected from 673 students at Morehouse College. The study included students required to register for freshman English composition 101 and 102. Ninety percent of students were between the ages of 17 and 18 years old, approximately 3% were between the ages 19-21 years old, and 1% were between 23-5 years old. The socioeconomic status of the subjects included students from middle-class and working-class backgrounds. The intended academic majors of the students varied. The sample population was African American males from the following cities: Atlanta, Austin, Baltimore, Birmingham, Boston, Buffalo, Charleston, Charlotte, Chicago, Cincinnati, Cleveland, Dallas, Denver, Detroit, Fort Lauderdale, Gary, Hartford, Hempstead, Houston, Indianapolis, Jackson, Jacksonville, Kansas City, Lagos, Las Vegas, Little Rock, Los Angeles, Memphis, Miami, Milwaukee, Montgomery, Nashville, Newark, New Haven, New Orleans, New York, Oakland, Philadelphia, Phoenix, Pittsburgh, Raleigh, Richmond, Saint Louis, Savannah, Silver Springs, Tallahassee, Washington D.C., and many other cities and small towns.

## Essay Prompts Topics

As the researcher, I selected and piloted the writing prompts. The culture-referenced topics incorporated characteristics based on the research on the writing abilities of African American students (Brossell and Ash, 1984; Conlan

and Chambers, 1987; Greenberg, 1981, 1982 and 1993; Hoetker and Brossell, 1989; Hoetker, 1982; Norment, 1997; Ruth and Murphy, 1984 and 1988; Smith et al., 1985). It also incorporated research related to language patterns influenced by cultural and linguistic contexts (Ball, 1992; Chaplin, 1987; Cooper, 1977; Carson, 1988; Eller, 1989; Fowler, 1985; Hoover and Politzer, 1982; Linn, 1978; Norment, 1990 and 1995; Scott, 1981; Smitherman and Wright, 1984; Wilson, 1985). The culture-referenced prompts selected for use as pre-tests and post-tests adhered to similar guidelines suggested by Conlan and Chambers, who recommended that topics should be: (1) clearly stated, using language familiar to the audience, (2) appropriate to the population being tested, (3) reasonable for the allotted writing time, (4) suited to the purpose of the test, (5) accessible to the broadest range of students, (6) enjoyable to write about, and (7) capable of producing writing across the range of student abilities (9). For this study, culture-referenced essay topics are defined as those related to the African American cultural knowledge base that writers are assumed to draw upon to respond to the essay topic or prompt. The prompts/topics appear in Appendix A.

### Instructions to Students

Directions for the pre-and post-test essay: The purpose of this pre-test essay is to determine how well you can write an academic essay. The purpose of this post-test essay is to determine if your writing has improved beyond the pre-test. You have fifty minutes to write an essay on the topic you select. Read each topic carefully and choose the one on which you feel you can do your best writing. Start planning your paper after you choose your essay topic. The organization of your essay is essential. A well-written essay has a central idea directly related to the topic. It has a clear organizational plan, develops points with support, is coherent and logical, and is free of frequent errors in grammar, mechanics, word choice, and sentence structure used in Standard English. (See Assessment Standards for Essay Rubric –Appendix B). Below are three topics. Select only one to write. Next, read the topic carefully to understand and discuss precisely what it means to you. Finally, write an essay (3-5 coherent paragraphs) in which you discuss whatever meaning the following quotation has for you: (See Appendix A).

### Testing Procedures

Pre-test and post-test Writing Measures: Students selected a prompt for writing essays on pre-test and post-test topics (See Appendix A). The writing samples, produced as responses to topic questions, were collected by each instructor who taught a freshman composition class. The students were requested to write on the topics during their scheduled class periods (50 minutes). They were not asked to write a specific number of words.

### Training of Readers for Scoring

The cohort of six readers included: (1) three men and three women; (2) five African Americans and one white person; (3) four faculty English instructors, one political science instructor, and one history instructor; and (4) they had seven to twenty-one years of teaching among them. All have taught at Morehouse College for at least five years. They were trained during three three-hour workshop sessions. In addition, I facilitated a one-hour training session immediately before each scoring session. In session one, the aim and design of the study were explained in an introductory workshop. Distribution of the writing rubric and instructions for analyzing the compositions were completed during this session as well. In session two, each of the six readers were assigned eight compositions (two from each of the proficient levels randomly selected from the data sample) and asked to score each composition according to the instructions and procedures provided by the researcher. They completed this scoring process four times so that each rater scored 32 compositions (two from each proficiency level). This second session aimed to familiarize readers with the scoring procedures and gather data to establish inter-rater reliability. In session three, readers discussed the reliability results and procedures to be followed in the scoring of compositions in the study.

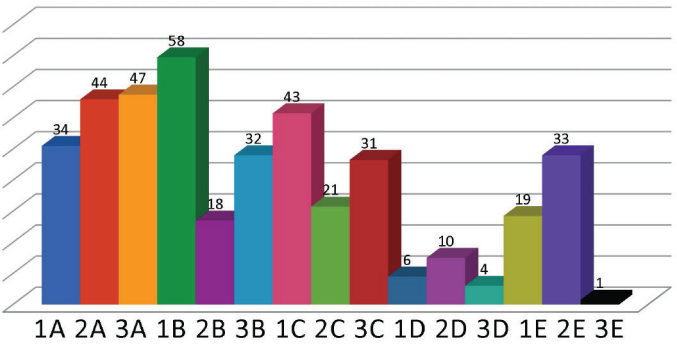
### Analysis of Essays

Each essay was assessed and evaluated according to the Assessment Standards for Essay Rubric content and criteria (see Appendix B), which included main idea/thesis, evidence, organization, grammar, mechanics, and diction. The assessment and evaluation rubric used to grade each essay included four levels of proficiency: Novice, Intermediate, Proficient, and Advanced. All essays were scored holistically. Each reader assigned a number that indicated their overall judgment of the quality of the essay, considering such things as the student's ability to handle ideas logically, write in a style appropriate to the audience and situation, and use standard grammar, spelling, and punctuation. Two trained readers gave each essay a numerical score from one through four, based on a set of specific criteria used to score the essay holistically (see Appendix B). Readers made no marks or corrections on the essay. The score was adjusted as appropriate for any essay that readers scored more than one level apart; for example, if one reader gives a two and another reader gives a three, a third reader will determine the outcome. The readers' scores on essays were selected randomly from the total sample of approximately 473 students and checked for inter-rater reliability. The overall reliability scores (coefficients) of ALPHA for readers' ratings ranged between .87 and .92.

Results

Polk notes that research on writing assignments has been discussed through “descriptions of assignments and prescriptions of effective design” and that much research on assignments was “embedded in studies that sought to describe broader practices of writing instruction in university contexts” (89). The use of culture-referenced writing prompts has a positive impact on freshmen's academic writing level. This section shows the general results of the pre-tests and post-tests of African American males' essays written in response to culture-referenced prompts. This study presents data on students' choice of the culturally referenced prompts (Appendix A) to write the pre and post-tests in Graph 1 and Graph 2. Graph 2 and Graph 5 show the different proficiency levels for each prompt of the pre and post-tests. Graphs 3 and 6 show the comparison between the pre-test and the post-test for each proficiency level. The two graphs also show that the students who had the lowest levels of writing competence on the pre-test showed improvement in their writing level on the post-test. Thus, students in this study improved their academic writing at each level (See Appendices C, D, E, F, G, H I, J K, and L).

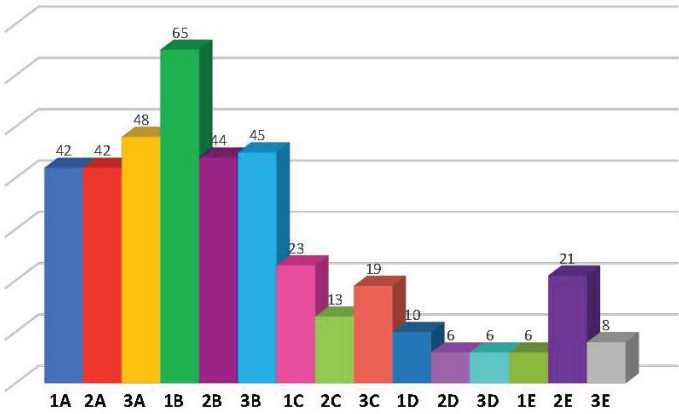
Graph 1  
Pre-test Culturally Referenced Writing Prompts



**Graph 1** shows the frequency of each topic selected from the Fall 2018 writing prompts. The African American culture-referenced topics selected the greatest number of times (1B, 3A, 2A, 1C, 1A, and 2E) accounted for nearly 70% of the selected topics. Fifty-eight of the students wrote on the topic (quotation 1B) by Carter G. Woodson; forty-seven of the students wrote on the topic (quotation 3A) by Malcolm X; forty-four wrote on the topic (quotation 2A) by James Baldwin; forty-three wrote on the topic (quotation 1C) by James Brown; and thirty-four

wrote on the topic (quotation 1A) by Alice Walker. The topics selected least were (quotation 3E= 1) by Booker T. Washington; (quotation 3D=4) by W.E.B. DuBois; and topic (quotation 1D=6) by Marcus Garvey (See Appendix A for topics).

Graph 2  
Post-test Culturally Referenced Writing Prompts



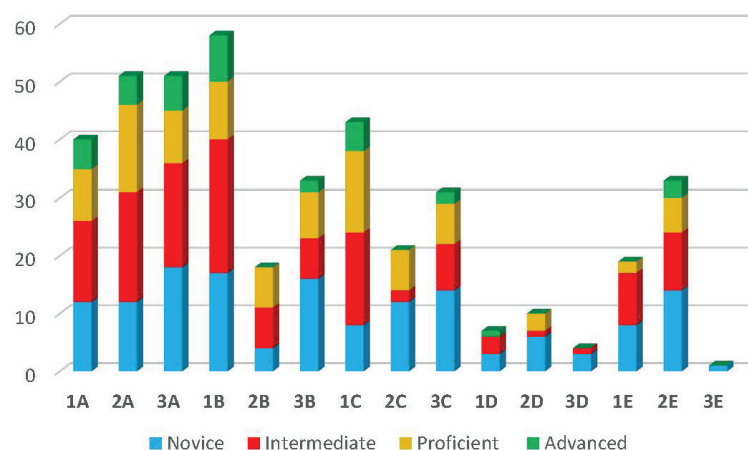
**Graph 2** shows the frequency of each topic selected from the Spring 2019 writing prompts. The African American culture-referenced topics selected the greatest number of times (1B, 3B, 3A, 2A, 2B, and 2E) accounted for nearly 80% of the selected topics. Sixty-five of the students wrote on the topic (quotation 1B) by Carter G. Woodson; forty- five of the students wrote on the topic (quotation 3B) by Benjamin Banneker; thirty-four wrote on the topic (quotation 3A) by Malcolm X; thirty wrote on the topic (quotation 2A) by James Baldwin; twenty-eight wrote on the topic (quotation 1A) by Alice Walker; and twenty-eight wrote on the topic (quotation 2B) by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. The topics selected least were (quotation 3D=6) by W.E.B. DuBois; (quotation 1D=3) by Marcus Garvey; and topic (quotation 3E=8 by Booker T. Washington; (**See Appendix A for topics**).

This study was designed to investigate two research questions:

**Question 1:** Are there interactions among the prompts and topics that incorporate African American culture-referenced content and the quality of students' writing samples elicited within a college pre-test and post-test examinations?

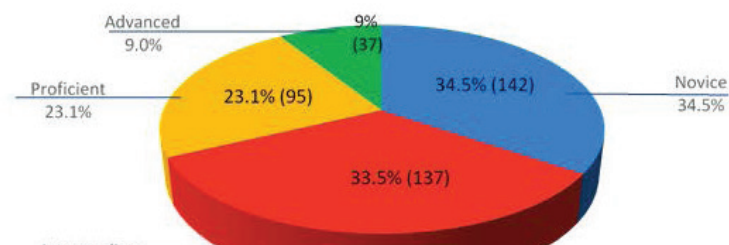


**Graph 3**  
Prompts and Level Proficient Level on Pre-test



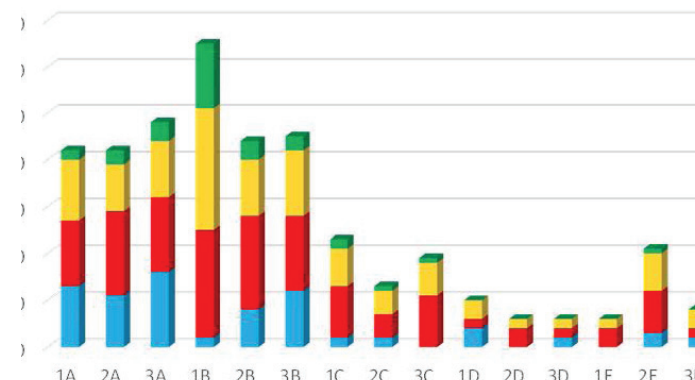
**Graph 3** shows the number of pre-test essays scored at each proficiency level for each writing prompt. For each prompt of the pre-test, most of the essays were written at the Novice and Intermediate Levels. See Table 1 for the number and percentage of each prompt written about on the pre-test.

**Graph 4**  
Pre-test Essays Proficient Percentages



**Graph 4** presents the proficient levels of 411 students who took the Fall 2018 Pretest. One hundred and forty-two students (34.5%) were scored **Novice**; one hundred and thirty-seven students (33.5%) were scored **Intermediate**; ninety-five students (23.1%) were scored **Proficient**; and thirty-seven students (9%) were scored **Advanced**.

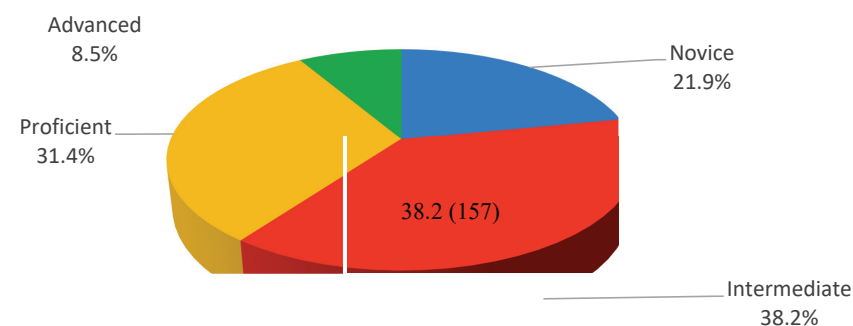
**Graph 5**  
Prompts and Level Proficient Level on Post-test



**Graph 5** shows the number of pre-test essays scored at each proficiency level for each writing prompt.

For each prompt of post-test, most of the essays were written at the Proficient and Advanced Levels. See Table 6 for the number and percentage of each prompt written about on the post-test.

**Graph 6**  
Post-test Essays Proficient Percentages



**Graph 6** presents the proficient levels of 411 students who took the Spring 2019 post-test. Ninety students (21.9%) were scored **Novice**; one hundred and fifty-seven students (38.2%) were scored **Intermediate**; one hundred and twenty-nine students (31.4%) were scored **Proficient**; and thirty-five students (8.5%) were scored **Advanced**.

nine students (31.4%) were scored **Proficient**; and thirty-five students (8.5%) were scored **Advanced**. Notice the change in the percentage of students at each level of proficiency on the pre-tests and post-tests. For example, students who initially scored at the Novice level decreased from 34.5% to 21.9%; students at the Intermediate level increased from 33.5% to 38.2%; students at the Proficient level increased from 23.1% to 31.4%; and students at the Advanced level decreased from 9% to 8.5%.

**Question 2:** Is there a relationship between the prompts and topics that incorporate African American culture-referenced content and the syntactic complexity, coherence, fluency, organization, and length of essay in male college students' writing elicited within a college pre-test and post-test examinations?

To collect data to answer Question 2, randomly selected essays of the most frequently chosen topics were analyzed conforming to the Assessment Standards for Essay Rubric (Appendix B). The rubric, which has criteria for each proficiency level, was used as a qualitative measure to evaluate students' pre and post-test writing samples. Overall, the proficiency level of the post-tests improved. Most of the post-tests were assessed at the Proficiency Level of the Assessment Standards for Essay Rubric. The post-test essays were more clearly written, more developed, more coherent, and contained fewer errors in grammar, punctuation, and other Standard English features. In addition, the post-test essays exhibited more effective use of appropriate word choice and included more ideas than the pre-tests essays.

## Discussion

The results indicate that culture-referenced writing prompts affect discourse features of the essays produced by African American college males. Summary results of the number of words, number of sentences, and length of sentences for each pre-test and post-test essay are included in Appendices C through L. Generally, the culture-referenced topics facilitated fluency and topic development. Development of ideas and content occurred more frequently in essays responding to culture-referenced topics. In addition, these topics elicited a significantly higher number of ideas from the culture-based knowledge of the students. The writing quality of students who wrote their essays in response to culture-referenced topics differed considerably from those students who wrote on the other topics. The culture-referenced essays generated more ideas about the topic and a greater number of words and sentences. The essays contained more information and more specific details relevant to the topic. The culture-referenced essays were more focused, organized, and rated as better than essays produced in response to the non-culture-referenced topics. The present results support specific culture-referenced topics for African American students rather than prompts and topics

exclusively used in large-scale assessment and locally developed topics. Culture-specific essay topics facilitate greater fluency, coherence, and clarity. In addition, culture-referenced prompts effectively encourage African American writers to include more culture-based knowledge of self and community.

Future research might investigate the development of culture-referenced topics that examine the influence of experiential demand, a feature of topics described by Greenberg that signifies the kind of knowledge a writing task demands and ranges from personal experiences to facts and generalizations. Research should also be conducted to determine the effects of culture-referenced topics that incorporate cognitive needs required by different writing tasks and modes of discourse (e.g., narration, exposition, definition, and argumentation).

