

Poetic awakenings: (Re)imagining epistemic justice and academic writing through a Black aesthetic lens

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Phillis Wheatley, Paul Laurence Dunbar, Langston Hughes, Audre Lorde, Lucille Clifton... It was when I met you through your poetry, that I found out... words can lift off the page... and lift me. My heart. My history. My spirit. My consciousness... -Revelation! As an African-American woman, poetry is integral to how I see, understand, and make meaning of the world. My first teacher, my mother, taught me about the world and her/our history through poetry. By extension, my greatest teachers, the scholars to whom I often turn, are artists. Incorporating poetic reflexivity into my research engages a Black epistemology and challenges the rigid notion(s) of what (and who) constitutes academic/scholarly writing. In this essay, I argue that poetry – which I use expansively here - allows qualitative researchers to reveal, distill, and illuminate their thoughts and findings. In the Black MAP research project (www.thebmp.org) - designed as an online historic archive of black aesthetics as healing, resistance, and liberatory practice - poetry sits at the core and fills the soul of the work. My essay will draw from the archive, the assemblage, and the offerings of participants.

Keywords: Black aesthetics, Black epistemologies, (re)imagining academia, Poetry, Storytelling

Introduction

Have you ever heard Nina Simone sing *I Wish I Knew how it Would Feel to Be Free* (Taylor, 1963)? If you have not, please listen to it immediately. She sings:

I wish I knew how

It would feel to be free

I wish I could break
All the chains holding me
I wish I could say
All the things that I should say
Say 'em loud say 'em clear
For the whole round world to hear

I listen to this song often, sometimes daily. *I wish I knew how it would feel to be free*. This song *moves* my spirit. To be Black and American is to know *chains*¹ that reach across generations and extend across contexts. To be Black and American is to be connected to a well of creative resistance. This essay lives in the tensions of enduring Black struggle and creative resistance in life, in scholarly research, and in academic writing. To be clear, this is not an essay that tells a single-story² about Black bondage and agony. To craft a single story would be to assert that this is *the* story of Black folx. This, however, is *a* story – an ongoing collective story – that speaks to how Black people(s) have practiced freedom³ consistently and persistently amid unfreedom [*holding hands, singing songs, co-carving paths forward and together, building place over time/space/generation*]. This paper argues there is an urgent need for the representation of Black epistemologies, theories, and aesthetics in academic scholarship and in our writings.

To make visible how Black aesthetics might be/must be woven into the academic space, I draw from The Black MAP Project – my dissertation in process – to ground and highlight the themes herein. Leaning into Black feminist praxis, this essay is a conversation (Collins, 2006). I am writing to/with/for people(s) in every moment. James Baldwin (2010) said, “The poets (by which I mean all artists) are finally the only people who know the truth about us. Soldiers don’t. Statesmen don’t. Priests don’t. Union leaders don’t. Only poets” (p. 51). Therefore, I turn to the poets (by which I too mean all artists)

¹ I use chains here to represent chains of bondage and to communicate a pattern of events

² I use single story here informed by Chimamanda Adichie’s TED Talk: *The Danger of a Single Story*

³ I am informed here by Alexis Pauline Gumbs (2018) who said, “freedom is not a secret. it’s a practice. it’s contagious” (p. 93).

– who read the collective (un)spoken and offer it up; who speak to our heads and hearts – to guide this piece. I lean heavily into citing artists and do not rely solely on citations that are [traditionally] considered academic.

The Black MAP Project

As a doctoral student in social welfare and a drama therapist, I started out curious about gaps – where were the arts in the “mental health” literatures; why are Black practices of living and thriving whited-out of “evidence based” practices? How does a literature review reproduce whiteness and facilitate the “scientific” erasure of my people/my history? Furthermore, I found myself questioning – as Fanon (1952) did – the extent to which the existent diagnoses and practices with/in the mental health field can [and cannot] truly attend to the pervasive ancestral | historical | compounded | persistent | structural wounds of Black folk. And so, I went to the archives to learn | re/member how Black people have survived, over time and continents and struggles and generations. I was concerned about racial “gaps” and “disparities” in diagnoses and access to health care, but/and I was also concerned about how academic traditions of replication, evidence, citation practices, the form(s) of our scholarship, and [...], enact a slow violence of erasing what we know, as Black people, about how we survive, how we build, how we find joy.

