



**This is Where We Go: The Quantum Healing Possibilities in
Languaging Black Humanity**

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This is Where We Go: The Quantum Healing Possibilities in Language Black Humanity

This invited dialogue between Dr. Lakeya Afolalu, tenure-track assistant professor of language, literacy, and culture, and Dr. Patriann Smith, associate dean of faculty success and excellence and professor of literacy studies, challenges the flattening discourses of racialization to reveal how Black cultural diversity promotes healing among Africa/ns and her diaspora. “This is where we go,” a verbatim off-mic realization from moderator, Dr. Tasha Austin, aptly summarizes what the dialogue revealed about the immaterial yet communal location of Black diasporic healing. From title to epilogue, the exchange alchemizes Afolalu and Smith’s expert insights, including the need to glean from intergenerational, youth, and artistic genius that reside within and across Black cultural communities. The following conversation, redacted for wordcount, is grouped by salient themes.

Interpreting the Call: Personal and Professional Discourses of Blackness

By “the call,” we refer to this special issue’s focus on intracultural diversity within racialized groups and its resistance to cultural essentialism in multicultural education. The call invites contributors to engage dialogic counternarratives and collaborative reflection that center listening, witnessing, and relationality as means of thickening solidarities within and across minoritized communities.

Afolalu: I always say my feet are in the academy, but my heart and literally everything that I do always go back to my communities. When I saw the call, I was like, this is powerful and beautiful to see. I think about people like Tyla¹, specifically the Black racial and colorism discourse surrounding her career in the global social media space, and I’m like, but she *really* is a South African Coloured person in her geographical context. So, the call created a soft landing space to talk about it in a way that did not feel like there was one way to be Black. I thought that was very beautiful. Even more, when I think about the role of language at the center, and I think about growing up as Nigerian and African American, and receiving questions, whether implicit or explicit, about my family’s languages – are African American or Edo *truly* languages?

And I’m like, yes! Let’s get even more specific. You got Detroit, New Jersey, and all types of Southern Black languages². So, African American language is diverse even within the United States. Then there’s Nigerian Pidgin, which is often written off as “informal,” and so it doesn’t

¹ South African singer/songwriter

² Terms such as African American Language (AAL), African American English (AAE), Ebonics, and African American Vernacular English (AAVE) are often used in scholarship refer to the linguistic practices of Black communities in the United States, though these terms are also taken up in broader diasporic and ideological ways. Black or African American Language (BL or AAL) has been described as a systematic language variety shaped by the historical and cultural experiences of U.S. descendants of enslaved Africans (Smitherman, 2006; Rickford, 1999) and as a set of shared linguistic practices that circulate across racialized and multiethnic contexts (Paris, 2009). Black Language is taken up as a political and pedagogical framing that affirms Black linguistic practices as legitimate, dynamic, and historically continuous across diasporic contexts (Baker-Bell, 2020). We use these terms interchangeably in this conversation to reflect lived, relational language practices.

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3 get treated as a real language, despite its consistent patterns, shared vocabulary, and structure.
4 Yet, Yoruba, Igbo, and Hausa languages are more recognized. I see that in my life, honestly. We
5 speak multiple languages in our home. It's important to me that we pass down all the languages,
6 not just the recognized ones, especially African American language. So, this call is so timely,
7 and it's so critical because folks have always tried to put us as Black folks in a box – have always
8 tried to control, erase us. From the term *Negro* to *Black* and *African*, we've seen the evolution of
9 these terms, which often have been prescribed to us, and often not by us.
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12 **Smith:** Wow. Can I just say, “Amen,” and keep it moving? When I saw the call, I thought,
13 “What would it mean to center understandings of language more broadly defined? What would it
14 look like to think about interracial and intraracial conversations in ways that actually emphasize
15 linguistics?” Because when you think about language practices, they are never occurring in a
16 vacuum.
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18 I was reminded about how I came into this whole conversation– I never was someone who talked
19 about race or anything to do with race before I came to the US, and I was a full grown woman
20 when I got to the United States of America. At the time, I didn't have a language for thinking
21 about interracial and intraracial dialogue. When I saw the call, I thought, pre-racial me would've
22 known nothing about this. And I thought about the pre-racial me and other people who are still
23 ‘pre-racial.’ People who are still operating today like that person that I was then, whether in the
24 Caribbean or not, and what I would have liked to say to the 26, 27-year-old woman– to me. This
25 call brought me back to then and also to now, and reminded me that I don't really engage with all
26 those conversations. What would this call be to me if I were the me I was then, today?
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31 What if I was someone racialized as white in the United States and always had the response as a
32 teacher that was similar to “Ohh, I don't see race”, or “I don't understand race”, or “I don't talk
33 about race.” What would this call do for me? I kept thinking of all the people that I was before
34 this time (or that I was not), or even, the person that I still am not and that I continue to be, who
35 still doesn't know as much as I think I do about race. Does anyone? Because, like you said
36 Lakeya, there are all these different ways of conceiving of the intraracial and how this actually
37 manifests across groups and the cross-dialogue that has to happen. We are always becoming
38 these things that we explore. And that thing that we are becoming is never ending. It's literally
39 always there. This is how I came to the quantum back in 2012 – realizing the limitlessness and
40 the never ending continuity of the realities that we are becoming. So there's never an end to the
41 conversation surrounding race. It's just always the beginning.
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45 Say I meet someone from Hawai'i tomorrow, and they're explaining how they experience
46 racialization or not. For me, it's always an open-mindedness. I wanna know, I wanna learn how
47 they feel this, how they see it, how they don't feel it, or how they don't wanna be part of it. And
48 all of it, for me, is legitimate. If they decide they don't wanna identify as a racialized person or as
49 a person of Color, that information is useful to me, even though I'm probably disappointed at the
50 time, or angry, like, and in my mind, like, “Why don't you?” I'm still engaging with it. So, the
51 call for me represented all of those becoming pieces in addition to a legitimization of who I was
52 or who I probably would never have become had I not migrated to the US. It represented an
53 acknowledgement of migration and how it creates so many opportunities to open our eyes to so
54 many things we would never be aware of. And it says to those of us who are willing to be open-
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3 minded, “Hey, come into this conversation with grace, with humility, and help us think about
4 continuing the becoming.”
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6 7 **Deepening Discourses: Structuring Understandings of Black Joy and Healing** 8