## Limitations

The present results contain some limitations. The culture-referenced topics (statements, quotations, and proverbs of African American culture) were the only prompts used to elicit writing samples; no other prompts were used in the study to compare. Questions also remained concerning using culture-referenced topics to enhance African American writers' self-esteem and confidence in writing. Students may not be familiar with the cultural context and significance of the prompts. Some students may not even identify any recognizable experiences within the prompts and may not respond adequately. However, introducing the culture-referenced topic enhanced critical thinking and elicited relevant thoughts and ideas about assigned topics. There is very little or no prior research on the overall writing abilities of college-aged African American males. Therefore, research is needed on all aspects of African American males' writing process and writing skills to develop an entirely new research typology to provide data and present the need for further development in teaching and assessing culture-referenced writing.

## Implications

The results suggest that teachers should develop knowledge of African American students' linguistic competency and linguistic environments. Doing so would improve African American male students' written language skills and allow teachers to assess African American male students' writing better. Since this study aimed to examine the effects of culture-referenced essay topics, the results may provide several implications for teaching writing to African American students overall, culturally relevant pedagogy, culturally relevant assessment, and culturally relevant composition curricula at HBCUs.

### Culturally Influenced Writing Style of African American Students

Writing, the production of written text, is inextricably embedded in cultural contexts; it is imperative to understand the conceptualization of the African worldview, which Azibo suggests is "compelled by the deep structure of African culture, the cultural factors, and cultural aspects, which projects interconnectedness, interdependency, appositional harmony, oneness, and the primacy of life" (82). Fox suggests that "cultural position" as a central concept in the exploration of African American student writers requires a pedagogy that investigates how history, culture, institutions, social relations and race interest and influence" (292); and "that a central strategy of African American writers is to seek authorial control and legitimacy in the face of an audience [known or unknown] that seeks to deny the very literacy that African American [writers] demonstrate" (293). Ball noted that discourse preferences that are influenced by both social and cultural experiences could have positive effects on students' [writing] (524). Students' writing can be strengthened through culturally relevant readings and writing assignments.

The writing quality of students who wrote essays in response to culture-referenced topics elicited a more significant number of ideas from the culture-based knowledge of the students. Culture-referenced prompts encouraged African American writers to include more culture-based knowledge of self and community. The nature of rhetoric/discourse is culturally specific. In addition to using Black life, history, and culture topics as subjects for writing, students themselves are centered as sources of knowledge. Researchers, such as Ball, Fowler, Chaplin, Gay, Norment, Richardson, and Wilson, among others cited within, have suggested that the writer's experiences and culture influence a writer's attitudes about written discourse. Language not only maps the individual's culture but also facilitates and shapes thought. An understanding and validation of their linguistic styles of written language communication empower the writers.

### Culturally Relevant Writing Pedagogy

Culture-referenced prompts develop ideas for writing in all situations and each mode of discourse. The use of topics and African American texts connects students with realistic and relevant writing prompts. Fox suggests that writing teachers who recognize the urgent need to reconceive writing pedagogy can look to [African] American literacy theory for strategies of reading to interpret African American students' writings that are free from a narrow understanding of dialect "interference," strategies free from the residue of deficit theories of language that still govern the reading of African American student writing, and strategies that instead see African American literacy in social, economic, and historical contexts (292). Ladson-Billings suggests that culturally relevant teaching requires

recognizing African American culture as an essential strength to construct the education of African American children. Thus, culturally relevant teaching is a pedagogy of opposition recognizing and celebrating African and African American culture (314). Culturally responsive teaching elicits substantial and intellectual reactions from students since it brings about and enhances student-centered critical thinking.

### African American English and African American Rhetoric

Scholars have provided valuable research on African American English and the African American rhetorical tradition (Baker-Bell 2020; Ball, 1992; Balester, 1993; Gilyard, 1996, 1999; Haddix, 2010; Young, 2010; Perryman-Clark, 2013; Richardson, 2004; Sealey-Ruiz, 2007; and Smitherman and Wright, 1984). For example, Ball names the three most used patterns among African American student writers: circumlocution, narrative interspersion, and recursion. She defines circumlocution as writing "characterized by a series of implicitly associated topics with shifts that are lexically marked only by the use of 'and.'" Narrative interspersion is a pattern that weaves narratives throughout the writing, and the recursion pattern is apparent when a writer introduces a topic and refers to it often with "different words or images." Interspersion is a pattern in written discourse that will appear when the student is changing from one topic to another (Ball 509-511). In another study, Ball reports that "[t]eachers scored texts written in vernacular-based patterns (narrative interspersion and circumlocution) lower than those written in academic-based patterns" (520). Richardson analyzes the rhetorical patterns in students' writing and found that the most frequent uses of Black preacher rhetoric in students' texts were "references to the Bible...sermonizing and moralizing." She reports that these features are usually characterized as "unsupported assumptions, disconnected ideas, unexplained examples, and truncated logic" (162). Balester concludes that these students shift from AAE in speech to Standard American English (SAE) in writing, which causes their writing to appear informal. Sealey-Ruiz's study reveals three main trends that emerged in African American females' writings: "language validation, the fostering of positive self and group identity, and self-affirmation or affirmation of goals" (44). These studies report a variety of written discourse patterns in African American students' writings. Culture and language affect the writing style and structure of any individual. Consequently, each language group has a unique pattern of developing and structuring written text. The difference in the stylistic features of each language group involves cohesion, word choice, grammatical deviation, sentence structure, patterns of paragraph development, and organization.

### Writing Curriculum at HBCUs

James explores the following questions: What is the subject matter of first-year writing at HBCUs? What does the writing curriculum look like at HBCUs? Are the mission statements of HBCUs reflected in their first-year writing program? Is African American English present in first-year writing courses at HBCUs? (22). She reports that the first-year writing courses at three HBCUs (Stillman College, Tougaloo College, and Tuskegee University) aligned with their institution's mission statements. However, she noted that first-year writing students had a vague understanding of African American English. More conversations are needed in the first-year writing classroom to help African American students value and appreciate their language as they learn the academic discourse and use Standard American English (ii). She argues that the "Conference on College Composition and Communication's Students' Right to their Own Language" resolution is not being fulfilled in the first-year writing classroom and that first-year composition instructors must rethink what constitutes Standard English and how attitudes toward language affect African American students' identity (ii). Some HBCU writing programs have recognized and incorporated AAE in various ways to change students' attitudes about the status of AAE and its use in writing good academic essays. The goal of HBCUs and PWIs is to graduate students proficient enough in Standard American English to write accurately written discourse. Hence, the intended readers understand that intention, purpose, and content. While HBCUs may employ various modes of instruction, the final effectiveness of their programs will be their students' ability to write acceptable discourse within the rules self-constraints of the accepted American English language.

Incorporating African American cultural materials in the writing and English curricula would provide African American students a content knowledge that would facilitate critical thinking skills and enhance analytical thinking and writing among male college students. Fox makes a valid point when he states that "teaching texts by African American authors teaches 'positions' (political, relationships between the literary critic and culture, history, and institutions). These 'positions' present intersections between race and history and history, race and institutions, race and gender. . . that would help writing teachers and their students map cultural and historical positions. . . as a means of exploring the relationship between self, race, language, and education" (292296). The quotations and topics from African American scholars, activists, individuals, and artists listed in Appendix A facilitate and enhance critical thinking and promote writing to learn. In addition, Redd recommends including African American rhetoric in the writing curriculum at HBCUs. She believes that instructors at HBCUs should teach students to weave African American English into Standard Written English (28). Teaching African American students about the Black Vernacular traditions and African American English connects them to the literacy legacies of Black people.

### Teaching Writing at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs)

There is a continuous discussion about teaching writing and rhetorical composition, First-Year Writing Programs, and Writing Centers at HBCUs. In 1937, the College Language Association (CLA) was created because Blacks were not allowed to participate in MLA activities fully. Members of CLA progressed with teaching English/Composition to Black students at **Lincoln University and Morehouse College**. Most striking is the relative scarcity of historical accounts of composition instruction and rhetorical practices (HBCUs). However, there are rich, complex rhetorical traditions that have developed at HBCUs. Three separate symposiums held at North Carolina A&T in 2014, Howard University in 2018, and Morehouse College in 2019 spotlighted the needs of writing program administrators, composition teachers, and faculty who teach writing at Historically Black Colleges and Universities. Jackson, Jackson, and Tafari argue that "the narrative about teaching writing to African American students is incomplete, and HBCUs are poised to fill the void left (192-193). Gilyard wrote that "there never was a time when we failed to contribute to the field in some way. We [HBCUs] may not have always been in the house of mainstream composition studies, but we were always knocking on the door" (642). For 150 years, HBCUs have developed curricula models, pedagogical strategies, and assessments to improve the writing skills of African American students. Writing programs at HBCUs have had the challenge of enhancing African American students' literacy. In the 1960s, with the advent of open enrollment at predominantly white institutions (PWIs), they designed their Basic Writing Programs to teach Black students enrolled at PWIs for the first time based on writing programs at HBCUs. The field of Basic and Remedial Writing evolved from the Writing programs developed at PWIs. Writing program administrators, scholars, and teachers in basic writing, composition Studies, first year writing programs, and rhetoric and composition at PWIs have duplicated curricula and pedagogical strategies of HBCUs writing programs.

### Assessment of African American Students' Writing

Eller suggests that we need to examine how differences in students' intentions are expressed linguistically and culturally in their written texts. Do these variations (if any) have cultural implications (and implications for designing topics, prompts, teaching, and assessment)? For example, do African American male students have different ways of meaning, and if so, do these variations become evident in a linguistic analysis of their written compositions (Eller 344). This current study investigated the interactions among the prompts that incorporated African American culture-referenced content and the quality of students' writing samples elicited within the college pre-test and post-test examinations. It also analyzed the relationship between the prompts that incorporate African American culture-referenced



content and the syntactic complexity, coherence, fluency, organization, and length of an essay in male college students' writing elicited within the college pre-test and post-test examinations. The purpose of the assessment should determine the nature of the prompt. That is the goal of providing the best writing prompt from which all students can write. The goal of assessing African American students should be to test the stylistic devices, syntactic, knowledge, and organizational structures that may be linguistically and culturally specific for African American students. Universities' testing and placement examinations should incorporate culture-referenced prompts to investigate how African American students view various positions when asked to produce writing samples for placement. Researchers need to examine the particular discourse features of African American students' written language to relate these features (if relevant) to cultural positions.

Furthermore, in his article "Expanding the Dialogue on Writing Assessment at HBCUs: Foundational Assessment Concepts and Legacies of Historically Black Colleges and Universities," David Green, Jr. suggests that "HBCUs provide a unique site for inquiry into questions of writing assessment and social justice because of their long histories negotiating social justice agendas with an academic focus on development and knowledge building. He calls for call for "the study of writing assessment practices at HBCUs" and that "[s]tudying assessment practices within the context of HBCUs also provides a powerful heuristic for rethinking foundational measurement concepts like validity, reliability, and fairness (157). Zandra Jordan notes that HBCUs provide "informative sites for examining complex issues surrounding writing assessment and language diversity" (98). The relationship between culturally relevant writing tasks and the rhetorical process in written discourse needs to be investigated: (1) to identify and develop efficient analyses for evaluating African American students' writings; and (2) to ascertain the effects of social, cultural, socio-economic, and political circumstances on Black students' written discourse content and development. Quantitative and qualitative research on the writing produced by African American students in various discourse modes and proficient levels should be conducted using culturally relevant assessment models.

### Recommendations for Further Study

This study analyzes the effects of culture-referenced essay prompts on the writing quality of 411 African American male students at Morehouse College. Although the two research questions were answered, many additional research opportunities related to this study still exist. Therefore, this study's areas can be replicated and expanded:

(1) Further research should investigate African American male students' attitudes toward the demands and content of different culture-referenced prompts.

Moreover, their preference for a particular topic type to determine which kind of topics interact to affect the performance of African American writers of differing reading and writing ability levels.

(2) Another study might determine how culture-referenced prompts designed for each discipline affect the writing of African American males.

(3) A study might approach the topic of writing from the students' perspective. What topics improve students' enjoyment of writing, and what topics have the opposite effect? What do students feel are the most impactful and helpful topics to enhance their writing?

(4) Another extension of the study could include a more longitudinal aspect of testing students' writing using a proficiency examination administered at the of their sophomore year and in their senior capstone course to determine if their writing skills improved or have declined over the past few years? What factors may have contributed to this improvement or decline?

(5) Future research might investigate the development of culture-referenced prompts that examine the influence of experiential demand, a feature of topics described by Greenberg that signifies the kind of knowledge a writing task demands and ranges from personal experiences to facts and generalizations. Research should also be conducted to determine the effects of culture-referenced prompts that incorporate cognitive needs required by different writing tasks and modes of discourse (e.g., narration, exposition, cause and effect, comparison and contrast, definition, description, and argumentation).

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## Appendix A

### Pre and Post-Test Topics –Fall 2018-Spring 2019

1A "No person is your friend who demands your silence or denies your right to know."  
—Alice Walker

2A "Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced."  
—James Baldwin

3A "Education is our passport to the future, for tomorrow belongs to the people who prepare for it today."  
—Malcolm X

1B "When you control a man's thinking, you do not have to worry about his actions."  
—Carter G. Woodson

2B "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere."  
—Martin Luther King, Jr.

3B "The color of the skin is in no ways connected with strength of the mind or intellectual powers."  
—Benjamin Banneker

1C "Say it loud. I'm Black, and I'm proud."  
—James Brown

2C "Oppression makes a wise man mad."  
—Frederick Douglass

3C "There is no future for a people who deny their past."  
—Adam Clayton Powell, Jr.

1D "Education is the medium by which a people are prepared for the creation of their own particular civilization and the advancement and glory of their own race."  
—Marcus Garvey

2D "For colored people to acquire learning in this country makes tyrants quake and tremble on their sandy foundation."  
—David Walker

3D "One ever feels his two-ness--an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder."  
—W. E. B. Du Bois

1E "What you do for yourself depends on what you think of yourself. And what you think of yourself depends on what you know of yourself. And what you know of yourself depends on what you have been told."  
—Ghanaian proverb

2E "When I discover who I am, I'll be free."  
—Ralph Ellison

3E "The first thing to do is to get into every school, private, public or otherwise, Negro literature and history [art, music, dance, anthropology, religion, political science, economics, philosophy, sociology, psychology, science and technology, film]. We are not trying to displace other literature, but trying to acquaint all children with Negro literature and history."  
—Booker T. Washington

### Other Culturally Relevant Prompts

"Dear Young Black Males, It's okay to be different. Don't be afraid to be yourself. Have courage! Follow your dreams, no matter how BIG your dreams may seem. Attitude is everything! Make sure that you keep a positive one, in spite of any obstacles that may come your way. Don't be so quick to give up, and please remember that self-discipline is your friend. Be strong, persevere, and most importantly, BELIEVE in yourself. Don't listen to anybody's negativity. Move forward knowing that you CAN and you WILL. Be unstoppable!"  
—Stephanie Lahart

"Black men hold a pivotal role in the advancement of the Black community. Black men must take responsibility and accountability for themselves." Discuss your views about the role(s) and responsibility(ies) you have as a Black man.

—Brandon Jones

"We're the only people on the planet who have been taught to sing and praise our demeanment. I'm a bitch. I'm a hoe. I'm a gangster. I'm a thug. I'm a dog. [I'm a nigger]. If you can train a people to demean and degrade themselves, you can oppress them forever. You can program them to kill themselves and they won't even know what happened."  
—Frances Cress Welsing

"What are your thoughts and feelings about the murder of George Floyd?"

"The trigger for white rage, inevitably, is black advancement. It is not the mere presence of black people that is the problem; rather, it is blackness with ambition, with drive, with purpose, with aspirations, and with demands for full and equal citizenship."

—Carol Anderson

"You have just met someone you would like to become your friend, and you want to tell that person something about yourself. What would be the most memorable childhood event that happened to you that you would want to share with this person (how old were you, what happened, how did you feel)?"

## Appendix B

## Assessment Standards for Essay Rubric

Criteria	Advanced (4) A	Proficient (3) B	Intermediate (2) C	Novice (1) F
Main idea	Essay has a focus and a clear thesis statement that responds to the topic.	Essay has a focus, but the thesis lacks specificity.	Essay's focus is unclear or not related to the topic.	Essay lacks a focus and/or fails to address the topic.
Evidence	Essay shows a good understanding of and response to critical arguments and ideas. Quotations or paraphrases are integrated into prose.	Essay shows an adequate understanding of and response to critical arguments and ideas. Quotations or paraphrases are clearly identified.	Essay shows a basic understanding of critical ideas. Essay shows some problems introducing and citing quotations or paraphrases.	Essay shows a lack of understanding. For example, textual support may be missing, or references may fail to identify source material adequately.
Organization	The introduction engages the reader and states the thesis. The body paragraphs connect to and develop the main idea logically. Transitions are clear. The conclusion points to the essay's purpose.	The introduction sets up the focus of the essay. Body paragraphs connect to the main idea but may need further development or clearer transitions. The conclusion summarizes the argument.	The Introduction is missing or not directed to the essay's focus. Body paragraphs too short (not developed) or too long (lack logical divisions into topics), or not connected to the main idea. Lacks transitions. Conclusion missing or of the topic.	The introduction is missing or not directed to the essay's focus. Body paragraphs not developed and/or lack connection to the main idea. Lacks transitions. Conclusion missing or off the topic.
Grammar, mechanics, and diction	Essay is essentially error-free and employs the conventions and diction of academic discourse.	Essay has occasional errors, but is comprehensible and attempts the conventions and diction of academic discourse.	Essay has numerous or distracting errors but is comprehensible and commensurate with good writing.	Essay lacks mastery of basic skills and makes numerous grammatical and mechanical errors and errors in syntax, paragraphing, and diction.

Appendix C  
(sample pre-test)

"Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced."  
—James Baldwin

People often avoid their problems because they are nervous of the outcome. Those who fulfill their commitments, promises, and goals are the ones who make a real difference in this world. This statement by famous American novelist James Baldwin, "Not everything that is faced can be changed; but nothing can be changed until it is faced" holds a deep meaning that many need to grasp today in order to be successful with anything that they choose to do. It explains the dilemma of one conquering their problems. This phrase is universal and can be applied to almost any challenge in life.

In order to grow intellectually one must realize that every problem you come across cannot always necessarily be fixed. Analyzing the first part of the phrase, "Not everything that is faced can be changed," means that you will come across problems that are inevitable. It is normal in human nature to take losses. The concept of perfection is not real because there are flaws within everything. Perfection is the unimaginable and does not exist because any situation has room to improve. It is unhealthy to stress over problems that one cannot do anything about. There are things one cannot change and one must learn to accept them.

