THE URGENCY: TABULA RASA FOR BLACK GRIEF IN AMERICA

THE TENTH MAGAZINE

"I'm not who I used to be,
a part of my childhood was taken
from me. […] It changed me.
It changed how I viewed life.
It made me realize how dangerous
it is to be Black in America."

–DARNELLA FRAZIER,
Grief and Grievance Personified

Words by MARCUS ANTHONY BROCK
Images courtesy of NEW MUSEUM

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It is certain that Black life is a gift. I believe that all our humanities have gifts to share. We have inscriptions to leave upon each other and throughout the gravel, crust, and salt of the earth—but if only we could get on with the business of living and forego the strain of existing with swiveling necks—waiting for the next guillotine to drop, swarmed by a spectacle of ongoing death.

We are not born with the instructions to shame, hopelessness, or pathology. Yet, along the way of living in Black bodies—of living in human bodies—like a piece of papyrus or tabula, we are inscribed, erased, and written onto again until the bounty and beauty of Blackness are distorted into a tabula designed in the destructive image and ideology of the oppressor. We have been brought to the world by hook, crook, and by way of our ancestors, standing at our backs hurling us forward, crawling, walking, and rising. They carry us up over yonder closer to that 'ultralight beam' that the controversial Kanye West yearns, "We on a ultralight beam, we on a ultralight beam, this is a God-Dream." One thing about Black people: we are truly descendants of a mighty oral tradition, and we will give you song, story, and some *blessed assurance*. But our lives in this country are continually under siege and Black people are continually intentional in their approach towards our grief.

I am forlorn—from writing about death.

I am forlorn—from thinking about death.

I am forlorn—from singing songs of sorrow.

I am forlorn—with grief.

I—am forlorn.

Still, I am hopeful that the 'In Memoriam' of Black people slain by the spectacle were not lost in vain, and that our grieving and mourning are not in vain.

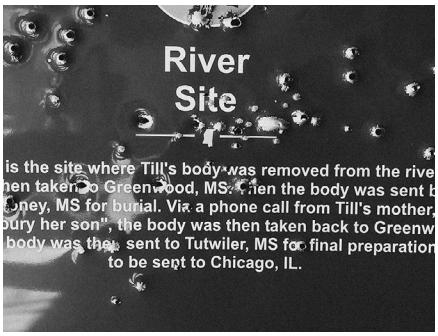
It was a sunny, spring afternoon when I attended the New Museum's exhibition, *Grief and Grievance: Art and Mourning in America*. With Mahalia Jackson's "Trouble of the World" on my mind, I chose to attend on my birthday and would endeavor to experience the dichotomy of living with the anarchy of mourning. I would also arrive to pay homage to the work and life of Nigerian-born, Okwui Enwezor, who began to produce *Grief and Grievance* in 2019 with plans for it to showcase just before the historic 2020 election, but he passed away at the age of fifty-five years wise to cancer. The global pandemic left us in shambles during that same year, further delaying the opening and prolonging our mourning. Acting as advisors, artists, and curators, Naomi Beckwith, Massimiliano Gioni, Glenn

Ligon, and Mark Nash were able to resurrect Enwezor's vision and carry the exhibition through. *Grief and Grievance* is a tribute, but also a commemoration of the atrocities placed on Black life in America and the global civil unrest of 2020. I do believe Enwezor's intention showed us that the work of sitting with grief is much larger than the grief itself—it was—and it is. I imagine it is grotesque, laborious, and empowering on another level to create an exhibition confronting the shock and horror of being Black and American, in a pandemic no less. And through it all, both a catalog and an exhibition were created as historical documents conveying the grief of Black Americans.

In the exhibition book, *Grief and Grievance: Art and Mourning in America*, Claudia Rankine has republished, "The Condition of Black Life is One of Mourning." A photo of Mamie Till Mobley hovering dejected over the casket of her son, Emmett, in 1955 at his funeral in Chicago accompanies Rankine's words. Till was originally sent to his mother in a pine box from Mississippi, where the grievance occurred. Even over sixty-five years later, racists and white supremacists refuse to let Emmett, nor us, rest in peace. Till's memorial in Mississippi at Graball Landing along the Tallahatchie River has been replaced four times now. Racist vandals have destroyed the memorial sign by riddling it with bullets, wanting it made plain—we don't belong here. As of 2019, the sign is now bulletproof and weighs 500 pounds, to fend off racial terror, or rather the psychological racial terror of learning about the number of times the memorial has been replaced from a litany of news notifications. So, in that regard, the condition of Black life is one of mourning, but I wonder, just how much longer can we mourn?

