



Dispatch

Pollen Grains and Seeds: Cultivating a Blackly Life in University Spaces

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A Blackly life, as defined by Justin Coles (2024), is limitless and free. It is not anti-white but rather pro-Black. It represents a life of possibility. However, Black students in the academy are routinely exposed to forces that destroy: anti-Black racism, neoliberalism, racial capitalism and other intersecting forms of systemic oppression that reduce narratives of Black peoples to deficiency.

Using Charmaine Lurch's wirework *Pollen Grains and Seeds* as a metaphor to foster critical inquiry, this essay explores Black students' educational experiences within the social and physical environment of the university. Synthesizing themes of identity, movement, and space it examines the complex relationships between nature, people, institutions and systems, bridging Black Studies theory with real life experiences.

Informed by Black scholars who address the social, spatial, artistic and identity dimensions of Black life within and beyond educational spaces, this essay serves to deepen our understandings of the connections between Black identities, Black geographies, and movement. It is an example of how art, meaning making, texts, and stories can sew connections between academic theories of racialization, Blackness and the education of Black students to create classrooms of possibility for Black learners by disrupting the old and imagining the new.

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Figure 1. Charmaine Lurch. (2023). *Pollinating Landscapes* [Iron wire and multi-coloured cable wire, 3.7m x 2.4m]. Wildseed Centre for Art & Activism, Toronto, Ont. (Courtesy Gesilayefa Azorbo)

Introduction

I didn't know I was Black until I was four years old. I didn't know I was oppressed until I went to school in Canada. It is a site of white settler domination. They say your pain becomes your purpose. I've come to this writing moved by my discontent. That is, anti-Black racism in the academy, in the street, and in the public education system is painful. Indeed, it has made

Black communities sick and is a barrier to living a Blackly life as defined by Justine Coles (2024). That is, a life that is limitless and free.

A Blackly life is not anti-white. It is pro Black. A Blackly life names whiteness and white supremacy, Black racialization and intersecting forms of systemic oppression that reduce narratives of Black people to deficiency. At the same time, it re-orient us to freedom mobilized by visions of new Black spaces and landscapes (Coles, 2024). It both unsettles the reproduction of power structures that govern our social, political, economic and cultural interests, and orients us towards “hope and desire within the context of total domination” (McKittrick, 2015, p. 2). A Blackly life is a human life. It is an orientation towards humanness and possibility. What insights can a Blackly life offer to the rest of the world?

This essay draws on the wirework *Pollen Grains and Seeds* by Charmaine Lurch, a gifted and internationally renowned Black artist who is also my sister. It critically explores human ecology in the context of Black students’ educational experiences within the social and physical environment of the Canadian university. The essay synthesizes themes of movement, identity and space, bridging Black Studies theory with real life student experiences. It reflects on the radical relational energies Black students call upon, largely in community, to navigate and thrive within the confines of the academy.

Ultimately this essay is a critical exploration of relationships between nature, people, institutions and systems. Informed predominantly by Black scholars who address the social, spatial, artistic and identity dimension of Black lives, it demonstrates how art can be used as a pedagogy that resists anti-Black racism and advances Black radical thought.

Position

I am deeply connected to this work. I have skin in the game: I am the mother of two little boys in little Black bodies. I am also an able-bodied, Black, female. I am a movement expert, that is, a physiotherapist, an educator, and a learner.

Radical Spaces of Possibility

bell hooks (1994) once said “the classroom remains the most radical space of possibility in the academy” (p. 12). Radical is: a change from the usual; of or relating to a root; a deviation from the status quo. The concept of radical is rooted in something that is not the dominant narrative. It is the antithesis of what Amiri Baraka famously referred to as “the changing same” (Mackey, 1978). Space can be defined by human behaviour and the interconnectedness of social relations (Harvey, 2006). Possibility is that-which- does-not-exist. YET.

In my experience, a radical space of possibility is one that is alive. A liberatory space is one that challenges entrenched norms and provides opportunities for learners to fulfill their potential. Classrooms like these are messy and bursting with ideas. These spaces can change the fundamental nature of our existence. These spaces are dynamic. They move.

Theoretical Foundations

I engage critical theory in this paper as an approach to challenge and make visible power structures and ideologies meant to limit and constrain. The conceptual framework is informed by the thinking routine “Unveiling Stories” by Project Zero (2022) at Harvard’s Graduate School of Education which asks: What’s the story? What is the human story? What is the world story? What is the new story? What is the untold story? Of note, there are no definitive answers to these questions here, just ideas as I seek to draw relationships between theory, texts, people and the world. Key theorists in this work, and in this Canadian context, are Hampton, Coles, Mendes and colleagues, McKittrick and James, amongst other noted scholars.

Black scholarship should not “spend time on proving oppression” (Williams, 2023, p. 103). There is already a large body of scholarship that affirms Black learners experience dehumanizing treatment within the Eurocentric, bourgeois, neoliberal, patriarchal confines of school in general and university in particular. Black students are marginalized and alienated, treated as property, erased, and viewed as sites of deficiency (Coles, 2024; Hampton, 2020, 2023; Howard & James, 2019; Mendes et al., 2022). Antithetical to these dehumanizing approaches to Black students are educational environments that value Black learners. These are sites of possibility and liberation. These are environments that are limitless and free. These are Blackly environments.

