Antiracism Inc.
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Published by Punctum Books

FeliceBlake, et al.
Antiracism Inc. Why the Way We Talk about Racial Justice Matters.

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Poetic Knowledge: 
On Why Art Matters to Antiracism Inc.

Alison Reed

We cannot exist without art.  
— Angela Y. Davis¹

On February 20, 2016, at a powerful public conversation Critical Resistance co-hosted titled “Profiles of Abolition: Abolition and the Radical Imagination,” moderator Robin D.G. Kelley asked visionary Black freedom fighter and abolitionist Angela Y. Davis to reflect on the vital links between creativity and change. Davis, without hesitation, affirmed the role of art in social movements, elaborating: “Art is always embedded in our efforts to create a better world, to achieve justice. It gives leadership to us...it both allows us to see what is not yet possible but it also allows us to see those things that are right in front of our eyes and that we refuse to see.”² Antiracism Inc.: Why the Way We Talk About Racial Justice Matters takes seriously this claim that art animates

² Ibid.
possibilities for building livable futures in the present. In short, a world without art is not only unimaginable, but uninhabitable.

Key to this concept is an understanding of the gross limitations of the representational model of cultural production: the mistaken notion, especially attached to writers of color, that art merely reflects social realities. Instead, this book collection recognizes that acts of artistry are not only deeply imaginative, but transformative of the terms meant to dictate experience. Creative interventions critique power’s brutal operation, while also engaging alternative forms of collective social life, amidst pain. All of the writers in this collection seek to model this poetic impetus, urged toward not only critiquing the present, but also reflecting on how community organizers and cultural producers prophesize and enact other ways to be.

Take, for instance, Kendrick Lamar’s electrifying performance of “The Blacker The Berry” and “ Alright” at the 2016 Grammys, which the audience at “Profiles of Abolition” joined Davis in praising robustly as indicating new horizons of possibility. It’s no surprise why this is so, as Lamar at once evokes the unlivable (anti)social destinies of global racial capitalism and simultaneously imagines otherwise. Lamar’s band enters the stage in a chain gang, while some are jailed, tracing the trajectory “from the prison of slavery to the slavery of prison.” Yet while Lamar spits rhymes between beats dropping like bullets, the saxophonist’s blare behind bars affirms that cages cannot contain creative dissent. Amidst a deep historical pulse, the re-signification of racialized symbols, and a stunned audience that rose in standing ovation, lies the poetic knowledge that—to paraphrase Fred Moten’s critique of Immanuel Kant—the creative wings of the Black Radical Imagination cannot be clipped.

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Poetic Knowledge in Outerspace

Poetic knowledge is born in the great silence of scientific knowledge.
— Aimé Césaire

In discussing poetic knowledge, I evoke Robin D.G. Kelley’s *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination*. In this indispensable book, Kelley quotes Césaire’s essay “Poetry and Knowledge” to elaborate Césaire’s term, which explains how poetry is capable of generating creative solutions to social problems where science fails. In Kelley’s words: “We must remember that the conditions and the very existence of social movements enable participants to imagine something different, to realize that things need not always be this way. It is that imagination, that effort to see the future in the present, that I shall call ‘poetry’ or ‘poetic knowledge.’” This statement about the necessity of poetry where science fails can be extended to social scientific methods of addressing systems of domination. As important as tracing the myriad untenable fates power engineers on purpose, equally critical is that which the social sciences often leave untouched: the way that grassroots organizers, community-based artists, and poets harness the “power to see the future in the present.” In other words, research that exposes the brutal maneuvers of gendered racial capitalism, as significant as it remains, needs the antidote of artistry to chart new star maps to a livable social world.

I’ll never forget sitting around UC Santa Barbara’s American Cultures and Global Contexts Center director Felice Blake’s table one afternoon, as we planned the next *Antiracism Inc.* event, when her daughter Malena dropped poetic knowledge, the wisdom of which far exceeded her years: she looked at us incredulously and explained, matter of factly, how any analysis

6 Ibid., 9.
of anti-Black racism needed to account for outerspace. Her brilliance echoes the Afrofuturist funk of Sun Ra’s *Space Is the Place*, Parliament Funkadelic’s *Mothership Connection*, and Janelle Monáe’s *The Electric Lady*. More specifically, it indicates the everyday awareness of Kelley’s concept of a “more expansive, fluid, ‘cosmos-politan’ definition of blackness, to teach us that we are not merely inheritors of a culture but its makers.”

