

Once Lost, Painfully Present: Maya Angelou's *Blacks, Blues, Black!* (1968)

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Dr. Maya Angelou's *Blacks, Blues, Black!* was a triumph of Civil Rights-era public affairs television, produced and aired amid nationwide uprisings in the immediate wake of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination in 1968. *Blacks, Blues, Black!* promoted Black unity, education, liberation, and culture. However, after it aired, the show's tapes were lost for decades and only rediscovered by chance in 2009. With its rediscovery, the program reveals similarities between state-sanctioned violence against Black people in 1968 and today while introducing a new generation of viewers to Angelou's enduring insights and strategic sensibility. This article first sets forth a rewriting of media history about lost archives, Black visibility, creative autonomy, publicly funded media, and popular education television. The article then analyzes specific lessons arising from the educational content of *Blacks, Blues, Black!*, the African origins of Black cultural forms/practices, and Black unity, and offers strategic insight to combating temporal state violence against Black bodies.

Keywords: 1968, Maya Angelou, Black Diaspora, uprising, Kerner Commission, television, violence, education

Like many other Black public affairs programs that were introduced that same year, "originating from the sense of crisis brought about by several years of 'long hot summers' and Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination, which undermined any fantasy that the United States was moving toward racial consensus" (Heitner, 2012, p. 78), Maya Angelou's (1968a) *Blacks, Blues, Black!* first aired in the summer of 1968, demonstrating the collisions of Black Power and the media. An educational public affairs program produced by San Francisco's KQED, *Blacks, Blues, Black!* consisted of 10 one-hour episodes foregrounding the histories and customs of Black Diasporic culture as a means to make sense of current events impacting the Black community.¹ Although celebrated at the time, the film reels and recordings of *Blacks, Blues, Black!* were then mysteriously misplaced and deemed lost for decades. Angelou reportedly searched for the series for years. Her representatives reached out to the Bay Area TV archive as early as 2005 looking for it, but there was no trace of it in any local archive. Then, in 2009, while sifting through thousands of cans of film

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Date submitted: 2021-05-27

¹ The *Black (or African) Diaspora* is the term commonly used to describe the mass dispersion of peoples from Africa during the transatlantic slave trades. This diaspora took millions of people from West and Central Africa to different regions throughout the Americas and the Caribbean.

for a project with the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, San Francisco State University film archivist Alex Cherian came across a canister with a single handwritten word scribbled on the outside: "Angelou."

The tapes were digitized and became available to the public in 2014. Tragically, Angelou passed away two weeks after the release and was unable to revisit any of its 10 episodes. Had she had the chance to do so, she might have observed the show's contemporary relevance and resonance. This article considers Black public affairs programs, such as *Blacks, Blues, Black!* (Angelou, 1968a), as an intervention in television representation and a site for contesting the very meanings and logics of both race and television apparatus. *Blacks, Blues, Black!* was nearly forgotten, and the lack of awareness of this program is yet another tragic example of Black history being ignored in the interest of television history that lends to racial hegemony and white liberal sensibilities.² The politics surrounding the location of hidden archives cannot be ignored in this case. Said best by media scholar Devorah Heitner (2013), "Unfortunately, because television stations viewed videotape as a renewable resource, episodes were often taped over rather than saved: most programs were archived sparsely or not at all, and even those archives that do survive are frequently incomplete" (p. 18). In this rare case of Black art, the archive survived, and now a once forgotten space of Black history can be enjoyed and experienced. However, where the discovery of other Black public affairs programs may offer more in-depth analysis from interviews with living media makers about production process, topic selection, hiring, and so forth, because Angelou was the sole writer and producer of *Blacks, Blues, Black!*, I am left to use print media and the episodic content alone as a means to discern the impact of the program. Watching *Blacks, Blues, Black!*, one may be struck by an artifact from 50 years ago feeling so immediately consequential. What allows for this timeliness? And how might lessons from the show be brought to bear on contemporary Black freedom struggles?

Today, in a context where relentless police murders of Black people have invigorated the mass movement for Black lives, many are seeking answers to the very questions Angelou took up in *Blacks, Blues, Black!* (Angelou, 1968a). For instance, how and by what means was racism embedded in this country's fabric? Angelou states that "the settling of this country was a long panorama of violence" (Angelou, 1968c, 2:55-3:03). She addresses this issue in the ninth episode of her series through an education on a history of American racial violence and its legacies to contemporary state violence seen through the Watts Rebellion.

