

For Us, To Us, About Us: Racial Unrest and Cultural Transformation

Dana A. Williams and Kendra R. Parker

As the official journal of the oldest and largest professional association for faculty and scholars of color who teach languages and literature, The *College Language Association Journal (CLAJ)* has consistently contributed to humanities scholarship in unique ways that speak to scholarly imperatives. This special issue, *For Us, To Us, About Us: Racial Unrest and Cultural Transformation*, is no different in this regard. But it is unique in the sense that it attempts to do the work that many of CLA's scholars are committed to doing every day in our communities and in our classrooms: to keep in mind the scholar's role as public intellectuals uniquely poised to help meet certain needs of the masses. This issue was born, in no small part, out of a belief that Black academics have a moral and ancestral obligation to embrace our roles as tea leaf readers, as interpreters of the drums. To be clear, there is no shortage of "think pieces" and commentaries by Black people about this storied moment in our history. But how many of them are intentional about speaking to and being in conversation with Black communities to which they belong? How many use language, tropes, images, and themes with which the full range of readers will be familiar? This is the work this issue tries to do.

Using as springboard the calls for change initiated by George Floyd's death at the hands of police officer Derek Chauvin, *For Us, To Us, About Us* aims to explore the possibilities for meaningful and systemic cultural transformation, which we interpret broadly to include everything from the removal of confederate flags and monuments to statements of solidarity by arts organizations to a flood of *mea culpas* about the ways mainstream institutions (from universities to book publishers to awards and prize committees) have been—and will no doubt continue to be—complicit in authorizing institutionalized racism. This interrogation of culture is at the heart of what we do as language and literature and humanities scholars. Accordingly, the contributors to this issue grapple with the full range of "hot topics"—from anti-racist reading lists to navigating grief and anger. But, too often, the humanities work we do is done in isolation instead of in community, disjointedly from one challenge to the next, and for scholarship's sake instead of for the express purpose of Black people's liberation. We reject this tendency towards isolation and disjointedness; *For Us, To Us, About Us* is guided by the spirit of Toni Cade Bambara who worked to "produce stories that save our lives" (41), because as Bambara warned us, salvation is the issue.

As we work to rectify these (sometimes self-imposed) silos, we don't claim to speak *for* the streets. In 8:46, Dave Chapelle said it best: "These streets will speak for themselves, whether I'm alive or dead. I trust you guys." Indeed. The streets, the grassroots organizers, the people doing the work—seen and unseen—speak for themselves, whether we, behind the walls of academia speak up or not. We know this. We also know as Black educators we are inheritors of a specific tradition. A long tradition. A tradition that compels us to be responsible for the minds we have the privilege of engaging. Accordingly, we—and the contributors—approach this with that tradition in mind, providing contexts and lenses for our students, which helps them hear from the streets with a clear recognition that we don't claim to talk for the streets except to the extent that we are in them.

"And still I see no changes"?

Certain aspects of this moment feel eerily familiar. There's an element of rememory present. When Marvin Gaye released his eleventh studio album *What's Going On?* in 1971, for instance, neither of us had been born. Yet, our souls were present for its debut. Its relevance almost fifty years later calls to mind the sanctity of one of Black culture's most compelling tropes—the "changing same," which Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones) coined in 1966 in relation to the blues impulse in America. "Through its many changes," he wrote, "it [the blues impulse] remained the exact replication of *The Black Man In The West*" (180). *What's Going On?* is indeed the blues in one of its highest forms, and its ongoing prescience buttresses Baraka's point—the more things change, the more they stay the same. We would do well to learn from the breathlessness of that album, the way it bleeds from song to song. One song gets the shine, but it takes the whole album to capture the spirit of the moment.

At least part of the beauty of the changing same trope is how well it captures the irony of difference amid similitude. The trope gives us permission, somehow, to say that as familiar as this moment is, there is also something importantly different about it. For one thing, the incremental approach to change has finally lost its staying power. We live in the age of Amazon Prime, where goods can be ordered with one-click, come off the shelf, be packaged, shipped, and delivered to our doorsteps in less than 24 hours. The "we want it now" generation has ushered in the "impatient nation," where we tell stories in 280 characters, order food from apps and have it delivered in minutes or it's free, forego human interaction for the speediness of self-checkout, and send text messages like "LOL" (when we opt to use letters at all instead of an emoji or GIF). What also makes this latest iteration of the culture wars different is the fact that the U.S. is flailing in its attempt to manage the COVID-19 pandemic. In the face of more than four million confirmed cases

and 159,000 reported related deaths (as of this writing), Americans' understanding of national myths of exceptionalism has finally begun to align more with reality than with myth. The fissures are too deep to sustain the lies of "culture" any longer. Unlike other moments of state-sanctioned violence against Black men, women, and children that ended tragically, George Floyd's death occurred during a pandemic, when so many people were sheltering in place and feeling vulnerable. To an impatient nation, the eight minutes and forty-six seconds it took to kill Floyd seemed like a lifetime. We were all at home to watch it, to be angered by it, and to put our bodies on the line to protest it. Change was imminent. There would be no slow drip; there was an inevitable barrage.

