BLACK EXPRESSION and white generosity

A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK OF RACE

NATALIE WALL

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Black Expression and White Generosity: A Theoretical Framework of Race

BY

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For Catalina, Cillian, and Nolan.

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About the Author

Natalie Wall is an interdisciplinary researcher focusing on black women's performance, artivism, and antiracist praxis in the Caribbean diaspora. She is Research Impact Lead for Social Sciences at King's College London.

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Preface: Towards Black Expression

'Are you from India?'

Living in Canada for most of my life, it is a question I was asked many times. However, I am thinking about one time in particular. It was during my undergrad and I was out with friends in a tiny little bar in Halifax, Nova Scotia. I offered to grab drinks and was accosted by a man at the bar.

'Are you from India?'

Warily, 'no'.

'You look like you're from India – which part?'

Oh no, it's another one of these. 'I am not from India'.

'Yes you are – which part?' Followed by 'It's okay. You can tell me. You do not need to be ashamed'.

Ashamed? Of my fictional Indian heritage/nationality? Oh, this was worse than usual.

'Just tell me. Where are your parents from? It's okay. It's okay to be Indian'.

This man now believes that it is his job to make me acknowledge my race/nationality/something to him, as I am obviously ashamed of myself and my skin. He wants me to know he is safe and I can share my racialised self with him.

'You do not need to be embarrassed'.

'Ummmm. . .. I know it's okay to be Indian and I am not embarrassed. I am not Indian'.

Thank God. The drinks are here. However, he sees me leaving and starts getting angry.

'It's OKAY. You can TELL me. What part of India are you from?!?'

At this point, I just try to leave and he responds by screaming 'Fuck you!' over and over at me. I become seriously scared now. I look around, but I cannot see my friends and no one else cares about the exchange. I wonder if this man will hurt me. He has become violent in his approach. His offer of safety has now become rage.

I walk away: terrified and ashamed. I look over my shoulder for the rest of the night. My friends that night were all white, so I did not even tell them about the exchange. I knew they would never understand; they would belittle the fear, thinking that would help. They would laugh it all away because, in the end, it does not affect their lives the way it does mine.

Years later, I still remember this incident. The need for strangers to know my race is not new, but this man showed me how that need to know is underpinned by the idea that the question itself is asked in the spirit of *generosity* – the desire to know somehow shows acceptance of you as a raced individual, no matter what

race, real or imagined. The refusal to acknowledge that generosity can only result in violence. I certainly have never had one of these discussions where I did not feel under threat psychologically or physically.

I think about this incident in tandem with the growing influence of such movements as 'bring your whole self to work'. Where a healthy work culture is understood as one where all employees are their *authentic selves* at work, whatever that may be. The idea that exposing myself to strangers will somehow make me more comfortable is, frankly, baffling. However, the insistence on being authentic, genuine, sharing pieces of yourself with relative strangers is becoming more and more popular, and the implication is that those of us who feel the need to protect our private lives from the intrusion of public scrutiny are ungrateful, poor colleagues and bad team players. Again, intrusiveness poses as generosity with the implied threat of damage to your career if you do not comply.

As a black woman, I feel this threat every day. I am not free to bring my whole self to any space where black folx are not hired, promoted or developed. Where, in fact, we are discouraged at every turn, reminded that we are there under sufferance and should be grateful for the fact. *Black Expression and White Generosity: A Framework of Race* is a book that examines this phenomenon, the giving that is not giving and the ingratitude that is self-preservation. In this book, I move through theoretical constructions of race, history of the black diaspora, my own experiences of race and racism and contemporary politics and arts in order to chat through this framework that I have named *white generosity*. There is an embedded and reciprocal relationship between generosity and violence, which is the thread that ties all of the following chapters together.

