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The Measure of a Black Life? : A Poetic Interpretation of Hope and Discontent

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The Measure of a Black Life? : A Poetic Interpretation of Hope and Discontent

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Abstract

Here, Spoken Word poetics (William-White, 2011a, 2011b; William-White & White, 2011; William-White, 2013) is utilized here to interpret and reflect on racialized violence and homicide in the United States. African American youth, particularly in urban communities, are disproportionately affected by violent crime, namely homicide when compared to other racial/ethnic groups. The impact of violence is heart-wrenching for families and communities; it undermines notions of personal and community safety, freedom, and equality within and between communities. It erodes the ideals of democracy in our country, particularly when racialized violence is under reported in the media, or ignored by media; and, when such violence is inadequately addressed by, or perpetrated at the hands of, law enforcement. As a performance narrative, this piece asks the question: How do we create communities of care, spaces for understanding and empathy, and utilize communities as sites for consciousness raising about the systems that perpetuate inequalities in the lives of people? This piece probes this question, and trumpets a call to end rampant violence in urban communities, promote safety and foster agency in ways that is responsive to the needs and interests of all citizens.

Keywords: performance narrative, spoken word poetics, African Americans, violent crime

¿La Medida de una Vida de la Comunidad Negra? Una Interpretación Poética de la Esperanza y el Malestar

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Resumen

Aquí, la Palabra Poética hablada (William-White, 2011a, 2011b; William-White y White, 2011, William-White, 2013) se utiliza para interpretar y reflexionar sobre la violencia racial y el homicidio en los Estados Unidos. Los jóvenes Afroamericanos, especialmente en las comunidades urbanas, se ven desproporcionadamente afectados por la delincuencia con violencia, es decir homicidios, en comparación con otros grupos raciales/étnicos. El impacto de la violencia no sólo es desgarradora para las familias y las comunidades, sino que socava la percepción individual y social de seguridad, libertad, e igualdad dentro y entre la comunidad. Esto erosiona los ideales de democracia en nuestro país, sobre todo cuando la violencia racial es informada en los medios de comunicación, o es ignorada por los mismos; y cuando esa violencia es inadecuadamente tratada, o considerada en la aplicación de la ley. Como narrativa performativa, esta obra se plantea la pregunta: ¿Cómo podemos crear comunidades de apoyo, espacios para la comprensión y la empatía, y utilizar las comunidades como espacios para tomar conciencia sobre los sistemas que perpetúan las desigualdades en la vida de las personas? Esta obra sondea esta pregunta, y enuncia un llamamiento para poner fin a la violencia extendida en las comunidades urbanas, promoviendo la seguridad y la colaboración institucional, de respondiendo a las necesidades e intereses de los ciudadanos.

Palabras clave: tarea narrativa performativa, Palabra Poética hablada, Afroamericanos, crímenes violentos

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Data on Black homicide rates magnify a disconcerting reality for the United States. According to a United States Justice Department report, the homicide rate has increased steadily since the 1950s, had peaked in the 1980s and early 1990s before experiencing a decline (9.3 homicides per 100,000 in 1992 to 4.8 homicides per 100,000 in 2010); and has remained relatively constant¹.

Blacks are only 12.6% of the US population², yet were: disproportionately represented as both homicide and victims and offenders. Data from 1980 to 2008 suggests that the victimization rate for Blacks is 27.8 per 100,000 people. The offending rate for blacks is 34.4 per 100,000; and, males represented 77% of homicide victims and nearly 90% of offenders. The victimization rate for males (11.6 per 100,000) was three times higher than the rate for females (3.4 per 100,000). Approximately a third (34%) of murder victims and almost half (49% of offenders were under the age of 25). For both victims and offenders, the rate peaked in the 18-24 year-old age group at 17.1 victims per 100,000 and 29.3 offenders.

