

## On Bridges, Bravery, and Blackness; or, Black/Woman/Academic

Jade C. Huell

A skinny little Black girl rests soundly among the huddled pink children asleep on the floor of an upper middle-class living room in the suburbs of Columbia, South Carolina. Her braided head barely peeking out of her sleeping bag, she stirs. Awake. Startled by a wet, warm, rough-textured brush against her right cheek.

“She hit me,” says the five-year-old pink girl, flushed with adrenaline, pointing her finger at me.

“She licked me!” I say, all Black girl indignant.

“Now why in the world would you lick someone as they are sleeping?” says the exasperated mother on sleepover duty.

“I wanted to see if she tasted like chocolate.”

I was almost six years old.

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**Jade C. Huell**, PhD., is an artist-scholar in Performance Studies and Assistant Professor in the Department of Communication Studies at California State University Northridge. Her research and creative activities navigate Black Studies, Memory Studies, theories/methodologies of the body, radical equity and inclusion, and ensemble experimental performance. Huell is the Director of CSUN Performance Ensemble: Creatives for Social Change, a multidisciplinary collective of social justice performers.

I had managed to make it through my master's program at the University of South Carolina before I was called a nigger to my face. My shopping cart (we call it a buggy where I come from), wandered. A mind of its own. In a Walmart parking lot, where I was shopping to purchase items for my move to Louisiana. I would be soon starting my doctoral studies at LSU. My buggy hit her bumper. No damage. Nigger.

I am a Black Woman Academic. Specifically, a scholar of Performance Studies. I am interested in the ways in which history, memory, and movement converge at the site of the precious Black body.

At the talkback session for my premier as a director of experimental theatre, my all Black cast and I sat together on one arch of a large circle in a black box theater. The other members of the talkback circle were white. Someone dropped the n-word (inadvertently, I think) during an impassioned statement about the power of language. Someone ate chocolate pudding in slow motion for the entire length of the meeting. Spooning every possible corner of the cup. Someone was worried that my show, which was created through devised work with the cast and based on our collective experiences, was overly concerned with middle-class Blackness. The production was titled *Black Body Business*.

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In my last year at my first tenure track job, I had several run ins with the interim provost, who was brought in to help the college deal with ongoing struggles related to the priorities of the small liberal arts women's college. There was a "Blackface Incident" on campus. The euphemism was worse than the offense. One of six Black Woman Academics on the faculty of 80 (on a campus of over 40% Black students), I served on a committee to address the structural and cultural issues of what this provost called, "a very *racial* campus." She says "racial" in a hushed tone. I met with the provost in various meetings four times. I had changed my hair. "I'm sorry, and you are?" "Remind me of your..." "And, nice to meet you...?" I introduced myself to her on three such occasions.

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I left the South. I live in Los Angeles. It is not as Black and White here. But I am still Black. Soon after a white police officer murdered George Floyd by kneeling

on his neck for almost 8 minutes, protests broke out here and across the country. A nation in disgust. A fed-uprising. My department at California State University, Northridge, like almost every other department, college, organization, administrative offices, issued a statement of solidarity. Black Lives Matter. No one thought to reach out to me to see how me or my Black Body was doing, with my Black 19-year-old son a nation away from me, as a Black mother subjected to the 8 minutes over and over. Again. They say he cried out, George, for his Mama. But I never heard that part.

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Black Lives Matter, it seems, in all kinds of new places at the university. And my presence and expertise are needed. I must be of service.

For my work, I am paid  
In tokens  
I am seen  
On every action committee  
Board  
Panel  
Brochure  
Not heard  
Angry not aggrieved  
Magical not memorable  
Bathed in promises of change  
“Clean” with the soapy residue of corporate capitalist symbolic gesture  
Itching my skin  
Raw  
As a not-mother; a quintessential mourner  
As a not-wife; an ever-in-waiting widow  
I am placated  
With neoliberal Black faces  
That smile at me with my eyes and my nose and my mouth  
But, no soul  
As their souls belong to the donor  
Class  
Begins.

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I am at the center of a fresh new crop of graduate students. We are separated by space and compensated by computer simulated presence. It is a Zoom session. I scan the panes to take in the eager faces of my seminar registrants, and I find the brownest student. I sigh. And, she winks.



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