



# IN PLAIN SIGHT:

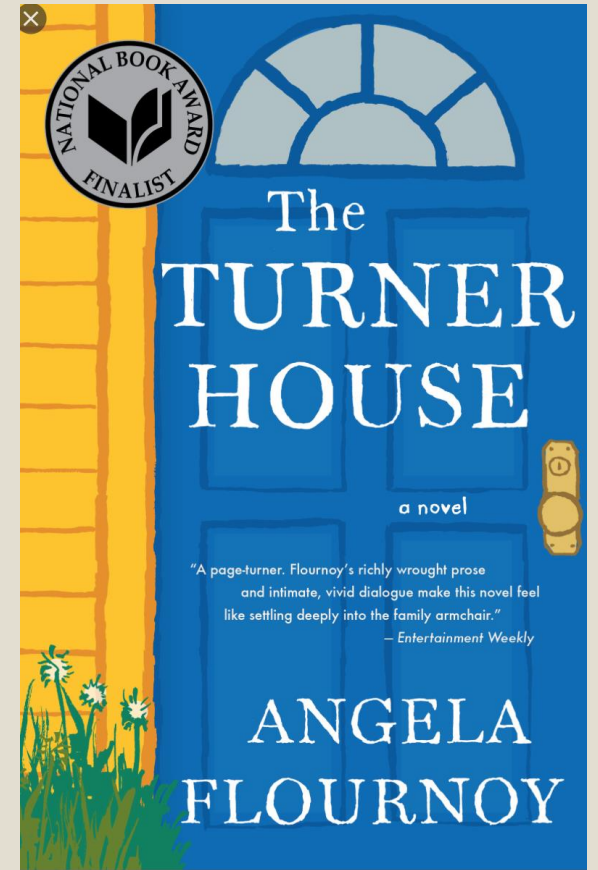
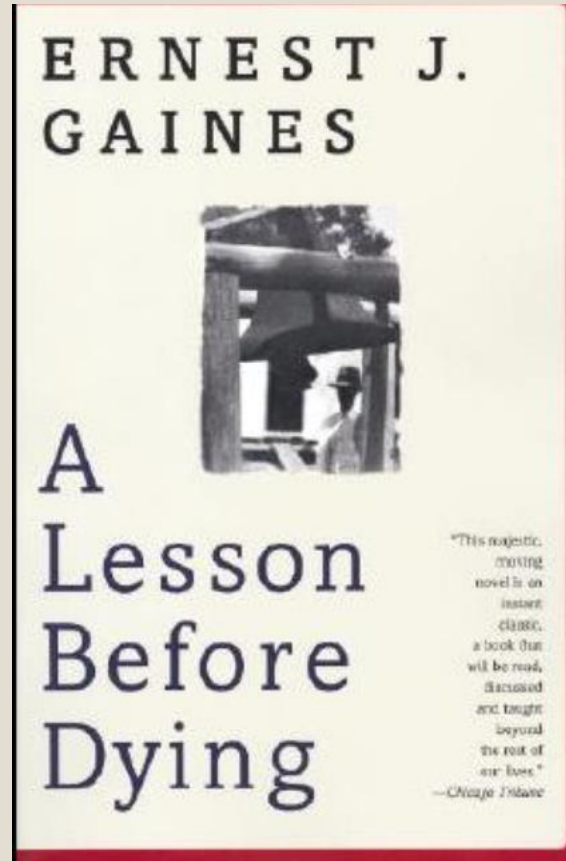
What Black Literature and Scholarship Teach Us About  
Revolutionary Aesthetics, Institutionalized Violence, and  
Memorializing the Dead

**Presented by Professor Renee Simms**

Presented at the June 3, 2020 Teach-In:

We Can't Breathe: 400 Years of Institutionalized Violence

# ART & LITERATURE



“How do we memorialize in art without violating the dead?” poet Aracelis Girmay

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=atyTZ8prhCg>



# ***A Small Needful Fact***

## Ross Gay

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.