The homicide victimization rates for teens and young adults also prove disconcerting. The same report states that the homicide rate for teens (14 to 17 years old) increased almost 150% from 4.9 homicides per 100,000 in 1985, and remained stable through 2008. In 2008, young adults (18 to 24 years old) experienced the highest homicide victimization rate (13.4 homicides per 100,000). The victimization rates for black children under the age of 5 have remained substantially higher than rates for white children and children from other races (11.3 homicides per 100,000). Yet, most significantly are the numbers from 2008. Black males aged 18 to 24 years-old had the highest homicide victimization rate (91.1 homicides per 100,000); this rate much lower than in the late 1980s and early 1990s, when the victimization rate reached 195.9 homicides per 100,000 (in 1993).

Racial profiling is yet another issue that disproportionately leads to disparities in the experiences of Black people in America, and is a subject of academic study (Free, 1996; Frerickson & Siljander, 2002; Weitzer & Tuch, 2002; Parker, 2008; Parker, Stults, & Lane, 2010), and media debate and scrutiny. Racial profiling is:

a practice that presents a great danger to the fundamental principles of our Constitution. Racial profiling disproportionately targets people of color for investigation and enforcement, alienating communities from law enforcement, hindering community policing efforts, and causing law enforcement to lose credibility and trust among the people they are sworn to protect and serve. We rely on the police to protect us from harm and to promote fairness and justice in our communities. The despicable practice of racial profiling, however, has led countless people to live in fear and created a system of law enforcement that casts entire communities as suspect³.

Moreover, racial profiling has been recognized by the international community as a significant factor which contributes to violations of human rights. They define it as:

the practice of police and other law enforcement officers relying, to any degree, on race, colour, descent or national or ethnic origin as the basis for subjecting persons to investigatory activities or for determining whether an individual is engaged in criminal activity. (ACLU, 2009, p. 12)

There is an overall lack of accounting for the numbers of people who have been profiled and killed by law enforcement, Consequently, the outcomes of such activity has had a significant impact on the lives of victims, their families, and communities, while serving to undermine the ideals of freedom, equality and democracy, as they American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) asserts:

Policies and practices that appear race-neutral but disproportionately restrict the rights and freedoms of people of color are difficult to challenge, and establishing their discriminatory nature in the public consciousness and among policymakers is an uphill battle. (ACLU, 2009, p. 9)

In fact, several cases of profiling and violence have been magnified in the mainstream media, most notably the recent death of Trayvon Martin (Bandow, 2012) and Oscar Grant (Winter, 2010). Clearly, American

citizens of all backgrounds should be concerned with policies, laws, and practices that threaten the lives of American citizens and that undermine the life, liberty and prosperity of people within our nation, specifically those in urban communities. The macro and micro-level forces that create such systems and that shape all our lives must be examined and interrogated.

Here, Spoken Word poetics (William-White, 2011a, 2011b; William-White & White, 2011; William-White, 2013) is utilized here to interpret and reflect on racialized violence and homicide in the United States. African American youth, particularly in urban communities, are disproportionately affected by violent crime, namely homicide when compared to other racial/ethnic groups. The impact of violence is heart-wrenching for families and communities; it undermines notions of personal and community safety, freedom, and equality within and between communities. It erodes the ideals of democracy in our country, particularly when racialized violence is under reported in the media, or ignored by media; and, when such violence is inadequately addressed by, or perpetrated at the hands of, law enforcement. As a performance narrative, this piece asks the question: How do we create communities of care, spaces for understanding and empathy, and utilize communities as sites for consciousness raising about the systems that perpetuate inequalities in the lives of people? This piece probes this question, and trumpets a call to end rampant violence in urban communities, promote safety and foster agency in ways that is responsive to the needs and interests of all citizens.

