As the World Burns: "Checking In" (An Annotated Letter to My Students with Lessons from Octavia E. Butler)

Kendra R. Parker

It should not have been difficult for me to write to my spring 2020 students; we had already endured so much together. In January, I arrived to class red-faced, puffy-eyed, and barely on time—I had an encounter with an officer. In February, we caught whispers of a Black man murdered while jogging in Brunswick—a stone's throw from Georgia Southern University's three campuses. In March, we all felt the COVID-19 disruption of the semester, our lives, and the world. And, we were all still reeling from the October 2019 book burning and death of a Black male student-athlete. For five days, I tried to type them something. For five days, I was silent. For someone whose students frequently quip, "Dr. Parker you always got something to say," such silence was palpable. But they deserved to hear from me. Five days after George Floyd's murder, I e-mailed my students who, three weeks earlier, had completed my course. But there is so much my message did not say. And so, dear reader, I present to you my letter to them, accompanied by annotations and reflections on Octavia E. Butler's work, whose wisdom infuses me daily.

From: Kendra R. Parker

To: ENGL 5590

Date: Saturday, May 30, 2020, 9:42 PM EST

Subject: As the world burns: Checking in

Hi, all:

I don't have any words of wisdom or cherry-picked quotes from King, X, or Douglass. But after our semester together, where we have discussed so many topics that are underlying many of the things that we are seeing unfold in real time as I type, I didn't feel right not reaching out to you just to say: take care of yourselves. It may look different for each of you, but however you do it please take care of yourselves. To my Black students in particular: whatever you're feeling right now is absolutely valid. Don't let anyone tell you any differently.

If you protest—and however you protest—be safe.

If you're angry about Ahmaud Arbery and George Floyd, you should also be angry about Breonna Taylor, Sean Reed, and Tony McDade. The latter three are a Black woman, a Black man, and a Black trans man also recently shot dead by police.

There are so many others. Too many names.

That's all I have folks.

Love and light.

Dr. Parker

"take care of yourselves."

Butler's *Kindred* (1979), a novel about a 26-year-old Black woman who time travels back-and-forth between her 20th-century American present and the 19th-century slavery past, emphasizes the importance of preparation. Each time Dana Franklin returns to her American present, she prepares for an inevitable return to the past, packing essentials: a comb and brush (114), sleeping pills (117), soap (114, 195), aspirin (114), antiseptic (195), Excedrin (195), pocketknife, toothpaste (114, 195), and clothing (114, 195). While Dana is unsure of when she will return to slavery's embrace, she knows she *will* return, and she prepares in advance to care for herself. Like Dana, I want you to anticipate the challenges ahead and equip yourself with tools necessary for your survival and wellness. Identify what you need. (Is it a therapist? To take your medication? To get a daily dose of sunshine? To complete deep breathing exercises?) And then figure out how to access it. I encourage you to use your campus' student wellness centers and mental health professionals, and I offer you three apps you can access from your smartphone or tablet: *Therapy for Black Girls*, *The Safe Place*, and *Pride Counseling*.

Prioritize and normalize your mental and physical health.

"To my Black students in particular…"

There were only three white students enrolled in my class. I wrote the e-mail for my Black students, but I decided to include my white students because I wanted to remind them that if they were not paying attention, their Black peers and Black professor did not have that luxury. I added "to my Black students in particular," because Black people are conditioned to perform strength, perpetuating the myth of unshakeability. I wanted them to give themselves permission to *feel*.

"If you protest—and however you protest—"

Many chose to take to the streets. Did you?

Don't answer that. Your activism will not look like everyone else's.

Ignore those who say your activism must be public and that you must take to the streets. First, it is an ableist assumption. Second, we are in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, and you may be (or live with someone who is) immunocompromised. Or, maybe you're scared of getting shot by rubber bullets or doused with tear gas—or worse. Heather Heyer, Summer Taylor, and Garrett Foster died while protesting.

Your activism does not need to be public to be powerful.

The 1955-1956 Montgomery bus boycott was set to begin four days after Rosa Parks was arrested for refusing to move from her seat on Thursday, December 1, 1955. This meant that "[b]etween Friday and Monday morning, organizers had to get the word out to tens of thousands of people" (Tufekci 63). Alabama State College English professor Jo Ann Robinson and two of her students used a mimeograph machine at the college to produce 52,000 leaflets. The leaflets, which announced the boycott, were completed overnight (Tufekci 63). However, they needed to be distributed. But how? Zeynep Tufekci notes,

> Without the digital tools we take for granted today, without even universal home telephones, distributing the leaflets required using a substantial number of previously existing organizations. In all, there were sixty-eight African American organizations in Montgomery . . . Within one day, practically every African American home had a copy of the leaflet. (63-64)

Tufekci's observation highlights the importance of individual and grassroots organizing to galvanize movements prior to the advent of digital tools. Similarly, Georgia Gilmore organized Black women cooks, maids, and service professionals with "The Club from Nowhere," "an underground network" of Black domestic workers who sold food to help raise money for the bus boycott organizers (Nadasen 29). The money from the food sales was used to provide alternative modes of transportation for Black people who relied on the Montgomery bus system but chose to boycott (Robnett 64-65, Godoy). These Black domestic workers "were service workers with a particular set of skills that could be utilized for political mobilization" (Nadasen 31). Though Robinson and Gilmore's contributions are not typically at the forefront of recollections and discussions about 1960s liberation movements, what's clear is this: without such behind the scenes work, there is no movement.