I am an antiracist feminist, a black woman, and this book pulls from my experiences as much as it pulls from history and contemporary theory and debates. This book is a story, and like most stories it captures only one piece of the whole. It is my hope that others think about the framework of white generosity and the possibilities of black expression and move the story forward, that they pick it up and create something wholly new. This is my story, but it is not the end. If my experiences resonate with your experiences, take that feeling and turn it into something positive in this world. Know that you are not alone, you are misunderstood but not misunderstanding, there is a truth beneath the lies of white generosity, a possibility for a different future, a new world of black expression.

But my experiences are not your experiences. I am a black woman, but I am also a mixed race woman; my experiences of whiteness are not just the violence of everyday racism but also the love of my mother, the embrace of family. One of the reasons that I have always been pulled towards critical race studies is because I needed to understand the ways that white people can hate racial groups and love raced individuals, how good people do bad things when race is involved. And while this is fascinating – and it is – I have learned over the years that it means nothing. Understanding white people will never result in black lives free of fear. This is a book about understanding *whiteness*, not white people, and only to the extent that theorising whiteness might help dismantle its power over black thought, black love and black creativity.

I am here to chat with black folx.

I was 12 when I decided I was going to write a novel for black people about black people. I was intrigued by the notion that if a character's race is not named in a novel, they are white, knowing this meant the author assumed that *I* was white too. I was fascinated/horrified by this realisation – *these books are not for me*. Television is not for me. Movies are not for me. But books, books live in your mind in a different way than visual media and it felt intrusive, this presumption of whiteness. So, I decided to write a black novel. It was going to be brilliant. It was going to be revolutionary. Please remember I was only 12 and was reading Nancy Drew or some such. It was another year before I read Toni Morrison and Alice Walker, and Maya Angelou. And still more time yet before I read Dionne Brand, nourbeSe Philip and Lillian Allen. And even more before I discovered d'bi.young anitafrika, Canisia Lubrin and Trey Anthony. Just to name a few.

Too bad I am a terrible creative writer.

I never wrote that novel because I could easily see I was not a creative writer. It has been a long time since 12-year-old me decided to write that book, but here I am. This is not a novel, and I am no longer 12, but here we are.

This is a book for black folx.

This is not to say that white people cannot learn anything here. I am not aiming to be exclusive, but inclusive to a community that has historically and contemporarily been excluded. Just like I could read Nancy Drew, white people can read this book. I am simply saying that this book is not written for, or about, white *people*. It discusses whiteness and its implication for black lives, sometimes at length, but this is not an instruction manual. There are no '20 top tips for being less racist' here. I have had too many conversations where white people suggest that it is our job to tell them how to fix their unconscious bias, microaggressions and ingrained racist turns of thought. We know that black folx, especially black women, are burnt out sitting on equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) committees, operationalising action plans for companies that refuse to pay for dedicated support. Black folx did not invent the problem of institutional racism, but, somehow, we are expected to fix it.

'But how do I know what to do if no one tells me?' A colleague once asked me.

I certainly do not have the answers. I can only say that black folx are dying across the world, and antiblack violence harms us everywhere. We need to focus on safety, physical and psychological, as a group of people that have been suffering from a system created to harm us. I do not have time to tell white people how to feel.

This brings us to the vexed question of allyship. As I argue in the following chapters, white generosity is a powerful, even totalising, discursive system centuries in the making, which underpins the stories white institutions tell about their own history, and that in turn shapes the experiences of black folx in the black diaspora. It is ingrained in the fabric of society and is not something any individual can unlearn in a three-hour workshop. Any form of allyship that congratulates itself on its good deeds, on having bestowed a *favour* on black folx by making common cause with us, is steeped in white generosity and cannot be part of the answer to untangling its influence from our lives. We cannot spend anymore time telling white people what good allyship looks like, dealing constantly with the 'element of saviorism that creeps into identifying as an ally' (Kendall, 2020, p. 252). Allyship can only be defined so many times. When allies need a guide, a reading list, training, workshops and websites, in order to commit to not harming black folx, we have to ask how real that

commitment is. This book is about the real violence that performative allyship enacts in the world. When white people feel the need to highlight their generosity at the expense of black voices, black actions and black movements, we can only understand that to be an act of oppression.

