Theories and Methodologies

The Shush

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It has now been more than six months of trying to write this essay, since Wai Chee Dimock and *PMLA* so graciously invited me to contribute to a Theories and Methodologies section that meditates on 2020. How to write a reflection on an unfinished past—the Trump presidency, the never-ending afterlife of enslavement, human exceptionalism, environmental devastation, and settler-colonial violence—and an ongoing present: the pandemic and all its magnifications in the ruins of deregulation and the gutting of the state and its flawed infrastructures? Our shared futures seem more precarious than ever before.

Are there any words that could hold what we went through for four Trumpian nightmare years, what the Movement for Black Lives protests of the spring and summer of 2020 meant to so many, what it is like to live through a murderous global pandemic? And which pandemic do we mean? The infection of aggrieved white injury let loose alongside a mutating virus? The privatized raiding of our already fragile infrastructures?

When I first started trying to write this essay, the sky was yellow with falling ash outside my window in Los Angeles and I thought, I can't write and tell my colleagues that I am scared because the sun has turned bloodred outside my home and my car is covered with huge cornflakes of burning tree remains. That's not what *PMLA* is for. So I didn't write.

Then, when the deadline passed, I was caught in a crisis that brought together histories of discursive violence toward faculty members and students of color in the field of English literary studies with my institution's failure—all of our institutions' failures—to take harm seriously. And although I could name you at least half a dozen departments engaged either peacefully or painfully in these same ongoing

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struggles right now, I thought, I can't tell this story because one doesn't talk about one's institution out loud. So I didn't write.

And then came the election and violent insurrection and death: the police-licensed entitlement of white nationalists intoxicated with their whiteness claiming the Capitol as their own fascist playground. I had to sleep a lot after that, trying to forget the contemporary manifestation of the lynch mob as it spilled up the steps of the Capitol and then was graciously led out. I kept my son inside. Again I thought, I can't write.

Then my husband and son and I all contracted COVID-19. And I *physically* couldn't write. We caught minor cases; all across my skin a network of cells transmitted mitochondrial ache the way, I imagined, mushroom and fungus networks transmit information across forest floors. A lack of oxygen and energy kept me in bed for months as our bodies joined the bodies of millions of other humans trying to manufacture enough ATP energy to keep our organs going. Over two and a half million dead. A global cellular energy crisis.

In the end I found that in order to write in 2021 about 2020 I had to write into the heavy quiet that had settled over me. I had to name both the shush of coerced nondisclosure under which so many of us live our institutional lives and the heaviness of the historical grief that weighs upon those of us who love what we do and who see the world, and our communities, and our institutions and fields and students, who are after all part of the world, suffering. Writing at what feels like the end of time I am trying to remember what it was like to come to the study of literature and culture with hope and wishes for the work we would do as teachers and writers in the world. We came to this work, at the very least, believing in the value that studying art and writing brings to the world, hoping that the world would value art and writing, and us too, in return.

Now, at the beginning of 2021, our field's publications are full of proposals for a better humanities, for saving the humanities and for saving English and literature departments. Correspondingly, a random and illogical "defense" of judgment and of a vision of English literature that barricades itself against interdisciplinarity has arisen, attacking straw-man accounts of interdisciplinarity and attempting to bury attacks on equity practices in sulking defenses of aestheticism. As a committed literary and interdisciplinary scholar of color, I can barely recognize these straw men; as someone who seeks to build institutionally, I can see the other attacks from miles away.

But the world is still burning. So whose permission are we waiting for in order to spell out the real stakes of this moment? Thus, at the beginning of 2021, six months after being asked to write this essay, I'm trying to pull myself out of the deadened creative energy of the last year to write to my colleagues in the field, my students, and the many of you I shall never meet and yet feel joined to in this flawed collective endeavor we call—well, what do we call it? Postsecondary education? Criticism? The sacred time and space to think and read as widely and promiscuously as possible in the service of an educated enfranchised critical public? In particular I want to talk about those of us living in departments and programs that find their histories in the study of literature.

Are You Okay, Tobe White?

On the last day of 2019, the hashtag #itsoktobewhite trended on *Twitter*, in what came as a surprise to no one, given both the cesspool that social media can be and the trash political moment we then found ourselves in. The Internet quickly clapped back:

"Now who the hell is Tobe White????," asked one tweet, with a GIF of a young Black femme-of-center person leaning back and staring into a camera in shady puzzlement and disgust (@s_adgirls).

