Slide 1: #BLM: Memoirs and Literary Responses

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Slide 2: “The condition of black life is one of mourning.”
(a friend of Rankine’s, New York Times, June 22nd, 2015)

“There really is no mode of empathy that can replicate the daily strain of knowing that as a black person you can be killed simply for being black.”
(Rankine, Citizen, 2014)

Critic Imani Perry called 2016 “The Year of the Black Memoir.” Celebrated writers like poetess Claudia Rankine and novelists Slide 3 Ta-Nehisi Coates, Jesmyn Ward, and Kiese Laymon, but also activists and journalists have produced autobiographical texts that echo and reflect on the Black Lives Matter movement, launched in 2013 Slide 4. Within the theoretical context of the genre of militant memoirs and African American autobiographical writing, three memoirs stand out: Slide 5 When They Call You a Terrorist (2018) by one of the leader of the movement, Patrisse Khan-Cullors; Charlene Carruthers’s Unapologetic A Black Queer and Feminist Mandate for Radical Movements (2019). Carruthers is the head of the Black Youth Project 100, created in 2013 in answer to Zimmerman’s acquittal for the murder of Trayvon Martin (Carruthers 116). The third is Alicia Garza’s The Purpose of Power. How to Build Movements for the Twenty-first Century (2020). Cullors is credited for creating on Facebook the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter that went viral as she answered Alicia Garza’s comment. Opal Tomali is the third leader of a movement that chose a non-hierarchical structure and was led by Black queer women. Slide 6

Slide 7 Definitions of the genre abound as memoirs hover between two opposite poles: historical testimony and personal intimacy (Aissaoui 2002 12). The three works focus on the BLM movement and hence map out the conjunction of an individual story and a collective endeavor. They report on a “historical” event, even if their closeness to that event makes them more akin to testimonies. As one review points out: “The challenge of reconciling the narrative of a person’s life with that of an historical moment in general is particularly acute when the “moment” is not yet historical at all, but still urgently unfolding.” (Kincaid 280).
These works report on the emergence of a collective struggle in an era when the individual and autobiographical writing effect a powerful come back, troubling Roland Barthes’s and Michel Foucault’s assertions on the “death of the subject” and concurrent predictions of that history has come to an end. The link between life writing and the black literary tradition is organic. Memoir, as “the offspring of the slave narrative” has thoroughly shaped that tradition (Perry). Stemming from the 19th century and constituted of such landmark novels as Richard Wright’s *Native Son*, Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, or Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, that rich and powerful tradition has lately been questioned. In 2011, Kenneth Warren indeed declared there was no longer such a thing as African American literature for the end of segregation and the progress of the Civil Rights movement had stifled its major creative thrust. As these memoirs testify and the attendant creative and theoretical works--novels as well as poetry and essays--attest, African American literature is very much alive and kicking. The BLM movement, which signals the enduring presence of systemic racism in the US, might even have given it a new momentum. Moreover, these memoirs are inscribed within the tradition of militantism and political struggle that is also at one with black writing. From the onset, African American writers have been expected to tackle the issue of race and define an aesthetics that should reflect their politics.

As political leaders and queer women, the authors place particular emphasis on the way in which women have been erased from the history of political movements, and how racial patriarchy has structured the struggles. For instance, Cullors describes the mobilization of the Dream Defenders (Umi Agnew), Al Sharpton, the protests, to throw light on the event and eventually bring Zimmerman to trial. The coming together of the Trans Women of Color Collective, the Marsha P. Johnson Institute and BLM further leads to a long passage about the role of women as “caretakers of this community”: “it is always women who do the work, even as men get the praise” (WT 219, italics in the original). Slide 8 For Carruthers, the roles of female leaders, such as Ella Baker, Rosa Parks, the action of gay activist Bayard Rustin, or of the founders of STAR, Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Riviera, should be brought forward and centered. Black feminist history should be taught as integral to the history of Black liberation. Garza’s *The Purpose of Power* also brings to the fore her own feminism (which she owes her mother), her queerness, and her fight for trans women: “I am used to environments where women, usually women of color, are carrying the lion’s share of the work but are only a
minuscule part of the visible leadership.” The critical political philosophy of #BLM finds its roots in Black radical feminism: Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman, Angela Davis, Audre Lorde, Sonia Sanchez, Assata Shakur.

