

## 5. Zooming While Black: Creating a Black Aesthetic and Counter Hegemonic Discourse in a Digital Age

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### Abstract

In this essay two members of the Global African diaspora finding themselves locked down in South-East Australia, reflect on their experience as the pandemic raged. There were times they felt trapped in a surreal, oddly written dystopian novel when using online video and image-based communication platforms. The exploration and conflict within media platforms in the year 2020 changed their understanding of critical media literacy education at a time when every school student in their province interfaced with their teacher via Zoom. Video / image-based communication platforms can magnify that which is political, and for Global Africans, these platforms showed how much they were not reflected; how much social media did not mirror their experience. Rather, it amplified the colonizer's gaze, thus creating an old and familiar dynamic of performance for survival. This paper is a response to the electronic erasure of their experience using a poetic critical inquiry that explores the misrepresentation and distortion of Black humanity. Critical race theory is used as an analytical lens for their poetic counternarratives. This essay points the meaning of education, a key tool of disseminating the White Western imaginary, replete with its colonial legacy and the universalizing influence of media in education.

**Keywords:** critical race media theory, critical race theory, the Black aesthetic, counternarratives, counter storytelling, poetry, White supremacy, White Western imaginary

### *Zooming While Black*

*Zoom,*

*Click,*

*Leave meeting.*

*I am left swatting the mist of her hateful words,*

*She came into my home,*

*Eyed through my fragile possessions,*

*Glazed over my Jim Crow'ed ancestors,*

*Glared at my Black arms wrapped 'round my Black babies,*

*Framed us,*

*Shifted Octavia B's spine to an alternative future,*

*Made Audre say oh my Lorde,*

*Tilted my bookshelf Silent*

*Then hurled her words like a bowling ball,*

*The words*

*Rolling down the gutter,*

*The words  
 Shaved my eyes,  
 The words  
 I saw as I  
 Scrolled down the Chat  
 And you?  
 You will be teaching children  
 to communicate,  
 hate.  
 Cause I's ain't 'loud to make,  
 criteria that marks ya wake.*

The concept of critical media literacy, when understood as an educational project, cannot be subsumed by a single objective, indifferent to the racial context in which education more generally is practiced. This is primarily because it is unethical to blindly assume that it is the responsibility of racially marginalized scholars and teachers, to educate the community about racism. As one of us is an educator engaged in preparing school teachers to educate the community, we speak directly to the experience of an experience of mediation, by which our bodies become the objects of exchange, the topic of a text, the ink by which the words are printed, without ever being acknowledged as an authority from whom the words themselves could arise.

So, it is hard to practice media literacy when one's body is read as the object of that media. This was the case for us, two Black creative writers from the Americas living in the South-East region of Australia during an eight-month lockdown to eradicate COVID-19 in the year 2020. Critical Race Theorists (CRT) posit that stories have the ability to dismantle White supremacist ideologies that justify Eurocentric views of the world (Solórzano and Yosso, 2002). Ladson-Billings (1998) notes that counter-storytelling is an integral part of exercising the tenets of CRT. Through the use of poetic counter-narratives, we as Black people attempt to regain control of our destinies in the midst of a White supremacist hegemony. We attend, in this essay to an understanding, that the ability to control the narrative is paramount for the maintenance of White supremacy. The "critical" element in critical media literacy approaches a recognition that whoever controls the narratives controls the population submitted to that narrative.

When faced with challenges, such as being marginalised Black intellectuals living in an overwhelmingly White-dominant society--and especially during a period when that society is locked down, much like under circumstances of military law--Global Africans<sup>1</sup> seek guidance in knowledge shared by our ancestors. It is our ancestors to whom we turn for lessons on how to speak and communicate under such conditions, because it is they who taught subsequent generations how to survive. Following the traditions of the griots the knowledge of ancestors was weaved and coded into stories then handed down by our grandparents, parents and elders.