Even better, @peytonelz posted, "[I] hope Tobe White is doing better from all of this support . . . its so beautiful to see the internet come together to support such a beautiful man who sacrificed so much just to be on this earth. i love you, tobe white."

I'm taking the disingenuous question "Are you ok, Tobe White?" seriously here—seriously and sincerely—because it helps me get at my own deep ambivalence about discussions regarding the crisis in the state of the field called "Literature" or sometimes "English." It does not seem clear to me that

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the questions the profession is asking about the state of the "field" are necessarily the same questions minority scholars and people invested in minority literatures and worlds—who after all also belong to the "field"—are asking. The world is burning and let's be blunt: despite incremental movements forward, the work of English as a literary field has always been and continues to be, disproportionally, to uphold an Anglo-Saxonist tradition that while productive of some major critical movements seems barely able to ethically respond to our current moment.

And while we may well take these skewed curricula up as a "historical" issue, whatever that means, or as an issue of "tradition," or, worse, as an issue of "value," perhaps it would be more useful to be materialist about this and simply admit that this distribution of the curriculum and entrenched ideas about "literariness" and "value" are actually used to determine the distribution of resources, learning, and ideas to students and faculty members. Specifically, the withholding of faculty lines, of tenure, of curricular distribution, and the misapportionment of social, cultural, and actual capital and value to minority colleagues, to minority fields, to minority students, and to minority spaces. And I say this with full respect for my colleagues doing the valuable work of decolonizing the British and United States literary curriculum whose critiques and outspoken activism and organizing inspire me. I say this with love for *every kind* of literature. These are not method wars: these are resource wars. Every "war," if we even want to use that term so loosely from here on out, is going to be a war of resources pretending to be something else. As perhaps all war has ever been.

Are we not all so tired? And so sad? How is it that forty years after the culture wars that I was born into, in many English departments across North America we are still having the same fights and conversations, but the stakes have now escalated thanks to deepening scarcities: a scarcity of majors, a scarcity of incoming undergraduates, a scarcity of middle-class families to pay for college, the upside-down market in student loans, the shrinking privileged tenured professoriat beleaguered by the administrative and care labor produced by having fewer faculty members to share that workload with, work conditions shaped by the growth of the student-affairs-risk-management-industrial complex, and, worst of all, a huge workforce of exploited precarious academic laborers. And surrounding us all, escalating white supremacist violence, a fascist former president, ten years to prevent climate collapse, and now ever-imminent war.

So on top of all of this, when I hear that "we" have a "crisis in the humanities," a "crisis in the majors," and a crisis in the field, I'm honestly no longer sure what to answer. And this is why I like the solicitous disingenuousness of "Are you OK, Tobe White?"—with its exquisite trolling of a fervent white nationalism proclaiming itself in existential crisis. Are you OK, Tobe White? Are you OK, departments of English? Is *your* crisis in the humanities *my* crisis?

In reading the many statements issued by departments and programs and institutions in the wake of the slow murder of George Floyd, I, like many of us, thought about what a horrible place an English department can be, and I could only meditate with awe on the actual gumption, the audacity of caucasity as the children say, it took for so many of these departments to issue statements about justice when the institutional and curricular structure, and so many colleagues, unfettered and unrebuked, casually negate the value of their Black and brown students, coworkers, staff, colleagues, and—in quiet but covert terms—the art and the artists who look like them.

I thought about what people of color, Black and Indigenous folks say to each other when our coworkers are not in the room, who we warn each other about, how we tell each other to stay reality-based, to protect our energy, how we sit around and ask each other, "What is the matter with this discipline, man?" And out from under the heavy unsayables of this difficult time we are hopefully but perhaps not emerging from, into what will be a continuing struggle, my question is simple: What will make us better? How can we be better, in this world, right now? Better departments, better institutions, better colleagues to each other, better servants to the students who will succeed us? What I mean by better is this: Are we going to sink deeper into this crisis, this ecological crisis, the wavering of already fragile and dubiously democratic institutions, these

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expressions of racism that ripple across the scale from the curricular to state violence? Or are we going to continue to ritually lament the past? What is the movement from protestation and statements to action to change, to disciplinary realignment in the service of the students and colleagues we actually have—not the floundering and flawed disciplinary project we inherited?

