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## All I Need Is One Mic”: A Black Feminist Community Meditation on theWork, the Job, and the Hustle (& Why So Many of Yall Confuse This Stuff)

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## Keynote Addresses

### **“All I Need Is One Mic”: A Black Feminist Community Meditation on the Work, the Job, and the Hustle (& Why So Many of Yall Confuse This Stuff)**

*Carmen Kynard*

At the heart of this essay<sup>1</sup> is a series of narratives about classrooms and teaching in both undergraduate and graduate spaces. Classrooms represent geographies of Black Feminisms for me because, above all else, a critical/ intersectional/ anti-racist pedagogy in classrooms is the practice of a Black Feminist imaginative. I am not referencing “creativity,” multimodalities, or some other tenet of liberal/progressive education, however, when I think about the imaginative. I am also not looking to John Dewey canons, open access policies, writing process theory, or tomes of progressive pedagogy that have abstractly centered benevolent whiteness for schools and classrooms and missed the concretization of Black feminist practices. Instead, the Black feminist imaginative as I see it here means something completely different because only the most radical imaginations can conjure up alternative learning spaces that work towards new visions of a world that could be but has yet to be (Ohi-to). Teaching for and with the kind of freedom that upends white supremacy simply can’t look like most of the paths that appear before us (Alexander).

As I write this, Breonna Taylor’s murder is still ignored despite national headlines and protest. Close to home for me here in Texas, there has been no justice for Atatiana Jefferson or the five Black women suing my university for the blatant discrimination and neglect they faced, with very few noting the connections between the police murder of Black women “off-campus” and the spirit murders of Black women “on campus” (Love). This non-seeing is the space in which theories and practices of composition-rhetoric, language, and literacies are currently being shaped on my campus and everywhere else.

Meanwhile, the Coronavirus wreaks havoc on Black and Latinx communities across the United States as I watch and listen to campus conversations about attendance, absence, and lateness polices in new online, remote learning environments, as if revising the old rules will somehow offer new experiences of humanity in our classrooms. The obligatory land acknowledgement on our syllabi is now followed by online-learning versions of western, white settler rules of managing bodies, time, and deadlines (Patel). We now acknowledge the lands that we newly re-settle as the digital/syllabus practice of COVID-related online learning (Benjamin). I am not suggesting that land acknowledgements are negative. However, as Leonardo argues, we

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1. I want to especially thank Veronica House, the founder of the Conference on Community Writing, for her friendship and support of this essay.

can do deep intellectual work in anti-intellectual times and still realize that more than concepts are at stake. A land acknowledgement has to commit to decolonization as action, not just metaphor and line on the common syllabus (Tuck and Yang).

Black folx and Black language run social media/digital communication right now; yet I have seen and heard nothing of a digital classroom approach that matches the current, public Black digital pedagogies that we are all living in. I am sure that this is what Marvin Gaye had in mind when he sang: *make me wanna holla way they do my life*. Only the imaginative can think up new possibilities for classrooms and communities right now. To that end, I am opting for a Black feminist narrative-meditation towards such imaginative work.

### *Movements towards a Narrative-Meditative Essay*

This essay circles multiple narrative-meditations in relation to the various communities in which I work that link specifically with Black feminist ways of knowing and doing. As a series of meditations rather than a presentation of research-driven answers and findings, I want to ask explicit questions for renewed focus and presence. My inspiration for narrative-meditative writing comes from Alexis Pauline Gumbs's "17th Floor: A Pedagogical Oracle from/with Audre Lorde," where Gumbs offers what she calls a poetic oracle as she uses and is used by Audre Lorde to travel us back to Lorde's 1974 poem, "Blackstudies." In this "freeform dream villanelle," Lorde meditates on her teaching+life as a Black lesbian feminist in English departments at the City University of New York during the radical protests of Black and Puerto Rican youth of New York City. Lorde's poem takes us to the seventeenth floor of her CUNY building that she repurposes with new dreamscapes. Gumbs, in turn, takes us back to this 17th Floor as a "poetic oracle" that can guide us in the ongoing work of "Blackstudies" and, therefore, the Black freedom dreams as imagined/ lived by Brown and Black youth. In her poetic oracle, Gumbs offers us a new methodology--or rather a counter-methodology—as its own praxis where Black and Brown youth demands for new university spaces are historically rooted and thereby ancestrally sanctioned processes.

Gumbs's focus on Lorde is especially important. As Tina Campt reminds us, these connections between fugitive imaginations, refusal of the status quo, and Black radical thought have always had their roots in Black feminist study. The imaginative, as I see it here, is thus a practice of refusal where, as Campt urges us, we reject the current status quo as something that is livable for us and work instead towards the deep possibilities and generative creativity that are always open to us even "in the face of negation" (Campt 25). Yanira Rodríguez, in chronicling her own teaching, further shows us what a pedagogy of refusal for composition and literacy teachers might mean and do and what its imaginative capacities hold for us. The imaginative refuses as it generates (Hartman, Sharpe).

