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# Conclusion: Dreams
# Toni Cade Bambara

> "I discovered, among other things, that writing is akin to dreaming. And to make use of either state involves risks. Writing, like dreams, confronts, pushes you up against the evasions, self-deceptions, investments in opinions and interpretations, the clutter that blinds, that disguises that underlying, all-encompassing design within which the perceivable world—in which society would have us stay put—operates."
>
> Toni Cade Bambara, "Salvation Is the Issue"[1]

> "To obtain a relevant, real education, we shall have to either topple the university or set up our own."
>
> Toni Cade Bambara, "Realizing the Dream of a Black University"[2]

Black Studies contains an immense archive of possibilities yet to be fully examined. The last fifty plus years alone are a treasure trove of Black intellectual engagement that is irreducible to standard historiographical framings of contributionism and diversity. So much more was happening.

The question of academic legitimacy and the stability afforded to the discipline by the Western academy pales in comparison to its chief aim: to extend the Black Radical tradition, to extend "the vocation of the Black scholar" so that we can speak the truth, our collective truth.[3] This book has tried to offer that one of the elements of this archive of thinking is a conception of Black Study, which is our way toward ourselves, our people, our futures. It is the intellectual conjuration for an otherwise-than-this-mess possibility. It is the declaration of an intellectual freedom, and such declarations were the only way to realize a Black University, a space for Black ideas, a space for considerations of Black liberation from the terms of order, from the present order of knowledge. For Toni Cade Bambara, this was the only possible goal for the discipline. We needed to *know* only so that we can be free to *be*. Yet Bambara also knew that such grounds for knowing were a dream.

Dreams are the province of something real not yet being real. They are realizable but have not yet happened. But the stage of the not-yet-real is

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important, for dreams embody what could or should be real, what is left out, or what is not present in the real that we know. Such dreaming is the province of Black freedom, for us who were never supposed to imagine a reality unstained by the dream of white supremacist Western forms of order. Black folk dreaming is a risk. It is a threat to the "real world" of pragmatic politics, to the desired place of Black life and labor as under, below, out of view (unless as a form of celebrity). That dreams occur while one is at rest, that they only come when we are not moving in relation to capitalist time, also says a lot about the futures they could enact. To dream of freedom is to take seriously the act of stopping to think, pausing to consider—hesitating. The dream occurs in the break. Though there is no inherent righteousness to dreams, to those for whom this real-world reality cannot be accepted, a different kind of reality not yet realized is a beautiful thing.[4]

Toni Cade Bambara had dreams. But they were not deeply rooted in the American dream. Bambara dreamed of a space inspired by Black women "turning toward each other,"[5] a space where they could dismiss the liberal American dream in favor of a Black liberation dream. A space of disavowal and affirmation. No longer would experts determine what Black women's lives were or were not, no longer would History or Literature frame their reality, no longer would a common notion of womanhood grounded in white feminism frame their ideology, their perception of the struggle. Turning to each other, Black women could be the authorities of their own experiences. Being Black and woman was credential enough to create a revolutionary sisterhood arrayed against the enemy of whiteness, of maleness, of America, of imperialism. For Black women, thinking and writing together was an "embrace, of the community and a hardheaded attempt to get basic with each other."[6]

Bambara dreamed of a revolutionary self grounded in "Blackhood," a way to *fully live* against the contradictions inherent in the infection of Western thought in Black men and Black women, in our very relationships to each other. We all needed an antidote to the "poison and lies that assault the ego and threaten the heart … that put the entire movement in peril."[7] Black Studies and Third World Studies needed to devise a curriculum that was an alternative to this "white presence" that founded property relations and premised the Fall on the assumed abject category of womanhood.[8] We were not "immune," for we sometimes accepted that premise in our relations. But there was no possibility for revolution under the sign of "this society's sick definition of 'masculine' and 'feminine.'"[9] If

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Black Studies could recover the meanings of the "old relationships," then perhaps the emergence of a revolutionary self, which explicitly extricated the chauvinistic self, could inspire a common ideal of Selfhood.[10]

Bambara dreamed of an artistic practice faithful to the ways and souls of ordinary Black folk. Of Miss Grandma Dorothy M'Dear who taught her about a storytelling tradition that preceded theory, that theory could not even capture fully. To make "a story" one needed "mimetic devices so that the tale is memorable, shareable … a story should be grounded in cultural specificity and shaped by the modes of Black art practice—call-and-response," a "modality that bespeaks a communal ethos."[11] The real territory for Black Study could be found in the sounds of "bebop musicians," and with the "performers and audiences at the Apollo and Harlem Opera House," and "women getting their heads done in beauty parlors."[12] In all those places of Black creative expression and in the very mode of living Black lives were lessons much deeper than the criticist project. More than that, it was in their language, in their codes, their tellings, that the question of salvation could be truly and faithfully realized. So Bambara dreamed a purpose: "I work to produce stories that save our lives."[13]

Bambara wrote her dreams in these stories. She wrote her rage, she wrote laughter, she wrote our capacity to realize powers "lying dormant with neglect; our hesitance to create new power in areas where it never before existed."[14] In her stories are the beauty of Black children living lives untrammeled by the forces of a world that had no place for them. These were Black children whose capacity for life and living was merely assumed, not bargained or pleaded for. These were Black peoples who would be free. Unhampered by industry and academy alike, unbought by the pressures of a world that could have easily made her a celebrity, Bambara storied our dreams of a world deserving of us.

