

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

by Renee Simms

The deaths of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and others remind us that brutality is a constant reality in the lives of many black people. In a 2014 essay on the Oakland dance troupe Turf Feinz, the poet and writer Aracelis Girmay looks at the troupe's work and explores what it means to memorialize the dead like Oscar Grant. Grant, you'll recall, was killed on January 1, 2009 by BART officers in a train station. Turf Feinz memorialized Oscar Grant with a video that features their dreamy break-style ballet performed in the location where Grant was killed. Their performance is a reclamation of that space which is a characteristic of protest art.

In the essay, Girmay asks "How do we memorialize in art without violating the dead?" I want to affirm that this is an important question to ask. And I want to look at poetry that I think does this and point out "the how," the aesthetics used that resist brutality and honor the dead without harm.

The first poem is "A Small Needful Fact" by Ross Gay. In this poem you'll notice that its marked by hesitation, the constant hedging and pause seen in the words "perhaps," "in all likelihood" "most likely". The poem has a quiet tone. And it references work that Garner, shown here with his partner, did as an employee with a horticulture department. It references nature. Nature and the natural world, plants, are things we don't often associate with black people. And you'll recall that the image that most of us have of Garner is from the video of his murder on a sidewalk in the city being choked by police. By contrast, the image that the poem conjures is softer. It's an image of Garner working with his large hands in the service of life, of working with plants, of acting in a gentle manner. The poem's revolutionary aesthetic includes resisting the common trope of black death seen in the video.

The next poem is "jasper texas 1998" by Lucille Clifton. It's about the murder of James Byrd who went out one night in 1998 to socialize with people he presumed were friends. Those people tied him to the back of a truck and dragged him down a dirt road, decapitating him. The characteristic that stands out about this poem is its lack of capitalization. Everything about the poem—the size of its letters, its stanzas and lines—is minimal. Again, like the Gay poem on Garner, the aesthetics contradict the outsized spectacle of the death. The poem also has rhetorical questions which are simultaneously a demonstration of civility and shade. For example, the line "why and why and why / should I call a white man brother?" is not a question that needs answering. It's a question that's really a statement.

The last poem is "#Sandyspeaks Is a Choral Refrain" by DaMaris B. Hill. Sandra Bland was murdered in July 2015 during a traffic stop for a minor infraction. The stop became confrontational between the officer and Bland, Bland was arrested, jailed and then was found hanging dead in her jail cell. I won't read this poem. But you can see that it contains a refrain where the speaker in the poem repeats "It could have been me". There's an identification with the subject that the speaker makes to point out the pervasive nature of the violence. Unlike the first two poems, this one incorporates an institutional critique by mentioning gendered racism and violence during slavery and the use of the word noose at the end which connects what happened to Bland to the history of lynching.

In addition to poetry that documents police brutality, we can look to works of fiction and nonfiction that document a range of brutalities. For fiction, I've included novels like *A Lesson Before Dying* by Ernest Gaines and *Erasure* by Percival Everett but I also have etcetera at the end because this is just a portion of the novels we could name. It's worth noting that these novels dramatize a range of brutalities including slavery, gendered racism, housing discrimination, poverty, and inequities in criminal justice.

Finally, we can look to scholarship that also documents institutional violence. In "Can You Be BLACK and Look at This?: Reading the Rodney King Video(s)" Elizabeth Alexander writes in 1994 in the midst of high anti-essentialist discourse (in other words, discourse against assuming black people are a monolith. As in, "Not *all* black people. We are heterogeneous!").

At the height of this discourse Alexander reminds us that there **are** instances where blackness is the "bottom-line." She argues that state violence erases differentiations within the group, creating a "bottom-line blackness" often used as spectacle for the consumption of the American public.

She writes, as many other 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.

Another essay which looks at institutional violence is "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.

And the final scholarship I want to share is "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.

In conclusion, the evidence of brutality against black people is in plain sight and plain sites—like art, literature, and scholarship. I'd like to add that while the literature and art named does the work to document a range of brutalities, the point of art is to create joy. If we return to Girmay's question

“How do we memorialize in art without violating the dead?” we might ask a related question. As artists, educators, and students, how do we create work that celebrates living despite systems constructed for black demise?

References

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