Not only has state-sanctioned violence against Black people continued apace since 1968, but the pedagogical practices and political messages Angelou offers in *Blacks, Blues, Black!* (Angelou, 1968a) remain as urgent as ever. By examining the influence of Black culture on modern America, this program promotes Black unity and demonstrates the political potential of art. This article intends to tell the story of this public affairs television program and consider its intervention in both Black liberation history and television history. The rediscovery of *Blacks, Blues, Black!* brings forth two distinct foci that I intend to address here. First, this article will contribute to a rewriting of media history about Black representation and visibility, Black creative autonomy, publicly funded media, and popular education television. Second, I am writing this piece to analyze specific lessons arising from the educational content of *Blacks, Blues, Black!*, the African origins

² The word "white" is lowercased for a specific reason politically; its capitalization does not speak to the same way "Black" is meant diasporically. Also, capitalizing the term, as is done by white supremacists, risks subtly conveying legitimacy to such beliefs (Daniszewski, 2020).

of Black cultural forms and practices, portrayals of Black difference that foster Black unity, and the political importance of thinking historically about violence against Black bodies.

Blacks, Blues, Black! (Angelou, 1968a) is not just an overlooked cultural achievement of the 1960s; it is also a television archive that offers new windows into Black political and cultural expression in the Black Power era, in a time when Black people had very circumscribed access to the televisual public sphere. Similar to Gayle Wald's history of the television program *Soul!* (1968–1973), I use *Blacks, Blues, Black!* as an archive of what "Raymond Williams calls 'structures of feeling,' expressive both of a particular time and place and of yet-to-be realized formations, some of which retain their utopian allure after more than forty years" (Wald, 2015, p. 6). This article looks at how these rediscovered episodes register contemporary sociopolitical realities—the temporal present, and how Black communities can still respond to such realities (Wald, 2015). Centering the political moment surrounding 1968 and Angelou's pedagogy around Black Diasporic culture and unity in tandem with histories of Black American violence offers lessons that I believe are especially urgent today, in the wake of mass movements surrounding the protection of Black lives and calls for restructuring the police state.

Black Television in the Civil Rights Era

In 1967, amid racial uprisings in cities nationwide, U.S. President Lyndon B. Johnson established an 11-member National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders.³ Chaired by Governor Otto Kerner of Illinois, it came to be known popularly as the Kerner Commission. Addressing the nation, President Johnson reasoned,

The only, genuine, long-range solution for what has happened lies in an attack—mounted at every level—upon the conditions that breed despair and breed violence . . . ignorance, discrimination, slums, poverty, disease, not enough jobs. We should attack these conditions not because we are frightened by conflict, but because we are fired by conscience. We should attack them because there is simply no other way to achieve a decent and orderly society in America. (Johnson, 1967, 5:50–6:40)

The commission's final report, released in March 1968, delivered an indictment of white racism and urged for legislation to promote racial integration and enrich Black communities through the creation of jobs, job training programs, decent housing, educational opportunity, social services, and media representation (Cobb & Guariglia, 2021).

³ Members of the commission included Otto Kerner, governor of Illinois and chair; John Lindsay, mayor of New York and vice chairman; Edward Brooke, senator (R-MA); Fred R. Harris, senator (D-OK); James Corman, congressman (D-CA); William McCulloch, congressman (R-OH); Charles Thornton, founder of defense contractor Litton Industries; Roy Wilkins, executive director of the NAACP; I. W. Abel, president of United Steelworkers of America; Herbert Turner Jenkins, police chief, Atlanta, Georgia; Katherine Graham Peden, commissioner of commerce, Kentucky; and David Ginsburg, commission executive director appointed by President Johnson.

Blindsided by his own commission, whom he handpicked with the expectation of more moderate recommendations, President Johnson refused to recognize the report (George, 2018). The document was nevertheless published in book form and became a national bestseller, circulating widely in April 1968 amid uprisings in more than 100 cities following the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. For his part, King had commended the report as a "physician's warning of approaching death, with a prescription for life" (Ciment, 2015, p. 753).

Some of the report's sharpest criticism was aimed at media norms: "The press has too long basked in a white world looking out of it, if at all, with white men's eyes and a white perspective" (National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, 1968, p. 210). To counter this problem, the commission recommended the creation of publications and programs that would recognize the existence and activities of the Black community, both as individuals and as a part of the community. "It would be a contribution of inestimable importance to race relations in the U.S." the report reads, "simply to treat ordinary news about Negroes as news of other groups is now treated" (National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, 1968, p. 212). Emphasizing the social role of television, the commission recommended the involvement of Black people "in all aspects of televised presentations . . . television is such a visible medium that constructive steps are easy and obvious . . . Negro reporters should appear more frequently—and at primetime" (National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, 1968, p. 212). Prompted by these findings, 1968 became a watershed moment for public funding and prioritization of Black representation on screen and in television production.