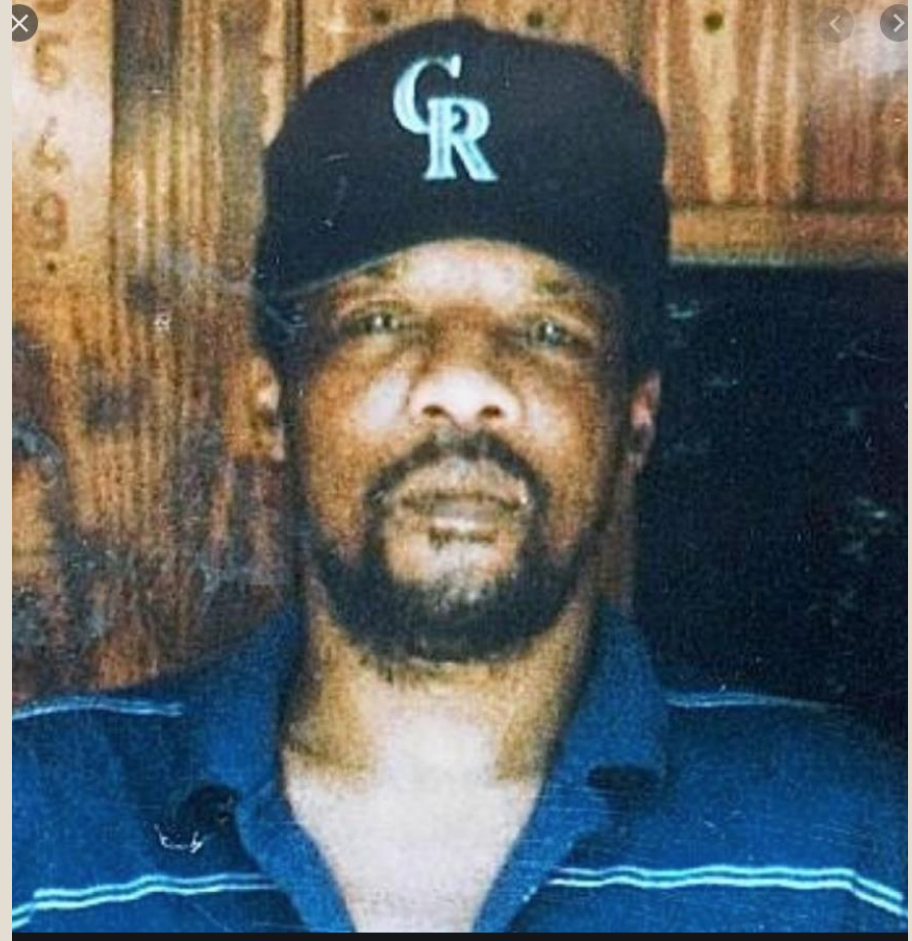
i was chosen to speak for the members  
of my body. the arm as it pulled away  
pointed toward me, the hand opened once  
and was gone.

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?

# *jasper texas 1998* cont'd

Lucille Clifton  
for j. byrd

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.



# #SANDYSPEAKS IS A CHORAL REFRAIN

DaMaris B. Hill

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.



# **#SANDYSPEAKS IS A CHORAL REFRAIN** cont'd

DaMaris B. Hill

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 clinged 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 Flournoy
- *An American Marriage* by Tayari Jones
- *Black Boy* by Richard Wright ETC. ETC. ETC.

# 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)

Elizabeth Alexander

*I still carry it with me all the time. I premed for years for it to be adversarial, not to be able to remember it.*  
HELVY MORALIS  
on seeing Malcolm X's murder!  
Memory resides nowhere, and in every cell.  
SALLI SCHANBERG?

At the heart of this essay is a desire to find a language to talk about "my people." My people is, of course, romantic language, but I keep returning to it as I think about the videotaped police beating of Rodney King, wanting the term to reflect the understanding that race is a complex fiction but one that is perfectly real in significant aspects of all of our day-to-day lives. No satisfactory terminology in current use adequately represents how I am describing a knowledge and sense of African American group identification which

This essay would like to thank the group of scholars convened by Larkin Bennett at the University of California Irvine in May, 1992, for their criticisms. Consulting Professor in African American Studies, for their response, generous commentary on an earlier version of this paper. Jonathan Susskind for his fine research assistance. Van Rogers for excellent bibliographic suggestions, and Public Church officials and outside readers - especially Lauren Fowler - for their patient assistance in preparing this work for its present form.

