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Keep Claiming Space!

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SPECIAL ISSUE: Hands Up. Don’t Shoot!
Critical and Creative Responses to Violence toward Black Bodies in the 21st Century

Keep Claiming Space!
Koritha Mitchell

Having studied violence my entire adult life, I have encountered a disturbing reality again and again: in the United States, the success of marginalized groups inspires aggression as often as praise. Therefore, members of these groups do not have to be criminals or do anything wrong to be attacked; their success is more often the “offense” that will make them a target. Marginalized communities and their allies must understand and highlight this troubling dynamic. When we study or simply talk about violence, we must do so with a keen awareness of its purpose: violence emerges to mark who belongs and who does not. It is not simply an injustice inflicted on human beings; it is an organizing mechanism that enforces society’s existing hierarchies. When we acknowledge its true function, and insist that others do the same, we create the conditions for a very different discussion that can inspire action and strengthen coalitions.

Because the purpose of violence is to mark who belongs and who does not, it is best understood as a severe form of know-your-place aggression (Mitchell, “Love in Action,” 700-02). Violence is a way of reminding targets of their “proper place,” a way of insisting that certain people should not feel secure in claiming space. Though citizenship technically extends beyond white, heterosexual men with property, “citizen” still signifies a particular demographic, and all others are treated like guests whose membership cards can always be revoked, even if they have done all that the nation claims to respect, such as work hard and achieve according to accepted rules and standards (Mills). In other words, violence is a performance of the denial of citizenship. It announces, this can be done to you because you’re just a [epithet], so I don’t have to care about your life and limb. Then, when others learn of the conflict, and the response is apathy or victim-blaming, the violence—both physical and discursive—becomes a more public performance. The message becomes, this person, these people do not belong. They are not valued by, or valuable

I am grateful to CLAJ for the invitation to write the foreword to this special issue. As someone who has always seen attending an HBCU as a remarkably life-affirming experience that I never had, this is a signal honor. Hands Up. Don’t Shoot! powerfully highlights the importance of Black self-affirmation, and I cherish the ways that CLAJ and CLAJ have affirmed me. I also sincerely thank the two anonymous reviewers for their feedback, which helped me see the piece anew. The reports offered guidance on how to improve the work but also acknowledged its strengths. Quite happily, I also publicly thank Topc Fādiran, whose sharp mind and deep investment in these issues helped me further strengthen the presentation of my ideas. Finally, I dedicate this work to the memory of victims and in solidarity with those who have survived and must cope with tremendous, unjust losses.

Also see Mitchell, “Never-ending Battles” and “OSU Haters.”

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to, a collective that matters. Violence fortifies the boundaries around citizenship that are defined whenever “guests” feel like they belong.

Understanding that violence aims to keep certain populations in their “proper place” recently helped me recognize how effective it had been on me, and this realization led to a deeper appreciation for the power of solidarity. In November 2014, I had been marching in a #BlackLivesMatter event for at least half an hour and had enthusiastically lent my voice to many chants, but I began crying as soon as the declaration became Whose streets? Our streets! I choked up and could not utter those words. The tears flowed because I am no superwoman. My Blackness has not made me impervious to the messages my white supremacist country insists upon sending. So, immediately, I was struck by how everything that has been happening—including the killing of 7-year-old Aiyana Stanley-Jones, Rekia Boyd, Renisha McBride, Ilaya Nettles, and countless others whose names we don’t know—is about showing me that public space is not meant for me and mine.3 So, trying to shout those words—Whose streets? Our streets!—made me face how little I believe American streets are mine. And that made me think about how crucial it was that people of all backgrounds were making that assertion, that these are our streets. Nevertheless, my tears were also about how much easier it was for some in that crowd to feel that those were their streets. Some are affirmed every day regarding their value to the nation. To be blunt, most of my white brothers and sisters who were marching with me are not bombarded with messages that public space is not their space. Still, as I participated in that embodied practice of belonging—which is exactly what that march was—I couldn’t help but notice the strength I gained from seeing and hearing and feeling people of all backgrounds prioritize the assertion of an our with their words and actions.

