

# To Live in the Wake, to Wade in the Water, to Sleep (and Wake) with Anger: A Response to Ronald David Glass

Kal Alston

*Syracuse University*

Thank you to Ron Glass for ‘telling it true’ as always. <sup>1</sup> There’s a lot to sink my teeth in and, in my response, I am attempting to recognize and respect a ‘contact zone’ between the passions igniting Ron’s paper and some of the encounters, ‘contacts,’ if you will, that I am having in my work right now that bridge over art, truth, and the politics of recognition.

Glass states emphatically:

I believe that not one more BIPOC youth life should be denied, wasted, or lost before we set as central to our thinking as a field the conceptualization of a philosophy of education adequate to the urgency and significance of Black lives mattering.<sup>2</sup>

I am feeling as though at this time I can only work in the ‘wake’ that fans out in the waters of history, of knowing, of collectivizing, and imagining. In preparing to respond to Ron’s paper, I reread Christina Sharpe’s trenchant account of how she uses a multi-vocal notion of the “wake” in order to concern herself “with the endurance of antiblackness in and outside of the contemporary.”<sup>3</sup> But while she joins those scholars who examine Black “abjection from the realm of the human,” she is also taking on the challenge of using a lens of the ‘quotidian disasters’ of the present to ask “what, if anything, survives this ... ontological negation ... and how to mediate this un/survival.”<sup>4</sup> She takes seriously what she brings forth in her gloss of Wilderson that “violence against the Black is gratuitous and not contingent; not violence that occurs between subjects at the level of conflict in the world but violence at the level of a structure that required, indeed invented, the Black to be the constitutive outside for those who would construct themselves as the human.”<sup>5</sup> However, Sharpe does insist on using literature, performance, and visual culture as her tools of examination.

Nonetheless, her book reminds me why afropessimism is not for me. If I do not believe that there is any future in any wish, any action, any conception of Black that can elide that ontological negation, then I cannot continue to think about education, much less philosophy, in any serious way. Nor do I believe that we can imagine our way out of history. As suggested by Langston Hughes, the problem with Afrofuturism as a single-toned response to social erasure is that “this is the mountain standing in the way of any true Negro art in America – this urge within the race toward whiteness, the desire to pour racial individuality into the mold of American standardization, and to be as little Negro and as much American as possible.”<sup>6</sup> This 1926 caution, or critique if you prefer, of the pitfalls of the first wave of Afrofuturism in the period of the Harlem Renaissance, still stands as a caution to all of us – not just writers of speculative fiction, no matter how much any of us might prefer consumption of NK Jemison’s collection, *How Long ’Til Black Future Month?*<sup>7</sup> as bedtime reading to more slavery porn.

#### LET’S PLAY A GAME: THREE TRUTHS AND A LIE

I am not your Negro

Archivists are dangerous (preserving Black life when forces would rather we be destroyed or forgotten)

Love, Study, Struggle is a remedy for our erasure

Philosophy of education is

I admit it, I introduced the game, but I am unsure of the rules or the answers in their entirety. It’s up to those who choose to play. But I am going to try to understand my ability to survive in the wake and what it means to keep one’s head above water.

#### I AM NOT YOUR NEGRO

James Baldwin is dead, but he has never been so present. I got a double dose of Professor Eddie Glaude Jr. this week: one time in conversation with Pro-

fessor Clint Smith,<sup>8</sup> to support the organization Facing History and Ourselves, and a second time as a speaker in the Friends of the Central Library author series in Syracuse (the night before I came to California for this PES meeting). Professor Glaude has the intonation of the preacher and the taste of a honey-baked ham in his delivery. He, in both presentations, calls for historical reflection through biography. Clint Smith, on his part, invokes Baldwin: “the world tells the Black child over and over again that they are criminal, and the work of the educator is to help that child understand that they are not the criminal, but it is in fact the society that created the conditions that that Black child is forced to grow up in that is the criminal.”<sup>9</sup> I believe that particular contention of Baldwin’s is essential but not enough because the effect of the system is not simply to analogize the child to the criminal but to erase the child into the system that allows for the criminal to stand in and set the conditions for incarceration and injustice. The answer back cannot rest on the shoulders of any given educator whom the child might or might not encounter but on a shift of consciousness, exhibited in public, through which, collectively, we might learn and unlearn, see and unsee, hear and unhear – disrupt the ‘normal.’

So, my question is what can be expressed? My question is what can be read? My question is who can read and be read?

ARCHIVISTS ARE DANGEROUS (PRESERVING BLACK LIFE  
WHEN FORCES WOULD RATHER WE BE DESTROYED OR FOR-  
GOTTEN)

Kimberlé Crenshaw introduced the construct of “intersectionality” in the wake of an employment discrimination case where a Black woman was essentially denied her legal status because she was not similarly situated to either the other Black workers (who were all men) or the other women (who were white). The court was unable to determine who she was before the bar.<sup>10</sup> Crenshaw, thankfully, is alive and also never more present – she was also part of the Harvard Law School cohort that pressed at Critical Legal Studies (that sought to expand legal arguments to include studies of material conditions) to conceive of the legal frameworks and apparatus as a manifestation and reification of “Racism is normal science.” Her organization AAPF (African American Policy Forum) has