An important avenue for this new Black representation was seen to take place in public affairs/public broadcast television. Public affairs television, after all, is funded through tax dollars and is legally obligated to serve the public interest in a way that is counter to less regulated commercial network television. Whether through Barry Dornfeld's (1998) *Producing Public Television, Producing Public Culture*, or Laurie Ouellette's (2002) *Viewers Like You: How Public TV Failed the People*, to name a few, scholars have often questioned, just how "public" is public television, and whom does it actually serve? Meant to be a media for the people, public television's perception of what the public needs has often been constrained by unquestioned cultural assumptions rooted in the politics of class, gender, and race. These assumptions often left out the voices of Black and poor communities as the focus of public television, until the Kerner Commission report brought many to notice.

The report's call for national and local shows "whose subjects are rooted in the ghetto and its problems" inspired multiple public affairs and educational broadcasting programs created by and for Black people (National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, 1968). In addition to the Kerner Report, the FCC's 1968 Notice of Inquiry set the groundwork for FCC rules that "ordered all cable systems with 3,500 or more subscribers to create a channel for local origination programming. Part of the rationale was the value of cable as a means of local community expression, especially in service to minority interests" (Howell, 2017, p. 5). Although many of these programs may have originated from a desire to contain Black discontent that may lead to future uprisings, Black media makers used this public forum to its full potential. Under the National Educational Television network, popular national public affairs programs such as *Soul!* (Haizlip, 1968–1973) and *Black Journal* (Brown, 1968–1970), and regional shows such as *Inside Bedford Stuyvesant* (Hobson, 1968–1971) and *Say Brother* (Lathan, 1968–1982), revolutionized the industry's screening of Blackness. Although many were critiqued for being one-

dimensional in their depictions of Black identity and the American Black experience, Black artists astutely used this public space to forward a Black agenda within public discourse (Heitner, 2013). These programs addressed topics that had often been ignored by mainstream television, highlighting national and local forms of racial uplift and advocating for education, economic rights, and social advancement from a deliberate and unmistakably Black perspective (Acham, 2004).

Although Angelou's foray into television production is noted and explored in Yvonne Welbon's *Sisters in Cinema* (2003) documentary, because it was "lost," Angelou's *Blacks, Blues, Black!* has not made its way into scholarly analysis of this historic period of Black public affairs television. Yet, it encapsulates the best of that moment, a prime illustration of what Catherine Squires (2002) has called "counterpublic strategies": the use of spaces by and for marginalized Black people to engage wider publics. Although Black viewers had an overwhelming stake in these Black public affairs programs, being invested in a transformed public image through Black art and liberation, *Blacks, Blues, Black!* (Angelou, 1968a) was also for anyone with a television who was interested in education and counterhegemonic ideas. As an educator, activist, and media maker, I believe Angelou used her program towards a similar goal of other public affairs television in this moment: "to reframe Blackness in America in the years after 1968 by creating a new public forum for addressing racial justice by rebuilding television from the inside out" (Heitner, 2013, p. 19).

Blacks, Blues, Black!

Known popularly as an American poet, singer, memoirist, and civil rights activist, Angelou had a keen sensitivity, grace, and depth of knowledge that she brought to the exploration of Black Diasporic life and culture in *Blacks, Blues, Black!* (Angelou, 1968a). She was also able to draw on her lesser known work as an actor, writer, director, and producer for her pivotal *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (Angelou, 1969) that soon followed her program. Because of archival availability and racial privileging of media studies, this show is a part of her history that is not often noted. *Blacks, Blues, Black!* is a portal into Angelou's own political education, which becomes clearest when understood within her overall body of work. In her life, Angelou published seven autobiographies, three books of essays, and several books of poetry, and she was credited with a list of plays, movies, and television shows spanning over 50 years. Angelou became a writer after a series of jobs as a young adult, including as a nightclub dancer and performer, a cast member of the opera *Porgy and Bess*, a coordinator for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., and a journalist in Egypt and Ghana during the decolonization of Africa. Her time in Africa helped her, as a native-born American, understand the deeply ingrained cultural connections shared between people throughout the Black Diaspora. While in Accra, Ghana, Angelou became close friends with Civil Rights leader Malcolm X during his visit in the early 1960s (Gillespie, Johnson Butler, & Long, 2008). She returned to the United States in 1965 to help him build a new Civil Rights organization, the Organization of Afro-American Unity, although this initiative collapsed soon after his assassination later that year.