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10 **Afolalu:** I feel like ‘joy’ has been co-opted as a buzzword. So when I say joy, it’s this idea that
11 other pan-ethnic racial groups get to define who they are for themselves, but there’s this static
12 identity box for us as Black people. I started reading *McKittrick’s Dear Science and Other*
13 *Stories* and was reminded that this is not merely a contemporary phenomenon.
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15 Keeping in mind with your theme of time, this has always been a means of putting Black folks,
16 down to the physical Black body, under surveillance and control. It made me realize other folks
17 have the luxury of being able to define themselves for themselves, but that has not always been
18 the case for us within the Black diaspora. Even when it is the case, it’s typically seen as a
19 problem or division. And I would say, no, there’s actually beauty in laying out these identity
20 nuances, because it ultimately traces back to our shared origin.
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23 In thinking through the trans-Atlantic trafficking of human beings— yes, we’re talking about the
24 differences and the nuances, but it also highlights that ultimately there is some *sameness*. And to
25 see how language took shape in the Caribbean, in South America, in Brazil— seeing the beauty of
26 that speaks to the innovation and the resourcefulness of who we are as people, and continue to,
27 as Dr. Smith said, “become”-- always growing, evolving, and changing.
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30 **Smith:** When you talk about joy, I hear you saying, let’s move beyond just the superficiality of
31 joy. We know we have a lot of pain with either our diversities or naming our challenges of
32 accepting each other’s diversities. I feel like the joyfulness comes out of that lineage of having
33 the soul part of who we are, connecting to something that’s bigger— the essence of our oneness
34 from the Afrocentric tradition. And I feel like that joyfulness should be something that comes out
35 of this work.
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39 It’s not the superficial joy that everyone’s parading around. For me it’s my own spirituality and
40 what has kept me grounded as a woman, as a scholar, as someone racialized as Black. How do I
41 find my joy in Christ? Because if I was not grounded in that perspective of my joy, then I would
42 not be able to make it *and* to name all of the different ways that Blackness is not being accepted.
43 Not because we can’t be happy and smile, but because that happiness and smiling, if it doesn’t
44 come from an inner groundedness that’s centered in who our lineages are, then it can be erased
45 by something external, which then means it’s not joy. So for me, the spirituality of joy is what I
46 come to with this call. How do we help folks who are thinking about wanting to be happy, to be
47 free, to thrive, to do so from a place that’s not dependent on what an external force has defined
48 that they must be within their Blackness? And I think that this perhaps even raises a controversial
49 question about racialization as Black. “*What does that even mean? Are we talking here about*
50 *Sylvia Wynter’s humanity that centers the whole of us? How do we reconcile being human with*
51 *what it means to be racialized as Black?*” Other groups, as you mentioned, Dr. Afolalu, get to
52 be able to define themselves as human. So, then how do we get to have joy— that joy that is real,
53 that is authentic, that is grounded, that is beyond a superficial kind of joy?
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Existing Research: Exploring African Diasporic Discourses

Afolalu: I can't help but think of two people in particular, whom I had the luxury and honor of sharing their stories through two pieces I wrote. I'm thinking of Okokho. I will never forget when I first met her, when I was down in Austin, Texas. She's Nigerian born in Cross Rivers State, Nigeria. I developed a relationship with her family over time. I remember when Okokho was in fifth grade, and we talked quite a bit about her racial experiences at school. One of the first things she said was, "I can do anything, but here in the U.S. everything is about race. I can do art. I can draw, I can do all these things— my skin color doesn't determine who I am." And I'm like, "Could you go to the White House? Can you go speak to all these people?" I think she was 10 at the time. It resulted in a piece I wrote for *Research in the Teaching of English, More Than My Race: Deconstructing Racial Identity Categories through Digital Literacies*. Okokho was basically engaging in digital art and deconstructing racial identity categories through art and technology. The youth are doing that work themselves.

