[MUSIC PLAYING]

KARLENE GRIFFITHS SEKOU: So welcome to our second and final-- yes, I'm good, thank you-- our final panel, our panel number two before our student panels, Revolutionary Art, Healing and the Politics of Change. And this panel was inspired by the fact that art in Black life has always played an intrinsic and important, significant role in Black life in marking the survival, and thriving, and flourishing of Black folk.

Drawing from the radical tradition, I think, of Nina Simone who said that the duty of the artist is to reflect the times. And if we know anything about Nina Simone, she aligned herself with the Black liberation struggle in a way that disrupted, and reimagined, and self-defined, and self-authorized the genius of Black people through her art.

And so we're looking at various genres of art, and the ways in which art is used to reflect, represent, and mark, in totality, Black life through multiple modalities and ways. From art within social movement, to art within spirituality and religion, through art that registers within the political. And so each one of our speakers will speak to dimensions, and these multiple facets, and define their own work, and their own impetus and motivations for the art that they do.

So it is my honor and distinct pleasure to facilitate this panel and to welcome each of our panelists. So first, we'll have Aric. And bear with me while I-- OK. Aric Flemming, our very own Aric Flemming, I should say.

Aric is an MDiv two. I always want to say three, MDiv three, because we don't really want you to graduate. Aric Flemming, Jr. Is a young, innovative servant of God with a multifaceted purpose in ministry. He is a preacher of the gospel, a scholar of religion and training, and a musical recording artist.

He is a native of Decatur, Georgia and a graduate of Arabia Mountain High School in Lithonia, Georgia. As a freshman at Morehouse College, Aric accepted a calling into ministry and previously served as youth pastor at the Mount Carmel Baptist Church under the leadership of his godfather, Reverend Timothy Flemming, Senior.

After graduating Morehouse with a bachelor's of arts, Aric received ordination and will be matriculating Harvard Divinity School this May. He currently serves the Memorial Church here at Harvard University as the first master of divinity seminary and for the Black Student Ministries at Harvard. He is also the former Vice President of the Harvard Graduate Student Council.

And alongside of his preaching ministry, he also has been blessed with multiple musical opportunities. And I'm sure we can hear a bit more about that in our conversation. But without further ado, Aric Flemming Jr. Thank you.

[APPLAUSE]

ARIC FLEMMING JR: OK. Hello, everyone. As stated earlier, my name is Aric. I guess how I can start, I come from a rich preaching tradition. And it's not one that particularly orients itself toward activism against oppression, but activism against daily struggles of the everyday mother, single mother in church congregations, bringing her kids to service every Sunday, finding ways to feed them with no money. That mother is who I was raised to speak to.

But while I was taught to speak to this mother, I was also told simultaneously that I could not sing to her because my voice was not adequate enough to serve her in ministry in that way. And I found, recently, liberation from a favorite of mine, Sam Cooke, who was raised in a very similar context, who actually decided to go by a different name on his first release because he didn't want the interrogation of his church family to kind of dismantle the power he was bringing to popular music.

My passion, after discovering my preaching calling, and also after wrestling with the musical gift that I have, my passion has been to reach a broader audience. But I have been limited because I was trained with those training wheels at home that I could not sing. And so I have been actively, every time I sing, every time I step up to sing, I'm actively vocalizing my struggle and I'm actively fighting against the people who told me I could not sing.

I think this is valuable because when you understand how your art reflects who you are and what you're called to do, you're able to kind of encompass all of the power that is within you. And I think that is what I've been struggling with the most, trying to find out what my voice is, who I'm called to speak to, who I am called to sing to, because I know now that when I open my mouth to sing, somebody's chains are literally going to fall off.

And it was, I wouldn't say the ignorance of the people back home, it was their fear that I was going to fall into a secularist kind of perspective of doing ministry. And I think the way I conceive of ministry is so far beyond the walls of the church, so far beyond the walls of academia, so far beyond a wall, period, I think at any moment, and anytime, anybody is ready to hear a song. And that song should be able to lift burdens off of people.

And I think that that goes into current resistance movements. I think that goes into resistance in church. I think that goes into social movements, whatever you want to call it, and however you want to address activism. I think raising songs is always the way. And we can talk a lot about this, but the songs will be the way that lead the people into activism. And so as long as my mouth is shut, we won't get there. But the moment I realize that I'm called to sing, to lead the people into liberation, I have I have done my duty.

KARLENE GRIFFITHS SEKOU: [INAUDIBLE]

ARIC FLEMMING JR: Oh, yes. Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah.

KARLENE GRIFFITHS SEKOU: OK, great. Thank you. Our next panelist is Kendra Hicks. Kendra Hicks is a nonprofit executive, community organizer, mother, and installation artist from Eggleston Square, a neighborhood of Boston.

Her work lives at the intersection of the practical and the imaginative. The Estuary Projects is a 10-part installation series about remembering the apocalypse and reimagining the new world. The installations aim is to memorialize the lives of 11 Black women who were murdered in Roxbury and Dorchester in 1979.

And I have the distinct pleasure of calling Kendra not only a sister, but also a comrade as one of my, one of the co-leaders, lead organizers of Black Lives Matter Boston. So welcome. Look forward to hearing from you.

KENDRA HICKS: Thank you, Carlene. I'm assuming I'm using this mic, but I think the voice is projecting pretty well. Thank you for that introduction. So like Carlene mentioned, my work is really at the intersection of what I call the practical and the imaginative.

And so I like to, part of the purpose of the Estuary Projects is to remember what I'm considering an apocalypse. And so I'm really, it's an invitation for us to look at what the end of the world looks like for us. I think that in this historical moment, it feels like all things are falling apart.

But the Estuary Projects is calling on us to remember that, actually, we've been here before, that our people have survived the end of the world, that our people survived the Middle Passage, and that we will continue to survive and continue to build the world that we need. And so in that way, the Estuary Projects is a remembering project, but it's also a reimagining project.

The good people at the Design Studio for Social Intervention, they use a framing that we're living in a toxic atmosphere. And that what we're trying to create is counter atmospheres. And so I look at counter atmospheres as being alternative social systems that are not rooted in white supremacy.