On the contrast, there are challenges that can be fixed, but one may never know unless they attempt to change. The next portion of the quotation from James Baldwin states, "but nothing can be changed until it is faced." Meaning that problems that are avoidable will not go away unless you do something about it. This particularly is a strong life lesson to learn, avoidable problems do not solve on their own and in fact have room to intensify over time if not

dealt with. People tend to run away from their issues with the mindset that it will go away on its own when that is far from the truth.

After analyzing the quote by famous American novelist James Baldwin, "Not everything that is faced can be changed; but nothing can be changed until it is faced." is very impactful and holds lot of potential in the lives of many. It reminds everyone that problems do not fix themselves and one will never the outcome or see a change in a situation unless something is done to improve the given circumstances. It also reminds those to not live in stress after crossing paths with a problem that is inevitable.

**Comment:** This essay includes 409 words and 20 sentence (average sentence length 20.4 words). Its proficiency level of writing on the pre-test is represented below:

Proficiency Level	Thesis Main Idea	Evidence Support	Organization Development	Grammar, Mechanics, and Diction
Intermediate Level (2)	This essay's focus is unclear or not clearly related to the topic.	This essay shows basic understanding of key ideas. The essay shows some problems introducing and citing quotations or paraphrases.	Introduction missing or not clearly directed to the essay's focus. Body paragraphs too short (not developed) or too long (lack logical divisions into topics) or not clearly connected to main idea. It lacks transitions. Conclusion missing or off the topic.	This essay has numerous or distracting errors but is comprehensible and commensurate with good writing.

Appendix D  
(sample post-test)

“Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced.”  
—James Baldwin

As a species human beings have come a long way. They have been through disease, war, death, and many other tragedies. For centuries humans have suffered racism and other forms of discrimination that go against human rights. All of these issues have not been solved, but they have been made better over time. James Baldwin beautifully puts it as “Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced. If people decide to give up on the world then the world will give up on them.

Humanity will continue to have problems, but without facing these problems they will continue to stay just as bad as they are. If human beings decided that since there will always be disease, we will stop trying to advance medicine then so

many would die and continue to die from diseases that have long been eradicated. Medicine is continually advanced so that the quality of life for people can be improved. People cannot simply give up hope on trying to make the world a better place because problems exist. If this is the case then humanity would have been doomed a long time ago. People must face their problems so something can change and perhaps overtime, like in medicine drastic changes will be made. If humanity becomes full of people who do not want to fix the world’s problems then humanity would not have lasted this long, and if it did, society would be in a fixed state. Nothing would ever change, what society was two hundred years ago would be the same today.

Baldwin, being an African American subject to racism all of his life knows this more than anyone. It would be easy for Baldwin to stop advocating for social justice and just conform to society, but he chose to face the problem of racism head on and try to make a change. Although racism is still present in modern society, if he and other people who publicly fought against racism decided to stop trying to get rid of racism, racism would be much worse in America. Attempting something does not mean you will be successful all of the time, but it means you would have done something. If every human being decided to not face any of their issues, then humanity would not last. The world keeps moving forward, the Earth will not decide to stop spinning on its axis. Baldwin’s quote is suggesting that we do not live in a stagnant reality we have to move forward like everything else. Plants and animals evolve and learn from their mistakes, humans are to do the same or else they will be left behind.

In anything people do there will always be problems they have to face. Baldwin discusses what to do under these circumstances. People can either face their problems head on or do nothing. Neither option will completely solve the problem, but one will make progress towards doing so. Modern medicine has not eradicated all disease, but improves quality of life and the life expectancy of people in the modern era compared to people five hundred years ago. These steps towards solving problems makes things better for all people. However, if people were to not make these advancements then people would die and suffer, which could be prevented. Baldwin’s point is that we cannot stay stagnant, we must do something to fix problems in the world or else nothing will change, in fact humanity would most likely deteriorate. Standing by and doing nothing to fix worldwide issues will doom humanity.



**Comment:** This essay includes 597 words and 31 sentence (average sentence length 19.3 words). Its proficiency level of writing on the post-test is represented below:

Proficiency Level	Thesis Main Idea	Evidence Support	Organization Development	Grammar, Mechanics, and Diction
Proficient Level (3)	This essay has a focus but the thesis lacks specificity	This essay shows adequate understanding of and response to key arguments and ideas. Quotations or paraphrases are clearly identified.	Introduction sets up the focus of the essay. Body paragraphs connect to the main idea but need further development and/or clearer transitions. Conclusion summarizes the argument.	This essay has occasional errors, but is comprehensible and attempts the conventions and diction of academic discourse.

Appendix E  
(sample pre-test)

"When you control a man's thinking, you do not have to worry about his actions."  
—Carter G. Woodson

Carter G. Woodson's *Miseducation of the Negro* focuses heavily on how poorly Blacks are educated on their culture and just how dangerous the effects are on the African-American community. With very few classes in African-American culture and African-American history it's hard for blacks to become truly conscious of the world around them. How does miseducation hinder blacks and their society on the issue of racism?

The "educated Negroes" have the attitudes of contempt toward their own people because in their own as well as in their mixed schools the Negroes are taught to admire the Hebrew, the Greek, The Latin, and the Teuton and to despise the African. While this isn't as true back then as it is today, today the African does not have as big a share in history as the others cultures do. The African culture is diluted in the school system for one to many reasons thus not giving blacks proper understanding of their culture.

The thought of inferiority of the Negro is drilled into him in almost every class he enters and in almost every book he studies. As James Baldwin put it his talk to teachers "But on the other hand he is also assured by his country and his countrymen that he has never contributed anything to civilization – that his past is nothing more than a record of humiliations gladly endured." African American culture has always been downplayed in America while European culture as gruesome as it is is glorified. Thus making the average African-American question his own existence and purpose in the world simply because he is being told his culture will only be prosperous under the white man.

Due to Miseducation blacks forcibly become unconscious on the issue of racism and just what it is. Miseducation hinders the black mind view of his own culture and the effects America has had on it thus the Negro becomes unaware on why his people act the way they do and he believe that they are just squandering their existence. He also glorifies and becomes comfortable with White culture adopting the same negative views of his culture that White society has. Miseducation in terms of racism is a huge step back for the African-American race.

The great Malcom X once said "Education is the passport to the future, for tomorrow belongs to those who prepare for it today". Reading this quote I could only wonder what happens when one's education becomes corrupt? What happens when the education that is being taught is built upon misleading those who partake in it? What then happens to their future? These questions arose within my mind in relation to Dr. Carter G Woodson's book the "The Mis-Education of the Negro" where he makes the assertion that education within black communities is flawed. In retrospect i agree with Dr. Woodsons analysis of the role that education plays for black people, however I feel as though his work is incomplete in some aspects.

**Comment:** This essay includes 494 words and 20 sentence (average sentence length 24.7 words). Its proficiency level of writing on the pre-test is represented below:

Proficiency Level	Thesis Main Idea	Evidence Support	Organization Development	Grammar, Mechanics, and Diction
Intermediate Level (2)	This essay's focus is unclear or not clearly related to the topic.	This essay shows basic understanding of key ideas. The essay shows some problems introducing and citing quotations or paraphrases.	Introduction missing or not clearly directed to the essay's focus. Body paragraphs too short (not developed) or too long (lack logical divisions into topics) or not clearly connected to main idea. It lacks transitions. Conclusion missing or off the topic.	This essay has numerous or distracting errors but is comprehensible and commensurate with good writing.

## Appendix F (sample post-test)

“When you control a man’s thinking, you do not have to worry about his actions.”  
—Carter G. Woodson

In this excerpt of “The Mis-Education of The Negro” by Carter G. Woodson, Woodson addresses many issues revolving around the African American community. Many of these issues have occurred for many decades before, and many are still occurring in 2017. The issues that Woodson presents in this excerpt strongly revolve around the Black community, and how the Black community has become so far removed from their culture and belief standards that were once the norm. He points these suggested topics out as a significant issue, especially when it is being caused by the very thing that is supposed to help the Black community, education. Woodson has specified education as being the root cause of these very issues because the lack of information given to the Black community about prominent people in the Black community is few in numbers, if not nonexistent. The effects of this then in turn causes the Black community to become whitewashed, basically overturned by the White community.

“The Mis-Education of The Negro” by Woodson suggests that he is saying that White people are purposely utilizing the education system, a system that the Black community has fought to have for so long, to ultimately swindle these Black people into almost unconsciously assimilating to White culture. If you think about it, it is actually a brilliant plan, having White people utilize the thing that Black men, women, and children have fought to have the right for. Education is the very thing they have sought to receive for themselves and their community. It is a brilliant plan. By whitewashing Black people, Black people will then begin to turn on those who are a part of their own community. Once the community begins to become divided that then causes a rift within the community and then families within the community, then causes issues within the household, and finally issues within the very person themselves. This division that education was and is causing with the Black community continues to grow every day. The system created Black people that began to feel that they were not obligated to uplift and encourage their fellow Black neighbor, because they had begun to assimilate to White standards which was to only look out for yourself and where you were going societally, and not to worry about anyone else. This is a very hostile way of thinking that would really hurt the Black community because a group of people who were once so strong together and could not be divided no matter what, will then begin turning their backs on one another and looking the other way when they saw someone in need. This type of Black people rarely gave back to their community because they felt that it just “was not their problem”.

Historically Black Colleges and Universities have seen the issues that the Black community are encountering and have taken this very issue to heart to try to rectify the issues and to correct what has now been a broken issue for way too long. If this division continues then we will come to a point where there will be no rectifying the issue whatsoever. HBCU’s have been known for trying to bring the Black community together, and to commit to uplifting their Black brothers and sister because the sad truth is, if we do not do it, then who will? We have to take the initiative, and the task to want to do better for ourselves, and want to do better for our community for someone else to want to help us. The Black community has to show the outsiders who are looking in that we are willing to take on the task to begin cleaning our own house before we want to let people inside. It is not easy, and I do not believe that Woodson is saying that it is or should be an easy task but that the Black community has to be willing to stand up for a cause, to stand up for our own cause which is to help ourselves, and our community first. In our eyes, we should see beyond me, myself, and I, we need to learn to be able to see “us”.

Woodson then argues that if the Black community has to adopt any rules and rituals from the White community then we should adopt their ways in which they look after one another. This would become a tactic that would help the Black community grow stronger as a whole, because the White community typically sticks together in times of need. That fact tends to be true in my own personal opinion. I believe that the Black community may have misinterpreted what we have taken from the White community as, “look after yourself, do what you have to do, forget anyone that you are leaving behind, and do whatever it is that you have to do to get to where you want to be”. That is a major mis-interpretation. That fault is mainly on The Black community because we were so quick to assume and try to beat other Black people to the conclusion that we did not take the time to fully evaluate their actions and therefore we then in turn interpreted it for something that it really was not.

Finally, the Black community has to do a better job of not being so invested in what and how other people will perceive us because ultimately it does not matter. The Black community has to get back to its roots of uplifting one another and making sure that Black people are continuing to soar right alongside of one another, because that is what we were doing in the past and Black on Black crime was down, there was not so much hatred within the community, and we were ultimately striving with love and care because that was the norm. With that we need to let go of trying to adapt to White standards of “how to live life” and get back to being ourselves, and what we know, because it has been proven to work.

**Comment:** This essay includes 1011 words and 32 sentence (average sentence length 31.6 words). Its proficiency level of writing on the post-test is represented below:

Proficiency Level	Thesis Main Idea	Evidence Support	Organization Development	Grammar, Mechanics, and Diction
Proficient Level (3)	This essay has a focus but the thesis lacks specificity	This essay shows adequate understanding of and response to key arguments and ideas. Quotations or paraphrases are clearly identified.	Introduction sets up the focus of the essay. Body paragraphs connect to the main idea but need further development and/ or clearer transitions. Conclusion summarizes the argument.	This essay has occasional errors, but is comprehensible and attempts the conventions and diction of academic discourse.

Appendix G  
(sample pre-test)

“Education is our passport to the future, for tomorrow belongs to the people who prepare for it today.”  
—Malcolm X

Malcom X has always been a Trend setter when it came to giving our people hope in times of need. He has always given us hope of when it comes speaking his mind on certain subjects. He was a pioneer for important topics for our people such as education. When I look at the quotetoation that is Given I see It As two whole parts. In the end It combines to build something that Is a very true and understanding statement for the future. This quote means to me the importance of how education can lead us to tomorrow.

The first part of this Quotation is “Education is our passport to the future,”. What I can understand from this first part of the Quote is the importance of education. This opens up the fire and future of our people. Malcom X was an advocate for the Civil Rights Movement. In the 1960’s getting an education was nearly impossible for African Americans. Our people needed motivation and a powerful response to those who question our right for education. Malcom X has many quotes for explaining the importance of education. In this quote he explains that importance of Education and how it leads to the future.

In the second part of the quotation explains more about the future tense. One of MalcomX’s tendencies were to talk about the future and what it meant to stay positive. “for tomorrow belongs to the people who prepare for it today. Which means that he wants for us to remain and keep hopeful. We need to prepare for today and how that can Impact tomorrow.

Once you put these two Quotes together. It blends A creative quote that talks about Education and the future. Which was Malcom X’s greatest goals During the Civil Rights Movement.

**Comment:** This essay includes 299 words and 21 sentence (average sentence length 14.6 words). Its proficiency level of writing on the pre-test is represented below:

Proficiency Level	Thesis Main Idea	Evidence Support	Organization Development	Grammar, Mechanics, and Diction
Intermediate Level (2)	This essay’s focus is unclear or not clearly related to the topic.	This essay shows basic understanding of key ideas. The essay shows some problems introducing and citing quotations or paraphrases.	Introduction missing or not clearly directed to the essay’s focus. Body paragraphs too short (not developed) or too long (lack logical divisions into topics) or not clearly connected to main idea. It lacks transitions. Conclusion missing or off the topic.	This essay has numerous or distracting errors but is comprehensible and commensurate with good writing.

Appendix H  
(sample post-test)

“Education is our passport to the future, for tomorrow belongs to the people who prepare for it today.”  
—Malcolm X

Malcom X fathered a significant quote that plays a large role in my life to this day. That quote states that “Education is our passport to the future, for tomorrow belongs to the people who prepare for it today.” Throughout my life I always struggled when it came to doing simple things as going to school everyday. My mother told me this specific quote and taped it onto my door to consistently remind me that in order to prepare for tomorrow I’ve got to get this education. All the time, I would hear this quote, but when I arrived here at Morehouse I realized what she was trying to do for me.

This quote obviously means that in order for us to succeed, we need a particular component. Without that component we could be set back immensely. This component is our education, our education is much more than something you learn in order to get past school. This education is vital to us, it can help us treat and address problems in a good manner. Without this education many people would be without jobs, names, and many other essential items.

Our education is also our formula to solve tomorrow and in my eyes I believe that is what Malcom X was trying to promote. The people that give us this education are essentially giving us the password to solve this thing called life. With our education our future achievements cannot be measured, the list would be endless. Life can flow so much easier with this education, however by no means is this education easy to attain. That's the thing about life, nothing worth chasing is easy to acquire.

Through today, you can set yourself up for a good tomorrow. When you see the key for a test what will you do, your immediate thought is to study the key to see if your answers will align with it. Malcom X provided us with a lesson that can take you places in life that you couldn't ever dream of. He showed us that we have the key for tomorrow and if we want that tomorrow to be a successful one we know how to do it.

What Malcom X stated spoke volumes to me because that all life is, is the preparation for the next day. Poor preparation will lead to a poor day, but poor prep is always a bad thing, if you don't study for a test will you pass? Everyday I wake up & consistently get up & go to class, I do this because I believe Malcom to be true in his words. If you live by these words that he spoke life will be nowhere near as hard as it would be for someone who abides by something else. Throughout life you've got to remember that in everything you do, there is a form of preparation. In life & for every day that follows that prep is your education. When you work for that education day in day out, tomorrow will match the energy you put in for it on the previous day.

**Comment:** This essay included 517 words and 26 sentence (average sentence length 17.7 words). Its proficiency level of writing on the post-test is represented below:

Proficiency Level	Thesis Main Idea	Evidence Support	Organization Development	Grammar, Mechanics, and Diction
Proficient Level (3)	This essay has a focus but the thesis lacks specificity	This essay shows adequate understanding of and response to key arguments and ideas. Quotations or paraphrases are clearly identified.	Introduction sets up the focus of the essay. Body paragraphs connect to the main idea but need further development and/or clearer transitions. Conclusion summarizes the argument.	This essay has occasional errors, but is comprehensible and attempts the conventions and diction of academic discourse.

Appendix I  
(sample pre-test)

“Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.” —**Martin Luther King, Jr.**

What is justice? For most it is a righteous word that means the punishment of some type of wrong doing. If this is considered to be the definition everyone is already committing an injustice. This can be said because your justice might not be the same as my justice. Or could be in direct opposition of my justice. So to this I say lets completely get rid of what society believes what justice is. The quote “Injustice everywhere is a threat to justice everywhere” is a valid one and the only way to truly achieve this is to completely get rid of justice everywhere.

While this is a radical and idealistic way of thinking it is the only way to get rid of all injustice. If morals change this actually wouldn't be that hard to pull off. The only way to have absolute justice would be to get rid of everyone's injustice. But because the world can't exist without injustice we create an injustice that bring everyone together. This is a terrible way of thinking but it would make everyone put aside their difference to get rid of this overbearing problem. With everyone working together people could see there isn't a difference from one another.

Ethically this may not be the best choice because many people would lose their lives in the long run it would save the human race from injustice. Bring it back to the quote by creating one huge global injustice people would have to get over their small injustices and by doing so creating a global justice that can protect everyones interests.

