I am a black intellectual. I love black people. I abhor antiblackness. Black freedom, for me, is an urgent priority.

In the 2014 film, *Selma*, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. is represented as asking this penetrating question: “Who murdered Jimmie Lee Jackson?” “Who,” he repeats, “murdered Jimmie Lee Jackson?” In this scene, as he looks out from the pulpit of a Southern church bursting at the seams with black mourners, the famous clergyman is perched over a casket topped with a striking spray of flowers (that Jimmie can see and smell no longer). The dead man was robbed of every sense he possessed—of smell, of sight, of tasting collard greens and cornbread that were filled with the soul of an oppressed but resilient people; of hearing and grooving to the sounds of Ray Charles and Dinah Washington; robbed of the chance to touch the body of another. Using a bullet covered in the armor of hate, a crook shattered Jimmie’s black flesh. He tore it into a million little pieces, before escaping into the night with a life and a basket full of senses he did not even want and in fact despised.

Jimmie Lee Jackson was a civil rights activist who, in the 1960s, helped to propel the local civil rights movement in and around Selma, Alabama. While participating in a nonviolent protest, a white police officer shattered Jimmie’s flesh.

As I write this meditation more than 50 years after Jackson’s murder, it is troubling that I can add to this query a few more questions: who murdered Eric Garner? Who murdered Yvette Smith?

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Tamir Rice? Akai Gurley, Aiyana Stanley-Jones, Jonathan Ferrell, and John Crawford, III? Who mutilated Rodney King in the thick of a Los Angeles night? Whoever it was stood under the cover of a white moon—that same moon that stood by for years as the men of quick horses, the men of long ropes, the men of crisp white sheets shattered black flesh as if they could find more for a dime a dozen.

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The men of the ropes, the horses, and the sheets enter my mind. An invitation is rare; their presence, frequent. There they stand—reveling in a mock bravery that can only be forged through a toxic alchemy of cowardice, mob security, and drunkenness with one’s own sense of power. As someone who writes about the literatures and cultures of African-descended peoples, I have often paused—sometimes against my will it seems—to gaze into their eyes, knowing full well that the act of looking into these eyes rubs up against, unsettles, the protocols of history.

As I look, memories of pristine white communion dresses come rushing forward. When I was a child, there was very little that I loved more than the promises of second Sunday: singing that inflamed goose bumps and ignited tears; preaching that let the ushers know to stand guard (and led my not-so-religious, nursing-degree-having cousin to exclaim: “Yo’ pastor has COPD!”); a needed snack of crackers and juice one could only gulp down after petitioning God to forgive one’s sins. And then there was the pageantry of the walk-right, sip-right, chew-right ritual known otherwise as communion. The choreography was seductive. White dresses floating around the altar, moving to a pomp and some circumstances that only those who have been black and oppressed, whose flesh has risked being murdered while walking to the store, while whispering a prayer to Jesus in the belly of a South Carolina church, can ever understand.

Like the wearers of the dresses on those Holy Ghost-filled second Sundays, you, too, dear sirs, were eating bodies and drinking blood. But as I look into your eyes, and notice your own pretty little white dresses, I realize that you will never be as brave as Sister Lila Mae Jones, sitting dignified on the front pew until her sitting days were over. And you will never be as fierce as Mother Hattie L. Chapman, who at 86 sashays around the altar as if her hips are still the thingamajig rumored to have made wo/men of the cloth lay down their religion.

And then, I find myself wondering: who washed those pretty little white dresses after you soiled them while destroying black flesh? Did you summon people’s mothers and grandmothers and
wives and sisters to hold the weight of all that flesh—shattered flesh and murderous flesh—in the palms of their hands?

The only comfort I find is in the fact that black people know how to craft beauty out of shattered things.

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And yet, if the truth of these claims is to be adjudicated by my public writing, perhaps I have lied. Where was I when the drama of Ferguson was unfolding? Where was I when Ty Underwood, Sandra Bland, Rekia Boyd, Trayvon Martin, Mike Brown, and scores of others were being robbed of their lives? Not even a Facebook post? A tweet? As I ponder, and even obsess over, King’s putative question—and its reverberations in the contemporary moment—I often feel that I am absent, crouched behind books and computers and faculty meetings and committees and article writings and mentorship obligations that I use to rationalize a lack of public visibility but that perhaps, in the final analysis, position me among the culprits for whom King is dramatized as searching so desperately. I shrink under the weight of cavalier posts on social media that reprimand people like me who remain silent.

