

## Confronting Black Ineptitude by C. Liegh McInnis\*

I've always written about the combination of white supremacy and black ineptitude as the equally driving forces that keep African peoples from obtaining first-class citizenship as evidenced by the sovereignty, or lack thereof, that they have over their lives. While my 2017 implosion post is the most noted example of my struggle to understand why black ineptitude is rarely given as much focus as white supremacy, my post on former Mississippi Department of Corrections Director **Chris Epps**, my post on local Afro-Mississippi Preachers challenging **President Obama** over marriage equality in which I assert that poor parenting in the African-American community is a bigger threat to the community than gay marriage, and my most recent post on **Charles Evers** are a few examples of me addressing various forms of black ineptitude. And, I venture that very few folks have discussed both factors as equally as I have. Black creatives rarely address black ineptitude because no one wants to risk being perceived as disloyal to the race, i.e. being called an Uncle Tom. Or, at least, when they address black ineptitude, it is someone who is clearly or easily definable as a race traitor. On the other hand, black conservatives rarely acknowledge racism as an issue and generally stick to the script, touting personal responsibility and disparaging any foray into racism as having a victim mentality. As such, when one someone like **Richard Wright** attempts to be nuanced about these two forces, over time he has been labeled as "hating black people," which is quite disingenuous since members of the African-American LGBTQ and feminist communities have made similar statements about black ineptitude and hate yet are never deemed as hating black people. To paraphrase *2 Timothy 4:2* and **W. E. B. Du Bois**, all who want a more just, peaceful, and innovative world must be willing to "correct, rebuke, and encourage with great patience and careful instruction in season and out of season." This means that we must be willing to speak the truth when it is popular and when it is unpopular, and we must be willing to criticize lovingly our allies as well as our adversaries. This includes correcting someone who usually does good work when they are wrong, such as Chicago Black Lives Matter Organizer **Ariel Atkins** who equated looting to reparations, stating,

I don't care if someone decides to loot a Gucci or a Macy's or a Nike store because that makes sure that person eats. That makes sure that person has clothes. That is reparations. Anything they wanted to take, they can take it because these businesses have insurance. They're going to get their money back. My people aren't getting anything.

I am not going to excoriate or demonize Atkins because I disagree with her. I admire her passion and her willingness to put her life in harm's way in the streets to fight for justice. However, just because I agree with much of the work she is doing does not mean that I must turn a blind eye when she makes a mistake, or is wrong, or I simply disagree with her. As such, we can all take her faux pas as a teachable moment to have a thorough discussion about reparations. More specifically, reparation is not repaying injustice with injustice or seeking merely physical payment for an injustice. It is the process to repair and restore an aggrieved or harmed party through a systematic means that ensures equality and equity while decreasing the need for vengeance and continued warfare. Further, Atkins must be reminded that, when she makes these types of overly general statements that are not rooted in the spirit of or in the empirical justification for reparations, she does a disservice to folks, like long-time reparations advocate

Attorney **Randall Robinson** and others, who are working in earnest to make even the discussion of reparations a valid discourse. While I know that my correction of or disagreement with Atkins might not be popular in some circles, one must not worry about and be hindered by the fear of being considered inauthentically black when it comes to correcting a wrong, standing for what is right, or simply providing necessary insight to any discussion.