**Comment:** This essay includes 266 words and 15 sentence (average sentence length 17.7 words). Its proficiency level of writing on the pre-test is represented below:

Proficiency Level	Thesis Main Idea	Evidence Support	Organization Development	Grammar, Mechanics, and Diction
Intermediate Level (2)	This essay's focus is unclear or not clearly related to the topic.	This essay shows basic understanding of key ideas. The essay shows some problems introducing and citing quotations or paraphrases.	Introduction missing or not clearly directed to the essay's focus. Body paragraphs too short (not developed) or too long (lack logical divisions into topics) or not clearly connected to main idea. It lacks transitions. Conclusion missing or off the topic.	This essay has numerous or distracting errors but is comprehensible and commensurate with good writing.



Appendix J  
(sample post-test)

“Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.” —**Martin Luther King, Jr.**

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., a very important leading figure in the Civil Rights Movement, not only created solutions to injustice in the world but also discovered the root of the problem with injustice everywhere. For years, African Americans have been the of injustice, mainly from whites dating back to slavery days. Injustice in any community often times leads to anger and revenge, resulting in murder and death. Just as Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. stated, no matter how small the scale of the problem is, it will eventually impact others in the same light.

Injustice still exists today as many races in America are treated unfairly and receive undeserved outcomes. People today are more aware about these incidents through organizations fighting for justice and via social media. Injustice is not just amongst racism but could also be in the criminal justice system or the education provided in areas of little wealth. Injustice disturbs the peace of this great nation as we are exposed to a world of instability and dehumanization. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. took on injustice head on as the organized numerous many movements and non violent protests to combat a form of injustice called racism.

Personally I feel that together we can over come injustice and create a world that is understanding of differences instead of tearing each other apart over these differences. As an African American growing up in a predominantly white school, I was exposed to a lot of injustice just because of the color of my skin, but sadly I’m not the only person going through the same experience. Nor can I change the world single handedly, thus I believe that someday we will get better at communicating with each other and living our lives in the other person’s, opening out perspectives for the better.

Furthermore, in the words of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., justice will never exist again unless we take on the necessary steps to stop injustice. The fact that the world is still in need of change has now become urgent. If we treat everyone around us with the same love and care as we treat ourselves then this world will be a more beautiful place to live in. If we do this then justice anywhere will be a threat to injustice everywhere.

**Comment:** This essay includes 385 words and 16 sentence (average sentence length 24.1 words). Its proficiency level of writing on the post-test is represented below:

Proficiency Level	Thesis Main Idea	Evidence Support	Organization Development	Grammar, Mechanics, and Diction
Proficient Level (3)	This essay has a focus but the thesis lacks specificity	This essay shows adequate understanding of and response to key arguments and ideas. Quotations or paraphrases are clearly identified.	Introduction sets up the focus of the essay. Body paragraphs connect to the main idea but need further development and/or clearer transitions. Conclusion summarizes the argument.	This essay has occasional errors, but is comprehensible and attempts the conventions and diction of academic discourse.

Appendix K  
(sample pre-test)

Say it loud. I'm Black, and I'm proud." —**James Brown**

“Say it Loud! I’m Black and I’m proud”. One of Brown’s most influential songs led the movement for black people having a new found pride within themselves. During the aftermath of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. being killed, Brown was in Los Angeles, California where he witnessed a fight between black people. The event caused him to go back to his hotel and write this song.

The impact of “Say it Loud! I’m Black and I’m Proud!” had its positives and negatives Positively, the song gave hope in the time of need. Negatively, the song was seen as militant and angry. Brown stated in 1986 “... if you listen to it, it sounds like a children’s song. That’s why I had children in it, so children who heard it could grow up feeling pride...”. Although his intentions are justifiable, Brown lost much of his crossover audience due to the song. Brown also stated, “The racial makeup at my concerts was mostly black after that. I don’t regret it, though, even if it was misunderstood.” Nevertheless, the song affected millions and put pride and hope back in black people’s state of mind.

Currently, the song is just as important as it was in 1968. Our black brothers are constantly being shot at, falsely accused, and murdered for actions we did not commit. Even though segregation is illegal, even though we can sit anywhere we want on any public transportation, and even though it is no longer to love someone of the other race, there is still a need for black pride. Racism did not vanish off the

face of the earth, So when we are faced with adversity, we must always remember to “Say it Loud! I’m Black and I’m Proud!”

**Comment:** This essay includes 290 words and 16 sentence (average sentence length 18.1 words). Its proficiency level of writing on the pre-test is represented below:

Proficiency Level	Thesis Main Idea	Evidence Support	Organization Development
Proficient Level (3)	This essay has a focus but the thesis lacks specificity	This essay shows adequate understanding of and response to key arguments and ideas. Quotations or paraphrases are clearly identified.	Introduction sets up the focus of the essay. Body paragraphs connect to the main idea but need further development and/or clearer transitions. Conclusion summarizes the argument.

Appendix L  
(sample post-test)

Say it loud. I’m Black, and I’m proud.”—James Brown

“Say it loud. I’m black and I’m proud.” This phrase is stated by James Brown. He decided to use his stature as a musician to influence a community as a whole. Through his speech, he influenced the mindset of all. Indoctrination has brainwashed African Americans to believe they are inferior. This, however, is outright dumb. With influential leaders such as James Brown, people should be proud of the melanin in their skin. This quote has a positive effect on me through positivity, ascension, and leadership.

The quote speaks to me in a positive manner. This quote exemplifies how one’s speech brightens others. The power of the tongue has vital importance. Through speech, many deeds are possible. Mantras, certain sounds, are sounds that when spoken bring a great deal of power. Through this, people believe that whatever is said will definitely happen. With this idea of positivity, the quote shows how speech is crucial for success.

Ascension is another aspect that is intertwined with the quote. Knowledge is pivotal in terms of ascending towards greater goals. This quote provides information that is necessary to advance. Knowing one’s status is beneficial to themselves and successfully binds them to greater thoughts. Through epistemology, one finds inner

truth and exploits the negative perceptions dawned on them. I find this especially beneficial to me, as I was once lost. Stuck between shifting mindsets and a lack of self-confidence, all I needed were some reassuring words, and these were the words. I experienced an epiphany and understood myself truly. In a sense, being narcissistic towards myself ultimately provided inner peace and happiness. James Brown and his musical presence invoked a spirit of pride in me.

Lastly, a aspect of leadership is implied with this quote. It takes a leader to understand the skill of manipulation. James Brown understood the manipulative ways of the oppressors. Rather than submit to their teachings, he reversed the teaching and created his own. He understood his prowess as a musician and stated a opinionated fact. The opinionated part is removed as this is is now a fact. The possibility of convincing me to hate my own skin is useless. I know for a fact the trials and tribulations of my ancestors. I know the struggles my people face today. I know the fight escalates day by day. Yes I know, and refuse to go back. I refuse to allow the oppressed to remain in a state of shambles. I refuse to lower my tone. This simple quote has inspired me to practice my rights for my people.

All in all, this quote has infused me with pride for my people. I never want to feel oppressed or humiliated ever again. I know the extreme pride James Brown feels when he states, “Say it loud, I’m Black and I’m proud.” This simple quote holds massive weight. Never will I cease to restrict myself from advancing. I will, through positivity, ascension, and leadership, advance in society.

**Comment:** This essay includes 493 words and 46 sentence (average sentence length 10.7 words). Its proficiency level of writing on the post-test is represented below:

Proficiency Level	Thesis Main Idea	Evidence Support	Organization Development	Grammar, Mechanics, and Diction
Advanced Level (4)	This essay has a focus and a clear thesis statement that responds to the topic.	This essay shows good understanding of and response to key arguments and ideas. Quotations or paraphrases are integrated into prose.	Introduction engages the reader and states thesis. Body paragraphs connect to and develop main idea logically. Transitions are clear. Conclusion points to essay’s purpose.	This essay is essentially error-free and employs the conventions and diction of academic discourse.

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## One Must Say Yes: Poetic Acts of Affirmation in Works by Baldwin, Fanon, and Ellison

Jacob Pagano

[O]ne must say Yes to life and embrace it wherever it is found....

—James Baldwin

In the above quotation from James Baldwin and Richard Avedon's photo-essay portfolio, *Nothing Personal* (first published in 1964), Baldwin, writing during a consequential moment in the fight for civil rights, offers a resounding imperative to his reader to say "yes" and embrace life. The basis Baldwin offers for why one must say "yes" is rooted in both memory and a kind of existentialism. Baldwin recalls a formative childhood experience in which his parents, amidst the terrors of racism, did not just bear life but affirmed it (60). Because he witnessed this affirmation, Baldwin maintains that he can affirm life too, and hence, the next generation, by witnessing him, can do the same. The "yes" in this passage is thus a speech act par excellence: It performs in its annunciation an act of affirmation, thereby making possible the survival of oneself and one's progeny.<sup>1</sup> It also calls to mind other resonant "yes" statements in works that similarly address the concern of how to live in and resist racist worlds: "Man is a yes that vibrates", Frantz Fanon writes in *Black Skin, White Masks* (2), while Ralph Ellison's protagonist, the invisible man unseen by anti-Black society, vows to "affirm, say yes" as a guiding principle (579). These "yes" statements, all offered by authors committed to the liberation of the Black experience, suggest that asserting "yes" constitutes an anti-racist strategy. But while these "yeses" clearly convey more than quotidian affirmation (e.g. "Yes, I hear you"), it is not clear what role they play within their authors' anti-racist projects. A question arises: What purpose do these "yeses" serve for three authors who, though writing distinct projects, are all committed to creating what Aaron Ngozi Oforlea calls a "space where they are free to define themselves or articulate their subjectivity in any way they choose" (2)?

Studies of Black subjectivity in Baldwin, Fanon, and Ellison respectively often focus on how Black speakers recover agency in opposition to anti-Black oppression and subjugation. Joseph F. Trimmer and Per Winther, writing in the *CLA Journal*, have both looked at this in *Invisible Man*; Oforlea has recently considered

empowered Black subjectivities in Baldwin's and Toni Morrison's fictional work. An area that has received far less attention, however, is the relationship between affirmative speech—literal "yes" utterances—and subjective empowerment, which Baldwin, Fanon, and Ellison all draw forth.<sup>2</sup> I argue that, for them, the articulation of "yes" in meaningful ways—whether as a way to self-affirm for a fictional character (Ellison), as a psychological commitment (Fanon), or to passionately commit to one's humanity and ancestry (Baldwin)—itself constitutes an anti-racist practice or strategy. The most obvious reason is that when Black speakers affirm themselves in their own complexity, they are resisting discourses that negate or restrictively define Black subjective existence, whether in hate speech, cultural racism, or structural discrimination.

I argue more specifically that these authors' interest in "yes" marks a strategy to militate against anti-Black racist discourse's distortion of the "yes" utterance. Langston Hughes sums up the historical legacy of "yes" as used in racist discourse when he writes of how a Black porter must "Say / Yes, sir! / To you all the time . . . All my Days / Climbing up a great big mountain / Of Yes, sirs!" (161). Hughes' verse perfectly distills a historical reality: the trope of Black speakers who must say "Yes, sir!" not from their own volition, but because of the racist social code. Baldwin, Fanon, and Ellison, as I show below, not only document this history but respond to it by emphatically affirming themselves and others through "yes" imperatives outside the framework of race, thus undermining it. All three authors frame affirmation as a generative practice for empowering Black subjectivity, and, in doing so, stand in conversation with movements such as Black Lives Matter today, which is fighting every minute for a world where "Black life is not systematically targeted for demise" (Black Lives Matter). While some White progressives have criticized Black Lives Matters' emphasis on language (e.g. the demand to say "Black lives matter") as incidental to the supposedly more valid goal of seeking structural change, I suggest that Baldwin, Fanon, and Ellison would counter that acts of affirmation are not incidental to empowering Black subjectivity. Rather, they are productive of it, especially when empowering acts of "yes"-saying are claimed as key tool in an anti-racist strategy.

In the sections that follow, I first turn to Jacques Derrida's lecture on Joyce's *Ulysses*. A founder of deconstructionism, Derrida offers a schema for how "yes" works within speech act theory. Derrida maintains that "yes," if pared down to its essential meaning, establishes presence: it lets another know you are listening. Using Derrida's theory as a lens, I ask how the normative operation of "yes" is

<sup>1</sup> The term *speech act* refers to speech that performs what it says, e.g. "I promise" constitutes a promise (Austin 3)

<sup>2</sup> Scholars who consider affirmation within racialized systems include Christopher Wise and Rudi Visker. Relatedly, critical race theorists, including Jasmine Lee, have considered affirmation as a question of identity formation.

problematized when “yes” is enlisted by racist discourse. For example, if “yes” signals at root “I hear you,” then how are we to make sense of the fact that in racist discourse, “Yes, sir!” rings with a different connotation, often suggesting that the Black speaker is not just “present,” but subserviently so, existing at the behest of another (often White) speaker? The bulk of this essay then turns to how all three featured authors directly respond to this problem through what I call a poetics of affirmation, whereby they use strategies of metaphor (“Man is a yes” for Fanon) or repetition (Baldwin repeatedly focuses on the interplay of “Yes, Lord,” and “Amen”), that re-ascribe to “yes” a performative value as a source of empowerment. In the section on Ellison, I consider the importance of the character Brother Tarp, who teaches the invisible man that saying “yes” to oneself is an anti-racist act that can become a kind of positive solipsism, a way to affirm and centralize one’s own subjectivity; in the section on Fanon, I consider how his exhortation to “man” to become a “yes” is a speech act of psychological empowerment that is central to his project of fostering Black subjectivity that is “actional,” its own source of agency; and in the section on Baldwin, I consider affirmations of posterity and community, specifically through Baldwin’s aspiration for more Americans to become “yes”-sayers, capable of affirming one another through quotidian interactions. Throughout, I draw on what Oforlea, in his recent study of Black male subjectivity, calls the process of crossing the “discursive divide,” or the movement from being “the object of a discourse to an empowered agent” (1). Oforlea’s frame is useful for thinking about how *yes* can serve such radically different purposes in different settings—at one time objectifying, and at another affirming oneself as an empowered agent.

My grouping of Baldwin, Fanon, and Ellison, as well as my decisions to address fiction and non-fiction together, warrant explanation. First, all three featured authors are concerned with acts of affirmation, specifically the “yes” utterance, and treat affirmation as an existential prerequisite, something that must be achieved in a rhetorical performance of “yes” in order to gain a fuller sense of agency. Additionally, they are all writing in a similar period: Ellison and Fanon published their works in the same year (1952), while Baldwin published *Nothing Personal* just over a decade later. While Fanon differs in his historical setting and psychological training from the others, he shares with Ellison and Baldwin an interest in Black existentialism, or the liberation of Black existence. The pairing thus draws forth an important similarity in their thinking with respect to affirmation as an existentialist act. At the same time, it also highlights important differences in how they argue we must respond to anti-Black worlds through using rhetoric, and what purposes acts of affirmation could serve in doing so. Each author emphasizes a different aspect of how Black subjectivity is oppressed (because in Baldwin’s *Nothing Personal*, racism creates barriers that preclude intimate connection; in Fanon, society’s negation of

Black existence creates a sense of internal division; in Ellison, the problem is not being seen or heard). In other words, at least in part, they in turn offer unique ways to use affirmation to reclaim Black subjectivity. Second, I choose to read acts of affirmation in both fiction and non-fiction because all three writers suggest that saying “yes” is both a literary act, or a form of a poetic performance, and, at the same time, something they actually want us to do in our embodied lives. Reading “yes” in Ellison’s fiction thus gives a sense of an individual character’s evolving relationship with “yes”-saying; reading “yes” in Fanon gives a sense of affirmation as it becomes a strategy of psychological empowerment; finally, reading “yes” in Baldwin finds “yes”-saying as an affirmative practice each of us can embrace in our interpersonal relations. In this way, “yes”-saying as an anti-racist practice stands at the nexus between fiction and non-fiction, both a poetic act *and* a praxis for a more anti-racist human relationality. Finally, I intentionally focus on Black male authors, not because female writers of color do not express similar concerns, but because they add another complexity: histories of racialized sexual violence that deprive speakers of affirmative consent. This is an urgent space to explore, but my hope here is to provide an overview of how acts of reclaiming “yes” help make speakers better able to affirm difference, recognize plurality, and embody antiracism. This framework could be used in the future to explore other spaces where speakers, confronting layers of oppression that divest them of affirmative speech, resoundingly reclaim it.

### I. Hear-Say Yes in Joyce: Derrida’s Conceptualization of Yes

This section gives a brief overview of Derrida’s theory of “Yes,” which he unfolds through a close reading of Joyce’s *Ulysses*. By “theory,” I mean a series of descriptions of how something works that give way to a series of principles or schemas that, in turn, offer an interpretive lens for approaching similar situations. In other words, Derrida schematizes what actually happens within discourse when we hear or read “Yes,” and some things that might problematize it. As I will suggest in the section after this one, Derrida’s theory is useful but incomplete when mapped onto spaces where speakers are racialized by anti-Black discourse, i.e. harmfully interpellated on racist terms, and often forced to say “yes” against their better interests.

There are 359 occurrences of the word *yes* in *Ulysses*, and more than 80 in Molly Bloom’s monologue alone, in which she utters the famous concluding words, “and yes I said yes I will Yes.” Pencil in hand, Jacques Derrida traces these “yeses,” begins grouping them by their different uses—there is the “yes” as a response to someone on the telephone, “yes” as an impassioned affirmation, etc.—and considers whether there is anything they share. For the purposes of this essay,

Derrida makes at least two critical observations governing his conceptualization of “yes.” The first is the idea of *gramophone*, a portmanteau of *graph* (word) and *phone* (sound). As Derrida reads *Ulysses*, he begins to *hear* “yes” whenever he reads the word. Indeed, anyone reading *Ulysses* likely experiences this, especially because there are so many scenes, including one where Bloom is on the telephone, where “yes” jumps off the page as if a voice is uttering it: “Hello? *Evening Telegraph* here . . . Hello? . . . Yes . . . Yes . . . Yes” (272). For Derrida, the fact that “yes” is both graphic and phonic is key, because it speaks to a fundamental tension in *Ulysses*: the human voice can be contained and reproduced in the absence of an actual human presence. Indeed, throughout the novel, there are actual gramophones that offer the fulfillment of that very wish: They will record the human voice and recreate it, thereby preserving the sense of presence for eternity. Read through this lens, the final “Yes.” in *Ulysses* comes as a very interesting move on Joyce’s part. In a literal sense, Molly is affirming her marriage. But in another sense, the finality implicit in “Yes,” with its period and capitalization, suggests that Joyce himself is in effect storing his own voice in the text, saying “yes” to his own project. For Derrida and Joycean scholars, this creates an interpretive dilemma, for Joyce has seemingly written his project and affirmed it too, leaving little for the critic to say.