My tears kept flowing, but buoyed by everyone around me, I raised my voice, insisting that these are our streets. For me, this is a claim not of ownership but of belonging. It’s about asserting that there is a public collective, and I am part of it. That is, I belong in it; I am valued by it; I am valuable to it. In that unforgettable moment, coalition helped to embolden me.

American coalitions will gain strength as more people recognize that violence reinforces unjust boundaries around citizenship; this understanding empowers one to resist the urge to defend victims who have done nothing that warrants defense. Instead, one can remain focused on the need to expose perpetrators’ true motivations and the extent to which their goals are supported by the nation’s most common discourses and practices. When aggressors are said to be justified and victims from marginalized groups are said to have “brought it on themselves,” people who understand the role of violence will show how those responses fuel injustice. For example, when speaking of George Zimmerman’s murder of Trayvon Martin, undistracted observers will highlight that Zimmerman was protected because his violence accorded with the nation’s racist values. By assuming the worst about Trayvon Martin because he was Black, Zimmerman honored foundational hierarchies that undergird American culture, so many Americans identified with Zimmerman and his aggressive behavior. Justice-oriented commentators will also note that Zimmerman walked free for 46 days after killing the teenager because Americans believe that a black person’s death does not constitute a loss for society.4 This dehumanizing belief also shaped the trial and made the “not guilty” verdict almost inevitable. In other words, keen observers will prevent discussions from being skewed by the hypocritical American tendency to insist that race-based value judgments are a thing of the past.

Furthermore, to demand justice, targeted communities and their allies cannot allow conversations to focus on that which does not need to change—an innocent victim’s behavior; we must insist that citizens grapple with all that empowers perpetrators. In Zimmerman’s case, the state rewarded him for demonstrating his Americanness by treating Blacks as non-citizens. Because violence and mainstream responses to it are geared more toward rejecting certain populations than toward identifying who is welcome, they rely on the victim’s identity for justification. For this reason, the fact that Zimmerman is Hispanic did not count against him when

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3 In the same spirit of the African American Policy Forum’s #WhyWeCan’tWait campaign, many have been calling attention to the violence against Black and Brown women that is too often overlooked by the media. See <http://www.aapf.org/whywecantwait/> as well as “Black Women are Killed by Police, Too” in Dame, August 18, 2014. <http://www.damemagazine. com/2014/08/18/black-women-are-killed-police-too> and “Black Women and Girls Killed by the Police: See Their Faces, Speak Their Names and Know Their Stories” Bougie Black Girl, August 24, 2014. http://bougieblackgirl.com/black-women-girls-killed-law-enforcement-see-faces-speak-names-know-stories/

4 This is not to deny the importance of the voices of those who protested. However, the momentum of dominant discourse cannot be overstated, given how matters ultimately concluded.

5 Many studies demonstrate that whether convicted criminals are sentenced to the death penalty depends more on the victim’s identity than on the perpetrator’s. In short, killing a white person increases one’s vulnerability to death penalty. See Amnesty International, <http://www.amnestyusa.org/our-work/issues/death-penalty/us-death-penalty-facts/death-penalty-and-race>.
he callously took an African American teenager’s life. He upheld the status quo by embracing white supremacy, so the legal system and many ordinary Americans mobilized to lend credibility to his actions and to the hatred that inspired them.

Zimmerman (and everyone watching) received confirmation that he had accurately interpreted the messages he had always received about the nation’s values. After all, most Americans have no clue that the United States is part of the Americas. Consider the violence embedded in the fact that instead of thinking in terms of “The Americas,” everyone here is taught to think of the United States as (all of) America. United States residents constantly participate in an erasure of much of North America and all of Central and South America. Given this quietly devastating practice, many people naturally conclude, “if you can’t beat them, join them.” Zimmerman’s investment in keeping Black and Brown people under surveillance and in their “proper place” serves white supremacy, and it represents the classic strategy of wedding oneself to whiteness in hopes of being embraced by dominant culture, which otherwise ignores your existence. This strategy seems worth trying, especially when dominant culture also consistently demonstrates its capacity to do far worse than ignore those who do not gain its approval.

