

Book Reviews

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Editorial note: Book reviews are lightly edited for clarity and typographical errors.

Reviews

THE LONELY LETTERS. By Ashon T. Crawley. Durham: Duke University Press, 2020.

In the first draft of my review, I wrote that Ashon Crawley's *The Lonely Letters* is a blending of love letter and serious intellectual inquiry into what he calls blackqueerness, but halfway through writing that document, I had to scrap it and start over. Because *The Lonely Letters* is not a blending of those two seemingly disparate genres, but rather an invitation for us to read the love letter *as* serious intellectual inquiry, the serious intellectual inquiry *as* love letter—an invitation that is “more robust, full, and non-coercive” and above all “reciprocal” in the search for that which is not yet but by no means undreamt (4).

There are numerous epistolary forms in Black literatures—and Crawley names a few as his touchpoints—but a central one that this meditation on blackqueerness as tenderness, as the haptic of possibility that challenges heteronormativity, liberal subjectivity, linear temporality and individual exceptionalism (and reveals them as blockades to worlds imagined by writers in the Black Radical Tradition, in Black feminist thought, in Black queer theory) gestures toward is Toni Morrison's *Jazz*. While not constituted by letters between characters, Morrison's sixth novel is a letter to Harlem and the thrum of Black sociality in 1920s New York City, and ultimately a letter from the book to us, the readers. The well-known final lines are:

I have watched your face for a long time now, and missed your eyes when you went away from me. Talking to you and hearing you answer—that's the kick.

But I can't say that outloud; I can't tell anyone that I have been waiting for this all my life and that being chosen to wait is the reason I can. If I were able I'd say it. Say make me, remake me. You are free to do it and I am free to let you because look, look. Look where your hands are. Now.²¹

Inasmuch that A, the writerly voice in *The Lonely Letters*, is writing to Moth, the composite figure who is drawn like his namesake to the light that is A, Crawley is also

writing to us and, in the deep intimacy of the letters and imagined replies, invites us to look at where our hands are. They rest on the his words about his tactile painting practice, about the soft hold of and between Chiron and Kevin in Barry Jenkins' *Moonlight* (2016), the insistence on marronage and emergence on Black Study. In resting our hands there, Crawley reminds us, we as readers are drawn into the very thing he writes of: the glimpse, the residue, of an otherwise. We are called to respond.

Divided into six sections—"and," "breath," "shouting," "noise," "tongues" and "nothing"—*The Lonely Letters* dwells in the place of loneliness not as a heteronormative expression of romantic loss, but rather a grief at being torn asunder from community. Crawley writes in his introduction that the book is "about the complexity of thought and movement and spirit that emerges from how it is to feel abandoned by communities of care and concern, about being left behind by churches and institutions that were once integral to life and love" (7). It is not that A longs for a return to, for what was made viable in these spaces still remains with him and finds an unfurling in friendship. "My life is a blackqueer one because my friendships teach me how to love and to have intimacy and to yearn and to practice joy," A tells Moth. "They teach me about touch and the refusal of possession" (177). The search that A undertakes through his letters of seeking, of yearning, is not for Moth—or any other singular person—but rather for what the touch, the breath between the two reveal: that "[l]ove is a material thing. It breaks open imagination and makes possible other ways of conceiving what we can think and do and be" (136).

The Lonely Letters, from A to Moth, from Crawley to us, is ultimately an illumination of a way to Baby Suggs' clearing in *Beloved*, the site of blackqueer care, the site of grace—an invitation to "refuse the prison of 'I' and choose the open spaces of 'we.'"2

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Notes

1. Morrison, Toni. *Jazz*. Reprint Edition. Vintage Books: New York City, 2004. 229.
2. Morrison, Toni. "Moral Inhabitants." In *The Source of Self-Regard: Selected Essays, Speeches and Meditations*. Knopf: New York City, 2019. 47.

COMIC BOOKS INCORPORATED: How the Business of Comics Became the Business of Hollywood. By Shawna Kidman. Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2019.

For generations of Americans, the inexpensive graphic pamphlet purchased at drug stores, groceries, and eventually comic book specialty shops was inseparable from childhood. For almost 100 years Americans looked up to heroes, laughed at funny animal cartoons, and were thrilled by pulpy detectives. These days, we take a trip to the movie theater to see many of these same stories in expensive CG. The book *Comic Books Incorporated* tells the story of the convergence of these two industries along the lines of intellectual property while deconstructing the paradox between mass appeal and a niche market.