Derrida’s idea of “yes” as gramphony speaks to a universal human concern: we want to know we are being heard and listened to; this is why we are naturally anxious about the “yes” that is given in recording. This leads to Derrida’s second critical point: “Yes” is at the root of how we establish contact with each other, antecedent to all other language: “Yes indicates that there is an address to the other” (299). In Derrida’s theory, “yes” signifies “I-here,” and can take the form of a telephonic hello, or a “tap through a prison wall” (300). These kinds of gestures are what “yes” does: they make possible ensuing dialogue, and thus, Derrida says, “yes” signifies “hear-say.” Derrida plays on the common sense of *hearsay*: information heard by a witness and thus inadmissible in a court of law. He suggests that we experience reading “yes” in this fashion—that is, in an audial way, or “through the ear.” Playing on a French pun between *oui-dire*, or “yes-say,” and *ouï-dire*, or “hear-say,” he further argues that “yes” signifies both, “I heard you” and “I say ‘yes’ to you” (267). Hence the anxiety around the “yes” given falsely. Consider the all-too-relevant example of giving a lecture on Zoom. At the beginning you ask, “Can everyone hear me?” A chorus of “yeses” follow. But what if those “yeses” were merely recordings of voices? What if, halfway through the lecture, you realize everyone’s camera is off? Naturally, you will want to re-establish contact, re-establish the “yeses” and perhaps also a visual cue that your audience are listening, to ensure that each “yes” is not being given “in the absence of intentional presence on the part of the affirmer” (276).

## II. Hear-Say Yes, Sir: Racist Interpellation’s Effect on Yes

Derrida’s conceptualization of “yes,” as both gramophone and the initial mark establishing discourse, is generally taken to be universally applicable within deconstructionist philosophy. However, this conceptualization of “yes” is problematized when put in conversation with Fanon’s conception of racist interpellation, and similar examples from Baldwin and Ellison. In other words, all three authors describe worlds in which the central tension around “yes” is not, as per Derrida, its potential to be gramphoned and given “without the presence of the affirmer,” but rather the way in which it can be perverted in racist discourse as a tool for oppression—something the Black speaker *must* say or face violence, outrage, or further alienation. Below, I consider examples of “yes” within racist discourse in the context of Louis Althusser’s and Fanon’s theories of interpellation, and then I return to Derrida’s theory with the help of Judith Butler’s theory of hate speech, to consider how the racialization of “yes” turns its utterance into a verbal injury.

For Althusser, interpellation is the process by which subjects become recognizable to the dominant ideology, often through an act of being hailed, or called into being, on its terms. As Fanon demonstrates in *Black Skin, White Masks*, interpellation can also be a form of racialization. Fanon writes of how being jeered at as a “Negro” by a White child imposes and inscribes a hateful discourse. Oforlea writes, “Fanon’s writings demonstrate the significance of interpellation as a domination of the racially marked subject through the white gaze, leading to a problematic sense of self . . . the black body enters into a symbolic order where it is . . . pathologized . . .” (10).

Within the space of racist interpellation, simple “yes” statements—statements that affirm, confirm, recognize—can become racialized, co-opted as a tool for racist oppression. This can happen in multiple ways, but the most obvious one is this: in racist societies, it has historically been expected of Black speakers to say “yes,” or “yes, sir,” in response to *whatever* the White speaker says. Fanon describes this phenomenon clearly in discussing portrayals of Black people in the media:

Willy-nilly, the Negro has to wear the livery that the white man has sewed for him. Look at children’s picture magazines: Out of every Negro mouth comes the ritual “*Yassuh*, boss.” It is even more remarkable in motion pictures. Most of the American films for which French dialogue is dubbed in offer the type-Negro: “Sho’ good!” (22; emphasis added)

In this passage, “yassuh” apparently serves as a proxy for racist interpellation; the Black speakers, through saying “yassuh,” seemingly consent to the demands placed before them and to the larger system that produced those demands. But in fact, they are doing nothing of the kind. As Fanon suggests, they are merely giving



a ritual response, “yassuh,” to a certain anti-Black interpellative atmosphere that requires it. This does not occur only in Fanon, but also in Ellison and Baldwin. In Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, as Trimmer and Winther have shown, saying “yes” is integral to the survival of the narrator, who *must* say it to the White academy and the White communist party. Likewise, Baldwin writes of a similar scene of the racialized “yes” when he describes how an “unsung army of black men and women . . . trudged down back lanes and entered back doors, saying ‘Yes, sir’ and ‘No, Ma’am’ in order to acquire a new roof for the schoolhouse” (“Letter”). To say “yes” requires they “put their pride in their pockets” and mechanize the utterance.

As these examples suggest, such instances of “yassuh” or “yes, sir” do *not* perform what Derrida tells us that “yes” does—recognition and affirmation. On the contrary, the “yassuh” is prescribed, the only possible response that can be given without inciting a racist reaction. Indeed, when the Invisible Man challenges and questions the system of his school (that is, when he does not merely say “yassuh” to the headmaster), he is expelled. Similarly, in Jim Crow, violence often resulted when a Black person did not act in the affirmative in response to White demands.<sup>3</sup> And there are far too many examples, which writers such as Alexandra Natapoff have documented, where people of color are disproportionately required to confess crimes even when they did not commit them. They are also threatened with jail time in the absence of a confession. A confession can take many forms, but at root it involves the State asking someone to say “yes, sir,” or the like.<sup>4</sup> Within a justice system that disproportionately implicates Black people, the coerced extraction of false confessions is a tactic routinely used by the State, especially in misdemeanor crimes. “Yes, sir” here perversely validates state control of Black bodies.

In *Excitable Speech*, Butler defines *hate speech* as speech that is backed with the threat of violence and that, in its very speaking, constitutes the “performance of the injury itself, where the injury is understood as social subordination” (18). Because hate speech, by definition, informs the victim that physical injury is never far off, the effect of hate speech is actually to destroy the normal rhythm and pulse of speech itself—that is, the expectation of a continued interplay of dialogue. Butler writes, “The threat of violence destroys the very possibility of expectation: it initiates a temporality in which one expects the destruction of expectation and, hence, cannot expect it at all” (9). For Butler, people subjected to hate speech cannot enjoy the luxury of *expecting* speech, because they always must be vigilant towards how the speech is seeking to harm them, or presaging actual physical violence. A “yes” given by a Black person within the confines of racist discourse is potentially painful and psychologically harmful to the speaker. The “yes” uttered

in such circumstances thus paradoxically could make its utterer the victim of hate speech.

Indeed, the “yes” of racist discourse—a “yes” that is forced or otherwise expected because of a speaker’s race—could destroy the Black subjects’ sense of expectation like hate speech: because the response “yes” is all they can say and all that is available to them, saying “yes” thereby imposes a social subordination rooted in the reduction of one’s speaking potential. Consider Ellison’s narrator in *Invisible Man*, who tells us of the pain of saying “yes” repeatedly against one’s will in hegemonic White spaces:

Too often, in order to justify them, I had to take myself by the throat and choke myself until my eyes bulged and my tongue hung out. . . . Oh, yes, it made them happy and it made me sick. So I became ill of affirmation, of saying “yes” against the nay-saying of my stomach— not to mention my brain. (573)

The act of repeatedly saying “yes” induces in the narrator nausea and disgust because it deprives him of his subjectivity, the intuitions of his “stomach” and “brain.” The racist system does not only harm him but forces him to harm himself, to violently reproduce the acts of violence he is subjected to.

Similarly, in Fanon’s image of “Yassuh, boss,” the Black speaker feels reduced to a stereotype, rendered “the eternal victim of an essence” (22). The requisite “yes” thus reinforces a racist discourse that seeks to censor Black speakers and limit their speaking possibilities.

Attunement to the conditions in which racialized speakers often utter “yes” reveals affirmation as contested and potentially racialized too, especially because “yes” purports to be a consensual affirmative, even when uttered in situations that subvert speakers’ agency to affirm consensually at all. The ritualization of “yes, sir” constitutes a chronic internalization of hate speech, reproducing discriminatory and self-discriminatory tendencies that negate agency. In the section below, I turn to look at how Baldwin, Fanon, and Ellison militate against this discourse.

### III. Affirming across the Discursive Divide

Among the many contributions to the study of African American literature which Oforlea offers in his recent book on the rhetoric of Black male subjectivity is the concept of the “discursive divide.” For Oforlea, the discursive divide is a useful paradigm for thinking about the division between how Black men in the works of Toni Morrison and James Baldwin are seen and described by society, on the one hand, and how they conceptualize, articulate, and view themselves, on the other. Oforlea writes:

<sup>3</sup> See Davis.

<sup>4</sup> See Appleby.

On one side of the discursive divide are the dominant constructions about black men that emerged from Eurocentric descriptions of Africa as culturally underdeveloped. . . . These negative representations circulate through laws, stereotypes, and visual texts. . . . Across the discursive divide, African American men are free to realize not an essential self, but a complex self that is aware of both racialized discourses about black humanity and African American cultural discourses about survival, resiliency, and achievement (2)

For Oforlea, the process of crossing the divide is worth investigating, because it reveals the journey by which victims of racial oppression conceive of themselves on their own terms. Oforlea describes this as “subjectivity construction that envisions subjects moving beyond colonial or racialized discourses to a space where they are free to define themselves or articulate their subjectivity in any way they choose” (2), a space characterized by “self-definition, self-hood, and communal consciousness” (6). In contrast to the essentializing effects of racialization, to be free in such a way is to have a sense of agency that allows them to reimagine themselves and define their identity using various psychological, rhetorical, and performative strategies. In a chapter on Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, for example, Oforlea looks at Black male characters who use silence as a “strategy of strategic endurance,” a means to subvert the linguistic domination that seeks to control them (47).

As shown in the examples from Fanon and others above, a discursive divide stands at the site of affirmation. Indeed, when Black speakers are forced or expected to affirm on account of their race, “yes” is used to create yet another “negative representation” of them. That is, it seeks to render Black speakers as implicitly inarticulate and thus unworthy of agency. What would it mean to cross the discursive divide in affirmation and articulate a “yes” that works in the service of self-definition and communal consciousness?

In the following sections, I consider poetic acts of “yes”-saying by turning to specific ways in which Baldwin, Fanon, and Ellison rearticulate and reimagine the utterance. *Poetics* refers to “the activity in which a person brings something into being that did not exist before,” typically through the configuration or placement of words in ways that create novel meanings (Polkinghorne 115). In his *Poetics of Relation*, Édouard Glissant applies a theory of poetics to colonized worlds. For Glissant, the racialized speaker suffers from a fixed relationality with Whiteness. Racialized speakers, Glissant argues, are always placed in a bind, either bracketed as essentially different from, or forced to prove their similarity to, the White other. In resistance, Glissant offers the poetics of relation, or a relationality that enables new connections and forms of multiplicity. In contrast to binary systems, poetics uses accidents, surprising combinations of meanings, and rhythm, to create possibilities for the racialized speaker to relate to both self and Other. I frame affirmation itself

as a poetic praxis whereby poetic strategies—metaphor, *volta*, repetition, rhythm, and call-and-response—serve to reimagine “yes” as a sign of agency and resistance against racism and racist discourse.<sup>5</sup>

#### IV. Finding a Poetics of Affirmation in Ellison’s *Invisible Man*

Ellison’s protagonist in *Invisible Man* encounters throughout the novel what Mary Ellen Williams Walsh calls in the *CLA Journal* the “plight . . . of invisibility” experienced by Black Americans; he is not heard, seen, or acknowledged by the myriad White characters throughout the novel, giving him the sense that his subjectivity is immaterial (152). Several Black characters, including his school’s headmaster, ignore him, or worse, re-enact racist logics. By contrasting his protagonist’s complex psychological interior with the fact that he is viewed by the White world as one dimensional, Ellison reveals what Walsh calls “the spiritual failure in American society” (157). But Ellison’s novel is not just about failure. In his National Book Award acceptance speech, Ellison noted that a central part of his aim through the novel was “to return to the mood of personal moral responsibility for democracy” (160). The question thus arises: what does personal moral responsibility look like, and how can one reclaim it, when one is not heard, acknowledged, or seen?

As suggested in the passage quoted above, in which the invisible man tells us that saying “yes” to the White world is “asphyxiating” one of the primary threats the narrator faces in *Invisible Man* is his own alienation from language. He is clearly alienated from society, but alienation from language—the sense of being “asphyxiated” by one’s own words—truly frightens him. Speaking before the Communist Party using a script written and forced upon him by its White leader, he confronts his separation from language as a loss of identity: “I might have been anyone, might have been trying to speak in a foreign language” (264). This experience is not unique to *Invisible Man* but central to the way anti-Black violence has long sought to take expressive language away from Black speakers. John E. Drabinski, for example, argues that racist systems sever the relationality of oppressed subjects with a language that allows for historical memory or cultural identity (204). The colonizer, Drabinski maintains, has sought “to simultaneously maintain the link between language and home and de-link—in the production of alienation at the level of the psyche, of knowing and being—colonized subjects from language, and therefore from any sense of home” (216). This de-linking characterizes creole histories in which one language is forced upon speakers at the expense of their own. What *Invisible Man* makes uniquely apparent, however, is

<sup>5</sup> *Volta*, meaning “turn” or “rotation” in Italian, refers to the rhetorical shift in poetry where a dramatic or notable change occurs in thought or emotion.

how this de-linking from home can take place through the racializing of “yes.” The Invisible Man says, “All they wanted of me was one belch of affirmation and I’d bellow it out loud. Yes! Yes! YES!” (394). With each “yes,” the narrator seems to distance himself from their utterance, till eventually he is offering a kind of commodity: the capitalized, exclamatory “YES!” one might find on an advertisement. To articulate “yes” in a way that responds to one’s interior psyche and affirms it in its complexity thus emerges as a necessary act in reclaiming a sense of home within language, a space for oneself. On a very simple level, to say “yes” for oneself is to say “I am here,” not in relation to a White other, but for and because of me.

Brother Tarp, an often-overlooked character in scholarship on *Invisible Man*, expresses the reclamation of a “yes” connected to home explicitly.<sup>6</sup> Meeting our narrator in the Communist Party, Brother Tarp has recently escaped from a chain gang in the South to the North. Face-to-face with the narrator, he tells his story for the first time, beginning with the nature of his crime: “no.” “I said no to a man who wanted to take something from me; that’s what it cost me for saying no . . .” (387). By saying “no” to someone above him in social status (likely a White man), Tarp ruptures the racist contract of the Black speaker as the “yes”-sayer and pays a price of nineteen years. Not only does he illuminate the implicit violence that lies within the racialized “yes” by showing the consequences of saying “no”; he also seizes on speech’s subversive potential: “I said no. I said *hell*, no! And I kept saying no until I broke the chain and left” (387; emphasis in original). Saying “no” to the White man is formally negative, but it is *positive* from this Black speaker’s point of view. The value here is not merely linguistic. Indeed, it marks what Oforlea calls the crossing of the discursive divide, in that in saying “no,” Tarp literally moves out of the physical space in which he is discursively required to say “yes.”

Immediately after Tarp recalls casting aside the racialized “yes” associated with compliance, and uttering his “no,” he recounts in his story a very different kind of “yes”: one linked to his own agency and affirmative of his own potential to journey back home. Tarp tells the story of his escape:

They let me get close to the dogs once in a while, that’s how [I was able to escape]. I made friends with them dogs and I waited. Down there you really learn how to wait. I waited nineteen years and then one morning when the river was flooding I left. They thought I was one of them who got drowned when the levee broke, but I done broke the chain and gone. I was standing in the mud holding a long-handled shovel and I asked myself, Tarp, can you make it? And *inside me I said yes; all that water and mud and rain said yes, and I took off.* (388; emphasis added)

<sup>6</sup> Notable studies that consider Brother Tarp’s role in the novel have been written by Winther (“Imagery of Imprisonment”) and Thomas A. Vogler.

When Tarp asks himself “Can you make it?” and responds “yes,” he is not only doing the answering but also the questioning. Through these utterances, he exits a discursive space where he is responding to the demands of a White other and creates one in which he is the provider of the questions that will free him to answer. This marks a kind of poetic solipsism, whereby one creates a sense of enjambment with oneself, a call (“Can you make it?”) and response (“yes”) constitutive of personal agency. Echoing other narratives of people escaping slavery to the North, Brother Tarp’s narrative is governed by a radical engagement with his natural surroundings, a discovery of amicability with “them dogs.” The sense of reciprocity he cultivated with his environment is mapped onto an affirmative linguistic construct, whereby his question of whether he can “make it” finds a double affirmative response, “yeses” germinating from psyche and environment, in counterpoint, resonating with his question.

Such affirmatives posit poetics. The “yes” from the “water and mud and rain” is an ecological personification, and the passage as a whole has a building rhythm, whereby waiting gives way to the rush of the levee that builds towards a “yes,” which resembles the *volta*, or rhetorical turn, of a sonnet. Notably, the turn in Tarp’s monologue resembles a “dolphin turn,” which is what Peter Sacks calls a “transformative veering from one course to another, a way of being drawn off track to an unexpected destination” (3). In this case, the “veering” is an act of resistance: the affirmative “yes” directs Tarp away from the literal “track” of the chain gang, sending both his voice and embodied self towards an “unexpected destination” in the North.