I am writing this book as a black woman, blending my experiences with the framework of white generosity and a theory of moment that I will lay out for you in chapter one. I make use of autoethnography[1] throughout this book in small anecdotes that highlight the power of moments because I believe that we need to open ourselves up in these discussions of race. We need to honestly think about the harm that these moments cause us and the exhaustion we feel in enduring, resisting and articulating antiblack oppression.

This book is underpinned by the understanding that we are taking an intersectional[2] approach to discussions of race, sex, disability, religion, sexuality and other differences in identity. While I tend to focus on black women here, partly because of my own experiences as a black woman and partly because black women are subject to some of the most loathsome acts of race-based violence today, understand that black women are one group of many experiencing the violence of white generosity, as '[t]here is no set of years in which to be born Black and woman would not be met with violence' (Sharpe, 2023, p. 331). I hope that when you read this book, you take this framework and move it into new spheres of understanding not covered here. However, for now, we spend a lot of time with black women – writing, educating, agitating, pleading, working, working, working. Black women are speaking up and saying they are done with gratitude: '[a]nger can be cathartic, motivating, and above all else an expression of the innate humanity of any community. Demands that the oppressed be calm and polite and that forgiveness come before all else are fundamentally dehumanizing' (Kendall, 2020, p. 252).

This book is a call for ingratitude.

Being thankful has not made black lives safe, comfortable, happy.

Instead, let us embrace ingratitude.

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[1]Autoethnography is a method of articulating the self in the research, of using the author as the subject of ethnographic study, allowing for a centring of wider cultural and political analysis.

[2]Intersectionality is a framework enabling an understanding that different groups experience discrimination differently and when people belong to multiple oppressed groups, the discrimination they face is not additive, but completely reshaped. First coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989, she describes intersectionality as follows: "Black woman can experience discrimination in ways that are both similar to and different from those experienced by white women and Black men. Black women sometimes experience discrimination in ways similar to white women's experiences; sometimes they share very similar experience with Black men. Yet often they experience double-discrimination – the combined effects of practices which discriminate on the basis of race, and on the basis of sex. And sometimes, they experience discrimination as Black women – not the sum of race and sex discrimination, but as Black women" (Crenshaw 1989:149).

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Introduction: White Generosity

I am late. I hate being late. I finally make it to the black pedagogies event being held in a predominately white, elite, Russell Group[1] university in London. I stand outside the room and notice it has two doors. I stop.

Which door? No windows.

I cannot tell which side the presentations are likely to be on. Will I walk into a presentation? Are the doors in the back or the front of the room?

I chance the door that looks slightly more like a side door. The signage is on the other door. I open the door hesitantly and sigh.

I am at the front of the room, but the presentations are happening in front of the other door (the door not chosen). Still... it is a full room. I take a moment to scan for a seat. This makes me nervous, as it means standing at the front of the room for longer than I feel comfortable (which is no time at all, really). A black woman on the left side of the room looks at me and smiles.

I relax. I am among friends.

I slip into the seat behind the woman who smiled at me, beside a white man who I assume is a student. This opinion is based entirely on observing the copious volume of notes he has already taken, before the presentations have even started. The woman in front of me turns to me and whispers, 'Do you have a pen that I could borrow?'

I feel seen. Of course, I have a pen for you. She smiles at me as if she knows that I would do the same for her. I search my bag. I always carry at least five pens. I search. I search. I search.

'It's okay', she says.

'I know I have something...' I respond. She smiles (again). The man beside me perks up.

'What do you need?' he asks.

She responds, 'Do you have a pen?'

He gets excited and burrows into his bag. He looks up triumphantly and pulls out a lovely monogrammed Moleskine and hands it to the woman in front of me.

[1]The Russell Group is an elite membership of 24 research-intensive UK universities, which includes the University of Cambridge and the University of Oxford (*Russell Group | Our Universities*, 2023).