Thus, the question for African-American creatives is: how do we address black ineptitude in its many manifestations without also justifying white supremacy? How do I, as a creative, address the myth of black-on-black crime (since just as many white folks—84%—kill white folks) while also addressing the empirically proven point that black self-hatred is real (as proven over and over by the [Clark Doll Experiment](#) and [other studies](#)) and that it manifests itself in or impacts much of what ails the African-American community? For instance, twice someone close to me has been killed by a black person: my stepson's roommate was shot multiple times by a black man as he slept in his bed, and, just four weeks ago, my wife's nephew was killed by his girlfriend's brother. So, how do I write about these acts of violence as equally and as forcibly as I write about the murder of black folks by law enforcement? I had planned to write about the murder of my wife's nephew in the listserv newsletter, but other "pressing" issues kept taking center stage: first it was the removal of the Confederate emblem from Mississippi's state flag; then, it was the death of Charles Evers. Two weeks ago I was moved to write about finding "happiness, joy, and serenity" after meeting with young African-American creatives via Zoom. (I questioned if the post on self-evaluation and finding happiness was worth the ink, given the current state of things, but I have been surprised by the number of folks who have emailed thanking me for that post.) And, last week, I had promised to address President Clinton's erroneous comments about **Kwame Toure**. (note: I try to keep my comments/commentary in the newsletter to one topic, though it does not always work that way, so that the bulk of the newsletter is sharing upcoming events.) For four weeks, the murder of my wife's nephew by the hands of a black man has been usurped by other "more pressing" topics. So, what is the value of Kenny Graves' life (a twenty-six-year-old black man murdered by another twenty-something black man) as it relates to these other topics? My question is not rhetorical. Of course, I could rest on my laurels by asserting that, the week after I wrote the poem, "Reruns," about the lynching of **James Craig Anderson** by white teenagers, I wrote "Too Normal to Notice," asking why do we give "so much more coverage [to black boys and black men who are killed by law enforcement] than other black boys and black men who were killed" by black boys and black men? (Rambsy 17). What's most interesting is that I was raising this question in 2011 with poetry, and **Howard Rambsy** is still raising it in 2020 with his book *Bad Men: Creative Touchstones for Black Writers*, which forces African Americans to ask why some stories, events, and people are cataloged by art and some are not.

I don't know the complete answer, but I do know that if black creatives are not willing to do the same problem-finding (asking the right questions) about black self-hatred and its various manifestations in the black community, then our use of creative touchstones or our creative productivity rooted in celebrating rebellious black figures will serve merely as performative and not as problem-solving. Thus, I challenge every black creative on this listserv to create art that mourns the loss of black life caused by black hands. I challenge that y'all do this not in the place of creating art that challenges white supremacy but simultaneously. We cannot seriously say that we care about the black lives taken by white hands if we are not just as hurt and outraged by

black lives taken by black hands. And, to be clear, I'm not saying that y'all must have and/or present the same solution that I do. Yet, I do find it interesting, for lack of a better term, that most of the black folks who assert that poverty is the primary issue driving crime and violence in our communities are the same folks who are anti-Black Nationalism or any form of self-determinism. Recently, poet and activist **Hakim Hasan** recommended **Michael Fortner's** *Black Silent Majority: The Rockefeller Drug Laws and the Politics of Punishment*, which details how many African-American New Yorkers broke ranks with the Democrat Party to support New York Governor **Nelson Rockefeller's** draconian drug laws that became a war on black people as New York became the first state to mandate long prison sentences for selling or possessing narcotics. Reading a few notes on the text, it seems, as usual, that African Americans were more emotional, which is understandable given what drugs were doing/are doing to our communities, than we were logical. That is—we always punish the pusher and the addict without addressing what causes the pusher to push and the addict to become addicted. (Oddly, this discussion is returning us to my previous discussion of **Joe Biden** and **Bill Clinton's** crime bills as well as my discussion on self-evaluation for happiness.) On a very base level, the drug trade is driven by two elements, limited economic opportunity that drives the seller and a sense of hopelessness and/or misguided sense of happiness that drives the user. Moreover, I think that we must acknowledge and resolve black self-hatred and the number of people having babies that they don't want and/or cannot afford. When children have children, especially without an effective support system, it's difficult for anything to grow other than a cycle of poor education, poverty, and crime. But, if y'all don't think that those are the primary issues, then creatives must be clear what y'all think the issue is because, once the government develops a vaccine for COVID-19, don't hold your breath waiting for it to develop a vaccine, cure, or answer for the number of black folks dying by white or black hands. As such, if we don't identify the cause and develop a solution to us killing each other, then it will only prove that black lives only matter to black folks when they are taken by white hands.

While in correspondence with poet/activist Hasan, he strikes the heart of the matter when he states:

I grew up with a set of values and social coordinates that would never allow me to sell drugs or, for that matter, end up in prison for doing so. I know one brilliant brother I went to high school with who ended up selling drugs. He is in jail now. The brother could have easily become an engineer or something substantive.

Hasan moves even closer to the heart of the matter when he adds:

Very often popular culture does not provide a basis for people to assess the implications of crime and its impact on Black folks—both externally and internally. There are brothers (and sisters) involved in the criminal life who have, as one Black psychologist explained to me, “lost the ability to feel.” If you get in their way they will maim or murder you. You become an abstraction to them. How do we deal with this? And how did some of them get this way?