And so when I think about revolutionary art, I think about, how does art disrupt our current reality? How does art disrupt our distractions? Toni Morrison said that one of the functions of racism is to keep us busy, and to keep us distracted, to keep us with our head down, always reactive and responsive, reactive and responsive. And I don't think that that gives us a lot of space to imagine.

I think that we spent a lot of time organizing, and fighting, and resisting, and not enough time dreaming and manifesting, really, the world that we want to see. And so my hope is that the Estuary Projects, but also just artistic practice in general, serves as a disrupter of that. That it serves as a calling to take our heads down from under the ground and put it up, and really focus on visioning and building the world that we want to create.

I think that there's a very capitalist orientation that we have that in order to build something new, something else needs to be destroyed. And so we're constantly, particularly in social movements, looking to break down, and tear down, and dismantle the thing that's already there, when in reality, we can just build right on top of it. I know that we'll have a lot of questions, and so maybe I can talk a little bit more then, but that's what I have for now.

KARLENE GRIFFITHS SEKOU: Thank you. Thank you, Kendra. Next, we have Michael Brandon McCormack. Michael Brandon McCormack is a PhD, Assistant Professor and Director of Undergraduate Studies in Comparative Humanities Program and religious studies at the University of Louisville. He earned his PhD in religion homiletics and liturgics, Black religion and cultural studies in 2013 at Vanderbilt University, where he was a fellow in the program in theology and practice.

Sorry. I don't have my glasses. [INAUDIBLE], sorry. His research explores the intersections between Black religion, popular culture, Black preachers, public theological discourse, and the moral panic surrounding Black youth culture. He teaches courses in African-American religion, religions of the African diaspora, and religion in hip hop culture.

His work has been published in Black Theology, an international journal, The Journal of Africana Religions, Practical Matters, a journal of practical theology, and religious practices, and religions. And as book chapters in a number of edited volumes. Most recently, he was a faculty fellow of the Commonwealth Center of the Humanities and Society at the University of Louisville, where he has researched a project that centered on Black joy as resistance and religious practices.

And as I said in the introduction this morning, Michael Brandon McCormack join us for our very first inaugural conference. And it is our delight to like to have you back again. Thank you.

BRANDON MICHAEL MCCORMACK: Thank you. So it's good to be here. It's late in the evening, so I'll gather up my energy again. But I'm very excited to be with these fellow panelists.

I was coming to Harvard, so I wrote a paper-- I wrote because it's Harvard. And so I apologize if I'm out of order of the more extemporaneous mood of this panel, but bear with me. I will try to read it with energy, and emphasis, and joy. Because indeed, that is what I want to talk about, Black joy.

So I think of myself not so much as an artist proper, although I think all of us are artists in our own right. I was trained in homiletics and liturgics, and so the arts of ministry are important to my own thinking and practice. But also, Black religion and cultural studies, so how religion is functioning within Black popular culture is important to me as well. And how the two sometimes mix and sometimes don't. So Black joy as an artistic and affective praxis of resistance, and resilience, and religion for me. So here goes.

In her work, The Black Interior, African-American poet and literary scholar, Elizabeth Alexander, describes the ways that, quote, "corporeal images of terror suggested experience can be taken into the body via witnessing and recorded as knowledge". These corporeal images or spectacles of Black pain include historical examples such as the whipping of enslaved Africans, public lynching, and vigilante violence, as well as more contemporary instances of police brutality and the state-sponsored killing of Black bodies.

For Alexander, Black bodies carry a collective cultural memory of violence on the flesh. A memory that has struck African-Americans concerning not only the parameters in which the bodies move, but also informs the subject formation of what she calls "the Black interior". Elizabeth Alexander's work bears witness to the affective experiences of public spectacles of Black pain and death endlessly circulated and massed in social media among spectators who feel themselves implicated in such violence.

While she is not a theorist of affect, Alexander calls attention to what affect theorists often described as how power, or forces, or currents flow through bodies, as well as how such forces flow through the consumption of various forms of media. I find that Alexander's argument concerning how the witnessing of violent and deadly enactments of power affects those bodies implicated and intended to be disciplined by the simultaneous spectacularization and normalization of such terroristic displays, dovetails with critical questions raised in a recent AAR panel I participated in on the felt life of vulnerability.

If indeed vulnerability is felt in bodies as the effects of power, and such power affects racialized bodies in distinctive ways, then I'm particularly interested in exploring how vulnerability is felt in the flesh of Black bodies as well as the Black interior. Affect theorists might ask more directly, how does vulnerability feel?

Indeed, this returns us with a difference to Dubois' perennial question, how does it feel to be a problem? Thus, Alexander's work serves as a critical point of departure for exploring a series of questions at the intersections of affect, emotion, and religion in the context of contemporary struggles for Black life and liberation.

What and how do Black bodies know through a possible epistemology of trauma as a result of the constant viewing of public spectacles of Black pain and death? Do such embodies ways of knowing suggest an irreducibly affective dimension to those who have been rendered racialized, gendered, or sexualized others, such as a turn to affect theory becomes necessary to more fully account for Black embodied experiences.

And I'll cut across field here some, but these questions open a more pressing set of questions that motivate this particular paper, and which is in the midst of such violence and trauma, what do we make about the possibility or praxis of joy, and Black joy in particular? If such a Black joy is possible, under what conditions is it sustainable?

What is the significance of the intentional cultivation of emotions such as joy? What work does Black joy do? What is the role of artists and other

cultural workers in expressing and holding space for Black joy? And of course, within the context of this particular gathering, is there anything religious or spiritual about recent constructions of Black joy?

Or better, how does Black joy as articulated and practiced by those who are often considered beyond the boundaries of Black religion, or at least precariously and problematically positioned within those boundaries, challenge us to rethink the religious and its significance as a mode of both resistance and resilience? But before I tell you the Black joy, however, it's necessary to further examine the vulnerability and trauma of Black bodies against which conceptions of Black joy are often articulated.