And I'll tell you why this piece comes from a very personal place, or at least why I was drawn to Okokho's story. If anyone knows anything about Nigerian culture, it is often a very collectivist culture in ways that are beautiful but, if you're not careful, could also be stifling. Who will you marry? At what age? What will you study? And on my African American side, my mom was like, "What makes you happy?" But then, on my Nigerian side with my father, it was about what makes *my Nigerian family* happy. All of that to say, this body of work that I've been building with the youth and their families over time, particularly African youth (and especially girls), reflects a personal, embodied, and rhetorical push against these cultural and racialized norms in ways that honor what works best for them.

Another young girl who comes to mind is Isioma from a piece I wrote for the Journal of Literacy Research called *I'm Still Nigerian: Navigating Race through Digital Literacies*. So, there are public and scholarly conversations about adopting the languages and accents of the countries where youth migrate to "fit" into society. But Isioma was very intentional, like, I'm gonna hold onto my Nigerian accent— I don't want to lose it. And her idea of *not* wanting to fit into the U.S. was so different. She was like, "I can't lose my ties," which for her was through her Nigerian accent and Nigerian languages, especially in conversations with her friends back home in Nigeria. If she lost those linguistic ties, she said, they're gonna be "questioning me" or what I refer to in the article as her "ethnic identity membership". They would ask her, "What's happening? You've changed."

I also wrote "Black, on Both Sides: Living Between My Nigerian and African American Identities," a creative nonfiction piece, for *Human Parts*, a digital publication for creative writers. Because I know in academia, there are lots of boundaries with how we're expected to write, especially around methodology and the "rigor", and I'm like, I just wanna say what I wanna say, and say it how I wanna say it. I wanna tell the story without, well, obviously I reference and make citations, but I do it in a way that flows. So, I wrote it as an autoethnographic essay. I was looking at my own identity experience in ways similar to the research I was doing with Nigerian youth and families. There's a personal generational piece to that, too. Before, I

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3 believed that I should just follow the cultural rules, but now I am a firm believer in pushing all
4 the boundaries. I think we also see that with racialization and resisting this cultural flattening.
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7 **Smith:** You are just amazing. When you share this, I hear so much of what I went through,
8 Lakeya, in my own journey of coming to my own work. I thought about how I wrote this
9 unpublished autoethnography about my daughter saying, “Some people make everything about
10 race.” She said that at 11. I was talking to someone about how her teacher wouldn't do certain
11 things and her teacher just didn't have understandings of what a Black girl needs– and her
12 teacher should have been more capable of dealing with diversity and trusting the needs of Black
13 children.
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15 And she was like, “Mummy, you know, not everything's about race.” And I was like, “Umm,”
16 but she was like, “No, you always are talking about race, but sometimes it's not just about race
17 and I just don't want it to be about race.” It's almost as if she wanted it to be **about her**
18 **humanity**. She wanted it to be about being seen beyond just the color of her phenotypically dark
19 skin. Not because this skin tone didn't matter, because she was the one who talked about race to
20 me all the time. In that moment, she just felt like that reduction of the conversation to a focus on
21 Blackness was something in which she did not want to be situated in that moment. And she felt
22 like she should have the capacity to not be situated in race. That caused me to think a lot about
23 how my conversations about racialization could be limited to my own perspective and not be
24 based on the actual generational understandings that our children or their children are having.
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29 And when you talk about generational, Dr. Afolalu, I hear you saying there *were* two parts of me
30 *then* that are in conversation *now*. I went back to the pre-racialization me that didn't talk about
31 race. And then I started thinking of the me in the now that now does talk about race– how do
32 those two versions of me get reconciled? What were they thinking about in these pieces? And I
33 think that caused me to ask questions about racial essentialism, cultural essentialism in ways that
34 didn't dichotomize, in ways that didn't say, “My daughter belongs to a group of people over here
35 who don't wanna talk about race sometimes at all,” as opposed to, “she can be both things.”
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39 She can wanna talk about racialization when she goes into a grocery store. People are staring her
40 down because they think she just stole something. And she can also be the person that says, “No,
41 I don't wanna be defined by racialization today. I just wanna be my good old little West Indian or
42 Caribbean or Nigerian or US self,” or neither or none, for that matter. She can say, “I just wanna
43 be a human today.” And I thought, “Where is that space in my mind to do that?” In fact, that's
44 how I came to the both-and piece that I talk about with quantum physics. I had started the
45 conversation with quantum physics and thinking about super positioning and how we position
46 ourselves as two things using the metaphors of quantum physics. I figured, “*How do I exist as*
47 *two completely different things in the same person at the same time?*” How can we be both one
48 thing and then be the opposite of that thing at the same time without losing our humanity in the
49 eyes of ourselves and of others and while operating on moral and ethical ground?
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53 I remember thinking, “It don't make sense.” And that's how I then started writing about racialized
54 entanglements of Englishes and peoples. In fact, the whole point was to show that you can be
55 multiple things at the same time. But there isn't always a space for people racialized as Black to
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3 hold this in our minds – equally legitimate yet seemingly contradictory perspectives don't always
4 have space to co-exist in our personas as humans because we wish to be one thing and not the
5 complex whole of varied pieces that we are. And I think my joy should come from being able as
6 a human being to sit with the fact that I can do both, and I can hold both of these supposedly
7 opposing viewpoints in my mind and my heart at the same time, and still be a full, thriving
8 human being.
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12 I've been wondering about how we wrestle with those tensions. So a couple of pieces that I
13 worked with are in *Literacies of Migration: Translanguaging Imaginaries of Innocence* – a
14 Cambridge University Press book where students were saying, "I don't wanna lose my Bahamian
15 accent. I wanna sound Bahamian tomorrow. I'm gonna sound Bahamian until the day I die."
16 Students said, "Oh, I wanna go back to The Bahamas," and, "I don't want people looking at me
17 like, oh, you just already just went to the US for one little year and you've forgotten everything
18 Bahamian that you learned." There were these youth in conversation with me writing and healing
19 my soul with this research. Had I not been through this study, I could not have understood how
20 they saw racialization. One of them actually literally couldn't understand how they were
21 racialized in different spaces. D'Arcy, from the *Reading Research Quarterly* piece, talked about
22 how she experienced racialization with different groups and how she didn't see herself in
23 multiple groups of Black populations. While she felt at home with the Caribbean population, she
24 was both Black and white in terms of how society defines it. She didn't belong to other groups in
25 ways that caused her to feel capable of centering herself. I grappled with the legitimization
26 D'Arcy needed to be able to feel free.
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31 I think that my whole body of work has led me to want to know more about the quantum
32 meaning– to want to know more about what it means to be "both-and." To be both something
33 that I am and something that I'm not at the same time. To hold those opposing viewpoints in my
34 mind and my heart and my soul and my actions at the same time without feeling the hatred of my
35 Black people– people whom I so love, so that I can continue to learn. Because, metaphorically at
36 least for me, the quantum is all about finding units of becoming that are never truly fully
37 expressed given that there are all these possibilities at any given time – all these possibilities that
38 are always becoming, never ending. Limitless.
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42 **On Black Youth, Being Free, and Possible Futures**

