

Blasphemously Black: Reflections on Performance and Pedagogy

Javon Johnson

“King Kunta, everybody wanna cut the legs off him. King Kunta, black [wo]man taking no losses.” — Kendrick Lamar

*On the night they decided not to
indict Darren Wilson for the cold-
blooded murder of Mike Brown
I, a well framed riot,
chose not to protest. Instead
I shut down
everything and like
any good gospel conductor
demanded a better harmony.
Closed the windows,
could not deal
with yet another choir lifting the rafter about
more Black death. My body,
an overused war drum, knows too well
the rhythm of danger, knows
all of the warning signs, stands too quickly
whenever the alarm sounds.*

The 2014-15 academic year was especially difficult for me. In addition to the typical struggles of adjusting to the demands placed on professors that all junior faculty negotiate in one way or another, I dealt with an incredible number of personal and familial issues, all while wrestling with an acute sense of despair that came about as a result of this country's most recent racial turmoil. If the

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deaths of Tamir Rice, Renisha McBride, Mike Brown, Eric Garner, Aiyana Jones, and so many others were not enough, the refusals to even indict the officers, coupled with the racist new and old media backlash, made teaching, at times, feel like a Sisyphean endeavor. As a communication studies professor, there were too many days in which I awoke to ask myself, “Who cares? Who cares about communication if they are unapologetically murdering black people? If they aren’t listening? If they don’t even care about black pain?”

Shortly after the courts announced they would not indict Daniel Pantaleo for the cold-blooded murder of Eric Garner, I tweeted, “I don’t feel too much like teaching, or writing, or much else with all of this state-sanctioned BLACK death and what not. #BlackLivesMatter.” After my own department retweeted the message to show solidarity, support, empathy, and how its faculty is affected, a white-appearing student responded, “How can you feel like not teaching? How can anything change if we don’t teach? I 100% disagree.” After a few exchanges—in which the student could not understand how the department’s Twitter account had not mentioned anything about the professors who presented at the National Communication Association’s annual conference, the recently impacted major, and other important issues directly related to how she uniquely understands the department—I invited her to a more robust conversation than what Twitter allows.

If I am being honest, I have never forgiven myself for that Twitter exchange, for allowing myself to let a student center her (assumed) whiteness when I was simply trying to survive. How did I allow her to talk about the classes she is able to take when Mike Brown and so many others were existentially denied that very option at the hands of the state? How did I allow her to disrupt a tweet about black pain, survival, and death to address her concern that the department is mismanaging its Twitter account? In short, I am a professor in the department who is in many ways in service to that student, but before that I am a human being. More, I was exhausted and simply did not feel the need to justify or explain to yet another (assumed) white person that my feelings are indeed valid. In all honesty, I wish I had the courage to simply not respond, or better, in the vain of Twitter, respond with two simple but effective hashtags: “Because #BlackLivesMatter #byeFelicia.”

*The protests were in a part of Oakland
I walk to near everyday, but on that night
I didn't want to be sad,
didn't want White supremacy
to tell me how to feel yet again. Instead,
I fell asleep smiling, listening
to Nina Simone and Otis Redding.
That night, I cut off all the lights cause*

*black was the only god
worth praying to.*

The aforementioned narrative is a near-perfect metaphor for the difficult choices I was forced to make throughout the year. Without delving too deeply into the issue of job security as it relates to outspoken academics of color, especially women, I constantly made strategic choices about how to perform teacher, black teacher, and black male teacher. While most, if not all, teachers must negotiate the weird and interesting terrain of the dis/embodied professor, given that the professor's body is always already presumed white male, the minoritized professor must confront this issue in radically different ways.

In order to make sense of this world, I re-turned to writing. I began journaling during the 2014-15 academic year and document everything that made me feel the black of me. While I regularly turn to writing poetry in moments such as this, journaling, outside of ethnographic field notes, was an entirely new practice for me. In this way, the following is a sample of my journal, a series of autobiographical vignettes in an attempt "to find out something which [I] don't know,"¹ to invoke James Baldwin. This creative essay takes journal entries and expands upon them to build and introduce what I call "blasphemous blackness," or performative acts of blackness that openly transgresses, violates, counters, and rebels against white normative standards. Braiding together performative writing, what Della Pollock calls "writing as doing,"² and autoethnography, all while interjecting and intervening with my poem, "Black AND Happy," this essay is guided by Baldwin's claim that "The whole language of writing for me is finding out what you don't want to know, what you don't want to find out. But something forces you to anyway."³ And, perhaps, what I do not want to figure out, but am still compelled to, is what it means to teach while black in moments such as this?