Charmaine Lurch’s *Pollen Grains and Seeds*

Mounted to the east facing wall of Wildseed Centre is Lurch’s installation of *Pollen Grains and Seeds*. The Wildseed Centre, inspired by Octavia Butler’s novel about two immortal Africans with superhuman powers, is the site of Black Lives Matter in Tkaronto (Toronto) and serves to grow radical Black experimentation and artistry.

There are 82 pollen grains and seeds that when mounted on the wall span 3.7m x 2.4m. They take up space. They are installed 2m above the ground. One needs to look skyward to see them. The individual pollen grains and seeds are not equidistant from each other. It is as though they have been scattered, dispersed. Shadows move across the work as the sun moves across the sky and

in this way each pollen grain and seed are influenced by its neighbors. As the light shifts, the structures transform, as does the viewer's perspective.

Each pollen grain and seed are unique. They are all perfectly imperfect. The armature is made from iron wire that is wrapped, weaved, bent. Multi-coloured cable wire is layered onto the armature closing down and opening up spaces within each sculpture. When juxtaposed against the white wall, and against each other, the colours become even more vibrant – and there it is! We are bathed in colours of Mother Earth.

These sculptures are produced with care. They are grown by many. Community members, passersby, friends, family, artists, those from all walks of life volunteer to create the pollen grains and seeds. It is a collective human endeavor. The handwork, the movement of fingers old and young coalesce to hug, hold, push, pull these structures into being. It is as though a birth is occurring. Not all sculptures come out unscathed. Bread is broken. The shapes are transformed. Having conversations, sitting together, sharing, learning, understanding – this is community. This is education. Might this be a classroom that is a radical space of possibility?

Pollen grains and seeds are a human story. They are a way to think about Black students in the academy.



Figure 2. Charmaine Lurch. (2023). *Pollinating Landscapes* [Iron wire and multi-coloured cable wire, 3.7m x 2.4m]. Wildseed Centre for Art & Activism, Toronto, Ont. (Courtesy K. M. Augustine)

Identity Formation: A Story of Ecology

One of the most consequential events in the earth's history was the colonization of land by plants over 370 million years ago (Baroux & Grossniklaus, 2019). Early land plants underwent developmental, structural and physiological changes over time to accommodate the challenges of desiccation, heat, UV radiation damage, nutrition absorption and allocation (Kapoor et al., 2023). This resulted in the development of seed plants. Pollen grains, transmitted by wind, air, water and animal, contain the sperm required for seed plant fertilization. Fertilization results in the development of the plant embryo, food stores, and a protective layer, the seed coat. Together these become the seed (Baroux & Grossniklaus, 2019). Seeds allow embryos to withstand hostile environments. They can remain dormant for centuries until the environment is optimal. Because the sperm and egg mature in an enclosed environment, they are not free. Their potential is bound within the casing. Only when the environmental cues related to survival are right, do they emerge.

There is not just one variety of pollen grains and seeds. They are multitudinous. Humans, like seeds, are influenced by society, culture, opportunities, community and experiences. Our experiences are not simply individual, but rooted in social, political, and economic systems that impact our growth potential. We are shaped by our stories and histories. As are institutions. While our identities are fertilized by the stories we disperse about ourselves, these identities are also informed by the stories people tell about us. The identities of Black students, like pollen grains and seeds, are routinely exposed to forces that destroy: anti-Black racism, neoliberalism and racial capitalism are enacted ideologies that institutions and systems are highly invested in maintaining (Walcott, 2018). We are both a source of income and viewed as problematic. The latter impacts our educational outcomes. We are more likely to be underestimated, more harshly punished, have fewer opportunities, drop out and come home not wanting to be Black (Johnson, 2013). As a result, we are continually adapting to survive. But surviving is not thriving. Thriving is a life that is limitless and free. It is full. Unlike white supremacy which insists on monocropping, a singular dominant way forward, a Blackly life is one of human abundance that can take root and grow. So, while there exist dominant narratives that normalize anti-Blackness, a Blackly life makes possible the supplanting of negative stories with new stories.

Movement as Freedom

Movement is central to a classroom that is a radical space of possibility as it counterbalances restriction (de b'Berl et al., 2014). At the university and in the world at large, Black students experience "relative freedom within unfreedom" (Sharpe, 2010, p. 83). We represent possibility, alterity, resilience, growth, and legacy. Like seeds, our movement can be hindered by trauma or pathogens.

Whether physical or metaphorical, movement disrupts. Broadly interpreted, the word movement means: to change position or have this changed; a change or development; a group of people working together to advance their ideas. Here movement can be “re-imagined as solidarity” (Mendes et al., 2022, p. 329).