Ultimately, the novel’s narrator learns from Tarp two key lessons on how affirmation can become anti-racist: First, he discovers the necessity of saying “no.” Relatedly, he learns that true subjective agency does not involve committing oneself to an affirmative or negative stance, but rather possessing an indeterminate relationship with how one uses affirmative speech. The narrator says in the epilogue, “I condemn and I affirm, say no and say yes, say yes and say no. I denounce and I defend and I hate and I love” (579-80). The narrator ties humanity to the generation of expectancy, the fact that he *could* hate or love, say “yes” or “no.” Indeed, if omnipresent hate speech ruptures expectancy, and if “yessing” the White world serves to “asphyxiate,” he counters those facts by reimagining himself as the generator of expectancy. The narrator’s concluding question posits an epistemology generated by Black speakers themselves. He asks, “Who knows, but that on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?” (581) On the one hand, the text has answered, demanding the “readers’ identification,” according to Walsh (158). On the other, the question invites the novel’s readers to respond, to give “yeses” that affirm, or “noes” that further distance themselves from the narrator. The poetic



sensibility arises in a performative inversion of authorship, whereby we are asked to hear the narrator's voice as formative of *ours*. In other words, Ellison demands a radical affirmation of Black authorship and invites the readers' commitment to worlds in which Black speakers, from the invisible man to Brother Tarp, can author their own existence.

### V. Fanon's Poetics of Affirmation: The Principle of Iterability

Fanon's poetics of affirmation differs from Ellison's in that it focuses less on productive ruptures at a personal level and more on how affirmatives mediate the process of subject formation within society, what Fanon calls "the social constellation, the cultural whole" ("Racism and Culture" 36). In her introduction to *CLA Journal's* special edition, "Decolonizing the University: A Battle for the African Mind," Kendra R. Parker considers how two of Fanon's ideas are central to decolonization: recognizing Black people as the agents of their own experiences and repeatedly questioning legacies of the colonial situation (164). Indeed, Fanon often analyzes the crisis of anti-Black racialization in psychological terms, suggesting that it led to an identity fixed in a dialectical relationship with Whiteness, and in turn to an "antinomy" of existence (2). For Fanon, resisting such a system requires the creation of an alternative productive dialectic. Fanon's position carries an existentialist tenor: It does not posit a series of essential truths for humanity, but claims humans must become, through their behavior, the creators of their governing principles themselves. In this way, the racialized speaker becomes productive of a more universal sense of life, not forced outside it.

Fanon's work has been widely considered as a project of psychological empowerment. A relatively understudied area is the role which affirmation plays in this empowerment.<sup>7</sup> Fanon contrasts the sense of negation menacing colonized subjects with an affirmative relationality that empowers:

Man is a *yes* that vibrates to cosmic harmonies. Uprooted, pursued, baffled, doomed to watch the dissolution of the truths that he has worked out for himself one after another, he has to give up projecting onto the world an antinomy that coexists with him. (2)

In an anti-Black world, Fanon maintains that Black subjectivity contends with a horrific paradox: the dominant discourse purports to affirm universal life and principles, while repeatedly disregarding Black life. Black subjectivity

thus experiences an antinomy: the self as human but also repeatedly denied that humanity. Fanon is essentially telling readers that such an antinomy will always exist so long as one thinks within a paradigm that is itself racist. In contrast, in the poetic vision of man as a "yes that vibrates to cosmic harmonies," Fanon is charting a different kind of subjectivity, defined by harmony and synchronicity. In this vision, one is not restricted by (often racist) social conventions or racist interpellations, but free to envision oneself dynamically. Indeed, vibration itself is by definition dynamic. In having a vibratory existence—an existence, in contemporary vernacular, that *vibes*—one is not constrained in one's sense of self, but open to becoming, through one's interactions with "cosmic harmonies" which point to a space antecedent to racism. Indeed, if man is "a yes that vibrates," man has the potential to exist in synergy with cosmic rhythms, which by definition do know and cannot know racism. Within Fanon's broader antiracist project to imagine worlds in which racialized speakers are *actional*, capable of effecting change, his "yes" gestures to what such an actional stance looks and sounds like within discourse: a generative affirmative motion that propels its utterer into a transcendent sense of self, beyond the confines of the existing racialized space.

In the other key "yes" passage in *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon emphasizes the productive role affirmation plays in militating against the tendency to become inured to existing racial structures. The project's "true value," Ziauddin Sardar writes in his foreword, "is as a clarion call against complacency" (xix). While Sardar emphasizes those facets of society producing racialization towards which Fanon hopes we do not become complacent, one area to which Sardar devotes less attention is the actual praxis Fanon claims can underpin and uphold antiracist action. Continuing to frame "yes" not just as something one says, but rather something one *is*, Fanon centralizes an affirmative principle within this antiracist work:

The self takes its place by opposing itself . . . Yes and no. I said in my introduction that man is a yes. I will never stop reiterating that. Yes to life. Yes to love. Yes to generosity. But man is also a no. No to scorn of man. No to degradation of man. No to exploitation of man. No to the butchery of what is most human in man: freedom. (173)

In his assertion that he will never stop reiterating that "man is a yes," Fanon emphasizes the iterability of speech. Although all speech is iterable, or repeatable beyond its context, "yes" is uniquely so. As Derrida outlines, "yes" is contingent on its ability to be repeated, the fact that with each spoken or written "yes," one promises to remember what that affirmation contained. In this passage, Fanon uses iterability to fashion a mode of antiracist resistance, suggesting that the repetition of affirmation is integral to helping the psyche feel more connected with itself and

<sup>7</sup> Works that do consider affirmation in Fanon's project include Sebastian Kaempf's "Violence and Victory," and Cynthia Nielsen's "Frantz Fanon and the Négritude Movement." Neither, however, focuses on affirmation as a practice that navigates the tensions and oppressive turns of racist discourse.



become a site of production, rather than negation. Indeed, in a literal sense, Fanon has stopped repeating “yes”: it is his text that will continue to signify it. But his hope here is that the reader will become the agent of iteration to carry forward the motion of affirmation and negation, the assertion of “yes to life” and “no to exploitation.”

The sense of an oral tradition arises in the repetition of “yes,” an anaphora that Fanon implicitly summons readers to use so as to become repeaters of his message. The iterability of affirmation must be passed on because it offers a mode of agency-enforcing subject formation whereby selves actually articulate themselves within language, naming what they oppose and affirm. The repetition of “yes” is a poetic distillation of Fanon’s hope that Black speakers will become what Bhahba calls “incalculable object[s]” (xxxiv). “Yes” thus marks the first note, the incipient motivating utterance, from which a vibratory existence—one that is dynamic, latent, connected with a space beyond racist societies—could unfold.

In discussing Fanon and Ellison’s interest in affirmation, I have suggested that their poeticizing of “yes” serves to foreground a more affirmative relationship with the self, language, and the broader sociocultural space. Both Ellison and Fanon stop short, however, of envisioning how their “yes” imperatives might be fulfilled within a quotidian encounter, in the socialized space of the community, or on the city block—a subject to which Baldwin turns a decade later. If “yes” can help mediate the relationship between psyche and language, how might reclamation of connectedness manifest itself in quotidian encounters, or become a productive praxis to militate against the tendency in racialized spaces to deny the totality and complexity of another person?

## VI. Imagining Yes as an Encounter

By 1963, the civil rights movement had created some legal recourse and representation for Black communities, but it had notably failed to substantively shift White America’s racist “attitudes and behavior towards their black counterparts” (Farred 286). In fact, it revealed how entrenched those attitudes were. It was against this backdrop that Baldwin penned *The Fire Next Time*, a pivot in his thinking that Africana scholar Grant Farred claims “anticipates, through the black anger at America that Baldwin gives voice to, a new—less conciliatory—mode of black opposition to the status quo” (286). Farred argues for the centrality of love to Baldwin’s vision: “Love must itself do the work that love requires and for which the law is, because of America’s racist history, unwilling to assume responsibility” (287). Farred also evokes Derrida’s concept of asymmetrical love to highlight how Baldwin’s idea of love is founded on loving others *because* of their hatred, a “responsibility that must be taken up precisely because that Other is so unwilling

to evince or countenance love” (289). While the centrality of love to Baldwin is irrefutable, his less studied essay from a year later, *Nothing Personal*, finds him turning towards a space anterior to love and outlining a precondition for love: reimagining the conditions through which we relate to others and affirm them in relation to ourselves. If a politics of love is Baldwin’s *telos*, I amplify here the affirmative relationality Baldwin finds indispensable to that vision.

*Nothing Personal* is a collaboration with Baldwin’s high school classmate and portrait photographer Richard Avedon, who took dozens of black-and-white portraits of diverse swaths of American society, which he then shared with Baldwin. Baldwin, in response, penned a sermon-like essay, each section of which corresponds to one of the facets of society that Avedon documents. The depicted subjects include celebrities and showbiz stars, whom Baldwin scrutinizes as representing a dangerous “myth” of America, an addiction to the “irreality” of “simplicity and youth;” politicians and activists, who represent two sides of a struggle for and against Black freedom; patients in a mental asylum, whom Baldwin sees not as pathological but as the unfortunate consequence of a society that fails to provide necessary emotional support systems; and families on Santa Monica Beach, who offer Baldwin an opportunity to think about posterity and our intergenerational commitment (58). The consonance between text and image invites readers to approach America’s existential crisis as one implicated in both how we speak and how we see others.

Both Avedon and Baldwin are concerned with a problem of relationality, the ways in which we mediate encounters with others. For Avedon, portrait photography has become over-staged, creating idealizing representations. In response, he creates portraiture that captures the instantaneous exchange between himself and his subjects, or what he calls “the thing that happens between us” (Aletti). In his essay, Baldwin takes a similar approach, framing urgent social questions, not in terms of policy, but within the disarray of our relationality. Baldwin writes, “Our failure to trust one another deeply enough to be able to talk to one another has become so great . . .” (55). In contrast, there is hope when “New York is cheerfully immobilized by snow—cheerfully, because the snow gives people an excuse to talk to each other” (51). Talking to one another will not overcome alienation, but it might evoke a desire to understand each other. Baldwin’s assertions on the importance of “talking,” echoing his claim, in “Stranger in the Village,” that we must encounter each other’s “human reality . . . weight and complexity,” suggests dialogue can rupture intractable barriers (127).

Focused on affect and interpersonal encounters, *Nothing Personal* emphasizes a politics of relationality, inviting one to realize that how one relates to other people is constitutive of the communities one inhabits and the power relations

within them. Baldwin's "yes" imperative emerges in this context. Baldwin asserts that affirmation of others is existentially urgent because it makes life possible for subsequent generations, and potentially less discriminatory for them too. Hence, his "yeses" differ from Ellison's and Fanon's—which are about a relationship with the self or one's psychology—by emphasizing dialogue and communication, the "yeses" we say to one another. After describing, in a parable of Black suffering, "all that terror and . . . helplessness" systemic racism has created, Baldwin offers his imperative as a source of humanistic hope (59):

It is a mighty heritage, it is the human heritage, and it is all there is to trust. And I learned this through descending, as it were, into the eyes of my father and my mother. I wondered, when I was little, how they bore it—for I knew that they had much to bear. It had not yet occurred to me that I also would have much to bear; but they knew it, and the unimaginable rigors of their journey helped them to prepare me for mine. This is why one must say Yes to life and embrace it wherever it is found—and it is found in terrible places; nevertheless, there it is; and if the father can say, *Yes, Lord*, the child can learn that most difficult of words, *Amen*. (60)

Baldwin descends from the heights of "human heritage . . . into the eyes of [his] father and [his] mother," and then moves from an "embrace" of life to the formative utterances of faith, "*Yes, Lord*" and "*Amen*."<sup>8</sup> The power of the affirmative utterance is governed by this relationship between the abstract, on the one hand, and the vocalized and tactile, on the other. In the former sense, "yes" has an archival quality: its utterances participate within "the human heritage." Affirmation thus foregrounds the very possibility of a sense of relation not reduced to the present moment, a sense which is often unimaginably painful, but transcendent of the present, rooted in a history of ritualizing the "Yes to Life" others have said before and will say in the future. At the same time, the affirmatives act with instantaneous efficacy, as speech acts *par excellence*; they don't merely say but perform, allowing the listener to become a witness of an almost sacred act that will shape their own relationship with life. Indeed, in both of the passages' "yeses," the speaker engenders acknowledgment, whether a recognition of life ("nevertheless, there it is") or confirmatory affirmation in the child's *Amen* (expressing agreement). Baldwin thus posits an ethical sensibility tied to how we issue affirmatives within discourse, and how their ability to generate a response constitutes the human heritage we compose.

<sup>8</sup> *Amen*, i.e. "so be it," generally marks affirmation of a prayer. Baldwin uses it here in this sense. In other works, such as *Just above My Head* and his poem "Amen," *Amen* marks a character's epiphanic recognition that a prayer or promise constitutes an existential truth in their life.

*Nothing Personal* ultimately offers an antiracist ethics governed by living affirmatively. For Baldwin, this begins with an affirmative utterance that signals to others the kind of openness and recognition with which we will approach them. In this sense, affirmation produces recognition of life outside racialized structures and, in so doing, both erodes them and helps produce a "human heritage" worthy of the name. In a scene just after his "Yes to Life," Baldwin asserts the importance of rooting this ethics in quotidian acts. "I've sometimes watched strangers here, here for a day or a week or a month, or newly transplanted, watched a boy and a girl . . . yes, there was something recognizable, something to which the soul responded, something to make one smile, even to make one weep with exultation" (52). Here, "yes" emerges as a *volta*, a rhetorical turn prompted by a surprising intimation of life. Indeed, if the scene in which "One must say Yes" marks the kind of genesis of what affirmation might look like, here Baldwin shows how "yes"-saying might become an anti-racist act in practice: the recognition of life in places where we have been conditioned not to expect it. For Baldwin, the moral responsibility for all of us is to make possible worlds in which life, and most importantly, every child's life, is seen, heard, affirmed, and said "yes" to.

## VII. The Ongoing Work of Yes

By way of a coda, I want to consider how affirmatives in literary texts might inform a practice of affirmation beyond them, in the communities we inhabit, and as part of urgent contemporary movements, including Black Lives Matter, as it seeks to build spaces, and ultimately an entire world, able to affirm Black existence. In *Evidence of Things Not Seen*, Baldwin writes of the need to "Excavate the meaning of the word *community* . . . our endless connection with, and responsibility for, each other" (122). For Baldwin, community is not a stable entity, but rather must be "excavated," implying the work of the recovery, rediscovery, and use of heritage. Throughout this essay, I have suggested that "yes" occupies a formative role in the featured authors' works because each of them firmly believes that the way in which one interacts with even the most basic language will dictate in part how one conceives of oneself in relation to others. In that perspective, if "yes" is reduced to the logic of a racialized "yes, sir," a speaker is negated and reduced. But in contrast, when a speaker gives or witnesses an affirmation outside the linguistic system of racism and in opposition to it, there is the potential for their consciousness to feel reanimated, or for them to discern a new sense of connectivity in their relation to others.

This fact has key implications for anti-racist activism because it asks that anyone committed to the creation of more equitable worlds pay close attention to

their own affirmative speech, and ask themselves “To whom and how am I saying ‘yes’? What kinds of community relations does my ‘yes’ portend?” As Baldwin maintains at the close of a 1972 essay for *Playboy*, in which he discusses the subject of the play he is writing—a Black boy growing up in Harlem—we all owe a responsibility to those in our communities who have been left behind or told “no” so repeatedly they lose hope. “That . . . boy is my subject and my responsibility. And yours,” Baldwin writes, speaking, not just to his moment, but ours, one of rising mass incarceration and horrifically frequent, unjustifiable police shootings (713). To live responsibly within a world that routinely undermines the ability of so many to affirm and become the authors of their own affirmation, one must always be cognizant of who needs to hear a “yes” and alert to whose voice is calling out to be recognized as life, and embraced, wherever they are found. For while the perilous consequences of not saying “yes” are all too certain, the possibility of “yes” is unbounded.

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## "A Family Affair": Introduction to the First *CLAJ* Creative Writing Section

*doris davenport*

Creative Writing Editor

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*Greetings, Dear CLA Colleagues, Comrades, Kinfolks!*

Hello and how are you all doing? Invocations of total well-being and health to all, from the Cherokee Homelands (Appalachian foothills of Northeast Georgia) where, in the midst of ongoing world pandemics (crises like Queen Hurricane Ida, the Haitian earthquake) including toxic ytmale supremacy & global acts of violent misogyny, i still find joy, faith, meaning, and inspiration in us, in the world(s) that we create in CLA.

That *meaningfulness* justifies a *CLAJ* Creative Writing section: joy, faith, meaning, and inspiration. Here, as at CLA conferences, we acknowledge and honor our collective past, as we create and *insure* the future. *CLAJ* should include (or must include) creative writing because of passion, because it is timely and because. Just because.

CLA members generate passion; whether creators of literatures or critics of literature, the commitment and dedication exhibit passionate involvement. (Literary criticism may be one of the most intimate of passionate acts.) As critics, we write (often sublimely) about what? Creative writings: poetry, short stories, creative non-fiction, novels, and emergent forms.

*CLAJ* needs a creative writing section too, because it is timely, in this era of digital reality and virtual everything, like our 2021 (very wonderful) CLA Conference. Since the *CLAJ* is now digital, here is an opportunity for *CLAJ* to showcase, not only traditional creative *writing*, but also multi-discipline; inter-disciplinary; cross-genre collaborations and interactive art forms; multi-generational creatives; emergent, archival & futuristic art forms; to be more inclusively and overtly multi-gendered (LGBTQ+, pronouns included), eventually to include photography; theater pieces and live audio-videos That said . . .

The new editor of *CLAJ*, Dr. Vershawn Ashanti Young, or "Dr. Vay," asked me to be an assistant editor, focusing on cultivating high quality creative output for *CLAJ*, one day in June. You would need to ask him why he asked *me*, i can only say why i agreed. There are many reasons, including my being a poet, literary and performance (with a *passion* for dance, music and photography). But the underlying reason that i agreed is my love and devotion to the College Language Association because of the *infrastructure* provided by the Paine College English Department,



1965-1969: Ms. Johnson, Dr. Mildred Hill Lubin, and Dr. Joyce Cherry. They took me to a CLA conference in my junior year (at Atlanta University, Dr. Richard Long was President, i think). And that was that. Since then, this organization has been a necessary aspect of my life. i said yes, to being creative writing editor for these lofty, abstract, nebulous, nostalgic reasons, then suddenly an all-too-concrete and specific Aug. 20 deadline came at me like those proverbial fast-moving freight trains.