What Does Communication have to do With Race?

In Spring 2015, I taught a course entitled "Performance Art: Aesthetic Communication Criticism," which was designed to use performance art as a method, theory, and practice to critically explore a particular political issue. We examined the recent history of performance art, the roles and responsibility of the performance artist in contemporary moment, her effects and affects, as well as

¹ Elgraby, Jordan. "James Baldwin, The Art of Fiction, No. 78," *The Paris Review of Books*, Spring 1984. <http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/2994/the-art-of-fiction-no-78-james-baldwin>.

² Pollock, Della. "Performing Writing." *The Ends of Performance*. Ed. Peggy Phelan and Jill Lane. New York: New York University Press, pp. 73-103.

³ Elgraby, "James Baldwin, The Art of Fiction, No. 78."

how she uses performance to challenge conventional norms and mores. Given that the uprisings in Ferguson, Missouri were at their zenith during the summer, it was not a stretch to explore police brutality and the wave of black death at the hands of the state. In this way, we developed both individual and group performances and instillations that critically and aesthetically investigated state-sanctioned violence enacted upon black bodies, while imagining safer and more egalitarian possibilities. After discussing some of the history and goals of performance art, as well as theory addressing the role of artists, we collectively decided that artists are uniquely primed to respond to the state. While we spoke in great detail about the urgency of the topic during the first three weeks of class, many students lamented the course. I overheard too many statements like, “Why does it always have to be about race?” and “Shouldn’t this be in Africana Studies?” Desperately wanting and needing to address the racial tension in a very diverse class, I opened week four by inviting the students to openly share their problems and concerns.

Understanding that the classroom is laden with all sorts of power and political issues—as critical pedagogues rightfully informed us three decades ago, and critical race and gender theorists decades before them—I wanted to open the classroom as much as I could. I try my best to be a critically honest pedagogue, a teacher who is as transparent as possible in hopes of helping my students to find languages of possibilities, to riff on and move slightly beyond Henry Giroux’s claim.⁴

Despite all of our discussions about our classroom being a shared learning space in which we are all teachers and students, as suspected, very few students spoke up, presumably out of fear that no matter how much I teach and preach critical pedagogy, I am still firmly in the position of power.

I invited two of my white students to further explore their comments and feelings after they told me that I am intimidating and that my demeanor deters them from speaking in class. After I politely asked them to explain, both of them replied, “I don’t know,” one of them added, “You seem very sure of the things you say.” I quickly replied, “Because I am.” In moments such as these, I cannot help but to think about how my unapologetic black body leads the class and decenters whiteness in a way that throws some students into panic. I challenged the class to think about our subjectivities and positionalities, and asked if they question the certainty level of their math and science professors. We had a tough but necessary conversation about “social capital”⁵ and baggage, the possibly troubling ways they might be reading their “raced” professor teaching a class that deals with uneasy conversations about race, structural racism, and

⁴ Giroux, Henry A. *Pedagogy and the Politics of Hope: Theory, Culture, and Schooling: A Critical Reader*. Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1997.

⁵ Bourdieu, Pierre. *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1977.

how *white fragility*, “a state in which even a minimum amount of racial stress becomes intolerable,” might be preventing them from having meaningful interactions with me, the course, and the materials.⁶

*Asked if
Jesus be a Black woman,
said, the only people I know
who could stretch that small amount of food
into a feast are big mommas. We laughed.
Talked about bones and spades, about
how Black women must be magic.
Couldn't figure out why
all the old Black men who smoke menthols
know how to fix carburetors too. Smiled at
how creative Black kids are,
said we must be, this world
aint never been safe
so we build new ones out
of bones, scrap paper, and possibility.*