As vast segments of continents are erased from the country’s consciousness, all Americans receive powerful messages about who matters and who does not, and for many, a choice can be made; one can either identify with those who clearly have the power to erase, or one can align with the disadvantaged and accept the consequences. When acknowledging this context, one sees why Zimmerman would adopt white supremacist values; doing so is a way of asserting citizenship when a sense of belonging is clearly reserved only for certain groups. Though Zimmerman seems uninterested in it, there is always a third option: working to make the nation live up to its promises of equality and justice.

Zimmerman’s “not guilty” verdict demonstrates that demanding justice requires re-orienting national conversations about violence, and Americans can start by noticing that Zimmerman was rewarded because he punished Martin and his family for their success. They lived in a gated community and had the audacity to feel a sense of belonging in it; that sense of belonging is the success that Zimmerman’s actions were meant to negate. Trayvon Martin operated with the belief that he belonged in that American neighborhood, that the space was meant for him. Therefore, the violence against Martin highlighted, and sought to further naturalize, existing boundaries of citizenship. African Americans no longer need freedom papers to travel, but the means to shut them out of the social contract are always available because “citizen” still signifies a particular demographic, and all others are treated like guests—if not intruders. When these “guests” seem too comfortable, know-your-place aggression is a ready corrective; many Americans support its use without question. However, when one recognizes that violence aims to prevent entire populations from enjoying hard-won human rights victories, one can appreciate how constructed the boundaries of citizenship are. And because those boundaries are constructed, they can be re-constructed as more people identify common ground and build coalitions to demand justice.

Because American culture is shaped by racism, sexism, heterosexism, classism, ableism, and an aggressive Christianity, these ideologies currently dictate whom most Americans will vindicate, and this pattern proved as reliable for Craig Hicks as it had for George Zimmerman. When Hicks, a white atheist, shot three young Muslims in February 2015, the fact that his victims were not Christian mattered far more than the fact that he wasn’t. Being an atheist could work against Hicks in other scenarios, but his violence accorded with a Christian tendency to denigrate other faiths, especially when racism intensifies intolerance, as it does when encountering Islam. The citizenship, the life-long belonging of Yusor Abu-Salha, Deah Barakat, and Razan Abu-Salha too easily faded when the violence they suffered became public. Hicks shot these three young people in the head. The horror and brutality of this act should have made impossible the suggestion that it was motivated by anything other than hate. Nevertheless, the national conversation took seriously the insistence that the killings were about a “parking dispute” and had “nothing to do with religion” (NBC News). Apparently, aggressively “Christian” actions are so American that they must be affirmed; denying the anti-Muslim tendencies of this Christian nation simply becomes part of the violence. Or, as Indigenous Studies scholar Jodi Byrd put it, “White folks: Killing people over long-standing territory disputes unrelated to race or religion since 1492.”

Predicting which person will be affirmed and which will be denigrated can be painfully simple, but Americans routinely deny that racism, sexism, and other repressive ideologies determine outcomes. Many Americans refuse to admit that the victim’s identity had anything to do with their being attacked or with how most people respond to learning of attacks. These refusals extend the violence. However, let us be clear about the implications of these dehumanizing denials.

Not only do these tendencies disregard the experience of marginalized communities and insist that they cannot be trusted to know what happens to them; these tendencies also work to erase the fact that victims were targeted for their achievements. In other words, the country’s most common practices work to destroy all signs of marginalized people’s success while insisting that it never existed.
The pattern is ubiquitous but too seldom identified. It looks something like this:

Dominant discourses and practices work to keep certain people in a subordinate social position by constantly casting them in a negative light. Certain groups are said to be hopelessly inferior. However, members of these groups nevertheless manage to succeed, and their success often inspires aggression because someone wants to remind them of their “proper place.” Whether the method is a microaggression or a physical assault of some sort, the message is, you may be a better student than I am or better at your job than I am, but you’re still just a [epithet], so I can treat you this way. Then, when the incident becomes public, many Americans are eager to deny that the person was targeted because of bias and/or hatred. When a member of a marginalized group suffers, many Americans immediately look for explanations that have nothing to do with racism, sexism, or the other ideologies that maintain the status quo. This country was built on and continues to depend on racism, for example, but many Americans love to insist, “but this had nothing to do with race.” In the process, the success that inspired the attack—the success attained despite a society designed to prevent it—is treated as if it were a non-factor, as if it never existed. Thus, both the perpetrator and Americans more generally deny that the attack was an attempt to negate the success of marginalized groups.

