The Art of Protest

Poetry in the age of Black Lives Matter
by LyDiaLyLe Gibson

BEFORE YOU GET to any of the poems in Clint Smith’s new book, Counting Descent—some with titles like “How to Fight,” and “No More Elegies Today,” and “Ode to the Only Black Kid in the Class”—you’ll find an epigraph from Ralph Ellison’s interview with the Paris Review in 1954. It reads: “I recognize no dichotomy between art and protest.”

Smith, a third-year Ph.D. candidate in education, thinks about that quote a lot. For him, Ellison’s words are deeply felt. And deeply lived. “It doesn’t even make sense to me that art and protest would be separate,” he says. “Part of what it means to be an artist is to imagine the world as it could be, and to not be confined by what seem like the political possibilities of the day. To reject false caricatures of humanity. And to complicate our understanding of history.”

People often ask if Counting Descent is a book about “the black experience.” Not exactly, he tells them; it is his black experience. Everything is in there: the childhood in New Orleans, full of gumbo and books and family affection. His parents dancing in the kitchen to Frankie Beverly & Maze. One grandfather (“a quarter century / older than his right to vote”) who cleaned floors for white people; and the other, Smith’s namesake, a zoologist who as a teenager had to move to a different Mississippi county because his own didn’t have a high school for blacks. Smith himself, a runner and stand-out soccer player (with, the poems attest, no basketball jump shot), turned 17 on August 25, 2005. Four days later, Hurricane Katrina destroyed his family’s home. “I come from a city that is drowning,” he would later write in a poem called “what is left,” “while being told it is rinsing itself clean.”

One night during a summer internship in...
New York, he found his way to the Nuyori- can Poets Café, a spoken-word mecca on the Lower East Side. The first poem he heard was from a woman with cerebral palsy. Smith was transfixed—and transformed: “I wanted to be a part of that.” He became a National Poetry Slam champion, with spoken-word poems on immigration, food deserts, and other subjects that landed on YouTube, where hundreds of thousands of people have watched them. “History Reconsidered,” which he performed often during his Counting Descent book tour, is written as a letter to five slave-own- ing American presidents: “James Madison, when you wrote to Congress that black people should count as three-fifths of a person, how long did you have to look at your slaves to figure out the math?” Another stand-by is “My Father Is an Oyster,” a filial love song prompt- ed a few years ago by his father’s sudden illness. (He is healthy again, after a kidney transplant.) Smith first performed it standing with his family beside the hospital bed.

In August 2014, during the first week of Smith’s doctoral program, Michael Brown was killed in Ferguson, Missouri. That event, and every- thing that followed—the grief, the pro- tests, the Black Lives Matter movement, more police shootings spawning further grief and protests—has shaped his life and work. That semester, he began writing the poems that would become Counting Descent. Its short- est poem, “Canon,” reads: “Our stars weren’t meant for / their sky. We have never known / the same horizon.” In another, “How to Make an Empty Cardboard Box Disappear in 10 Steps,” the innocuous-sounding title dark- ens as the poem unveils a parade of tragic and familiar names: Trayvon Martin, Renisha McBride, Jordan Davis, Michael Brown, Eric Garner, Freddie Gray. The way to get rid of a cardboard box, the poem instructs, is to make signs from it, for protesting the deaths of slain African Americans.

Smith didn’t figure on becoming a teach- er: after college, he worked in public health in South Africa, en route, he thought, to a career in international development. But a Teach For America recruiter put a bug in his ear: what about the help needed in your own back yard? After a year in Johannes- burg, he went to Prince George’s County,
Montage

Smith kept thinking about education—people cultivate a civic and social identity. Before long, it became the reason why.

"While I was in grad school," he says, "something that would keep me grounded while I was in grad school," he says, "something that would remind me why I came." Before long, it became the reason why.