The Black MAP Project is an online historic archive of black aesthetics as healing, resistance, and liberatory practice. It lifts the deep history of Black music, performance, embodied and enacted practices as expression, cultural memory, resistance, freedom dreaming, and liberatory praxis and is a project shaped by Black epistemologies⁴ and rooted in Black aesthetics⁵. In the first phase of the project, I traced and weaved across

⁴ Black ways of knowing

⁵ “Black aesthetics is broadly defined as the processes and relational meaning-making of peoples racially positioned as Black. It centers the breadth of Black experiences within a world stratified by racial orders. While Black aesthetics include a wide collection of philosophical arguments about Black art and lifeworlds, contemporary scholars have delineated its trajectory as a political project within two periods (Taylor, 2016). Taylor (2016) noted that the first period marks a time when Africans and non-Africans sought to create and explore beauty and meaning within new distinctions of race, sourced from the first conceptualization of Blackness juxtaposed with whiteness. The second period arose when Black artists, scholars, critics, and other thinkers began to systematically approach their expressive practices from the lens of “modern race-think-ing” (Taylor, 2016, p. 12). As such, Black aesthetics engendered the broad

histories and trajectories of Black music and performance in conversation with the brutalities of anti-Black oppression in the US. In the second phase of the project, Black people(s) have been invited to submit their own representations of Black creative healing to the archive. The third phase of the project entails conducting oral history dialogues⁶ “with artists, activists, clinicians, and scholars regarding their work, experience(s), and understanding(s) of Black creative healing and liberatory praxes” (The Black MAP Project, homepage, para 4). Indeed, the Black MAP Project is a relational work that is born in and through a precious Black tradition: call and response.

Academia Otherwise

Writing is one of the strong arms of academia and there are often assumptions and expectations attached to academic writing that exclude Black modes of expression and communication (Toliver, 2022). The oral tradition has been integral to Black people(s) and communities in lifting and disseminating knowledge and information. Yet, academe often privileges the written word, the single author, the “replicable” evidence, usually cast in “race neutral” (that is, whitestream) language. Storytelling is central and foundational to many Black folx and communities, though this style of expression is not [often | always] understood as academic. Yet when we consider academic writing *otherwise*, we [perhaps] open ourselves up to new possibilities and entry points of learning, understanding, and knowledge production and creation.

practice of “art, criticism, or analysis to explore the role that expressive objects and practices play in creating and maintaining Black life-worlds” (Taylor, 2016, p. 6). Yet, Blackness has been historically critiqued, maligned, fetishized, or otherwise condemned with-in dominant western aesthetic discourse (Bewaji, 2012; DuBois Shaw, 2004; Moten, 2003; Welsh-Asante, 1994). Black aesthetics is a response to the necessity of dislodging Black or essentially African subjects from the white aesthetic gaze and the movement of Black people from objectivity into the realm of subjectivity” (Norris, Williams, and Gipson, 2021, p. 1-2).

⁶ In alignment with CaR Method, I recognized that the word “interview” did not fully encapsulate the experience(s) I was having with people when conducting oral histories for the Black MAP Project. I reached out to the chair of my dissertation and shared that “oral history dialogues” felt more in alignment with what was happening and the relational commitments of this work. With her support, I have embraced this framing.

I knew that I wanted to approach my dissertation – design, methods, analysis, and the final products of the work – in a way that was true to Black ways of knowing. As a Black mental health practitioner troubled by narratives and truths of disparities, cultural erasures, and barriers in mental health *care* for Black folx, I wanted the Black MAP Project to lift how – not ask if – Black people creatively | communally heal/hope/resist amid structural brutalities. And I wanted to lift | share | tell these stories of Black creative healing and liberatory strategies with/in/through a Black aesthetic lens. Citing only “evidence-based practices” chilled and hollowed my project.

Toliver (2022) offers the term “endarkened storywork, as a new possibility for qualitative research, one that hinges on Black storytelling traditions and honors alternative ways of thinking about, doing, and writing scholarship” (p. xv). She calls for a “recovering” of Black storytelling in qualitative research while underscoring that academia has long dismissed “the unique storytelling traditions of Black people” (p. xv). The need for incorporating Black epistemologies and Black aesthetics in academia and mental health cannot be expressed without speaking to the hi(stories) of erasure and dismissal. The experiences are inextricably tied.

Call and Response as Method

This paper introduces and engages *call and response* (CaR) as a method of narrative elicitation and as a method of writing with/to [including you, my readers]. Framing and developing call and response as a research method has been an outgrowth of the Black MAP Project. Through CaR method, I utilize poetic reflexivity to reveal, distill, and illuminate emergent thoughts, information, connections, and findings. CaR method encourages the researcher to acknowledge and contend with non-traditional sources, surprises, interruptions, new framings, as well as the emergent thought(s), material(s), encounter(s), that shape and are shaped by the work. I put forth CaR as a method that recognizes and shares *process* as a core component of the research. This essay is a performance of CaR method throughout wherein I weave a blend of guiding quotes,

snapshots of my biography, poetry, and [excerpts of] letters from my dissertation⁷. This essay is poetry, theory, and methodology.

Each section begins with a guiding quote from a Black scholar that has had a meaningful impact on my life and/or my thinking. The quote is followed by [excerpts from] a letter that introduces elements of The Black MAP Project. Additional context and information about the project follow the letters. I then offer a mix of thought in conversation with quotes [from wise guides to whom I often turn] that reflect a call and response between myself and the artists and scholars I lift herein. Each section ends with a poem I have written in response to the ideas held within it. Across and between the sections, I stitch together threads that may appear disparate yet are inextricably tied.