Those committed to justice must highlight the fact that marginalized populations are being punished for their accomplishments because doing so exposes what violence most seeks to obscure. Namely, members of dominant groups occupy higher positions and enjoy more resources, not because they deserve to, but because the nation’s most common practices virtually ensure their prominence. “Dominant groups do not prevail because their members are so exceptional but because the system is set up to ensure that they win even when they are mediocre” (Mitchell, “Love in Action” 704). Any measure of success attained by those who in some way represent traditional citizenship is protected and bolstered while others’ achievements are either destroyed or discounted. (e.g., “She only got that opportunity because she is a woman.”)

Success can take many forms, and all of them can inspire aggression because even the smallest achievement can be interpreted as a refusal to know one’s “proper place.” For example, as I have said of LGBTQ+ communities, success is not simply the visibility of people like Ellen DeGeneres, Anderson Cooper, Laverne Cox, Janet Mock, RuPaul, and the gay couple on Modern Family: A victory that many would love to see reversed is the simple fact that not every single non-conforming person stays in the closet (Mitchell, “Love in Action” 701). Likewise, when hate speech and other forms of racial violence erupt on college campuses, perpetrators aim to put back in “their place” students who are not white but who dare to occupy space as if they believe they belong.

Considering everything from microaggressions to physical assault and murder through the framework of know-your-place aggression can help targeted communities and their allies avoid the defensive posture that mainstream discourse works to impose. Because declaring that victims somehow “brought it on themselves” is the norm, speaking up for those targeted often means defending them against assumptions about their presumably improper behavior. However, this preoccupation leaves the real problem ignored. When one remains clear that success inspires aggression, one is less likely to tolerate the unjust emphasis on how victims behaved. After all, they were not likely targeted because they were doing something horrible; they were targeted because their believing that they belong offends those wedded to hierarchies based on -isms.

Given America’s tendency toward know-your-place aggression, Black and Brown people who “sag” their pants, though not often discussed in this way, highlight what is at stake when dominant assumptions determine the orientation of everyday conversations about violence. When considering society’s problems, should one be concerned that a victim’s pants were sagging, or that Americans believe that people are not entitled to occupy space and receive basic human respect if their pants sag? American culture works to convince pant-saggers that they do not belong, so their feeling a sense of belonging—even if only on a single street corner—constitutes a victory against the odds, and violence emerges to negate that victory. In a society that will insist that they “brought it on themselves” even if they are executed in the street, let us be clear about what accepting this logic requires. Quite literally, one must overlook pant-saggers’ basic human rights because they somehow succeeded in believing that their humanity and citizenship did not depend on following a dress code.

All Americans are encouraged to believe that one must prove worthy of human respect by following certain rules, but for marginalized groups, following the rules—being successful according to mainstream standards—can easily make a person a target for know-your-place aggression. Given this reality, rule-followers often have more in common with pant-saggers than those in power want them to discover. As Cathy Cohen has argued, however, such a discovery is important because it can mean that “one’s political comrades” will be based on “one’s relation to power, and not some homogenized identity” (22). That is, it can inspire solidarity as Americans of all backgrounds commit to making the country better fulfill its promises of justice and equality. When one understands that violence aims to prevent certain people from flourishing, one can push for a broad investment in

7 For one example of a story involving state-sanctioned violence against a pant-sagger that led to death, see <http://thefreethoughtproject.com/cops-arrest-man-sagging-pants-tase-him-leave-face-cell-died/>
welcoming people and affirming their sense of belonging rather than reinforcing unjust boundaries around citizenship.