"history is a decidedly political endeavor with significant implications for making or destroying mechanisms of power and social control. Whether practiced by professionals within the griot, imbongi, gnawa, or western academic traditions, the work of historians has always reflected contemporary concerns and contexts" (Butler, 2010, p. 22)

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<sup>1</sup> "The global Africa idea holds that Africans and people of African descent worldwide share a common set of historical experiences, most notably slavery, colonialism, racial oppression, and their many consequences" (West, 2005, p. 86)

How do White supremacists - among whose community we Black people live the experience of marginality - apprehend the Black intellectual? They assume postures that vary from virtue-signalling, to speaking on behalf of Black people.

***Don't Brand Me***

*I's a free Black woman in dis here outer space,  
My fro flap free not fearful, soapbox in its place,  
My words are amplified ain't OZ-tracised with Others like me,  
Our essence an' power shouldn't be commodified on y'all's self-promotin' T.V.  
Cause as Gil S.H. done said, he done advised,  
The Revolution will not be televised.*

Both the performances of virtue signalling and distortion have clear objectives: each is oriented to scoring points with White peers. There is a sycophancy that, like a parasite, gorges on the blood of the marginalised Black person; the White ally can only ever acquiesce beneath a Whiteness from which they benefit and by which they refuse to define their identity. Whiteness is a tautological sign-structure that hides itself without ever being able to reach a point that would stabilise its privilege. Rather, it is defined by reference to an other that it appropriates and defines as its opposite: the Brown, the Black, the racial, the coloured. As Chivaura (2020) has commented, research conducted by White scholars into the African population in Australia seems to be based on trying to contain the group as primitive and inept (2020, xviii). Chivaura cites Stuart Hall to suggest, "Africans become objects within the discourse. As objects of discourse Africans are written about and not to" (Chivaura 2020, 8). This means that White people are talking among themselves about the other, who becomes an object of exchange. Black people are thereby prevented from participating in the exchange of ideas, or of contributing to a "mainstream" discourse about race. Similarly, Gayatri Spivak (1988) has commented extensively on the ways in which Brown and Black peoples are prevented from speaking for themselves, and how White colonial narratives shape the mainstream view of a "foreign" culture.

Within this context, we cannot render coherent our attempts to write poetically, and creatively, about our experiences as Black "foreigners" in a White supremacist context, simply by assuming that the context is shared. Race is not just a point of dividing society but of framing the text, such that what might appear to be a shared horizon is always mere appearance, a privilege enjoyed only by those who do not drop off the edges of the page because their voice is stifled. The page is not the same for anyone who looks at it: although since White people do not admit that there is anyone except White people who can read, it is easy to forget that the page is not shared, that not everyone who writes or reads is White, reading and writing "White". To confront this erasure of otherness, the focus of much of our writing in the time of COVID constituted a message we were trying to communicate, a message that was being systematically distorted and misrepresented. In the next section, we offer an initial literary interpretation, to highlight the way that media literacy education needs to include analysis of the Black Aesthetic.

***I am***

*the canary in the coal mine,  
the viewer of the puppet master's strings,  
the litmus test for what you swim in,  
the world's mudsill,*

*I am  
Concerned.*

### **Who is the canary?**

A canary is a metaphor for a White message: and in my Black poem it is appropriated, to stand in the place of my subjectivity. Otherwise without a White metaphor, the White cannot read me, I would be covered over, hidden. I am the canary and when you hear the canary it is my (Black) voice. If you don't hear the canary, it is also a message, a foreboding of death, but it is not a foreboding of my death, because if you cannot hear me I am already dead. Which means that my silence is a message arising from an apparition, a ghost, of me. And this is the ghost who inhabits the Australia of the coalmine; it haunts Australia as if I cannot be seen, as if I (Black woman, and Black man) cannot be heard. The reason "I" am dead is that the coal in the mine has spoken, emitting a gas that the White man cannot smell, cannot sense. The coal is the earth, of which Franz Fanon (2004) spoke, in which we are the "wretched". And this gas, invisible and undetectable, is a ghost, too. It was only supposed to kill me (Black who is hidden) and then the White man was supposed to hear the message of my death, and escape, learning ahead of time, just in time, of his own imminent demise. But since I am dead, the message may yet deliver itself - bypassing me, and perhaps delivering an altogether different message than the one that I - the Black woman - could have conveyed to the White man. Who knows if it will ever be heard, seeing as it is the message of the earth, the earth that White men have made wretched.