By then, Angelou was living in the Los Angeles neighborhood of Watts and witnessed the destruction caused by the 1965 racial uprising. The experience emboldened her, and in 1968, when Martin Luther King Jr. asked her to organize a march, she agreed. But then she postponed. Consequently, in what biographer Gillespie et al. (2008) calls "a macabre twist of fate" (p. 98), King was assassinated on Angelou's 40th

birthday. Devastated by yet another loss of a prominent leader whom she considered family, Angelou fell into a depression from which she recovered by following the advice of her dear friend James Baldwin. He encouraged her to tell her story. The wake of such tragedy made way for Black discontent to be exhibited in the television space. "The pressure of years of uprisings and the wave of fear and remorse following King's assassination prompted some media executives to return to the findings of the Kerner report and begin to act on some of its recommendations" (Heitner, 2013, p. 6).

While interviewing various Black writers across America, producers from San Francisco-based KQED met Angelou at her home in New York City (individuals whom Angelou describes only as Jon, Verna, and Steve in her autobiography; Angelou, 2004, p. 1161). The producers explained to Angelou that it was past time for their television station to do some programs on African American culture and history, and, given Angelou's time living in Africa, she might be the very person to put it together for them. When the negotiations were finalized, Angelou pored over books about television documentaries, producing, and directing to prepare for a medium to which she was not accustomed (Angelou, 2004). Upon the start of the series, Angelou was asked how she intended to sum up the experience of racial frustration in one all-encompassing show; she replied, "No people can ever begin a constructive positive program for the future without understanding the achievements of the past. You can't see where you're going unless you know where you've been" (Stanley, 1968, p. 126). In the spirit of critical pedagogy, *Blacks, Blues, Black!* took as its premise that recognizing diverse Black experiences was crucial for realizing the aim of Black liberation. "That's where I come in," Angelou explained, speaking amid and against an increasingly violent American psyche. "I'm trying to instill an understanding of Negro heritage in those who don't know it or understand it" (Stanley, 1968, p. 126).

Blacks, Blues, Black! (Angelou, 1968a) offered a sharp contrast to mainstream television programming when it first aired. At the time, primetime network television shows starring Black actors, such as *I Spy* (Leonard, 1965–1968), *Julia* (Kanter, 1968–1971), and *The Mod Squad* (Spelling & Thomas, 1968–1973), often marginalized, maligned, or ignored Black communities and pathologized Black cultures and families.⁴ At a time when the increasing visibility of long-standing racial tensions opened up a new space for Black television, Angelou's voice and artistry corrected for these narrow representations, educating all willing viewers about the multiple and varied experiences of Black people and communities (Heitner, 2013). Emblematic of the response from white audiences, one reviewer proclaimed, "It is a mighty seed she is planting" (Stanley, 1968, p. 126).

The program revolutionized Black representation on screen, not only because it featured many Black people in each episode, but also because it portrayed the fluidity of Black social realities and

⁴ Television in the 1960s, *Julia* (Kanter, 1968–1971) especially, is often frowned upon for retreating from the real-life conflicts taking place in the United States about civil unrest and struggles of Black life in general. Diahann Carroll herself (who played the titular character, Julia Baker) believed that her role in *Julia* (Kanter, 1968–1971) was an acceptable image to break down barriers so that Black people could move on from there. Just as Black women took on the roles of domestics to infiltrate the system, Carroll saw her role in *Julia* (Kanter, 1968–1971) as a necessary building block to Black women's possibilities of televisual humanity and fluidity of identification.

experiences. As media scholar Devorah Heitner (2013) explains, of all Black public affairs shows of the time, "the program was distributed in a medium that by 1968 entered almost every home, giving whites and other audiences a window into African American perspectives" (p. 3). The repetition of the word "Black" in its title (*Blacks, Blues, Black!*) emphasizes the program's focus on Black audiences, much like the title of Chicago's concurrent *For Blacks Only* (Saunders, 1968–1979). This was a bold reversal of television's tendency to privilege white audiences. "Simply having a Black host on a public affairs program was transformative," Heitner (2013) recounts, "both for the station to mark the program as Black and for audiences and guests who found this to be an important intervention" (p. 13).