WE DESERVE TO FEEL FREE.

In just three years, the centennial of James Baldwin's born day will undoubtedly implore celebrations of grandstanding. Like Enwezor's exhibition, it too will be one of mourning, but also one of resilience and commemoration. Grief has taught me that these stories can live on and impact the maturation of so many Black people.

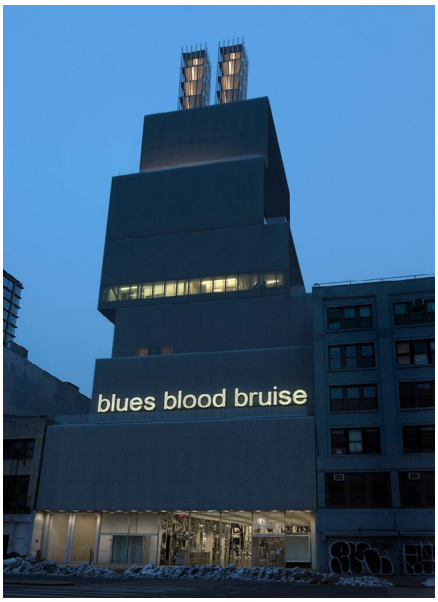


During a 1990 interview with Bill Moyers, Toni Morrison paraphrased Baldwin's words as a reminder: "You've already been bought and paid for. Your ancestors already gave it up for you. It's already done. You don't have to do that anymore. Now you can love yourself. It's already possible." And yet, the problem is that Black grief is one of psychological terror in a futile, but repeated, attempt to erode that possibility.

It is a grievance that a Black teenager, Christopher Martin, has to sift through the dirt that is receiving the counterfeit bill from George Floyd as the cashier on duty. During testimony, he recounted that he offered to pay for Floyd's cigarettes himself. His awareness of Black people and the police is omnipresent here: ultimately he knew it all could have been avoided.

Darnella Frazier, seventeen years old at the time, filmed Floyd gasping for air for more than nine minutes on her camera phone. Following that

dreadful day, she said she shook so much at night that her mother had to "rock her to sleep."



Glenn Ligon, *A Small Band*

Taking this all in, I crossed the street to enter the museum. Black people don't just understand Black grief, they have also recorded it. Perched on the outside of the museum was Glenn Ligon's neon fixture, "Blues Blood Bruise" or *A Small Band*, originally conceived for the Venice Biennale, but a reference to a recording of teenager Daniel Hamm, one of the Harlem Six brutally beaten in 1964 and denied medical treatment. During an interview, he makes a slip of tongue, "I had to, like, open the bruise up, and let some of the blues blood come out to show them." Following Ligon's piece atop the roof, I was greeted with a familiar song as I crossed the threshold into the museum: loud, like a headwind lifting me up, carrying me into the space, and setting the stage, a repeated recording of Kanye West's, "Ultralight Beam" from *The Life of Pablo. Grief and Grievance* occupied all floors of the museum, but before I could enter the space holding the familiar tune, I followed a young woman's voice, narrating Garrett Bradley's award-winning short film, *Alone*. A single mother, Black, shares an experience about how incarceration shapes a Black family. In choosing to marry her lover behind bars, she is intentional and making a commentary on choosing and defining her own happiness despite those who disapprove. She yearns for love. She yearns for freedom in this lifetime. Also within that room were the X-ray photographs of ritual funerary objects, "memory jugs," by Terry Adkins. A juxtaposition, if you will.

I then sat to watch Arthur Jafa's montage, "Love is the Message, the Message is Death." I sat and consumed the montage twice, spending fifteen minutes on a bench, shaking my head, nearly in tears, and reciting the lyrics of West's backing track through my mask, "I'm trying to keep my faith, but I'm hoping for more, somewhere I can feel safe, in this Holy War." A closer inspection of Jafa's work asserts that relinquishing to Black death is not the only option. We must not fold under that grief. Perhaps, the message is not death, because the spirit of Black people transcends such triteness. As Chance the Rapper beckons on the record with West and Kelly Price, "You can feel the lyrics and spirit coming in braille, Tubman of the Underground come and follow the trail."

IN MEMORIAM

During Chauvin's trial for the murder of George Floyd, Darnella Frazier told the jury, judge, courtroom, and global viewing audience, "It's been nights I stayed up apologizing and apologizing to George Floyd for not doing more and not physically interacting and not saving his life." Instead of Chauvin on trial, it was our Black children on trial. Her act of contrition, much like Martin's, is a reality for teenage Black children who are now living with the trauma and the "condition of Black life" in this country. They are not at fault for the engineered system of anti-Black aggression. Yet, they wear the scars.