So let us return to Alexander with an eye toward ethics of displays of power upon Black bodies made to feel vulnerable under more contemporary regimes of white supremacy. As Alexander traces the legacy of state-sanctioned violence against African-Americans, she calls attention to how witnessing, watching, or awareness of such forces that threaten Black lives lead to feelings of vulnerability that affect how Black bodies comport ourselves and move in and through the world.

She is also attentive to the circumscription of the boundaries in which Black bodies move. Moreover, her work calls attention to the existential effect upon Black subject formation. Alexander argues, "Black bodies in pain for public consumption has been an American national spectacle for centuries. White men have been the primary stagers and consumers of the historical spectacles I have mentioned, but in one way or another, Black people have been looking, too, forging a traumatized collective historical memory that is reinvoked, I believe, at contemporary sites of conflict."

In an essay entitled, Can You Be Black and Look at This? reading the Rodney King videos, Alexander calls attention to African-American responses to viewing video footage of Rodney King's beating by Los Angeles police in 1992. Says Alexander, "The language employed by the speaker is a corporeal one, heard and then experienced in his nervous system as a pain that went from the top of my head to the tip of my toes." Alexander observes the entire body and its synapses make this response.

Alexander's attention to the effects of violent power upon Black bodies is deeply connected to our interest in how subsequent feelings of vulnerability affect the subject formation of the Black interior and its expression of related emotions. In an article for New York Magazine, writer Ashley Weatherford describes more recent examples of these contemporary sites of conflict, corroborating Alexander's critical reflections on affect emotion and the vulnerability of Black body.

Weatherford's article can be described in terms of what literary scholar, Karla F.C. Holloway has called "the African-American mourning story", or a narrative marked by collective memories of African-Americans particular vulnerability not only to pain and suffering, but also to premature, untimely, senseless, tragic, and violent, and often murderous death. According to Weatherford, quote, "I can't tell you how many times I watched a Black man die on a two-by-four inch phone screen in 2016. The number is equal to the times I witnessed a white man escape punishment for

his crime. It stunk. It hurt like hell. It made me feel broken from within."

Weatherford's account of the effects of repetitious witnessing of Black death is described as a kind of fracturing of wholeness that is felt within the Black interior, but with implications for the body. Conversely, Damon Young, editor for the online magazine, Very Smart Brothers, begins with his body's own refusal to be further subjected to trauma.

However, on Young's account, the body's self-protective mechanisms are apparently not enough to shield the Black interior from feelings of vulnerability described as an experience of tearing and searing that calls to mind a realization of the boy's subjunctive possibility of the tearing asunder of the souls of Black folk, now bereft of the dogged strength necessary to maintain wholeness against the white supremacist forces working on, against, and through Black bodies.

In an essay entitled, Laquan McDonald and the Slow Death of Black Joy-- what a title, right? Young wrote, "And I'm thinking about watching the recently released video of Laquan McDonald's execution. And I'm thinking about why I just don't have the stomach to watch it tonight, or tomorrow night, or any night. And I'm thinking, convinced, actually, I'll never watch it.

And I'm thinking about what Laquan McDonald could have possibly been thinking about in the last moments of his life. And this is how shit like this tears your joy away. How it rips it apart, how it burns it. This is the invisible psychic cost of existing in America while Black." And though Young offers his richly descriptive account of, or tragic account of the slow death of Black joy, it doesn't exactly focus on the significance of joy or the implications of his demise for the kind of "existential Africana", to borrow from philosopher Lewis Gordon, that he describes.

Of course, Harvard professor and philosopher of religion, Cornel West has consistently invoked these concerns in his work, particularly in his more public pedagogical performances, even if not in a substantive or sustained manner in his writings, though one could certainly imagine that a concern with Black joy is implied in his earliest treatment of Black nihilism in America, in race matters. But since at least the mid-1990s, West has argued that there has been an erosion of Black joy among a younger generation of African-Americans.

For West, this is in part because of the increasingly vicious effects of global capitalism that undermine the strength and integrity of Black communities, institutions, including religious, and networks of care, as well as the commodification and individualization of various modes of pleasure that corrupt what he sees as the more substantive and communal experiences of joy. This waning of Black joy among younger African-Americans is a tragic loss for West, since Black joy has not only been instrumental in the physical and psychic survival of African-American communities, but also in empowering the weary back into collective struggle.

Indeed for West, Black joy is inextricably linked to what he sees as a set of non-market values such as love, care, kindness, service, solidarity, and the struggle for justice that he argues are values that provide the possibility of bringing people together. West laments that under the weight of white supremacist backlash to Black progress, the worsening economic and material conditions in which vulnerable Black bodies are forced to live, and the alienation of young people from prophetic Black religious communities and practices, whether forced or chosen, such a subversive joy has been eroding among those younger African-Americans who have come of age in the post Civil Rights era.

And to be sure, Damon Young's testimony of how "shit like this tears your joy away, how it rips it apart, how it burns", it seems to corroborate West's account. Yet, I want to pay attention to how the seemingly non or anti-religious Black Lives Matter movement, with all of his expressions of rage, and defiance, are perhaps even a talk turned to expressions of Afro pessimism, has also given renewed expressions of Black joy as a mode of resistance in struggles for Black liberation.

Recently, a younger generation of Black intellectuals, activists, and artists, to be sure, has begun to reclaim and reimagine Black joy as a vital contribution to the struggle against the constant trauma inflicted upon Black people. For instance, in 2015, Black Latinx poet and writer Kleaver Cruz began the Black Joy Project on his Instagram page. Reflecting on the origins of this project and the context of his own feelings of mounting depression, Cruz remembers, quote, "I thought about how present I was to Black death and pain through my organizing work with various activist collectives in New York City and the ways I felt bombarded on a daily basis", end quote.

Cruz would go on to describe his experiences in ways consistent with Alexander's analysis of black-embodied affectivity. He insists, I wanted to relieve myself of the pain that surfaces after watching too many news accounts of fatal shootings, of law enforcement ending the lives of Black people in the US, or the numbing feeling that chills the heart after another young Black person is killed for similar reasons in Brazil.