The phenomenon of movement is based on an object occupying different positions in space at various times. If an object is something mental or physical toward which thought, feeling, or action is directed, surely, then, we can treat ideas, feelings, experiences, relationships as embodied reality. Our ideas shift, our identities change, our perspectives move. Our relationships are in constant motion. Galton (2007) defines a position as where someone or something is in space at a certain time. I think of position in terms of hierarchy. Who gets what and who is deciding? While the west views time as linear, contrary to some Indigenous knowledges, McKittrick (2007) and Williams (2023) remind us that history is not. Our past becomes our present, becomes our future becomes our past. In many Indigenous societies, this is seven generation thinking. Like the cyclical nature of time and history, some seeds, like some Black students exist on a continuum. We reach into the past and into the future engaging with ancestors and lineages, resting, sprouting, growing, resting again. We are alive and always have been. Marxist geographer David Harvey (2006) describes space as absolute, relative or relational. He posits that relational space is socially made and is influenced by shifting internal and external factors. In terms of education, relational space exists whenever learners believe the classroom is “their classroom, as a space that only exists through their specific combination of social and spatial relations” (Kesteloot et al., 2009, p. 115).

Pollen grains and seeds embody ideas of movement, of life-giving connections. Inside there is life ready to emerge. They are discrete units of possibility that are in relation with each other. They do intermingle, integrate information, adapt and relate *if* the environment enables them to do so. For Black students this occurs in spaces working in solidarity with Black communities. Black mentors, teachers, communities are ideal environments for germination. This is where seeds can burst open and spring to life, transitioning from dormancy to wakefulness. This transformation challenges the static representations of Black students I alluded to above. I long for more sites of fertile ground.

Dynamic relationships give us agency to co-create our futures. There is not just one way to freedom but rather multiple routes that are only passable if we are in relation with one another. This requires intersecting with other sources of life in the environment that are in motion: the sun, water, land, seeds, people. Indeed, our neurons, our hearts, our ideas, our relationships, our professions, our institutions, our systems are in perpetual motion. It’s time we started thinking about movement as something more than just bodily movement. Whether physical or meta-physical, movement is key to the freedom-seeking practices of Black students. We can move individually, together, and then

allow our movements to overlap. Pollen grains and seeds, like Black students and communities, are healthier when we intermingle. Biodiversity is good! This creates new possibilities of solidarity, new relationships and new ways to move in the world.



Figure 3. Charmaine Lurch. (2021). *Connectivity (detail)* [Iron & multi-coloured cable wire, approximately 3.7m x 0.1m]. DuEast, Toronto, Ont. (Courtesy Charmaine Lurch)

Space and Reclaiming Space

There are at least 298,00 species of plants that inhabit the world (Wiens, 2023). There is but one human species. They, we, are in peril, though there is a space that is safe for seeds. It is otherworldly. The Svalbard Global Seed Vault located in Norway is one location that provides storage for many of the world's seeds. The seeds are secluded, segregated, confined, surveilled, frozen, just like Black students on university campuses. Black students have had to continually adapt under the gaze of whiteness and white supremacy. Black students are *excellent* at working hard in the face of systemic inequity, though the soil can be toxic, infested with dehumanizing ideologies in neoliberal spaces. Despite this, seeds do grow. They disrupt. They burst open and take root. They transform landscapes.

Pollen grains and seeds, like Black students in white-majority universities and cultures, take up physical spaces and meta-physical spaces, but are subject

to decay and destruction. We challenge the erasure of our presence intentionally or unwittingly. I am often reminded that my Black peers and I put ourselves at great personal risk in educational spaces every day. We are on public display, similar to an art exhibit. Black radical imagination also allows us to find underground spaces and reclaim earthly spaces (Nxumalo & ross, 2019). Despite toxic environments we do still grow. Some recognize Black students as important to educational spaces while others don't. In relation to Canada, Walcott (2018) clearly states "there is not one institution in this nation that takes as foundational that Black people are a necessary element of that which we might make a more hopeful future" (p. 87). And at the same time Khalili (2024) reminds us "to grow is to insist on life."

In a Black oriented world, our spaces are harmoniously intertwined with each other, and with all living things. Here is where we move and curate space at the same time. These spaces are where we learn with each other, not just about each other. This learning is rooted in the lived experiences and needs of community. There is freedom in reclaiming space and re-imagining spaces that are different than Eurocentric ones that homogenize, omit and control (Mendes et al., 2022). Black spaces are fluid, unconstrained, where we are not dormant, but very much awake. Our presence is significant. Like the seed that has sprouted, or the pollen grain to the bee, we seemingly draw attention when we trouble spaces and systems, like the education system, or racialized geopolitical, neoliberal capitalist systems. Yet troubling transforms. It builds new worlds out of old worlds and human worlds that embody liberation and life.

Conclusion

The relationship between identity, movement, space and art serves to connect academic theories of racialization, Blackness and education to Black students in the Canadian academy. One function of Charmaine Lurch's wirework *Pollen Grains and Seeds* is to deepen our understandings of academic discourse, making art a pedagogical tool to advance radical Black thought and create classrooms of possibility for Black learners by disrupting the old and imagining the new. Perhaps this goes against the *grain* – but wouldn't that be radical?

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