Gumbs moves us away from white, traditionalist research paradigms that are far too commonplace where a list of pedagogical and/or research resolutions are offered as grand finale. Instead, Gumbs creates new openings and cyclical loops rather than

false endings. In that spirit, I am also rejecting final resolutions and instead attempt to offer imaginations, questions, mantras, and meditations where the ongoing work of teaching for Black freedom is an infinite yet life-affirming loop. To quote Ruha Benjamin: “the facts, alone, will not save us... we are drowning in the facts of inequality and injustice” (2). We have done the studies showing the sophistication of the languages and epistemologies that Brown and Black youth bring to their classrooms and communities (Paris and Alim) and so many now have developed curricula and events that raise awareness about injustice. We have, at least in some corners but not nearly enough, invested in research paradigms and publications about young Brown and Black people. Yet all this research has not halted schools and societies from still pursuing oppression, including linguistic oppression (Lewis). Like April Baker-Bell insists we come to terms with: no acquiescence to white (communicative) norms has halted Black deaths. As Benjamin argues, we have maintained “an underdeveloped investment in social transformation” that refuses to imagine we can alter schools and corrupt the idea that even universal access to college is enough. Ruth Wilson Gilmore has continually reminded us that the prison industrial complex, alongside the destruction of the global environment and greater white wealth hoarded by the 1%, have happened alongside the largest numbers of college-educated people in U.S. history.

White universalist calls for a progressive education are simply not good enough (i.e., civic education, global good, etc). Abstract, distant, formal social science research reports just won’t do right now either. What we need now is counterstory like the work Aja Martinez does in her book, *Counterstory: The Rhetoric and Writing of Critical Race Theory*. Counterstory, as Martinez theorizes+practices it, shows us the everyday materiality of race as a process of “race-making” (Knowles). Race-making helps us understand that anti-black racism is reproduced actively and daily in how people move, look at, and interact with one another. Race thus has its own “grammars” that are taught, learned, and shared by people in real time and space (Carbado). I have in mind here the white, activist undergraduate students in my African American rhetoric class in spring of 2020 who argued that their traditionally-framed college courses on race taught them how to argue with statistics, a stance that ultimately did not alter people’s views or even their own spirit. In contrast, African American rhetoric taught them to talk and think and live alternatively. Educational counterstories can thus reveal, in real talk, the everyday ways that whiteness and racism are remade and reaffirmed *in* schools and *via* schooling and the radical counter-narratives that make other worlds.

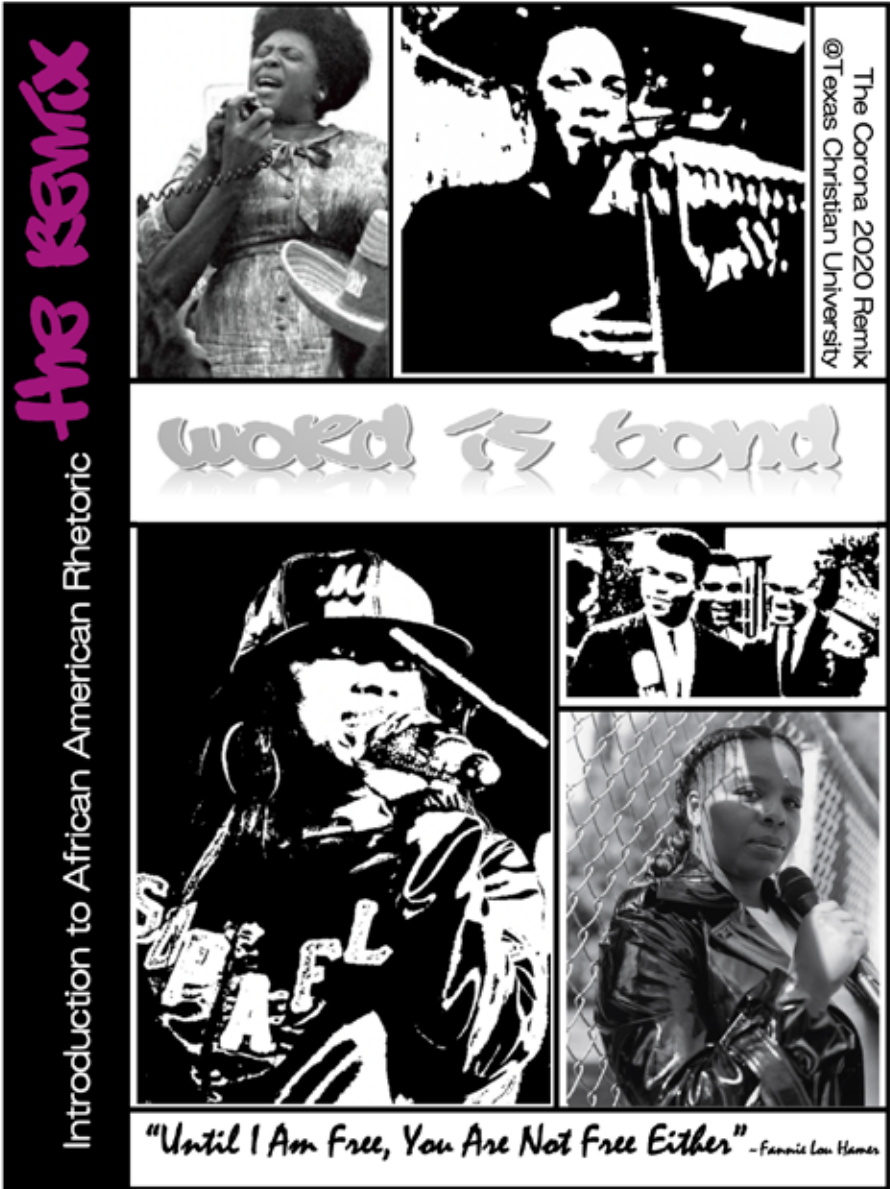


Figure 1. Cover for Syllabus Zine of My Undergraduate Course: “Word is Bond: Introduction to African American Rhetoric” (go to [funkdafied.org](http://funkdafied.org) for syllabus and more)

Story and narrative are always choices and theoretical interventions (Brayboy). In my case here, it is a choice to reject the white rationality that organizes writing styles, essay formulas/subsections for social science research reports, and obtuse/an-

ti-praxis humanities critique (Boggs, Meyerhoff, Mitchell, and Schwartz-Weinstein). I intend to disturb and unsettle the authority of white research's discursive and, thereby, ontological approach. Instead, I turn to a Black feminist imaginative narrative.