It’s easy to forget about the imagination as a necessary resource, amidst seas of statistics and the lived trauma — often fetishized in academic spaces — they point to. Yet the poets gathered in this collection dream new worlds into existence, reminding us of the danger of forgetting the fundamental agency of, in Malena’s words, not forgetting outerspace.

**The Poetics of Activism, the Activism of Poetry**

As Critical Resistance co-director Mohamed Shehk says, “abolition is both a beautiful vision but also a practical organizing strategy.” Poetic and abolitionist imaginaries continue to intervene in our current political and cultural landscape in ways that challenge the violent status quo. As our beautiful vision reminds us, we are not the passive observers of history; we are active agents in mobilizing to fight against the seemingly inevitable continuation of power across flexible regimes. Even more importantly, we build sustainable communities. To be *against* something suggests that someone else defines the terms of a dialectical relation. Yet the Black Radical Imagination moves to the *works*, which is to say, how we can model transformative approaches to justice, even and especially when they defy state recognition. Once the state assimilates our resistance, it no longer

7 Ibid., 2.

8 As Kelley warns against in *Freedom Dreams*, “There are very few contemporary political spaces where the energies of love and imagination are understood and respected as powerful social forces” (4).

speaks to or for us. In an era of neoliberal multiculturalism that incorporates antiracist discourse through rhetorical traps of “inclusion” and “diversity,” we refuse the possibility of reforming or “humanizing” fundamentally inhumane institutions.

This refusal of organizing as reactionary, and our insistence on deep creativity and world-building, also speaks to how and why “antiracism” as a term often interpellates those invested in the philosophy of white liberalism, not the Black Radical Tradition. The neoliberal progress narrative of reformist antiracism — or Civil Rights struggle as assimilation into rather than transformation of foundationally racist institutions — simultaneously occludes and reinforces ongoing brutality. Thus, it is largely the assimilative model of antiracism that has been incorporated, not modalities of the Black Radical Tradition. We came to Antiracism Works precisely on these terms, asking what flees incorporation through constant reinvention: not legal appeals to reform carceral power, but a transformative way of being in the world. Against an ethic of collective care, the antiracism that has been most fiercely co-opted is precisely the version that was about incorporation, and thus bedmates with the state.

Holding in tension both what confounds and what compels change — or how antiracism gets incorporated into oppressive regimes and how alternative social formations disrupt this co-optation — has been central to the Antiracism Inc. program. Rather than perceiving the persistence of domestic and border policing, the prison industrial complex and immigration control apparatus (with their invented wars on drugs and terror), labor exploitation, and other forms of state violence as signs of defeat, cultural producers continue to posit concrete visions of justice. While activist-oriented scholarship risks performatively enacting rather than dynamically investing in social change, our project has everywhere shaped and made us accountable to our coalitional work and vice versa. For example, the Coalition for Sustainable Communities formed in response to an Antiracism Inc. event series we hosted titled “Engaged Activism/Activist Encounters,” which compelled our local engagements during the 2013–14 programming year. This second year of the program
featured the subheading *Antiracism Works* and sought to extend the critical frames for addressing issues central to *Antiracism Inc.* by bridging intellectual work with coalitional possibility. From the Shawn Greenwood Working Group\(^{10}\) in Ithaca, New York, to UC Santa Barbara Students for Justice in Palestine, “Activist Encounters” engaged grassroots responses to police murder, global security, drones, immigration, detention, occupation, and incarceration.