This text is well-researched and fantastically written, with an eye toward untangling the subculture/mass culture interplay. Kidman uses the historical method to relate a thesis about the intertwining of the mainstream success of comic book intellectual properties and big-budget films. In a welcome nod to comic book history, Kidman makes sure to relate that comic books have often toyed with what would later become known as "transmedia."

The table of contents lays out Kidman's organization as chronological. This chronological approach is occasionally frustrating: each chapter's timeline is discrete, causing

the book to jump around. An example: the 1950s chapter tells a story that leads to the 1960s, then goes back to the 1940s and leads to the 2000s, then returns back to the 1950s to return to the primary subject. The text attempts to relate narratives within the chronology as they come to a head, then adds important historical context (past and future) as particular issues arise. This approach is difficult because separating individual issues from the industry's tectonics does a small disservice to the industry's overall evolution. This is admittedly a problem largely caused by the issues themselves being complicated rather than being a failure on Kidman's part, who acknowledges these complications.

The biggest problem I found with this book is that there isn't more of it. The text came out in 2019; the main body of the book stopped tracking the industry in 2010. There have been numerous (arguably more important) events to approach the thesis of this book from that have happened between the cutoff point of the text and the release of the book. Considering the magnitude of events that happened shortly after the 2010 cutoff date, I can't help but wonder why the main text's look into the industry ended when it did. The first *Avengers* movie came out in 2012, heralding a sea change in crossover film and the first in a string of substantial moneymakers. *The Walking Dead* television show was the highest-rated show on cable in 2014. Marvel's Netflix deal, also in 2014, put comic adaptations into people's homes on-demand 24/7. The text is about the mainstreaming of these intellectual properties, yet fails to account for these huge events and more. The introduction and epilogue do briefly mention the convergences of the missing decade, but primary text itself does not. Kidman wouldn't have needed to upend the whole project to include, at the least, a final chapter addressing these events. Unfortunately for the text, the current cultural impact of comics makes almost ten years an eternity in this field.

This small gripe aside, the wealth of historically driven theory in *Comic Books Incorporated* is a welcome addition to the library of any comic book scholar or reader interested in media studies.

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STANDING WITH STANDING ROCK: Voices from the #NoDAPL Movement. Edited by Nick Estes and Jaskiran Dhillon. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2019.

In *Standing with Standing Rock*, Nick Estes and Jaskiran Dhillon, along with dozens of other contributors, present a historical flashpoint—a movement that is intergenerational, that inextricably pairs Indigenous sovereignty with the non-human environment, and that inspires and attracts people across borders and from different backgrounds. In effect, Estes and Dhillon ask why the Water Protectors' stand against the Dakota Access Pipeline (#NoDAPL) resonated so strongly with Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples alike, and then use the answer to challenge readers to join in the struggle to protect our world. As Lewis Grasspe states bluntly in the collection, "This means something to everybody. This is everyone's fight" (36).

Standing with Standing Rock, like its subject, is a convergence. Through interviews, poems, letters, op-eds, and other essays, the many authors offer a range of perspectives on #NoDAPL—some first-hand, others from a distance. The Oceti Sakowin Camp—which brought together more than 300 Native nations and their allies—provides a focal point, but what makes this collection so provocative is how it also presents this moment as something larger and historic. At Standing Rock, Indigenous nations challenged the US government. Defenders of the natural world defied the destructive fossil fuel industry. Everyday people stood up to predatory banks. Non-violent activists confronted armies,

water cannons, and attack dogs. In short, #NoDAPL provides a glimpse at new possibilities for upending the current order.

A logical companion to Estes' excellent *Our History is the Future*, this collection similarly connects #NoDAPL to a long history of Indigenous, anti-colonial resistance, while also framing today's struggle as a harbinger of a "decolonial future" (10). To that end, various pieces offer a primer on Indigenous sovereignty, treaties, and centuries of US government policies alternating between assimilation and elimination—a past that LaDonna Bravebull Allard reminds readers is "not ancient history" (46).

The authors also offer a more immediate historical context, connecting #NoDAPL to contemporary struggles against gender violence, white supremacy, environmental destruction, and empire. These include direct and indirect ties to other movements for justice, such as Idle No More, Black Lives Matter, Sanctuary, Anti-fascism, Occupy Wall Street, and others. There is also an important link to the Global War on Terror, both through the mercenary forces that provided surveillance and joined heavily-armed police forces in their violent attacks on Water Protectors, and through a group of US military veterans who stood alongside Water Protectors and offered apologies for US crimes against Indigenous nations.

