
How We Write Now: Living with Black Feminist Theory by Jennifer C. Nash, Duke University Press, 2024, 130 pp., £19.99, ISBN: 978-1-47-803046-1

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This review of Jennifer C. Nash's *How We Write Now: Living with Black Feminist Theory* employs personal writing to reflect on the author's concept of *beautiful writing* as a new form of writing marking contemporary Black feminist theory. Contemplating Black ordinariness as an archive for Black feminist theory, the author's engagement with loss as constitutive of Black women's lives is considered. This includes the use of the author's own personal writing, and that of other Black women writers, as they attend to forms of loss that are non-spectacular and embedded in the conditions of the everyday. The review reflects on the relationship between writers and readers with a focus on what Black feminist writing aspires to offer, do to, and demand from, its readers. The author's engagement with beauty as a Black feminist method and ethical method of Black feminist writing is brought into conversation with questions of the therapeutic.

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***How We Write Now: Living with Black Feminist Theory* by Jennifer C. Nash, Duke University Press, 2024, 130 pp., £19.99, ISBN: 978-1-47-803046-1**

Foluke Taylor

A friend sends me the obituary she has written for a Black feminist fellow traveller who was dear to her. It begins with the word ‘picture’—imperative as in ‘picture this’. Various scenes of her dear one follow: duetting with her daughter to Andra Day’s *Rise up*; offering a reassuring hand to a child at school; demonstrating in an urban street. Prior to reading *How We Write Now*, by Jennifer Nash, I would have said that her writing was beautiful. Now, called by Nash into *Living with Black Feminist Theory*, I send her a slightly different message: ‘This’, I say, is ‘beautiful writing’.

Nash introduced beautiful writing in a journal article, *Writing Black Beauty* (2019). *How We Write Now* extends and deepens this research to offer further evidence supporting the claim for beautiful writing as a new form marking contemporary Black feminist theory. I wish the newspaper editors who hack at my friend’s obituary had read this book. When the piece is published, it is barely recognisable. The writing is functional (and factually correct) but no longer beautiful. My friend and I commiserate (and rage) over the loss—a quotidian and ordinary loss perhaps, but palpably more than a reduced word count. In Nash’s book, which shows Black ordinariness as a rich archive for Black feminist thought, I find space to theorise this loss.

Black women’s lives and the losses that constitute them are at the core of this book. Spectacular murders at the hands of the state have come to be understood, Nash tells us, as the paradigmatic form of Black loss. She points to other forms of loss that need our attention. Her study—a textual meditation through various works by Black women writers—is concerned with forms of loss that are ‘nonspectacular, durational, embedded in the conditions of daily life’.¹ The opening sentence locates both author and reader in a loss that will not let us go: in the time it takes her to write, Nash tells us, her mother (diagnosed with Alzheimer’s) ‘may lose her capacity to read this sentence’.² This is Nash starting as she means to go on, with personal writing that invites the reader to come close. She admits that surrendering the ‘armor of critical distance’³ (learned via the academy within and to which she is writing) has felt risky. The risk is generative,

¹ Jennifer C. Nash. (2024) *How We Write Now: Living with Black Feminist Theory*. (Duke University Press, 2024), p. 22.

² Nash, *How We Write Now*, p. ix.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

effectively bringing Nash's writing into intimate conversation with the work of writers who have inspired her thinking. She thinks about beauty as a Black feminist method and an ethical method of Black feminist writing. The method is ethical, she says, because it sets out to do something that requires emotional risk: bring the reader and writer closer to the scene of loss and invite them to stay.

The text stays with beauty and loss throughout. The four chapters have distinct foci and narrative arcs but speak to and through one another in an extended, intimate conversation. In chapter 1 Nash thinks and feels with 'Black Feminist Theory's Mothers', and then in chapter 2 invites readers to 'Stay at the Bone' with her in an analysis of three beautiful texts—Elizabeth Alexander's *The Light of the World* (2015), Jesmyn Ward's *Witness and Respair* (2020) and Natasha Trethewey's *Memorial Drive* (2020). Chapter 3 visits epistolary form, issuing 'An Invitation to Listen' as Nash explores how Black feminist letters turn readers into eavesdroppers reading texts that didn't anticipate them. In chapter 4—'Picturing Loss'—my friend's 'picture this' comes to mind as an example of a 'Black feminist grammar [...] *always* both discursive and visual'.⁴ Nash asks what allowing others to see our losses might make possible and assists the enquiry with writing that renders her losses visible to us. The personal writing contextualises and enriches her theorisations. We readers have permission to be moved by loss in the fabric of the everyday: her mother's cognitive decline; lost reading practices and reading identities; letters (lost and found) that reveal love in non-spectacular forms in her parents' lives. It is with attention to the details of ordinary life—through her own and other Black women's writing—that Nash offers her version of what it is to live with Black feminist theory.

