



Creative Intervention

Mentoring is not an Excuse for Bringing in One Negro at a Time¹

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I am sick of the one Negro at a time mentoring model.
Each generation there is a Negro
from Bangalore
from Port au Prince
speaking Tagalog
painting in African American Vernacular English
clicking on digitally coded pages in 1s and 0s
trying to wish away what their grandmother meant when she named them Cielo
hungry to stun them with his pelo malo
reaching beyond their body deemed cave
retching stories that outrun, roll along, and lie very still.

What there is not – is a critical mass
that can recognize in each other
a whole field of operation and action
and decisive difference and continuity

¹ This poem was originally a cultural object to be included for analysis in a research article that appears in this journal issue, co-authored by Chasia Jeffries, Mariel Rowland, and myself. “Pulling Ourselves Together: Looking Towards Black Reparative Theory and Pedagogy in Post-George Floyd Higher Education” (Jeffries et al., 2024) explores the groundworks (a decade plus of collective Black feminist campus activities and capacity building) that undergirded Chasia and Mariel joining the graduate program. As members of the Inaugural (and now defunded and defunct) Black Studies Graduate Cluster in the School of Humanities they have a particularly important role to play in analyzing the material conditions that make their knowledge production possible. We wrote that research article during their preparation for the master’s degree examination milestone based on their concerns about the discontinuation of the Black Studies Graduate Cluster. It was important to me to bequeath a perspectival and embodied history about what activities had created their belonging; had sustained the demand for their presence; and had welcomed and longed for their research agendas. As co-authors, we decided to analyze only a small portion of the poem in the research article and to publish the entirety of it as a standalone creative intervention.

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that can put their shoulders to the plow
to till the whole damn universe
not just one measly dried up row.

On my back I carry a croker sack full of cotton and juju
That you may carry silk or talismans or wampum or feather or honey
That the ancestors who carried flesh and bodies overboard may breathe a breath
Of their prayers answered in your great great great great great grandchildren
I am sick of the one Negro per generation
And while we arrive from San Salvador
and Oakland
and places that used to be Cleveland and Harlem and Johannesburg and Marseilles
places that only exist in the broken hearts of our uncles and cousins
We are ready to till the universe
We are the universe

Explaining the Poem “Mentoring is Not an Excuse for Bringing in One Negro at a Time”: Critical Tools for Teaching Reckoning, Repairing, Reworlding with Poetry

I wrote this poem and shared it at an awards ceremony where my colleagues awarded me the highest award that my campus gives for distinguishing mentoring as a category of leadership. It was a moment of embracing Ama Ata Aidoo’s concept of being a “sister killjoy” (1973) and embodying Sara Ahmed’s concept of “complaint” (2021). My intention was not to bring ill repute or disdain to the labors put forward by my colleagues who spent many months reading my work and advocating on my behalf. I shared a preface that duly thanked everyone who had labored in the nomination process. But after that necessary regard for protocol and expression of collegiality and gratitude, I read this poem to heal myself. My goal was to evoke a much-needed campus-wide conversation about the notion of “critical mass” and “strategic planning.” At no point in the design of this institution was this history of polyglot, multinational, sacred, intentional, multireligious, cis and trans-bodied Blackness supposed to remember itself. Instead, Blackness was supposed to be churned into a product for sale as a “wholesome student experience” to benefit other students. And if Black students were not admitted, retained, graduated, or taught, that was a necessary price to pay. Each new cohort of Black students was supposed to accept the university’s recruitment initiatives as progressive. But these recruitment initiatives were actually the spoils of a war for educational justice that resulted in many unrecorded casualties. Incoming Black students would only hear about the transformative work of student activists that preceded them in fading whispers. To teach the incoming Black Studies Graduate Cluster students required an ethical historiography of the place enabled by inviting the casualties and faded memories to speak, be heard, and to give witness.

Alas, this paradox of what is to be done with embodied Black historical memory has been explored endlessly in Black Arts and Letters. In his play, *The Colored Museum*, dramatist George C. Wolfe (1987) wrestles with this enduring philosophically significant phenomenon by imagining a scene of a slave ship airlines. The play is composed of dramatized museum exhibits come-to-life. The “Git on Board” scene-exhibit features flight attendant Miss Pat who regales theatergoers with the false promise that this emigration scheme is sure to be a leisurely ride into historical obscurity, with an added bonus of dispossession and deracination. Wolfe offers the paradox of whisking away the history of segregation by simply inviting Black people to go away into a future where the present has been achieved without their struggles for justice.

I read my poem because I needed to remind my colleagues and my campus that I am here because generations of people pursued educational justice for themselves and for the entire society. There is no award that I can ever earn that will not belong to those Ancestors. My poem affirmed the ongoing presence of those deemed mere casualties and faded memories. Further, it was a spiritual grounding that reveals the ethical stakes of individualized recognition. Whereas individual recognition is supposed to satisfy the demand for full and unconditional access to higher education, the demand is vast and far more numerous, and is rarely, if ever, singular. There is no individual achievement, then, that will ethically negate the unequivocal right to education for liberation.

Jurist and short story essayist Derrick Bell offers another iteration of concern for embodied Black historical memory. Bell refers to the disposability of memories and space of Black contributions globally in his cautionary fable, “The Space Traders” (1992a). In exchange for Diapora African people leaving, non-African Americans will receive all the resources that they need to have endless energy. What was posed as a *choice* becomes the inevitable willingness to traffic in African American people. Bell writes, “and though there have been periods in which [Black peoples’] striving for full equality seems to have brought them close to their goal, sanctuary remains the more accurate description of black citizenship” (p. 153). Such a contingent citizenship paradoxically secures the *sense* of freedom for everyone else. Freedom (albeit restricted by complexion, history, and ideology) can be imagined, pursued, inhabited without material guarantees and outcomes *as long as* the Black presence signifies inherent, perpetual and deserved unfreedom.

