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2019

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Citation

Sullivan, Mecca Jamilah. 2019. "Practices of Imagination: Learning from the Vision of Thadious Davis." *Women's Studies* 48.6: 593-599.

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Practices of Imagination: Learning from the Vision of Thadious Davis

Mecca Jamilah Sullivan

In her 1988 Essay "Expanding the Limits: The Intersection of Race and Region," Thadious Davis traces late twentieth-century black writers' acts of what she terms "historical imagination," in which moments of creative and geographic return to southern regional pasts open new possibilities for black identification (9). This prefigures her path-breaking work in *Southscapes: Geographies of Race, Region, and Literature*, in which imagination works alongside—and, at times, in a tension with—memory and history to produce sites of black regional identity in the Deep South. Throughout the creative production of "southscapes," Davis argues, black southern artists, "by means of a spatial imagination, locate themselves within a relationship to 'homeplace' ... " in the South, subverting dominant racist ideologies and thus "claim[ing] the very space that would negate their humanity and devalue their worth" (*Southscapes* 19).

As an aesthetic tool, a mode of analysis, and a resource for black living, imagination threads wide through the capacious geography of Thadious Davis's oeuvre. Her work offers a wealth of lessons on the uses of imagination and its crucial importance for us as thinkers and writers in academe, particularly as we navigate questions of blackness, gender, space, labor, and value. The need to revise, restructure, reimagine, and reclaim spaces that would negate and devalue us feels real—*is* real—in both the material we work on and the institutional spaces through which we move. As Davis's work shows us, *imagination*—historical, spatial, and geographic—is crucial to our thinking, our work, and our living.

As a black woman, a creative writer, and a scholar of black women's literature, I am especially moved and catalyzed by Davis's revelatory work on imagination in the literary creation and expansion of black women's selfhoods. In her foundational biography, *Nella Larsen: Novelist of the Harlem Renaissance, A Woman's Life Unveiled*, Davis explores the place of imagination not only in Larsen's own self-fashioning but also in that of her characters as they navigate racial and spatial belonging. As Davis shows us, Clare Kendry, the protagonist of *Larsen's Passing*, "makes up her life entirely from her imagination," while *Quicksand's* Helga Crane "feels an enormous need for greatness, for distinction, but her imagination fails to produce a process for fulfilling her need. Much of the energy and the imagination required for writing or self-expression goes into self-creation, self-generation" (277).

This is, of course, a familiar conundrum that black women writers (and black Women more broadly) have faced over time: how to harness imagination as both sustenance and transcendence; how to use one's creative stores to support one's own bodily life, while also imagining possibilities for new ways of being, for self and for others. This is the conundrum Lucille Clifton names in her iconic poem, "won't you celebrate with me," a poem I rediscovered as a PhD student in English at the University of Pennsylvania while completing my dissertation under Thadious Davis's direction. Clifton writes:

won't you celebrate with me
what i have shaped into

a kind of life? i had no model.
born in babylon
both nonwhite and woman
what did i see to be except myself?
i made it up
here on this bridge between
starshine and clay,
my one hand holding tight
my other hand; come celebrate
with me that everyday
something has tried to kill me
and has failed. (25)

Clifton theorizes black women's practices of imaginative self-making in spatial and bodily terms, offering a set of visual and material images of the creative self-fashioning Davis describes. Clifton's speaker locates herself within a spatiotemporal imaginary that, like Davis's, is both geographical and historical – a place between the "clay" earth she inhabits (inevitably marked by the biblical danger zone of "Babylon") and the "starshine" of unseen futurities. In this space, the speaker finds cause for celebration in her imagination's power, and in her own ability to stand on that bridge of the ever-uncertain present, to remake it, and to survive. Her survival is a bodily gesture of self-sustenance and self-guidance ("my one hand holding tight my other hand") as well as a feat creative vision: "what did I see to be except myself?/I made it up."

I think of this poem often when I think of Thadious's imprint on my own work as a writer, a scholar, and a teacher. I think of what it means for Clifton's speaker to "have no model," and how my "making it up" has been eased and expanded because of Thadious Davis's presence in my intellectual life. I know I join many other black women writers, scholars, teachers who have had the benefit of Thadious's support and instruction, whether in traditional academic spaces or in the boundless classrooms of the printed page. Through her work and her teaching, Davis helps us understand this "making up," this creative self-invention: its aesthetics, its functions, and its uses in black literature, as well as in black women writers' lives.