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44 **Afolalu:** There's something so funny about all the words like emancipation, liberation, humanity.
45 I find that if I do not disentangle myself from these boundaries that we've been put in, especially
46 as Black women in the academy, then the deeper we get into it, the more confined it can feel. I
47 constantly remind myself that I am a *person* first. I keep all my personal literature books very,
48 very close to me whenever I write academically. 'Cause these are women across literally the
49 Caribbean and Africa, who remind me that there are ways that we can speak and push back on
50 these boundaries of who people say who we should be or how we should show up. And as much
51 as it can be hard to make space for my creative writing alongside this very narrow/confined
52 tenure track journey, if I don't, and I mean this with every fiber of my being– if I don't, I cannot
53 survive. I won't be good for anybody.
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3 So, I think about all that with youth today and how they're just unapologetic about it, and it's like,
4 wow– did we have that when we were younger? I know my mom's from the Boomer generation
5 with more traditional ideas and values, which got passed down to us. Just to see how youth are
6 just taking life and going forward and saying, “This is who I am, and this is how I'm gonna
7 define myself for myself.” And doing it boldly– with a boldness that is both inspiring and
8 informative. Making sure that we're always listening– they got a lot to say, you know? And that's
9 not something that I always grew up with. My grandmother's generation on my mom's side, on
10 my African American side, would always say, “Children are to be seen and not heard.”

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12 And I think even that's a form of language, too. These idioms and Black proverbs that we grew
13 up with; we're pushing back against as well.
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16 **Smith:** You were talking about the generations and I can see the **collapsing of time**, again.
17 Those kids *are us*. Those kids are the people we actually were –who were told all these things to
18 do. But they are us *now* seeing all this knowledge around them, and they are becoming versions
19 of who we actually were as kids, but we didn't get to be. In fact, they instantiate possibilities that
20 we were denied from our own childhoods. If you think about the collapsing of time and space,
21 how are these kids literally redefining the imaginaries that we had in the present for us so that we
22 can see what's possible now in ways that we couldn't?
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25 We are actually right now experiencing *with them* the possibilities here in this moment. Our
26 childhood selves need to heal from a lot of the traumatic ways of denying our inheritances
27 through possibilities of the *now*. That's why I talk about imaginaries being so integral to this
28 work, because the imaginaries of those childhood kids that we were that literally never got the
29 chance to do all these things become now. Yes, we think our adult selves are doing it, but those
30 little kids that we were are still here with us. Like, “I would've loved to be able to create and to
31 write the fiction and to do these things,” – all the things that were denied, that our adult selves
32 have sanitized and that we're living seemingly well with. But this is what I see with the
33 generations that are here. Gen Z, Alpha – they give me hope. They'll let me see, “Hey, we're
34 gonna do the things you guys couldn't do” and, “We're gonna show you that you can still do it
35 because we're making it possible.” Truly, if we think about collapsing time and space, we are
36 getting to go back to our younger selves here today and saying, “Hey, you can do the same things
37 that you wanted to do, and here's how I'm gonna help you to do that.”
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43 **Interpersonal Harms and Community Healing**