Coping with loss and the state of the world, Angelou then proceeded to write, produce, and narrate *Blacks, Blues, Black!* (Angelou, 1968a). Just as other programs at the time held to particular visions, its 10 episodes reflect Angelou's philosophical, pedagogical, and aesthetic influences (Heitner, 2013). On the show's importance, Angelou (2004) proclaims,

We were Blacks in Africa before we were brought to America as slaves, where we created the blues, and now we were painfully and proudly returning to being upstanding free Blacks again. The program would show African culture's impact on the West. (p. 1163)

The show celebrated the connections between blues music, Black Americans' African heritage, and what Angelou called the "Africanisms still current in the U.S." (Angelou, 1968b, 17:40–17:50). The series was produced for KQED's National Educational Television, precursor of the Public Broadcasting Service and featured episodes on African history, art, Africanisms, positive and negative behaviors, music, education, business, and violence in the Black American world.

Although the program explicitly addressed Black culture and viewers, it also offered history lessons and made political connections explicit for everyone. Similar to Heitner's analysis of *Black Journal*, Angelou deliberately situated

the topics it explored as common to Black people in many regions and nation [;] the program proposed that Black viewers should consider themselves part of an emerging Black world wherein all regions of Black America as well as Africa and the Black Diaspora were vitally relevant. (Heitner, 2012, p. 83)

This is made clear immediately in the opening credit sequence of the first episode, entitled "Positive Behavior"; the series opens by evoking African historical and cultural traditions (Angelou, 1968b). Along with the title "Blacks, Blues, Black!" across the screen, the title sequence shows snapshots of various African statues while a woman sings in an African tongue. This introduction is interrupted by a medium shot of Angelou at the KQED studio. She introduces herself, looking directly into the camera, and asks viewers, "What is Africa to Me?" (Angelou, 1968b, 1:33–1:46). *Blacks, Blues, Black!* stands out in this moment of numerous Black public affairs television shows because it is one of few that feature a Black woman as the host. In every episode of the series, Angelou, with her hair in a natural Afro style, is draped in traditional African clothing, consistently connecting viewers to various Black Diasporic fashions and culture. Her clothing varies from brightly colored textiles, to abstractly embroidered robes, to colorful beaded bracelets, dashikis,

and necklaces, redefining not only traditionally accepted television fashion, but also the popular image of what Black women looked like on television.⁵ The personal image was political, and the “politicization” of hair, bodies, and clothing became an important site to assert Black identity and pride (Craig, 2002; Heitner, 2013). With Angelou speaking directly to the camera, viewers can see that she has an infectious presence on screen. Mirroring the tactics of Black actors and direct camera address in the independent films of this 1960s moment that scholar Katherine Kinney (2019) highlights in her work, Angelou uses her direct address as a form of confrontation, reciprocity, and alignment, establishing her political stakes and creative possibilities with her viewers (Kinney, 2019). Angelou often fumbles words and sometimes even stutters; the clear improvisation on set, distinct from any staged productions, further draws viewers into what she is saying and the poetic lyricism she uses to say it. This feeling of improvisation on set supports the authenticity of the lessons that Angelou’s pedagogy introduces.

While most of her dialogue takes place in the built studio space of KQED, Angelou often uses recorded video and interviews with community members in the surrounding cities that make up the Bay Area to further her claims about Black Americans and their shared experiences with the larger Black Diaspora. This direct dialogue with members of the Black community was a type of journalism rare for the time because it prioritized the voices of everyday Black people over Black leaders. Most Black public affairs programs of the time generally took the perspective of Black civil rights and political leaders over that of everyday Black community members. In Episode 1 of *Blacks, Blues, Black!*, “Positive Behavior,” Angelou (1968b) discusses games played in Africa by adolescents, and she demonstrates the various ways in which the children use all of their limbs and create songs. She then cuts to a group of Black children in San Francisco playing the game “hokey-pokey” (Angelou, 1968b, 3:36–5:25). Angelou considers instances like these as African crossovers into the Black American psyche—“not only in the rhythm, but also in the tonality and the joy” (Angelou, 1968b, 6:24–6:33). These crossovers serve as proof of the cultural and historical links throughout the diaspora that Angelou believes are instilled in all Black people, whether they realize it or not. With live music from a pianist and a bongo drummer on the studio set playing jazz, blues, and music from various African countries, Angelou makes visible, and audible, the connections to the intricacies of these varying musical styles and how they are all linked through their findings within Black Diasporic culture.