### ***Discomfort***

*Why do you get dressed to go to Zoom, dad?  
My daughter asks.  
She doesn't know yet, that in that box I am not me.  
I represent an entire continent.  
They ask me to speak but they don't want to listen  
Smiling to bring comfort.  
But solace never arrives.  
Not for me and not for them.*

### **The Australian Colonial Gaze**

That wretched earth is a name for a colonial world. Historically the colonial (White) Australian resisted hierarchy (Hall, 2014). The large numbers of Irish, low caste Englishman and Scots, who (by force) were sent here, who settled here, were very influential in creating a collective resentment towards British authority. So the White people are very bad at listening to themselves. They mistrust messages, and those who try to deliver them. They are indifferent to their demise, and to the system of discourse from which they were sent here, objects themselves, escaping from a British genocide called the Potato Famine.

They made of Australia giant coalmine, a giant hole in the earth that they could excavate and then ship the Black mineral around the world, like another slave trade. So why would they listen to me, the canary? Especially when I am as dead as the coal? Yet the coal still speaks with its poisonous gas, a poison for the White man who will not listen for its message, cannot read the text.

### ***White Flight***

*Audience is seated.  
Waiting for my premier.  
Thought I was in the gallery.*

*But the playbill read.  
 Centre stage.  
 Pushed to the >>>spotlight<<<.  
 My role, my caste?  
 Mr. 'Representation'.  
 With a cortisol smile.  
 The spectators know I am there.  
 Like Urubus, they're flapping.  
 My presence is sensed.  
 Green screens charge the air.  
 My melanin says it all, An orchestrated meal.  
 A satisfied gaze.  
 Full bellies, they flap.  
 Distorted senses.  
 Leaving scraps.  
 Performing.  
 Yet...  
 Another White flight.*

### **I can't breathe**

Schools in Australia continue to be haunted by the ghosts of settler colonialism. Just recently as April 2021 in an act of White supremacy, the Australian government censured school children for a primary school project about Black Lives Matter. In the midst of the COVID lockdown, a Black man tried to speak in America, tried to warn the world that Black people were overrepresented in the numbers of people at risk - not just from COVID-19, but from the police state, from heightened xenophobia, and the Trumpian real-politik, which infected Australian politics.<sup>2</sup> We note that we do not speak of all Black people: in Australia the voices of First Nations people are different from ours and different from themselves. They too are silenced. They too must adopt White metaphors to be heard in a White supremacist context. Like the canary in my poem, the Black man crying out to the world could not breathe: and this suffocation was a lightning rod that globalized the Black Lives Matter movement. A routine police arrest in the street was suddenly recognised as **the lynching of George Floyd**. But just as the police officer who murdered Floyd would have gone free were it not for a bystander documenting the arrest on her phone, so we had to remain as bystanders on the sidelines, on the margins, of the mainstream White supremacist discourse, of which we, paradoxically, were the objects. Media was flooded with Black pain, Black death, and racist rhetoric and for many stuck at home due to the government sanctioned lockdown with little to do, gazing at Black bodies became a spectacle, a strange pastime, a type of media spectacle doomscrolling.

“Media spectacles demonstrate who has power and who is powerless, who is allowed to exercise force and violence, and who is not. They dramatize and legitimate the power of the powers that be and show the powerless that they must stay in their places.” (Kellner, 2020, p.1)

We Black foreigners looked into a mirror on Zoom, on social media, on television. But the mirror was not our mirror, it was a White mirror and it could not show our faces. We were invisible, even on those screens filled with our image. Interactions on the video conferencing platform Zoom became a site of dislocation, where our Black bodies, practicing critical

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<sup>2</sup> Some Australian politicians capitalized on the Trumpian style for spreading baseless lies (Crowe, 2021).

media literacy, were met with actions that compounded the trauma experienced from media headlines.