### *Narrative-Meditation on the Teaching of First Year Writing*

I want to start this narrative-meditation in what I see as the place of origins for the college classroom: First Year Composition. Perhaps, an opening to the re-imagination of that space is a think-back on the actual first day of class in the very first year in college. With the words of soul-singer-sista-extraordinaire, Betty Wright (R.I.P.), I will add some emphasis for this backtrack:

I want you to do this for me if you will, EV'RYBODY! Think back— to your—veeery— first— time. (Pause) Now I'll give you a little while longer, cuz I know some of you have to think back a little bit furrrrther than others. Come on now, I want you to play catch up, cuz I don't want you waiting until I get to the end of my [meditation] saying: oh yeah, now I remember.... Now whether it was good (aside: oh you just smiling, it was good) or on other hand, if it was not so good, *here's my story* [emphasis, mine].

*Mine was not good at all.* I see a lecture on the novel that we were assigned that week. I no longer remember the novel, just that it was something white and dull. I see a discussion guided by the questions of a white professor. More whiteness and dullness. I remember being assigned an essay on the novel which was really just a vacuous, bourgeois written performance of literary theory that I had no use for. I remember the sensations and tasks and the name of one person in the class who didn't talk in that schoolish-literary-speak. I never knew why they called it a composition class. Such a course is still normative for many college students in first year writing, though not as prevalent as when I was an undergraduate student. I knew that I would never teach this way.

On the first day of my own classes, I ask students to do something that is still pretty rare in many college classrooms: I ask them talk to each other. I write out 2-3 questions, ask students to write their responses, and then I move them into pairs to partner with someone in the room who they do not know. When they get in pairs, they must add their own question to the mix and interview their partner. After the paired discussions, we go around the circle and each person introduces their partner and I do this whether I have 27 students in the room or 40. I follow that with an opening icebreaker for the next few days of class that requires students to know each person's correctly-pronounced name and pronoun in class. I have done this for many years now and somehow it is still a novel expectation for students to actually know the names of their classmates. Ask them to also know the pronunciations and pronouns and you have a revolution up in there.

In the spring semester of 2019, despite the fact that I had done this activity for many years, as in decades, I really messed up one of the prompts. I was proud that I had asked students to write this first assignment with some fire, especially their opening lines. I even asked them to give it some Sam Cooke style like those classic, first two lines that have come to signify African American freedom struggles in just 20

words: “I was born by the river in a little tent and just like the river, I’ve been running ever since . . .” I knew that these predominantly Black and/or Latinx college students and their families had been to hell and back to get to college. I wanted their writing to bring the same kind of fire that they bring to their lives each and every day.



Figure 2. Cover for Syllabus Zine of My First Year Writing Course: “Digital Justice/Digital Rhetorics” (go to [digidrhetorics.org](http://digidrhetorics.org) for syllabus and more)

Maybe I was exhausted or something, I'm not sure, but once I read one of my prompts aloud to the students, I tracked all the way back on it. Here was the prompt:

What, if anything, are you leaving behind in 2018 and why?

As soon as I read-said it aloud, I was hella annoyed with myself and sighed. The question leaves too much room for those typical study-skills-sessions that are entirely problematic for the students who I was teaching at the time: working Brown and Black students in part-time or full-time jobs, mostly in the service industrial complex, who are parents and caretakers and paying the most for college today, both psychically and financially (Lang and Hamer). I have little tolerance for the never-ending programs, workshops, and offices with paid employees who spend their time talking to these students about things like time-management and planning. The single mothers and families in my classes who are barely making it are not struggling because they do not know how to use a calendar, day planner, or time-management app. This is the logic of fast capitalism that suggests they are not running their bodies into the ground efficiently enough mixed in with the residue of racist educational/behavioral sciences that mark these students' lack of time as an individualized phenomenon of their own choosing. And it is also simultaneously the logic of racialized capitalism (Melamed) that is now killing them in larger numbers than the rest of the U.S. population due to COVID-19 (Oppel Jr. et al). I abhor these kinds of approaches to capitalist time-ownership and here I was, standing in front of young Black and Brown people asking these dumb questions that could very much be construed within the terms of neoliberalist body management (Ferguson). So I said as much to the students.

I couldn't come up with a revised question on the spot so I just asked students NOT to give ridiculous answers like with those typical time-management questions written by people who have never had to juggle all of the limitations and barriers that they have confronted. My suggestion to students is to let them know that, when in doubt, keep it real, and attack the question if you need to. There was silence... and then one, lone voice: "Aiiight, bet"! They started laughing and then they got to writing. After the writing, students went into their pairs.