Part I, *Call and Response as Epistemology and Method* offers an overview of how and why call and response is implemented as a way of knowing in this essay and The Black MAP Project. I introduce CaR as method which is embedded throughout this piece.

Part II, *Images of Academe*, acknowledges and contends with the ways in which Black aesthetics and ways of knowing have been excluded, ignored, and erased in academia while offering a counter-narrative and approach.

Part III, *Blacademe: (Re)imagining Academia*, dares to (re)vision academia through a Black lens. It centers Black epistemologies and positions “academic” outside of institutions and with/in Black communities, culture, and creative practices.

Part IV, *Critical (Re)memory*, offers a sampling of how the Black MAP Project seeks to presence Black epistemologies and aesthetics in academia and mental health care.

Part V, *Root Work*, is a re/turn to my commitments as a qualitative researcher and the commitments of The Black MAP Project. It is a (re)centering of community, connectivity, and care in/through research.

Throughout each of these sections, poetry, prose, letter writing, and story are folded in – not as an addendum or support to the material, but rather as foundation and core to it. In this way, I allow expressions and forms of communication that have been

⁷ These letters serve as cartilage between the bones of my research and mark the history and trajectory of my research process.

integral to my cultural ways of learning and knowing to presence themselves throughout unapologetically so.

Part I: Call and Response as Epistemology and Method

For people of color have always theorized - but in forms quite different from the Western form of abstract logic. And I am inclined to say that our theorizing (and I intentionally use the verb rather than the noun) is often in narrative forms, in the stories we create, in riddles and proverbs, in the play with language, since dynamic rather than fixed ideas seem more to our liking. How else have we managed to survive with such spiritedness the assault on our bodies, social institutions, countries, our very humanity? (Christian, 1987, p. 52)

Dear Willie⁸,

I sat in your office... feeling overwhelmed by my own ideas. I felt unsure how to connect what felt disconnected. You said to me, “No, it’s not disconnected... it is all connected...”

...you asked me if I knew Mary Turner ‘s story – that she was brutally murdered and mutilated while 8 months pregnant for speaking out against the unjust lynching of her husband. You then asked me, “what does therapy look like for the descendants of Mary Turner?” That question has stayed with me... it has shifted and shaped the trajectory of my work. -BW

After the conversation [referenced above] with Dr. Tolliver, I found myself coming back to his question often. “What does therapy look like for the descendants of Mary Turner?”

⁸ Dr. Willie Tolliver, Hunter College, Associate Professor

The more I thought about it, the more I realized that the focus of my work needed to shift. Before meeting with Dr. Tolliver my work was more focused on undoing racism and patterns of dominance across education, mental healthcare, medical healthcare, and prison systems. While this remains important and necessary work, it requires that the central focus be on the oppressive systems and people who hold power with/in them. Speaking with Dr. Tolliver was an opening for me to (re)imagine *care* that centered Black people's emotional wellbeing *through* Black epistemological and aesthetic lenses, which includes a whole-istic⁹ approach to understanding *care*.

Call and response is a central practice in Black arts and culture. Sales (1992) described Call and response as “a basic model that depends and thrives upon audience performance and improvisation, which work together to ensure that the art will be meaningful or functional to the community” (p.41). At its core, Call and response is collaboration and co-creation... it is a form of communication and a way of knowing. Call and response is story making, storytelling and story (re)telling (Sale, 1992). Aligned with critical participatory action research (CPAR) processes, the inherently collaborative nature of call and response challenges the notion of fixed | hierarchical | linear leadership and relies on collective knowledge | expertise | engagement (Fine & Torre, 2021). In addition to being a way of *knowing*, Call and response is a way of *doing*. In other words, call and response is foundationally and centrally a practice of theory building and method.

To participate in a call and response is to be in relationship... it is to contribute to the tone and trajectory of a story. I am introducing CaR method, which centers the [existent | emergent] relational dynamics at every stage of research – dynamics between me and the archive, ancestors, Black people who read and submitted their narratives, and dynamics between me, the writer and you the reader. Engaging CaR as a method emerged organically in the early stages of my research process. The Black MAP Project incorporates a blues epistemology which reflects how “Black people make sense of the world and their place in it” (Speight Vaughn, 2019, p. 1094). When I first read about blues

⁹ I use the term “whole-istic” here to underscore the importance of taking in the whole of a person's being and experience. Who they are and what they are experiencing in conversation with their histories, ancestry, culture, intersectional identities, environment, community, and etc.

epistemology, I spent hours immersing myself in the blues and its history. It was in/through engaging a blues epistemology and the music/poetry/art/dance/[...] of Black folk, that I recognized my desire/need to engage call and response as a method. To be clear, neither a blues epistemology nor a recognition of Black aesthetics asserts that Black people are a monolith. Rather, they recognize a cultural importance of honoring shared | interconnected histories and experiences.