In another class session, one young white woman came to me during the break, on the brink of tears. She was desperate to leave the stress-inducing situation of having to talk about race. She said, “Normally I am very talkative in class, but I am afraid to speak up in here because I don’t want to appear stupid. I feel like I’m not valued and that I don’t get the material, which is tough because I am generally a good student. And, I usually get it.” I offered her tissues and simply replied, “I want you to use this as a learning experience. Some people go through their entire collegiate career, or their entire lives even, feeling inadequate because their identities do not feel entirely welcome in the space they are in.” In a way, I failed to be empathetic toward her, but I had recently read yet another article about police killing yet another black person, and I simply did not have the emotional capital to coddle whiteness yet again. While she did not speak at all in our class for the next three weeks, she presented an art instillation that used our brief interaction and was utterly brilliant in her self-reflection. She questioned her own race-based assumptions, including asking herself at the beginning of our class, “What does communication have to do with race?” She critically explored her own privilege, the ways in which white women have both supported and fought against structural racism, and ultimately arrived at the conclusion that allyship is difficult and confusing, but a neces-

⁶ DiAngelo, Robin. “White Fragility.” *The International Journal of Critical Pedagogy* 3, no. 3 (2011).

sary “lifelong process of building relationships on trust, consistency, and accountability.”⁷

*Funny, how we make survival look
stylish, look dope, look
damned good. We dance, on beat, and
that night I chose
to be happy AND Black.
And, how political that was.
How political that always is.*

At the end of the semester, she thanked me for not coddling her and for challenging her in a way she has not been before. Tears streaming down her face, she said, “This class was difficult but it did so much for me. Thank you. Can I hug you?” Although I am not much of a hugger, I obliged and responded, “You all have done a lot for me as well. Thank you.”

*When I first saw a man shot
to death, his arms flailing wildly,
as if he was dancing for a God he knew
he was about to see. What an unholy prayer
his body was, arms all in the wrong
direction. But this poem cannot be
about Black death, it's
about how that night we listened
to Tupac, imagined heaven's ghetto.
Corner stores draped in gold. An ocean
of Black faces smiling as wide as before
the beginning, when it was still Black
and still good. Little girls playing double-
dutch, and him, still dancing.*

SFSU and Indiana

Today, March 30th of 2015, the President of my school emailed the entire institution the following message that would later find its way on various social media sites:

⁷ A quote she used in her presentation from *Allyship* (blog). *The Anti-Oppression Network*. Last Modified April 11, 2015, [https:// theantioppressionnetwork.wordpress.com/allyship/](https://theantioppressionnetwork.wordpress.com/allyship/).

Dear Faculty, Staff and Students:

I am dismayed, if not extremely disappointed, in the recent legislation signed into law in Indiana. It is unconscionable for this great University to spend its resources in a state that attempts to legislate discrimination of any kind.

By this note, I am informing the campus community that *no* San Francisco State University funds from any source—general funds or auxiliary—will be used to support employee or student travel to Indiana. This action is effective today, Monday, March 30, 2015 until further notice. Any travel authorized prior to today may proceed as planned with approval of the appropriate vice president.

We are researching similar legislation reputed to be existent in other states to determine further action.

As a member of the NCAA Division 2 President's Council, I will not attend a required meeting of the Council to be held in April in Indianapolis. A copy of this note is being sent to NCAA President Mark Emmert and to Chancellor, Timothy White.

Our commitment to social justice on this campus remains a point of pride for me. The vice presidents, deans and Academic Senate's Executive Committee all endorse this action.

Les Wong, President

On March 26th of 2015 Indiana Governor Mike Pence signed an anti-gay "Religious Freedom" bill into law at a private ceremony. The bill, which made it legally safe to discriminate against LGBTQ people on religious grounds, was met with robust backlash from Indianapolis' Republican Mayor Greg Ballard, various CEOs of major companies, celebrities, the National Basketball Association, the Women's National Basketball Association, Indiana University, Purdue University, Butler University, and many others, including my own institution, SFSU.