1. Marshall Field, "The Chances of Malcolm X," *The New Yorker*, October 12, 1992, 78.  
2. *African World*, March-April, 1993, 42.  
Public Culture 1(4), p. 57-83.  
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## "NO HUMANS INVOLVED" AN OPEN LETTER TO MY COLLEAGUES

Dear Colleagues:

You may have heard a radio news report which aired briefly during the days after the jury's acquittal of the policemen in the Rodney King beating case. The report stated that public officials of the judicial system of Los Angeles routinely used the acronym N.H.I. to refer to any case involving a breach of the rights of young Black males who belong to the jobless category of the inner city ghettos. N. H. I. means "no humans involved."

Stephen Jay Gould argue that "systems of classification direct our thinking and order our behaviors." [Gould, 1983] By classifying this category as N.H.I. these public officials would have given the police of Los Angeles the green light to deal with its members in any way they pleased. You may remember too that in the earlier case of the numerous deaths of young Black males caused by a specific chokehold used by Los Angeles police officers to arrest young Black males, the police chief Darryl Gates explained away these judicial murders by arguing that Black males had something abnormal with their windpipes. That they had to be classified and thereby treated differently from all other North Americans, except to a secondary degree, the darkest-skinned Latines. For in this classificatory schema too all "atypicalities" are equal except one category - that of the peoples of Africa and of Afro-mixed descent who, as Andrew Hacker points out in his recent book, are the least equal of all.

"Certainly," Hacker writes, in *Two Nations: Black and White, Separate, Hostile, Unequal* (1992) "all persons deemed to be other than white, can detail how they have suffered discrimination at the hands of white America. Any

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allusions to racist attitudes and actions will find Cherokees and Chinese a Cubans agreeing with great vigor ... yet ... members of all these intermixed groups have been allowed to put a visible distance between themselves a Black Americans."

"The Vietnamese," Richard Poyor quipped, "have learned how to be go Americans. They can now say nigger."

## WHERE DID THIS CLASSIFICATION COME FROM? THE POINT OF MY LETTER TO YOU

Yet where did this system of classification come from? One that was by both by the officers involved in this specific case of the routine "big breaking" of Black males, as well as by the mainly white, middle class suburban Stimi Valley jurors? Most of all, and this is the point of my letter you, why should the classifying acronym N.H.I., with its reflex anti-Black male behavior-proscriptions, have been so actively held and deployed by judicial officers of Los Angeles, and therefore by "the brightest and the best graduates of both the professional and non-professional schools of the university system of the United States? By those whom we ourselves would have educated?

How did they come to conceive of what it means to be both human a North American in the *blinds of tenor* (i.e. to be White, of Euroamerican culture and descent, middle-class, college-educated, and suburban), will whose logic, the jobless and usually school drop-out/push-out category young Black males can be perceived, and therefore behaved towards, only the lack of the human, the Conceptual Other to being North American? In same way, as Zygmunt Bauman has been pointed out, that all German Jewish descent were made into and behaved towards as the Conceptual Ot

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KIMBERLE CRENSHAW, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Antiracist Politics," *University of Chicago Legal Forum* (1989): 139-67. Reprinted by permission.

## Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Antiracist Politics

Kimberle Crenshaw

One of the very few Black women's studies books is entitled *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave!* I have chosen this title as a point of departure in my efforts to develop a Black feminist criticism because it sets forth a problematic consequence of the tendency to treat race and gender as mutually exclusive categories of experience and analysis. ... I want to examine how this tendency is perpetuated by a single-axis framework that is dominant in anti-discrimination law and that is also reflected in feminist theory and antiracist politics.

# **“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.

# ***“Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics”***

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.