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45 **Smith:** I think the place to start is to think about who gives us the right to determine who a
46 person should be culturally? I think we tend to focus on the recipient, the person positioned, the
47 person who is racialized as Black as the recipient of an action from people's perceptions, real or
48 imagined. But we don't spend sufficient time on what we might call the “white listening subject.”
49 And what happens is we can start thinking about how the white listening subject– that individual,
50 that person, that group, that perception – tends to come from those of us who have positioned
51 ourselves similarly to the people whom we judge to be acting in ways that deviate from a certain
52 cultural norm.
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55 So, because we have overlooked this tendency by our own racialized status, to racialize – as
56 *Black, white people of color*, we have said to ourselves, “*You know what, let's focus primarily on*
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3 *these white people over here. They're the ones creating the challenge. They're the ones creating*
4 *the oppression. They're the ones creating the problem for us.”* And we don't have to necessarily
5 spend all this time looking internally at our own people who are racialized as Black or as people
6 of Color and the harm we *also* do to each other. Because we have been through enough of the
7 struggle— our ancestors have been enslaved. Our response is: *“Why should we place this burden*
8 *on ourselves?”*

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10 I will argue that it is this very omission in our historical lineage that has brought us to where we
11 are today. We are at a place right now where it's as if our kids are resurrecting us from a
12 generational slumber. I look at my daughter and how she talks about racialization with
13 unapologetic boldness, like “Mom, you know, this is wrong. This is not something you should
14 do” when it comes to intraracialization. And I'm like, where is that righteous indignation from
15 within our communities when our ways of oppression are directed against our very own people
16 that we claim to love and care for? And if we could resurrect some of that – that righteous
17 indignation that we hold for others as much as we do for our Black others – I think we could get
18 at the heart of some of the problems we face because **we have been focused on seeking an**
19 **external healer that is never going to come.**

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24 **But the healer is not from without, the healer is here – within the camp.** You have that
25 determiner who has been made Lord and Judge over subjects who should be specifically a
26 certain way because “Black people don't eat this”, or “Black people shouldn't do that”, or “Black
27 people who do this right here, they don't belong.” Or they maybe walk a certain way or they
28 comb their hair a certain way, or they hike and that's a white thing – they don't belong. NO! I
29 feel like if you have an external observer telling you you don't belong, it's perhaps easier for you
30 to overlook that because you contend, “How could they know how I feel?”. But for the internal
31 people in your Black camp to be denying you the right to be legitimized, I mean that's where the
32 psychology of this thing gets real. Because we have normalized this treatment – it's basically
33 okay for someone within the camp to tell us how to be Black and for generations we've decided
34 that we will orchestrate an alienation of the person from Blackness should they dare to be who
35 God created them to be.

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38 And that's what I saw with the students that I worked with from the Caribbean. The people –
39 internally with whom they expected to receive the most love and care, people racialized as
40 Black – they couldn't get that in ways that they felt they needed. They had never maybe talked
41 about race before, but thought there should be an affinity, and they couldn't get it there. So you
42 have this situation where the internal battles that we have faced intraracially, but decided to
43 ignore, are now coming home to roost. We also have a generation of children who are saying,
44 “We're just gonna help you navigate this little thing that you clearly have not been addressing.
45 And we are gonna do it, and we're gonna do it in love. Or maybe we're gonna cancel you at the
46 same time, whichever, you know,” and this is what society now has to grapple with.