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We look at each other, perplexed. Certainly, this is related to the object she asked for, but what will she do with it if she has no pen?

His confidence is unrelenting. He pushes the notebook at her. Is he giving this to her? How does one borrow a Moleskine? Does he expect her to tear the pages out?

The woman and I are still confused. She pushes the notebook back and he pushes it towards her again, sure of her needs in a way that I never am about my own. She pushes the notebook towards him more firmly. Finally, he takes it. She reiterates, 'a pen'.

The man looks confused. He goes back to his bag and begins searching, but there is no pen in there. I hand the woman the pen I found, and she proceeds to fill out the feedback form the organisers distributed before the event started.

For some reason, this sequence of events stays with me. I spend months reflecting on why this near-silent interaction sticks with me. I think I get it. I find this interaction metonymic of those we have, as black folx,[2] hourly, daily, monthly, yearly on individual levels as well as systemic ones. Our interactions with whiteness are all too often defined by the same notion of the *gift* that underpinned this interaction, and by a phenomenon I have begun to call *white generosity*.

In 2020, I published an article in the journal *Equality, Diversity and Inclusion* called 'White Generosity: Black Freedom Faced with Good Intentions' (Wall, 2020). That article, it turns out, only begins to scratch the surface of a value system that, sometimes tacitly and sometimes very, *very* vocally, underpins so many aspects of how black folx are seen in this wide world, justifying ongoing oppression, discrimination and inequality on the grounds that whiteness has already *given enough*. My thinking on white generosity has evolved and expanded considerably since that initial article, and the book you have before you now, *Black Expression and White Generosity: A Theoretical Framework of Race*, is the result.

However, I reproduce the opening to that first article here almost word-for-word because it continues to illustrate in perfect microcosm some of the central tenets of white generosity: specifically, whiteness's construction of non-white people as the recipients of its benevolence. While an unasked-for Moleskine is an absurd, trivial and vaguely comic manifestation of white generosity, it lies on a continuum with far more violent and insidious manifestations on which I dwell at length in this book, among them the 'gift' of the abolition of slavery and the resultant expectations of gratitude for this gift from black communities. I theorise white generosity with particular reference to Jacques Derrida's work on *the gift* (1992), to which I will return often. White generosity demands gratitude in excess of the value of the thing given. If for Derrida 'the gift' is given unconditionally, it

[2]Throughout this book, I use the term 'folx' in my description of black people in order to assert inclusion, this is a book for *all* black folx and to establish this book as part of a black community who are using the term 'folx' to bring us together in a joyous and respectful way (@blkfolxtherapy, 2023; *For Black Folx*, 2021; Goodman, 2021). 'Folx' as a term originated in the 1990s, and acts as a signifier for gender non-conformity or allyship (McPhillips, 2020), deliberately queers a term that is already non-gendered in order to express an active allyship (Glassman-Hughes, 2022).

becomes devalued as soon as it demands acknowledgement or draws attention to itself as a gift, white generosity is the gift's inverse: a 'giving' that manifests itself only as a demand for its supposed recipient's gratitude. Emancipation is no gift at all, simply a deferral of debt. The 'gifts' of diversity, decolonisation, widening participation or access are all objects of brokerage in a system that is inherently unequal and violent for black communities.

Through an investigation of the history of abolition and subsequent calls (and refusals) for reparations, *Black Expression and White Generosity* calls for a refusal of the metanarrative that black communities have already *been given too much* and, thus, are not deserving of the basic human right to live unmolested by state policing forces. Analysing the history of whiteness and white generosity as performative narratives offering a vision of white supremacy as benevolent, the book offers a framework in which to read the real violence perpetuated by these narratives. In addition to looking at the history of slavery and the capitalist function of black bodies as property, I examine the capacity of language to reinforce power imbalances by looking at the pervasive figure of the white saviour, constructed in part against stereotypes of non-white people as ungrateful and miserly, manifested, for example, in terms like 'gypped' and 'Indian giver'. Finally, I look to offer, among many possibilities, a way forward by looking to examples of sustained change using artistic methodologies in the pursuit of activist goals. In this call to action, *Black Expression and White Generosity* is not meant to resolve a history of narrativising whiteness as generous and benevolent but, instead, to offer a new language with which to speak truth to power.