It is tried and it is true that Black people, in all our majesty, have been in a state of perpetual mourning in America since we stepped upon these shores shackled at our ankles. But, those are not our origin stories. Yet so much of our outward existence and portrayals around the world, in media, film, and art are wrapped in the trauma and systemic grievances flowing from our enslavement. Though we have created home in this country, Black people have mourned their homeland since we arrived here, and not just the physical homeland, but our spiritual homelands. In Zora Neale Hurston's, *Barracoon: The Story of the Last Black Cargo*, Hurston speaks to "the last known surviving African of the last American slaver—the Clotilda," Cudjo Lewis, or Oluale Kossola. He speaks of Plateau, Alabama, which was once called Africatown, where he settled after his freedom was granted. It was a sacred place where they restored their rituals of song, prayer, food, and gathering to create an Africa in this land—an African American identity and culture. Scholar, Deborah Plant, found and edited Hurston's work in a posthumous publishing through the eyes of "the Last Black Cargo" almost ninety years later. I wonder when Phillis Wheatley was stolen from Senegal at just seven years old, did she think that we would still recite her poems centuries later to trace and hold our history?

We inhabit the organic matter of our bodies, but what is true is that

we will leave them, eventually. The body will die, but the spirit of Black people will not. The legacy is there in perpetuity, and we are here to make sure it thrives. The grievance is racism, but we must find a way to use the grief if we are to live out our full potential and leave our descendants with a reminder that we are not born of pathology. Before Enwezor's passing in Munich, he wrote about the "national emergency of Black grief" and the assemblage of thirty-seven intergenerational artists who are responding to the emergency, imploring Black communities to aspire and transcend those images about Black life in America.

As I awaited the verdict for Chauvin's ominous, kamikaze act, I could only think to myself: *we've been here before*. Waiting on justice. Seeking refuge. The verdict is in, guilty on three charges of murder. After the announcement, there was no jubilee, there was just a somber mood, perchance a sigh of relief that we could have a respite from the horrors of 2020—and for now, get on with the business of living. As an "end" to this saga, Chauvin was sentenced to twenty-two and a half years in prison, but this is only the practice of justice, not full justice for Black people seeking redemption after enduring a modern-day lynching on camera for more than nine minutes.

We've been here before: Latasha Harlins has recently received a mural in Los Angeles which resurfaced the grief, front and center, for the family and friends that were left in mourning since her death just after Rodney King's heinous beating in 1991. Harlins' mural reminds me of Kerry James Marshall's series from *Grief and Grievance*, *Souvenir*. All are reminders that exhibitions of grief and mourning are not gone:

Kerry James Marshall, *Souvenir*

they are traveling, they are on the walls, they are written in books as an act of commemoration to those who gave their lives as a catalyst for social justice and change—and they are always within our hearts.

I do not want to stomach another Latasha, another Breonna, another Rodney, another Emmett. In the wake of Black Spectacle and the heinous murders of our kin, in some frightening or enlightened way, I am still assured that spirit, legacy, and grief can be transformed, or rather it must be transformed, or we are at the very risk of being taken out from it.

Cup Foods in Minneapolis is now a site for Black grief—just like Graball Landing, Breonna's bedroom in Louisville, and Latasha's mural in Los Angeles. They are not museums for Black death, but of Black transformation.

THE AFTERLIFE

When Tupac asks, "How long will they mourn me?" or D.R.S. sings in despair, "I tip my forty to your memory" in "Gangsta Lean" they were in tune with the spirituality of being Black. Whether it was intentional or not, their acts were wrought with intuition and messages passed down from our elders.

While the act of pouring out a forty-ounce bottle of Old English 800, clad in a brown paper bag is oftentimes reduced to ghetto behavior, it is our act of homage to those who have passed—it is a *libation* to the ancestors. These are rituals that those like Kossola brought over in hulls and left for us to use as rituals to process grief. As Black people, we are so rooted in the practice of our ancestors whether it is rapping as storytelling and poetics, or braiding our hair into complex designs of cornrows for a show at Bronner Bros. In some spaces, we ditch the ceremonial clay pot and formality and use a forty-ounce bottle of brew instead, but what is true is that the cultural practice is still rooted in the ancestry, mythology, and beauty of Black people.

Nari Ward, *Peace Keeper*

Grief and Grievance is a gift from our elder, Okwui Enwezor.