To be clear, I was elated to read such an institutional stand against structural discrimination, and I opened each of my classes with celebratory and critical discussions around SFSU's stand and the larger issue. While I was once again reminded of SFSU's radical politics, which is incredibly present throughout the campus and the school's history, I could not help but think about the fact that the President of such a radical institution remained silent on the wave of police murders and the state's refusal to indict the officers. We never so much as received an email about counseling services in these difficult times. Only two of my colleagues engaged me in the issue of police brutality and murder, which is a bit concerning given that much of my creative writing illustrates how much I grapple with it all. Honestly, it not only made me feel that the University does not care, but that it problematically positioned queerness against

blackness. This is not to say that the University has to formally respond to every political issue. Indeed, that would be an exhausting amount of emails to sift through, however, it must be pointed out that my home institution, with its robust history of radicalism, took a hard stance for one important national issue without even mentioning another (or an Other?).

It is difficult to teach in moments when your black body is a “space invader.”⁸ When professors are “of and in space, while at the same time not quite belonging to it...not being the somatic norm” because of their raced bodies, they are “both insiders and outsiders [and] they occupy a tenuous location” in the academy.⁹ This semester was filled with subtle and not so subtle incidents that reminded me of all the ways I do not belong. I wonder when universities will move beyond quantity as the sole indicator of diversity to add *quality of being* as an equally important marker.

Thoughts on the Bay Bridge

*When I awoke the next morning to
an arrogant sun, I called
my mother. She was the only god
worth praying to. We laughed,
and said, “I love you.”
I wanted her to know
her baby boy was both Black and alive.
And, how political that call was.
How political it always is.*

I am heading to work as I drive over the Bay Bridge from Oakland into San Francisco. On most days, I lament the traffic, but today I marveled at the beauty of it all. I asked myself, “How lucky am I to drive across the Pacific Ocean to work at a place I love, to see San Francisco’s beautiful and historic skyline, to see the ships coming and going, and to take in the world-famous Golden Gate Bridge?” John Legend’s “Coming Home” begins playing on the radio: “A father waits upon a son/A mother prays for his return.” Although the song is about soldiers “not knowing if [they’ll] make it home and could die at any point. And knowing that America is perpetually at war with somebody,” as John Legend said in a *Rolling Stone* interview with Austin Scaggs, I could not help but to think of the war at home and all of the black mothers who pray for their chil-

⁸ Puwar, Nirmal. *Space Invaders: Race, Gender and Bodies Out of Place*. London: Berg Publishers, 2004.

⁹ Ibid.

dren's return.¹⁰ I started crying, and I thought to myself, how symbolic and apropos that I am crying over an ocean, adding salty tears to a salty sea that no one will ever know or care about.

Just as it began to be unbearable, my mother called. "Hey son," she said. "Just needed to hear your voice. I ain't heard from my baby in a while. Just want to make sure you're still alive." In an anti-black world, the "still alive" inquiry is a serious one masqueraded as a disarming joke because the truth of having to check such a thing is too absurd to admit. After our phone call, which was literally life saving, I went to my office, locked the doors, canceled my morning hours, shut off all of the lights because black was the only god worth praying to.

All That America Has to Offer

My older sister called me today to tell me that her oldest son just received his driver's permit. Many Americans, especially those living in cities dominated by car cultures, think about driving as a rite of passage, a step towards adulthood, freedom, and a means of experiencing all America has to offer. My sister, however, called me crying, worried that her oldest child, a good-hearted, six-foot black boy with facial hair, will experience *all* America has to offer those who look like him. The most revolutionary thing I did this week was tell them both how much I love them.

*But this poem cannot be
about politics, cannot be
about Black on Black
crime, or the prison industrial complex.
This poem is not a metaphor;
it is simply about Black love.
About cookouts and fish fries
where all the Black kids
know the dances before
they even come out.
This poem is about how
the most revolutionary thing I can do
is enjoy my nieces' laughter.
Their brown faces and the way
their smiles bubble
like good fried bologna sandwiches.*

¹⁰ Scaggs, Austin. "Q&A: John Legend: The R&B Singer Does it 'Once Again'." *Rolling Stone*, November 2, 2006. <http://www.rollingstone.com/music/features/John-legend-20061102>.