The usual criteria will apply, in future, to submissions: *CLAJ* online portal, “blind peer review,” CLA membership and (previously unpublished) original works. For this issue, there was no time for all that protocol, and Dr. Vay wanted, and i agreed, to secure creative writing for this issue, and here we are. Quite honestly and simply, i reached out to a few CLA friends. i emailed, called, cajoled and begged (even used snail mail), and secured these wonderful offerings from our colleagues, Dr. Sandy Govan, Dr. Seretha Williams, and Dr. Jerry Ward<sup>1</sup>. Fortunately, Dr. Vay already secured the creative non-fiction “offering,” from Dr. A. Rich Robinson.

Robinson’s creative non-fiction piece, “Testament” is *a propos* and timely; it is a gay coming out story, just as this *CLAJ* issue, in this “special moment,” (Dr. Vay’s designation), is “coming out” with a creative writing section. “Testament” is an oft-told tale of a (sometimes excruciating, traumatic) familial emotional drama, still playing out, in real time, with endless variations. The character’s terse sense of humor and sparingly but aptly used references add a unique dimension to this rendition.

Govan (whom i affectionately call “Dr. Sandy”) was amenable, available and *accommodating*. Subsequently, i had the pleasure of her \*reading\* these poems to me. Their (musical) rhythms, word choice, rich *resonance* of “Dem Bones,” plus the *archival historical accuracy* of “Ms. Betty’s Fro” had me doing a mental happy dance. As she stopped reading, i shouted (sorry, Dr. Sandy): “CAN I HAVE THESE NOW? Please?”

Ward, as some of you may know, consented to be in a photo (of us dancing at CLA) on the cover of my most recent book of poetry, *dancing in time: poetry, monologues, stories, lies* (2019). That congeniality, plus his almost legendary prowess in writing, led me to ask him for something. Immediately he responded with “EXERCISES FOR A SUMMER DAY: adventures in hard history.”

This piece is, to me, several genres: creative non-fiction, an essay (with a rumbling rolling poetic cadence), and Afro-Futuristic Signifying. In truth, i read this work several times; each time, i realized or understood something else.

<sup>1</sup> Due to technical issues, Dr. Jerry Ward’s piece could not be published in this issue. It will, however, be included in a future issue.

“EXERCISES . . .” is just that, a very good mental workout with several enjoyable (multi-cultural signifying) “zingers.” (Dr. Ward’s piece will be forthcoming in a future issue, due to technical issues, but we wanted to mention it here to whet the appetite for is forthcoming publication.)

Seretha Williams, whose creative work also appears here, and i intermittently exchange emails in her role as intrepid Editor-in-Chief of the deliberately futuristic e-zine, *Third Stone Journal* (<https://scholarworks.rit.edu/thirdstone/>). That is how i came, indirectly, to read the sweet (yes), well-crafted evocative “Gary, Indiana: A Poem.” When i asked for it, she complied and sent “Augusta, Georgia” and “Monroe” as extras. (i am *so* blessed!)

Each of these pieces is rich with descriptive energy, intonational rhythms and immediacy. Each one has something unique to offer the *CLAJ* audience(s). And i call this introduction “A Family Affair,” because i contacted these three writers, in the way we reach out to family and close friends, if we get in a bind (need a ride, immediate extra money, somebody to watch your back). And they more than came through for me, and, more especially, for you, CLA members. (i am so grateful to each of them and i thank them, on behalf of all of us!)

Right now, writing this draft, i am listening to Duke Ellington’s “New Orleans Suite” and Rosie Ledet’s “I’m a Woman” as i mourn and celebrate our indomitable Adelle (*Adella Adella the Storyteller*) Gautier of New Orleans (Jan. 15-1948-Aug. 10, 2021). And while i do often listen and dance to music as part of my writing process, not quite like this. Subsequently, this introductory piece may not be as *whatever* as you, or i would have it be, but. It’s. About. This. Deadline! (LOL)

For future issues, i welcome suggestions for writers and works to include. i welcome suggestions, in fact, for these introductions which will (probably, maybe) be more scholarly, with a suitable abundance of epigrams, quotations and end notes; allusions, cross references; multi-syllabic diction, cutting edge contemporary acknowledgements (Lottie, Simone Biles at the Olympics; The Candy Man remake and so on) and so on. You got it! (Paine College provided me those skills. My title alludes to the classic “Family Affair” by Sly & the Family Stone.)

But not right now. For now, i am grateful for the opportunity to be Creative Writing Editor; i humbly and honestly solicit all kinds of input, but for now, this hybrid introduction, hopefully, can suffice.

*Peace and love,*

doris diosa davenport (pronouns: person / per)

Independent Scholar

B.A. Paine College; Ph.D. University of Southern California

## Gary, Indiana: A Poem

*Seretha Williams*

---

Built on dune sand and immigrant backs,  
Gary was the city of the twentieth century.  
The ghosts of the indigenous Calumet  
haunt the rusted belt that squeezed life out of  
Sears Roebuck and Frank Lloyd Wright homes.  
The great lake threatens to swell over the  
smokestacks and reclaim downtown as shoreline.  
This stilled city was a town of steel where  
Africans in exile built safe harbors among  
trees bearing progeny, not strange fruit.  
The sands of Gary sing quietly now;  
marram grass and driftwood bespeckle southern shores.  
Gary, Indiana, Indiana, Indiana,  
my home sweet home.

## Augusta, Georgia

*Seretha Williams*

---

Pinks and whites  
bloom in every neighborhood  
  
in Augusta, Georgia  
where trees are a metaphor  
  
for the coming together  
of black and white  
  
houses with centipede lawns or swept-clean red patches  
with metal, glass, mesh storm doors  
  
that set the backdrops  
of Southern porches framed  
by azaleas and dogwoods.  
  
Cities within a city,  
separate and unequal,  
South and east meet west and north  
  
in Augusta where you can smell  
the funk of race, the stench of class  
  
travelling between Sand Hills and Summerville,  
Pinched Gut and Bethlehem,  
Laney Walker and Harrisburg.

Augusta, where the Westobou falls  
across the Piedmont  
and the ghost of Bobby Jones  
walks the greens of Fruitland.

Augusta, where Woodrow Wilson  
spent his childhood  
and Butterfly McQueen caught fire  
lighting a kerosene heater.

Here, pinks and whites bloom  
in April, the month when  
neighborhoods look the same.

## Monroe, Georgia

*Seretha Williams*

---

(after a trip to the Morris Museum)

The horror unfolded on July 25, 1946. Two couples,  
George and Mae Dorsey and Roger  
and Dorothy Malcolm,  
were lynched at Moore's Ford Bridge. Two couples  
were dragged out of a truck, down a trail,  
and tied to dogwoods. The bodies  
of four human beings were penetrated  
by a barrage of ammunition. The souls  
of four human beings oozed into the dirt  
beneath their feet. Everyone  
knew the perpetrators of this crime. No one  
uttered a word.

Up the road, a boy pumps well water, gazes at azure skies and dreams of  
flying. His lean arms pull slowly on the handle, prolonging this  
moment of solitude, of possibility.

In July, pristine cotton flowers have given way  
to the split-open bolls ready to be picked. Cotton folds  
into the horizon, and field hands deftly pick fibers  
from between dried bristles that slash skin like razors.

Hums of Leadbelly's blues rise up from the rows and  
lilt on the slight breeze that teases the backs of stooped-over workers.

Dusk settles over Georgia. The field hands stand in line.  
The sharecroppers wait for judgment.

The cotton haul must be weighed. It will not be enough. It is never enough  
to free them from this land.

The boy holds two sticks in his right hand, a cross, and swoops his outstretched arms through the air as he runs unfettered through broomsedge, circling the grayed home where he and all his siblings were born.

Near the bridge, where teenagers play at love, the FBI recovers spent bullets from shotguns and pistols. President Truman sends men to ask questions, but Georgia is silent; the bridge is an impasse not even the brave are willing to cross. Walton County looks like a place where men and women can breathe. Farms and smiling faces are organic to the Piedmont topography. The air stifles. Red clay chokes.

Murders go unsolved.

Up the road, a boy watches the sun slip behind dogwoods; he imagines a life beyond those trees, flaps his lean arms preparing to fly over broomsedge, over cotton, over dogwoods, over bridge, over Apalachee, over, over, over.

## Dem Bones

*Sandra Y. Govan*

---

Used to be I worried  
struggled even some might say  
angry with my body my joints and yes  
dem bones  
Cockeyed crooked skewered bones  
bones not made  
of water and sand  
when da Lord was making Man  
annoyed by how they fit or don't together

Since my arrival to my risible years  
the grating and the grinding  
the cracking and casual snapping  
the all too often locking popping twisting turning  
of often painful too loose joints  
while they supposed to be holding me firm is,  
as they say,  
annoying.

Now I know in most true lives  
the center does not always hold  
and bodies before things will fall apart  
and no matter the light in my eyes  
or the charm of my smile  
or that never met a stranger



way of walking through the world  
or my Chicago way of loving folks  
and Louisiana Hot Sauce  
whatever the heat my outer self projects  
it is the interior disjointed joints  
the inflexible muscle those brittle bits  
of bone  
on bone  
or muscle altogether lax

The constant binding grinding tearing  
'till all connecting links  
dissolve  
disband  
disintegrate  
leaving behind  
to do as they will  
joints or bones  
to stand alone  
make do on their own

Oh dem bones

Bones that may  
or may not  
rise again  
Dem Bones  
Dem Bones  
Dem Bones

**Ms. Betty's 'Fro  
(On Women's Day)**

*Sandy Govan*

---

Glorious, dense, impenetrable  
thicket atop a long angular frame  
Ms. Betty's unconquered 'fro  
renounces ribbons braids barrettes combs  
heat hats caps scarves  
to stand staunch  
unwavering, majestic.

I cannot imagine it suppressed  
constrained by any fashionable cover  
nor by a drum major's marching rig  
I cannot envision it yielding  
one inch to parts or twists  
or complicated curls  
to Dreadlocks or Sisterlocks  
and certainly never  
the dreaded pressing comb.

Perhaps a skillful scissor sculpts it  
now and again and surely  
to retain its beauty it must be washed  
and somehow dried now and then

but whenever I look  
that magnificent  
Unthinned Bush remains  
dense  
impenetrable  
unbossed by any hair taming tool

Ms. Betty's Magnificent Afro  
Proud  
Natural  
Uncompromised

## Testament

*Angelo Rich Robinson*

---

The Summer of 1998 begins as my previous three summers: working in Atlanta using the skills from my first career as a computer programmer analyst. I'm on break from doctoral studies in English at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. While routine, there is something new to this summer. In June, I officiated at two friends' wedding in western Virginia and I visited Europe for the first time with a trip to the Netherlands in early July. But now, both of these new and exciting experiences seem like a lifetime ago, although it is only July 24<sup>th</sup>. I'm sure my impending trip home and what I must face there have much to do with agony and pain replacing the immediacy and joy of these experiences. Adding to the emotional misery, I was plagued with the distress from a multitude of canker sores in my mouth. This is already the most stressful week of my life and it's only Friday.

With existential dread and physical discomfort, I board a flight home to Pensacola. On the plane, I sit next to a white minister who questions me about my faith. I wonder if this is a sign from God that I'm about to do the wrong thing. He continues to talk about worshipping and attempts to blame blacks for the lack of integration during Sunday worship. I politely point out the errors in his thinking, educating him that it was whites who would only worship with blacks if they were in segregated inferior spaces or refused to worship with blacks at all. He doesn't say much after that. I'm reassured that God did not send him as a sign to abandon my mission.

I have told no one that I am flying home to finally share the truth about my sexuality with my parents, particularly Mama. I have always known that I would do this because I wanted her to hear it from me firsthand. I have never wanted her to get this news from a second party, and I certainly have never wanted someone to use it in an attempt to hurt her. Not surprisingly, I decide to put it in a letter that I will present to her. As the nine drafts attest, it is the most important letter that I've written in my life.

I arrive home late Friday evening but do not plan to share the letter with Mama that night. She works overnight, and I don't want to be insensitive. She has also previously insisted that she not be given any bad news before going to work--and definitely not at work. As a histologist, she works with sharp medical instruments and fears cutting herself upon hearing bad news. I have little doubt that this will be bad news to her. So although it is killing me, I wait. I have waited thirty-six years; I guess I can wait one more night.

It was a long night to say the least. Between the anxiety and the pain from the numerous canker sores, I don't get much sleep, and the sleep I get isn't that good. When Mama arrives home from work the next morning, she is busy with tasks. But she immediately begins to ask about my trip to Amsterdam. She is also curious about what I bought her. The gift is uncharacteristically skimpy, and I feel terrible about it but linen from Belgium was the only thing that was truly unique. Of course, there's also Belgium chocolate, but that doesn't appeal to her. So after talking pleasantries about the trip, I interrupt Mama's business and ask her to sit as I want to talk to her. She hears the seriousness in my voice and complies with an almost stern look. I present her with the letter and impatiently wait as she slowly reads it with her head down, not once looking up at me. I watch for a reaction as my heart pounds like never before, but I do not get one as she continues to read in deafening silence. I frantically, but patiently, wait for her to finish.

July 25, 1998

Dear Mama,

This is probably the hardest letter that I have ever written, but in my opinion, the most necessary. The subject of this letter is my homosexuality. By homosexuality, I mean that I am physically, romantically, and sexually attracted to men. This is why I have not seriously dated women during my life. It is also the reason why I more than likely will not marry a woman and produce grandchildren for you. For me, it would be dishonest and cruel to marry a woman under these circumstances.

How long have I been a homosexual? Well, I trace my feelings back to elementary school and definitely knew by middle school. But since society, church, and family do not approve of this lifestyle, I have repressed and hidden these feelings for many, many years and tried to please you, the church, and society.

Who knows that I am homosexual? Some of the friends I had before moving to Amherst know. But for me, the North has been very liberating. When I moved to Amherst, I decided to make a new start in my life and refused to lie about or hide my sexuality. As such, many people there know that I am homosexual, including faculty and friends. My friends there love me as I hope and pray you will continue to do.

In addition, Pastor Bright has known for two years and continues to love me and tells me that Jesus does also. I am presently seeing a counselor recommended by Pastor, and I am discussing my homosexuality as well as other topics.

From these sessions, I know that my homosexuality is not a curse, demonic, or something that can be cured. God made me this way and he loves me. I know that no amount of praying by me or others has changed this. I am writing this letter in

the hope that you and I will finally have an honest relationship. For the past few years, I have felt resentment toward you and society because I felt forced to lie and live two separate lives in order to please you foremost, and a few others as well. More importantly, I believe that it is unfair and a shame that the people that I love the most, you and Mallory, do not know everything about me.

Mama, I hope that my honesty will begin a new and better phase in our relationship and I invite and welcome you to ask any and all questions that you might have. While I know that this letter will cause you initial pain, sorrow, and unhappiness, I hope that it will bring us closer than ever.

*I love you.*

*Angelo*

When Mama finally looks up very calmly from reading the letter, I can tell that she is not pleased. I can see her choosing her words very carefully before she speaks. She begins with a question: "Is this the kind of life you want?" I'm not offended and welcome the inquiry as an opportunity to further explain that although it is my choice, it really isn't a choice. It is who I am and who God created. With that, I pour my heart out to Mama and try to explain my romantic same-gender attraction as openly and honestly as I can. However, when my philosophical and intellectual attempts fail to clarify my desire for men, I have to break it down to Mama and say that women do not give me a sexual erection. While my sexuality is definitely more complicated than this, I think it best at this point to take this stance. I don't want to give her any hope of romance and marriage with a woman. I have come too far for this. I am reminded of scholar/artist E. Patrick Johnson's conversation with his mother when relating his same-gender desire to her in his book, *Sweet Tea: Black Gay Men of the South* (2008). As Johnson puts it:

I knew then that I could only make her understand by providing her with some kind of anecdote or analogy. I asked her, "Mom, have you ever found yourself attracted to another woman?" She said, "No," drawing out the word while simultaneously shaking her head. I replied, "Neither have I," which was actually a lie, but I thought that it would help her to understand where I was coming from. (111)

After at least making it past the hurdle of getting across to Mama why I am not seeking romantic relationships with women based on physical desire, she moves on to her next concern: my desire is a sin, and I will be doomed to hell for my attraction to men. I expect this reaction from her as a Christian as it had also been on my list of concerns. To be honest, I can't say that it was ever my biggest fear, but I did have an adolescent dream that I was caught in bed with a man on Judgment

Day. Nevertheless, I always found it unbelievable that God would create me with this desire and give me no outlet for expression.

Wouldn't that be cruel? What kind of God would do that?

My therapy sessions had also helped me to begin to believe that my homosexuality was not a sin. Ultimately, I was always more fearful of my family's--particularly Mama's--and society's reaction, but not of God's. I was also fortunate enough to grow up in a church that was not outwardly homophobic or participated in gay bashing to my knowledge. Perhaps this was Pastor Bright's regret when he mailed me a brochure earlier this year. On it was the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod's formal doctrinal disapproval of homosexuality, especially since my prior therapy sessions failed to cure me or communicate that I was living in sin.

Upon listening to my understanding of Christianity and interpretation of scripture concerning homosexuality, Mama did not challenge my views or attempt to refute my explanation of God's view on the subject. I could tell that, however, she was not convinced that I should walk away from heterosexual marriage or abandon having children in the traditional way. As such, I resort to the pre-dawn secret that I overheard more than two decades ago: I ask if she wanted me to subject a woman to what her friend Pat had endured when she discovered that her husband was gay. Mama is stunned by my question and knowledge of this truth. She, nevertheless, does not answer my question and I wonder if Mama, like another female relative, thinks I should still get married even though she now knows of my homosexuality.

Do they think marriage will cure me or is it simply a solution for respectability? Is it a call for black unity and heteronormativity? Were they predating Minister Louis Farrakhan's message: "Get a woman brothers, even if you a little gay now?"<sup>1</sup>

When Mama does not respond to my original question about who I should marry, I know then that we have gone as far as we can today on the subject of my gayness and her acceptance.

But tomorrow is another day.