On a personal level, Thadious has helped me imagine a space for myself in the academy, to "make up" a vision of my life as a writer-scholar. I came to Penn as a graduate student with a Master's degree in fiction writing, an enthusiasm for literary analysis, and a commitment to teaching in black literature. I also had, like many first-year graduate students, not a single clue what a faculty career really entailed. As is the case for many black women entering the academy, I knew my only option was to "make it up," to imagine a vision and write, dream, and perform it into a reality, into "a kind of life." Thadious has helped me become an architect of bridges I didn't know I would need to walk, didn't know I was standing on: the bridge between writer and scholar, between tender artist and efficacious pedagogue, between imaginative spirit and incisive critical mind. From coursework onward, Thadious alerted me to those bridges and challenged me to walk them. She urged me to lay claim to my own imagination, to bring my creative vision to my scholarly work, even when this seemed to be impossible, even when there seemed to be no model.

Now, as a Black Feminist literary scholar with graduate students of my own, I see how anxieties about knowledge and mastery play out in strange ways, even at the level of graduate student prose. I remember my own endless introductions, my conceptual throat clearing, my near-obsessive tendency toward quotation and other weird rhetorical tics that I now see as understandable features of graduate students' work. Thadious always responded to these tics with supreme patience and generosity, lacing my papers with gentle nudges handwritten in swirling blue: Where is your voice? Don't let your voice be buried. Of course, these tics are hard to overcome, and now as an Assistant Professor of English, I still fall back, trying to cut words and struggling for precision, for clarity. And when I do fall back, I think of Thadious's swirling blue ink: *Where is your voice?*

It is no coincidence that these words endure, imprinted on my story of self-making as a writer-scholar. In addition to centering imaginative theoretical engagement in her critical work and encouraging it in her students, Davis also shows us the possibilities of imaginative theoretical praxis as an artist and a poet herself. For me, she has offered a glimpse of the missing model Clifton discusses, showing what black women's creative possibility and self-generative imagination can look like, not only in critical discourse and in the classroom, but also in the space of the poetic page.

Published in *African American Review's Black American Literature Forum* in Winter 1983, Davis's poem, "Cloistered in High School," reveals clear threads of Davis's theoretical work lacing through her own poetic imagination, particularly in her concerns with space, property, self-fashioning, and belonging (148). Published alongside poems by Gwendolyn Brooks, Herman eavers, and Toi Dericotte, among others, the poem demonstrates the work imagination does in facilitating black female selfhood.

In "Cloistered in High School" (Figure 1), Davis's speaker shows the unfolding of a complex and transcendent blackwoman inner world, particularly in institutional and educational spaces. At its outset, the poem gestures toward a dichotomous spatial and temporal logic through a poetics of juxtaposition (echoed in the two-column form of at least this particular printing). From "Monday to Friday," the life the speaker lives and the spaces she traverses seem to be those of the mind and the spirit, cloistered in the sterile and sterilizing halls of a Catholic school run by the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament (an order dedicated to service and ministry to Native and Black populations). Her "Friday to Monday" life, by contrast, appears to be the bodily life of public and political realms, a life of geographic and physical movement "past state lines" to advocate for sociopolitical mobility, and a life labor and protest, written loudly on the body in all caps, in the "VOTE" buttons of the third stanza and issuing from the speaker's once-silent and "demure" mouth in the second.

The penultimate lines of these two stanzas highlights this spatial and temporal contrast, quietly invoking the speaker's deeply interior "path toward the spirit world" through which the speaker breaks, in the next stanza, to critique the "here and now" in a biting joke over a shared po'boy sandwich. The seventh line of each stanza reveals the bodily stakes of this dual life, with, on one hand, the "devout interior litanies" of spiritual transcendence located deep within the body and "repeated" in a foreign tongue, and, on the other hand, the next stanza's contrasting emphasis on the layered far reaches of the bodily exterior – not only the jacket that covers the body, but the political message buttons that cover the jacket, figured in bodily terms themselves as "pock-marks" on a body whose layers keep the interior ever further within.

The form of the poem reflects this dichotomous logic, but also disrupts it. The two-column structure invokes a duality and juxtaposition that are destabilized and undercut by the first and final stanzas, in which these two spatial and temporal locations join in the speaker's single voice: "I led two lives ... Now I know there was danger in them both." Here, the "dual upward mobility" and "split patterns" of thought and action that define and distinguish the speaker's institutional versus political and interior versus bodily lives merge: It is thus only by imagining herself into a possibility beyond this dichotomous framing of life that she can fully understand the lives she has lived, and critique the imperatives of "normalcy," "purity," and racial self-improvement that have tried to shape her inner and bodily worlds. Only by imagining herself into a time space beyond duality is she able to understand the danger of each of these lives she has lived and open space for reflection on the triumph of her survival.