This led Cruz to an alternative praxis of resistance captured by a simple but powerful call to action. He said, "Let's bombard the internet with joy. This is resistance, too. Trauma is real, [NON-ENGLISH WORD]. Let's trigger love as much as the pain as we share important topics that we all need to be up on. And a more expansive articulation of Black joy is resistance." Cruz insists, "It is resistance to choose to laugh, and dance, and sing, and smile, and all the ways that joy manifests itself in the face of white supremacy, in the face of systems, structures, and societies that tell us that we are not worthy of living, let alone enjoying it."

And so while Cruz's digital curation of Black joy was initially conceived as a 30-day self-healing challenge, testimonial feedback from organizers and everyday folks convinced him that this notion of Black joy was bigger than his own personal healing. That the Black Joy Project was indeed a call to community transformation.

So indeed, the sentiments expressed in Cruz's the Black Joy Project have resonated and become pervasive in Black popular culture and among artists and activists involved in the movement for Black Lives. From DJs Amber Phillips and Jasmine Walker's The Black Joy Mixtape, to curators Nick Alder, Lauren Ash, and DJ Rae Chardonnay's creation of Party Noire, as an intersectional space for all Black joy, to performance artists marked by Marc Bamuthi Joseph's choreographed dance and spoken word piece, Black Joy in the Hour of Chaos.

And more recently, to Oakland's Black, second annual, just last weekend, Black Joy Parade, as well as Shamell Bell's street dance activism out in the Bay Area, Black cultural workers have been intentional about the deployment of Black arts and culture as a means to conjure a kind of sustaining and indeed subversive joy in the face of state-sponsored violence. Thus, I'm interested in the ways that these and other Black cultural workers have creatively reimagined and deployed Black joy as an affective, potentially effective means of resistance.

And such, I am concerned with how these performances of Black joy seek to represent Black Lives in ways that not only resist trauma and despair, but also encourage collective identification around notions of Black resiliency, self-care, healing, and thriving. I got a lot more in this paper to say, but I've already said a lot and I'm reading a paper. And we're being more extemporaneous.

So let me yield the rest of this time. And hopefully in conversation, we can get at some more of these dynamics about how artists are deploying and holding space for what they see as Black joy as an intentional kind of praxis. Not to deny Black pain and other forms of organizing and struggle, but as a way of buoying up Black spirits to do this kind of work. Thank you.

[APPLAUSE]

KARLENE GRIFFITHS SEKOU: Thank you so much. And our final panelist is Steve Núñez. After growing up in the port city Wilmington, North Carolina, Steve Núñez enlisted in the Army, where he earned a Green Beret and spent five years as a special forces weapons Sergeant.

After an honorable discharge, Steve began contracting for the State Department as personal security specialist in the embassy protection detail in Kabul. While there, he became critical of US American imperialism and began to question his commitments to it. Additionally, he was struck by the gulf between the Muslim antagonist propaganda circulated in the US American media and the Afghan communities he worked closely beside.

This led to his enrollment in the University of North Carolina at Wilmington where he completed a BA in philosophy, and religion, and anthropology. He went on to complete an MTS in religion, ethics, and politics here at HDS last May. He is currently completing doctoral studies in social and political philosophy at the University of Connecticut, where he studies the thought of Frantz Fanon and WEB Dubois, philosophy of race, philosophy of education, critical war studies, and just war ethics, and is

fleshing out the politics, ethics, tactics, and aesthetics of a phenomenon he terms "revolutionary counter violence". Steve?

STEVE NUNEZ: Well, thank you all so much. It's good to be back at Harvard. I don't really know where to start. This has been an amazing conversation. So I think I'm going to pick up on the conversation of joy.

I think the conversation of joy is really, really important. And I think I'm going to kind of juxtapose that to an affect that's more near and dear to my heart than joy, which is rage. I think that the two are very, very intertwined. And I think for Black people and blackness in the United States of America, I think they're always in response to the hell that Black people are catching.

The reality of white supremacy has been deeply entrenched in the United States. I don't think we need to hit on that. But yeah, I think the question of joy is really, really important because following in the footsteps of my dear sister, Professor Cherry, who I was just listening to her at the Harvard bookstore presenting a book on her podcast called UnMute, one of the ideas that she she's really giving me that I've walked through the world with since she said it is she defines joy as bliss in spite of.

And I really, really liked this idea, because joy is not the same as happiness. If it was, we would just use happiness. I think there's a deep, deep meaning and a deep thing going on whenever we speak of joy. You can only have joy whenever there's something that you shouldn't be joyful of. And in any United States that happens to be white supremacy, yet Black people and non other non-white peoples continue to find a way to say, fuck the white supremacist bullshit, I'm going to be happy for a minute at least. And I think that that's a really, really important role in the world.

Now, how that plays out in art I think is really, really important. For me, art is a language that can convey truths, perhaps even future truths, in a language that can't be captured by written, or oral, or whatever. I think that art gives us an emotional truth that can't be conveyed any other way.

So for me, my life has very much been defined by hip hop culture. And one of the things that I love about hip hop culture is that, for me, hip hop is necessarily a critique of the social conditions in the United States of America, and I think that's why it's important for me. And I think one of the things that I've been wrestling with in my work over the past few months is thinking about how, there's sort of a generational schism, I think, that's going on within, what we might call loosely, contoured hip hop culture.

And I love that you evoke Brother West and Brother Gordon, two men near and dear to my studies. But yeah, I think West and I see don't see quite eye-to-eye on his view of hip hop. And I think that there's a generational difference. And I think that we see even a generational difference within hip hop, where we like to shape so-called "hip hop heads" like to shape the '90s as this golden era of hip hop that is full of social critique and

full of the Nas' and the Jay-Zs and that, but a lot of times we forget that there was also a lot of trash hip hop in the '90s, and we like to elevate in pedestalize a lot of these artists that are great, and they should be great, but I don't I think we should hold intention with some of the shit that came out of the '90s as well.

