

Julius B. Fleming Jr.'s *Black Patience*: Unveiling the transformative potential of theater during the Civil Rights Movement

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Julius B. Fleming Jr., *Black Patience: Performance, Civil Rights, and the Unfinished Project of Emancipation*. New York: New York University Press, 2022 (301 pages)

ABSTRACT

In *Black Patience: Performance, Civil Rights, and the Unfinished Project of Emancipation* (2022), Julius B. Fleming Jr. analyzes plays, productions, and performances staged during the core years of the Civil Rights Movement (1954-1965), highlighting the underrecognized importance of Black theater to the cultural and political practices of the movement and expanding its archive and repertoire beyond more commonly studied sources, namely photography and television. Black patience, a disciplinary device that entails specific temporal protocols and affective postures based on deferral, deference, and docility, serves as the conceptual framework for Fleming's study. By introducing and applying the concepts of Afro-Presentism and fugitive affect to Black theater, Fleming advances the burgeoning field of Black Time Studies and develops an original analysis of understudied performative practices enacted by Black artists and activists during the most prominent phase of the Civil Rights Movement.

Keywords

Black patience, Black Time Studies, Afro-Presentism, fugitive affect, Civil Rights Movement, Black theater

In Lynn Nottage's 1993 one-act play *POOF!*, Loureen, a Black housewife in her early thirties, responds to routine domestic violence with an extraordinary speech act that has unexpected material consequences. Before being beaten for the umpteenth time, she tells her abusive husband to go to hell, causing him to spontaneously combust and turn into a pile of smoking ashes. When her Black neighbor and friend Florence enters the kitchen-turned-crime scene, she concludes that the deceased husband "must have done something truly terrible" to lose his wife's patience, to which Loureen replies "No more than usual. I just couldn't take being hit *one more time*" (Nottage 2004, 99, emphasis added). An incredulous and shocked Florence, herself a victim of domestic abuse, promptly adds "You've taken a thousand blows from that man, couldn't you've turned the cheek and *waited*" (ibid, emphasis added). Patient passivity, the automated response of abused subjects, was not a viable option, says Loureen, whose radical response to male violence reflects her impatience with patriarchal demands for docility

and submission. “Everybody always told me, ‘*Keep your place*, Loureen’. My place, the *silent spot* on the couch with a wine cooler in my hand and a *pleasant smile* that warmed the heart” (ibid, 100, emphasis added), she explains. Sick of sitting still and smiling silently, Loureen shouted enraged words that attest to the transformative potential of women’s voices in the coercive context of abusive relationships.

These brief excerpts from Nottage’s *POOF!* – whose title evokes the explosive outcome of denied freedom and deferred dreams expressed in Langston Hughes’s 1951 poem “Harlem” – capture the temporal, spatial and affective dimensions of what Julius B. Fleming Jr. calls “black patience,” a disciplinary device that serves as both an anti-Black instrument of white supremacy and the conceptual framework of Fleming’s first and field-defining book *Black Patience: Performance, Civil Rights, and the Unfinished Project of Emancipation*. Like the theater artists and activists of the Civil Rights Movement to whom Fleming devotes his critical attention, Loureen embraces, embodies, and enacts the movement’s urgent demand for “freedom now,” refusing to perpetuate a performance of patience that would indefinitely postpone her liberation.

Fleming defines Black patience as “a race-based structure of temporal violence” (6) that entails specific affective postures and protocols based on deference, gratitude, and the rhetoric of resilience. As he explains in the book’s introduction, from the onset of the transatlantic slave trade Black people have been strategically positioned within a dual, racialized temporality that has favored the frantic speed of capitalist production on the one hand, and the perpetual deferral of civil rights and equal opportunities on the other. Whether in the slave castle, in the hold of a slave ship, and on auction blocks during slavery, in the debt peonage economy, convict leasing system, and chain gangs of the post-Reconstruction South, or in the modern prison industrial complex, Black individuals have been routinely coerced into racialized performances of patient waiting that sustained their oppression, exploitation, and civic exclusion. Fleming contends that the historical and global significance of the “black body in waiting” (5) calls for a concerted critical investment in the analytical category of time in both social theory and Black studies, an interdisciplinary effort that he deems capable of illuminating how racialized conceptions of time and the social production of race influence and reinforce one another. Aligning his research with previous studies by Anthony Reed, Michelle Wright, Kara Keeling, Soyica Diggs Colbert, Shane Vogel, Carter Mathes, and Calvin Warren, among others, Fleming positions *Black Patience* within a burgeoning and fertile field of critical inquiry that he names Black Time Studies, whose aim is to “foreground the social, political, and aesthetic significance of time to black people, to black experience, and to the black cultural and political imaginations” (14).

With *Black Patience*, Fleming offers a cutting-edge contribution to Black Time Studies, civil rights historiography, and performance studies. In positing Black theater as “a vital

technology of civil rights activism” (4) during the core years of the Civil Rights Movement (1954–1965), Fleming highlights the underrecognized importance of plays, productions, and performances to the political practices of the movement, expanding its archive and repertoire beyond more commonly studied sources, namely photography and television. Given its rootedness in the circumscribed here and now of the live performance, theater allowed civil rights activists to articulate the “radical grammar of the now” (5) advanced by the movement and to counter the calls to “go slow” in their fights for freedom and full citizenship. As Fleming demonstrates, theater functioned as a communal space to expose and dismantle the racial project of Black patience and its violent logics of deferral. In staging “a political aesthetics of now-time” (33), Black theater artists embraced and enacted Afro-Presentism, a term originally coined by Fleming to denote “a radical structure of racial time” (26) and “a black political and ontological orientation” rooted in the possibilities of the present.