CaR method allows for contradictions and dissonance akin to the improvisations of blues and jazz artists. It does not seek linear storytelling, resolution, or reconciliation. I wanted to capture the relational riffs and responses that I was noticing with/in the work. This looks like writing poetry in response to texts, images, videos, oral history dialogues that *move* me in some way. This helps capture | illuminate | reveal thoughts that may live in my body but/and may not yet be fully clear to my mind. This looks like allowing relational connections to emerge in/through the oral history dialogues (which has included: full-bodied laugh out loud moments; connecting over similarities in childhood experiences and family practices; allowing the emergence of feeling to be expressed and acknowledged; unspoken/embodied communications that hold | reveal | represent cultural messages, knowledge, and information).

In CaR method, researchers acknowledge, lift, and critically examine their relationship to every element of the project, including: the literature, histories, information, and research participants. This approach recognizes the inherent relationalities and subjectivities in re:search¹⁰ as critical knowledge and information with regard to how knowledge is cultivated, nurtured, and shared with/in community. Furthermore, CaR method problematizes the ways in which assertions of objectivity and neutrality, expertise and the all-knowing academic (or mental health practitioner) in research elusively maintain hierarchies of knowledge. In other words, CaR troubles the wielding of expertise as protection | distancing | colonizing tool that asserts academics | practitioners as all-knowing and assumes students | clients | communities as receptors *in need* of information and intervention without recognizing them as rich holders of

¹⁰ I use re:search to articulate research as regarding or concerning *search*.

intervention and information. To be clear, this is not a call to deny expertise | intervention | academic knowledge, rather, an insistence that Black ways of knowing and healing [that have sustained us for centuries] not be whited-out | colonized | censored | wiped out because they do not reflect or repeat default dominant expectations.

CaR method is embedded in this paper through my letters, biography snapshots, and poetry. I am acknowledging, in these expressions, how and where I am positioned *with/in* my work. I am in constant conversation with and between the work and myself through these expressions, which creates openings for discovery. The improvisational [alchemical] imperative of CaR is the *site* of co-recovery | co-discovery | co-excavation | co-re/membering wherein new | expanded | shifted | co-created understandings, directions, viewpoints, and other complexities, may take form.

The ethics of CaR method encourages the researcher to share the history and trajectory of the research project, arguing that transparency of process is part of the production of knowledge. This includes incorporating intentional critical citation practices¹¹ that honor how and where the researcher has come to know what they know or think what/how they think. This also entails sharing the work of research-in-process to invert process¹² and illuminate the evolutions, tensions, ruptures, and emergent outgrowths along the way. Honoring conversations, peer reviews, and cultural production that have shaped and formed the project are also commitments of CaR method. Oftentimes, we only see the final product(s) of a research project and don't get to know

¹¹ Sarah Ahmed (2013) noted the ways in which the “reproduction of a discipline” can be (and often disciplines have been) framed by exclusionary citation practices (para. 4). More specifically, Ahmed (2014) explained, “white men cite other white men” (para. 24). McKittrick (2020) asserted, “[...] in a world that despises blackness the bibliography – written or sung or whispered or remembered or dreamed or forgotten – ushers in, or initiates, or teaches, or affirms. This is the praxis of being black and human as struggle. This cites and sites a genre of humanness that emerged from but is *not solely* defined by plantocratic logics of dispossession: the works cited, what we tell each other about what we know and how to know contain *how* to refuse practices of dispassion” (p. 27-8). She further noted, “The works cited, all of them, when understood as *in conversation* with each other, demonstrate an interconnected story that resists oppression” (p. 28). Plantocratic logics of dispossession may be understood as colonial logics of enslavement.

¹² *Inverting process* is language I use that means: speaking transparently about how and why specific choices have been made and/or directions have been taken. Inverting process is a commitment to transparency.

the encounters, feedback, and experiences that that have shifted | expanded | changed | informed the development of project. Sharing the history of the Black MAP project is an ethical commitment of intentional recognition of the hands that have helped to shape, mold, and (in)form this work. This history is shared openly on the Black MAP website in the form of letters, poetic reflections, videos, and other modes of expression. Call and response is an embodied process and CaR method privileges embodied knowing and – similar to CPAR – recognizes that those most impacted by the research should be centrally included in co-weaving the process from inception to analysis (Fine & Torre, 2021).

Black Body of Knowledge/

Embodied Knowing

This house of wisdom

My body

Of knowledge...

Skin, bone, and blood

The spine of my favorite books

Live in the souls and songs

Of my ancestors

Part II: Images of Academe

If we examine critically the traditional role of the university in the pursuit of truth and the sharing of knowledge and information, it is painfully clear that biases that uphold and maintain white supremacy, imperialism, sexism, and racism have distorted education so that it is no longer about the practice of freedom. The call for a recognition of cultural diversity, a rethinking of the ways of knowing, a deconstruction of old epistemologies, and the concomitant demand that there be a transformation in our classrooms, in

how we teach and what we teach, has been a necessary revolution – one that seeks to restore life to a corrupt and dying academy. (hooks, 1994, p.30)

Dear Michelle¹³,

...I wanted to focus my work on Black creative healing... turn to my ancestors... So I turned to history... lifted threads that may have appeared disparate and braided them... across genre and generation. I began to realize that this work – tracing the evolutions of Black artistic expressions against the societal landscape – was not the supportive material to my dissertation research... it was the core of it.