Though it does at times give redundant information from piece to piece, Estes and Dhillon's collection flows better than many volumes that feature numerous entries and authors. *Standing with Standing Rock* is a real achievement. Its simultaneous depth and breadth is impressive. It has much to tell us about where we are and where we need to go. It should be useful, and appreciated, in a wide range of college courses—and beyond.

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PTSD AND FOLK THERAPY: Everyday Practices of American Masculinity in the Combat Zone. By John Paul Wallis and Jay Mechling. Lanham: Lexington Books, 2019.

In 2017, Afghanistan War veteran Donny O'Malley launched VET Tv, a VOD streaming network aimed at (straight, male, cis) U.S. service members and recent veterans. Self-dubbed the "Comedy Central of the military," the service features skits on everything from PTSD-induced spousal violence to military sexual prevention ("How Not to Rape a Bitch"), all of it filtered through the lens of "dark, perverted, inappropriate, controversial, and irreverent military humor." Nevertheless, VET Tv claims to have a therapeutic purpose, its sketches about casual violence and all things misogynistic designed to help warriors, both past and present, deal with their mental traumas.

The theoretical underpinning of VET Tv—about the psychological value of laughter and distraction—turns out to be remarkably similar to that of John Paul Wallis and Jay Mechling's intriguing new book, *PTSD and Folk Therapy: Everyday Practices of American Masculinity in the Combat Zone*. Working with an interdisciplinary body of evidence, including photography, memoir, war reportage, and ethnography, Wallis and Mechling argue that many of the folk behaviors of American troops function as "short-term solutions to the psychological and physical symptoms of PTSD" (xii). Over the course of the book, the authors examine five "genres" of folk therapy—keeping companion animals, playfighting, playing video games, masturbating, and engaging in "dark, deep play"—all of which, they contend, provide a kind of "psychological first-aid" to American warriors in the combat zone (52, 1). To a greater or lesser extent, these folk therapies mirror the formal processes of prolonged exposure therapy (or PET), a treatment for PTSD that in-

volves recreating a “heightened state of excitement” within a safe, controlled environment (50). Playing a video game, for example, offers warriors the rush of combat without the danger of death, while spending time in the “jack shack” promises a “transcendent” state of excitement and release resembling that found on the battlefield (114).

The two authors met when Wallis, an Iraq War veteran, was completing his undergraduate honor’s thesis in the fall of 2011. Mechling, recently retired, served as his advisor, and, in the following years, they continued to collaborate on projects about the “taken-for-granted, everyday realities” of military life (xiii). A strong sense of biography runs throughout the book. The first chapter describes how the two authors’ boyhoods (Mechling in the early Cold War, Wallis in the decades preceding 9/11) socialized them into cultural narratives of violent masculinity. Like other American boys of their respective eras, the two authors were taught to idolize the military and view war as the ultimate test of manhood. These biographical elements make for powerful reading, especially when Wallis reflects upon his own first-hand experience with various folk therapies. And yet, in their efforts to explain troops’ wartime behavior, the authors often rely upon generalization to make their case. At one point, Wallis and Mechling pronounce: “The warrior in the combat zone absolutely comes to trust his superiors and fellow warriors” (59). Perhaps such ahistorical claims are a product of the authors’ penchant for psychoanalytic theory, or perhaps they stem from the writers’ desire to connect individuals’ behavior to mythic archetypes. In any case, they distract from the book’s effectiveness as an analysis of specific people fighting specific wars.

Wallis and Mechling are reticent to extend their analysis to women. Although they are quick to point out the relatively high rates of PTSD among female troops (in part, a result of military sexual trauma), they argue that it’s “difficult to make generalizations” about women’s use of folklore to cope with psychological trauma (51). Further, as I finished the book, I couldn’t help but wonder about the book’s central argument. Even if we accept that these specific practices “survive in the folk groups of the warriors because they actually provide some therapeutic relief,” how do we explain similar kinds of behaviors outside of the military (139)? At the risk of generalization, I think you could visit most any frat house across the United States and find much the same thing: young, horny, energetic men who like to keep dogs, jack off, play video games, pick fights, and indulge in dark humor. This doesn’t invalidate the authors’ thesis, of course; rather, I hope it will spur future scholars to investigate the nuanced ways in which vernacular folk culture functions differently in different spaces and in response to different psychological needs.

Clearly written and empathetically argued, *PTSD and Folk Therapy* will no doubt excite any scholar interested in gender, trauma, and recovery in the contemporary military.

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