“King Kunta”

Kendrick Lamar’s sophomore album dropped today. I have my fair share of issues with the album, but I am absolutely in love with “King Kunta.” The beat is unmistakably West Coast hip-hop, and the call and response, including the constant “We want the funk” refrain, is reminiscent of the brilliance of James Brown. Indeed, Kendrick Lamar’s “i,” in which he constantly proclaims “I love myself” over a smooth beat that samples the Isley Brothers’ “That Lady,” would have been an easy choice for a piece such as this. However, “King Kunta” and its video—which features the “Welcome to Compton” sign, tattooed black men in L.A. Dodgers caps, men who are doing L.A. street gang dances while twisting their fingers in a W for “West Coast,” women dance-battling men, other women who are bigger and curvier than what Eurocentric beauty standards can appreciate as the most desirable, a Korean-owned liquor store, and low-riders—is an audio and visual symbol of black L.A. that loves itself fiercely. In this way, “King Kunta” is as happy and self-affirming as “i,” but it is thus in its undeniable blackness and unapologetic blasphemy.

By “blasphemy,” I mean “a transgressive act of cultural translation,” where black bodies, such as those in Kendrick Lamar’s video, are able to celebrate the whole of ourselves, even the untranslatable parts.¹¹ It is not necessarily blasphemy in a religious sense of the term, but a “secular blasphemy” that “is not merely a misrepresentation of the sacred by the secular,” but a performative act where blackness rejects unquestioned higher power, overwhelming and alienating white authority “in the act of translation,” that tells us how to properly, civilly, respectfully, and—dare I say whitely—perform.¹² Indeed, at the very core of blasphemous blackness is the recognition and rejection of the notion that “The American idea of racial progress is measured by how fast [we] become white.”¹³

Far from reducing blackness to a monolithic way of being and doing in the world, blasphemous blackness “goes beyond the severance of tradition and replaces its claim to a purity of origins with a poetics of relocation and reinscription” that is always shifting, moving, maneuvering, and remixing.¹⁴ In this way, to be blasphemously black refers to how blackness, in all of its brilliant manifestations and expressions—that is, the queers and queens, the bourgeois and boughetto, the pastors and prostitutes, and everything else—refuses to perform in the comfortable confines of white supremacy and black respectability alike.

¹¹ Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge, 1994.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Baldwin, James, and Randall Kenan. *The Cross of Redemption: Uncollected Writings*. New York: Pantheon Books, 2010.

¹⁴ Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*.

Throughout the 2014-15 academic year my blasphemously black performances literally and figuratively saved me. On the days when students wanted me to center their whiteness, when the media tried to force-feed me a steady diet of black death, when it appeared that to be black and alive was oxymoronic, when the institution I worked for seemed not to care, and when everything around me felt chaotic and constricting, the rejection of it all was my saving grace. In this way, my black, in all of its blasphemy, is angry when whiteness assumes it should be happy, and happy when whiteness assumes it should be angry or sad. It openly defies the “rules” and proudly embraces a “politics of disrespectability” because it knows that in an anti-black racist world, blackness itself is marked as an unforgivable sin.

My blackness refuses to apologize for the moments in which it disrupts the “purity” of the classroom, mainly because my blackness understands, knows it in its bones, that the classroom was never a pure place to begin with. My blackness comes to class angry, hurt, and saddened by the state-sanctioned terrorization of black bodies and wonders why more critical scholars do not say they feel the same. My blasphemous blackness will not be silent, unless it is for strategy. It is loud. My blackness will not allow for a disembodied lesson, because it recognizes that my body is always the lesson.

To be blasphemously black is not limited to or shaped by trauma. To be blasphemously black is to find joy, black joy, unmistakable and life affirming black joy in the rejecting, reviling, and rebuking of supposedly sacred white standards. It is knowing that the very act of transgression can be transformative in its attempt to locate a space unconcerned with, and perhaps outside of, white supremacy. It is knowing that black joy is “a real and imagined site of utopian possibility” where we create and are given the “space to stretch our imaginations beyond what we previously thought possible... to theorize a world in which white supremacy does not dictate our everyday lives.”¹⁵ And, this is incredibly blasphemous because, despite every reason not to, we still smile; we still live, laugh, and love.

To be blasphemously black is to be unconcerned with “white fragility”; to not care if your neighbor’s air conditioner unit is malfunctioning because white supremacy is quite literally and figuratively trying to burn your black house down. And, here lies some of the conflict: how does one effectively teach and engage (fragile white) students when embracing black blasphemy has been so life saving? When the service of self seems at odds with service to the institution, but you refuse to choose between being black and being a professor, how does one negotiate this conflict, especially at a moment such as this?