A Poetic Interpretation of Hope and Discontent

[Hook:]

What is the measure of Black worth and masculinity?
Normative ideations of ebony people
Don't account for the complexities
That stem from nuanced, racialized realities
US society constructs and obscures
Black lives, personhood
and identity

pejoratively

regardless of whether one is in his own community

Thus, surveillance, containment

And execution

Not uncommon in this society

(For those minorities)

Within many cities there exists a surveillance culture

Black males, regardless of age, face a hostile structure

Doubly conscious of the policeman's watch

A distrustful gaze

Black men often live this psychic torture

It shapes this age

One can be constructed as a hoodlum,

a threat

a deviant

convict

SUSPECT

perhaps then there's less outrage

at the life lost through a violent death

Trayvonn⁴...Grant⁵ ...Byrd⁶ ...

Bell⁷--

(Johntue Caldwell)⁸

emblematic of a journey for many men, unfortunately

Then comes the outcry from the community

an absolute political necessity

Bring attention to an issue that has existed

since the inception of this country

working back from the Civil Rights struggles, Jim Crow days

and of course U.S. slavery

The individual is dehumanized

terrorized

Through violence
And tragedy
It's a travesty!
Not from a plantation overseer
Or bounty hunter
But *often* by those from a City "pd"⁹

Black life, today, minimized
Through corrosive power and authority
The tragic loss of life, a lesson for all to see
in the 21st century
creates knowledge and consciousness
Which *should* arouse a moral trajectory
And agency!

Certainly, it's disheartenin' when one learns of such incidences
They occur with such frequency,
far too prevalent
And when amplified through the media
issues arrest people's consciousness
Reveals wounds yet unhealed¹⁰
Reflecting a plethora of historic precedents

Trayvon, for example, then becomes canonized
As a victim of racial violence
And the communities galvanize to protest the incident
*Kendrick McDade -- another recent addition to the list*¹¹
Churches amplify their calls for justice¹²
And the momentum catches the winds that shape the historic moment
And statistically significant disparities
In frisking and searching is documented
The ACLU extensively reports this
Through Prof. Ayers acknowledgement¹³

The union of American Civil Liberties, too, shows the racial disparities
When black and brown drive through inner cities

Blacks twice as likely as whites to be arrested
 Four times more likely to experience the use or force
 or threat¹⁴
 Issues such as these must be acknowledged
 So we can address
 and face it!

Racial profiling an important subject
 Like when
 Bobby Rush “dons hoodie” to protest on the House floor¹⁵
 An issue that affect scores more
 Using his position to advocate for crimes
 we should ALL abhor

He was poised to make a statement using his positionality
 Material effects consistent with affiliations he held previously
 Co-founded of the Illinois Black Panther Party
 And a former member of the Student Non-violent
 Coordinating Committee¹⁶
 This issue – profiling, we surely must take *seriously*
 it occurs often enough
 reports framed by Amnesty¹⁷

[Hook:]

What is the measure of Black worth and femininity?
 Normative ideations of ebony people
 Don't account for the complexities
 That stem from nuanced, racialized realities
 US society constructs and obscures
 Black lives, personhood
 and identity
pejoratively
 regardless of whether one is in *her* own community
 Thus, surveillance, containment
 And execution
 Not uncommon in this society
 (*For those minorities*)

I must also say
the slaying of persons, no respecter of gender
Or age,
unfortunately
But, the outcry from the community
an absolute political necessity
Bring attention to an issue that has existed since slavery

Chicago has been a cauldron for homicide and political neglect
Too little done still to curtail urban violence
Effectiveness of the Force?¹⁸
a point that is suspect

Children slain frequently
Callously
Memorial walls¹⁹ erected by mothers to honor their memories
Families assemble openly to mourn and grieve
Yet little is done that can soothe
or offer reprieve
In our justice systems responsive and fair?
A question that many perceive
Rekia Boyd's²⁰ family, I'm certain finds justice
hard to conceive
or BELIEVE

How do we create communities of love
And care
Reflecting enduring consciousness
On that is politically aware
Where bigotry and snap decision-making does not threaten
One's life or WELFARE?