Before I return to Atlanta on Sunday, Mama and I talk again; she asks how others take the news of my homosexuality. I tell her that they all accept it and offer their unconditional love. She particularly asks about my father's--her ex-husband's--response and seems displeased by it. I laughingly imagine her saying, "Damn, he isn't good for anything, not even helpful in keeping our son straight!" She tells me that she has hope and confidence in my therapy sessions and prays they will work to heal me. I respond that my therapist recommends some books to help her accept my homosexuality. We leave things there; I don't want to give

her any false hope. I have come out and I'm not going back in for anyone. It's my turn to live my life on my terms and do what's best for me without apology or compromise. Mama wants me to be straight and I can't and won't; we are at a stalemate. I hope that love will see us through our discord. Time will tell.

When I return to Amherst in late August, I am told that Mama is having a hard time accepting my homosexuality. Reports range from telling of her despondent despair to saying she is enraged. I have no firsthand account because, for the first time in our lives, we are not communicating. I am giving her space to accept all of me. I also don't inquire about her unless told as I don't want anyone caught between our battle lines, especially Mallory, as we each take our stands. Nevertheless, I never doubt Mama's love, even in what I perceive to be selfish and loveless acts. I believe she feels otherwise. To Mama, her actions come out of love and wanting the best for me, even her rejection to accept my sexuality and my perceived lifestyle. She views it as me throwing my life away in terms of respectability. Her candid question she repeats to me less than a month later confirms it for me: "Is this the kind of life you want?" It was not the life she wanted for her perfect and only son. Mama wants a wife and kids for me, and a daughter-in-law and grandkids for her. Pastor Bright correctly recognizes her behavior as mourning the loss of a daughter-in-law and grandchildren. She is, after all, a traditionalist. I have some compassion for her, but I have no intentions of kowtowing to her demands or feeding her hope. I'm done with living my life for her or anyone else. IT'S MY TURN! This seems harsh and extreme to some, but I can't and won't relent. Mama learns that I have as much will power and stern as she does. She raised me to be this way.

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<sup>1</sup> Hip Hop & Entertainments Leaders. Atlanta, GA, October 13, 2016.



Temple, Christel. *Transcendence and the Africana Literary Enterprise*. New York: Lexington Books, 2018. 217 pp. ISBN 978-1-4985-4510-5. Paperback.

#### A Review by Inte'A DeShields

*Transcendence and the Africana Literary Enterprise* ends with a discussion of James Baldwin's *Esquire* article in which he introduces the notion of an "atmosphere of freedom." Relegated to the periphery in the arts, media, and literature, this strategic exclusion of Blackness supports the necessity of a monograph that not only centralizes African American culture. It provides tools for the creation of an "atmosphere of freedom" and the "'transcendence' enabled by...Africana Studies critical approaches to literary criticism [and] literary phenomena" (191).

Creating an atmosphere of freedom requires the deliberate consideration of the traumas—psychological, economic, and cultural—endured from the *Maafa*<sup>1</sup>. Specifically, the colonization of Africana people in the Global South and the perpetual enculturation of Eurocentric ideals reiterated ideological centrality and implied white neutrality. The result is a tug-of-war to rescue and reclaim people of African descent's cultural, intellectual, and technological contributions.

The effectiveness of Western enculturation is a testament not of the physical enslavement of Africans. Instead, it speaks to the educational and institutional obstructions imposed through the Constitution, anti-literacy laws, Jim Crow, Separate but Equal, redlining, continued underfunding of schools, vehement opposition to critical race theory and the truthful teaching of history, and relegating African American culture to the periphery of American identity. *Transcendence and the Africana Literary Enterprise* provides scholars of Africana studies, cultural studies, humanities, literary studies, and a range of interdisciplinary pursuits a survey of a dozen African American texts to demonstrate the value in applying Literary Africology to the exploration of culturally affirming texts. This book presents a multidimensional dynamism of Africana studies. It further encapsulates a "unique method and logic for layering ideas, concepts, theories, history, and data into usable narratives and tools to advance Africana experience as a model of the human capacity for renewal and regeneration" (Temple xxii). Thus, *Transcendence* presents a framework for "culturally grounded, agency-focused, transformative discourse," and approaches to the analysis, critique, and pedagogical exploration of African American literature and creative production that is uniquely informed by Pan-Africanist sensibilities (Karenga 577).

<sup>1</sup> The Maafa is a Kiswahili concept introduced by Marimba Ani referencing the "great disaster" of the African Holocaust by violent European cultural infringement. It refers to the physical as well as psychological enslavement and oppression of the African (Wells-Wilbon et. al. 509-526; Richards, 1980).

The African American literary enterprise has birthed a range of literary traditions. Despite African Americans' literary and creative contributions to American and international literary annals, the exploration and critique of these works have been largely sustained by scholars' application of theories and methodologies. Though valuable, they are not born from culturally informed inquiry or bolstered by the invaluable perspective of informed-insider analysis and critique. In *Transcendence*, Christel Temple presents a manuscript demonstrating the necessity, feasibility, and enjoyment of engaging Africana literature and other cultural productions. The traditional canon of literary and textual analysis alongside traditional Africana perspectives and the audacious application of Black cultural mythology present an innovative framework for critical and comparative analysis of Black cultural and creative productions.

Temple argues that effective literary criticism of African American literature cannot be achieved without proper consideration. She argues that for "understanding of how literature is a prism that reflectively signifies the cultures historical, social, political, psychological, linguistic, narrative, and conceptual realities." She further encourages a culturally informed analysis of Africana texts and inspires the development of a literary imagination that is agentively Africanist (xvii). In Toni Morrison's *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, Morrison explains that coming to terms with what makes American literature distinct is its "unsettled and unsettling population" (6). Morrison goes on to explain the literary imagination, as derived from Euro-American cultural and political consciousness, compels the American (white) writer to "talk about themselves through and within a sometimes allegorical, sometimes metaphorical, but always choked representation of an Africanist presence" (17). This too can be said of the African American, who either through constraints imposed by teachers or employers—or because of their own inclinations—is oppositional to a holistic portrayal and analysis of an Africanist presence. Temple provides a solution to the problem of reading and writing "with and through a language that can powerfully evoke and enforce hidden signs of racial superiority, cultural hegemony, and dismissive 'othering' of people and language" (Morrison x). She encourages the centralization of Africana identity to connect with and engage in a meaningful and immersive critical analysis and interpretation of scholarly inquiries. The text is a thorough response to the problem of the choked representation and analysis of the African presence in literature and a reply to the challenge to move away from Western science's bifurcation of the study of human experiences.<sup>2</sup> Temple

<sup>2</sup> Asante discusses the core philosophies that lead to the Black Studies Movement and the eventual pursuit of Africology. Specifically, the responsibility of departments of Africology to take a holistic approach to the study of African phenomena (Asante 206).

demonstrates how the Africana literary tradition is ripe with possibility for engaging the social sciences, humanities, and literary studies.

Organized in 13 chapters, Temple gives the reader an introduction to the “Canon of the Africana Worldview.” This introduction provides an overview of the text, fundamental explication of literary criticism, and its “significant role in maintaining the canon, the tradition, and society’s understanding of how literature acts as a prism that reflectively signifies the culture’s historical, social, political, psychological, linguistic narrative, and conceptual realities” (xvii). *Transcendence* provides a critical review of the social context that necessitates the development of African American and Africana studies programs. Along with situating the reader’s orientation in understanding the “why” of Africana Studies, Temple further explains the need to create and refine theory and method for examining the literature. Delineating the theory and method of literary Africology, its pedagogical employability, and social scientific application for research makes chapter one of *Transcendence* invaluable as it invites scholars to enjoy “a space, literal and figurative, which is exactly as real as the limits which have made it necessary” (191) as discussed by Baldwin from beginning to end (Baldwin “Color” *Esquire* para. 7).

As Baldwin’s analysis presents, *Transcendence* suggests an articulation of freedom through a thoughtful collection of culturally-centered, agency-focused theories and methodologies for examining and critiquing Africana literary and creative productions. The examples teach how applying the theory and methodology can elevate the traditional canon of literary analysis and criticism. In short, *Transcendence* is written for scholars and students who desire to engage with and critique African diasporic literature and creative productions. In reading DuBois’ *The Souls of Black Folk* and Dorothy West’s *The Living Is Easy*, the second chapter subtly encourages the reader to pursue technocultural innovation in Africana Studies and models the complex intellectual exercise of comparative literary analysis. It draws a symbolic connection and contrast to the mortality and vulnerability of Black males through a framework developed in “Molefi Kete Asante’s synthesis of African-centered cultural epistemologies drawn from the work of Cheik Anta Diop” (14). In addition to presenting theoretical models for literary criticism, *Transcendence* lays out pedagogical approaches for educators to assist students in examining a text through Africological *reader-response* (Chapter 5) and introduces the demographic literary standards (DLS), a social scientific methodology (Chapter 7) that “merges humanities and social science skills and methods into a functional engagement of literature” (91). *Transcendence* presents example after example of applied literary Africology, in theory and methodology, along with modeling comparative literary analysis.

*Transcendence* is essential reading for students, lecturers, and scholars to pursue a curricular or research agenda that is culturally centered and rigorous in its approach to literary criticism and comparative analysis. For application and inspiration, this text is especially useful in informing strategies for instructing post-secondary developmental literacy and for instructors searching for inspiration for exploring texts and cultural productions for courses in Africana humanities. Inclusive of the fundamentals of Africana Studies, *Transcendence* successfully demonstrates the employability of the Africological paradigm in exploring the depths of the literary enterprise.

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**Anderson, Carol. *White Rage: The Unspoken Truth of Our Racial Divide*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2017. 285 pp. ISBN: 978-1-63286-413-0. Paperback.**

A Review by Reginald A. Bess

#### What Critics say about *White Rage*

A critic at the *Washington Post* has this to say about the work under review:

“Anderson convincingly shows that African Americans’ economic and social progress has historically and sometimes ferociously been reversed...*White Rage* is a sobering primer on the myriad ways African American resilience, triumph over enslavement, Jim Crow and intolerance have been relentlessly defied by the very institutions entrusted to uphold our democracy.”

Also, a critic at the *Boston Globe* writes this about the book:

“Much of what [Anderson] details is horrible, but she writes with hope, too, ending with a call to ‘take our country forward into a brighter future.’”

Finally, a critic at the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* writes:

“*White Rage* lends perspective and insight for those who are willing to confront, study and learn from the present situation in this country.”

#### About the Author

Dr. Carol Anderson is the Charles Howard Professor and Chair of African American Studies at Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia, and a Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. Her book, *White Rage: The Unspoken Truth of Our Racial Divide*, won the 2016 National Book Critics Circle Award and was a *New York Times* Bestseller.

#### About the Book

In five chapters and a prologue, Carol Anderson takes the reader on a scintillating journey from the Reconstruction Period to the Age of Obama. She also provides an extensive Notes section (82 pages), expounding on aspects of each chapter and including a section for discussion and recommended reading. In the prologue titled, interestingly enough, “Kindling,” Anderson explains how she arrived at the kind of rage that she would be writing about. First, she says, she looked at what was considered *black* rage, i.e., “looting, rioting or other forms of visible violent protest” (3). Then she writes: “This led to an epiphany: what

was really at work was *white* rage” (4). But what triggers white rage? She answers: “The trigger for white rage, inevitably, black advancement” (3). She notes the damage done by white rage in the conclusion to her introduction: “white rage has undermined democracy, warped the Constitution, weakened the nation’s ability to compete economically, squandered billions of dollars on baseless incarceration, rendered an entire region sick, poor, and woefully uneducated, and left cities nothing less than decimated” (6)

Chapter one deals with the Reconstruction Era following the Civil War. Chapter two covers the Great Migration of Southern Blacks. Chapter three breaks down the Brown v. Board of Education ruling. Chapter four discusses the events of the Civil Rights movement. Chapter five presents the election of President Barack Obama and the ramifications attendant thereunto.

In conclusion, *White Rage* is an important educational resource to further the goal of creating a more just society.

**Brown, Jericho. *The Tradition*. Port Townsend: Copper Canyon Press, 2019. 72 pp. ISBN: 978-1-55659-486-1. Paperback.**

A Review by Reginald A. Bess

### The 2020 Pulitzer Poetry Prize

In 2020, the Pulitzer Prize Board awarded its Poetry Prize to Jericho Brown for his collection *The Tradition*. The Board deemed the book “a collection of masterful lyrics that combine delicacy with historical urgency in their loving evocation of bodies vulnerable to hostility and violence.”

### About the Author and his Other Works

Jericho Brown is Associate Professor of English and Creative Writing and Director of the Creative Writing Program at Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia. His other two books of poetry also have garnered prestigious awards. *PLEASE*, his first book of poetry, won the 2009 American Book Award. His second book, *The New Testament*, won the 2014 Anisfield-Wolf Book Award. He is the recipient of a Whiting Award and fellowships from the John Simon Guggenheim Foundation, the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study at Harvard University, and the National Endowment for the Arts.

In an interview with podcast *American Masters: Creative Spark* titled “Jericho Brown takes on *Tradition*,” Brown “breaks down the process behind the collection’s titular poem, *The Tradition*.” The listener learns that the title of the earlier draft was different. Brown says: “Somehow or another, I clearly didn’t have a title for it. So I just called it *2014* (the year that the three Black men whose names appear at the end of the poem were killed) because I didn’t know what to call it.”

The interviewer then informs that the final draft “takes shape in the sonnet format—it is now down to 14 lines that follow a strict rhyme scheme and structure” and that “[o]ne of the first things you might think of when you see the word ‘sonnet’ is William Shakespeare.” Brown concludes: “I was asking questions about the history of what we think of as good. We think of the sonnet as the achievement of the poet’s work. You know, if you can write a good sonnet, you must be a good poet. Or so we’re told.” And finally, he tells the listener how he landed on the title: “And then obviously John Crawford, Eric Garner, Mike Brown, their deaths, their murders seem to me, outcomes of a tradition.” Hence the title of the collection.

### The Creation of a New Poetic Genre

Brown is also credited with creating a new subgenre of poetry called the “duplex.” Herewith is an example of the subgenre in a poem of the same name (*The Tradition*, p. 49):

#### “Duplex”

I begin with love, hoping to end there.

I don’t want to leave a messy corpse.

I don’t want to leave a messy corpse.

Full of medicines that turn in the sun.

Some of my medicines turn in the sun.

Some of us don’t need hell to be good.

Those who need most, need hell to be good.

What are the symptoms of *your* sickness?

Here is one symptom of my sickness:

Men who love me are men are men who miss me.

Men who leave me are men who miss me.

In the dream where I am an island.

The first thing to note in this poem is the repetition of entire lines (e.g., lines 2 and 3 and lines 12 and 13 or parts of lines, e.g., 6 and 7 and 10 and 11).

The ‘duplex’ is a combination of the sonnet (fourteen lines, strict rhyme, and structure), the ghazal (a form of amatory or ode originating in Arabic poetry that includes themes like the pain of loss or separation and the beauty of love despite that pain [see especially the opening two lines]), and the blues (see especially line 11).

The back cover opens with the statement: “Beauty abounds in Jericho Brown’s daring new poetry....” This review closes with it.





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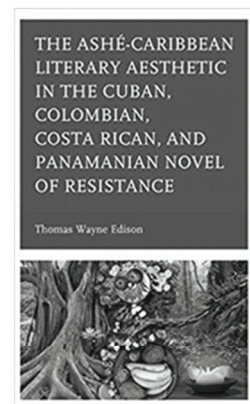
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## ASHÉ-CARIBBEAN LITERARY AESTHETIC IN THE CUBAN, COLOMBIAN, COSTA RICAN, AND PANAMANIAN NOVEL OF RESISTANCE

By Thomas Wayne Edison



"In this book, Thomas W. Edison argues convincingly in support of the importance of the philosophical concept of Ashe' to the worldviews of the selected Cuban and Afro-Hispanic authors. Ashe', in this context, underscores the resistance to the oppression and dehumanization of black peoples and is an integral component of the cultural maroonage that has sustained them throughout the African Diaspora. *Ashé-Caribbean Literary Aesthetic in the Cuban, Colombian, Costa Rican, and Panamanian Novel of Resistance* is original, thoroughly researched, meticulously documented, and represents an excellent example of literary intertextuality in critical practice."

— Marvin A. Lewis, University of Missouri

### ABOUT THIS BOOK

*Ashé-Caribbean Literary Aesthetic in the Cuban, Colombian, Costa Rican, and Panamanian Novel of Resistance* contributes to understanding the important role that African-influenced spiritual cultures play in literature that challenges the concept that European aesthetics are superior to African-inspired cultures. Thomas W. Edison highlights the novels of four courageous Caribbean writers who have used their novels to integrate aspects of African ontology with literary techniques, themes, and history. The common element in these works is the inclusion of African-inspired faith traditions and culture. As a result of this perspective, their literature stands out as keen examples of Ashé-Caribbean resistance literature. While each writer presents their unique literary style in the works, collectively they draw on a foundation of the Afro-Caribbean. The Circum-Caribbean region will be the geographical unit because of its collective history of slavery, colonial rule, and parallel patterns of religious syncretism. This book makes an important literary connection among Caribbean Hispanophone nations.

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Thomas Wayne Edison** is associate professor of Spanish in the Department of Classical and Modern Languages at the University of Louisville.

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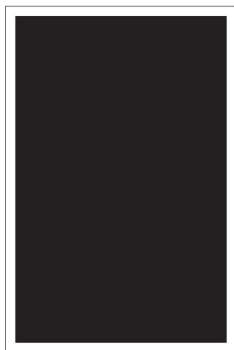
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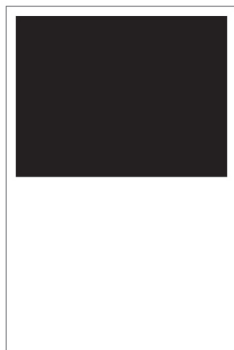
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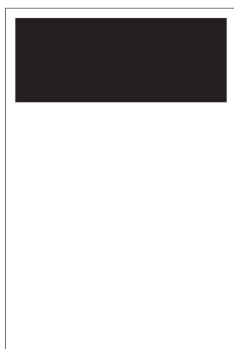
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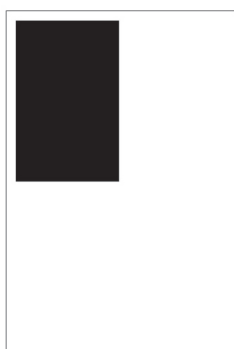
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