50 **Loss, Black Performance and Black Survivance**

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53 **Afolalu:** Also, I'm thinking about personal experience, and have been thinking about it my whole
54 life. It's this idea of who we are supposed to be, because identities are imposed *onto* us. It
55 actually happened in my first year traveling between Seattle and Nigeria. I kept getting these
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3 questions about my travels. Their repeated questions carried an air of racialized intrigue. It felt
4 like a mix of fascination coupled with shock that marked my travels as unusual, almost exotic.
5 And, I couldn't help but wonder, if I weren't a Black woman, would my international traveling be
6 questioned? It got me thinking on a deeper level about this idea that Black folks are constantly
7 moving across geographical lines, not just within the United States, but especially
8 internationally. Contrary to what the media depicts, Black, African, and Caribbean folks are
9 always moving within and across geographical borders. I know this to be true. So, what is it
10 about me that makes you question this very common thing?
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14 Then there was an added layer of this new administration. This added a new round of questions –
15 “Are you gonna be okay? Or is your family going to be okay?” On the surface, they seemed
16 well-meaning and even caring. They also carried a kind of benevolent othering or a racialized
17 disbelief that someone like me could move freely between nations, **as if Black mobility were**
18 **unusual or precarious. But migration has always been part of our story; Black people, too,**
19 **move securely, intentionally, and agentively across borders.** So I'm thinking back to what you
20 said, Dr. Austin, earlier about this, this kind of carceral state, this idea of, you know, **Black**
21 **bodies being restricted.** It's not just in school spaces or classrooms– like requirements for
22 students to stand in straight lines. This carceral state, unfortunately, **follows us long into**
23 **adulthood and into professional spaces.** Here I am, as a grown woman, having my movement
24 surveilled and questioned as if airplanes do not exist. It got me thinking on a deeper level about
25 cultural essentialism, and the flattening of the Black body and the Black experience– that
26 attending to these things is critical and urgent.
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31 Could we talk about the social, emotional, and mental health implications of it all? I'll get to the
32 curricular implications in just a bit, but I want to emphasize the beauty of having a calmed
33 nervous system. Truly having one's mental health, like in a good state, because **we are expected**
34 **to perform**, whether that is culturally, whether that is ethnically, or even expectations from
35 loved ones within our families and communities. And now the classroom setting. Classrooms
36 could be transformed, because if we are truly building curricula, we have to ask ourselves,
37 “Who's getting certified to become bilingual dual language educators? Have y'all truly thought
38 about how Black languages across the world are integrated within these programs? Have you
39 actually even begun to think about it? Is it even a thought in your mind?” This kind of thinking is
40 so important for teacher education programs. I think of bringing it back to the real world, a real,
41 open, flexible, globally-nuanced understanding of Blackness. Going back to the example that I
42 used earlier with Tyla. As we use terms like Blackness or whatever term is specific to the
43 geographic location that reflects how Blackness takes shape, it is so important to be able to
44 define oneself for oneself. How might defining Blackness in these flexible ways deter, frustrate,
45 or inhibit solidarity?
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50 I think we have to be careful to fight against the internalization of colonization of white
51 supremacy that still exists within Black communities across the diaspora. That can be a point of
52 contention. And that can and often does deter, frustrate, or inhibit solidarity building. So letting
53 go – truly releasing that. I've been thinking about this a lot because, I wonder *why* there is this
54 fear to let go? I think it's also a loss of control and even wondering, “Are you truly a part of this
55 culture? Are you truly Black if you're not doing it this way? You know, “Black Card Revoked”
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3 is an actual card game, and the concept exists symbolically, but they're also very much a reality
4 of **this idea of loss**.
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7 What if we're not performing or narrating Blackness in a way that is familiar, that is digestible,
8 or understandable to us as a collective? Of course, there's the beauty in sustaining culture and
9 sustaining language. If we also move past all of these limitations and boundaries, it could make
10 solidarity-building more possible. Like true freedom. Again, I'm not saying that as a buzzword. I
11 mean true freedom that shows up through a calm nervous system. That shows up through better
12 sleeping habits. That shows up in other ways in our lives. So, I've talked about the social,
13 emotional, and academic curricular aspects, but it comes down to life or death. Too often, one is
14 alive, but the spirit and soul are ravaged from the harms associated with racialization and
15 antiBlackness.
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19 **Smith:**

20 So many times, the exclusion characteristics that we're using tends to be what came out of a
21 forced way of surviving. Yes, we named the Afrocentric traditions that are part and parcel of
22 what our ancestors gave us. But I wonder if the entanglement of those traditions with the forced
23 survival mechanisms of being descendants of humans who were enslaved has created that
24 tension that makes it difficult to separate the two. We can't separate the brutality of being forced
25 to exclude people and to surveil people from all these values inherent in the Afrocentric
26 traditions of collectivity and oneness and justice. To us as a people who have to again, wrestle
27 with who we are— we are people entangled with those histories. We superficially name it and we
28 say, “There's internalized racism, but that's over there. Let's focus on the big one over here.”
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32 So my problem is not that we haven't named it, my problem is that we've decided to focus on one
33 part and to rehash all this pain and hurt that people are doing over here to us, instead of also
34 taking the time and saying, “Let's walk through this hard process of healing. What does that look
35 like? What does it look like to create a model of a cognitive system over here that is itself based
36 on us talking about racialization, how we are racialized,” but as we're healing. We're creating
37 generations who are healed. I just don't see that that has been our focus. And I think that that is
38 probably one of the biggest barriers to us moving forward.
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41 **Afolalu:**