Marginalized groups and their allies must expose the tendency of dominant discourses and practices to punish and repress certain people’s achievements, and we must do so understanding that victories of coalition will inspire particularly intense opposition. Aggression often emerges when marginalized people operate out of a sense of belonging, rather than act as if they are guests who are grateful to be tolerated, but antagonism seems to intensify whenever people cross the boundaries that sustain injustice. When individuals come together despite everything they have been taught about having nothing in common with people of a different identity category, they forge connections that can transform society, and that transformative potential motivates hateful responses. For instance, in April 2012, students at Ohio State University held a “Hoodies and Hijabs” rally, memorializing Trayvon Martin, a murdered African American teenager, and Shaima Alawadi, a murdered Muslim woman. Soon thereafter, the Black Cultural Center was vandalized. The words “Long live Zimmerman” were spray-painted on the side of the building. The more I got involved, it became clear that, for years, Muslim students, Asian and Asian American students as well as Latino/a students had been consistently targeted and that peers of many backgrounds had been coming together to support them.

So, the words “Long Live Zimmerman” on the Black Cultural Center did not simply aim to remind Black students that they should not feel comfortable occupying campus space; this aggression emerged because a broad coalition had found common ground. Just as Zimmerman had aligned himself with white supremacy in order to escape the disadvantages reserved for those deemed inferior, “Long live Zimmerman” both reflected and conveyed a powerful message about avoiding proximity to marginalized groups. Students who might consider standing in solidarity were receiving a warning, regardless of their identity.

Make no mistake, violence works to tell everyone who belongs and who does not, and it is extremely effective. My own experience teaches me that no one is impervious to its message. Less than a month after a broad coalition had empowered me at that November 2014 march, I noticed that I was still letting violence win. Scholars and activists were planning #Ferguson2MLA, a #BlackLivesMatter solidarity event to be held at the annual convention of the Modern Language Association. I noticed their efforts right away, and it was clear that they were asking for any and all help they could get, but I deliberately kept my distance. However, when asked to speak at the gathering, I agreed. Shortly after doing so, I wrote to the organizers and withdrew myself from the program. Because I am rarely that indecisive, I began to ask myself some serious questions about my distance from this upcoming solidarity action.

With pain and regret, I realized that the self-censorship represented by my hesitancy about shouting Whose Streets? Our Streets! had been taking other forms. Since the Michael Brown shooting in August 2014, I had received invitations to appear on radio programs to discuss the issues involved, and I had turned them down. Though I had been using Facebook and Twitter to speak out, dodging deeper involvement with #Ferguson2MLA helped me see how significant my declining those radio invitations had been. My country has long been sending me a clear message about how little it values me and mine, and that message was having its intended effect.

I ultimately agreed to speak at #Ferguson2MLA, and it was clear to me that only solidarity could have made my involvement possible. My country was encouraging me in very persuasive ways to be silent, and my refusal to do so did not result from my individual strength and resiliency. I had very little of those resources. Through its relentless attack on my people, American violence—including the apparently bloodless violence of criminal justice procedures—was taking a serious toll on my mind, body, and spirit. Because others, of every background, cared enough to put their time and energy into resisting the nation’s brutal anti-Black messages, I began to reinvest in the effort required to hope for, and work for, a better day. As I said at the event, “when I’ve been in retreat mode, Pranav Jani has been on full-blast; when he needed relief, Laura Goldblatt and Lenora Hanson were ready; when they needed rest, Roopika Risam and Adam Miyashiro were feeling refreshed; when they needed encouragement, Deborah McDowell and Houston Baker got involved. And on and on and on.”