You mentioned one day that it would be helpful to index all that I had gathered. I went to work distilling emergent themes from the assemblage. -

BW

Engaging history as method in *The Black MAP Project*, I traced genealogies within Black cultural production against the backdrop of racial violence and oppression in the U.S. from middle passage to present. Indexing the assemblage was a helpful step in clarifying and grounding *The Black MAP Project*. I began to group the creative pieces I had gathered informed by the conversation between the extensive histories, literatures, movements, archives, and other materials I engaged. This process of assemblage was a call and response. The bricolage of themes include: 1) Expression and cultural memory 2) Resistance, Activism, Disruption and Subversion (RADS) and 3) Freedom dreams, Radical Hope, and the Black radical imagination. It is not my contention that these three themes are an exhaustive or definitive list. Rather, this is an emergent story from the materials I gathered at a moment in time – marked by the shadows of COVID-19, swells

¹³ Dr. Michelle Fine, Distinguished Professor of critical psychology, women's studies, social welfare, American studies and urban education at The Graduate Center, CUNY and founding faculty member of The Public Science Project

in the movement for Black lives, demands for police accountability amid a deluge of anti-Black violence and Black death... and yet, still with a spirit of Lucille Clifton and Maya Angelou... *everyday something has tried to kill us and has failed... And Still We Rise*. To animate these themes, I created spoken word poems that live on the Black MAP website. In these video pieces, I blend my poetry with background music tracks and images that lift – among other things – history, Black artists/creatives, representations of Black care practices, and systems.

Learning for me, at its most potent, is an embodied and expansive process – an experience with and alongside others. I learn from the songs I hear, the poetry I read, the art I take in, the conversations I hear and engage in. I learn from the poetry, art, and songs I create as responses. I learn in/from the *doing of life*. I learn from my family. I learn from my elders and my ancestors. I learn from observing the world around me. I learn from the stories that have been told | read | shared with me. Champion (2003) noted that “despite the horrors of slavery, Africans (now African Americans) still told stories to comfort, teach, and record history in their new home” (p. 3). Champion continued, “The storytelling traditions continued from slavery through Jim Crowism, to the Civil Rights movement, and on to present-day America” (p.3). Toliver (2022) extended in response to this quote,

[...] my ancestors retained their stories, refusing to let whiteness destroy their connection to the past and to their homelands [...] Their stories continue to teach, to heal, to bring life; therefore, storytelling in not a luxury for Black people, it is vital to our very existence (p. xv).

Academe is steeped in a history and trajectory of actively and elusively delegitimizing the emic¹⁴ knowledge of Black people and communities and “our storied lives are often shunned in academia” (Toliver, 2022, p. xv.). Indeed, Black folx, Black aesthetics, and

¹⁴ Merriam-Webster (2022) defines emic as “of, relating to, or involving analysis of cultural phenomena from the perspective of one who participates in the culture being studied.” The use of this language was inspired in conversation with my chair, Dr. Michelle Fine.

Black epistemologies have overwhelmingly been consistently and persistently erased and ignored within the institution(s) of academia.

The system of white supremacy has resulted in higher ed being historically and persistently white [...] Enslaved peoples literally built the nation's most elite institutions (Patel, 2021, p. 5).

Black hands, blood, and tears built academic institutions, and yet Black wisdom and ways of knowing have [largely | elusively | blatantly] been excluded from them... excluded from (re)shaping the possibilities of them...

The colored girl... is not known and hence not believed in; she belongs to a race that is best designated by the term 'problem,' and she lives beneath the shadow of that problem which envelops and obscures her (Williams, 1987, p. 150).

When I acutely feel my Blackness against the starkly *white walls* of the *ivory tower*¹⁵, I often feel severely (*un*)*seen*¹⁶. Additionally, Black folx are [overwhelmingly] expected to speak in a *language*¹⁷ that is not their own... a language of assimilation (Fanon, 1952) to exist with/in the academy. Even in spaces where Black and Indigenous scholars are present and/or their works | theories | practices are lifted and desired, there may be a pervasive and weighted labor and quotidian [often quiet and/or unseen/unrecognized] injury that comes with working| learning| being in spaces that were never meant to support | recognize | value you. And yet there have always been counter-voices and movements of resistance heartily challenging the colonial project (Patel, 2021). And here I find myself

¹⁵ Inspired by a quote from Zora Neale Hurston: "I feel most colored when I am thrown against a sharp white background."

¹⁶ I am calling up the narrator in Ralph Ellison's (2010) *The Invisible Man* here

¹⁷ I use language expansively here

steeped in academia, working within the ivory tower, and co-developing this work in what Fred Moten would call the under commons of the academy (Harney & Moten, 2013).