42 We're aware of the barriers that exist and name them, but then there's also the fear that it takes to
43 *actually* go there. Yes, we've evolved from the generations before us. We've traveled these
44 professional journeys while remaining connected to our communities and cultures. Then, you get
45 to this “dream” that was sold to us, the point of “success”. Then you're like, wait, what's
46 happening? We become increasingly aware of the racial dynamics in the professional spaces
47 we've worked to get to.
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51 I often hear about this experience with Black women in corporate America who are like, “I'm
52 gonna name the racial dynamics, but how far am I really gonna go? Because I've worked so hard
53 to get here and I'm not willing to lose it.” I don't know if it's called scarcity, but capitalism plays
54 a role. How far are we willing to go to speak up? Because there is an element of loss that is
55 associated with truly speaking up. And history has shown us over time – I mean, rest in peace to
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3 Assata Shakur, who just passed away – what happens when we truly, truly speak up and go there.
4 So, I think there's also that element, too, of loss.
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7 **Smith:** When everything was going down in Florida, that was what I was forced to reckon with,
8 “*Will you decide to keep speaking up? You've come from so far, you've done so much. You've*
9 *raised this child for 20 years. Will you speak up about racism in this climate?*” And it took a lot
10 to say, “*I will keep talking about what I talk about, even though I am potentially going to lose my*
11 *job.*” In fact, even in doing so, I was forced to acknowledge that most people don't have that
12 luxury particularly if they're in a tenure-track position. So I had to wrestle with the fact that as a
13 Black person, I have privilege and all of that. But it actually the second time in the academy
14 where I thought, “Are you willing to speak up respectfully about these things that matter for life
15 or death and are you willing to do so knowing the potential outcome?” The first time is a matter
16 of discussion for another day.
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20 Dr. Allan Luke and I talked about this matter of life and death in 2022, and when you said it, I
21 was like, “What?” That's literally what came out of the conversation: “It is a matter of life or
22 death.” The fact of the matter is that literally, we are forced to wrestle with that one question,
23 “Will we speak up?” And that comes out of fear. But as my Bible says, “God has not given us a
24 Spirit of fear.” So to be truly liberated is to be unafraid of the potential possibility of what can
25 happen because it is a tangible reality. It is not a reality of the soul and of the spirit. So if we
26 were truly liberated as people racialized as Black or not, we would be willing to do the things
27 that mattered most. And in fact, I will argue that our enslaved ancestors went beyond where we
28 are willing to go – even remotely – right now. In fact, I will argue that the fact that we got to be
29 free and refused to do what we needed to do has brought us to this moment where we have no
30 choice but to now do what we were supposed to. Then again, maybe all of us won't do it, but
31 there will be those of us who do– and those of us who do, are the ones who are going to continue
32 to boldly define what our future generations can and will be.
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37 So it's just fascinating that you brought that up, because it is the fear that kept us so dormant.
38 And I think that that is why we are now seeing that the younger ones are being raised up with
39 this boldness, that advocacy that will do the work that we failed to do.
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42 **Afolalu:** Fear. And also, I'll just say wisdom too. Wisdom to say, perhaps I can't say it *this* way,
43 but I will say it *that* way...
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45 **Smith:** Or somebody can say it *for* me.
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50 Possibilities in Black Languages and Literacies

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52 **Afolalu:** So thinking about modalities and multiliteracies– in what ways and through which
53 modalities are we speaking up that folks might not even be able to decipher –the folks that we
54 “think” have control?
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3 **Smith:** And the collective too, right? Dr. Afolalu said it, it's like a collective group of people
4 speaking. It's very different because it doesn't identify you. I think of the tenure-track faculty all
5 the time. They wanna say things, but if they're part of a bigger, broader group of STAR Fellows
6³ or of LRA⁴ folks, right? The collective forms a shield around the group and then speaks out
7 about the situation without identifying an individual, because that's not the way the world works.
8 It's a collective.
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11 **Afolalu:** And Dr. Austin, I'm bringing it back to, to literacies too, and language - like Negro
12 spirituals. On the surface, it may have been just a song, but when you decipher what our
13 ancestors were truly saying! So, maybe not fearing literally death or lynching, but still speaking,
14 singing, communicating in a way that only we could decipher. Ways the “masters”/white
15 overseers” on the plantation could not decipher. And so fear, yes, but I don't think that's the final
16 stopping point. I think that Black folks globally have always been wise enough, discerning
17 enough, creative enough, industrious enough, resourceful enough, linguistically creative enough
18 to say, “This, how we're gonna say it.” And even with all the limitations, especially those we
19 have right now, we'll continue to carry on through these forms of communication. I don't care.
20 One could sit on TikTok for hours, but they will never be able to decipher Black language in the
21 way that we have lived and embodied it. And I think that is something that I look to.
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25 **Smith:** Yeah, that's the semiotizing, right Lakeya? It's where we started the conversation. The
26 body is so entangled with those ways –and I don't like calling it survival. I like calling it ways of
27 being– self-determination. It does not necessarily have to be that it's trying to survive necessarily
28 as much as it's trying to recreate. And that's what humans do. Humans are creative, endowed
29 with that creative potential. I think that limiting Black people to always responding to the fear of
30 being obliterated says that that's the only way they can create. Yes, we're responding, but we're
31 also creating. We are creative people in our own right. With or without an oppressive power
32 behind us saying, “*Go do this in the plantation tomorrow.*”
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35 **Afolalu:** I think...there's no history book. I can point to my mother, I can point to my aunts. I
36 can point to women in my own family on both sides, African American and Nigerian, who
37 through their actions and words have said, “They put this barrier here, but watch me creatively,
38 industriously, get around it, over it, and through it.”
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41 **Smith:** That is the crux of the whole matter. If you are always in a defensive mode, you are
42 responding to someone over here, you're not creating what you should be over there because you
43 are always responding and defensive. And don't tell me we don't have power. All the power is
44 stored, and has been stored within us for generations.
45

46 It has been. So people need to stop talking about white people having all the power. We have
47 everything we need in this moment. It's what we've decided to do with it that matters. What have
48 we decided to do with it? The quantum possibilities are not limited to one person. Dr. Afolalu
49 talked about the singing. You know, those folks knew what they were singing. They were
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52 ³ STAR (Scholars of Color Transitioning into Academic Research Institutions) is a two-year cohort-based mentoring
53 program within the Literacy Research Association for scholars of color in the early years of tenure-track literacy
54 appointments.