As the Coalition for Sustainable Communities learned in our fight against the proposed jail and ICE detention center projects in North Santa Barbara County, people will often be more receptive to critique if you propose alternative visions of safety and security without cops and cages. The creation of inventive solutions functions as a practical organizing strategy. Using creative tactics in public spaces, from community forums to an Isla Vista Earth Day Festival in 2014, we exposed how — amidst an economic crisis — the so-called public safety budget justified a proposal to spend over $153,000,000 to build the North Santa Barbara County Jail.\(^{11}\) As the county increased investment in imprisonment, it decreased funding for health and public assistance — concretely demonstrating how unchecked expenditure on carceral power siphons resources away from a plethora of programs that actually sustain communities. Since the state is hemorrhaging money to uphold the inundated and ineffective punishment industry, the county also proposed to increase sales tax.\(^{12}\) Instead of standing only in opposition to the expansion project, we fought for recognition of life-affirming alternatives to imprisonment — understanding that the proposed jail project

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10 This grassroots working group convened to challenge clear injustices and discrepancies in the case of Shawn Greenwood, a 29-year-old Black man who was killed by Ithaca Police Department Officer Brian Bangs on February 23, 2010 in Ithaca, New York. The working group later focused on challenging police violence, militarization, and racism in the broader community.


12 Ibid.
would not alleviate overcrowding, but further bolster an inherently violent system that attacks the physical, mental, spiritual, and social health of our communities. In illustrating these realities, the Coalition for Sustainable Communities used our collective creativity as a resource to perform and embody the motto “Jails are Toxic.” While we had some victories, what sustained us through the defeats is the knowledge of what we stand for, not only what we stand against.

Members of the Antiracism Inc. working group continually affirmed that a generative analysis produces hope, not just keen awareness of power’s machinations. For example, in “Breaking the Chains and Steering the Ship,” George Lipsitz insists that the ongoing struggle needs amplified dialogue between academics and activists to produce new sites of organizing in the academy that necessarily extend to larger collective networks. Knowledge production, grassroots organizing, abolitionist frameworks, and arts practice remain generatively entangled and bound up together even and especially in their tensions and contradictions. As the co-founder of the Combahee River Collective, Barbara Smith, urged in “Toward a Black Feminist Criticism,” the mutual exchange among artists, activists, and academics can create new epistemologies, cosmologies, and social formations capable of opening us to “not only know better how to live, but how to dream.” The poetry we find most compelling moves us toward our dreams of a just world.

Poetic Praxis

Since its inception in the fall of 2012, Antiracism Inc. centered the poetic work of imagining otherwise. In this section, I briefly outline how poetry intersected with three years of program-

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ming at UCSB’s American Cultures and Global Contexts Center, housed in the English Department. While I served as graduate fellow of the program, Dr. Felice Blake’s directorship constantly reminded us to not just create space for poetry, but to make poetic praxis the guiding logic of our organizing efforts.

In that spirit, we hosted a daylong workshop in the spring of 2013, “Poetic Interventions,” which brought together community members, students, staff, and interested faculty, as well as New York and Bay Area-based hip hop and spoken word artists: Dubian Ade, Ebony P. Donnley, Daniel Hershel Silber-Baker, Gregory Mitchell, Colin Masashi Ehara, and David Scott. With these poetic pedagogues and radical visionaries we engaged our imaginations and collectivity. Through a series of writing prompts, community-building exercises, and captivating performances, we put our finger on the pulse of new language and strategies to intervene in the critical impasses our current racial landscape presents to possibilities for justice. “Poetic Interventions” did not remain in the space of critique but ultimately ushered us into the works—or, how we must constantly generate and manifest new propositions for antiracism, despite and especially because of its co-optation.

Elated and invigorated by our coming together for “Poetic Interventions,” we invited these poets back to the Antiracism Inc./Works Anticonference in the spring of 2014. Our anticonference featured the voices of faculty, organizers, students, and poets from across the country, and focused on the reading and redefinition of antiracism in the Age of Obama. In lieu of a typical Q&A after a panel of speakers presented their work, invited poets led audience members through a series of exercises to address the questions, insights, and possibilities emerging from the conversation. Moreover, the Coalition for Sustainable Communities facilitated a teach-in, “How to Stop the North County Jail.” Members from PODER (People Organizing for the Defense and Equal Rights of Santa Barbara Youth) also attended, offering their insight on the Santa Barbara gang injunction struggle, which they ultimately won. Our poetic praxis meant creating space for real engagement of pressing issues, rather than ab-
abstract analyses and academic performances divorced from the urgency that animates our organizing commitments.