She dreamed so that we could dream. And in case we forgot, she re-membered the dreams of those who had gone before, like W.E.B. Du Bois, who she recalls was a formative figure in her quest to "construct her self."[15] He, too, had dreams. And he had prayed that the "Dreams of the Dead" might "rebuke the Blind who think that what is will be forever and teach them that what was worth living for must live again and that which merited death must stay dead … there is no Dream but Deed, there is no Deed but Memory."[16]

So it really is these dreams that we must recover, that we must realize.

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Before the university became the behemoth that it is today, it was a place where we could at least dream of thinking about what it meant to "critically re-appraise" humanity's cultural heritage.[17] But even Bambara then saw, as her colleague at City College, June Jordan, had also seen in this moment of upheaval, the Western academy could not do this for us. Writing in a position paper entitled "Realizing the Dream of a Black University," Bambara argued that too often what was called cultural heritage meant a "mainstream American culture" shrouded in national myth. It was "riddled with too much duplicity (land of the free and home of the brave on the one hand—discrimination, injustice, lynchings on the other), too much illusion (the multiracial melting pot myth on the one hand—conflicting and often antagonistic racial, national, ethnic clusters on the other), too much evasiveness to merely be studied."[18]

As Jordan had also written, students were hip to the lie. At City College, as elsewhere, true study of the meaning of that heritage was denied by the very disciplinary traditions that organized intellectual life. The academy produced courses like History I, which became "White Western History"; Art Appreciation, a consideration of those cultures that influenced the standard Western tradition; and Literature, which conceded that Black people could write, too, but were not "serious," that "Anglo Saxon Literature was the Literature."[19] Students were hip to the lie because they came from worlds in which otherwise knowing was practiced. The disciplinary standards they encountered could be studied, but they were not the only kind of truth. It was these students who desired a "viable alternative to the madness inside these walls."[20] So they dreamed of a Black University.

It was that or nothing. Bambara offers that such an intervention might dispense with the traditional forms of expertise, lodged in the "credentials mania" of the academy and that students and teachers might listen and learn from those who knew, regardless of where they were.[21] Students brought into the university through programs like SEEK had an honesty that made up for the "lack" of skills, which were a function not of their intellectual capacity but of an unequal secondary education system. Yet this honesty qualified them to be co-creators of a new kind of university, one that would be a place for Black Study.[22] Bambara suggested that potential courses such as "American Justice and the Afro-American," "Negritude," "Nutrition," and "Psychology and Blacks" would offer alternatives and give context to the Western thought traditions that produced the "madness we are now objecting to and attempting to extricate ourselves from."[23]

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It was her descriptions of two other courses, however, that perhaps have the most relevance to the way we might dream now. A proposed course entitled "Trends in Western Thought" was inspired by a need to examine the three prongs of "existentialism which focuses on man's reliance on his self, naturalism, which stress[ed] man's dependency on the forces within his environment, and rationalism which decreed that man needs no other equipment than a firm resolution and faith in the rational faculties."[24] It further offered that we might examine such questions by "tracing the roots of the Great Conceit from Aristotle's 'Ethics' up through Descartes, Pascal, Comte, Bacon," a genealogy of thought responsible for a science that relegated "accident, chance, magic, God, evil, error, love, weakness, dependency" to the dustbin.[25] This idea that "scientists who can control their world under good lab conditions—isolating, insulating, manipulation—and demonstrate damn near everything by reason" had, as we have seen, produced "the great rationales for racialist convictions and imperialist adventures."[26]

But our dreams cannot and must not end with a real analysis of the problem. So there was the aptly titled "Root Courses," a space imagined as a way to "move into our roots and hook up with Blacks in areas other than North America."[27] She proposed that it constitute "part workshop or studio dance, part lecture, part lecture-demonstration" and "examine the religious cultures and sects of old and New Africa, the Caribbean, the south U.S., [and] South America" in a Pan African discussion of the connections, common struggles, and common rituals that have emerged to contend with the world around us.[28] Bambara's conception of a Black University aligned almost perfectly with the theoretical work of Sylvia Wynter, Jacob Carruthers, and Cedric Robinson. With these two courses, and the others mentioned in her paper, Bambara was moving from idea to organization, from concept to concrete manifestation. It was a dream that could be real.

Bambara, along with June Jordan, Barbara Christian, Sonia Sanchez, and numerous other notable artists and writers who were interestingly less heralded as scholars of Black Studies, wrote about the question of the nature of this project. In many ways, their ideas welcomed more and more perspectives, approaches, and theories that should be brought back to center stage. But as we recover them, we must remember that as they critiqued, fought and clawed for space, and expanded the field—it was the Blackhood that mattered. Blackhood was soul, it was memory, it was radical. Blackhood was enough for Black Study. It was the thing of dreams.