Listen folks
We must mobilize to secure all's right in this democracy
Where all men are presumed to be of value and free
Free from indictment and judgment

Based on perceptions of pathology
Or inherent criminality
Where a hoodie can be an article of clothing
Not a symbol of threat or deviancy

These souls cry out:
What do you sense when you see me?
Does my skin obscure your view
of my humanity?
A child, I once was
Yet now a soul suspended in perpetuity
Another relic of urban violence
And US societal cruelty!

Let's not forget all the many names of the slain
candlelights dimmed where only souls remain
No airplay, OR remembrance day
Or media display

Were these lost lives in vain?
We await the just conviction of *their perpetrators*
A status still unclaimed

We should all be incensed about this
By slaughters of the innocent
People's lives wrecked
Families destroyed
as though of no consequence
Are these repeat performances a coincidence
Or a reflection of a sociopolitical dissonance?
Where urban rage produces outrage
But leads to social paralysis?

It's time for us to take a stand
As a country, let's develop a MASTER PLAN
One that protects the lives
of *all* in this land

We need some grassroots activism
Get all legislators' attention
Engage each woman and man
In dialogue
To create a moral vision!
Anti-profiling legislation
And real attempts for just litigation

[Hook:]

What is the measure of Black worth and identity?
Normative ideations of ebony people
Don't account for the complexities
That stem from nuanced, racialized realities
US society constructs and obscures
Black lives, personhood
and identity
pejoratively
regardless of whether one is in *his* own community
Thus, surveillance, containment
And execution
Not uncommon in this society
(*For those minorities*)

only emblematic of a journey for many,
UNFORTUNATELY
The outcry from the community
an absolute political necessity
beyond the issue of safety
but part of our moral trajectory
Ask yourself:
Am I ready to fight for social equity?

Notes

- ¹ See <http://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/htus8008.pdf>
- ² Racial demographics states that 82.9% of the population is White; 4.4% other American Indian, Native Alaskan, Asians, Native Hawaiians and other Pacific Islanders.
- ³ See <http://www.aclu.org/racial-justice/racial-profiling>
- ⁴ See <http://www.cnn.com/2012/03/31/justice/florida-teen-shooting/index.html>
- ⁵ See <http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2009/01/07/MNOV154P0R.DTL>
- ⁶ See http://articles.cnn.com/2011-09-21/justice/justice_texas-dragging-death-execution_1_lawrence-russell-brewer-john-william-king-shawn-berry?_s=PM:JUSTICE
- ⁷ See <http://revcom.us/a/071/nyc-police-shooting-en.html>
- ⁸ See http://abclocal.go.com/kgostory?section=news/local/east_bay&id=8254384
- ⁹ Police department
- ¹⁰ See <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2012/03/31/piers-morgan-vs-toure-how-the-cnn-host-blew-it.html>
- ¹¹ See http://www.pasadenastarnews.com/ci_20269927/cop-shot-kendrec-mcdade-from-police-cruiser
- ¹² See coverage at <http://www.foxnews.com/us/2012/03/25/churches-amplify-call-for-justice-for-slain-teen/>
- ¹³ See the citing of Yale University Professor Ian Ayers on page 45 of http://www.aclu.org/files/pdfs/humanrights/cerd_finalreport.pdf
- ¹⁴ See report at <http://www.aclu.org/racial-justice/department-justice-statistics-show-clear-pattern-racial-profiling>
- ¹⁵ See http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/2chambers/post/bobby-rush-sometimes-decorum-has-to-take-a-back-seat/2012/03/28/gIQAKS5zgS_blog.html#pagebreak
- ¹⁶ See http://www.rollcall.com/issues/57_118/Bobby-Rush-Dons-Hoodie-On-House-Floor-213513-1.html
- ¹⁷ See http://www.amnestyusa.org/pdfs/rp_report.pdf
- ¹⁸ Force refers to police departments
- ¹⁹ See <http://www.suntimes.com/news/5258338-418/mothers-have-memorial-of-slain-children-on-mothers-day.html>
- ²⁰ See <http://www.clutchmagonline.com/2012/03/justice-for-rekia-boyd-whos-rallying-for-murdered-black-women/>

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