The notion of white generosity is related to theoretical constructs, such as white fragility, white tears and the white gaze, which have commanded significant scholarly engagement in the areas of decolonisation (see, for example, Ahmet, 2020; Hall et al., 2021; Tate & Bagguley, 2017; Tate & Page, 2018), critical race studies (see, for example, Hamad, 2020; Liebow & Glazer, 2019; Phipps, 2021) and media studies (see, for example, Caridad Rabelo et al., 2021; Griffin, 2014; Pailey, 2020; Sobande, 2021). However, white generosity has not previously been named or analysed in a systematic way. In naming and theorising the assumptions, discursive constructions and rhetorical manoeuvres underpinning white generosity, this book aims to offer a theoretical framework for use by antiracist scholars, students and activists to name, interrogate and deconstruct a powerful narrative used in the structures of white supremacy and in the continued marginalisation of non-white people.

White generosity, as I argued in that initial article, is 'characterised across [a] spectrum of contexts by a violence that – even in its most well-intentioned manifestations – centres whiteness and consolidates the structures of white supremacy. This generosity supports and complements anti-black violence' (Wall 135). For me, the theoretical paradigm of white generosity operates from the standpoint that black people have yet to see freedom, as freedom is often constructed around notions of abolition from slavery as a gift, not abolition from state structures that support and encourage violence against black bodies. Here, I expand on this theoretical framework in order to present a lens through which to understand the rest of this book.

White generosity is a product of whiteness and of hierarchised relationships between whiteness and non-whiteness, defined by a *supposed* gift made to the person racialised as non-white, which has not been asked for and which has no obvious practical purpose. White generosity underpins a broad spectrum of interactions, from undoubtedly well-intentioned but inappropriate gestures of white allyship to insidious reinscriptions or justifications of white supremacy in the guise of gift-giving. In its most benign form, white generosity is a gesture from a white ally that holds no real-world value: an offer of support or a gesture towards 'inclusivity'. At its most violent, white generosity posits emancipation from slavery – the restoration of a fundamental human right by those who previously violently wrenched it away, offered with no acknowledgment of wrongdoing but an expectation of gratitude – as a gift. In defining the phenomenon of white generosity, I make extensive use of Derrida's *gift* to analyse the paradoxical structure underlying white generosity and the expectation of gratitude that accompanies it. This is a construction I explore through numerous texts and moments, using literature, film, theatre, music, social media, news articles and politics to explore the trope of the gift and its relationship to white generosity, a phenomenon that underpins the narrative of black life in all its facets. White generosity is characterised across this spectrum of contexts by a *violence* that – even in its most well-intentioned manifestations – centres whiteness and consolidates the structures of white supremacy.

So, without further ado, it is time to get theoretical. This is probably a good time to note that I like Derrida. I really, *really* like Derrida. This book is, for the most part, a celebration of black authors, activists and artists. A nuanced expression of love for those that have nurtured me as a writer and researcher, making me someone bold enough to think I have the capacity to actually teach you something about race and racism against the backdrop of anti-blackness out there in the world. However... there is also going to be some love for Derrida. If you hate Derrida, I accept your hatred and beg you to carry on despite it. If you generally feel Derrida to be incomprehensible nonsense, then you are well on your way to enjoying this trip. If you have no idea who Derrida is, then I have probably scared you needlessly. In short, and not to centre Derrida overly in a narrative about blackness, he is an Algerian-born French philosopher who developed the philosophy of deconstruction (think of the deconstructed food trend only for the brain), as an offshoot of poststructuralism (a broad set of philosophical and linguistic approaches investigating how things we consider to be universal truths rest on very specific but unchallenged assumptions and are upheld by the language we use and the culture we consume, every day). Derrida is dreaded almost completely by university undergraduates because of how dense and incomprehensible he can seem, but this is part of the point. Questioning *every* assumption you have ever had about the world you live in is complicated and hard and confusing. Essentially, there are no shortcuts here; you just need to *do the work*. Plus... I just kind of like it. So, back to it.

