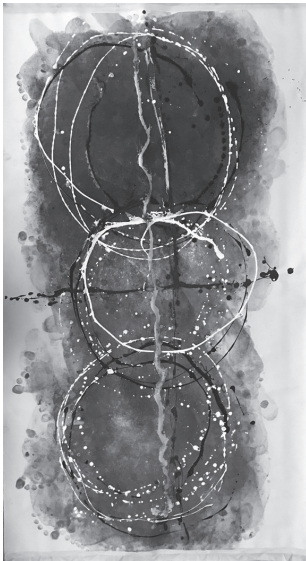


Protest, Prayer

Ashon T. Crawley



“dancing in one spot”
by Ashon Crawley

This American Life is antithetical to protest, to prayer. Though they might mythologize about la Niña, Pinta and Santa María, though they might wax

I can’t breathe.

Announced again. Return. Repetition. Grief.

And what is protest but a solicitation, a plea, a desire? And what is protest but an insistence that otherwise is not only able to be enacted but can materially emerge in, and thus against, the normative world? And does, continually. And has emerged. And is emerging.

Otherwise is the practice of breath and breathing. To breathe in an inhospitable place, in the context of settler colonialism and antiblack violence. To breathe inhospitable air and atmospheres. To breathe for black life, blackqueer possibility, is protest, is prayer.

And to pray is to announce relationship. Relationship to and with, at the very least, one’s breath. It is to make one’s flesh implement, conduit, instrument, with hopes of a different kind of way to live and relate to one another.

nostalgic about throwing boxed tea overboard ships as an act of dissidence, the American way of life has never been able to accommodate protest when it shows up and emerges from within black and indigenous and the various nonwhite strategies for living.

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And we are in a moment of intense protest, of intense prayer for otherwise than the normative world. There is no beginning to this resistance to white supremacy and its racial capitalism, its patriarchy, its cisheteronormativity. As soon as there was theft of land, of flesh, there was likewise resistance - protest and prayer - against such theft. But some might point to the murders of Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, Tony McDade as the most recent catalysts for struggling against the violence of policing, the violence of white supremacist organizing principles against our capacities to breathe, our being held captive by this regime of power and knowledge.

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And this particular moment against police violence is occurring against the backdrop of a world changing event, the pandemic, COVID-19. The stakes are clear because the danger is ever present. To gather in community breathing and sharing air when such breathing is the way the virus spreads, a virus that targets most emphatically though not only the lungs, is to enunciate the ways white supremacy targets the breath and breathing of black folks. We just wanna breathe. Breathe easy. Be easy. Live. What happens in protest, in prayer, is the practice of relation. Celebrate.

I am thinking about the poetic form of black life and love, a form of breathing the word, the phrase, the stanza. Lucille Clifton is a guide. *Won't you celebrate with me*¹, she questions.

Celebration because white supremacy has done a lot to make whiteness a protected class but absolutely nothing about it seems joyful or celebratory. Look at the way they who are committed to white supremacy refuse masks, look at the way those committed to whiteness carry guns against people screaming Black Lives Matter as if this plea, this protest and prayer, is an attack. Fear. There is so much fear in white supremacy. And whiteness seems to be so much about squandering relation and sociality.

Clifton's poem to me demonstrates sociality and relation—"won't YOU celebrate with me"—it is a call to together acknowledge the fact that white supremacy has not destroyed the joy she has with living. Shaped into a "kind

of life” but not one predicated on white supremacist logics, she celebrated a life that was also an outpouring, an unfolding into absolute possibility, absolute potential. We should learn from this outpouring. The poem is protest, is prayer.

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White supremacist capitalist patriarchy is capable of practicing harm but it cannot be nor produce nor practice a life of joy and celebration. It fails at its own attempt. There is an inventive capacity in black life that white supremacy cannot endure, an inventive capacity it seeks to destroy. This inventive capacity, its energy and verve, is at the root of black radicalism—like breathing it has to return, it has to be inhaled and exhaled, it has to be repetition. This inventive capacity is created continually out of imposition but also love that exceeds occasion.

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Otherwise possibility is the phrase I use to say that what we have is not all that is possible, that alternatives to the normative can exist, already exist in this world. We can look to traditions of the past to inform what is possible now. The practice of marronage—during the Antebellum period when enslaved people escaped plantations, marooning in woods and swamp interiors—is a dangerous practice of imagining other kinds of relations to one another, to the earth, to the world. And after imagining, these maroons put into practice the desires they imagined. Their imagination was protest, was prayer, and in such imagining they practiced otherwise possibility in this material world. It wasn’t about some celestial moment to come but was a striving to breathe in this world. And their world is our world. Imagination, the practice of otherwise possibility, is not the lack of fear, it does not mean one isn’t afraid. Imagination, the practice of otherwise possibility, is the recognition of—and honoring as sacred—fear and being afraid and moving in the direction of the alternative anyway, anyhow, in spite of.

And so it is. The protests during this pandemic make abundantly clear that black life, the striving for otherwise possibility, is not lived in absence of fear. I fear the contracting of the virus for the man that have made their flesh vulnerable to infection by gathering to scream together for relief against white supremacy. What they demonstrate is the way black life is a kind of courageous wisdom fashioned in the face of fear to continue to breathe and become otherwise. It has always been our time to practice alternatives. And we do so because of the love of our flesh, against the violence of the terribly violent white supremacist world.

July 8, 2020

Note

1. Lucille Clifton, "won't you celebrate with me," *Book of Light*. Copper Canyon Press. 1992, 25.