And now I find myself—a black intellectual, writer, and freedom dreamer—asking a pivotal question: what does it mean to “write black” in the Age of Ferguson? One answer, of course, lies in the probing, often excellent social media posts and think pieces that engage directly with issues that have accrued social and political relevance. But here I want to highlight, and celebrate, other modes of “writing black” that in my estimation are as critical to realizing black freedom dreams, to altering the shape of a universe that makes no bones about privileging whiteness, richness, maleness, straightness, cisness, ableness, and healthiness. More specifically, I want to turn briefly to recent social media posts by black intellectuals that have nothing and everything to do with “writing black” in the Age of Ferguson; that are nothing other than writing black in the Age of Ferguson.

My first example is from Imani Perry. A part of what is so earnest and brave about Perry’s posts is her willingness to engage the exigencies of health, to recognize the bodily limits black intellectuals often work within and around. Her stories of chronic illness are a constant reminder of the wide-ranging vulnerabilities black bodies often confront. (Alas, the Selma police officer is not the only answer to the question: Who murdered Jimmie Lee Jackson?) These posts have inspired me to schedule routine wellness visits. To listen to my body when it testifies. To hear it when it whispers in a key
that seems off-kilter. To cherish my body. To have hopes and dreams for my body, while being honest about its current realities.

I have learned much about joy from Koritha Mitchell. Her posts demonstrate an intentional nurturing of love(s), both animate and inanimate, long runs and life partners. When considered alongside the singularity of antiblack violence, and its routine denials of black joy, this brand of writing is certainly key to black survival. From Brittney Cooper, I have learned the value of being articulately there, and then of not being there when the body and the soul insist that you prioritize their survival. Cooper has been one of the bravest and most consistent laborers in the vineyard of black freedom dreams. But her recent hiatus from social media served as a radical reminder of the necessity of self-care, of the reality that even our best trombones must sometimes rest, readying themselves for the next measures.

And then there is Kiese Laymon, who writes about us. To us. For us. He loves us. Visits to his Facebook page yield nuanced perspectives on race and sports, black life and black death, black writing and black rights, and the rights of blacks who write. His voice has been baptized in the oil of black Southernness; I know the healing properties. His conversations about his Southern granny—who was trained in the same “bless your heart” pedagogy that gave the world my own granny and Zora Neale Hurston alike—have, on several occasions, given me the drive to write another sentence, to prepare for another class, to be a resource for my graduate and undergraduate students.

And then there were flowers. As I sat pondering the loss of black freedom fighter Muhammad Ali; as I grappled with the reality that a convicted rapist was sentenced to only a few months in prison; as I chuckled nervously at the chicanery animating the 2016 presidential election, I turned to social media. On these fronts, my timelines were filled with probing and moving and critical analyses. Yet the discourse that resonated most was not even writing—at least not in the ordinary sense. It was four arresting images of flowers that Farah Jasmine Griffin posted to her Facebook timeline. The burst of color had a grammar of its own. A familiar grammar it was. I had learned to read it in my parents’ rosebushes, which always demanded that passersby confront their beauty, become conscious of their thorns, and recognize how they had managed to live atop blistering landscapes that had been structured to force their withering. And I had encountered this grammar in other images of flowers Griffin posted to her timeline in the months prior. These images, this black writing, seemed tailor-fitted to the demands of living in a world that readily and religiously renders black flesh vulnerable to the nation’s shattering praxis. What I read in those flowers that day
was enough to rekindle the embers of my own freedom dreams, to broker a renewal of my commitment to the ethical imperatives of black freedom.

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These are the circuits through which my black thoughts often flow as they labor to become black writing in the Age of Ferguson. What can you do when you study the shattering of your own flesh, when you teach the historical destruction of that flesh, write about it, present on it, find it tucked away in the recesses of archives the world over? How are you to write of black flesh as you face the daily possibility that your own flesh stands to be violated at any moment? From this vantage point, critical distance seems a tall if not impossible—dare I say unethical?—order. When critical distance makes flesh a stranger to itself and incentivizes a misrecognition of one’s self, it is high time to embrace, indeed to invent, another way. And let us not assume that one always has a choice in the matter. Doing so discounts the forces of history and memory; it undermines the lingering clutch of trauma.

I sit down to write a talk about the film Selma. And against my will, I find myself a spectator in a theater of lynching, a child sitting excitedly in church on communion Sunday, a black intellectual contemplating the beauty, the wisdom, the horror that has animated my grandmother’s life. This winding journey toward putting words on a page is a curious circumlocution, a dark stream of consciousness that I can only explain as the living residue of African slavery; it has found residence in my soul, within my flesh. I suspect that such is the case for many black intellectuals who carry the weight of black flesh as they labor to “write black” in the Age of Ferguson.