It didn't take long for the pairs to start moving chairs from the designated pairs and into four-somes and six-hoods. I somewhat eavesdrop in these moments, but I'm mostly gauging the noise level in the room. Without fail, if this activity is loud, that space is about to be a turnt-up group of students who may say or do anything in the course of the semester. If it's quiet, these are some dull folk who will require a whole lot of support in unthinking their ideas of school, bourgeois decorum, individualism, and white affect (#goals that they may never fully achieve). Based on the noise level, my guess was that this class was gonna be lit all semester long, with even a bit of foolishness coming into the mix.

I was right.

Ten minutes into the paired discussions and it was on. For pair after pair, in a go-around in the room, there was ONE recurring answer to the dumb question that I asked about what students were leaving behind in 2018. What was the one, common answer? KANYE WEST. By the time we made it around the entire room of 28 students, I was laughing so hard I was in tears. They had not seen the syllabus, did not



know one another, had never seen me in their lives and they were just going in. Kanye ain't have a chance up in there. No one in that room would be surprised by what we are seeing today and no one in that room was conflating Ye's current misogynoir (Bailey and Trudy) with his mental health issues (Howard). While Ye might have the latter, that does not cause the former.

In this first narrative-meditation, I remind myself, as a life-mantra if you will, to know, feel, and focus on the ways that Black language, life, and literacies flow from alternative histories of making meaning in the world that exceed what we think we are doing in "best practices." Even seemingly microscopic moments, like in my story where I intuitively knew to discard a neoliberalist utterance and give it over to Black and Brown youth, deep histories and legacies are in place. Even in those first thirty moments of class on the very first day of first year composition in the very first year of college, multiple pedagogical and literate histories are possible. Black and Brown people are NOT what Alex Weheliye calls "merely the ethnographic localities" at the side of the field of study or theoretical practice— we are the whole history. How does that history show up in the daily work that we do? When do we allow for its presence? How and why do we obstruct it?

### *Historizing the Black Feminist Imaginative*

I jumpstarted this narrative by traveling back to First Year Composition. But I want to travel way back more to perhaps a fictional context. I am talking about the moment when teaching first year writing wasn't seen as punishment for teachers or as the dead-end for the prestige-and-visibility-seeking researchers of our field. I imagine a time when first year writing laid the groundwork for composition-rhetoric as the space where Black and Brown college students composed Brown and Black lives with Black Feminist teachers that tripped and left open the closed white circuits of knowledge in the western university. Audre Lorde (Atkin and Brown), June Jordan (Reed and Shalev), and Toni Cade Bambara (Lavan and Reed) probably came closest to this at the City University of New York, but what if this was how we wrote and narrated our roots writ large in this field?

I write and talk about critical moments in Black communities and classrooms to remind myself of who I am, where I come from, why I been sent, and the work I am here to do. I'm not talking here about some kind of warm, feel-good notion of student-centered, progressive pedagogy, collaborative learning, or student-led discussions. That's all certainly part of what is happening in my classrooms, but all of that still misses the whole point. I am interested in the moments like the one I described with my first-day prompt when the white, neoliberalist, racial-affect-sanitized ethos of the western academy and its epistemological violence were disrupted. That's the point of the work. That's the only work that is worthwhile in the academy; everything else—including the disbelief of the university as violent—is just the set of white maintenance labors of a system designed to exclude. ... *and Lawd only knows there are plenty of folk in rhet-comp about that life.*

Part of the work here also, especially when we are in communities, is to accurately locate the radicalization of the young people who, as just one example, overturned my problematic and potentially violent first-day writing prompt into a political, cultural, contemporary conversation that could be of some actual intellectual value. On the best day, I am a conduit for the higher calling of community knowledges, ancestral life-forces, and radical protest histories. Those are the days that I am a compositionist and a community literacy organizer. *I love this work, but I hate this field.* A Black feminist imaginative always allows me to distinguish the two and work the in-betweens (Cohen, Bey).

### *Now Loop All the Way Back to Black*

The classroom narrative that I have offered here represents a lens to see the history of Black youth, especially college student activism. We still give too little credit to the major transformations of college learning that Black students, especially Black students at HBCUs, have designed and that's all the more reason we gotta understand this history and feel it with every fiber of our being. If young Black people get lit in our classrooms and community programs, IT AIN'T US and the wonders of our work. It's the histories that they belong to; to not deeply center these histories belongs to a kind of white paternalism where we diminish the power of Black and Brown youth activism and protest histories by allowing a white-hero-narrative that always positions Brown and Black people in need of a pied-piper.

We have to come to terms with that fact that the western academy never intended for college learning to look like, sound like, or be like the students who I have described here in my opening narrative. Like Sylvia Wynter has always insisted of her generation, I too, as Black faculty, am here because Black youth demanded it (Kynard). No other space or place in the history of higher education has so continuously insisted that Black teachers have a unique perspective and should be paid equally. It was never even a given when HBCUs were first created in the 1800s that Black people would teach there. That was a battle that had to be fought and is still being fought on PWI colleges across the country. It has continually been Black students who have made the argument and shut down buildings until they got heard. This is the legacy that Black college students carried forward from the dawn of emancipation; this was LITERALLY THE DREAM of our enslaved ancestors and we've carried it past centuries now (Kynard, Rogers, Williamson). Young Black people got us here, not 4Cs (and other such professional organizations), not our individual mentors, not our book publishers.

