

Allow me to begin by thanking The Humanities Institute for this virtual gathering. Aimee and Dean organized this event not once, but twice, for which I am eternally grateful. Almost a year ago exactly, Dean and I had met for my first meal in “the pit” ever, during which time I would not shut up about the expansive brilliance of one of my academic heroes, Rod Ferguson. It is nights like these that I am thankful for my big mouth.

Rod’s work makes clear that the task ahead of us must breach beyond the rhetorical magic of committee creation and performative apology, disrupting what he terms in *The Reorder of Things*, “the will to institutionality.” In the wake of student-led uprisings and revolutionary fervor that plagued academic institutions in the last century, Rod argues,

Administrative power had to restrict the collective, oppositional, and redistributive aims of difference at the same time that administrative power had to affirm difference to demonstrate institutional protocols and progress. We must read this affirmation as not simply a moment of construction but a moment of subjection. (214)

As Rod cues, contending with the structural logic of antiBlackness in/as the institution, reveals the ways in which the making of ‘slavery, race, and memory’ into a fundable project, is also “the administrative university adapt[ing] to modes of difference by attempting to normalize them.” (223) Against this impulse, Rod finds resonance with Corey, who argues for “a style of thinking and a practice of living that consciously registers the in/ability to confront the past in all of its complexity and density.”

But exactly how does one do that? Well, precisely by rebuking the notion that there is any “one” who changes, learns, or heals on their own, let alone to the benefit of their community. Rod reminds us that within the intellectual project of African American literature, the inclusion of ancestors is not a strategy for making slavery, race, or memory devices of rhetorical flourish. Ancestral knowledge, the presence of history embodied, is generative here, but only if we are willing to authentically maneuver with that knowledge in mind. As Rod suggests, “The African

American novel and the figure of the black ancestor...were ways of guiding a social group transiting into predominantly white institutional and social settings.”

As a reader of Black feminist literature, and as a faculty member of the very institution at the center of our conversation, I am delighted that Rod would invoke one of my favorite books to return to, *The Salt Eaters* by Toni Cade Bambara. In the book, a local civil rights activist by the name of Velma is recovering from attempting suicide and finds herself in a facility not treated by medical doctors, but by the local root worker, Minnie. The opening pages are instructive of the moment we are currently grappling with. They read,

“Are you sure, sweetheart, that you want to be well?...I’m just askin is all,” Minnie Ransom was saying, playfully pulling at her lower lip till three different shades of purple showed. “Take away the miseries and you take away some folks’ reason for living. Their conversation pieces away. I can feel, sweetheart, that you’re not quite ready to dump the shit...got to give it all up, the pain, the hurt, the anger and make room for lovely things to rush in and fill you full”...[Minnie] waited till she got a nod out of Velma. “But you want to stomp around a little more in the mud puddle, I see, like a little kid ‘for you come into the warm and be done with mud.” (16)

Bambara describes a path toward healing as anything but straightforward, solitary, or comfortable. As an allegory of the healing process, in which true healing begins and ends with ancestors, *The Salt Eaters* describes the difficulty of living outside of our coping mechanisms or, as Rod argues, the problem of allowing institutions to self-asses, self-diagnose, and self-congratulate for a job well done. Despite a history of helping those in need, of being a pillar of the community who has helped the less fortunate, Velma and Wake Forest are now in the position of needing help, which they both find extremely uncomfortable. *The Salt Eaters* asks us

to consider ourselves as part of a community in which we will play different roles at different times. More importantly, every institution, every character, from the townsfolk to the ancestors to the healer, at one point or another had to surrender to the facts of their wounds, witness the extent of their traumatic impact to their community, and allow others more knowledgeable to step in to sort the mess out. Perhaps like Velma, Wake Forest's will to institutionality, its desire to remain a pillar in the eyes of the community despite itself, makes it difficult to surrender to healing, to reckon with its own woundedness.

To this end, I want to ask, What would it look like for Wake Forest to read Black feminist literature? To be open to a process of transformative justice, anti-racist action, and abolitionism as instructed by Toni Morrison, Bambara, Audre Lorde, Cheryl Clarke, Saidiya Hartman, Carole Boyce Davies, and so many more? Such knowledge, such healing, might go beyond enveloping it in the rhetoric of the institution, to disrupt its desire to normalize the un-normalizable. This work, its disruptive and riotous nature, can perhaps begin the painful process of closing the gap between students, professors, and administrators.