I often ask my students to think about who taught them the lessons that travel with them most meaningfully. It is an invitation to unsettle the notion that [valuable | meaningful] learning only takes place in the classroom and that “higher learning” is only achieved in universities. It is meant to be an opening to (re)imagine what is deemed academic¹⁸ and who is considered a scholar... to (re)envision academe, resuscitated through the dream it used to be¹⁹. I also often invite these reflections to be shared as poems, short stories, songs, letters, and/or other creative | expressive representations to expand assumptions and expectations of what is considered and deemed academic writing.

My Highest Degree

The school of the highest learning
For me... has no walls
I walk the halls between the (written) lines
I move to the bells (of poets’) chimes
I learn from the (deepest of) wells
And as far as I can tell
This has brought me to my highest degree
Through art(s)
I have come to know history
I have come to know me
I have come to see the world
Expansively

¹⁸ Academic: “of, relating to, or associated with an academy or school especially of higher learning”; “of or relating to performance in courses of study”; “based on formal study especially at an institution of higher learning” -Merriam-Webster (2022).

¹⁹ I am speaking to the academic dream that bell hooks (1994) references when she positions the university as a site for the practice of freedom. I am calling up Langston Hughes’ poem, “Let America be America Again,” that emphasizes (enduring) broken promises and dreams...

I have learned to hold tensions
Contradictory
I have come to appreciate wisdom
It's the Black poets for me

Part III Blacademe - The Dialectics of Blackness

As an historically oppressed group, U.S. Black women have produced social thoughts designed to oppose oppression. Not only does the form assumed by this thought diverge from social academic theory – it can take the form of poetry, music, essays, and the like – but the *purpose* of Black women's collective thought is distinctly different. Social theories emerging from and/or on behalf of U.S. Black women and other historically oppressed groups aim to find ways to escape from, survive in, and/or oppose prevailing social and economic injustice (Collins, 2000, p. 11).

Dear Willie,

You noted the narrow focus that academia asks its students to take... And you said, “that is not our epistemology.” How could it be? We have had to speak multiple languages,²⁰ know multiple worlds, carve worlds within... Something has tried to undo us at every turn and yet we remain²¹. Black experiencing necessitates an expansive view/understanding. -BW

The Black MAP Projects weaves across [social work | psychology | the creative arts therapies] disciplines and [history | social-cultural dynamics | policy | education | carceral | mental health care] contexts. Bringing this expansive lens has been a necessary part of recognizing patterns across

²⁰ I am informed and inspired here by how bell hooks speaks to and grapples with the complexities of language in *Teaching to Transgress* (Chapter 11).

²¹ I am invoking Lucille Clifton's poem here: “won't you celebrate with me,” Clifton (2020, p. 139).

generations and systems. It has allowed me to speak within and across the multiplicity, overlaps, and gaps of/in Black experiencing.

W.E. B Du Bois (1903) noted the tension that Black folx hold by merely existing... the double-consciousness²² of Black folx and twoness²³ of Black being. Black folx experience and express twoness in a myriad of ways²⁴. Paul Laurence Dunbar (1913) lifted this truth in his 1895 poem, “We Wear the Mask.” He wrote:

We wear the mask that grins and lies,
It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes,—
This debt we pay to human guile;
With torn and bleeding hearts we smile,
And mouth with myriad subtleties.

Maya Angelou offered a response to Dunbar’s call, in her poem “The Mask.” She said:

Seventy years in these folks’ world
The child I work for calls me girl
I say “HA! HA! HA! Yes ma’am!”

²² “It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity” (Du Bois, 1903, p. 215).

²³ “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” (Du Bois, 1903, p. 215).

²⁴ For example, Franz Fanon (1952) shared, “The black man possesses two dimensions: one with his fellow Blacks, the other with the Whites. A black man behaves differently with a white man than he does with another black man. There is no doubt whatsoever that this fissiparousness is a direct consequence of the colonial undertaking” (p. 1). In the *Invisible Man*, Ellison (2010) writes, “I am an invisible man. No, I am not a spook like those who haunted Edgar Allan Poe; nor am I one of your Hollywood-movie ectoplasms. I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fiber and liquids -- and I might even be said to possess a mind. I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me” (p. 3).

For workin's sake
I'm too proud to bend and
Too poor to break

An embodied dissonant duality²⁵ so often accompanies Black living and being. *Soon Ah will be done-a with the troubles of the world ---- We Shall Overcome... I wish I knew how it would feel to be free ----Lovely Day*. The contradictions of Black being – across [individual | collective] contexts and experience(s) – are expressed across/through Black cultural production. The arts can hold the contradictory [affective | emotive] range(s) of Black experiencing... Entering the liminality of the creative is to break into a space of possibility. Black creative practice(s) have been a necessity to Black survivance²⁶.

In the Black MAP oral history dialogues, I typically start by asking some variation of an invitation for the person I am speaking with to share what – for them – represents or reflects Black creative healing. Several people have responded to that prompt by moving directly into a creative response (call and response). This has included reciting original poetry, singing songs of freedom, playing a negro spiritual on the piano, sharing artistic imagery, and more. The creative takes us somewhere that words often cannot...