The word 'therapeutic' does not appear in the text and yet its implicit presence whispers to me as I read: when Nash says that writing is a tool that she has mobilised to live with her own pain; when she asks what seeing lost pasts might do to ameliorate or repair loss; when it becomes clear that amelioration and repair are of much less interest to the author than the question of how loss is, and can be, lived. The Black feminist ethic she describes—that 'loss requires companionship'⁵—is one that many therapeutic practitioners (including me) would recognise. Nash asks questions that I want to think more about: What does beautiful writing do to and ask of its reader and writer? What does getting to the bone together offer and/or achieve: lifeboat, form of shelter, practice of safety? If Black feminist writing is a voice aspiring to affect its readers—to whisper in their ears, get under their skin and make Black loss feelable as Nash suggests—the

⁴ Ibid., p. 74 (italics in original).

⁵ Ibid., p. 97

question of what specific affects we might aspire to (and not) remains open. Here, there is no shying away from the messy complexities of loss. Nash acknowledges that getting close also shakes and unravels us and can leave us feeling vulnerable, exposed, and exhausted. Neither is there any suggestion that avoiding this would be in any way ethical. Drawing from Jesmyn Ward, Nash reminds us that witnessing is different from watching; that spectator and witness are 'qualitatively and ethically distinct positions'.⁶ Knowing that some readers will not be moved does not mean that they are outside of the address and enquiry of this book; if not moved, Nash says, the question becomes why not?

In the conclusion, Nash returns to living with Black feminist theory by continuing to ask what Black feminism can teach us about what we wish to know more of. In Nash's case this is the Black paternal—a place of relative silence in a Black feminist tradition where she seeks 'Black Feminist Theory's Fathers'.⁷ She wants to know more about figures that provide tenderness and attention. She hones her gaze on *tenderness* as a word that 'capture[s] the feeling of being sensitized, open to the world—including to the pain of the world—and vulnerable'.⁸ Nash offers us an opportunity to visualise tenderness through her father who, as her mother's condition progresses, inhabits new roles and performs tending that he has not been socialised to do. The disruption to tired gendered divisions of labour is noted, but the real focus of Nash's attention is the surprise of tenderness in unexpected forms and places. Her aim is 'to mobilize Black feminist theory to mark what it feels like to find oneself open, soft, receptive, vulnerable, broken open by love, by fatigue, by repetition, by devotion'.⁹

How We Write Now meets a market now familiar with, and hungry for, beautiful writing. Could this, Nash wonders, turn into pressure on Black women to always write like this? The demand for Black writing that can think about how antiblack violence shapes our lives and brings tensions and complications. As the routinisation of spectacular violence carries it ever closer—or even in—to the realm of the ordinary, I begin to wonder: Could there be such a thing as writing that is too beautiful? Could beauty become a valve through which a reader's affect—rapt in intrapsychic experience—is funnelled away from urgent realities of an antiBlack now?

I listen to a podcast in which Nash tells the story of the book's title. They are in class, discussing Christina Sharpe's *In the Wake* (2019) when one of her students asks,

⁶ Ibid., p. 36.

⁷ Ibid., p. 91.

⁸ Ibid., p. 94.

⁹ Ibid., p. 95.

'is this how we can write now?'.¹⁰ This is how I can write now: about a friend losing a friend; about writing losing words; about the words lost being carriers of the attention to detail with which she—and we—are brought close to the loss and get to stay at the bone together. I can write because there is a We who write: contemporary Black feminists sharing a commitment to beautiful writing, among whom I can include myself. I can write of—and to—my friend, not as an attempt to repair the loss inflicted by an un-beautifying edit, but as an expression of my intention to accompany that loss. I write in gratitude for the fundamental critique—and riches—that *How We Write Now* offers to us in the academy and beyond.

¹⁰ 'Jennifer C. Nash, "How We Write Now: Living with Black Feminist Theory'. New Books in Critical Theory, 25 December 2024, online sound recording, Spotify, <<https://open.spotify.com/episode/6XKbxmmY7wcljLgbD7a5K9?si=kMJco2xyT6CKSKG0i0gxsA>> [accessed 24 June 2025].

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Sharpe, Christina, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Duke University Press, 2016)