Initially planning to study how young people cultivate a civic and social identity, Smith kept thinking instead about education and incarceration. The prisoners had formed a longstanding and deeply rooted literary community, reading and writing together for years, Smith says: “It was the teachers who cycled in and out.” The men were thoughtful and brilliant in a way he was not prepared for. Smith began to wonder whether recidivism and after-release employment were really the best metric for assessing the overall value of prisoner education. For the almost 200,000 people serving life sentences in the United States, that measure makes no sense. “It’s almost a human-rights question,” Smith says: “Just because society will never utilize these men’s vocational skills one day out in the world, does that mean we shouldn’t be investing in them as people?” He continues, “Part of what literature does, or history, or any education that’s not geared toward specific vocational training, is that it makes you a fuller person, a more empathic person, more compassionate; you’re more likely to recognize common threads of humanity in all of us. And I think that’s the case whether you’re teaching high-schoolers or men who are serving life sentences in prison.”

In “How Malcolm Learned to Read,” Smith puts it this way: “Malcolm, could you ever have imagined / what this dictionary / would make of you? Do you / remember who you were before you picked up the pen?”

Off the Shelf

Recent books with Harvard connections

The Ethics of Invention, by Sheila Jasanoff, Pforzheimer professor of science and technology studies (W.W. Norton, $26.95). In an era of digital databanks and gene engineering, technology—far from being neutral—is entwined intimately with ethics and human rights. Jasanoff focuses on the implications for governance and policy, as her title suggests. Advancing the underlying work itself, Venkatesh Narayanamurti, founding dean of what is now Harvard’s school of engineering and applied sciences, and Toluwalogo Odumosu, of the University of Virginia, write in Cycles of Invention and Discovery (Harvard, $24.95) that the distinction between basic and applied science is outmoded and hinders research, as they demonstrate by exploring the experiences of practitioners in major research laboratories.

Aging with a Plan, by Sharon Hoffman, J.D. ’88 (Praeger, $37). A Case Western Reserve law professor helpfully and systematically explores “What should middle-aged individuals contemplate, study, decide, and do to be as well equipped as possible for their own aging and that of loved ones?” A chattier take on the phenomenon itself is The Age of Longevity, by Rosalind C. Barnett, Ph.D. ’64, and Caryl Rivers (Rowman & Littlefield, $35), who encourage a positive perspective on the “new, healthy stage of life” between 65 and 79.

The People and the Books: 18 Classics of Jewish Literature, by Adam Kirsch ’97 (W.W. Norton, $28.95). The author, a poet and prolific critic who directs the Jewish studies master’s program at Columbia, guides readers through texts that have been fundamental to Jewish culture and belief for more than two millennia, from the book of Deuteronomy through Theodor Herzl and Sholem Aleichem. Kirsch is a contributing editor of this magazine.

Legal Affairs I. A new president and Congress may engage with matters penal and otherwise. 23/7, by Keramet Reiter ’03 (Yale, $32.50), an in-depth examination of the rise of solitary confinement by a young scholar at the University of California, Irvine, offers evidence for coming debates over sentencing and imprisonment. In Liberating Minds: The Case for College in Prison (The New Press, $26.95), Ellen Condliffe Lagemann, former dean of Harvard Graduate School of Education, presents examples of, and makes the broader argument for, educating the incarcerated.

Legal Affairs II. Stand Your Ground, by Caroline E. Light, lecturer on studies of women, gender, and sexuality (Beacon Press, $25.95). The author, a southern Virginian from a skeet-shooting family, examines the origins and risks of a “do-it-yourself security citizenship,” one of the gun-related issues likely to be legislated and litigated soon. In Praise of Litigation, by Alexandra Lahav, J.D. ’98, of the University of Connecticut School of Law (Oxford, $29.95), vigorously restates the case for lawsuits as “critical to American democracy” on matters large and small. The ultimate litigation, of course, ends up in the Supreme Court; contributing editor Lincoln Caplan ’72, J.D. ’76 (see also page 69), succinctly reports in American Justice 2016 (University of Pennsylvania, $24.95) on what he subtitled “The Political Supreme Court”—not the familiar process of confirmation proceedings, but the operation of the institution as currently constituted.

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