Gilmore, Robinson, and others used their talents and resources to participate in liberation and justice movements. What talents, resources, and passions do you have that can be used for political mobilization?

You have your own part to play.

Your activism may not look like everyone else's.

But get in where you fit in.

And let's get to work.

"You should also be angry about..."

The semester's theme was freedom, and we read eight Black autobiographical texts that were published between 1845 and 2019, exploring liberation's intersections with genders, disability, weight, enslavement, sexuality, violence, fashion—and more. As I closed my e-mail, I wanted to reinforce our semester long journey by calling attention to the lack of attention surrounding Breonna Taylor and Tony McDade's murders. In naming them, I hoped to remind my students of an important point: that #BlackLivesMatter as a rallying cry all-too-often has a cisheteropatriarchal[1] focus—one we must resist.

Our collective liberation depends on our willingness to live in community and work with, advocate for, and demand the liberation of the most disenfranchised. Butler once explained, "[I]t is a writer's duty to write about human differences, all human differences, and help make them acceptable" (Harrison 6), citing her own life experiences, which taught her to create communities regardless of differences. Butler shared: "I always automatically create community. This has to do with the way I've lived [. . .] I'm used to living in areas where there's real community [. . .] So, I've always lived in clusters of people who found ways of getting along together even if they didn't much like each other, which was often the case" (Mehaffy and Keating 60-61).

In *Kindred*, solidarity between Dana and Alice (her 19th-century doppelganger) is presented as "conflicted, ambiguous, even aggressive" (Levecq 41). Dana finds herself at odds with Alice, a newly enslaved Black woman, but they find ways of coexisting. Dana observes that "elsewhere, under other circumstances, I would probably have disliked [Alice]," but she puts those feelings aside because "[they] had a common enemy to unite [them]" (Butler 236). They learned to respect each other, and when possible, worked to alleviate the harm the other experienced. They worked to ensure the other's survival. This lifestyle of respect, co-existence, and working together toward a singular cause is necessary, and it asks you to disrupt your comfort and live with, commune with, and advocate with oppressed people.

[1] "Cisheteropatriarchy" is a system of power that affirms and benefits cisgender, heterosexual men at the exclusion, oppression, and exploitation of women and LGBTQIA+ individuals.

Like Dana and Alice, you must learn to coexist, not for the sake of coexistence but for the sake of communal survival, wellness, and liberation. Such goals cannot be realized if you view Black disabled, queer, transgender, same-gender loving, gender non-conforming, and nonbinary people as undeserving of humanity, love, and justice. Your righteous discontent and profession of #BlackLivesMatter must not come at the expense, disparagement, and victimization of multiply marginalized Black people, especially those whose lived experiences do not check the cisheterosexist boxes of respectability.

"There are so many others. Too many names."

I was thinking about Black victims of police violence outside of the U.S. like Cláudia Silva Ferreira and Flávio Ferreira Sant'Ana[2] and about militarized police violence more broadly. *Kindred* reminds us of the importance and necessity of linking global movements for liberation. On one of her returns to the present, Dana

> turned on the radio and found a news station—tuned in right in the middle of a story about the war in Lebanon [. . .] The news switched to a story about South Africa—blacks rioting and dying wholesale in battles with police over the policies of the white supremacist government. I turned off the radio and tried to cook in…peace. South African whites had always struck me as people who would have been happier living in the nineteenth century, or the eighteenth. In fact, they were living in the past as far as their race relations went. They lived in ease and comfort supported by huge numbers of blacks whom they kept in poverty and held in contempt. (Butler 196)

Butler's juxtaposition of the Lebanese Civil War and South African apartheid against Dana's recent experiences and reflections on 19th-century American enslavement functions as a clarion call for us to build well-organized freedom movements. For me, to think about the "[South African] blacks rioting and dying wholesale in battles with police" (196) is not only to think about American Black people defending themselves against the militarized-police occupations of Ferguson or Minneapolis but also around the world. Butler's blending of Dana's past/present, reminds me of Angela Y. Davis's words:

[2] My own awareness of these murders in Brazil came from Reighan Gilliam's article, "'Do I Look Suspicious?' Digital Acts in Response to Police Violence Against Afro-Brazilians," *CLA Journal*, vol. 58, no. 4, 2015, pp. 286-302.

> Just as we say "never again" with respect to the fascism that produced the Holocaust, we should also say "never again" with respect to apartheid in South Africa, and in the southern US. That means, first and foremost, that we will have to expand and deepen our solidarity with the people of Palestine. People of all genders and sexualities. People inside and outside prison walls, inside and outside the apartheid wall. (60)

In the spirit of Davis and Butler, I invite you to think about coalition building. Know that your liberation here means little if the collective liberation of oppressed people globally is not realized.

"**Love and light"**

I have long been known to close my e-mail correspondence with "All the best," and recently, I have switched to "Cheers." Neither seemed appropriate.

Love, a "strong affection for another arising out of kinship or personal ties," encapsulated the kinship we formed throughout the semester—a result of the Black Life Writing we read and the autoethnographies we wrote instead of traditional researched essays. Light, as a verb, means "to ignite," and as a noun, it can mean "expression in someone's eyes indicating a particular emotion or mood," usually as insight or revelation. I hoped my e-mail was a light in both senses of the word.

Only one student immediately responded to my message; some took days, some took weeks, and some, I imagine, are wrestling with the weight of the world and my words.

But each reply affirmed the love and light I hoped to transmit.

Though I did not have the words then, I seem to have found some now.

This has been my letter to you, dear reader.

Love and light.

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