Various forms of violence affect people in different ways and with varying degrees of intensity, so as with the Whose Streets? Our Streets! chant, our different levels of energy and our varying capacities to keep fighting may have been a reflection of the disparate impact of the violence. By acknowledging that probability, we could truly make diversity our strength—the glue of a collective not bound by class status, employment status, sexuality, gender expression, race, ability, or nation. Indeed, it seems that this very possibility helped make space for Professor Amber Riaz to address the #Ferguson2MLA crowd. After I reminded everyone that #BlackLivesMatter was created by queer women of color and that anti-LGBT violence was part of what brought us together (Garza), Riaz declared, “…I approach you today with intense fear. I am a Pakistani Muslim mother, and I am here only because they are murdering my children. They are killing my men. And thank you for opening up this space to all identities. Thank you for accepting
all identities because Black lives matter."9

I do not believe that anyone can remain unaffected by the powerful messages we receive from the violence that surrounds us. However, I have also felt the power of witnessing a range of people affirming their belonging and mine. Therefore, I am even more convinced: whatever one's identity or location, we can choose to assert, Whose space? Our space!

Why This? Why Now?

The title of this special issue of the College Language Association Journal (CLAJ) evokes the power of not only words but also gestures and actions: Hands Up. Don't Shoot! Critical and Creative Responses to Violence Toward Black Bodies in the 21st Century. As they offer creativity and analysis, the dramas, poems, essays, short stories, and reviews herein will also prompt embodied practices of belonging, thereby continuing the tradition of one-act lynching plays of the 1910s and 1920s. In the midst of mob violence, while lynching remaining a palpable threat to their own bodies, families, and communities, Black authors wrote plays that did not plead with whites to stop the violence. Instead, they focused on Black audiences, acknowledging that they were under siege but reminding them not to believe the mainstream hype; they told their communities the truth about why they were attacked. Namely, the scripts showed again and again that the mob's most common targets were not criminals but successful men and women. The genre's community-centered message was unmistakable: Black success beckons the mob. Know that...and keep living according to your own values and self-conceptions. You are a citizen, no matter how much this nation tries to deny that fact.

Like those playwriting forebears, the authors in this special issue have undertaken the task of expressing their thoughts and feelings while grappling with the pain of this historical moment, which is characterized by violent backlash to the human rights victories of many marginalized groups.10 Through this work, authors of various backgrounds have operated out of an understanding that their perspective is valid and deserves to be heard, just as they and their co-laborers deserve to take up space. That is, they are standing firm in the belief that we all belong, despite American messages to the contrary. As much as the nation would be happy to silence them, they have collected themselves enough to speak. And they do so in community, sharing their texts so that others might gain clarity and strength from their work. Because these dramas, poems, essays, short stories, and reviews are in the world, they can inspire conversations in classrooms and living rooms that help readers make sense of this painful moment and face another day.

Because these works will prompt embodied practices of belonging,11 it is especially appropriate that this issue was conceived and executed under the editorial leadership of Dr. Sandra Shannon. Having devoted her career to the study of drama and theater, Shannon understands the power of performance, of embodied practices. She values the written word but knows that the most powerful texts reflect and create spaces where communities experience the dynamism not only of words but also gesture, tone, and movement. As an expert on playwright August Wilson, she has guided audiences around the world to appreciate Black performance traditions that push past "proving" Black humanity to assert Black belonging. Like Wilson, she has been a preserver of that which the American mainstream happily ignores or distorts. Likewise, she has worked to sustain Black institutions, including the Black Theater Network, Howard University's historic English department, and the College Language Association (CLA) itself.

The CLA and its journal have affirmed that artistic expression and cultural

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9 The audio from #Ferguson2MLA can be heard at http://rabble.ca/podcasts/shows/f- word/2015/02/black-lives-matter. For Amber Riaz's comments, go to 35:30. More details about the podcast: It begins with music and contextual framing from Sarah Jo. Then, remarks from Roopika Risam from about 8:00 to 11:00; Pranav Jani from 11:00 to 15:00; Deborah McDowell from 15:00 to 24:00; a song about the LAPD from 24:00 to 26:25; Koriitha Mitchell from 26:30 to 35:15; Amber Riaz from 35:30 to 36:07; and Houston Baker from 36:15 to 42:15.