The rather everyday conversation among my students about leaving Kanye behind is also part of the legacy of Black student knowledge systems. The class talked at length about the intersections between white supremacy, popular culture, current iterations of racism, all with an unrelenting disgust of Black accommodation of white racial violence as called up in the figure of Kanye West. The western academy and all of higher education was NOT designed to talk about, theorize, or support this kind of thinking. This very idea that college students and college spaces could and should

address contemporary social problems, especially around race, begins with young Black people. It might seem rather commonplace to young Black people, especially at HBCUs, to have these kinds of conversations, to read these kinds of things, and to do assignments on these kinds of things, but that's only because they invented the very concept.

This very idea that contemporary culture is worthy of inclusion in college discussions is also rooted in the experiences of Black college students and made further possible by Black feminist icons like bell hooks. That Kanye West is a proxy for discussions about music, popular culture, and white supremacy might seem obvious now. But once again, this is because Black students designed the concept of talking about their here and now as relevant and critical to intellectual inquiry. Think tanks around race and racism begin with the HBCUs and the Black faculty who Black students demanded be there to teach them. When you see universities with research institutes today that look at issues of Blackness and race, know that the very concept came from them. It was UNTHINKABLE in the academy before they got here.

The simultaneous identity of student and activist—the very idea of the student-activist—is also an invention. The very idea that you go to college AND protest and speak up against the racial injustices that you see all around you and in your classrooms begins at the HBCUs and with Black students. The western academy was not designed around the notion that a racially subjugated college student would see their activism against their condition as part of their very identity and time on campus. Not only was it inconceivable, it was also always unwanted and, in many ways, still is.

I remain stunned by the graduate faculty who argue that graduate students should not be criticizing the racism of their graduate programs because that's not what students are there to do. It's like they aren't even speaking the same language as Black students. Black students have been calling out the racism of their administrators, curriculum, and campus life since at least the 1890s, given their multiple letters and demands that are archived at Tuskegee. When Black graduate students feel like they are speaking a different language to their faculty, as has been the case in all of the graduate programs where I have worked, the truth of the matter is that it is a distinct language and identity that might take folks another one hundred years to catch up to.

In many ways, graduate education sits at the epitome of the university's whiteness as its property (Harris). Of course, I am referencing Harris's still crucial work in critical race theory alongside the reminder that slave labor quite literally built and maintained college campuses on stolen lands with a white research faculty at the helm who were simultaneously “researching” and “arguing” for the “evidence” of their own white superiority (Wilder, Anderson and Span, Tallbear). The barriers that universities thus manifest are not fictional or subtle, especially as they are now often major purveyors of the gentrification of Black and Brown neighborhoods in poor, urban city centers across the country. Settler colonialism is quite literally the context of college campuses (la paperson, Patel). Ahmed has taught us to see these longstanding colonial rituals and histories of the university as an affective whiteness where white power has accumulated to such a degree that the embeddedness of whiteness seems to permeate the very air that we breathe there.

Graduate education is a pinnacle of colonial expression as this is the space that really mines the next generation of researchers and knowledge makers, a fact that no graduate program in the field of composition-rhetoric has ruptured. It should come as no surprise that so much of the enterprise rests on grooming graduate students as the parrots and proprietary goods of their advisors. More bodies of color, even if a larger number make it out of the program, are not enough to unsettle graduate education and the affective whiteness of our universities' colonial legacies (Leonardo and Zembylas).

Brown and Black graduate students who refuse the academy's affective whiteness in content, form, language, style, and intellectual purposes are especially rendered as illegible and unintelligible. It's blatant too. In my own experience at a recent, required graduate faculty meeting, one professor rather forthrightly asserted that her long-standing experience with the graduate students in that setting was evidence of the fact that the students who were "complaining" the most were simply people who did not do their work. Their very intelligence and literacy were called publicly into question. Critical race theorists of education like David Gillborn have noted that such seemingly banal talk solidifies, re-makes, and re-affirms whiteness as a routine process. Though no students' names were used, the program is small enough that we all knew who was being referenced. It didn't stop there though. As another example, a professor described a graduate student with significant medical bills and named the hitherto-anonymous white professor in the room who paid \$1,000.00 (anonymously) from their own pocket towards this student's bills. Though I was the latest member of the faculty, even I knew which student was spotlighted, a queer disabled student, further cementing the process where the faculty and deans publicly mark all "complaining" graduate students as Ungrateful Extraordinaire for all that the white, liberal faculty has done for them. In the least, such open, public, and hostile conversation about a disabled, queer graduate student struggling to pay medical bills constitutes all kinds of legally-actionable stuff. Since the formerly-anonymously-bankrolling professor was neither shocked nor upset that her identity was publicly revealed in this way, it was clear to me that this public exchange was pre-meditated, as much of the discourse, down to the turn-taking, in white academic departments is pre-arranged. No one in the room said a word to counter these offensively racist and ableist descriptions of graduate students. The total negation of the most marginalized and race-conscious graduate students in the program came naturally. The most that white empathy ever offered in that space for these graduate students who supposedly do not know that they have to do their homework was a call to give students more years and courses so that they can "catch up." We moved seamlessly from the grist of an outright lawsuit to an outright argument for cultural deficit. We would do well to remember that cultural deprivation theory was an educational invention hurled at Black children that coincided with school integration (Valencia). It has since been upgraded to cultural deficit theory, but both are systems of logic with its very roots in the plantation economy (McKittrick) and white superiority research of the founders of the very universities who profited from slave labor. The Brown/ Black/ Queer/ Disabled graduate students who survive the "emotional geography" of this "forcefield of whiteness" (Zembylas) while also rejecting the logic of white settler colonialism should be at the center of

how we imagine the future of our field. What would unsettling graduate education mean for our work in composition and community literacies studies? What are the consequences if we don't?

