

On Breath: B(l)ack at the Edge of the Wor(l)d¹

Presented by Dr. Wind Woods

Presented at the June 3, 2020 Teach In:
We Can't Breathe: 400 Years of Institutionalized Violence

I'm reminded of something rapper Killer Mic said a few days ago as he emotionally addressed a crowd: "I don't want to be here." I don't want to be here. I too don't want to be here, again. We shouldn't be here. Again. But we are, returned to black bodies like ghosts; "Mississippi Goddamn" this haunting Déjà vu.

If we are forced to revisit these "scenes of subjection" (as Saidiya Hartman has theorized),² if we are required to look again at the remains, at what remains, I hope our being here together, allows us to return with radical difference this time.

I want to offer what I can in terms of remarks to support all of us as we gather, remember, resist, teach, learn, and mourn. Most of all, as we engage in serious and somber study, "heightened and renewed focus" of where we are, where we've been, and where we might go. To that end I present some ideas and reflections in four parts:

Part 1: Inhalation.

The first question asked in an emergency situation is: "is the person breathing?" Is the person breathing? We are in a ceaseless state of emergency. 400 Years of Institutionalized Violence and we can't breathe. On the run. Running out of breath. We Can't breathe, still, again, now.

Like a refrain to an old song, remixed over and over in this, what Amiri Baraka might call, "changing same"³. Worn and wary, "harried by day and haunted by night"⁴ (as King said); hyper visual yet unseen: "some things are just too unjust for words, and too ambitious for either speech or ideas" (said one invisible man);⁵ how to stand in solidarity against the "murderous self-possessed"⁶ obsessed with standing, what they claim is, their ground? How to listen to and with Black noise, "a noise in which" (as Jacques Lacan says about the Real) "everything can be heard"?⁷ How to turn what we perceive in the moans, pleads, as well as the praises and joyful cries of black life into "word sounds" as Grace Livingston might have it? How can one produce either word or sound with the hands of history choking them, again. The same refrain even when we continue to say their names. Where can a black person breathe when they are too fatigued to scream due to the physical, spiritual, emotional, and intellectual exhaustion of a return that never left, that only slips into the shadows or goes into remission? How to radically, and forever, change the "changing same" of anti-black violence whether one's neck is shackled, roped or there is an officer's knee placed on it: I still can't breathe. We still can't breathe.

Part 2: Exhalation

The lungs bring in oxygen and expel carbon dioxide, a cyclical exchange of chemicals. Breath a noun. Breathe a verb. Breathe...to say something with quiet intensity as Traci Chapman undertones: "Don't you know / they're talkin' 'bout a revolution / it sounds like a whisper." But don't hold your breath.

Sentimentality without action is a type of violence. We must think harder this time. Only then can we discern the important difference between the rap group NWA's lyrical-political call to "Fuck the Police" and Joy James' theoretical call to "F**k tha police state".⁸ What praxis would be needed to bridge the void between, what Du Boise has marked as himself "and the other world"?⁹ To close the gap between the ways civil society positions and protects some bodies vs. those bodies that "magnetize bullets" (as Frank Wilderson has formulated)?¹⁰ Joy James ask us to consider the difference between the "episodic and sporadic" nature of rebellion and the overturning quality of a revolution. To consider which one can be commercialized and commoditized.

If the earth makes revolutions around the sun what is the relation between revolution and the Wor(l)d?

Part 3: Expiration

"In a revolution, CLR James reminds us, "when the ceaseless slow accumulation of centuries bursts into volcanic eruption, the meteoric flares and flights about are meaningless chaos and lend themselves to infinite caprice and romanticism unless the observer sees them always as projections of the sub-soil from which they came".¹¹

Too often the acknowledgment of where we've been is eclipsed by the spectacles of the moment. To situate ourselves in order to study the here and now, that which is now here again, we must come to grip with the fact that we are still in the paradigm of settler colonialism, the categorical logics and orders of knowledge of Western modernity; we are living and dying in the "afterlife of slavery."¹² We must gather and think studiously about better questions.¹³ We must question the difference between structural violence and performative violence, the state violence always looming just out of sight. If not, we will never have an analysis of the violence of the status quo, the difference between the burning of a business and the sustained deathliness of business as usual?

"Hands up don't shoot!"; "Black lives matter"; "I can't breathe"; "No justice no peace"; "No blood for oil"; "No more pigs in our community"; "We shall overcome"; "say their name" riffs on the same refrain.

Yesterday, today, next summer, tomorrow, way back in the past, earlier this morning:¹⁴ the system looted someone of their breath as if they choked on a few bad apples. Refrain from violent protest. Breathe through the pain. Again. Again. Only the empire can strike back with impunity. The rest of us must vote for change too long coming. While we remain in the wake of this, the new(est) Jim Crow.¹⁵ The ballot or the bullet.¹⁶ Recognize the violence of the status quo.

Part 4: Inspiration

The breath in meditation practice is that which ties one to the moment, the present in a mindful way. The idea is one can't get back a past breath, nor can we breathe a future one. Breathing is of the now.

