



*Book Review*

Daniel Black. *Black on Black: On Our Resilience and Brilliance in America*. Toronto: Hanover Square Press, 2023. 256 pp. Cloth, \$27.99 (ISBN 9781335449382).

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What kind of world might people of African descent create if we embrace all the gifts and talents our youth, adults, elders, and ancestors have to offer? What would we gain to rid ourselves of the reductive stigmas, stereotypes, self-hatred, and injury that challenge human relationships and nation-building? In *Black on Black: On Our Resilience and Brilliance in America*, the essays by Daniel Black are filled with life lessons from an outsider—meaning a person not within an enclosure or boundary. Black is free and unfettered, maybe in the way that we needed James Baldwin or Bayard Rustin to be—had we not rejected the uncomfortable parts of them. At the same time, Black’s lessons come from his life as an insider—inside the Black family; the Black community; the Black Belt; the Black Church; Black colleges and universities; and Black Studies. His dual position as an outsider and insider makes this book required reading, listening, contemplating, and discussing.

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For almost two decades, challenges to social structures and the ways that Black people govern themselves, their families, and their communities under those structures appear in Black's oeuvre of fiction: *They Tell Me of a Home* (2005); *The Sacred Place* (2007); *Perfect Peace* (2010); *Twelve Gates to the City* (2011); *The Coming* (2015); *Listen to the Lambs* (2016); and *Don't Cry for Me* (2022). These novels are found on university syllabi, and are also book club favorites across the country. However, in *Black on Black*, the author draws from a deep well of experiences, observations, and study to lay bare his (and our) blemishes and beauty in thirteen essays.

The content is blemishes and beauty, but the writing of the prose is all beauty. Black's style of writing is intimate, emotional, and bold. He walks readers through memories of his life as a child, a college student, adulthood, and eldership with the conversational "we" that draws readers to his proverbial feet. There are dramatic moments punctuated with exclamation marks. There are rhetorical questions where readers will want to pause. Some will want to stop at the end of an essay for a lengthy reflection to let the questions take root; some will return quickly because the writing is clear and potable. Some will wonder where this book was when they thought they needed it. And others will wonder if they are ready for all that Black is revealing as truth. There is even beauty in Black's use of profane language surrounded by good speech and even more divine wisdom.

For some, the essays will reopen or deepen existing wounds. In the first chapter titled, "Reasons I Write," Black confesses, "I write because we rape. I write because we hurt. I write because some of the pain cannot be described. It can only be felt in the marrow of a story or the lyrics of a song" (p. 19). He further discloses, "I write because black people still speak of good hair and boast of minuscule strains of Indian blood in African veins. I write for those who birthed children then buried them too soon. Those who love so hard their hearts quiver. Those who want to love, but trauma disallows" (p. 22). Trauma in this chapter and the subsequent chapters is not fictional, metaphorical, sugar-coated, ignored, omitted, devalued, or on the periphery. It is real and central to the individual and collective experiences of being Black in America.

Some of our institutions, created and sustained to address the trauma of being Black in America, fall short or reinscribe the trauma from which Black people seek to be free. In the essay titled "Prayer Won't Fix This: What to Do with the Black Church," Black acknowledges "the historical impact of the black church on social and

political progress” (p. 60). At the same time, Black admonishes: “The downfall of the black church is that it keeps teaching its own bondage” (p. 62). The bondage of which Black writes is in the ways the black church has taught “black versions of white supremacist thinking and celebrated itself for the rejection of pagan, Africanist ways” (p. 63). He warns that the continuing and increasing embrace of white supremacist ideas and practices codify and cement us to unsustainable ways rejected more and more by young people.

Black has similar criticisms for historically black colleges and universities (or HBCUs). He tells the story of his experience at then Clark College in Atlanta with a professor that demanded excellence without conceding any ground. However, Black writes, “...HBCUs teach what they believe will make students most successful in life. Again, the failing, I believe, is that this includes too much deference to Western notions of success and knowledge” (p. 155). Of the many critics of HBCUs, Black’s voice is one of a small cadre whose insight comes from being a product of the undergraduate program and a member of the faculty for three decades at Clark Atlanta University.

Arguably, the most painful chapter to sit with is the one on the self-inflicted trauma Black writes about in “Dying to Be Loved.” The disproportionate rates of HIV among Black men are an infliction where, according to Black, “many young black gay men are willing to die—if it’s the only way to be loved without limits.... One could even say they’ve decided to die in order to be touched fully and freely in this life” (p. 124). The other infliction is one by the Black community on itself. The prayers to eradicate “abominable acts,” the demands for silence, and the hopes of celibacy from our sons, uncles, and fathers have also cost the collective. Could it be possible that our liberation has been missing the integration of LGBTQ artistic, cultural, and transformative traits and views? What might happen if we saw queer identity as necessary to the “we”?

Readers will likely confront their participation—be it active or passive—in the perpetuation of Black institutions, structures, and cultural productions discussed by Black as foundational and flawed to his own identity. However, this book does not read like a litany of complaints with no prescriptions. Black instructs readers to go far beyond tolerance and acceptance and to embrace the diverse ways Africanness shows up in our communities—divine ways—that are LGBTQ and otherwise. Black’s essays call for “an immediate reconstruction policy, theology, and social consciousness”; the creation of “our own institutions” and “aesthetic rules”; the restoration of health,

justice, and hope; the affirmation of “liberty, self-love, and fearless truth.” If fact, we might dare, as Black has done, to write ourselves into beauty, capability, and divinity. The essays are a series of love letters to Black people, and if we dare to return the love, our families, institutions, and communities will be the better for generations to come.