



REGISTRATION

Notes after Christina Sharpe's *Ordinary Notes*

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In Note 195, Professor Sharpe talks about a gesture that she starts to make during her time in graduate school. She writes:

‘As I talked, my hands would move to my throat, my thumbs meeting at my larynx, my eight fingers touching behind my neck... To develop a gesture like that. I was strangling words before they even left my throat.’¹

She realises that she started to do the gesture after a series of events as a student in which her tutors tried to make her feel like she didn’t belong. She writes that it took months of vigilance to undo the gesture completely.


Sharpe’s description causes me to attend to one of my own gestures. When I feel anxious – which first manifests for me as quickness of breath – I unconsciously put my hand to the left side of my chest and hold it there. When I became aware that I did this, I first understood it as me fielding a blow to my chest from the outside, like I’m trying to stem an imaginary flow of blood. At some point I figured it must look from the outside like

I’m making a pledge – hand on my heart. And in a way, I’m doing both things: as I become more wholly accepting of myself – I realise the gesture serves to connect me with the feeling of my heart pumping blood around my body – and also sets into motion a pledge I make to myself to remain present in the room – to breathe.

I am most moved by the bit in Professor Sharpe’s book where she lists various definitions of ‘life’ – each written with Blackness as its centre. I find this so moving because, as Sharpe highlights, it’s both a deeply personal question and one that Black people have struggled and experimented with throughout history. Sharpe reminds us of the question ‘Can I live?’² a question Saidiya Hartman imagines being asked by the first Black girls in America, experimenting with what it might *mean* to live free, Black and a girl.³ ‘Can I live?’ reminds me of the question Whitney Houston apparently used to ask those around her when their advice grated against her being: ‘Can I be me?’⁴

This question reminds me of a letter that, in 1957, the ground-breaking Jamaican broadcaster Una





Marson wrote to her former employers at the BBC in England, nine years after they forced her onto a ship back to Jamaica, against her will.⁵ Explicitly racist complaints from Una's white colleagues about Una's conduct exist in the BBC's written archive, but these are filed alongside a report from the BBC's Medical Advisor, which states that:

'Miss Marson has delusions of persecution by a group of individuals, but she is unable to say who the members of this group are.'⁶

Labelling Una's anxieties as a mental health crisis, the BBC used this as justification for forcibly deporting her. Nine years after, Una penned a letter to the BBC, requesting a reference:

'I hope you remember a girl by the name of Una Marson... She is still alive.'⁷

Later in Sharpe's *Ordinary Notes*, other iterations of this central question come up:


'What the fuck. Can I live? Can I live? Can I fucking live?'


and 'How Can I Lose?'

and 'Do you feel safe?'⁸

I'm writing this imagining I'm reading it aloud in the setting of the university, specifically the institutions in which I'm often employed and rely on for my livelihood. I start to get anxious about really *really* considering a question so personal as 'Can I live?' within a professional setting. My hand goes automatically to my heart. Why does it feel taboo to talk about honestly about Black life (and by extension death) in the university? For all the talk about 'diversity' and 'decolonising the university' and utterances of 'Black Lives Matter,' it feels personally risky to really talk about life and death of the Black person in uni.

This reminds me of what I first found so inspiring in Professor Sharpe's work when I came across it during my masters. She doesn't hide how the personal comes into, no, is the bedrock of Black studies as an 'academic' field.⁹ It cannot be abstracted.





For three years I have worked in the Performance department at a university. In my practice, I think about the roles we perform. When I think about considering, really considering the question ‘Can I live?’ in the context of a university, I think of the Black students I’ve encountered in my time in institutions. Across elite universities in the UK, these are the minority. Many Black students struggle with getting their deeply felt ideas understood by their peers, are subject to overtly harsh critique, isolated from their peers and tutors, struggling to make friends, find collaborators. Tragically, a Black student on another course in my department committed suicide in 2019. At the inquest, his mother cited the racist abuse he suffered at the university as a contributing factor.¹⁰ All these things remind me: ‘attendance’ in all its meanings – caring for, paying attention to, turning up, remaining here, coming to the class, registration – is difficult.