55 ⁴ The Literacy Research Association (LRA) is an international community of scholars dedicated to advancing
56 research on lifespan literacies in a multicultural and multilingual world.
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3 bringing that creative oneness together, the essence of the oneness and the collectiveness, and
4 tapping into quantum possibilities that we are yet to unleash. Why? Because we have failed to
5 harness this oneness of the essence. And I think that's why, for me, the quantum represents a lot
6 of what we need to explore because they knew it. They tapped into it and they were able to do
7 things with it.
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10 **Afolalu:**

11 I'm thinking about two digital publications. They mostly come from creative writers. The first
12 one is *Kweli Journal*, which is a nonprofit digital literary publication that centers emerging
13 BIPOC writers. I love that the journal has many pieces of literature from lived experiences, from
14 poetry to essays, that do a lovely job of bringing in the Black diasporic voice. And one of my
15 personal favorite publications is *Brittle Paper*. It is a digital literary magazine that publishes
16 African writing and cultural criticism, foregrounding the diversity of the continent and
17 transnational African and diasporic perspectives. They do a lovely job of bringing in a
18 transnational African, Caribbean, and Black diasporic perspective, even in how the writing
19 unfolds. Now, the next one is a memory instead of an actual publication. When I was a little girl
20 in Detroit, Michigan, there was this phenomenal school, Malcolm X Academy. Once I grew
21 older and went to college at Michigan State University, I learned that Dr. Geneva Smitherman
22 co-founded it. Growing up and seeing the school, and later realizing when I got to undergrad,
23 like, oh my gosh, that is *thee* Dr. Geneva Smitherman, who ran this school, like, what? My mom
24 would always show my sisters and me, as young girls, this school in Detroit. It planted seeds for
25 sure.
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30 **Smith:**

31 I just wanna shout out to Dr. Vaughn Watson who has been getting researchers to dismantle the
32 dichotomy between researchers and youth. Getting youth and researchers to engage with each
33 other in a dynamic way to explore these notions of diasporic representation and to get to the
34 heart of these cultural wars, so to speak, in ways that are welcoming and inclusive. Saying,
35 "*Come from the margins, come reveal yourself. We will seek to understand you.*" I think that
36 there is room for these barriers to be broken in ways that get scholars to be so much more
37 connected to youth. Not necessarily to teach youth how to do scholarship because they have so
38 much to teach US. I push back on that notion.
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42 I feel like youth have ways of engaging scholarship that we have a lot to learn from. If we are
43 open I think that a dynamic relationship between folks who have determined that they are
44 scholars needs to be subject to what youth are doing in this moment. Youth who are on TikTok,
45 creating videos, creating theatrical representation. They're not talking about theory over there.
46 They're not talking about abstracts. They're just basically dealing with the realities. And I ask
47 myself, "*What am I doing? What am I doing writing about all of these racial linguistic tensions*
48 *over here?*" And when I think about the work that Dr. Vaughn Watson and his team are doing –
49 that kind of work positions us in ways that can evolve and be dynamic like Dr. Afolalu's work.
50 Shout out to your scholarship, Dr. Afolalu, on that intergenerational lineage you're creating to
51 think about ways of youth coming into conversation with each other. I think there's opportunity
52 for that to be expanded across different racial and cultural groups.
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3 This can be a great point of conversation for thinking about what it can look like for individuals
4 to be able to engage with literacy and with language norms. Also, I would have to say too that
5 Dr. Rahat Zaidi is doing a lot of work with film, in Canada and with the theatrical
6 representations with immigration that brings youth from different lineages together. So there isn't
7 just a Black lineage. There's also youth participatory research, because the youth are hurting but
8 also wanting to heal. I think that if we start with the youth actually creating models we can then
9 help them to tap into the things that matter. For example, my daughter is like, "Mom, I'm not
10 hopeless" because I'm always worried about how she sees this crumbling world. She's creating a
11 film, and I realize that that helps her to see the world as full of possibility, even if it's falling
12 apart. Her thought is, "There's a lot of bad stuff going on, but there are good people out there.
13 There are people who are creating, like me." So how do we help youth to get that? That's what I
14 think can be used as opposed to these strict literacy curriculum norms that we've designed that no
15 longer serve us. I have problems with us limiting ourselves to these standardized curricular
16 practices. But I think that those ways of engaging with youth can lead them to places where they
17 can see that there is more to life than what's going on around them.
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22 Epigraph

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25 We are one from the very start
26 We are one deep down in your heart
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28 We are one
29 And that's the way it is
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33 -Frankie Beverly
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