IN PLAIN SIGHT:
What Black Literature and Scholarship Teach Us About Revolutionary Aesthetics, Institutionalized Violence, and Memorializing the Dead

Presented by Professor Renee Simms
Presented at the June 3, 2020 Teach-In:
We Can’t Breathe: 400 Years of Institutionalized Violence
ART & LITERATURE

- Ernest J. Gaines
  - "A Lesson Before Dying"
  - "A page-turner. Flournoy’s richly wrought prose and intimate, vivid dialogue make the novel feel like getting deeply into the family’s secrets."
  - "Chicago Tribune"

- Angela Flournoy
  - "The Turner House"
  - A novel

- Video of a hip-hop dancer performing on a road.

- Photo of a dancer in red attire performing a solo on a white background.
“How do we memorialize in art without violating the dead?” poet Aracelis Girmay

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=atyTZ8prhCg
Is that Eric Garner worked for some time for the Parks and Rec. Horticulture Department, which means, perhaps, that with his very large hands, perhaps, in all likelihood, he put gently into the earth, some plants, which most likely, some of them, in all likelihood, continue to grow, continue to do what such plants do, like house and feed small necessary creatures, like being pleasant to touch and smell, like converting sunlight into food, like making it easier for us to breathe
jasper texas 1998
Lucille Clifton
for j. byrd

i am a man’s head hunched in the road.
i was chosen to speak for the members
of my body. the arm as it pulled away
pointed toward me, the hand opened once
and was gone.

why and why and why
should i call a white man brother?
who is the human in this place,
the thing that is dragged or the dragger?
what does my daughter say?
the sun is a blister overhead.
if i were alive i could not bear it.
the townsfolk sing we shall overcome
while hope bleeds slowly from my mouth
into the dirt that covers us all.
i am done with this dust. i am done.
It could have been me,
with three degrees creased into the front seats,
bits of the constitution in my veins,
like braille. The declarations tattooed inside
my eyelids. How many times did Sally Hennings
have to hear ‘bout them and affirm the tiny ego of
Tom, before he bares himself to his brothers
collecting their boastings, forgiving his debts?

It could have been me,
like Sandy, I would have missed them
dashes in the road. The ways I skirt around
corners under the cover of sun. I fleeing
an interview happy to have
some means, pockets fluffy
with promises.
It could have been me, listening to gospel, the lilts in my throat running and a Marlboro fog above my lips. My car would be all clouds, a Heaven, shaved with blue and red lights. It would have been me, my eyebrows high and voice low, questioning Encinia about his bidding.

It could have been me, a black woman the color of Oklahoma clay; a policeman pretending to be some cowboy. Sandy had been in Texas but a day. How long had he been hunting for one like her? Encinia seen this in his mind. It was

the means of forgetting the woman that refused to love him and the black man she clung to. In this vision, he is a rodeo-style hero, Sandy is a rogue rascal. He holds out his tongue to the shower of coins and praises. A black woman without a job owns her dignity. Did his fantasy desire that too? He mined it out of her back with his knees. History told him that he could squeeze gold from black women’s wrists with iron cuffs. Is that why he braided the noose to resemble a lasso?
Novels that dramatize institutionalized violence

- *Invisible Man* by Ralph Ellison
- *Beloved* by Toni Morrison
- *Erasure* by Percival Everett
- *A Lesson Before Dying* by Ernest Gaines
- *Corregidora* by Gayl Jones
- *Salvage the Bones* by Jesmyn Ward
- *The Turner House* by Angela Fluornoy
- *An American Marriage* by Tayari Jones
- *Black Boy* by Richard Wright
Nonfiction that explores institutionalized violence

- *Between the World and Me* by Ta-Nehisi Coates
- *The Fire Next Time* by James Baldwin
- *Heavy* by Kiese Laymon
- *The Yellow House* by Sarah M. Broom
- *Citizen* by Claudia Rankine
- *Sister Outsider* by Audre Lorde
- *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America’s Great Migration* by Isabel Wilkerson
- *The Souls of Black Folk* by W.E.B. DuBois
- “The Case for Reparations” by Ta-Nehisi Coates, ETC. ETC. ETC.
SCHOLARSHIP
“Can You Be BLACK and Look at This?: Reading the Rodney King Video(s)”
by Elizabeth Alexander

In this essay, Alexander, writing in 1994 in the midst of high anti-essentialist discourse (i.e., “Not all black people. We are heterogeneous”) argues that state violence erases differentiations within the group known as Black people, creating a “bottom-line blackness” often used as spectacle for the consumption of the American public.

She writes, as many other black scholars have written, that this violence can emerge at any time. She then traces how information about this violence is passed within the group through writing and music, naming Frederick Douglass’s slave narrative and narratives about Emmett Till.
“No Humans Involved: An Open Letter to My Colleagues”
by Sylvia Wynter

Like Alexander’s essay, this is published in 1994 and is inspired by the police beating of Rodney King. Wynter looks at a classifying acronym used in the Los Angeles judicial system to refer to black and brown men that came into that system. The acronym is N. H.I. and it stood for “No Humans Involved.”

Wynter talks about how systems of classification direct our thinking and behavior and points to statements that former L.A. Police Chief Darryl Gates made to justify deaths of black people due to police chokeholds. He justified them by saying black males had something abnormal with their windpipes.

The crux of the essay is an indictment of formal education. It questions how lawyers, police officers, and judges could go through years of education and arrive at such an anti-humanist posture towards certain human beings.
by Kimberle Crenshaw

This is the 1989 law article that names the concept of intersectionality. In it, Crenshaw looks at a different type of violence. It’s not police brutality or murder. Instead she analyzes brutality within employment and modes of legal redress for employment discrimination.

Crenshaw looks at two employment discrimination cases in order to demonstrate how the courts could not recognize the intersecting oppressions that black women faced and was forcing them to choose either a sex discrimination claim or race discrimination claim when in fact the women were the last hired and first fired because of both their race and gender.
The evidence of brutalities against black people is in plain sight and also plain sites.