Angelou asserts that one of the most explicit forms of these African crossovers is in Black American dance. The styles of dance in the Black Diaspora “place a great importance upon improvisation, satirical and otherwise, allowing freedom for individual expression; this characteristic makes for flexibility and aids the evolution and diffusion of other African characteristics” (Stearns & Stearns, 1968, p. 15). As a form of expressive culture, improvisation aids in creating individuality, self-expression, and joy when used in dance, and Angelou expresses that many of the Black American dances are in fact improvisations and imitated motor behavior of dances rooted in countries throughout Africa. I believe that Angelou’s assertion of Black dance and performance is necessary to discuss here because her history as a dance performer is often overlooked. Much public affairs television scholarship points to the program *Soul!* (Haizlip, 1968–1973) as television’s introduction of Black dance, music, poetry, and performance to the masses, given its larger

⁵ Angelou’s identity and persona in the public affairs television space were in stark contrast to the image of primetime television’s Julia Baker, played by Diahann Carroll in the NBC series *Julia* (Kanter, 1968–1971), who certainly did not wear an Afro or Black Diasporic attire.

national scale; however, *Blacks, Blues, Black!* must also be cemented in this history, given that Angelou charted the roots of Black dance and performance in tandem with the production of *Soul!*

With two professional dancers on stage (and Angelou herself also performing), Angelou instructs one to do the "authentic African movement" while the other does the "Black American movement" (Angelou, 1968b, 8:29–8:35). Exhibiting a series of dances and noting the similarities between the authentic African movement and the Black American equivalent, Angelou displays the cultural ties of Black Diasporic performance that have crossed over from Africa into Black American motor behavior. For example, in tracing dances directly back to Africa, Angelou describes and performs the distinct similarities of the Ethiopian national dance and the Black American "Hully Gully" (Angelou, 1968b, 12:08–13:00); both are fast-paced dances consisting of sporadic arm movements and calling for a concentration on the shoulders, clearly demonstrating that the dances share a common history.

Although many of the African crossovers that Angelou addresses deal with bodily performance and music, she does not neglect to address the crossovers that have enticed negative energy into the Black American psyche. In the conclusion of "Positive Behaviors" (Angelou, 1968b), Angelou makes reference to an Army recruitment poster as an example of a movement that denotes emotion. Angelou describes that the official poster put out by the U.S. Army to recruit soldiers (Uncle Sam pointing his index finger with the words "I Want You" under his image) "blatantly offends some twenty-five million Black Americans" (Angelou, 1968b, 13:32–14:07). According to Angelou, "Black Americans do not allow any person to point their finger directly at them, and often go into a mode of defense at this gesture" (Angelou, 1968b, 13:32–14:07). Angelou claims that this negative emotion felt when someone points at a Black American is a crossover of a Black Diasporic psyche that started in Africa; in Africa, it is not only in bad taste or taboo; "it is actually against the law to point your finger directly at another human being" (Angelou, 1968b, 13:32–14:07). Pointing directly at any person would cause him or her discomfort, but because of African crossovers and a history of institutional and systemic racism in the American military, this gesture, along with the recruitment poster, has had adverse effects on Black Americans specifically.

As Angelou's dancers act out a scenario of pointing back and forth at one another, they each show a visible discomfort, mirroring the discomfort that Black Americans may feel being on the receiving end of a white person, like Uncle Sam (the symbol of white imperialism/colonialism), pointing directly at them. Through this first episode alone, Angelou addresses some of the many different links that bring Black Americans closer into their connections with Africa while using African culture to critique U.S. imperialism. Using music, dance, art, and education, Angelou works to prove that although Blackness is fluid, experiences throughout the diaspora act as connective tissue for all Black peoples. Through the means of public affairs television, whose purpose is to focus on matters of public policy and politics, these collective Black experiences are made visual to all races of viewers in the Bay Area, and beyond through syndication. Angelou's production, aligning with the calls of the Kerner Commission report, was meant to teach these valuable lessons to all communities so that they might appreciate, understand, and build community about the complexities of the Black American experiences and psyches. It is hoped that these understandings would aid in ceasing centuries of slain Black bodies, especially as related to the late 1960s Black uprisings nationwide and the murders of Black community leaders.

Violence in the Black American World

Angelou's prophetic response to 1965's Watts Rebellion in *Blacks, Blues, Black!* is ever more relevant to this contemporary moment. In 1965, the CBS Reports documentary *Watts: Riot or Revolt?* (Williams, 1965) represented a crucial moment in national television programming as it called attention to the cause, effect, and ramifications of the Watts Rebellion. Although popular in its reception, the documentary displayed many shortcomings because of its racial biases. The Watts Rebellion ignited on August 11, 1965, when Marquette Frye, a Black motorist, was pulled over in Watts for reckless driving. A minor roadside argument broke out, which then escalated into a fight with police. Community members reported that the police had hurt a pregnant Black woman during the altercation, and six days of civil unrest followed. Watts in 1965 represented a people, a race, fighting for itself. Given the history of police harassment toward the larger Black community in a radically underfunded and underserved Watts neighborhood, this represented a moment of Black rebellion. Unfortunately, through the mainstream media coverage in *Watts: Riot or Revolt?*, the Black community members of Watts were only given a small portion of the interview coverage to explain their unrest, while white politicians, journalists, and the police were given reign to define this pivotal moment.