The Future of Literary Studies Simply Cannot Look Like Its Past

According to the data drawn from the American Academy of Arts and Sciences between 2011 and 2017, the number of English majors dropped around twenty-three percent; majors in "General Humanities and Liberal Studies" dropped from twenty-five to twenty-seven percent. "Cultural Ethnic and Gender Studies," however, not only retained all its majors but showed a growth of five percent.

Meanwhile, since fall 2014, more than half of public school students in the United States are not white and the percentage of public school students who are white is projected to continue to decline through at least fall 2028. The percentages of students who are Hispanic, Asian, and of two or more races are projected to increase. The percentage of Black students is expected to be about the same in 2028 as it was in 2016 (American Academy).

I raise these numbers for two reasons. First, to point out that questions of race and racism, as curricular, pedagogical, and enrollment issues, are rarely discussed in conversations and especially in documents about the state of the field, including the recent ADE report on the state of the major (ADE Ad Hoc Committee). And, second, to suggest that addressing the racism inherent in the now-outdated English curriculum would go a long way toward revitalizing and energizing the field. The students are already leading the way.

An Elaboration

Our disciplines may still be battling over decades-old curricular questions. But minority thinking, minority teaching, and minority scholarship are not. And minority scholars, as we move into the statistical national majority, are not. Let us imagine a world, for a moment, in which the courses and intellectual directions whose enrollments might actually save the entire field are given the resources to revitalize the field. For example, the fields of Black literary studies and Indigenous studies are in a state of effervescence. Asian American literary and cultural studies are deepening their conversations with ecology, political economy, and the complexities of being and working in transnational frames. All of this work, if it needs to be said, is also work on the aesthetic, that pearlescent category still clutched to the breast of traditional literary criticism as though New Criticism were still going to ride in on the whitest of horses and save enrollments.

Can we just finally say out loud that close reading in and of itself, by itself, is not that hard to do? Or, if that's all you do, not that hard to teach? Does anyone really need four undergraduate plus six graduate years of only close reading? I think not. And to be fair, most people don't only get that anymore. And this is in fact what minoritarian and other forms of structurally engaged critique tell us: that an engagement with aesthetics that interrogates the ground on which aesthetic judgement is formed not only yields rich analytic insight but also broadens our field of vision,[1] opens us up to more: more art, more people, more texts, more senses, more work, more ideas, more world. To paraphrase one of history's great aesthetes, Auntie Mame: The world is a *banquet* and most poor suckers are starving to death.

And here I'll turn briefly to the field to say where I see some of the most exciting and flourishing work being done that would support some of these course corrections.

I'm excited by posthumanist and environmental humanities scholarship that draws on the long-delayed return to Sylvia Wynter's work to consider the place of the human in the formation of foundational Western racial topologies. I'm drawn equally to scholarship that respectfully builds on the foundational work of native and Indigenous scholars to put the history of colonialism into conversation with the historical and census-based racial categories of ethnic studies in the United States. Undoing the

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calcified division between the literature of the United States and British literature in English departments and thinking along hemispheric lines or with oceanic and archipelagic formations—as scholars of Latinx, Indigenous, and Caribbean literatures and history long have shown us how to do—opens our field up to the study of relationality across boundaries of race and nation. This work also demonstrates how print culture moves and emerges in circuits far more geographically promiscuous and intellectually fecund than our courses of instruction even allow, as Raúl Coronado, Anna Brickhouse, and Kirsten Silva Gruesz teach us. Examples of this scholarship would also include the difficult work being done, for instance, in considering Black, Asian, and Indigenous relations by Shona Jackson, Bakirathi Mani, and Tiffany Lethabo King.

Work on the overlapping and shared coloniality of racial formation in the West, and moreover the imbrication of colonialisms worldwide, should not mean relativism or a flat ontology of race, history, or anything else. The framework of racial coloniality, certainly as put forward by those engaging race and modernity theory, is a way out of some of the less productive conceptual corners of exceptionalism—for instance, the history of considering postcoloniality, migration, or the transnational apart from United States–based minority literatures. Of course, there has always been minority work that expands and engages beyond the nation, in particular in Latinx and Caribbean studies, and in the Unites States, for instance, by those scholars whose archives rest in New Orleans and other Southern cities marked by a proximity to Caribbean life. The question is this: Have our curricular formations caught up with that work? Here speaking directly to other scholars of color working in minoritarian fields: I wonder whether the historically central and politically useful topographies of race in the United States as we have inherited them without our consent begin one day to stretch as disciplinary and taxonomic regimes. Keeping one foot grounded in a clear-eyed materialist praxis, let us begin to theorize fields and spaces in which we might ask about the ontologies and epistemologies that no longer serve us separately. Where are the sites of encounter in which to ask and answer difficult questions about our vexed relationships to each other, and not just to whiteness?