Black As Performance

Mouth tired from smiling to hide tears
Chest tight, from heart pounding fears
Tongue swollen from swallowing so many words
That I won't bother screaming, 'cause I know it won't be heard

²⁵ Ralph Ellison (1995) highlighted this in *The Invisible Man*, when the narrator expresses “I am an invisible man. No, I am not a spook like those who haunted Edgar Allan Poe; nor am I one of your Hollywood-movie ectoplasms. I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fiber and liquids – and I might even be said to possess a mind. I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me” (p. 3).

²⁶ Gerald Vizenor (2008) articulated survivance as a blend of survival and resistance.

There is no sleep
Can put a dent in this fatigue
Of walking through a world that doesn't want me
I've been labeled a problem, just ask WEB

And yet, when that music track turns on play
I'm gonna sing like it's a brand-new day
Get me on that dance floor
And I'm gonna dance to my feet feel sore
Gathering time with my community
I breathe deep, I practice free

Soon Ah Will be Done
And we Shall overcome
It's a different type of *twoness*
This double world type of life
Where joy can be present
When the backdrop is strife

Part IV The Black MAP Project as Critical (Re)memory

...black people have always used interdisciplinary methodologies to explain, explore, and story the world, because thinking and writing and imagining across a range of texts, disciplines, histories, and genres unsettles suffocating and dismal and insular racial logics. By employing interdisciplinary methodologies and living interdisciplinary worlds, black people bring together various sources and texts and narratives to challenge racism (McKittrick, 2020, p.4).



Figure 1 Photo of my mom and me

Dear Mom,

I was listening to the audio tape of grandad singing gospel music... As part of the Black MAP project, I am going to co-create an archive where Black folx can write themselves in. Where folx can share moments/experiences/snapshots of themselves engaging in Black creative practices that support or promote healing and/or liberation. -BW

Having a co-created archive was/is important to me because I want this work to be formed and framed in community. I also want to honor the many minds that inform my research and allow this [co-thinking | co-creating] to be reflected publicly. It was/is also a commitment of this work that Black folx outside of academia be recognized for their [valuable | meaning-full] contributions to this work [and beyond]... dis/rupting and expanding *who* is considered a scholar.

I envision the co-created archive as a way for Black folx to write themselves into a free and accessible resource that tells a story of Black [creative | expressive | embodied] resistance, healing, and freedom practices. My hope is for the archive to be a site of [deep] reflection and [expansive] connection.

Toni Morrison (2019) articulated rememory as “recollecting” (para. 4). To recollect, according to Merriam-Webster (2022) is “to bring back to the level of conscious awareness” and/or “to remind (oneself) of something temporarily forgotten.” Slavery demanded that Black folx forget... our histories... our ways of knowing... ourselves. Creative practices have been our containers of memory. In the Black MAP Project, I am engaging critical re/memory... as in re/membering that which has been severed (Williams, 2021)... as in paying attention to the ideologies of dominance that produce and perpetuate Black agony (Williams, 2021)... as in re/calling the Black creative resistance that has persisted.

Excerpts From the Archive

Black folx who are 18 years of age or older have been invited to submit to The Black MAP Archive. The guiding prompt for submissions has been to offer a representation of healing and/or liberation through Black creative practice(s) and process(es). Submissions thus far have included images, video(s), songs, creative writing. Each offering is accompanied by a brief reflection that speaks to how/why the submission is representative of Black healing and/or liberatory practice. The piece below is a collection of quotes from the first round of submissions to the Black MAP Archive. Creating this piece was a way to represent the assemblage thus far and offers a reflection of [individual | collective] thought from the submissions.

Where There is Hope: Healthy Ways to Thread Forward

Where there is hope, there is life

My artistic expression elevates me; gives me distance from the reality of this world and transports/transported me to a world where I am fully seen, heard, and felt in all my authentic glory, even if only for just those few performing moments.

Finding and accepting oneself, one shot at a time.

Makeup is a ministry that affords Black people a therapeutic experience

I am a Black storyteller, a modern day griot

As I continue to shape how my journey towards healing looks, I am reminded of the scores of Black people who can relate to not only my story, but the work it takes to keep one's self intact.

...my craft and support system afforded me the mental strength and fortitude to persevere against the fallacies that Blacks could not dance Ballet on professional levels. Ballet gave me the insight to my worth as an artist and stability that continues with me to this day.

This track supports Black emotional health by providing Black folks a space to safely and fully feel the rage and heartache engendered by White supremacy, so that we all might be one step closer to liberation.

Researching and sharing Black History is my only intellectual freedom, from the tragic past of my African and Native Indian ancestors.

One of the prime intentions of this docu-series is to nurture Black wellness and teach Black communities healthy ways to thread forward.

The collective piece above is an example of poetic reflexivity²⁷ as analysis. Through putting the submissions in creative conversation with each other, a story is told. Revealed in the collective piece are verbatim themes, reflections, and expressions of Black creative practices of healing and liberation. Poetic reflexivity allows for *an* analytic of the work without asserting it is *the* definitive analysis of it.

