Editors' Preface

The first issue of *Criterion* each year features several essays in conversation with a prompt written by a scholar in a field of literary criticism. This semester's prompt has been provided by Nicole Waligora-Davis, an Associate Professor of English at Rice University. She specializes in late-nineteenth and 20th century African American literary and cultural criticism, with a particular emphasis on black intellectual history, black internationalism, legal studies, critical race theory, and visual culture.

While not every submission need respond or even relate directly to the prompt, essays that do address the central questions of the journal this winter will be given special consideration by our editorial staff, and a significant portion of the issue will be reserved for papers on topics related to adaptation and multi-modality.

Forum Prompt: *Criterion*, Winter 2021

African American Literature Studies

Resilience: The Grammar of the Lower Frequencies

Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies I speak for you.
~Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*

2020. It was a year that stands all on its own, encumbered by loss, hurt, grief, fear, anxiety, despair, dispossession, displacement, disruption, uncertainty, scarcity, socio-economic and political turmoil, unrest, violence, and most significantly *death* on a global scale not seen in generations. Three global pandemics converged in 2020—the newest, COVID-19, joined two others well underway: virulent anti-blackness and climate crises. There is little doubt that the rippling effects of each of these pandemics will continue to transform the lives of individuals across our globe for countless years to come. And it seems to me that in a moment such as this, African American and, more broadly, Black Diasporic literatures, must be our guide. For it is in and through these literary and expressive cultural traditions—traditions that carry us across the US, the "New World," and all the archipelagoes of the West Indies, and that include the many nations, cultures, and linguistic traditions of the Afro-Diaspora—that the courage, creativity, innovation, imagination, and improvisation necessary to address, survive, and thrive amidst these pandemics, and to imagine and build better futures in their wake, may be realized. Belying my call to turn to Black US literatures in particular, and Afro-Diasporic Literatures more

generally, is an ardent conviction that, for some, may read as a provocation: to meet the measure of the greatest challenges confronting humanity—be they racial and social injustices, raced and gendered health inequities, violence in its many shapes and forms, structurally arranged education and wealth gaps, poverty, resource scarcity, climate crises, economic and political instability, or mass incarceration—requires us to be attuned with the lived and historical experiences of communities who have always lived life under siege. These are communities for whom the five "D's"—*Dispossession*, *Displacement*, *Discrimination*, *Disenfranchisement*, and premature *Death*— (over)prescribe existence. The capacious character of violent anti-blackness in the US, with its nimble ability to transect every quadrant of human existence, has meant that black lives have always been in, and conditioned by, what economists, political pundits, and medical practitioners might quickly caption a state of crisis. It is a crisis as long-standing as the modern world and the systems of global capital that slavery wrought into being and of which slavery, too, is a consequence.

To say this is to acknowledge that black social life and expressive cultural traditions exist in spite of, despite, and precisely because black lives have always been lived in crisis. Christina Sharpe nails the point more finely when she asks, "In the midst of so much death and the fact of Black life as proximate to death, how do we attend to physical, social, and figurative death and *also to the largeness that is Black life, Black life insisted from death*?"[1] Sharpe's query reminds us that *resilience* serves as an organizing grammar of black life. Make no mistake, resilience is far from passive. Resilience is about being able to live in the midst of and despite circumstances that threaten, impoverish, and even short-circuit your very life. Indeed, resilience should be confused with neither acceptance nor passivity. It is quite the opposite of both. Resilience manifests in the refusal to merely endure, to simply survive, or to passively accept. To be resilient is to live with hope and refuse to cede ground to despair. To be resilient is to confront challenges and rise to their demands—demands for racial and social justice; for enfranchisement; for access to health care, to food, to housing, to employment, to education, to clean air and safe drinking water. To be resilient means to be able to also live full lives, to generate that "largeness" of life, to which Christina Sharpe speaks, despite every odd being against you. To be resilient requires courage, strength, imagination, and creativity to tackle the hard thing and be willing to imagine and foster something new in its stead. In an essay for the *New York Times* published in 1962, James Baldwin wrote, "Not everything that is faced can be changed; but nothing can be changed until it is faced." [2] His essay addressed what he understood to be the responsibilities laden in the work of the writer, but in framing the charge of the writer in these terms, Baldwin invariably offered a rubric for reading Black American literature in particular and Black Diasporic literature more broadly.