So when we speak poetically of a canary in the coal mine moment, it is a narrative about the way in which messages are produced and shaped - even at the scene of the classroom - and at the same time, voices muffled, throats crushed, and when we metaphorically speak about canaries dying, we are teaching from a Black Aesthetic that appropriates the White metaphor for our purpose. It is not just the Black man whose identity is displaced by a metaphor. Whiteness goes on trial, because the media are likened to the police who killed George Floyd, stifling the cultural life of Black people whose perspective is not congruent with that of the Whites who control media and scholarship. This essay is therefore an effort to explicitly disrupt the formality and restraint of scholarly essays produced by the dominant culture; accordingly, we see our poems as a means to interrupt the formality of a White discourse that would otherwise smother us. We are signalling the Black Aesthetic.

### ***Being Black in 2020***

*was to see your brother George Floyd die under the knee  
of those meant to protect the public.*

*Being Black in 2020*

*meant not being seen on the frontlines and  
more at risk of dying from COVID-19.*

*Being Black in 2020*

*meant marching for our humanity,  
producing media that disrupts,  
while feeling the discomfort of the White gaze and colonial systems.*

### **The Australian context, lockdown, and the Global African**

In 2020, a miasma of despair seemed to stall under the noses of people living in Australia. The mist emanated from a stew of headlines and hashtags, marking consecutive crises-- first an unprecedented deadly bushfire season in which the country burned for 240 days, which led directly into the country battling the COVID-19 pandemic (Gretener, 2020). The red skies and smoke from fires had people wearing masks and staying indoors, and just as the fires began to ease, the spread of COVID led to lockdowns that brought forth orders to work and do school from home. Travel restrictions eventually transformed into Australia closing its borders; not letting anyone in or off the island (Bourke, 2021). With a population that has grown by 40 percent since the 1990s (i.e. 18 million to 25 million), the Australian 2016 census noted that 26.3% of Australians were born overseas (Parliament of Australia, 2018), “compared to 13.7 percent of the population in the United States and 14 percent in Britain” (Cave & Kwai, 2019, para 9). Australia famously began as an apartheid state that butchered its first nations inhabitants and marginalized non-White migrants under a White Australia Policy. (Jupp 2002). Yet these histories remain more or less proscribed and silenced within the Australian curriculum. This is reflective of the White supremacist agenda within the prevailing White regime and government plan to revoke section 18C of the racial discrimination act, which states that it is unlawful for an individual to “offend, insult, humiliate or intimidate another person or a group of people...because of the race, colour or national or ethnic origin” (Taylor, 2014, para 13). Attorney-General George Brandis stated that people had a “right to be bigots” (Taylor, 2014, para 1). Most recently this racism manifested as a ban on Australian citizens returning from India at the height of the sub-continental pandemic, while those from every other part of the world bore no such proscription. White Australia had returned under the aegis of pandemic protectionism.

***Turn on the Bushfires****Pour the Pandemic in Pan**Add Spice to the Rice and Stir**Seal up the Aussie Lid, then Watch the wickets bubble and boil,**Don't wait mate, eat it now for the Perfect Storm****Perfect Storm***

For many in Australia, the African immigrant is viewed as the newest group of immigrants to grace the shores of Australia. However, Yussuf (2020) points out that there is, “a long history of African settlement in Australia dating as far back as the First Fleet” in 1788, that included formerly enslaved African Americans amongst 12 persons of African descent. It was not until 1996 that persons of African origins were noted as a statistically recognised migrant group in Australia (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2008). The number of Black Africans in Australia has been estimated to be nearly 500,000 (Mercer, 2010), and while their economic contributions are notable, “Africans rarely feature in the media [and] when they do feature there tends to be an overrepresentation of particular nationalities involved in certain types of negative discourse” (Chivaura, 2020, p. 7). Traditional media in Australia continue to lack diversity and the perspectives of persons in the BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color) community remain muffled and muted.

“There are very few platforms in the traditional media in Australia where a person of color performs a central role, such as leading the conversation, even on matters that disproportionately (sic) affect those communities” (Nyoon, 2020, para 10).