Unapologetic concludes on a defense and illustration of the “Chicago Model” of community organizing and a mandate for future struggles. Chicago, the city of the Great Migration, home to Emmet Till, is central to the black radical tradition and to black culture, with such prominent figures as Langston Hughes, Richard Wright, and Lorraine Hansberry. The Chicago Model managed to bring together organizations and institutions that were not necessarily politically aligned. They successfully demonstrated against the 2013 police conference, an action that gave birth to #StopTheCops and #FundBlackFutures campaigns. The subtitle of Garza’s essay, How to Build Movements for the Twenty-first Century, likewise underlines that her intervention is about mobilization, community building, rather than a reflection on her own life, the focus of the first part of the book. She insists that “hashtags don’t build movements. People do” and is critical of social media as tools for change. She goes over her training as a professional community organizer and the groups she belonged to—San Francisco Women Against Rape, People Organized To Win Employment Rights (POWER), the National Domestic Workers Alliance, the Black Lives Matter Global Network and the Black Futures Lab—to explain that BLM is the outcome of a long and highly reflexive engagement in community work. Her book has a frank pedagogical purpose: to give advice, to train in grassroots organizing.

In sum, Cullors’ memoir rests on a more traditional apprehension of a private subjectivity that reconstructs intense moments of personal experience through dramatization. Carruthers’ opts for a political subjectivity that refuses to be individual and intimate, to turn her text into an essay on the Black radical tradition and its actual relevance. The singular trajectory of Now they Call You becomes in Unapologetic the blueprint for a radical movement that is truly transformative, a call to arms, a call to action. The Purpose of Power, appearing a few years later, goes over Garza’s role as co-creator of BLM. It offers a nuanced analysis on movement building, a critique of social media and of celebrity. It focuses on how to acquire power for the most vulnerable—women, queer and trans people, the poor—to bring about long-lasting social change.
If we turn to creative fiction or to essay-writing (another tradition specific to black writers), novelists, poets, and essayists have echoed that historical moment of mobilization, that time of reckoning. In 2015, (back to slide 6) Ta-Nehisi Coates’s *Between the World and Me*, shaped as a letter written to his fifteen-year-old son Samori, took as its template Baldwin’s letter to his nephew in *The Fire Next Time* (1963). In part 2 and 3, Coates mentions the murder of a schoolmate, Prince Jones, whom he had met at Howard University, as a result of police brutality, and his subsequent visit to his mother, Dr. Mable Jones. Slide 9 The autobiographical essay is a fatherly warning for an education into black manhood when the black body is always under threat. Poet Claudia Rankine in *Citizen, an American Lyric* (2015) and *Just Us* (2020) deals with racism at its most violent and in everyday life, in the shape of micro-aggressions defined after the pioneering work of Pierce in the 70s, and more recently Sue, and Williams. Of *Citizen*, she says: “... I wanted to ask: who gets to hold that status – despite everyone technically having it? How is it embodied and honored? The title contains a question.” Slide 10 Mississippi writer Jesmyn Ward’s *Men We Reaped. A Memoir* (2013) is a tombeau dedicated to the five men close to her who lost their lives to drugs, suicide, and accident. Slide 11 This work of mourning echoes the litany of deaths at the hands of police that triggered the movement: Trayvon Martin, Breonna Taylor, Eric Garner, Tamir Rice, George Floyd. The omnipresence of death is also echoed by Kiese Laymon’s *How to Slowly Kill Yourself and Others in America*, Ward put together an anthology, *The Fire this Time* (2017), which gathered black writer’s contributions in response to BLM.

**Slide 12: Bibliography:**

A. Memoirs

B. Journalistic essays
C. Creative works, memoirs and essays

D) more...
Nathan, 2018. *The Hate U Give*. Film de George Tillman Jr., 2018
Arthur Jaffa, *Dreams are Colder than Death*. 2013.