11 Among embodied practices of belonging, debate ranks as one of the most important because people typically do not debate individuals who mean nothing to them (Mitchell, Living with Lynching 84, 108, 146). Therefore, whether the works in this issue inspire agreement or disagreement when readers engage them, they will all bolster community.
criticism are crucial for understanding Black life, thought, and experience because they demonstrate that Blackness cannot be reduced to its encounters with violence, death, and loss. Indeed, African-descended peoples have made art, life, and love even while enduring the most brutal conditions. Because CLAJ is oriented toward performing Black self-affirmation, proclaiming Black citizenship and the right to space, and celebrating the fullness of Black humanity, this peer-reviewed journal has been offering insights available nowhere else since 1957. Personally, I have found its attention to early Black playwrights unparalleled. Drama produced in the United States has always been a "bastard art" receiving less scholarly attention than poetry and prose (Smith), and assumptions about the lack of significant work by playwrights of African descent has led many to overlook the rich material left by earlier generations (Mitchell, Living with Lynching 10-12). Refusing to yield to those scholarly trends, CLAJ has always published analyses reflecting the breadth and depth of the African diaspora. Taking only one example, CLAJ more than any other publication empowered me to understand KRIGWA, the guild of writers and actors once associated with the NAACP's Crisis magazine.

CLAJ now joins the effort to contextualize and honor the activism of the #BlackLivesMatter movement, and it adds rich dimensions, even though significant intellectual and activist engagement can already be found both online and off. On August 17, 2014, shortly after Michael Brown's murder and the earliest protests, historian Marcia Chatelain issued a call on Twitter for the sharing of teaching materials about the issues illuminated by these events. The resulting #FergusonSyllabus hashtag is an un-moderated Twitter feed archiving resources and an ongoing conversation. The importance of acknowledging this extended “teachable moment” became clearest when some public schools directed teachers to avoid the topic (Strauss). In the wake of that controversial news, and focusing on young people both inside and outside the classroom, activist-scholar Mariane Kaba wrote "#FergusonSyllabus: Talking and Teaching About Police Violence.” In December 2014, inspired by Chatelain’s call, American Theatre published “The Ferguson Theatre Syllabus,” listing plays about “race and justice” as well as key historical and critical studies that contextualize them. American Theatre thereby illustrated the value of discipline-specific resources that are so widely available (online and without subscription) that the discipline becomes more a catalyst and entryway than an ending point. Similarly, in April 2015, professor Jennifer Nash curated "Teaching About Ferguson,” a forum for the journal Feminist Studies. Around the country, countless organizations, civic centers, and educational institutions have held symposia, teach-ins, and speak-outs of every size. JACK Arts Center, a community-oriented “cultural hub” in Brooklyn, is partnering with Colloquy Collective to sponsor “Forward Ferguson” from January to June 2015. Among other things, the programming uses lynching dramas of the 1910s and 1920s to engage current events (Wang). Because early lynching plays refuse to depict physical violence, they offer insights unavailable through the artifacts that most shape American memory, photos of mutilated corpses, the "strange fruit" that hung from trees. The plays focus on the success that actually prompted lynching and spotlight the families and communities left to cope with tremendous losses. Therefore, these scripts encourage today’s audiences to consider what the nation fails to confront when it focuses on physical brutality (sometimes audio- and video-recorded) rather than on racism's less bloody, but no less devastating, consequences.

As this special issue enters a national conversation being shaped by these and countless other efforts, the power of its contribution resides partly in CLAJ's grounding in the Humanities. Americans typically view Black and Brown communities through sociological and anthropological lenses, especially in times of crisis. As important as those approaches are, literature and art provide a life-affirming outlet along with analysis. The Humanities direct attention toward not only the knowledge of observation and categorization but also the knowing made possible when one honors the connection between mind, body, and spirit. The Humanities encourage a holistic approach that resists attempts to make “objectivity” an ideal for scholars and artists, given that they live in a world whose engagement with Black and Brown bodies has been anything but objective or neutral.