After insurmountable grief, Enwezor's exhibition made it clear: the afterlife for Black life is life. So, when you view Nari Ward's *Feathers on a Burnt Out Hearse*, it is reminiscent of Baldwin saying, "we don't have to do this anymore." We don't have to be burnt out. Ward rebuilt the hearse, re-tarred, and re-feathered it for this exhibition. *Peace Keeper*, originally built in 1995, had been dismantled. But Ward traveled back into practice, back into grief, and resurrected the art piece as a response to the racial terror and to honor Enwezor's vision. We can take this grief and transform it into something else that is affirming and honors our past but moves us closer towards liberation. We have endured endless cycles of Black trauma in cinema. Both in and out of the theatre. I can imagine to some extent what Ida B. Wells must have felt conducting investigative journalism on the lynchings of our kin. Eventually, the records of those lynchings through the Equal Justice Initiative would conceive the National Memorial for Peace and Justice. Those bodies strewn up in trees left out in the scorching sun, like the bullet-riddled memorial for Emmett Till, were the continued aggression we receive—we don't belong here.

But, we do. We've created infrastructure in this country and built Africatowns through physical and spiritual spaces.

The tabula for Black people is in urgent need of care: tabula rasa. We can clean our own slates from the oppression of racism because they were already filled with spirituality derived from the *crust, gravel, and salt of the earth*. I felt this deeply in Dawoud Bey's photographs that commemorate the bombings of Birmingham, Alabama. And in *Lynch Fragments* by Melvin Edwards, Jack Whitten's *Birmingham*, and throughout the somber photographs of Carrie Mae Weems that invited me in. Ditching the violence of grief and experiencing the message of grief returns us, tabula rasa, to the greatness our ancestors have prepared us for.

Enwezor's legacy left a message about mourning and the message of the exhibition is clear: enough is enough, it's time for us to start living.

The killing and trial of George Floyd sparked a global revolution. Amends are still lacking for Breonna Taylor. Although, Amy Sherald has donated a profound painting of her to the Speed Art Museum and the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture, which also holds a sacred exhibition for Emmett Till, harking back to Rankine's "the condition of Black life is one of mourning."

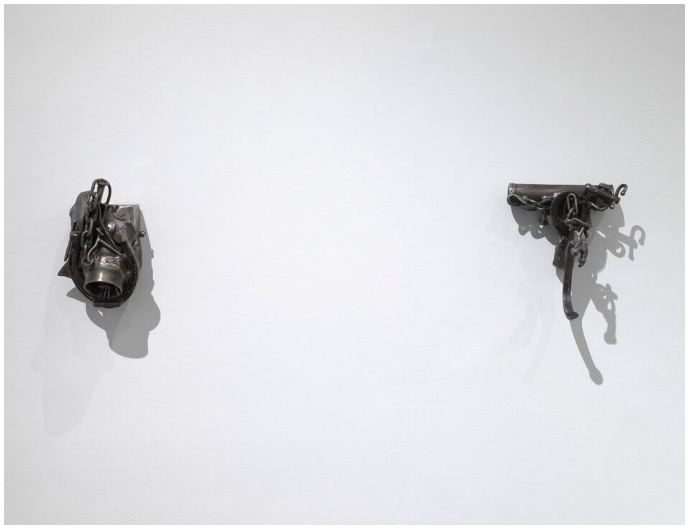
Jack Whitten, *Birmingham*

But perhaps, it doesn't have to be.

During the summer of 2021, the world will open, international travel will resume, tourism will crowd the streets and support the infrastructure of many communities, commerce will exploit our pocketbooks, and once again throngs of people on beaches will pose for the quintessential Instagram post, captioning: "Take Me Back."

Dawoud Bey

Carrie Mae Weems



Melvin Edwards, *Lynch Fragments*

To where? Denzel Washington often says, "You'll never see a U-Haul behind a hearse." What are the riches that we want to take with us that are beyond the materiality of commerce? We cannot take it all with us. The ancient Egyptians understood this as they packed sarcophagi and tombs with the sacred items they would need in the afterlife. What do you need in the afterlife? Can I, or you, unequivocally say it is the splendors of wealth or the iconic Telfar bag? Let's be clear, that bag won't undo us, but what powerful tools can we pour into it? What libations can we fill it up with?

Grief seems as though it is an abyss with nowhere to go, but grief has everywhere to go. Grievances are the injustice and acts alone, while grief is the resurrection of that dismemberment. The ultimate grievance is falling under the weight of terror, consigning ourselves to oblivion and mourning for so long that we forget grief can be useful for breaking free and loving ourselves. Until we forget that we are born of stars. Darnella Frazier's harrowing words are right, it is dangerous to be Black in America, but it is also magnificent.

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