So what is black intellectual writing at this historical juncture? For far too many, the principal answer to this question is a robust writerly presence on Facebook and Twitter. According to this rubric, social media operates as the standard by which one is said to be an authentic black writer, a committed black intellectual. This is a curious calculus rooted in a thick irony. The rub, of course, is the sobering reality that social medial outlets traffic in and reify neoliberal logics of racial capitalism that are far too often complicit in the ugliest of the ugliness facilitating and carrying forward the decimation of black flesh. Radical uses and subversions of these technologies are possible and already apparent. But what does it mean, after all, that these platforms have succeeded in transforming their apparatuses into the barometers we—especially black intellectuals of my generation—use to judge who is writing and who is not? Who is “saying something” and who has remained silent? In a
tradition that has historically placed a premium on the words of black intellectuals, the charge of silence is a heavy accusation.

Perhaps, a part of the work that remains to be done is retraining ourselves to hear and to see the black writing that might not present itself as such, the black writing that often transpires beyond the precincts of social media. Then, too, we must strive to unsettle, or at least be honest about, the sometimes self-serving, the often self-promotional logics that have enabled social media to function as the repository for our political and intellectual receipts. We will never know fully the gallons of ink that have been spilled writing encouraging, life-sustaining emails to students who feel incapable of collecting the pieces of themselves. We are often clueless about the marches, the town halls, and the many other efforts that seek to dismantle the global project of shattering black flesh.

What we stand in need of, in part, is more generous reading practices that enable us to discern the multiple forms of black writing unfolding in the Age of Ferguson and thus to know that our eyes and ears cannot behold the totality of this writing. The flowers. The conversations about grannies, life partners, running, health, and self-care. These things are as central to pointing the way forward as the performative utterances that crescendo in the wake of tragedy and ostensibly bring us into (social media) being as legitimate and committed black writers and intellectuals in these troubled and troubling times.

As I finish this meditation, I receive news about a violent, homophobic mass killing that has left some 49 people dead at Pulse Nightclub in Orlando, Florida. Black intellectual writing in the Age of Ferguson must necessarily grapple with, not jettison, the linkages between the shattering of queer flesh and black flesh—that is, if one assumes they ever diverge. Papi Edwards. Sandra. Trayvon. Rekia. Victims of Pulse. Members of the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church. We speak your names. We commit you to memory. We labor on your behalf in the vineyard of justice.

I have no prescription for what black writing should look like in this moment. But what I know is that with careful thought, sincere intentions, constructive criticisms, and barrels and barrels of love we can work across our differences, around our busy schedules, through our ignorances, over our mistakes, and outside of our egos to make black writing in this age something that history cannot, and shall not, forget. I guess what I am advocating, then, are various and varied forms of black writing that advance black freedom dreams, generous and flexible literacies whose purviews both encompass and move beyond social media, and an unabashed openness to the art of radical proximity as a praxis and methodology for black writing in the Age of Ferguson—which is also to say black writing in the Age
of Orlando, Charleston, Cleveland, Baton Rouge, and the many other geographies and temporalities of global terror upon which the shattering of black flesh is routinely staged.

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Coda

Less than one month after submitting the initial draft of this essay, I received the editor’s comments. By this time, Alton Sterling and Philando Castile were dead—both slain by police. By the time I completed the revisions, each police officer tried for the death of Freddie Gray had been acquitted. In other words, the US judicial system had provided a stark, even startling, answer to a version of King’s Selma question: No one murdered Freddie Gray. In fact, how can you murder the unmurderable—take value from the one who has no value?

As I revise this essay about writing black in the face of such circumstances, the process of revision heaps a palpable weight upon my shoulders. As sentences become shorter, the inventory of black people killed by police grows longer; there is no sign of justice to come. Each time I add yet another name to the scroll of shattered black flesh—and face the glaring reality that, before this essay is ever printed, even more black flesh (this time, perhaps, my own) will have been shattered—a visceral mixture of grief, anger, sadness, and hopeless hopefulness wells up, erupting over and against my efforts to suppress it.

There is no one, I realize, more skilled in the art of the remix than white supremacy. The routine extermination of black bodies in the present is a vile performance of repetition with a difference. Each restaging endorses and concretizes a racial order that is as ancient as the nation’s myth of discovery. These acts of violence, in short, are variations of antiblackness—clever remixes that revise the tracks of white supremacy, retrofitting its primordial hits to thrive in these ostensibly modern times.