



OBSIDIAN

Literature & Arts
in the African Diaspora

Call & Response: Experiments in Joy
Furious Flower:
Seeding the Future of African American Poetry
Fall 2015
41.1 • 41.2



CALL & RESPONSE: EXPERIMENTS IN JOY

An Introduction

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Without a discourse of their own, Black women artists remain fixed in the trajectory of displacement, hardly moving beyond the defensive posture of merely responding to their objectification and misrepresentation by others.

—Freida High W. Tesfagiorgis, “In Search of a Discourse and Critique/s that Center the Art of Black Women Artists”

Call & Response was born from an astral e-mail exchange with the then president of Antioch College, Mark Roosevelt, who was checking in with me about a job offer. At the time, I had been securely ensconced as an associate professor of English, women’s studies, and critical studies of race & ethnicity at a small, predominantly women’s college in the Upper Midwest. I had worked there for thirteen years and had been tenured for six. I had not initially been seeking a new job, had not done a full search on the job market, but I had grown restless in the snowy heartland. I was seeking new ways to grow as an artist and teacher. I wanted—and still want—to become a better and better-known artist.

So when my friend Miré Regulus sent me the Performance job listing for Antioch out of the blue, my heart welled up. Here was an opportunity to align my extensive artistic practice and community teaching as a Black feminist performance artist with my professional identity. This position would be to build and lead an undergraduate Performance program with the notion of Performance as interdisciplinary and deliberately linked to the Visual Arts and Media Arts programs. The position

would allow me to test and develop my pedagogical ideas about experimental performance and consider key questions of performance art practice within a liberal arts context. More importantly, the job could shake me up, challenge me, and push me to put my money where my mouth is.

At the same time, accepting a job at Antioch would mean venturing into the cornfields, living in a tiny town (Yellow Springs, OH, pop. 3,500) far from the dynamic art centers that had been my lifeblood (New York, Minneapolis, Mexico City). The thought excited and unnerved me. That spring of 2013, I had interviewed and received a job offer from Antioch, then asked for a week to decide whether or not to make the leap. During that time, Mark sent me a message, the exact words of which have been wiped away with the rest of the e-mail correspondence from my old life. It went something like:

Dear Gabrielle, I always think that March will be warm, but today again is cold and rainy. But then I thought, maybe something good will happen today. Maybe Gabrielle will write me about coming to Antioch.

To that, I responded something like:

Dear Mark, I have been dreaming about the cornfields... My biggest fear of coming to Antioch College is losing my context, the people, places, things, situations that allow me and my work to make sense. One thing that would help allay that fear would be a festival of Black women and performance at Antioch College, an opportunity to bring Black women performers together from around the country, presenting and sharing work with each other and Antioch students. This would be magical.

Although the possibility of a Black women's performance festival had long been percolating in my mind—indeed Rosamond S. King, Wura-Natasha Ogunji, and I had tossed it around separately at various times—I had no idea that I would propose this idea until I did. The flash of insight to write this to Mark that day felt to me like a gift from God, although others could as easily thank the universe, killer instinct, or #blackgirlmagic.

To my surprise and delight, Mark immediately responded:

This is the best e-mail I think I have ever received. Let me ask around and see if we can actually make this happen...

Mark's instant enthusiasm helped convince me to give Antioch a try. Because I proposed this idea at a key moment and the institution agreed to support it, the Call & Response symposium of Black Women & Performance took place at Antioch College. May more such miracles come to pass.

The seven lead artists of Call & Response were myself, Gabrielle Civil, project organizer, newly relocated to Yellow Springs, OH; Duriel E. Harris from Chicago, IL; Kenyatta A.C. Hinkle from Los Angeles, CA; Rosamond S. King from Brooklyn, NY; Miré Regulus from Minneapolis, MN; Wura-Natasha Ogunji then based in both Austin, TX and Lagos, Nigeria, now fully relocated to Lagos; and, Awilda Rodríguez Lora from San Juan, Puerto Rico. Our practice represented a full gamut of performance from multi-media performance art, live art actions, performance installation, theater, dance, music, conceptual art, spoken word, poetry, and more. Moreover, each artist had significant experience with more than one performance form. We also had various diasporic connections to Africa and the Caribbean and represented a range of ages, academic backgrounds, sexual orientations, familial situations, gender experiences, languages spoken, and more. Even more significantly, none of the artists, myself included, had met all of the other ones. While many of us ran in the same circles or had heard each other's names, the symposium became an opportunity to build community as Black women performers and make new artistic connections.

The structure of the project was innovative and historic.

In Summer 2014, seven Black women performers—with different relationships to the words “Black,” “woman,” and “performance”—came together at Antioch College in Yellow Springs, Ohio from seven different cities to create and announce a Call, a collective prompt for artistic action. A month later, the seven artists reconvened to share their Responses to the Call with each other and the Antioch community.

To my knowledge, there had never been a gathering of Black women artists focused on process. Too often, artists, activists, scholars gather together, share what they've already made, hit it off, connect, spark ideas for collaboration, and then never see each other again. Call &

Response scheduled time for conversation, collaboration, going home to make work, and then coming back a month later to premiere this work before a knowledgeable audience. This structure allowed us space to generate ideas and then manifest them.

In our July session (July 18–22, 2014), we introduced ourselves to each other and the community. Each artist brought an object, a writing prompt, and an embodied exercise to do together. We had closed group sessions where we talked about our lives and our work. We visited the Herndon Art Gallery on campus. Many of us took walks in the Yellow Springs Women’s Garden or in the Glen Helen nature preserve. Some strolled down our Main Street and had coffee at the Underdog Café. With students, we ate meals, visited classes, and conducted a public roundtable about our work. With faculty, students, staff, and local African American residents, we attended a community potluck in our honor organized by history professor Kevin McGruder. Our Saturday evening of Artist Presentations drew a crowd of over a hundred people (quite significant in a school whose student population at that time was about two hundred) and even attracted local hero Dave Chappelle to the audience. This marked the first public event in our reopened Foundry Theater and helped put the Antioch Performance Program on the map. All of this activity undergirded our main artistic task: to produce the Call, the collective prompt for artistic action that would articulate our ideas about art making and catalyze our new performances.

It took us hours of writing, moving, and talking to come up with the Call. Again, we didn’t all know each other beforehand and had certainly never collaborated before on a document. We brainstormed questions and gestures. We quibbled over semantics. We laughed. One of my sharpest memories was when Wura asked us one day, what would it mean for us to look at our own work separate from or beyond the lenses of our multiple oppressions? What would it mean to create work from there? No direct line existed from these questions to the final composition of the Call, but these questions cracked open something crucial for me. Here was our chance to create our own discourse as Black women artists. We could now respond to the world on our own terms. What would move us forward in Black feminist practice? What would it mean for us as Black women artists to claim joy?