Another important theoretical intervention to be found in *Black Patience* is the concept of “fugitive affect,” which Fleming defines as “a dissident practice of straining against the affective protocols of black patience” (33). At a time when dissident Black bodies and affects were being disciplined and punished in street marches and rallies, lunch counter sit-ins, and prison jail-ins, theater provided a relatively safe site to stage counter-normative performances of Black affective expression. Conceived of as both experiential and analytical paradigms, Afro-Presentism and fugitive affect underpin Fleming’s sustained study of Black theater during the Civil Rights Movement’s most prominent phase, which spanned broadly from the Supreme Court’s landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) decision to the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

Chapter 1, “One Hundred Years Later: The Unfinished Project of Emancipation,” focuses on two theatrical events staged during the 1963 Emancipation Proclamation Centennial, a national commemoration organized by the American Negro Emancipation Centennial Authority (ANECA). Fleming examines an Indianapolis revival of Lorraine Hansberry’s family play *A Raisin in the Sun* and the first production of Duke Ellington’s musical drama *My People*. The latter was the highlight of Chicago’s Century of Negro Progress Exposition, a major and yet understudied event of which Fleming provides the first detailed scholarly account. Fleming’s analysis offers original insights into both Hansberry’s classical play and Ellington’s involvement in the civil rights movement.

Chapter 2, “Black Time, Black Geography: The Free Southern Theater” moves to Mississippi, home to a particularly violent racial regime during and after slavery, to advance a “deeper discussion of black patience in the US South” (88). Fleming’s focus here is the Free Southern Theater, a grassroots theater company founded in 1963, whose 1964 repertoire included Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* (1952), Ossie Davis’s comedy *Purlie Victorious* (1961), and Martin Duberman’s documentary drama *In White America* (1964). By performing

these time-conscious plays in the back porches, cotton fields, and former plantations of Mississippi, the Free Southern Theater exposed and repurposed the violent practice of Black patience in the places where it was practiced with the utmost cruelty, thus urging the audience to take action against the protracted exercise of this anti-Black form of temporal violence.

Chapter 3, “Black Queer Time and the Erotics of the Civil Rights Body,” focuses on Amiri Baraka’s one-act plays *The Eighth Ditch* (1961), *The Toilet* (1964), and *The Baptism* (1964), which Fleming frames as Baraka’s Black queer trilogy. As his thorough textual and contextual analysis makes clear, Baraka played a crucial creative role in the Civil Rights Movement before becoming, most famously, the founder and principal playwright of the Black Arts Movement. By engaging “the civil rights body not only as a site of formal political activity but also as a locus of sexual action” (132), Fleming convincingly argues that during the Civil Rights Movement the urgent cry for “freedom now” expressed both civic demands and sexual desires.

In chapter 4, “Picturing White Impatience: Theatre and Visual Culture,” Fleming turns his attention to white impatience, an analytical shift that mirrors the thematic and formal experimentation of the theater pieces he examines: James Baldwin’s *Blues for Mister Charlie* (1964), Douglas Turner Ward’s *Day of Absence* (1965), Alice Childress’s *Trouble in Mind* (1955), and Hansberry’s *Les Blancs* (1970). By shifting the theatrical focus from injured Black bodies to the white people who attacked them causing arm and death, these plays and playwrights directly addressed and challenged the white gaze, testing the patience of white audiences and exposing their privilege and fragility.

Chapter 5, “Lunch Counters, Prisons, and the Radical Potential of Black Patience,” offers a cathartic ending that celebrates the embodied, counter-normative forms of Black patience that were strategically appropriated and enacted by Black activists as alternative ways of expressing their call for “freedom now.” Fleming reads traditional practices of civil rights activism such as lunch counter sit-ins and prison jail-ins as performative acts rather than passive forms of political protest. By refashioning “the violent cultures of black patience via black patience” (37) itself, civil rights activists unveiled its transformative potential and used it in creative ways to support and energize the movement.

Besides advancing the field of Black Time Studies and expanding the archive of civil rights historiography, Fleming’s *Black Patience* attests to the transhistorical and transnational legacy of the cultural and political practices developed by Black artists and activists during the core years of the Civil Rights Movements. As BIPOC theater practitioners in the United States collectively articulate their principles and demands for building anti-racist theater systems through initiatives such as “We See You, White American Theater,” and as Black people in various geographical locations continue to be forced to wait patiently for human and civil rights, Fleming’s theoretical attention to the entanglement of time, space, and affect in the making of

the modern racial order is relevant to a number of disciplinary fields, including theater, performance, cultural, and critical race studies.

As my opening reference to the dramatic treatment of Black patience in Nottage's one-act play *POOF!* suggests, a critical investment in the gender-specific implications of "time-based modes of racialized violence" (3) would enable scholars to consider how racialized women playwrights and practitioners have used drama, theater, and performance to unsettle the patriarchal protocols of female patience. This analytic shift would further expand Black Time Studies in an intersectional direction oriented by both foundational and original Black feminist contributions, favoring a capacious diachronic and diatopic deployment of the notions of Afro-Presentism and fugitive affect introduced by Fleming in his model and multifocal study of performative acts of civil disobedience.

References

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