In Episode 9 of *Blacks, Blues, Black!* (Angelou, 1968c), entitled "Violence," Maya Angelou speaks truth to the aftermath of the Watts Rebellion and violence in the Black American world. At the beginning of her episode on violence, Angelou states,

I dedicate this program to the memory of Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, Denmark Vesey, to Dr. Du Bois, to the men and women who are nameless, whose names have not come down from the centuries but whose blood, whose agony we inherit. (Angelou, 1968c, 2:05–2:50)

This heartfelt dedication makes it clear that Angelou is not only speaking to the violence against Black people, but also bridging the centuries of anguish, turmoil, and the precarity of Black lives as linked instances of violence in a world of racial hegemony. In the same way that these present uprisings, due to violence against Black people, have led many to attempt to educate themselves on the histories of racial injustice in America through books and media, through *Blacks, Blues, Black!* in 1968, Angelou is also having these conversations through literature and her media—presence and performance. Angelou speaks to the troubling reality that many people outside the Black community claim to have a lack of understanding about the American traditions of racial hegemony. To such a claim, Angelou faces the camera directly and asks her audience, in a self-reflexive moment, "In a country, where the communications media has its tendrils in every home, every thinking, in every level, how is there a lack of communication or a lack of understanding what has happened?" (Angelou, 1968c, 5:08–5:23). As Angelou then explains the various riots in America, as early as the Tulsa Massacre in 1921, it is clear that her question is meant for those who simply seek to ignore the realities that are, and have been, in plain sight.

To understand the fury and uproar of Black people in these historically disenfranchised communities, Angelou suggests that her viewers read William H. Grier and Price M. Cobbs's *Black Rage* (1968). In this psychological study, two Black psychiatrists reveal the full dimensions of the inner conflicts

and the desperation of Black life in the United States. According to Angelou, *Black Rage* helps explain to the viewers that if they are Black in present-day America, they have been asked to shoulder too much, they have had all they can stand, they will be harried no more. The centuries of pain and mistreatment of Black people at the hands of state-sanctioned violence has led to, and will undoubtedly lead to, a boiling point at which Black rage is shown in action, like in Watts in 1965 and worldwide today.

Angelou reflects on violence in the Black American world, first in the KQED studio, and then by taking the audience on a journey outside the walls of the built studio space. Through poetry, table reads, stills, moving images, and interviews throughout the episode, Angelou discusses violence politically, socially, and artistically. The episode leaves the Bay Area and features Angelou touring Watts (three years after the uprising) with riot expert and educator Mary Jane Hewitt, looking for evidence of gains and positive development since the 1965 uprising and celebrating the breakthroughs the community has made since. While touring the Watts community festival, Angelou speaks vehemently on the self-determination and pride of Watts's Black community and its efforts to rebuild and grow after the uprising triggered by the unjust authority of the police. With the opening of the Watts Cultural Center, a skills center for job placement, doctors' offices, and social service buildings, many new spaces for community welfare and social development were now local to Watts citizens. The rise of these new spaces was a direct response to the spatial and racial segregation that caused members of the community to rebel in the first place. Watts was seemingly becoming a community that was finally benefitting from county funding, support, and attention.

Arguably the most important moment of her time in Watts is when Angelou interviews members of the community on camera and allows them to speak for themselves freely, openly, and without reservation. Whereas CBS's white mainstream television documentary, *Watts: Riot or Revolt?* (Williams, 1965), took a heavy-handed and biased approach to the cause and effect of the uprisings three years earlier by mainly interviewing white correspondents and police, through *Blacks, Blues, Black!* Angelou (1968c) is righting the wrongs of that account by allowing those it impacted the most (Black people) a voice and platform. Being greeted and welcomed as their "Sister," Angelou is instantly embraced by Watts simply by her Blackness and willingness to treat them as human. While speaking on the hostility that many Black people in America have experienced, Angelou makes clear that this angst has grown because "the Black person has always been pictured as either subhuman or superhuman—never just human. We have to arrive at the stage where we're just human" (MacKenzie, 1968, p. 16). With her interviews of the citizens of Watts, Angelou is allowing her audience to bear witness to the humanity of these people, whose lives have been historically undervalued and left without a voice.