In three short months, the laundry list of change looked something like this. Two days after George Floyd died in police custody, protests erupted across the country. A few days after Floyd was killed, "Central Park Karen" was fired from her job after a video of her calling the police on Christian Cooper, a Black man who was bird watching, went viral. On June 5, Mayor Muriel Bower authorized a name change of the section of 16th Street, NW in Washington, DC, to "Black Lives Matter Plaza," amid calls to defund police all over the country. Unwilling to meet that demand, the compromise was to offer a symbolic show of solidarity. The month of June saw protestors and city officials alike topple, vandalize, or officially remove monuments exalting white supremacy from New York to Mississippi. Surely, Nina Simone is somewhere rejoicing (while still humming "Mississippi Goddam")—by month's end, the state finally voted to remove the Confederate flag emblem from its state flag, after stubbornly retaining it for 126 years. The first big news of July was the Andrew Mellon Foundation's announcement. Under Elizabeth Alexander's leadership, the Foundation announced its intent to focus its grantmaking on social justice projects. As part of its racial reckoning, the publishing industry offered its responses by appointing two Black women—Dana Canedy, the former administrator of the Pulitzer Prize, and Lisa Lucas, the executive director of the National Book Foundation—as top executives at two of the industry's largest houses: Simon and Schuster and Knopf. And the NFL, still denying any conspiracy to blackball Colin Kaepernick and realizing that commissioner Roger Goodell's June statement against racism wasn't quite enough, announced in July that a recorded or live version of the Negro National Anthem would be played at every game during Week 1 as a show of solidarity with Black people. Theatre workers of color joined forces to demand a meaningful response to historic, systemic racial injustice in the industry. And the list goes on and on. Part of the work we have to do now is to make sure that the changes we have seen have meaning and the changes being called for are enacted. That is work that we must all do together.

“For us, this shit is for us”

We resist the primacy of anti-racist reading lists; often, they are concerned more with white audiences and have little more than a panacea-like value. Accordingly, this issue features essays written by CLA members who responded to the call for short essays that we thought might be classified as “essential” reading for Black college students and the faculty who teach them. Given its importance, this is the first issue of *CLAJ* that is free beyond the CLA membership. At this moment in our history, we are reminded of CLA founders’ mission and our rooted existence at the intersection of scholarship and pedagogy. The significance of this going back to fetch it is not lost on us. The essays in this issue are designed to stand alone; however, for those interested in reading cover to cover, and we suggest this unreservedly, the essays have been organized into two parts: **Part I: You Good, Fam?** and **Part II: Dear Black Academics**. For those interested in incorporating this issue into their classrooms, the **Coda** offers a series of ready-made discussion questions and writing prompts.

A masterclass in the art of eloquent rage, the issue’s opener is Theri Pickens’s “The Echoes of History, a Personal Professional Meditation.” Pickens highlights the ableism that sought to erase and minimize all the resources and needs disabled people had lobbied for (for decades). In expressing dismay at how accommodations became available so quickly as abled folks sought to obey—or push for—work from home orders, Pickens discusses how Black disabled epistemologies become apt survival and thriving tools for us during a time of COVID-19 and beyond.

In “COVID-19 and Black Grief in the Academy,” Elizabeth J. West critiques the white academic gaze that, because of the COVID-19 pandemic, offers white academics an opportunity to recklessly gaze and assess Black grief. West reflects through her recent and not-so-recent experiences on how Black people in academic spaces—staff, students, and faculty—are subject to laboratory like treatment from white intellectuals observing or studying Black suffering. Her essay offers a snapshot of this phenomenon. Angelyn Mitchell, Shauna M. Morgan, and Kendra R. Parker each consider what writers like Octavia E. Butler, Lucille Clifton, and Toni Morrison have already told us about these moments. Morgan’s essay reveals that Clifton’s vast body of work, both artful and instructive, contains a poem for every day and every moment. Morgan demonstrates that Clifton has left us a body of work to help us reflect and guide us to the life of freedom we have always imagined. In “Surviving the Pandemic: Necessary Lessons from Morrison’s *Beloved*,” Mitchell shows how one of the most important texts in the African American archive, Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987), offers necessary lessons of the resilience, persistence, and perseverance for today. Parker, in her annotated letter “As the World Burns: ‘Checking In,’” deconstructs her May 30th e-mail to her students, sharing with a