To teach while blasphemously black is/was difficult but necessary. At times it was a refusal to placate or even engage white fragility, while at other times it

¹⁵ Johnson, Javon. “Black Joy in the Time of Ferguson,” *QED: A Journal in GLBTQ Worldmaking* 2 no. 2 (2015): 177–183.

meant openly and fiercely challenging it. It meant showing my students multiple ways of responding to and resisting the state and white supremacy. It meant finding and living in the joy in all of this. As a pedagogical strategy, to be blasphemously black is to decenter whiteness in almost every way, at nearly every turn, without apology or reservation, and using that as the lesson itself. In other words, to be blasphemously black is to look a crying white student in the face, inform her that white supremacy has taught her this tactic, deny it, and remind her of the lesson in all of this.

To be blasphemously black is to check white fragility and any other tactics that promote white supremacy whenever, wherever, and however necessary to save black lives. It is to recognize that this essay may not necessarily save any other life except for my own, which is a revolutionary act, but it can lead to important and, dare I say, blasphemous dialogues. This is not to suggest that the issues I highlight in this essay will come to an easy close as this piece draws to an end, but instead my turn to critically creative writing, that is journaling and authoring poetry as a means of becoming authoritative over my own life, was, and still is, incredibly salient for me.

“I speak here of poetry as the revelation or distillation of experience” that must be articulated, negotiated, and unpacked.¹⁶ In this way, “Poetry is not a luxury. It is a vital necessity of our existence,” as Lorde so aptly and pithily claimed of women of color.¹⁷ Poetry is not only a tool to reveal our experiences and critique unfair power regimes, it allows us to imagine beyond the beyond, to make possible what we previously thought impossible, and to articulate safer worlds and new modes of being that inherently counter the current dominant power structures. Why else would Socrates expel the poets from Plato’s Republic? Poets, and their constant reminder that truth rests on who is telling the story and how it is told, are uniquely poised to challenge the unquestionable authority of the philosopher-king, of ruling classes.

*This poem is about how
when my brother came home
from his tour in Iraq
the first thing we did was hug and
make fun of each other.
When Tamir Rice was gunned down
Black people banned together
to help his mother out
of the homeless shelter she was in.
When my aunt laid in her deathbed,*

¹⁶ Lorde, Andre. “Poetry Is Not a Luxury.” In *Sister Outsider: Essays & Speeches*. Berkeley, CA: Crossing Press, 1985.

¹⁷ Ibid.

*waiting for cancer
to finally make her lungs a liar
out of her own body,
she still cracked jokes.*

During the 2014-15 academic year, I penned a number of poems that critiqued and challenged police brutality, the state-sanctioned murder of black people, how people use the #blacklivesmatter movement in ways that are almost always concerned with straight black males at the expense of black women and queer folks, as well as poems that challenged higher academia and my own life. In many ways, poetry saved my life; it allowed me to write myself into an/other world. Not a checking out of the academy – my issues it, my concerns with some of my colleagues, the growing white fragility of some students – but a checking into an/other space, one that might be best characterized by what Ashon Crawley calls the “otherwise, or “the disbelief in what is current and a movement towards, and an affirmation of, imagining other modes of social organization, other ways for us to be with each other.”¹⁸ Writing in and towards an/other world is done so in “the enunciation and concept of irreducible possibility, irreducible capacity, to create change, to be something else, to explore, to imagine, to live fully, freely, vibrantly.”¹⁹ In this way, writing kept me sane when the world tried its best to take that, too. It allowed me to imagine a world where I can be black, alive, and happy.

*You cannot kill Blackness;
too much of it is wrapped in unshakable joy.
And, aint that why they think we magic
in the first place?
That despite every reason not to,
we still love.
We still Black.
We still...*

¹⁸ Crawley, Ashon. “Otherwise, Ferguson.” *Interfictions Online: A Journal of Interstitial Arts*, November 2014. <http://interfictions.com/otherwise-fergusonashon-crawley/>

¹⁹ Ibid.



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