Believing that the texts in this special issue will prompt embodied practices of belonging, I must end with a word about its main title, Hands Up. Don’t Shoot! Some have expressed discomfort with the apparent acceptance of vulnerability that comes with emphasizing that Michael Brown's hands were up, signaling surrender, when he was killed in broad daylight. For similar reasons, some question the wisdom of demonstrations that take the form of a “die-in.” These critics may agree with Ilyasah Shabazz, who argues, “I imagine [my father Malcolm X] would applaud the ‘Hands Up’ gesture for its sheer dramatic effect, but also critique it as rank capitulation that ironically accommodates the very goal of police brutality—to intimidate and immobilize black citizens, forcing them into a defenseless posture if they hope to survive.”
While I understand the insistence upon the value of Black and Brown life that inspires this critique, and the declaration embedded in it that self-defense cannot continue to be understood as a right of whites only, “Hands Up” acknowledges a community-centered truth that also deserves space in the world. Namely, Michael Brown and so many others were indeed posing no lethal threat. Acknowledging that fact creates not simply reason for protest; it also invites mourning. Not every word and gesture of the marginalized can be dictated by how it relates to dominant culture. Such a constraint would leave no space for acknowledging that grieving families and communities must be able to say just how egregious the injustice is. If there is no room for that, how can they find ways to cope while living in a country whose violence against them will not magically end?

A striking example of the need to express remarkable pain and frustration appeared on a network television show that viewers typically appreciate as pure entertainment. “The Lawn Chair” episode of Shonda Rhimes’s wildly successful drama Scandal features a white police officer who kills an unarmed Black teenager and falsifies evidence to make it seem justified. Because the father of the deceased stays with his son’s body, bringing media attention and preventing further evidence tampering, Olivia Pope and her team become involved. Their extraordinary investigative efforts and unusual access to the Attorney General lead to the officer being arrested and charged. By offering an ending that represents justice while real-life scenarios are playing out very differently, the episode suggests that communities of color must apparently enter the realm of make-believe in order to get justice. This episode proved especially powerful because it came in the wake of the Justice Department’s report on Ferguson, which documented racial bias at levels that shocked even scholars who study such disparities, yet the Department of Justice still found no reason to bring federal charges against Darren Wilson for killing Michael Brown.

Like lynching playwrights who lived and wrote at the height of mob violence, today’s activists, allies, and artists know very well that the dominant message is that victims get what they deserve and should not be mourned. Thus, the Michael Brown memorial has been defiled more than once, including by police (Follman; Mathis-Lilley). In this climate, “Hands Up” allows the living to perform their awareness of the enormity of the injustice, no matter what the powerful say. Just as important, protesters mourn and insist upon the validity of taking up space to do so—together, across identity categories, and in public.

As it often declines to arrest or indict those who kill Black and Brown people, the legal system joins mainstream American culture in declaring that nothing significant happened. The message is, carry on, people. Nothing to see here. In contrast, “Hands up” demonstrates that the victims are not forgotten. The gesture proclaims, despite declarations to the contrary, they were citizens and so are we who mourn them.

As Shabazz suggests, marginalized people and their allies must reject the idea that, unless certain victims can be proven not only innocent but also submissive, then they “brought it on themselves.” Attempting to gather such proof is dehumanizing. Furthermore, it encourages Americans to ignore the fact that success inspires violence because the purpose of violence is to keep certain people in their “proper place.” There are many ways to become complicit in one’s own dehumanization, however, and one of them is to allow mainstream culture to determine one’s every word and deed. That sort of diligence about the dominant gaze requires adopting a demeanor that makes claiming space less likely. And if we are to honor those who died unjustly, the least we can do is keep claiming space.

Works Cited

Mitchell, Koritha. Living With Lynching: African American Lynching Plays, Performance, and

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13 When dominant discourse shapes one’s every move, it inspires shame. Marginalized communities and their allies need a “critical demeanor of shamelessness” because “grief can empower victims to seek justice but shame never does” (Mitchell, “No More Shame!” 143-44, 147).

14 The DOJ report released in March 2015 suggests that Michael Brown’s hands were not up.


Is This The History of Air?

E. Ethelbert Miller

"I can’t breathe," he said.

But there was no air.

Only the absence of trees

and rope. The swaying

of history over another

black body.