These experiences I see remind me of my own experience as an undergraduate at another ‘elite’ institution. Where I tried to make friends, to communicate my ideas, campaign and organise around the huge lack of diversity, but by my final

year I was so stressed about my social situation that the fear that people were looking at me confined me to my bedroom. This fear left me unable to go to the library or to submit my portfolio. It would be white to say this was paranoia. In fact, while they couldn’t admit that there was a lack of Black students, the admissions tutor did refer me to the college psychologist (something I didn’t take up). And of course, people *were* looking at me, as people often do, when there is only one Black girl in a class of 30 or a college of 1500.

Sharpe describes an encounter when she was a student on her postgraduate programme:

‘There have been many protests, many meetings, many demands for curricular and other changes, yet [my teacher] asks, in apparent sincerity: “Why are you so unhappy? Why are the Black students so unhappy here?”

I respond: “Ask the white students why they are so happy. In their replies lie the answers to your question.”





Such things happen too many times to recount.¹¹

According to the university workers union, UCU, in the UK university sector there is currently a 17% pay gap between Black and white teachers.¹² Most Black people I regularly encounter in the university are cleaners on insecure contracts.¹³ Black lecturers are often on insecure contracts. Sometimes white students complain that they can't relate to the content I teach. This summer, a UK university announced the shock decision to cut a postgraduate course in the History of Africa and African Diaspora, referencing a lack of student recruitment. At the same time it proposes to make the professor who ran the course, the first British African to become a professor in the UK, redundant.¹⁴ Sometimes your attendance is not marked down, registered, renumerated or valued. Sometimes you want to attend, but are barred from doing so.



Untitled (Woman playing Solitaire), Carrie Mae Weems, 1990.

'Some things I remember but they no longer live on the surface of my days.'¹⁵

I did get out of my undergrad bedroom, with the help of a professor who offered to come to my door and help me carry my portfolio to the





architecture department. The thought of him turning up at my door embarrassed me so much that I quickly mobilised – it literally moved me. This was one small chapter of my ongoing experiment in living. And Black students do attend, make friends, fall in love, submit assessments, make art, articulate the most fantastic dissertations, continue their still radical experiment of being Black in a UK university. Yes, this is still a radical thing to do! Our attendance at universities is often reduced to a disproportionate amount of two-dimensional shiny photos of us smiling on campus. But, for us, attendance is not just a surface level aesthetic and registration is not a tick-box exercise. It is an ongoing, deeply-involved, financially and psychologically labour-intensive, creative process by which we move in, out and within. I see you and in the words of Sharpe, I hold you in deep regard.

I want to thank Professor Sharpe for her work, for the friends I've been able to make through an engagement with her work, through an engagement with the difficult discussions and dreams that her work holds space for.

- 1) Christina Sharpe, *Ordinary Notes* (London: Daunt Books, 2023), 277.
 - 2) Sharpe, *Ordinary Notes*, 76.
 - 3) Saidiya Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*, (London: Profile Books Ltd, 2019).
 - 4) *Whitney: Can I be me?*, directed by Nick Broomfield & Rudi Dolezal (United Kingdom: BBC, 2017), TV.
 - 5) Rosa-Johan Uddoh, *Practice Makes Perfect*, (London and Southend-on-Sea: Book Works and Focal Point Gallery, 2021), 71-75.
 - 6) Uddoh, *Practice Makes Perfect*, 76.
 - 7) Uddoh, *Practice Makes Perfect*, 93.
 - 8) Sharpe, *Ordinary Notes*, 283.
 - 9) Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016).
 - 10) Josh Salisbury, "Menelik Mimano: Tributes paid to 'much-loved' actor as inquest hears fear of 'unchecked bullying' at Central Saint Martins," *Southwark News*, February 27th 2020, <https://southwarknews.co.uk/area/southwark/menelik-mimano-inquest-tributes-central-saint-martins/>.
 - 11) Sharpe, *Ordinary Notes*, 259.
 - 12) "FAQs", University College Union (UCU), <https://www.ucu.org.uk/article/12469/FAQs>.
 - 13) UAL: End Outsourcing, GMB, UNISON, UAL UCU & Arts SU, *The Case Against Outsourcing at University of the Arts London*, 2021, https://issuu.com/ualendoutsourcing/docs/ual_outsourcing_case_doc.
 - 14) Aamna Mohdin, "Outrage over UK university's plan to cut African history course and its professor," *The Guardian*, July 23rd 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2023/jul/23/outrage-over-chichester-university-plan-to-cut-africanhistory-course-and-its-professor>.
 - 15) Sharpe, *Ordinary Notes*, p.281.
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