But I think even these "hip hop heads" as we might call them, folks that came up with the culture in the '90s really, really look pejoratively upon what I would call trap music, which is a necessarily southern phenomenon, I think, that comes out of Atlanta. But you might hear it called mumble rap. And a lot of the times, I think there's a different understanding how we're dealing with these sorts of emotions or affects throughout the musical culture.

And I think one of those big things is the way that catharsis appears in hip hop. I think that catharsis is really, really, really extremely important. I'm going to read a quote from Dubois. So Dubois, for those of you that know, Dubois studied what we call the sorrow song that comes out of African spiritual as well. Dubois says, quote, "through all the sorrow of the sorrow songs there breathes a hope of faith in the ultimate justice of things. The minor cadences of despair often to triumph in calm confidence.

Sometimes it is a faith in life, sometimes a faith in death, sometimes an assurance of boundless justice and some fair world beyond. But whichever it is, the meaning is always clear-- that sometimes, somewhere, men will judge men by their souls and not by their skins." So interestingly enough in that same chapter titled, Sorrow Songs, Dubois also says, "by faithful chance, the Negro folk song, The Rhythmic Cry of the Slave stands today, not simply as the soul American music, but as the most beautiful expression of human experience born on this side of the seas. It has been neglected and it has been, and is half despised. And above all, it has been persistently mistaken and misunderstood.

But notwithstanding, it still remains as the singular spiritual heritage of the nation and the greatest gift of Negro people." So Dubois really, really places this heavy, heavy emphasis on the role that African spirituals, particularly, played on the formation of Black communities in the United States of America. And as hip hop, I view hip hop as a departure from this sorrow song, trying to deal with the social, and political, and economic, and otherwise circumstances in the United States of America.

And for me, this is the role, for me, I think of Black artists trying to help us deal with this, whether it is through joy, or whether it is through rage. It's to build this effective sort of catharsis that allows us to participate in social society in the United States of America. And I think, interestingly enough, right now, in my studies this is very, very new. I just started sort of exploring this line of questioning about catharsis, and joy, and rage in the past few months.

But recently I read under Lewis Gordon at UConn, Frantz Fanon's second dissertation. For those of you that don't know who Frantz Fanon is, he wrote a book called Black Skin, White Mask, a book called The Wretched of

the Earth. But in a dissertation, Black Skin, White Mask was supposed to be his dissertation, but Leone rejected it as his dissertation, so he wrote another dissertation.

And in that dissertation he really, really places catharsis as the key to entry into political life, into social and political life. So that's sort of where I'm at in my thoughts about art. Like I said, I think that it can convey really, really power-- I think it's powerful and violent. And just to wrap up my comments, in 1915 DW Griffith came out with a film called The Birth of a Nation.

The president at the time, Woodrow Wilson, said something along the lines of a birth of a nation is history forged by lightning. And that was after watching The Birth of a Nation in the White House. Well, later on that year, that Thanksgiving, 16 men got together on Stone Mountain, Georgia and they rebirthed the Klan. Fast forward to 1992, a man named Bill Clinton rolls out a tough on crime policy from the same exact place where there's now a prison at the base of Stone Mountain, and he rolls out a tough on crime policy in front of a bunch of people.

So I think that we're still wrestling with the legacies of art that was made in 1915 that still captivates the United States of America. So for me, I'm not an artist, either, but I think all of us need to sort of think that are dealing with the academy on how, for me, it's art, I think, is a medium that can express some of these deep ideas at ground levels of culture that the academy just, I don't think, can reach, nor does it want to reach.

So yeah, as we think about what it means, art as resistance, particularly from places like Harvard, I think it's important that we think about the legacies and how we can sort of, I guess, challenge some of the negative legacies that have come out of white supremacist art and create new art that can give us a new imagination to imagine a world that is rid of white supremacy, as difficult as it may seem.

[APPLAUSE]

KARLENE GRIFFITHS SEKOU: Wonderful. Thank you so much, Steve. So as we pushing against time, do we have any burning questions for our panelists?

[LAUGHTER]

I'm sorry?

AUDIENCE: You said, burning, I'm not even going to raise my hand.

AUDIENCE: [INAUDIBLE]

KARLENE GRIFFITHS SEKOU: Or just a question. Anything is fine.

AUDIENCE: Yeah, I would like to know whether there is some type of, there was some type of video of The Black Joy Project and your joy and rage?

STEVE NUNEZ: What particularly about joy and rage?

AUDIENCE: Well, was there some type of program, or some type of cathartic performance?

STEVE NUNEZ: I'll let you jump on that, and then I'll jump in [INAUDIBLE].

BRANDON MICHAEL MCCORMACK: Well, The Black Joy Project is primarily on the social media platform, Instagram. So it's a visual representation of Black joy. And so essentially what he did, it began with him posting just a picture of he and his mother smiling and enjoying life.

And then he wanted to turn that into a larger project. And so he challenged himself to continue to post. But he went out and--

[PHONE RINGING]

Sorry. Went in the streets and was taking pictures of individuals, and was simply asking them the question, what is Black joy to you? And that you would hear different individuals giving their response to their conception of Black joy, and then those all got posted to Instagram.

So that's, if you're looking for The Black Joy Project, you would see that. And then you can, I think, find video of him giving an interview about that project. But outside of that, you've seen a number of things that have spun out from that, and other people taking up Black joy as a hashtag, and other kinds of artistic production.

So you can find video of Marc Bamuthi Josephs Black Joy in the Hour of Chaos, and that performance that he did in New York. You can find his poem around that you, can find Aja Monet, a poet, plus a poem on Black joy. You can find Javon Johnson, who is a professor and performance artist who has a piece on Black joy, and a number of folks who have done this.

The Collegium of African Diaspora Dance CADD, that's operated out of Duke by professor Tommy DeFrantz, their biennial conference on Africana dance was Dancing Black Joy last year. So they have a number of dance, theorists, performance artists, theater folks who are theorizing their way of talking about Black joy and its embodiment. And I think there's video footage of parts of that conference. So I think there are different ways that you could access manifestations of popular cultural expressions of Black joy.

