

# Narrative Reconstruction and Collective Knowledge

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In a podcast episode of *Intersectionality Matters*, entitled “Narrating the Nightmare and (Re)Imagining the Possible,” Kimberlé Crenshaw spoke with writers Kiese Laymon, Viet Thanh Nguyen, and Arundhati Roy about the power and value of storytelling in times of crisis.<sup>1</sup> “The work of social justice,” Crenshaw observed, “is the work of narrative reconstruction, building new stories around facts that are often disregarded, invisibilized, and taken for granted as acceptable and unremarkable features of social life.”<sup>2</sup> The conversation that followed touched on power and representation; the writer/artist in a society structured by racial capitalism, settler colonialism, and unending war; and the political and ethical dimensions of fiction, nonfiction, memoir, scholarship, satire, and humor—each important to understanding where we have been and where we might go from here. “The struggle at hand is not simply one for survival,” Crenshaw continued, “but a struggle of interpretation, a struggle over what the story of this moment is and will be for future generations if we are to survive.” Indeed, how we choose to narrate our present—whose stories we tell, whose lives we center—matters for how we might collectively act in response to crisis. As someone who teaches literature and cultural studies and also grapples with questions of power, memory and the production of knowledge in my own writing, I listened attentively to the conversation. How might the classroom be a site for the work of narrative

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1. *Intersectionality Matters*, African American Policy Forum

2. “Under the Blacklight: Narrating the Nightmare and (Re)Imagining the Possible,” *Intersectionality Matters*, May 20, 2020 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E0ppfjbESV4>

reconstruction? How might students engage in the “struggle of interpretation” to frame what is to be done both now and in the future?

These last months living and teaching in the time of COVID-19 have been deeply unsettling. The news daily becomes more grim as the racially-stratified death toll rises higher and higher (itself an inaccurate accounting), while anti-Asian racism is normalized across the political spectrum. Police and white vigilantes continue to terrorize Black communities and those thousands protesting the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Sean Read, Tony McDade, Ahmaud Arbery (the list goes on) are met by the full force of the militarized U.S. police state. The cruelty and disdain of our government for our lives—but especially for Black lives—comes into ever starker relief. In the midst of all of this, I have begun to question anew what I teach and how I teach it, especially as the most basic features of classroom instruction—in-person engagement with students, collective discussion and debate—have shifted both uneasily and unevenly to online platforms. Like many of my educator friends and colleagues I feel like I am treading unstable ground, wanting to support my students as best I can but also struggling to do so under our present conditions.

Unsurprisingly, my students have been a lifeline. The generosity and care with which they have continued to engage with me and each other online has reinvigorated for me some semblance of hope, intention, and energy. They have also reminded me that the critical languages and interdisciplinary frameworks of Black, Native and ethnic studies, and transnational queer and feminist studies remain vital for any clear-eyed understanding of our present moment and for imagining the kind of future world we would like to inhabit. On our discussion boards and in their final projects, for example, students in my queer literature and film course last semester used Marlon M. Bailey’s theorization of cultural and performance labor in the Detroit ballroom scene to analyze the networks of queer of color kinship and care in the context of the AIDS crisis, narrativized in Joseph Cassara’s novel *The House of Impossible Beauties* and on the FX television series *Pose*.<sup>3</sup> Other students offered critical readings of Barry Jenkins’s *Moonlight*.<sup>4</sup> Using interpretive frameworks offered by Ashon Crawley and the Combahee River Collective, students discussed the film’s depiction of Black queer intimacy, touch and feeling as spaces from which to critique the dispossessions of slavery, mass incarceration, and poverty.<sup>5</sup> Just this week in my summer “Empire and Its Afterlives” course, two students drew on their reading of scholarship by Dorothy Roberts, Anne McClintock and Deborah A. Miranda to examine the

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3. Cassara, Joseph. *The House of Impossible Beauties*. HarperCollins, 2018. Bailey, Marlon M. *Butch Queens Up in Pumps: Gender, Performance, and Ballroom Culture in Detroit*. University of Michigan Press, 2013. *Pose*. Created by Ryan Murphy, Brad Falchuk and Steven Canals. FX, 2018-.

4. *Moonlight*. Directed by Barry Jenkins. A24, 2016.

5. Crawley, Ashon. “To Be Held by *Moonlight*.” *The Root*, February 27, 2017; Combahee River Collective, “A Black Feminist Statement.” April 1977.

necessary work of forging queer feminist solidarities in the face of multiple, nonequivalent histories of colonial conquest and gendered racialization.<sup>6</sup>

The academy is by design an isolating place, exacerbated further by gender, race, class, sexuality, ability and other categories of differentiation. The brilliant work that my students have produced under such precarious conditions is a reminder of something I thought I already knew but that somehow slipped from my grasp with the physical and social distancing necessitated by the COVID-19 crisis: it is only through collective engagement with each other that we might begin the work of narrative reconstruction. My students are ready, as am I. We start reading Toni Morrison's *Beloved* next week.

June 9, 2020

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6. Roberts, Dorothy. *Fatal Invention: How Science, Politics, and Big Business Re-create Race in the Twenty-First Century*. The New Press, 2011; McClintock, Anne. *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest*. Routledge, 1995; Miranda, Deborah A. "Extermination of the *Joyas*: Gendercide in Spanish California." *GLQ* 16, April 2010.