

## BOOK REVIEWS

**KIESE LAYMON.** *How To Slowly Kill Yourself and Others in America: Essays* (Chicago: Bolden, 2013). 148 pp., \$15 paper.

Social scientists will most likely categorize writer Kiese Laymon's collection of essays as a literary intervention into masculinity studies in our current era: marked by the (seeming) paradox of black presidency and celebrity on the one hand, and the entrenchment of police power over black boys and men on the other. Scholars of history and literature might situate Laymon in political and literary traditions stretching from turn-of-the-twentieth century "race men" to the work of feminists of color in our time, noting his acknowledgements to Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin, Octavia Butler and Toni Morrison (12).<sup>1</sup> With its Mississippi setting and sensibility, American Studies scholars will likely soon cite it, particularly the essay "Hip-Hop Stole My Southern Black Boy," as an example of the "New Southern Studies," which places the Black South and regional identity at the center of an analysis of national economic, political, creative, and intellectual narratives.<sup>2</sup> *How to Slowly Kill Yourself and Others in America* will surely teach brilliantly in classrooms in all of these fields.

But as his title suggests, Laymon is not writing primarily to "those who are paid to read for a living"—nor even those students who pay tuition to read—but instead those who read "for living," and he writes determinedly against the academic tendency to flatten experience, identity and literature into arid sociological categories and intellectual trajectories. He imagines his essays as musical tracks in the Black American tradition, incorporating multiple voices, echoes, "ad lib, riff, collaboration, and necessary digression," revolving around black audiences' experiences and imagination at the center (13). The result is a set of deeply personal philosophical reflections on black people's responsibility to each other, the nation's responsibility to black citizens, and the reciprocal artistic responsibilities of writers, readers, and teachers.

Laymon began composing the essays at a destructive moment when, he explains, he refused responsibility for behaving dishonestly and inhumanely, "as American monsters and murderers tend to do" (11). He closes the book emotionally transformed, in large part by writing and teaching, and through those painstaking processes recognizing the effects of his actions and ambitions on himself and beloved others. "I don't want to be a murderer anymore," he confesses. "I choose life" (145). The nation has engaged in no such honest accounting, many of the essays

observe. "The Worst of White Folks," for example, contrasts the responsibility accepted and borne by generations of black southern women in the face of "servitude, sexual assault, segregation, poverty, and psychological violence" to the denial of white Americans who not only shirk responsibility for racism, but celebrate themselves for "post-racial" multiculturalism. "There is a price to pay for ducking responsibility, or clinging to the worst of us, for harboring a warped innocence," Laymon writes. "There is an even greater price to pay for ignoring, demeaning, and unfairly burdening those Americans who have disproportionately borne the weight of American irresponsibility for so long. Our grandmothers and great-grandmothers have paid more than their fair share and our nation owes them and their children, and their children's children, a lifetime of healthy choices and second chances. That would be responsible" (32-33).

For Laymon, assuming responsibility requires reckoning honestly with black masculinities, which he does in a series of real and imagined conversations with family members, hip hop artists, comedians, athletes, politicians, and peers. Broadening the spectrum of responsibility involves expanding definitions of violence to include everything from "drones murdering civilians around the world" (107) to the slow violence of "eating," "fucking," "lying," "slanging," "robbing," "gambling" or "shooting" your way "out of sad," which are "just slower, more acceptable ways for desperate folks, and especially paroled black boys in our country, to kill ourselves and others close to us in America" (45). In "Echo: Mychal, Darnell, Kiese, Kai, and Marlon," the participants reflect on their hurtful and healing relationships with intimate others and each other, essentially examining how to conduct oneself with love, honesty, integrity and humanity in the context of dehumanizing institutions and ideological systems (73-83). These systems include professing and publishing, and the writers, editors, readers, and teachers involved. Throughout this collection, Laymon presents writing, reading and teaching as an exchange necessitating work and "moral change" at all turns. From his account of refusing to make substantial changes demanded by an editor ("You Are the Second Person") to his hope that a broad audience "work with the essays" and "write back with brutal imagination, magic, and brilliance" (20), Laymon calls on the subjects, readers, teachers (and reviewers) of his work to take on responsibility for getting better at "being human" (13, 145).

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Hazel Carby, *Race Men*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000)

<sup>2</sup> Examples of "New Directions in Southern Studies," include Zandria Robinson, *This Ain't Chicago: Race, Class, and Regional Identity in*

*the Post-Soul South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014); “Forum: What’s New in Southern Studies, And Why Should We Care?” *Journal of American Studies* 48: 3 (August 2014): 691-733.

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**DWAYNE MACK, ELWOOD D. WATSON, AND MICHELLE MADSEN CAMACHO, EDs. *Mentoring Faculty of Color: Essays on Professional Development and Advancement in Colleges and Universities* (Jefferson, North Carolina: MacFarland and Company, Inc., 2012). 220 pp., \$45.00 paper.**

Looking back at my graduate school years, the most vital mentorship I received came in the form of sometimes brutal, but often measured honesty from a small set of trusted advisors and advanced graduate students. Their guidance was critical to my journey because they talked openly about the obstacles they faced in navigating work/life balance, spoke candidly about dealing with unsupportive colleagues, and relayed freely the challenges they encountered in their attempts to gain legitimacy as academics or scholars-in-training. In short, much like the earnest insight shared by the authors of *Mentoring Faculty of Color: Essays on Professional Development and Advancement in Colleges and Universities*, they avoided clichés and other platitudes—they “kept it real.”

In this timely collection of first-person essays, underrepresented faculty and administrators discuss their personal experiences on the road to achieving tenure. Each author effectively links their own ethnic identities to the broader “how to’s” to achieving the benchmark moments central to their professional development. Indeed, an important strength of the collection is the breadth of issues that they address along the way. Getting tenure is not just about publishing—and this is especially the case for Faculty of Color. Notably, they must also develop effective teaching strategies, deal with disrespectful or discriminatory attitudes by students, colleagues, or administrators, and serve as the “diversity” go-to person for campus and community events.

One of the greatest strengths of this collection is its attention to action and honesty. Judith Liu’s open letter on how to succeed in academia is an excellent example of raw insight that combines strategies for professional success while not losing your soul along the way. In outlining how to avoid the three Ds—depression, disillusionment, and despair—common attributes for academics—she advises to be cognizant