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Undergraduate Colloquium Presentation

20 March 2022

To start with “we live in unprecedented times” would seem not only a cruel Deja Vu but it might also read as a joke. We hear this and retroactively cringe at the way we littered our texts, our posts, our emails with this phrase as we were forced to work through a pandemic, and left grasping for words that encompassed everything we were feeling. Everything we had never felt before. It would also read now as ironic, these “unprecedented times,” have actually become quite preceded; at least more than we ever imagined. With the fourth (or fifth) variant on the horizon, with increasing police budgets despite steadfast struggle by Black organizers against violence of the state, with ICE detention centers growing roots across the country, with the continuation of enforced poverty, with a war waging in Ukraine which is further marginalizing working-class people of the country and of Russia, as Black people there are forced to flee only to encounter anti-Black racism instead of asylum. As brown and Black people here, we listen to the talking heads on the tv say *this* struggle, *this* refugee crisis, *this* situation is just more important than *yours*, I mean they *are* whiter than you. Sorry, I mean they are more civilized than you. You know these times seem too like a cruel deja vu, a dip into despair that we have known before, that we have lived before, that we have read about, that we have been warned about. And when I feel despair, I turn to literature.

How does literature fit into this world? How is literature political? It is not enough to say that literature is political. Of course, it is political. Even that which claims not to be reveals its politics of apathy, of neoliberal individualism, of investment in oppression. Yet, I return to the question: a text as political? Political: relating to politics: politics: activities associated with the

governance of a country. That simply does not interest me. “Political” smells of stagnation.

During his campaign Joe Biden promised “nothing will change,” he is a man of his word. And I am not interested in those types of words, or those types of questions.

In times when they rip books off the shelves, bar critical race theory from discussion, when they tell gay, queer and trans children not to name themselves, tell the oppressed to silence ourselves, to make ourselves not just small but invisible. I want to know, I want you to know, I want us to know, how literature can be dangerous. How it can be liberating.

In his novel “Amor En Tiempos de Cholera,” *Love in times of Cholera*, Gabriel Garcia Marquez states: Ella se defendía diciendo que el amor, antes que nada, era un talento natural. Decía: “O se nace sabiendo o no se sabe nunca.” *“She would defend herself, saying that love, no matter what else it might be, was a natural talent. She would say: You are either born knowing how, or you never know.”* We, like the book, are in times of love and of cholera, cholera evoking both times of passion and times of disease. Yet, while we find ourselves in similar times, I am inclined to disagree that love is a natural talent: we *can* learn it and we do through literature.

When you come to the end of your literature studies you may find that you have learned to read between the lines and even the letters. You are a decrypter of the dense, an identifier of themes and contradictions, an erudite of textual evidence, simply perfection in persuasion. And you are really good at the Wordle. But I also know you’ve learned to love. In his book “Pedagogy of the Oppressed” Paulo Freire identifies that there is an “assumption of...dichotomy between human beings and the world: a person is merely *in* the world and not *with* the world or *with* others” When we read, we do precisely this, we are *with* others. We stop to listen, to understand, to immerse ourselves in another, and so we are offered the opportunity to blossom

with radical love. Love that Freire defines as “an act of courage, a commitment to others [and to] the cause of the oppressed.”

In reading we, the privileged, we confront ourselves in poetry, in fiction, in theory. Distorted and disturbing. Uncomfortable to the core, maybe even shocked by our reflections but as Michael Apple said, “whoever said that an awareness of one’s tactic political stance was supposed to make one comfortable?” (Apple). We are *with* others when we choose to sit with discomfort, to turn the critical eye that literary studies has gifted us onto ourselves, when we disassemble our unearned pedestals, and we hand the tools to someone else.

We, the oppressed, see ourselves reflected in passages, in stories, in struggles and we know that we are not alone. Maybe, we have never been alone. The words of those that came before us have, like water against stone, carved the rivers we follow - against the current - up to the peaks of mountains where we find community, hope and love. Love of life, love of liberation.

And in these ways, reading brings us into love, into being *with* the world, *with* each other, in community. It weds the lessons of the past, the hopes of now, the promise of the future. And, just as those writers have not left us alone, we will not leave them alone. We must pick up the embers of their words and conserve them, spend time with them, listen to them, reflect on them, create a fire, watch it burn.

Walter Pater said “nothing which has ever interested living [people] can wholly lose its vitality.” As readers, we create the conditions to keep literature alive. As critics we enter a dialogue with it helping it resurface and rebirth, each time more transgressive, more liberating than the last. Literary criticism in many ways, is a response to *the* common dismissal of today: “it is not that deep.” In the face of racially charged comments, of homophobic slights, of misogynistic murmurs “it is not that deep” In the face of slurs, of insults, of hatred: “it is not that

deep.” In the face of incarceration, of murder, of death: “well okay, there might be some water on the floor. Can you people clean it up. Please?” Literary criticism says: it is that deep. It is deeper than you ever thought, it has grown roots to the core of the earth. The apples are bad, the batches are spoiled. Let us uproot this rot, let us heal this soil and start anew.

When we read, we are with the world, and we find radical love. When we analyze, we design a discourse centered in empathy, grounded in truth, and liberation for marginalized people. When we create, we reveal truths, we bear witness to oppression and injustice, we manifest a society that values life, love, and true freedom. We are dangerous. As Toni Cade Bambara states: “As a culture worker who belongs to an oppressed people my job is to make revolution irresistible.” Literature is more than political, it is liberating. We can be more than creatives, more than scholars, we can and must be cultural workers.

So, in precedented times like these, when I feel despair, I turn to literature. Lorraine Hansberry, in a speech to the American Society for African Culture said: “I wish to live because life has within it that which is good, that which is beautiful and that which is love. Therefore, since I have known all these things, I have found them to be reason enough - and I wish to live” When the oppressor’s love of death feels immense, feels unmoving, literature gives us an avenue to return to the good, the beautiful, to love. And as much as it is our duty to bear witness to oppression, to document and refuse injustice, we have the duty to bear witness to goodness, to beauty, and to love. So, when you can, create these things, return to them, share them, and wish to live.

Now, we have the incredible opportunity to hear from the award-winning Dr. Qiana Whitted about her marvelous work, which explores the intersection of African American literature, comics, and social protest. She recently published her third book, *EC Comics: Race, Shock, and Social Protest (Comics Culture)*, in which she discusses *EC Comic's* popular horror story comics in conversation with their anti-oppression, social commentary. Today, we are lucky to hear about Orrin C. Evan's *Lion Man*, in the context of Black popular culture in 1940s and 50s and its pertinence now. You can also look for her words in the introduction to the all-new Penguin Classics Black Panther collection coming out this June. Now, without any further delay, please welcome Dr. Qiana Whitted.