Hasan's two statements make clear the conundrum of what is wrong, wondering how it got this way, and the inability or lack of desire of more African Americans to do the difficult work of

finding a solution for ourselves. When my stepson's roommate was shot thirteen times while lying in bed as he slept, I understood that level of violence is way beyond crimes for work and is rooted in extreme pathological disorder. Yet, few folks on either side seem to have the desire or the ability to address the violence in this way. On the right, it's simply "monsters are born to be monsters," and on the left, it's simply the fault of "white supremacy" with very little nuance and complicated thinking of how systematic oppression impacts and is impacted by personal agency, sensibility, and morality. It would seem that one of the goals is for us (African peoples) to ask: why did some maintain their "values and social coordinates" and some had their "values and social coordinates" changed by the hell in which they existed? Why did some of us who could not afford grass continue to sweep our dirt as an example of our humanity while others of us decided to rob, kill, and whatever to obtain grass?

Hasan later reminds me that, while large areas of black communities all over America have been reduced to "social red-light districts" of drugs and prostitution as their primary means of economic survival, black drug dealers know that they cannot "set up shop" in white neighborhoods as they do in black neighborhoods. He adds "Those people use drugs too; but, the people selling drugs know that they cannot sell drugs on the corners in THOSE neighborhoods." This is the most critical aspect of the conundrum where white supremacy and black self-hatred/ineptitude intersect. For fourteen years, my wife, two step-children, and I lived in West Jackson in the Jackson State University community. It's an example of the same ole narrative. Once a neighborhood for the black middle-class, it's now a haven for poverty and crime. (I only moved because, while my credit score and down payment were high enough, no bank would give me a loan to make additions to our house or build another house in the neighborhood. That includes the black and white banks. So, I was forced to leave the neighborhood, but I was determined to remain in Hinds County, which is majority black. Noted novelist, poet, and essayist **Ishmael Reed** has an excellent essay, "**My Neighborhood, Parts 1 and 2**," that explains how redlining never ended and continues to pack people of color into areas in which every aspect of their lives are limited by folks—such as "banks, gun shops, real estate investors, absentee landlords, liquor stores, hourly-rate hotels," pawn shops, and more—who profit from black folks inability to change their circumstance.) In our old neighborhood, there were a couple of brothers selling drugs right in front of our house. My step-children were eight and nine at the time. So, I mustered all the nerd courage I could find and meekly asked if the brothers could not sell right here where my children live and where other children catch the bus. One of the brothers said to me, as if I didn't understand how life works, "You don't expect me to sell it in front of my house do you?" Yet, I think that my look of utter bewilderment and astonishment caused his partner in crime to say, "Man, let's just move up the street." They say that God protects fools and babies, and I wasn't no baby at the time. All of this is to say that fear of the power of whiteness combined with black self-hatred creates a certain kind of black person who will kill his own for profit because he's too afraid and self-loathing to attack the real cause of his negative condition. (Think Bigger Thomas' fear and inability to rob a white-owned store while he has no problem robbing black folks because he knows that the consequences of harming white folks are severely more punitive than for harming black folks.) And, I would be willing to accept that maybe the brothers just don't understand the real cause of their negative condition. But, as Hasan shows so well, they know/understand enough not to attempt to stand on the corner of white neighborhoods and sell drugs. Thus, they are not completely devoid of agency as they choose where to sell based on the risk and degree of punishment for their actions. Through

Bigger, Wright attempts to answer my question about the dirt and the grass, but few seem to desire or be able to hear him in this new age of Twenty-First Century Scholars bashing Wright to curry favor with their liberal white financiers. Yet, I still don't completely know the answer to why some choose to sweep their dirt and some choose to do whatever is necessary to obtain grass, but, again, it seems that the answer to this question is essential to changing the fundamental reality of most African Americans.