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What are our dreams now? How is our work connected to the conceptual space created out of a tradition of Black Study called forth through W.E.B. Du Bois, Sylvia Wynter, Jacob Carruthers, and Cedric Robinson? As well as through so many others we should continue to name: John Henrik Clarke, Vivian Gordon, Vincent Harding, Bertha Maxwell Roddey, Sterling Brown, Bernard Magubane, James E. Turner, Anna Julia Cooper, Abdul Alkalimat, Joyce Ladner, Archie Mafeje, Wole Soyinka, Ronald Walters, Dionne Brand, Manning Marable, John Bracey, Faye Harrison, Theophile Obenga, C.L.R. James, and Eleanor Traylor. As we enter the second half-century of Black Studies, let us continue to re-member the origins of this disciplinary project, its roots in struggle, its promise for another kind of university, its hope for another kind of world. Let us take seriously the path tread through and beyond and not *of* disciplines, for what is left for us to do is fortify intellectual commitments that are undisciplined, that are gathered together in the name of our people. When we are unmoored from the imperial designs of Western disciplinary thought, we can better see, understand, and study with our people. We can create spaces that are *of* Black Study.

This calls for us to ask questions that move us from "crisis to liberation."[29] In our updated versions of the Negro problem, we have become quite versed in the crisis. If for nothing else, the most recent flowering of work under the imprimatur of Afropessimism has demonstrated a particular kind of awareness of everything that is wrong.[30] Conversations around Blackness become simply conversations about white supremacy and our negation.[31] Both Black liberal and Marxist thought converge with Black Studies institutional forms to opine and theorize the mess. In new media, experts are called in to tell us about things we already feel, if not know: The planet is imperiled. Black life is especially imperiled. Indeed, most conceptions of life are imperiled. They tell us that we live in market economies that do not recognize our ways of honoring human and natural life. This economic violence structures how we show up in policy discussions and debate. Then we are subject to state violence in the forms of the police and in the guise of war and intervention. And we meet more lies when we are told that becoming indebted students is the only way out of the morass. Those who make it make peace with the system; they become individual exemplars, academic stars, and thought leaders, people who represent to the rest of us how to get over. Yet it never seems to work. When the university is not producing knowledge

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that maintains order, it is perpetuating inequality through an academic bureaucracy that has made knowledge a commodity, the substance be damned—unless it threatens order, of course. We must remain docile and complicit as the neoliberal order fails to meet our basic human needs and makes the planet uninhabitable. A global pandemic exposed what we already knew and simultaneously further enriched the already rich. Still, the experts have not really broken faith with the order that says these problems are solvable with improvement, refinement, better politics, better knowledge. Breaking the chain will be difficult. But do it we must. There are models.

Writing in 2011, Africana Studies scholar Greg Carr places such questions of crisis and knowledge production at the center of the future of the Black Studies project:

> Is our intellectual work in the field being put to the best uses? Are we asking the right questions, or even the same questions our ancestors and those not oriented to our privileged elite class status asked? Are our contemporary questions still deeply relevant, and, as the environmental and experiential conditions that caused us to ask our initial human questions continue to exist, has the circumstance that interrupted and tethered that arc of human inquiry to the problematic of survival so altered it that liberation as a collective practice is no longer conceivable?[32]

If Black Studies is to answer such questions, it must draw "first on the most familiar, richest and most accessible deep well of human experience, namely the one native to the cultural arc out of which one emerges as a human being."[33] A vision for the future calls for more excavations into these cultural arcs, for more projects to translate and recover them, for more connections to Pan African intellectual frames, for more representative conversations about who African people are and have always been, in the rhythms of our unity and in the beauty of our difference. As Vincent Harding put it, "the old/new philosophies of science and of the universe which are beginning to re-emerge out of the African and other non-Western worlds" have the power to frame reality for us today.[34] This is a dream that we can realize. This we know because we have always known each other.

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What we are trying to say is that all is not lost,
we have not conceded everything.

Black Study is a naming

of those
practices that allow us to keep on living,
to keep on insisting on life,
that indeed gave us life

of those
cycles of life,
that disrupt historical time,
that show us that we are because others were

of the
kind of order that cannot be observed by telescopic eyes,
the vibrations which cannot measured by tools,
that sacred space we make in our utterance of Asé

of the
authority to radically love each other,
to love every living thing,
to remember even the dead,
that it is right to defend their honor

of the
belief that everything that happens to us will be recorded,
that there is ultimately something resembling, perhaps larger than
justice in the offing,
that struggle don' last always

of a
kind of protection that does not require a market relationship

of a
kind of care that does not expect a return on investment

of a

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kind of ethical relationship to provide modes of healing

of a
responsibility to community.

What we are trying to say is that we know what it is to be *against*, and
even what it is to be *for*

still, this space was consecrated by ancestors, by a living tradition, who
gave so much
so that we could imagine
what it is
to be *of*
each other,
to be *of*
our worlds
to be *of*
a practice of study,
to be

… *Of Black Study*.

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