As we leveraged institutional resources for community-based projects, we did not fetishize the space of the university as a privileged site of study. During the spring of 2014, we presented our work on fighting prison and jail expansion projects at community forums and local schools, such as San Marcos High School, where we collaborated with Ismael Huerta, an eminent youth educator and counselor. We also founded Anti-racism Writes, an afterschool tutoring program for local junior high and high school students oriented toward critical and creative expression. Our work was guided by the motto “Writing is a Right and Form of Self-Empowerment.”

Finally, our program featured a visiting poet in residence, Daniel Hershel Silber-Baker, who facilitated a course in the spring of 2014, “The Poetics of Struggle.” It brought together students across campus interested in how words can reckon with and transform histories of struggle, how 36-letter alphabets can make room for marvelous analyses and channel ancestors whose spirits invigorate the work. From Nina Simone, Bootsy Collins, and Kendrick Lamar to Aimé Césaire, James Baldwin, and Audre Lorde, the class dove into the aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition to emerge from the depths with new words and worlds between our open palms. The workshop-oriented class centered group activities, self-reflection, and self-revelation. In collectively studying Audre Lorde’s “The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action,”15 for example, we interrogated why we speak, of what we are afraid, what we have survived, how we resist, and how we heal. In the classroom, we held space for healing, and for the words we do not yet have. We then asked ourselves how our own healing is necessarily embedded in a larger project of developing holistic visions of collective

social life. Ultimately, the class was nothing short of a thesis on the work of poetry.

Star Map to What Follows

Acknowledging the limited authority of the dominant, this collection chooses to not only speak back to power but to radically reimagine the terms of how we connect meaningfully with each other. Exchanging a reactionary position for a creative one does not mean a naïve minimization of the material force of state violence on people’s lives; it simply refuses to let that violence delimit the spiritual authority of our communities and commitments. The poems gathered here make powerful propositions for the future grounded in rich legacies of the past. These poems provide a through-line across each section of the book, from “Working Politics,” “Educational Strategies,” and “Cultural Productions” to “Racial Justice Praxis.”

From the so-called “post-racial” era of Obama to antiracism in the time of Trump, or from the colorblind mechanism of disavowal to the current era of neo-fascist rule, Antiracism Inc. helps us interrogate the mechanisms through which we understand continuity rather than rupture across historical moments. For example, Dubian Ade’s work addresses the tension between the Black freedom struggle and white liberal denial in a post-Civil Rights era. Dahlak Brathwaite’s “The Good One” is also situated in a post-Civil Rights era where racism so often attempts to wear antiracist masks. His poem brilliantly indicts neoliberal multiculturalist incorporation: “I’m just playing the game with the tokens given / We already Willy Wonka’s chocolate factory / Here’s your golden ticket.” He continues, mocking colorblindness ideology: “Your Barack Obama / You voted for him / You didn’t even see he was black!” From Obama to Trump, Jari Bradley’s “Trump 2016” gestures toward Black queer love as survival and resistance to the country’s ongoing violences, which the neoliberal police state attempts to conceal: “This has always been America — a silent bloodlust / loud in the heart until it bursts.”
Against this bloodlust that bursts, Colin Masashi Ehara’s “Akira” affirms the presence and power of social movements led by young people of color. And David Scott’s “Gangland Wonderama” theorizes how people negotiate the deep wounds born out of structural harm. Ebony P. Donnley explores the politics of desire amidst state-sanctioned death, and Black queer love as a revolutionary act: “black femmes / i didn’t intend for this to be worship,/ but a deep longing for a call to arms,/ for us to lock ours.” Corinne Contreras and Sophia Terazawa ground us in space to meditate on how knowledge of the traumatic rifts of hate speech and diasporic memory urge people toward one another through storytelling. Directly summoning his pedagogy and our collective philosophy, Daniel Hershel Silber-Baker’s poems contest the state’s attempted theft of the radical imagination and assert language’s power to heal, create, and “hold spiritual space.” As he testifies, the duplicitous face and brute force of state power has co-opted, sanitized, and incorporated antiracist discourse and strategies. Our volume as a whole intervenes in this oppressive “antiracism” by bearing witness to its brutality — and looking to poetry for an otherwise and otherwhere that hungered for another kind of collectivity.