### *Public Pedagogies, Black Feminisms, and the Life of Atatiana Jefferson*

In the semester that I began writing this piece, I was teaching a graduate course in Fort Worth, Texas, called #BlackGirlMagic: @The Intersections of Literacies, Public Pedagogies, and Black Feminisms. In the days before, we had started this subtheme on Black Girls' Literacies (Muhammad and Haddix). Then, Atatiana Jefferson was murdered in her home, about ten minutes away from our college, by a Fort Worth police officer who shot through the window of her home imagining her to be an intruder while her 8-year old nephew watched her die. In fact, I was attending the Conference on Community Writing<sup>2</sup> while the public wake and funeral for Atatiana were taking place. The meditations of this part of my texts were inspired by Atatiana's life and represent part of my class's teach-in strategy and are applicable beyond that:

What in the institution's existing curriculum (the one you are required to teach or the one you are required to take as a student) contextualizes the life and murder of Atatiana Jefferson? Be specific—name the texts and teaching methods. List it all here. If there is very little connection, diagnose AS EXPLICITLY as you can this deliberate erasure. *Read it for filth*. List it all here.

While these questions were very specific to my fall 2019 course, they apply to all of us in our work. What have we all assigned to others or to ourselves that illuminates both the social death and murder of Black women like Atatiana and also the complexity and beauty of their lives? What have we peer-reviewed recently that illuminates both the social death and murder of Black women like Atatiana and also the complexity and beauty of their lives? What have we seen published recently in the journals that we read/ in the journals that are most coveted in our fields that illuminate both the social death and murder of Black women like Atatiana and also the complexity and beauty of their lives? What you have heard at the professional meetings that illuminates both the social death and murder of Black women like Atatiana and also the complexity of their lives? There are other specific examples of things we can ask ourselves: How do our understandings of community literacies, for instance, contextualize Atatiana's care-taking roles where Black women like her are caring for elderly parents at a rate that exceeds every other group in this country? How does that show up in our methodologies, in our curriculum, in our instruction? How does the public nature of Atatiana's execution shape the counter-publics that we build now—with and in our communities? While the questions that I have here, the meditations, are ongoing, I want to place the ONTOLOGICAL ABSENCE—both real and symbolic—of Atatiana in our theoretical work as representative of the material site of violence which justified, in her white murderer's eyes, her murder. #BlackSpring2020 and its formidable protests against ongoing, anti-Black racism should be central to how we shape new #BlackFallCurriculum2020.

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2. For the slides for this presentation, go to: <http://bit.ly/kynard-ccw>