been supporting educators who have been disciplined, fired, or otherwise pushed out for reflecting back both history and present experiences to students who have been erased from narratives of the US. Another tenet of CRT is Derrick A. Bell's interest convergence,<sup>11</sup> which argues that wide (read white) support for moves toward justice are conditioned on both perceived advantage for the elites and lack of disadvantage – this is the theory he used to criticize the idea that Brown was the solution to the problems of racism. Interest convergence is a disruptive idea to the notion of inevitable liberal progress; hence it has a lot of critics. But I think that if Bell were still with us, he might recognize the limitations of the eruptions post the George Floyd murder – and the importance of the effects of white children learning about the link of history from 1619 on, seeing their parents perhaps putting up a #BlackLivesMatter sign in the yard (at no cost to their comfort) AND continuing to luxuriate in the privilege of whiteness – The children began to hold themselves, and their schools, and their families accountable for that privilege – and that confrontation provided fuel for hostile school board meetings (ably assisted and cynically supported by Christopher Rufo and his ilk.<sup>12</sup> Luckily, they have found a perfect tool for the job). But it is not the guilt or bad feelings felt by their children that is at stake but their own calling to account. They don't want to feel bad, but they do not mind at all that BIPOC students can be disappeared again and continuously. Through curriculum, through the pedagogy, through the school safety officer, through the Child Protective System, through the legislatures and the governors' pen.

#BlackLives do matter.

But these days I am feeling

#SayHerName

#TelltheTruth

Can we call it education if

We cannot bring ourselves to tell

The fucking truth?

As Sharpe points out, that erasure is literal as well as figurative. The

wake is both imagined and felt. Joy Buolamwini founded the Algorithmic Justice League. In her doctoral research at MIT, she discovered that the AI (artificial intelligence) face recognition software she was working on with her team could not read her face until she made a molded white mask. I love that she now calls herself a poet of code – continuing to study the technology at the same time as she diversifies the means through which faces come back into focus. Her group successfully pushed back on a rule the Internal Revenue Service was going to put in place to require the use of an AI app to interact with the agency.<sup>13</sup> The group came to public view through a documentary film (Coded Bias) and continues its work through education, public discourse, and art/representation. She reminds us that racism is normal science,<sup>14</sup> and someone always needs to be making visible what looks and feels like progress.

What is Philosophy of Education to the Negro? (s/o to Frederick Douglass)

Pratt was a philosopher of education

He said, “Kill the Indian, save the man.”

He had distaste for the idea of literal extinction,

But

He didn't cavil at the figurative

Tongue tied/hair cut and manacles for the rebels

And he didn't scruple (along with his Canadian cousins) to bury the bones

Out of sight

Never out of spirit

Domesticate Christianize Servantize

Now repatriate rematriate those remains

Pay them what you owe

Pay them what you owe

What can never be re/Paid.

Jefferson was a philosopher of education

Called for public university to educate the common man for  
democracy

While he called for Sally to do his bidding

While he called for James to make his mac 'n cheese to impress

Wrote elegant prose declaring the Creator's intentions

For equality

While he wrote papers proscribing his children's manumission

He allowed that he had seen

Artistry in some 'Indian' carvings on pipes

Something sublime in occasional oratory

For the Negro, no element of artistry in visual arts nor any  
oratory worth of note

For the Negro ardent love and a full share of misery, but no  
imagination

Not to mention an understanding of beauty

"Religion indeed has produced a Phyllis Wheatley; but it could not  
produce a poet"<sup>15</sup>

Said Jefferson. What in the world does he know of love?

Don't tell me that history is in the past.

Don't tell me that I should get over it.

I don't forget. At least not as it rises in the wake.

I don't forgive. At least until there is teshuvah.

I will try to Love, as Robin Kelley tells me.

I will try to Study, even if it is in Moten's undercommons.

I will always Struggle

To stay in and above the wake

To continue to sing along the waters to my ancestors, to my loves, to my progeny's progeny.

---

1 In the presentation, I read the entire preface ("a guide to undrowning") of *Undrowned: Black Feminist Lessons from Marine Mammals*, by Alexis Pauline Gumbs (Chico, CA: AK Press, 2020).

2 Ronald David Glass, "Living the Dream of Martin Luther King, Jr.: A Philosophy of Education Presidential Address," *Philosophy of Education* 78, no. 1 (2022).

3 Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: on Blackness and being* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 14.

4 Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 14.

5 Sharpe, 14.

6 Isiah Lavender and Lisa Yaszek, "The First Death of Afrofuturism," *Extrapolation* 61, no. 1-2 (2020): 1-6, <https://www.liverpooluniversitypress.co.uk/journals/issue/5385>.

7 N.K. Jemisin, *How Long 'til Black History Future Month?* (NY: Orbit Books, 2018).

8 Clint Smith, *How the Word is Passed: A Reckoning with the History of Slavery across America* (New York: Little, Brown, 2021).

9 Clint Smith, from the transcript of *Facing History and Our Lives* webinar, March 8, 2022.

10 Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics," *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, no. 1(1989), retrieved

from <http://chicagounbound.uchicago.edu/uclf/vol1989/iss1/8>.

11 Derrick A. Bell, “Brown v. Board of Education and the Interest-Convergence Dilemma,” *Harvard Law Review* 93, no. 3 (1980): 518-33. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1340546>.

12 Christopher Rufo is an American conservative activist and is a senior fellow at the Manhattan Institute. During 2020-21, he focused many of his efforts on leading efforts to limit the teaching of American history vis-à-vis race.

13 James Hendler, “Why the Prospect of the IRS Using Facial Recognition Is so Alarming,” <https://slate.com/technology/2022/02/irs-id-me-facial-recognition.html>.

14 CODED BIAS explores the fallout of MIT Media Lab researcher Joy Buolamwini’s discovery that facial recognition does not see dark-skinned faces accurately, and her journey to push for the first-ever legislation in the U.S. to govern against bias in the algorithms that impact us all. Dir.: Shalini Kantayya, 2020.

15 Thomas Jefferson, NOTES ON THE STATE OF VIRGINIA, 266-67. Retrieved from <https://www.thirteen.org/wnet/slavery/experience/education/docs4.html>.