As creatives, we must stop trying to provide simplified answers and provide art that is just as nuanced as the problems that we are trying to solve. In *Galileo*, **Bertolt Brecht** presents a protagonist who is just as flawed as the antagonists trying to stop him. In all of Brecht's work, his characters address the choice of working for personal gratification versus working for the greater good; yet, his characters are often able to serve the greater good even while being self-indulgent, which is true of Galileo who is mean, selfish, and conniving even though his research helps humanity. Thus, Brecht's plays force the audience to become more complex and critical thinkers as they refuse to provide easy or simple solutions to complex problems. Accordingly, Wright provides multiple characters throughout his short stories and novels that are not "heroes" but are various and wide-ranging archetypes/examinations of what happens when personal agency is maintained, when personal agency is relinquished, when personal agency is stripped, and when personal agency is never nurtured; all of which provides multiple ways of understanding what happens when humans are denied or stripped of their humanity as opposed to being able to retain their humanity in the face of all-encompassing oppression. Moreover, **Margaret Walker Alexander** in *Jubilee* provides two fundamentally different characters, Randall Ware (a literate free black) and Innis Brown (a slave freed by the war), crafting a clear understanding of how each man's past creates their present perspective without demonizing either, ultimately providing a more holistic understanding of the multidimensional aspects that combine to constitute what it means to be an African American. Similarly, the positive about President Clinton's erroneous statement about Toure is that it gives us an opportunity to revisit the successes of our ancestors despite the internal and external forces hindering them. I'm appreciative of all that the folks before me were able to accomplish given the multitude of forces working to hinder them. Yet, that's the seminal point that must be made more public in our art and in our scholarship to show folks that ideological and personal/petty disagreements are natural and that they can be overcome. When Du Bois called **Marcus Garvey** a "fat little monkey," that was a personal/petty issue and not an ideological issue. When **Adam Clayton Powell** often called **Martin Luther King, Jr.**, "Martin 'Loser' King," that was a personal/petty issue and not an ideological one. Yet, I don't think any less of Du Bois or Powell because I don't expect people to be perfect. I only demand that people work to overcome their personal/petty issues to benefit the good of the community, which both men did. I tell my world literature students that history is not the study of perfect people creating a perfect world but the study of complicated beings trying their best to overcome or balance their iniquities to create a legacy that can teach us to be even better and more innovative than they were.

For instance, I recall only one or two movies that attempt to show the prolonged, complicated, and, often, intense and adversarial process of coordinating mass meetings into work sessions from which strategy is developed. If I remember correctly, in the film, *Freedom Song*, which has its flaws, there is a moment, after a night of debating to develop a strategy, when one character says, "Man, that was a long and heavy night." To which, another character responds,

“That was short and light for a SNCC meeting.” Too many people think that “movements” and “solutions” just happen, and when they are confronted by the difficult work that it takes to solve any problem, especially the problem of white supremacy and genocide, far too many people quit simply because they have not been properly educated about the process that leads to change. In contrast, a great article, “**The Secret to Raising Smart Kids**” by **Carol Dweck**, shows that raising intelligent, well-adjusted, problem-solving children occurs when parents focus on the process and not the final result, especially focusing on the work to obtain the desired grade rather than focusing on the earned grade. Rather than complimenting the child for the “good grade,” the parent will compliment the child for the work invested in earning the grade. Therefore, when the child encounters another difficult issue, the child is holistically prepared to overcome it. Similarly, I thank my Pops, my uncles, and, even, my recruiter for enabling me to complete basic training. Unlike some of the recruits who had been told that basic training would be easy, I knew before I arrived at Fort Knox that basic training would be hell. So, when hell hit, I was prepared to take its punch and continue moving. I’m not saying that basic training was easy, especially for a nerd like me. But, I was amazed at how many “tough guys” quit or were broken simply because they were not mentally, emotionally, and psychologically prepared for what basic training would be. I think that the same applies to teaching the history of our liberation story, especially teaching it through art. I’m dismayed by how many young people think that our history is simply “there was slavery, Rosie Parks sat on a bus, Martin Luther King, Jr., gave a speech, there was a march, and we got free.” I’ve even had a few young people say to me, “When King and them were marching to end slavery,” and they were not being metaphoric or purposefully hyperbolic with their use of slavery. Our history has been reduced to two paragraphs in a high school history text. Because of this, many of us don’t know how to move beyond mobilizing and engage in organizing that leads to fundamental legislative change. So, yes, the complications and nuances of our liberation struggle must be made more public, especially through art, so that people can stop using the notion that “black folks just can’t get along” as an excuse not to work against injustice and so that they have a better blueprint for how to navigate those natural ideological and personal/petty differences that will always exist. Yet, Freedom Summer and so many other accomplishments show that those differences can be overcome so that the oppressed can move closer to freedom. But, it will take African-American creatives being holistic, nuanced, and wide-ranging, engaging the popular and unpopular issues, the sexy and not-so-sexy issues, the cool and uncool issues, in a way that black lives harmed by black people are as equally engaged and confronted as black lives harmed by white people.

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