STEVE NUNEZ: As for the rage part, I would just recommend generally, I'm with Dubois. I think Black music is, like, the greatest thing that's ever come out of the United States of America. And I think that continues today.

And I think one of the shortcomings of the way that we talk about the hip hop culture and the hip hop industry is that we focus on albums and streams and rather than full corpuses of projects. So I would recommend that you look at these music videos, these short films that these artists are sort of putting together. Here, I'm thinking like Kanye West and Jay-Z No Church in the Wild. This is a crazy, crazy rendition of revolution.

There's a number of artists that have really, really high-quality visual art that comes along with their lyrics and their musical art. Jay-Z, his 4:44 album, he put out a different film for every single track that's on that, that explores a different facet of some social ill in the United States.

But yeah, for me, I think rage is really, really encapsulated in a lot of, particularly, what you might think of more as even rap than hip hop. So listen any Meek Mill introduction on any Meek Mill album and you will feel what the fuck they're talking about with rage, because it's pretty intense.

But yeah, I would just say, keep an eye out for, I would say look for artists that you enjoy. Like for me, particularly, I'll watch anything any film that J. Cole puts out, any film that Jay-Z puts out, any film that Travis Scott puts out. There's a number of different artists, I think, that are coming up that focus a little bit even more, as great as their music is, they focus on the visuals of what comes along with that music and what they want to portray to watchers that may not even experience it as much as the music.

KENDRA HICKS: And if you're looking to even out the testosterone a little bit, Janelle Monáe has a video for her song, Django Jane, and also released an entire album, an entire motion picture for her album, Dirty Computer. And Janelle Monáe is a queer Black women, for those that know. And so I would also recommend that as some visual to engage with.

BRANDON MICHAEL MCCORMACK: And let's not forget about Queen B.

KENDRA HICKS: Of course, Lemonade. [LAUGHS] I love that one.

KARLENE GRIFFITHS SEKOU: Yes?

AUDIENCE: [INAUDIBLE]

AUDIENCE: I was just thinking, [INAUDIBLE] how do we translate that to resistance and structural change in terms of kind of using it, because we have a lot of these artists who are sort of doing these things, but how is that pushing us to create the kind of structured resistance, mass resistance and structural change that's going to alter a lot of the causes of this?

KENDRA HICKS: Hi, Baba. Can I answer your question?

AUDIENCE: [INAUDIBLE]

KENDRA HICKS: So I think that's a really good question, even in the framing of a mass resistance, right? I think that often times we think about our movement as, like, the organizing, the mass resistance, and the direct action, which naturally tend to be really masculine types of work. And when I say masculine, I don't mean men, I mean, like, masculine kind of linear energy. And we don't think as, we don't think of the more feminine emotional work that typically comes from cultural organizing,

that typically comes from artists, that typically comes from women as also being a part of that resistance.

And so when I envision the way that this kind of revolutionary art is really going to get us there is by marrying those two things together. I think that there is something that we're not connecting in the movement right now about the necessity of having those two things together. And I feel like that's why it feels like we're kind of doing this start and stop.

It's because we're not connecting this other part of it. And so I think that, really, the role of the art is to be transformative. I think that you can theorize art. But in the end of the day it's something that needs to move you. It's something that you need to feel in your body.

And when I think about, particularly, the Estuary Projects, and I think about the state of the world right now, is that this constant bombardment of, like, this pain, but also this kind of, like, push that we have to do more, and work harder, and kind of, like, respond and show out in mass all of the time stops us from taking the actual time that we need to slow. And I'm thinking about, what are the release?

My hope is that the art can get us to really think about, what other small, tiny, intentional things that we can do that are going to move us closer to where we're trying to go every day? I'm not saying that those things, that the kind of work that we're doing now in the movement doesn't need to exist, but I think that we need to do a-- we need to have much more concerted effort over bringing those things together, because I think that that's actually what's going to give us the drive. I think that's actually what's going to push the work over.

AUDIENCE: So with your particular work, for example, based on the women who were murdered, so that was quite a process when we were organizing. And 2,000 women, people, not just women, but women led it, to deal with that. And so that was in, like, '79. So it's a film overlooking at the film.

KENDRA HICKS: Yeah, yeah, on April 1, they take the walk on April 1.

AUDIENCE: People united [INAUDIBLE]. But the question is that, so that's in '79. And so your installation is addressing that now. But now, we have-- oh, whats her name? [INAUDIBLE]

KENDRA HICKS: [? Jazzy ?] [? Corea, yeah. ?]

AUDIENCE: --and other stuff. So how do we-- we have to really look at art in relationship to change, but in relation to movement and so forth. And how do we begin to make that connection and examine the Black Lives Movement, and what they do right, and what were some of the errors, and how do we move forward. It's a very important part in this. We'll keep making installations and still be enslaved--

KENDRA HICKS: And I think that the purpose of the project is exactly what you're saying. It's to remember that things are cyclical. And so this

Jazzy [? Corea ?] thing has happened smack in the middle of remembering these women in the 40th anniversary. And the framing of the Estuary Projects is that 2019 is a lot like 1979, right?

And so my hope is that by remembering that we've already been here, that we've done this before and that we've seen these things before, it's going to embolden us, our people, to build this audacity to imagine. What I'm trying to do is use art to embolden people to feel that we have everything that we need to move forward, instead of feeling like we need to go and strategize again, and have another march, and do another rally, and show up to this thing. I think that culture is upstream from structure and system.

And so how are we building through art culture that's going to shift? Because that's really what we're trying to do. We're going to, just like you said, we're going to keep doing the same thing over and over again unless something shifts. And so when we're looking at it, what is it that needs to shift, right? What are we doing that's the same? And what do we need to do that's different?

BRANDON MICHAEL MCCORMACK: Just quickly, I mean, I would want-- because I think we often get into these conversations about culture versus politics, right? And, like, what's the real thing? Is culture really politics, or is cultural work really significantly political?