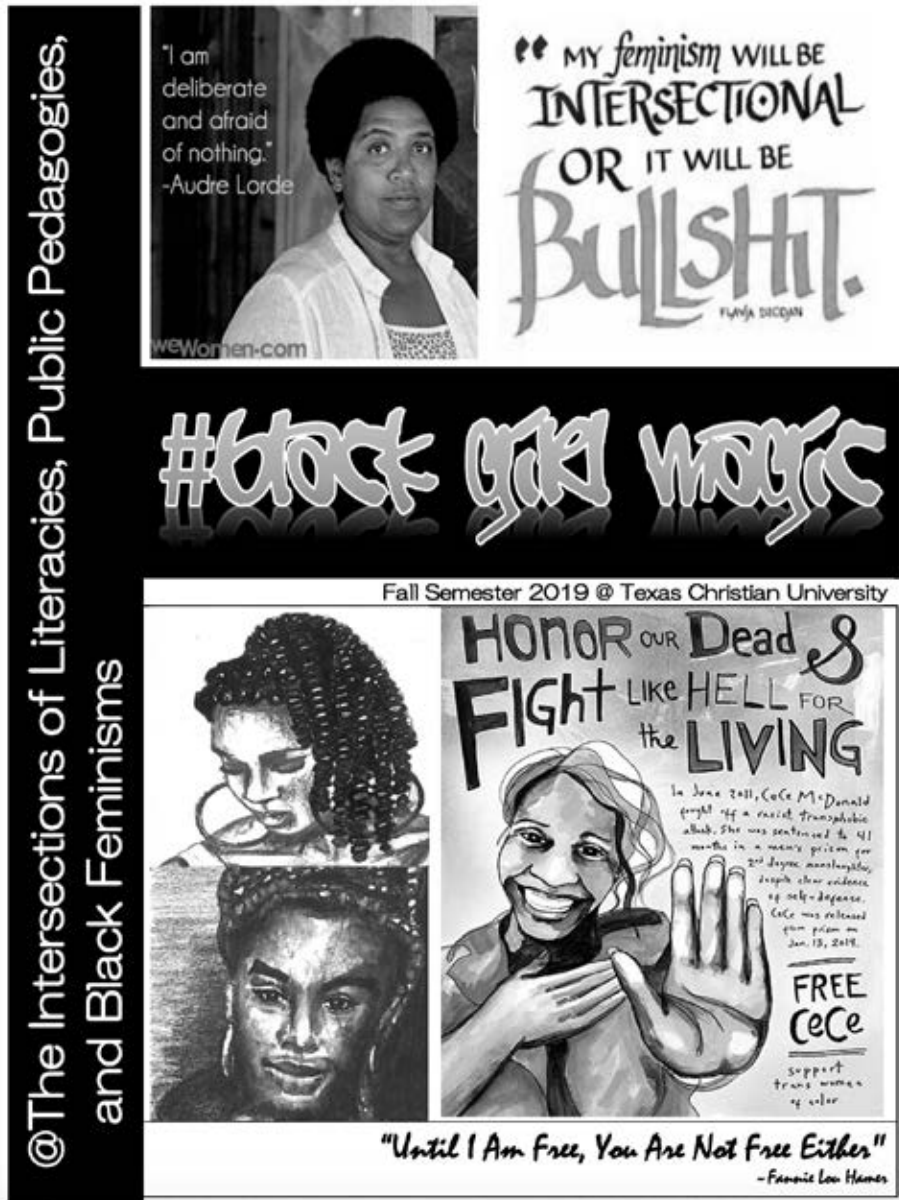


Figure 3. Cover for Syllabus Zine of My Graduate Course: "#BlackGirlMagic: @The Intersections of Literacies, Public Pedagogies, and Black Feminisms" (go to [blackfeministpedagogies.com](http://blackfeministpedagogies.com) for syllabus and more)

Such intellectual queries around curriculum, instruction, schooling, and theory have deep roots in radical Black intellectual traditions, from Carter G. Woodson's reminder in *The Miseducation of the Negro* that the ideological justificatory system for

lynching had its roots in the classroom to Sylvia Wynter's reminder in "No Humans Involved" that the policies and theories that academics develop hold within them the explanatory models that justified the police beatings of Rodney King and the subsequent acquittal in 1992. When I asked my graduate students to READ FOR FILTH every ontological absence of Black women in their curriculum, I meant that quite literally and I meant something bigger than the neoliberalist strategy of including a Black woman author on a document. Ontological absence is not altered by inclusion.

There are more questions that further guided my graduate classroom but apply beyond just those walls: What does it mean to be a graduate student—right here and right now (not just the dissertation or the articles you will publish later)? We could all ask ourselves the same questions here: What does it mean to be a community scholar/teacher/activist right here and right now? What do our research and scholarship—RIGHT NOW—challenge and remake? What do our institutional practices—RIGHT NOW—challenge and remake? Whether we are in high schools, colleges, or the non-profit industrial complex, we work in institutions. What institutional practices are we interrupting? And perhaps, this is the harder, more inward question: What institutional practices and actors are we sustaining? And at whose detriment?

### *The Work, the Job, and the Hustle*

My advisor from graduate school, Suzanne Carothers, always stressed knowing the difference between the work and the job and also knowing and feeling when the job is interfering with the work. As a mentor, she offered a vision for an alternative to making white liberal concessions as the price of the ticket. I add to these two distinctions between the work and the job one other component: the hustle. Here I am referencing the ability to understand and navigate the arbitrary neoliberalist structures of the job market, publishing, tenure, and the grind of academia in a way that pushes beyond our race/class-neutralized language of "professionalism" and "professionalization." This newest vocabulary is merely a screen for white assimilation and really obscures the racial biopolitics of the processes we are witnessing in higher education.

I was lucky to have Suzanne Carothers as mentor because she imagined our lives in ways much richer than what the research literature on mentoring suggests. Mentoring of young Black faculty (and graduate students) who work at colleges across the country usually hinges on teaching young Black professors the rules of college life as it pertains to tenure and promotion. You can find all kinds of empirical research on the best strategies for mentoring young Black faculty so that they secure that golden fleece of tenure in the end. This research is also really clear about the importance of Black mentors for these early career professionals. But there's always been something missing from these discussions for me. It's not just about teaching young Black faculty the rules of the academy. It's about centering Black thought and Black life in people's lives *at the academy*.

When I have become obsessed with yet another dysfunctional episode at the colleges where I have worked, the words of Suzanne Carothers always ring in my head: *do not confuse the WORK with the JOB*. Those words have kept me sane and

grounded and those words have helped me move onwards and higher when the limited horizons of other folk have attempted to confine me. I locate this mantra—and its many offshoots—squarely within Black culture and Black language.

The reality is that many professors base their entire scholarly and professional identity within the college where they work—but that’s the job, not the work. The conflation of the job and the work, however, is only possible for those groups sanctioned within the terms of a default white norm and privilege. *It is easy to see the job as your work when the people and the culture around you are YOU.* The fact of the matter is that Black folk cannot readily find themselves in most university spaces (outside of the HBCUs) and non-profit funding cultures so they have to understand rather quickly where the institution ends, where their own lives and minds begin, and not expect a centering unless by way of tokenism. This is an important praxis for leading intellectual and activist lives at institutions today because neoliberalism does not love anyone, not even its white citizenry. Some people have been learning that lesson in deep ways and things will only get thicker post-COVID: tenure and promotion denials after years of dedicated service, entire departments and fields obliterated because of a corporate “bottom-line” and takeover (sometimes called austerity), decimation of tenure track lines in favor of multiple, exploited lecturer lines. The list goes on. Black faculty, especially those with Black content, know the university doesn’t want us, hasn’t ever humanized us, and only allowed us entry because of Black student protest. While I am definitely borrowing from the work of critical university studies and neo-marxist managerial critiques in composition-rhetoric studies, even that work is still too white (Boggs, et al) and cannot imagine a Black feminist epistemology at the American university as a center force of social gravity.