Black public affairs programs in general consciously rethought mainstream television's tendency to insist that expertise emanates solely from those in power, so throughout this episode, Angelou also relies on her interview with a Black UCLA professor, Mary Jane Hewitt. The documenting of this Black community and its humanity in Watts is celebrated by Angelou throughout the episode. However, Hewitt claims that although changes in self-determination and increasing Black pride of Watts residents are seemingly positive gains, "without some economic and political progress, I'm afraid that the Black pride will come to naught eventually" (Angelou, 1968c, 31:07–31:15), and the people of this community will be called to rebel again. These interviews are critical to public television because they make clear that Black public affairs programs

did not edit Black guests and situations down to incendiary sound bites, as so often happened on mainstream news in this era (Heitner, 2013, p. 13).

Much like the present climate of racial unrest and upheaval, where Black communities, allies, and businesses are binding together under the anthem of Black Lives Matter, claims for Black unity and pride are necessary, but changes in policy and practice within the historically disadvantaged economic, political, and social lives of Black people will allow one to see that Black lives truly matter amid the violence of America. With fleeting images across the screen of Black people being dragged away and subdued by white police forces, Angelou brings her visit to Watts to an end by reflecting on the timeless Langston Hughes (1951) poem "Harlem (or A Dream Deferred)" (Hughes, 1951). Like the dream deferred that Langston Hughes questions the possibility of, Angelou equates Black livelihood as a dream deferred: "Does it rot in the sun or does it explode?" (Angelou, 1968c, 31:33–31:35). In the case of the possibility of Black lives amid American social and racial order, the dream of livelihood is often deemed to explode.

Closing the episode, Angelou recites at length a poem by Margaret Walker entitled "Now." Written in Walker's series of poems about the Civil Rights movement, Angelou intentionally repeats Walker's line, "time to wipe away the slime, time to end this bloody crime" (Angelou, 1968c, 57:59–58:08). This statement is a call to action, that change is going to come and that Black people will be at the forefront abolishing these centuries of bodily crime and starting anew. Although she is making this claim in 1968, these words ring loudly in this present moment, as Black people bear witness to the same atrocities, and that same rage has overcome them. Whether with poetry, books, art, policy, or bearing arms, many Black people worldwide have been enlightened to living in the brink of chaos and have dedicated themselves to washing away the slime. The exhaustive and painful work of pleading for Black humanity is seen so truthfully in the heartfelt and exasperated sigh in the uttering of "I, thank you" (Angelou, 1968c, 58:11–58:12), spoken directly to the screen while Angelou fades to black, and the closing credit sequence begins.

Conclusion

Although the year 1968 was faced with much turmoil, the movements it created and the artistry it catalyzed forever changed the American political and social climate. *Blacks, Blues, Black!* was an effort to draw unison among an often-divided people. This program is critical to the history of Black television, as a space meant to educate, inform, understand, and love the shared histories of the Black Diaspora in a time so fraught with racial uprisings and social and political upheaval that was purposely meant to place Black people at odds with one another. Angelou ends her series reciting Margaret Walker's "For my People":

Let a beauty full of healing and a strength of final clenching be the pulsing in our spirits
and our blood. Let the martial songs be written, let the dirges disappear. Let a race of
men now rise and take control. (Angelou, 1968d, 54:36–59:10)

We must know our history to know and take control of ourselves. The introduction of *Blacks, Blues, Black!* and other public affairs television shows that examine the state of Black life helped to imagine new Black television possibility—and their place in histories of communication and education must continue to be critically addressed in scholarship and conversation at large, because, like in 1968, the time to understand

Black rage and the pleas for a new American order is drastically at hand. The rediscovery of this once lost archive reveals the continuity of racial violence in America and shows strategies used to combat said violence. This rediscovery also has implications for scholars, research, and teaching. Watching this show today, one can use these episodes to find strategic insights into how to learn about the history, music, art, and livelihood of all historically disadvantaged peoples amid a world of racial hegemony. With her episodes, Angelou created a syllabus that chronicled the lived experiences of Black American people and how these experiences extended the temporal moment in which they were produced. This archival source is just one important piece to understanding and unifying an American culture in its collective pride and pain, and making clear that these acts of bigotry are not isolated events; rather, they are within the fabric of this country, and tearing this fabric requires all people to learn this history.

Whether you have pleaded for names like Breonna Taylor, Tony McDade, Ahmaud Arbery, and George Floyd, or for the countless names of Black people whose state-sanctioned murders have not reached national attention, the existence of Black people often inherits the agony of their slain sisters, brothers, and siblings. In the same way that these recent uprisings have led many to attempt to educate themselves on the histories of racial injustice in America through literature and media, through *Blacks, Blues, Black!* in 1968, Angelou is also having these conversations through her media—presence and performance. We must look back to find a way forward.

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