Re: Search

Regarding search for my history... for the wisdom of my ancestors

Concerning search for our creative expression, our creative resistance, our ability to radically imagine the beauty of *what could be* through the harsh reality of *what is*

²⁷ I use poetic expansively here. Poetic reflexivity encompasses a range of creative processes and practices.

About search for Black aesthetics in academia, in social work, in the creative arts therapies, in psychology.

Back, searching for what was always there... ignored, erased, played over by the master track

A process to take what was stolen back

Again and again, search for the patterns the repetitions that play on repeat

Lifting this work through a call and response epistemology

A framework that lifts how Black people make meaning of the world and how we fit in

A critique of social-societal norms - of the way things have always been

Part V: Root Work

We have been raised to fear the yes within ourselves, our deepest cravings.

But, once recognized, those which do not enhance our future lose their power and can be altered. The fear of our desires keeps them suspect and indiscriminately powerful, for to suppress any truth is to give it strength beyond endurance. The fear that we cannot grow beyond whatever distortions we may find within ourselves keeps us docile and loyal and obedient, externally defined, and leads us to accept many facets of our oppression as women. (Lorde, 2007, p. 100)

Dear Alexis²⁸,

When we were talking... I was thinking through all the possibilities... I wanted a creative way for folx to experience my dissertation research... you helped me to clarify the vision... and you offered that perhaps one of my findings would

²⁸ Dr. Alexis Jemal, LCSW, LCADC, MA, JD, PhD, associate professor at Silberman School of Social Work-Hunter College

be a documentary distillation that weaves everything together. I will compile, as one of my findings, a video presentation that weaves across every element of this research... a story of this work... -BW



Figure 2: Tree in forest (public domain)

Trees are incredible. They survive across generations enduring the ebb and flow of seasons and the whim(s) of the elements. They send messages to each other. They know their kin; in fact, mother trees communicate messages of survival to their offspring (Wohllben, 2016). Trees are life sustaining. To study trees is to study *care* networks.

During her confirmation hearing for the supreme court, Ketanji Brown Jackson shared a memory of being in Boston and feeling homesick and out of place during her first year at Harvard. She was questioning if she could “make it” within the environment. She recalled a Black woman passing her and seemingly knowing how she felt. That Black woman looked at Judge Jackson and said, “persevere.” That [moment | message | nurturance] traveled with Judge Jackson so much so that she said she wishes to share that same message with young folx.

Black folx are like trees. Sending care across a network, tapped into a system of knowing that is beyond measure...

*Re/turn to my roots*²⁹

Black love
is like
deep roots
growing down
Stretching ‘cross generations

Like mycelial connections
An unbroken network
Of care
What you don’t have
The community will spare

Black love
is like
Strong roots
Intertwined
Radical interconnectivity

Black love
is home
I re/turn here
And even when I’m gone
The roots will still sing my song

²⁹ I am in conversation with Lucille Clifton’s poem, *Roots*. Clifton (2020, p. 38).

Un/concluded

I re/turn to Mary Turner. We are caught up in a [beautiful | cultural | multigenerational] network. My [wise | nurturing | ever present] ancestors have [with urgency | with love] guided me to this work. I co-tend to this [heart | spirit | love | cultural | academic] work with care. My heart is [broken | mended | tended to] in this work. How many [Black people's] dreams have been deferred³⁰? Is there [time | endurance | mathematics] enough to count them? How many [Black lives] have been discarded? Is there [ground | tears | remembrance] enough to hold them? What is the [salve | remedy | care] to tend to this unimaginable wound? What does therapy look like for the descendants of Mary Turner?

In my history with/in academia, I have had to actively search for theories and methods that reflect Black cultural traditions... Or, create them with/from the acorns of ancestors in and out of the academy whose wisdom lights and guides my path... or through encounters in the archive, with my mother, through art(s), in community... The Black MAP Project is a creative work that is rooted in Black creative practices. I return to Mary Turner. Murdered for speaking out against injustice – the murder of her husband. What does therapy look like for the descendants of Mary Turner? How do I explore this question with the care it deserves? I return to S.R Toliver. *Endarkened storywork*. I return to Nina Simone. *I wish I could say all the things I should say*. I return to the poets (used expansively) cited throughout this essay... Engaging Black creative thought and multi-disciplinary methods are tools for unsettling and disrupting oppression. In reflection of [response to] this piece, I am re/minded to listen to – and be led by – my ancestors... re/member their stories and strategies of survivance. I am re/minded to acknowledge the body as a critical site of knowledge. I am re/minded that the range of Black experiencing deserves epistemological and aesthetic frames that can grasp and hold that range. I am re/minded to allow re:search to be heart work [work *rooted* in love] as much as it is head work. I am reminded to re/turn to my [Black] roots.

³⁰ I am calling up Langston Hughes' Poem "Harlem."

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Britton Williams is a Black woman. Drama Therapist. Artist. Activist. Storyteller. She is a multitude of hyphens, contradictions, and ands. She is a teacher and student. A thinker and dreamer. She is deeply and urgently concerned with the possibilities that live with/in radical (re)imagining and the inextricable connectedness of healing and liberation.