However, in “The Space Traders” and in “The Colored Museum” Black people remember both the dispossession of the past and of the present. Further, in Bell’s story, Black people remember how our contingent citizenship is underwritten with sacrifice, patriotism, and inside deals that only work if Black people agree to be trafficked, debased, and dispossessed. Bell notes that an avaricious craving for an exclusive *sense* of freedom without Black people continues to win the day against whatever Black people demand and fight for. Thus, Bell’s characters debate guile, manipulation, cunning and transactional

ethics, on one hand, and integrity, on the other. While integrity is satisfying to the soul, it rarely guarantees survival. As Black people are hated for staying present *and* for disappearing from historical memory, in this version Bell offers no possibility of repair, reckoning, and reworlding. What is guaranteed, instead, is casualties and whispered rumors about history – which can provide enough tissue to suture together a world organized by this un-blackened *sense* of freedom.

In the same anthology, Bell’s parable “The Afrolantica Awakening” (1992b) reprises three centuries of Diaspora African people’s debates on emigration. Bell’s premise is that an edenic place emerges that can only support the life of Black people. Faced with the choice of moving to a dignity affirming place, Black people initially debate whether or not to abandon the known where they and their ancestors have experienced “being driven to” escape (p. 44) because of “hopes...dashed” (p. 46). Offering a set of truer ethics for repair, reckoning, and reworlding sits awkwardly beside the historical fact of being sold down the river. This collective cross-generational psychological trauma surfaces as trauma. The historical legal theorist Derrick Bell gave his life to teaching generations of lawyers how to use the existing laws to defend and protect Black people. Yet Bell cautions how the purpose-driven history of revolutionary and emancipatory struggles can be repressed, denied, and erased. Without re-staging these debates in successive generations, anyone in coming generations could be socialized into historical forgetting that might pathologize complaints like my own. As one fellow awardee told me in many successive phone calls, that my poem had disparaged the wholesome present by inviting in the haunting of my still not satisfied Ancestors.

South African cultural theorist and poet Koleka Putuma returns to this storied question. Putuma calls the condition of being disappeared from a relationality to history a dangerous “collective amnesia” in her poetry collection of the same name (2017). Putuma cautions that the efforts that constitute a history of self-determination must not be made invisible.

In the past of my own campus, the will to self-determination had extracted demands, had exacted leverage, and had drawn great condemnation by literally turning tables over and sitting in. Such fierce Black actions expressed principles that undergird reckoning, repair, remediation, and deep social change that is more than worldmaking, it conjures what I have come to call a *world worthy of us*. And yet every time Black protest breaches norms and is deemed an uncouth and undignified rabble there is the risk of being separated from the venerable historical memory of potent Ancestors.

As a person walking in dignity with Ancestors and the histories they made, this poem enabled me to explore the impact of this insisting on teaching about the origins of reckoning, repair, and remediation from a wholly different episteme. This poem allowed me to refute the demand that we ought to apologize for the sin of our Black presence decades before the police murdered Mr. George Floyd. It allowed me to cope with witnessing the numerous demands that Black administrators apologize for not being able to contain and

pacify the return of Ancestral ambitions and assertions. This poem allowed me offer salve to students being unduly influenced and threatened and cursed at for protesting. These words served as a *nyabinghi* (Rastafari ceremony of reasoning and celebration to share historical memory) chant to bring the Holy into a setting of profane individualism and historical forgetting. This poem reminded me that my disagreeable Blackness could never be needy, deserving, grateful, or neat enough. This poem demanded that we do even more to repair such a place until the reparations are finally registered as a debt, paid in full.

Because the world is made up of “good kills,” and “legitimate homicide,” and “use of force,” and “no human involved,” all euphemisms for willful, wanton, and unprovoked collective and systematic violence with *sjamboks*,² hands, truncheons, and feet in steel-toed boots, this world is in desperate need of something called repair, reckoning and reworlding. The dominant understanding of being in this world denies the persistence of institutionalized animus and racial terror. At the very least in this era marred by book bans and the closing of schools and a judiciary that is not able to defend bodily integrity and the basic right to fair employment and educational access, I and my poem aim to carry the cultures of rebellion with me into the spaces of acknowledgement and reward.

It would have been far easier to make nice and say thank you as if there are others who are not actively denied access to the full enhancement of their gifts and possibilities. But I stand on other people’s shoulders and those people accompany me. I survive and thank the Ancestors far more than any institution. If I speak of Ancestors who have “died and those yet to be born,” I signal an “unbroken community of poets” that tarry with and translate across realms of meaning making and existence (Molebatsi, 2023, p. 72, 71) I hope that the students of the future will welcome their Ancestors into every room they enter, as well, so they can help us imagine the scope of reckoning, repair, and reworlding.

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² Sjamboks are leather whips designed as cattle prods that came to international notoriety during apartheid in South Africa, as the weapon of choice used by police and military. Their use indicated the virulence and willingness to use face-to-face violence to subdue African persons during nonviolent protests, civil disobedience, or simply groups of people attempting to secure freedom to assemble, speak freely in the public sphere, the right to petition the government, and the right to self-defense.

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