In his book *Given Time 1: Counterfeit Money*, Derrida investigates (or *deconstructs*) the notion of the gift and all the assumptions and transactions that underlie this deceptively simple-seeing idea. In thinking about the gift and the act

of giving, Derrida observes that 'the gift, *if there is any*, would no doubt be related to economy. One cannot treat the gift, this goes without saying, without treating this relation to economy, even to the money economy' (1992, p. 7). For Derrida (and, indeed, for us), the gift is indelibly linked to economy, which is a fundamental argument for this book. As Rinaldo Walcott argues '[o]ne cannot stress enough capitalism's foundation as well as it constant and continuous production of death in which all nonwhite bodies are mastered into a project of disposability' (2021, p. 63). The relationship between capital and non-white bodies cannot be overemphasised; from the Atlantic slave trade to black families selling a Sainsbury's Christmas to the commercialisation of hip hop, black folx are still embroiled in a white capitalism that sees them as commodities only. Thus, the gift and its relationship to economy is critical to understand in both its *giving* and *receiving*. Derrida even finds economic exchange in the language afforded the reception of the gift, 'the *credit* we accord each other, the faith or good faith that we lend each other' (Derrida, 1992, p. 11). Because we always want *credit*, do we not? Giving a gift always insists on credit for the act of giving itself because 'it's the thought that counts'.

This requirement for *credit* or for some return, for Derrida, undermines the entire notion of the gift: '[f]or there to be a gift, there must be no reciprocity, return, exchange, countergift, or debt. If the other *gives* me *back* or *owes* me or has to give me back what I give him or her, there will not have been a gift, whether this restitution is immediate or whether it is programmed by a complex calculation of a long-term deferral or difference' (Derrida, 1992, p. 12). Here is where we get to the crux of it. The gift is not a gift if it requires exchange *of any kind, at any point in time*. When we posit emancipation as a gift, the critical context is that black lives become framed as commodity, to be bought, bartered and sold. This is historically honest, an accurate reflection of how we have been treated in the past and continue to be treated today. Within the stories that whiteness tells, there are always hints of the truth of black lives. When politicians tell us about the great British Empire, which ended slavery and emancipated the slaves, let us ask 'at what cost?' Was the price 400 years of slavery? Or are we still paying the price for that 'gift?' The credit that whiteness demands for the act of emancipation, credit in terms of reputation, banked goodwill to offset future harms and the literal credit in funds that we, as taxpayers, were paying to the families of slave owners until 2015, all hang over us black folx, haunting us, ever-present even as the narrative of whiteness tells us it does not exist.

And that is why this book is personal to me. I am part of the collective that is haunted by this phenomenon, actively harmed every day of my life in degrees, and this book is an exploration of my lived experience as much as it explores the theoretical underpinnings of that lived experience. This book is about the black diaspora, 'a concise conceptual and political term that is a space from which to begin to appreciate the enormity of the dispersal of those now known as Africans at a moment in European expansion and the tragic and complicated legacy of our brutal dispersal' (Walcott, 2021, p. 23). I grew up in Canada and now live in England. My father was from Trinidad, and my family live all over the United States. This book is about the black diaspora, and this book is about me. This

book is a work of autoethnography because, like Rachel Alicia Griffin, 'I have no intention of keeping the personal private because treading lightly when it comes to racism and sexism is killing me softly' (Griffin, 2014, p. 144) and I am 'determined [to] embrace [...] autoethnographic writing as a means of resistance' (2014, p. 139). Like Griffin, I am mixed raced and write my experiences as a black mixed race woman. You will also note that this book operates between four strategic locations: Canada, the United Kingdom, the Caribbean and the United States, all spaces that figure large in the lives of diasporic black folx. I was born in Toronto, Canada, to a (black) Trinidadian father and (white) Canadian mother and currently live in London, England, and this book reflects on life as a Black woman in and between these spaces of black oppression. The United States has always lived large for black Canadians and Brits and though I have never lived there, the cultural ramifications of what happens in the United States cannot be ignored.