In my own corner of the world where I work on matter, affect, aesthetics, and race I would call this an interest in touch, touch across and *as* difference, understood either as the encounter between bodies and populations or as our enmeshment in shared but uneven historical conditions; Lisa Lowe's related word for this, in her recent work, is *intimacies*.[2] Here I would like to see this idea of relational intimacy, of touch or even contact, expanded beyond the bounds of the human to take us further into the important work on ecology, the animal and the human, the work being done on speculative fiction, and indeed speculation itself as a countercapitalist formation.[3]

I'm excited by a return to aesthetics understood as a problem of the colonial ordering of the senses and counterexcited by the barely veiled return to Leavisite formalism couched in the framework of a "new formalism." Rather than shrink our units of analysis down to their smallest units, to channel Hortense Spillers's scathing characterization of formalism from the 1980s,[4] how promiscuously sensual can we be in relation to the literary? What is the place of literature in the forming, schooling, and historical disciplining of the senses? Here I would call for a deeply disciplinary interdisciplinarity or even antidisciplinarity, by which I mean a close listening to our multiple objects of interest as they travel across history, across borders, and between media—and of course scholarship on jazz and literature, Brent Hayes Edwards's work on jazz, or Fred Moten's work on sound (*In the Break*) leads us there methodologically, as has African American literary studies *for decades*.[5] This is not a turning away from close reading so much as an expansive relation to textuality as only one modality within which culture works. But I am also interested in attending to the strangeness of detail, in Alex Vasquez's terms. Here I draw from her poetic sense, reading the Cuban musician Ignacio Villa's performances, of "the countless details that disturb any attempt to make the field stable." This is a different, multisensory close reading, a sense of attentiveness that *allows difference in* (4). I would like to see minority literary studies sink into deeper conversation with such fields as historical poetics,

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not to bolster disciplinarity but to ask ourselves how illiberal, in Kandice Chuh's words, our humanities and our humanists can become (2).

More, more, more; can we not make and have more than we do now? As we transition out of this difficult time, as we start to leave our homes, if we are lucky enough to have homes, as we return to the classroom, as some of us shake off the last effects of this tenacious, exhausting virus, is it even possible to return to the old normal? Must we concede to false narratives of scarcity?

More pedagogical compassion. Across the length of the pandemic I have been energized by the folks whose electronic presence kept me going: in daily *Zoom* writing groups where I sometimes checked in while my friends wrote. When I couldn't write or teach sometimes they let me either sleep or just be present with them. Similarly, while wading through an intensive Melville class, or another class on affect and the new materialism, my students and I worried about each other, spent time on *Zoom* letting ourselves be human and present to each other. I have been moved by the recentering of care and compassion as fundamental pedagogical strategies: maybe, as my colleague Treva Ellison says, pandemic pedagogy is the new pedagogy.

More funding for our students and for our institutions. To the barricades! I am inspired by the labor organizing of graduate students at Columbia, Brandeis, Tufts, Boston College, and the University of Chicago; we would be foolish as faculty members not to follow their leads and take back the university, as workers, for and with each other.

More literatures, more art. More geographies, more peoples. More difference. More encounter. The future of the English department cannot be the same as its past.

Notes

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1. In the chapter "Knowledge of Freedom" in *Stolen Life* (1–95), Moten argues that blackness acts as the "drive and limit" of Kantian aesthetics (12).

2. See my *American Quarterly* essay, "Sweetness, Capacity, Energy."

3. See, e.g., Bahng.

4. Spillers wrote that "we have probably lost, again by degree, an interest in narrative, having gained a very high tolerance for the contemplation of smaller and smaller units of verbal and symbolic reference" (62–63).

5. See my *Social Text* article, "'You Make Me Feel Right Quare.'"

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