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[1] Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 17. Emphasis added.

[2] James Baldwin, "As Much Truth as One Can Bear," *The New York Times,* January 14, 1962: 38.

From eighteenth-century freedom suits to black science fiction and fantasy, from slave narratives to protest literature of the 1930s–1940s, from post-WWII petitions directed at the UN to the jailhouse letter of Martin Luther King Jr., from the blues that emerged from chain gangs to the placards of civil rights demonstrators during the 1950s–1960s, black expressive traditions have always characterized the hallmarks of resilience—critique, accountability, and possibility. Whether turning to David Walker's *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World (1829),* to Frederick Douglass's "What to the Slave is the Fourth of July" (1852), or to Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1950), African American writers have typically held this nation and its people accountable for the failings of its democratic project. This capacity to face our sociopolitical foibles, to recognize the disproportionately borne costs and sheer unaffordability of nostalgia, and to register and humanize the effects of racialized and sexualized violence, for example, are but strands of the tripartite structure of resilience found within the Black literary imaginary. Black authors and artists teach us that it is not enough to simply make evident the instrumental role race plays in structuring our societies, our human interactions, our cultures, and our relationship with and distribution of natural resources, but that accountability must accompany recognition in order for meaningful (social, economic, political) transformation to occur.

This discourse on accountability that forms a strand of resilience is best understood as an ethic of care. Pluriform in nature, this ethic of care speaks not only to those moments when writers hold us responsible for our histories, for our present, and for our future, but equally for one another, for our nation, for our planet, and for other living things. It is this ethic of care—of accountability and responsibility—that subtends Morrison's description of the black women who care for Ysidra Cee Money's broken body and spirit following the eugenicist reproductive surgical experiments conducted on her by her employer, Dr. Beau, as much as it is found in the audacious love of a slave mother for her children captured in Harriet Jacob's slave narrative. This capacity to love oneself and to love others, to feel responsible for and treat with respect both self and others, which is embodied in Baby Sugg's memorable sermon in the Clearing on loving the flesh in *Beloved*, is intimately linked to the capacity to imagine futures otherwise.

What might it mean to imagine a world that fulfilled the promises of the democratic project? What might it mean to reimagine alternative ways of being in the world? Whether turning to black science fiction, graphic novels, satire, or neo-slave narratives, black writers have actively imagined futures otherwise prohibited. They have imagined spaces of freedom in the midst of slavery, they have imagined possibilities for connection and reconciliation amidst the violent social order of Jim Crow, and they have imagined life amidst that catastrophes of war and death. Turning to black literatures of the United States or to the Black Diaspora more broadly, where do you see examples of one or more of these features of resilience? How do you see, black literature engaging with some of the most urgent questions of our times—climate crises, ecological devastation, environmental contamination, resource scarcity, racial injustice and police violence, etc.? How does black literature respond to the problem of civil and/or human rights? How does

black literature engage with racialized and gendered health inequities? Wealth inequalities? In a moment when big data risks obscuring subjects and reducing individuals into computational units of measure, how does black literature insist on the value and dignity of both the living and the dead? How have particular black authors outlined projects of resistance and/or revolution to confront the climate of anti-blackness? How has black literature registered the depth, breadth, and tenacity of black social life even during historical periods when its expression was most stridently restricted? Whether listening to Louis Armstrong or Nina Simone; reading Gwendolyn Brooks, Claudia Rankine, M. NourbeSe Philip, Joshua Bennett; or studying the works of Octavia Butler, Nalo Hopkinson, Toni Morrison, Jamaica Kincaid, Alexis Pauline Gumbs, Alice Walker, Audre Lorde, Colson Whitehead, Mat Johnson, John Edgar Wideman, etc.—how does black literature invite us to 'face our world,' to use Baldwin's terminology? How does it call us to boldly envision a world (or worlds) and futures otherwise?