Respiration has two phases: inhalation or inspiration and exhalation or expiration. Take in, expel, take in, expel. This might be akin to the act of teaching and learning. We take in information and

then hopefully expel it. Not in the form of mindless regurgitation (as Paulo Freire has critiqued)¹⁷ but the hope is that one inhales information and exhales knowledge in new radical ways.

Over the last few days, I've been taking in an article by Sylvia Wynter titled "No Humans Involved, an open letter to my colleagues." Written in the Wake of the Rodney King beating, Wynter's is trying to explain the use of the acronym N.H.I. (No Humans involved) which was routinely used by the Los Angeles police department to "refer to any case involving a breach of rights of young Black males who belong to the jobless category of the inner city." "You may remember," Wynter writes "that in the earlier case of the numerous deaths of young Black males caused by a specific chokehold used by the Los Angeles police officers to arrest black males, the police chief Darryl Gates explained away the judicial murders by arguing that Black males had something abnormal with their windpipe. That they had to be classified and thereby treated differently from all other North Americans".

Here, we arrive at a troubling logic of classification, one between, normalcy and abnormality, of cases and encounters involving humans and those of the NHI classification. To this, Wynter asks a profound question: "Yet where did the system of classification come from?" How is that police as well as the "mainly white, middle class suburban Simi Valley Juror" come to agree on which lives matter and which lives didn't? "Why should the classifying acronym NHI, with its reflex anti-black male behavior-prescriptions, have been so actively held and deployed by judicial officers of Los Angeles, and therefore by the "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?"

If we must look again this time, perhaps we can ask, in step with Wynter, in the case of Chauvin, Thou, Lane, and Kueng what was wrong with their education? This is not to point the finger solely at the education system but to remind us of the ripple effects of what we do or don't do in the classroom? To encourage us to question the ways are disciplines might perpetuate structural violence. To work to disavow our students of the white washed history that most of them received in their high school classrooms. To encourage our students to speak truth to power and against tyranny. To affirm black life. To fight and sacrifice for a world where Black lives matter not just sentimentally and symbolically but ontologically.

So what does it mean to stand in solidarity with black people? The question leads me to an article by Lewis Gordon called "Theory in Black"; there, Gordon states that theory in black is theory in jeopardy, it is the darkside of theory; which, in the end, is none other than theory itself, understood as self-reflective outside itself."

To stand in solidarity is to think with and alongside black people "in and against the world," as Fred Moten might have it. To have those who've been refused the accoutrements of freedom and justice animate and radicalize one's understanding and commitment to those very terms. Howard Zinn reminds us that, "one cannot be neutral on a moving train"; I regretfully believe that this train isn't bound for freedom, but is more and more heading toward a "socio-ecological disaster"¹⁸. Moten asserts in and through his "Stolen Life" that, "the preservation of blackness...is revealed to be tantamount to the preservation of Earth."¹⁹

What so-called liberties would we forfeit in order preserve the earth? In order to have clean air that belongs to everyone? What will we in this time sacrifice so that black people can breathe?

-Wind Dell Woods

¹ I am sampling Aristotle's philosophical treatise of the same title, specifically thinking of the passage: "for body is nourished by body, and the breath is of the nature of body. What then is the method?" ("On Breath"). In the title, I also wish to evoke Ashon T. Crawley's theorizing on the aesthetic practices and performances of Black Pentecostalism (Crawley, *Blackpentecostal Breat: The Aesthetics of Possibility*).

² Hartman, Saidiya. *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*.

³ Baraka, Amiri. "The Changing Same (R&B and New Black Music)" (1966). See also P. Khalil Saucier and Tryon Woods, "Hip Hop Studies in Black," specifically the passage: "In the case of hip hop studies, we are using "a changing same" to denote how the antiblack world continually finds new ways, across an astonishing diversity of political, economic, and cultural conjunctures, to consume and use blackness in manners that extend the interlocutory life of the captive black body for the coherence and morality of the "human" community (Wynter 2002) (268).

⁴ King, Martin Luther, "Letter from a Birmingham Jail"

⁵ Ellison, Ralph. *The Invisible Man*

⁶ I borrow the phrase from Fred Moten in his description of the angry crowd surrounding Elizabeth Eckford in the famous photograph in Little Rock.

⁷ Bowie, Malcolm. *Lacan*. P. 95.

⁸ James, Joy. "F**k da Police [State]."

⁹ Du Boise, WEB. *The Souls of Black Folks*.

¹⁰ Wilderson III, Frank B. *Red, White, and Black: Cinema and the Structure of US Antagonisms*, p. 82.

¹¹ James, CLR. *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution*.

¹² Hartman, Saidiya. *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route*, p. 6.

¹³ I am thinking with and alongside Fred Moten and Stefano Harney's formulation on the praxis of study. See *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study*.

¹⁴ A reference to a line in Suzan-Lori Parks' *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World*.

¹⁵ A reference to Michelle Alexander's *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*.

¹⁶ Malcolm X's speech "The Ballot or the Bullet" (1964)

¹⁷ Freire, Paulo. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.

¹⁸ Fred Moten makes this point about the modern world (or modernity) and its constitutes in his book *Stolen Life*, p. 242.

¹⁹ Moten, Fred. *Stolen Life*, p. 242-43.