I have worked in higher education across two countries (as a lecturer and in professional services), got my PhD in Caribbean Canadian women's performance at the University of Calgary and have worked in three universities in London. I say this because there will be some reflections on higher education here. I have *feelings*. As Azeezat Johnson tells us:

> ...rather than trying to fit within a framework that perpetuates the objectification of Black and Brown bodies as deviations from the (white) norm, I need to move beyond seeing my work as only (or predominantly) fitting into these academic spaces. Writing for (and connecting to) this wider community enables me to remember that our existence is more complex and nuanced than represented through our positioning as researched objects. It assists in fending against the isolation that keeps us feeling "most coloured" against a sharp white background. (2020, p. 94)

This is not a book for an academic audience. It uses my academic background to theorise narratives of whiteness as they permeate and oppress black folx today, but the academy is not black. This is a book for black folx. You do not need a degree to read this book because we all know that higher education works to make people who look like us feel unwelcome and I want to welcome you. Welcome you to my world and if you see a bit of yourself in it, so much the better. To be clear, there will be Derrida. However, there will also be movies and television and plays and poetry and Twitter and Instagram. We are a complicated people, we black folx and we have a devastating history and a heartbreaking present. I have no intention of bringing my 'authentic self' to work, but I will share it here with you because I write this with the understanding that we work against the 'sharp white background' by speaking to each other and understanding that blackness was never the 'deviation from the (white) norm' but the community we built to survive.

In his book *The Long Emancipation: Toward Black Freedom*, Walcott argues that '[t]he conditions of black life, past and present, work against any notion that what we inhabit in the now is freedom. Postslavery and postcolony, black people,

globally, have yet to experience freedom. We remain in the time of emancipation' (2021, p. 1). We, as black folx, are still dying. In the streets. In police custody. In our homes. We are not free, and we need to acknowledge the fact that if we are still dying, the construction of freedom from slavery is a false one. We 'must note that at every moment black peoples have sought, for themselves, to assert what freedom might mean and look like, those desires and acts toward freedom have been violently interdicted' (Walcott, 2021, p. 1). *Black Expression and White Generosity*, in its exploration of how the insidious narrative of white generosity underpins violence against black folx today, seeks to explore what black freedom may be by recentring black experience and looking to black art as expressions of emancipatory work. What do black folx create and know when they are no longer pinned that 'sharp white background?' Is it even possible to *be* without whiteness undermining everything we do?

Tkarontonian dub artist d'bi.young anitafrika asks themselves how they make art when they have been taught to hate themselves in their poem 'magick:'

> . . .we don't like to talk about the colourism/shadeism/classism that creeps into our blood, making us scrub ourselves, sometimes till we bleed. I was taught to wash the centre of me clean like I was scouring a pot. scrub it clean because the centre of me was somehow inherently dirty. and ugly. the way that dark skin west afrikan broad-nosed, thick-lipped, blackness was immediately ugly, evil. (who is the beholder?) (2019, p. 281)

anitafrika's pairing of cleanliness and blackness calls out the centring of whiteness and white experience in black history, even as they call out whiteness as being uncriticised and unspoken. If we think of white as pristine and perfect, then what are we? anitafrika's words to themselves are harsh and rough so that we bleed alongside them, a reminder that the 'sharp white background' cuts.