And I think, to me, that's kind of an argument doesn't get us very far. If I think about The Black Joy Project, it's coming, it emerges from an organizer who cannot get out of the bed anymore because the work has become so dispiriting and debilitating. I can't move. I can't get up because I've seen this happen over and over again.

So how do I exercise self-care and healing for myself to get me back into the work? So the art becomes that means to get me back into the work. And he's receiving messages from other organizers who said, I was burnt out, too. But I came across your page, and now I'm renewed, back for the work, on the one hand. So that the art becomes a means to replug into the work.

But on the other hand, I want to say that on another level, I think Black joy is the endgame. You do the political work because you want joy. Like, I don't want politics. I want joy. And I want some of that joy right now, even as I'm doing the political work to get to joy, so that I don't have to keep struggling, and organizing, and fighting, so that I can just be, and have the joy that was already as my birthright. So I think that the question of, well, how does something like art push us back to politics is one question, but how does politics push us to the kind of affect, I think, that we want from the art, is as another way to get at the question.

KARLENE GRIFFITHS SEKOU: Yes? Oh, you have a question as well? OK, I'll go to Nikki, and then I'll come back to you. Thank you.

AUDIENCE: I just have a brief comment that echoes, I think, what the two of you just said. And it's about art not simply being its product, but it is its process. And so the thing that makes it valuable for politics, I

believe, is the habitants, it's the practice of creation, it is that ethical project of production that is in the face of death.

So if it is over and over a process of creating, and working, and believing in newness that comes from the imaginative space of sort of another possibility, then it's a way of creating habits and a way of creating life over and over again through activity, that contrasts the work of death feeling, oppressive politics. And so I think in that way it becomes really valuable.

I think I heard that in what you're saying. And I read it as, in ethics, so the art becomes a barometer for our actions, and it becomes a measurement for how we are to be, and behave, and to be in unity and relation.

KENDRA HICKS: Thank you.

STEVE NUNEZ: And to echo that, sometimes it just allows us to be, right? Like, art, for me, like, I think one of the problems is that sometimes art, the art of the art is actually just like, that's what I like about trap music. I think a lot of the art that's in trap music that people miss is, like, I actually just want to exist right now.

I don't want to fucking think about the politics, I don't want to think about anything. I want to drink some lean and exist in a way that feels good. And I think that that's an important part of the politics is having that little piece of respite, even if it's only for a song.

ARIC FLEMMING JR: I want to say one more thing. I think we also have to be very strategic. Coming from an artist's perspective, you have to value the artists so much. Because I think when the artist is liberated, the movement moves forward. Because if the artist is bound, you won't actually get the prophecy.

Because it's literally out of the soul of the artist that the movement moves, because they paint the picture of what the future will look like. But if you bind me and my artist to creation and don't value who I am and allow me to express what I feel as an artist, we won't get anywhere. So I think movements, politically, have to be conscious of saving the artists, keeping them liberated, so that they can keep producing the art that's needed to push us to the next level.

[APPLAUSE]

KARLENE GRIFFITHS SEKOU: Wonderful. [INAUDIBLE]? No, you're fine.

AUDIENCE: So far, basically two weeks ago some of us were here where you are, and we were speaking in front of religions. Our Divinity School religions and the practice of peace. And it was a notions of that conversation, which was, but we're having a conversation here at Harvard Divinity School and there's a number of people we were talking about, like, I know something, and I want to talk to you about that as your belief.

That implies that somebody's life is going to be better because of what I know. But one question is like, how do we know we actually have it right? And at one point, somebody's life is better, but not because of what we're saying. And I think what Baba was kind of testing Kendra on another identity she has.

So we have a population identity. [INAUDIBLE] Some of us are like, this woman that people are reading about in the news and tweeting about because she was kidnapped, we're going to be with that family in that neighborhood. And we're going to use some notion of what we're talking about here to make that community better or not.

And I've been trying to find what I call, what medicine sometimes call the vertical line for what's happening in academia to being actually happening on the ground. Not insider pieces. And in that thinking-- I'm just going to share a couple things-- because I have fear for the first time.

One, I think when we start talking about certain English words, we're using words that Africans invented concepts for that English can't capture. So like, the word joy design, I don't think captures what we're talking about. I think I've seen an instance of this rage and joy thing combined.

Two Saturdays ago, when we had 65 [INAUDIBLE] doing [INAUDIBLE] about hyper violence with this joy at the same time. And that, to me, is uniquely an African concept. A earlier person talked about [INAUDIBLE]. That's joy [INAUDIBLE].

And so sometimes, in a lot of artwork, hundreds of parties, film and all of that, but when I'm in that identity as an artist, I kind of forget another word for this other thing, which is art that derived from the way Africans invented the notion of art. Like the first time that an African said, oh, Baba can have a view of me that's separate than my own view of myself. So I'm going to put something on my body or make a sound to communicate something different to him. And we're going to communicate on those lines. That's what I call art, the beginning of art.

And that was translated in my soul, though. Translated in my soul. It wasn't to entertain. So I've been trying to separate entertainment from art. And here's where my fear is. This is the highest time since-- I'm just going to talk about Black people for it, in Black existence that so many Black people don't consider themselves artists. It goes down exponentially.

I can't sing because I'm not good. Whereas it was invented for the expression of your soul, and now we're-- there's some parts where we're like, because of your body type you can't do this. And somebody's judging how well you sing, so you don't get the expression of, like, my grandmother just died and I want to sing. And better not nobody tell me I sound terrible. That's against our wire.

And then, it's the first time, and this is the very first time. The first time ever since so many Black people are exiting the church, whatever church we're talking about. There's a huge exodus as, like, 20, 12 to 45

years old not following any practice is sharply, sharply increasing since-- so I'd say increased the growth rate declined, but now we have a decline.

And then, the suicide rate of Black people. Now, somehow-- and I don't have any answer-- or I mean, I have things I'm toying with, but somehow I-- after a conference like this, we'll all disperse, but how do we all stay together so we can work on this extremely hard problem, which will require tweaking of whatever we said that says, yes, that suicide rate will go down, faith will be increased, and the use of whatever we get the joy of doing is now going to spread to the average person in Fulton County District.