This lack of representation in Australia’s traditional media has resulted in a systematic, segregated visibility, such as when an Australian editorial cartoonist published a cartoon caricature of Serena Williams that harped back to damaging minstrel stereotypes (Corbould, 2018); the perpetuated view of Sudanese Australian youth as African gang members (Nyoon, 2020); Adam Goodes, a now retired Indigenous Australian rules football player, being asked to apologize to a teen who publicly called him an ape (Wu, 2015); the 200,000+ targeted, published words tinged with racial elements meant to police and punish Sudanese-Australian writer, media presenter, and award-winning community advocate Yassmin Abdel-Magied for her posted-then-deleted link of “Lest we forget (Manus, Nauru, Syria, Palestine)” on Anzac Day (Watkins, 2018). Abdel-Magied fled to the United Kingdom after receiving numerous death threats. She shared,

“The rules are different for young, non-White Australians. We tread with ridiculous and exhausting caution, even as we’re the subject of frequent causal and formal racism... These are the varied and violent anxieties of the safe, comfortable and free. Your speech is free in direct proportion to the wavelength of light your skin absorbs. It’s not worth even discussing how this might be countered without first admitting we have a serious problem that is hurting energetic, articulate and successful young Australians” (Watkins, 2018, para 4).

For persons who are not White Australian, speaking up and even the presence of one’s skin, can result in one’s message being misinterpreted and/or silenced. A widely held view of the hegemonic cultural group in Australia is:

“the idea that people should be considered as equal in all aspects of life: ‘Not only should one person not inherit greater life chances than another; none should be allowed to accumulate a great deal more than another through his own efforts or luck. Exceptional performances or capacities are deprecated by both individuals in a relationship’ (Hansen, 1968, p. 60). The phrase ‘tall poppy syndrome’ refers to a tendency in [Australia and] New Zealand to find fault with high achievers, to ‘cut

them down to size' if they pretend they are better than anyone else. (Kennedy, 2000, p. 4)

More recently within Australian media, the phenomena of Brown Poppy syndrome has intensified due to the layered effect of the COVID lockdown, George Floyd's death, and BLM. Brown Poppy syndrome is a modernized, racialized version of Tall Poppy syndrome and is carried out in media, "[w]henver a minority proudly stands for Australia, [W]hite Australians immediately bite back" (Joshi, 2017, para 1). In listing this array of racist media representations, we are drawing attention to the media's pedagogical function, especially given the digitization of curriculum practice in Australian schools.

*We were thirsty,  
We drank from digital streams  
to stay in-the-know.  
We sipped and,  
We gulped from digital wells  
Seeking time before the COVID foe.*

### **Conclusion**

This essay points a finger at the meaning of education, a key tool of disseminating the White Western imaginary, replete with its colonial legacy and the universalizing influence of media in education. In order to scratch out a place of difference from which to write, to read, and to speak, amidst the cacophony of racist education vomiting from Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, we name ourselves as contributors to a Black Aesthetic. We know we are and probably always will be vulnerable targets in the digital world. But by exposing the witness of the metaphors we must use, and the mythology that White education extends, we attend to the exchange of Black bodies, we recognise our object-status for the White man, as the same point of exchange on which Black bodies were *auctioned, standing on a block* for the spectacle of White merchants. We think of the stories our ancestors handed down to us and recognise those stories as the datum of a Black Aesthetic, and the substance of a post-White curriculum (Croom 2020). Where once that trade in enslaved human Africans was the business of colonial governments, now we have the responsibility to perform a peaceful violence on that educational economy. If we are to be the silent objects of media analysis, we will perform against type. It is not our job to educate the White man about his racism. But it is our pleasure, our aesthetic, to signify a different place than that ascribed to us by the White educator. As Kellner has argued,

“Media spectacles demonstrate who has power and who is powerless, who is allowed to exercise force and violence, and who is not. They dramatize and legitimate the power of the powers that be and show the powerless that they must stay in their places.” (Kellner, 2020, p.1)

And we say that the way digital media invades the lives of school teachers and students is a story that must be written from more than one perspective, so as not to allow a White supremacist agenda to go forward, publicly suffocating debate, crushing the throats of a Black voice.

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