anitafrika ruminates that 'it was performance that brought me salvation. storytelling is the realm through which I conjure change. I write stories about magickal black gxrls who sever the hands of inappropriately-touching xncles; stories about mystical gxrls who ascend erotic dance poles into the abyss of ochun's womb; about mythical gxrls who kiss each other between the thighs. and it is this that saves me' (2019, p. 282). So, for anitafrika, black expression for black folx is not an ideal Cosbyesque space where we live as white folx live (well, maybe not quite so well. . . but close). Instead, we are offered the truth of black experience, the hurt, the oppression, the colonial inheritance of hate and the gxrls who move through pain to find, if not happiness, the truth of themselves and in that truth acceptance. Because there is no truth in ignoring the continual and constant global violence against black folx – we are not and were never free. However, we find a semblance of freedom in speaking to, for, and with black folx while acknowledging the real violence that whiteness continues to inflict on us.

Black oppression is now. Slavery is not history no matter what white supremacy wants you to believe and '[d]espite abolition, an Act of Parliament was not going to change the perception overnight of enslaved African people from

quasi-animal to human. Less than two hundred years later, that damage is still to be undone' (Eddo-Lodge, 2017, p. 6). Black folx who worked in the United Kingdom up to 2015 (me included) paid the descendants of the slavers who owned our ancestors reparations for the loss of labour that emancipation cost them. I feel sick when I think of it. The trauma of it. Imagine. And we are expected to keep calm, act respectable, remain civil. We have never been treated civilly. We are traumatised at every juncture and told to keep quiet. If we disagree, we are told that we are too angry, and *no one* likes an angry black woman. If we acquiesce, they see that as an opportunity to commit further atrocities. If we stay within our community where we feel safe, we are divisive. There is no gain in operating within these rules of whiteness. We black folx need to write our own rules.

In her essay 'not feeling too british today', nourbeSe Philip reminisces/agonises on her memories of a girlhood in Port of Spain, Trinidad (and its relationship to Tobago where she was born) and her present in Toronto, Canada, all through the lens of the hot summer that a British queen died. Musing on the memories that overlay themselves in her mind, Philip says that it is 'the smell of my own fresh sweat – that returns me to a time and place that is no longer there but that never leaves. It lingers' (2022). The sense memory of her own body's reaction to summer stirs Philip and takes her back to the age of 10 at the Tranquility Girls School because winter, decades later, is still too foreign to move the mind and body back in time. Philip continues that she 'stand[s] in a large hall with plenty-fuh-so children, most African, some Asian – all descended from the enslaved or indentured and under the age of 11' who are 'singing our lungs out to the tune of "Rule Britannia," made great by the sweat of others' (2022). Philip's memory stirs in the weeks prior to Queen Elizabeth II's death on the 8 September 2023 and again when 'the Queen's picture tak[es] up the entire front page of the *Toronto Star* just one day after the same page was dedicated to the 8 September 2022 massacre on the reserve of the James Smith Cree Nation', an agonising echo of colonialism and the harm caused by the British Empire *that continues* today.

I was at work the day the Queen died. I had just come back from holiday the week before and was exhausted. My severely disabled daughter had not had a good week – holidays are always fraught with her, but she was absolutely enraged that week. We had gone to Devon and the heat was overwhelming. Our rickety old caravan (the only space we can make safe for my non-verbal daughter who likes to go runabout) was on its last legs, the electrics kept flickering periodically, giving out between the TV and the fridge, and my daughter decided to throw a bucket of water over the whole thing just to tip it over into completely blown. It had been a hot summer and a wrought year – every day bringing news of anti-black hatred and new stories of black suffering. I just wanted to spend time with my family and forget everything for a bit and ended up feeling like a complete failure at it all. I had just presented a keynote on black motherhood and while it was an amazing experience, I felt dredged of thought and feeling by that point.

The news of the queen's death was not surprising; we had been waiting since she disappeared from public life, since news of her having COVID, since she was a very, very old woman who had led a long, long life. Yet, the performance of the