much larger audience how Octavia E. Butler's life and work (specifically *Kindred*) leaves us with guidance on preparing for survival and embracing the liberatory potential of interconnected communal networks.

Part II, Dear Black Academics, opens with David F. Green, Jr.'s "Views from the Bricks: Notes on Reading and Protest," which examines Hip Hop's role within the genre of Black social protest literature, noting that Hip Hop music provides an interesting entry point into the study of Black protest. Green ruminates on Hip Hop's musical and visual contributions to the modern Black protest canon; and, he examines DaBaby's "Rockstar" remix for the 2020 BET Awards and H.E.R.'s "I Can't Breathe," emphasizing their importance to understanding and examining recent social protest campaigns against police brutality and other systemic racist practices. Beauty Bragg points to an expansive literary tradition that reifies autonomous Black self-conception, from Equiano's narrative to Erykah Badu's *Mama's Gun*. Bragg's "We Are Our Own Monuments, and We Can Be Theirs, Too" reminds us that "[o]ur self-love... is a powerful challenge to the national discourses that have erased or minimized Black achievement and contributions to anything that the mainstream of this nation celebrates" (177).

Kenton Ramsby and Howard Ramsby II's "Black Books and Dead Black Bodies: Twitter, Hashtags, and Antiracist Reading Lists" marks a shift in the contributors' pieces. They explore how the remarkable feats in sales and media attention achieved by books about race and African American booksellers in June 2020 indicate that significant news coverage about brutalities committed against Black people can substantially drive the interests of reader-consumers. Using Twitter analytics, they feature the work of an undergraduate student who tracked the hashtag "#HowToBeAnAntiRacist" to monitor Twitter's discourse before and after George Floyd's murder. What the analysis reveals is that the relative lack of attention for African American fiction suggests that these genres matter less for consumers in dire moments, at least in comparison to antiracist nonfiction.

The issue's final two essays are written by Greg Carr and Tony Bolden, two scholar-activists with long and deep ties to the communities they write about. Though Carr concedes, "Contemporary Black academics... are poised to speak, once more, to themselves, their publishers, and their ever-shrinking readership of patrons and fellow-craft" (184), his essay "Black Intellectuals, Black Archives, and a Second American Founding" offers a hopeful outlook—a "Second Founding" of these United States. Carr emphasizes that this Second Founding must be rooted in the oral and written archives of Black memory, as they "inform our moment to speak the unspeakable, to voice new realities, and to discard the anxieties and concessions of cultural assimilation" (189). In "Let's Keep It Funky: Reflections on Black Studies During the Black Lives Matter Uprising," Bolden laments the loss

of Black intellectual activity and the Black Studies tradition that is removed from the community and from radicalism. Bolden critiques Black public intellectuals who do not, like “black-blues writers,” offer “the most serious challenge to white epistemology and capitalist ideology this nation ever produced” (193). Instead, Bolden observes, these Black public intellectuals “[provide] negligible insight on white supremacy.” Bolden’s essay acknowledges “the price” of Black academics’ acceptance into mainstream academia is to “deny—the blues and its cultural philosophy like family secrets” (194). Bolden issues a clarion call, reminding Black academics to “keep it funky” in the spirit of Aime Cesaire and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o; Jayne Cortez and Henry Dumas, Amiri Baraka; Langston Hughes and Octavia E. Butler. In invoking these visionaries (and calling on the names of others), Bolden reminds us—much like Carr—that we must “claim” the radical Black Studies tradition, rooting ourselves in a black-blues tradition.

This issue has all of the advantages and limitations of a “rapid response” to anything. The contributors here were each equally reluctant to add to the commentary that emerged too hastily in response to a sudden national, mainstream interest in what Black academics think. But they relented because the things they write about in the pages that follow are things they think about and teach as a matter of course, not as a matter related to the “fierce urgency of now” (King). They also responded because of our shared interest in and commitment to the singular ground-rule we established when we sent out the call—write for us, to us, and about us.

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