In addition to knowing the difference between the work and the job, there is also the hustle. Here I am referencing what many refer to as “professionalization.” I do not use this language because it functions as a white-masking discourse. So, alternatively, by the hustle, I mean the arbitrary rules and processes you chase down to get your paper/ to make that money/ to get tenure and promotion, rules like: journal article rankings, university press rankings, CV lines, job market trends, hiring committees, salary negotiations, job applications, interviews, and other submissions of all kinds. The list goes on. Winning at these games is part of the hustle, but it ain’t the work, but some of us can get so caught up in the visibility and fleeting status of what all that means that we lose sight of the work. And because we call all of this “professionalism” or “professionalization,” especially for early career folk, rather than a hustle, it is easy to neutralize these neoliberalist regimes and forget that this hustle has nothing to do with helping communities of color. By calling it a hustle, yes as in, “Everyday I’m hustlin,” yes, like what me and my peers in the ’80s and ’90s called the underground economy of crack dealing, I distance myself from any false imagination that our “professionalism” is somehow more ethical or is somehow making a positive difference somewhere. It’s not. I say this especially to graduate students and community organizers whose precarity can be exploited in such a way as to make you think that all you need to do is gather networks or CV lines without ever having something to say and without ever moving towards the work that you have been called to do. The work is



not in the job and it is not in the hustle. The mentoring offered by Black culture and Black language can teach us and remind us of these differences.

Though rapper Rick Ross and his greatest fan, comedian Katt Williams, re-popularized the words “the hustle” in 2006, they were certainly not the originators. Hip Hop re-coined and re-circulated “the hustle” many decades before. Well before that, my parents would tell you that the word and its use belong to their generation. The generation before them would make the same argument. It could go on and on. My point is that Black culture has centered this expression with everyone non-Black, as usual, merely appropriating it. The critique of white cultural appropriation of Black language applies here (Baker-Bell) and the violence of such theft leaves the political origins of “the hustle” muted. Black culture and Black language are doing more than offering popular terminologies here; Black culture and Black language are defining experiences through the specific terrain of Black life that could not be achieved otherwise. Black bodies have their own humanizing language in a system that has extracted labor for centuries without recognition or pause. Everybody else is just borrowing a language that could never come from or represent them. My use here of the hustle to articulate the labor of Black bodies in the academy is therefore quite intentional as it signals the university as just another common site for the routine, exploited labor and violence against Black bodies struggling to just live.

The coercion towards unnamed and uncompensated labor in the academy, especially for Black women, is insidious. In fact, I would argue that far too many of us perform the vocabularies of maroonage, flight, fugitivity, and refusal today like it is a script straight from the *Undercommons* handbook (Moten and Harney). Performing these definitions in white university spaces, white academic language, and white academic publications is not the same, however, as living a Black fugitive life. Ongoing concessions to white liberalism belie any full achievement of a Black undercommons by far too many of its proponents right now: the ad nauseum search for white colleagues/allies in professional organizations and on our campuses who will offer so-called “support” while ignoring the harms and offenses that they have caused to Black peoples; accepting multiple committee assignments where the connection to real-time, real-life transformation for large numbers of Brown and Black students and communities is obscure and long far-away at best; teaching all of the entry-level diversity classes that become the punching bag for white animosity that then cement simplistic political processes; working at the snail’s pace of white progress and comfort again on every collective that comes your way; dedicating one’s energy to teaching/moving white students and faculty towards anti-racism rather than the always more radical work of centering Blackness (Pritchard). It’s pretty simple actually: fugitivity is about running *away* from the university’s stamp on your time, mind, and political directions and self-determinations; if you find yourself going *to* the university all of the time to do its work instead of physically and ideologically *away* from it, then you are moving in the *wrong direction*. As Campt argues, Black feminist study embraces Black fugitivity in ways that are more complex and grounded than grand, institutional masculinist and binaristic notions of power vs. resistance for Black peoples. Black feminist life lodges fugitivity in the “microlabors of Black struggle” and

the “everyday struggles” that grand narratives often dismiss as ineffectual or take for granted (Bey). It is within these microlabors, however, that Black feminism positions its stare-down with Black precarity without compromise.

### *“All I Need Is One Mic”: Resting Mediations and Meditations*

I close with my own sort of appropriation. I’m traveling back to 2002, back to Nas’s haunting lyrics in “One Mic.” For me, Nas’s lyrics here deconstruct every aspect of the consumerism that he faced as an artist in Hip Hop’s most lucrative appropriation phase, although he never fully achieved what I might consider a heightened awareness, especially as it relates to Black women. I am appropriating Nas’s words here as a Black feminist to achieve the effect, affect, and political possibility that the lyrics bring forth in the world.

All you ever need is one mic.  
 Not white approval.  
 Not disciplinary accolades.  
 Not celebrity visibility.  
 Not departmental support.  
 Not academic fame and status.  
 Just one mic.  
 One beat.  
 One stage.  
 Your “own voice ... to the whole world.”

We are not without precedents, without ancestors, or without a history that shapes alternative ways of knowing and doing, even when they try to erase our presence, even when they gun us down.

I close with these final meditations: What are our healing and regenerative practices when the job tries to undermine our work? What do we do/say/chant/read/write to remind ourselves that our jobs are not the work? How do we self-check on our own consciousness when we get so deep into the hustle that we forget who we are and what we came here for? What do we need to do within ourselves/within our spirits/within our minds for that one mic to center real and dynamic transformation?

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