And this last piece is about the healing of the artist and joy being that thing. Kendra and I were in-- well, she called me down to South Carolina, I mean--

KENDRA HICKS: Ferguson.

AUDIENCE: --St. Louis, to deal with Ferguson. I'm talking about Tef Poe, all those guys, and that stress of organizing, there was no container for. I don't think celebrating alone does it. And there's a science of taking care of people that are in schools that you probably are familiar with, being deployed. Like, critical incident, stress debriefing, and so forth.

And basically, that's what we offered the organizers. Yes, there was joy in that, too. But the caretaking of the warrior, in a sense, I think we need to make science on that, because the reason when you pull something back together-- firemen get it all the time, EMTs, we need to do something-- so wherever, again, [INAUDIBLE], I'm scared about all those things. And panels, to me, are a great time to be together, and then we'll be hoping that we stay connected and the conversation is continued afterwards, and that separation is what I want to somehow undo. Maybe [INAUDIBLE].

KARLENE GRIFFITHS SEKOU: Thank you so much for your comments and for all of your insights. And there is a point that I do want to insert. And I think for peoples of African descent, art is embodied and has always been a part of our resistance. And we have to remember that in the day-to-day. From the days of the ring shouts, to the juke joints, to the ways in which we use music.

The juke joints, blues has emerged, the spirituals have emerged, fashioning ourselves through artistic aesthetic. And I'm talking about day-to-day ways in which Black folk have always resisted through the arts, through the aesthetics of the body. Black fashioning, Black bodies, Black women's modes of fashioning.

One of the things I've noticed in social movements now is the ways that artistic aesthetics and deployment is woven into our movement from BLM LA, where women were shutting down a major LA thoroughfare highway, and did so nude from the top down with art on their bodies, disrupting a mechanistic system that chooses to erase not just Black bodies, but Black lives, right?

And I remember in Ferguson, shortly after the uprisings, the first periodicity of uprisings there, that organizers disrupted the symphony by infiltrating a performance of the symphony that was lily white. And as such, as symphonies go, where you have the separation of class and those who have the privilege of being sequestered and enjoying, or consuming certain kinds of music, organizers disrupted the performances, and dropped banners, and cosmically, for us, that is significant. And it signifies and it disrupts the status quo.

I'm totally in agreement that this is one way to enact resistance. This is one way to also cast imaginaries of Black life and to feed and nurture the souls of Black folk within the systems and structures in which we exist. Art is a part of our movement. Art is a part of our daily lives.

So I'm concerned about binaries where we separate the political from the artistic or the spiritually. And I think of the tradition of the Black church, and I think this is woven into Afrikana spiritualities throughout, where the full humanity, and expression, and range, and ledgers, and registers of emotion, are intertwined, they're interconnected. I don't think we are of this business of dissecting and compartmentalizing our humanity.

And so I think, perhaps, it's continuing to revisit, and reimagining, and reconstructing what we mean when we say art. And there are particular modes, and uses, and lineages of art that revolutionaries, including Simone, including-- is it Paul Robeson, who and artists today who currently deploy their art Tef Poe is one, Aja Monet-- and I'm going to close this out on that note.

But I know that every time we gather, we deploy art because it is a way of life, representing our full humanity within our existential reality. So with that, you conjured Aja Monet, [INAUDIBLE]. This piece was done at the Say Her Name March. And yeah, I will close this out right after this.

[AUDIO PLAYBACK]

AJA MONET: I am a woman carrying other women in my mouth. Beyond a sister, a daughter, a mother, dear friend, spirits demystified on my tongue. They gather to breathe and exhale, a dance with death we know is not the end.

All these nameless bodies haunted by pellet wounds in their chest. Listen for them in the saying of a name you cannot pronounce. Black and woman is the sort of magic you cannot hashtag, the mere weight of it to vast to be held. We hold ourselves, an inheritance felt between the hips, womb of soft darkness, port of light, watch them and be the revolution of our movement.

How we break open to give life flow, while the terror of our tears, the torment of our tastes, my rage is righteous. My love is righteous. My name, be righteous. Hear what I am not here to say. We, too, have died. We know we are dying, too.

I am not here to say, look at me, how I died so brutal a death. I deserve a name to fit all the horror in. I am here to tell you how, if they mention me in their protests and their rallies, they would have to face their role in it, too. My beauty, too.

I have died many times before, the blow of the body. I have bled many months before the bullet to the flesh. We know, women know the body is not the end. Call it what you will, but for all the handcuff wrists of us, the shackled ankles of us, the bend over to make room for us, how dare we speak anything less than I love you?

We, who love just as loudly in the thunderous rain as when the sun shines golden on our skin, the world kisses us unapologetically. We be so beautiful when we be. How you going to be free without me? Your freedom is tied up in mine at the nappy-edged soul of my singing for all my sisters. Watch them stretch their arms in my voice, how they fly, open-chested toward your ears. Listen, watch them stretch their arms in my voice, how they fly, open-chested towards your ear.

Listen for Rekia Boyd, Tanisha Anderson, Yvette Smith, Aiyana Jones, Kayla Moore, Shelly Frey, Miriam Carey, Kendra James, Alberta Spruill, Tarika Wilson, Charisse Francis, Chantel Davis, Melissa Williams, Darnisha Harris, Michelle Cusseaux, Pearlie Golden, Catherine Johnston, Eleanor Bumpers, Natasha McKenna, Sheneque Proctor. Listen. Listen. Watch my sisters stretch their arms in my voice, how they fly, open-chested toward you ear.

We will not vanish. We will not vanish in the bated breath of our brothers. Show me. Show me a man willing to fight beside me, my hand in his, the color of courage. Show me. Show me a man willing to fight beside me, my hand in his, the color of courage. There is no mountaintop worth seeing without us. Meet me in the trenches, where we lay our bodies down in the valley of a voice. Say. Say it. Say it, y'all. Say her name.

[CHEERING]

[END PLAYBACK]

[APPLAUSE]

[MUSIC PLAYING]