Published in the same 1983 issue, Davis's poem, "Reunion" (Figure 2), offers a creative praxis for accessing this crucial imagined simultaneity of mind and body, and performing it as an intersubjective gesture of intimacy, sustenance, and support (149). Tracing the Southern girlhood friendship of two women, her speaker states:

Growing together

We measure distances like rings on palm trees

Move up out

Spread fond-like in casual directions apart

At home or away in college and marriage

But with every new growth we remember how

We laid by a stock of coal

To warm cold spells ahead

(those sharp seasons that come damp and certain

in exotic New Orleans and tropical girlhood)

Now in our separate grown-woman-space we light

Together our chinks of coal against chills

We hear our voices clairvoyant

Girls together in warmth

We see into ourselves the love

We know into our nights the bond

Speaking from a "separate grown-woman-space" of imaginative memory, Davis's speaker reaches across the space-times of "at home or in college and marriage," to tap into shared girlhood voices – voices that are themselves possessed of imaginative transtemporal vision, a "clairvoyance," that reaches to the present, and brings these "girls together" in a sustaining bond that is both bodily and sublime. This shared vision, in turn, allows both women to feel the warmth and "see into ourselves" across space and time. Here, Davis invokes both the possibility and necessity of a collective imagination, and invites us to consider what the kind of imaginative blackwoman self-holding Clifton talks about ("my one hand holding tight the other") might look like when spread across not only time and distance, but also disparate

subjectivities and bodies, as a shared practice of imaginative support, nurturing, friendship and care among black women.

These are the gifts of imagination that Thadious Davis has given us, has given me: the challenge to approach theoretical work as an act of creation, to generate a vision for my own particular kind of black woman intellectual life, and to share that vision with others on the bridge. Davis offers us insight into the aesthetics, possibilities, and historical necessities of black art and black literary study and teaches us to make spaces for ourselves to continue that work across generations. These are acts of triumph, acts of imagination, and I am so happy, and so honored to have my voice included here, celebrating with her.

Works cited

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Figures

Figure 1. Thadious Davis, "Cloistered in High School," Black American Literature Forum, special issue of African American Review, vol. 17, no. 4, Winter 1983, p. 148.

THADIOUS DAVIS

CLOISTERED IN HIGH SCHOOL

I led two lives.

Monday to Friday

Swishing pass silent Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament
I was demure in navy pleats modest with covered calves
Blouse stiff with Faultless starch glistened white
Oxfords soft-soled reflected hand-rubbed Shinola
Dressed for salvation I repeated in wooden order
"Angus Dei" "Ave Maria" devout interior litanies
Bending my path to the spirit world
Down those antiseptic halls where I was sterilized pure.

Friday to Monday

In bleeding Madras shirt stuffed in overalls

In brogans mud-stained red on backwater roads
I pushed past state lines North to Mississippi
East to Alabama in cars still damaged from last week's fray
Armed with a divided po' boy oozing Blue Plate spread
Inside a jacket pock-marked by myriad VOTE buttons
"New field workers eat too" I joked of the here-and-now
With those fellow workers in black bonded soil.

Then in days of dual upward mobility
Years fractured by commitments to faith and necessity
Split patterns of passivity-activity meant normalcy
Frenetic and dormant creed became schizocarp a fait accompli
I led two lives then
Now I know there was danger in them both.

Figure 2. Thadious Davis, "Reunion." Black American Literature Forum, special issue of African American Review, vol. 17, no. 4, Winter 1983, pp. 149.

REUNION

(for Frances)

Girls together we think
eyeing each other's womanhood
your two sturdy-legged sons
their fingers dimpled touch
smear soothe your house or heart
my matched pair of Siamese
their eyes cool survey
guard guide my study or mood

Girls together once in the city that care forgot
during hot evenings elongated summers
the two of us in the sweat of days
growing through ankle socks knee-highs
ribbons and headbands

Girls together sharing pleasures that girls will
we fix our hair with Dixie Peach
eye-buy flats at Maison Blanche
giggling at CYO socials
we slow-drag to Aaron Neville
and smell of Avon

Girls together riding the St. Charles car
round the belt just for adventure
we stand arm-in-arm against the turn-off
lingering on neutral grounds to talk secret-talk

we phone in the dark and whisper
things that girls dream

Girls together storing valuables in snaps and diaries
we read about worlds outside the South
learn to kiss behind hibiscus
to feast on oyster loaves cherry cokes
we discover differences
in boys and books

Growing together
we measure distances like rings on palm trees
move up out
spread fond-like in casual directions apart
at home or away in college and marriage
but with every new growth we remember how
we laid by a stock of coal
to warm cold spells ahead
(those sharp seasons that come damp and certain
in exotic New Orleans and tropical girlhood)

Now in our separate grown-woman-space we light
together our chunks of coal against chills
we hear our voices clairvoyant
Girls together in warmth
we see into ourselves the love
we know into our nights the bond