

PATHWAYS AND PASSAGES

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ABSTRACT/ING

Here is creating an autobiography of my politics –
the way they were shaped and reshaped and shaped again,
by my pieces my parts my positions
plural and intersectional,
contradictory and aligned
in pursuit of me and protective of my kin/d (Crenshaw, 1995).
i am navigating my own story¹
in the only way i know how;
lifting my voice and singing,
to harmonize with liberation
lift my knowledges into this work.
Running through and against the stories
i've been told about myself,
countering the narratives
written about me
without me (Dixson & Rousseau, 2005; Ladson-Billings, 2016).

i'm telling stories through metaphors
metaphors through parables
learned from my preacher daddy
who learned from his preacher daddy;
learned from my yes-imagination mommy
who learned from her preacher daddy.
He dropped story nuggets into his middle girl's ear
that she passed on to me:
stories of lynchings in the front yard
and sharecropping in the back
stories of fear and opportunity
stories of love (because and) in spite of hate
stories to make sense of the knowledge
we don't belong anywhere
no matter how far we move:
a dissonance of displacement (Brayboy, 2013)
playing liminality limbo and trying not to fall.

My granddaddies read more than the Bible
and preached more than its gospel –

their storytelling is in my DNA;
it Zooms through me when i come off mute,
telling all my stories
undressing my lived experiences
subjecting selves to analysis (Dixson & Rousseau, 2005)
in the name of scholarly work.
i'm now in
countermigration of my ancestors –
moving
through the south to this great white north
with a versed voice
because “it is a vital necessity for our existence”
and the source of my power (Lorde, 1984, p. 24).
Because an autobiography is a self-story,
and here is how i know self.

A YEAR OF FIRSTS

That year, first grade, i started biting my nails
when i had loved growing them out.
That year, nails were bitten and raw.
That year, i knew anxious.

That year, i learned what Black was:
it was not only a construct, but a conflict
an “ongoing remembering” (Dumas, 2018, p.30),
an ever-reproducing tension
i was too confused to understand
too broken to confront.

It was cold, distant eyes from my teacher,
seeing in them she was without empathy
without sympathy
without humanizing relations (Dancy et al., 2018)
let alone first grade care.

It was drilling reading at home
speeding through the Victory Drill Book
laughing while my times got better and better
reading rows of words
and never competing in the reading races
when i got to school.

It was parent-teacher conferences about my anxiety
that took strange turns, like
“Stop teaching her at home,”
from my teacher
as though a slower-learning me

would have satisfied her.

It was knowing all the answers,
and none of the solutions,
and being served by neither –
too smart to learn (Leonardo & Broderick, 2011)
and too Black to teach.

It was yellow cards under my name,
screaming “Hullabaloo” when i wasn’t talking.
Black was a seat lined with suffering (Dumas, 2018)
a briared and burred Blackness
in the outfield at recess
the stretch of playground asphalt between me,
and everyone else.
No one met me halfway.

That year, i learned what smart won’t get you
learned that Christian school doesn’t mean Christian values
learned that my skin would always trump my brain
learned that neat clothes and hair won’t shift a mind
learned that Black has shades that matter; white has shades that don’t.
But i can’t remember any schoolwork,
no lessons besides these
learned at the round table i squeezed up to
reading books to myself no one else could read yet
with the taste of my own nail beds
bitter in my mouth.

WHAT THEY SAID (I THINK)

If nothing else, you were gonna think.
In that lady’s class,
she was gonna assign mad reading,
she was gonna hold you to doing it,
she was gonna tell you to annotate,
and she was gonna make you think.

Sometimes she’d correct your grammar
like the way you talk wasn’t good enough (Baker-Bell, 2013)
but sometimes she’d also talk that way
and you might feel better
or you might think she was always worried
about all the wrong things
like tests and grades and commas, but
also, sometimes worried about you.
She said she had to be in our community



she was only teaching Black kids;
she was a teacher to discuss words
and she would always make you talk about them:
like how they work, and what they mean
why you chose that word instead of another
even when the word was a cuss word.

She would ask you questions all the time,
like “How do you know?”
or “Why do you think that?”
and make you wonder if you were right,
because she’d ask them even when you were right,
because she wanted you to know
what you didn’t know
and why what you did know
was right.
It was like she thought we had something
to offer the group, like everyone was useful
like our lives were literacies (Coles, 2019)
and not just tryna be lit.
I mean, she was cool or whatever.
Kinda weird, usually bald-headed, always in purple
and always tryna make you think.

She wanted you to feel special (Rólon-Dow & Davison, 2021),
and like you were learning something;
like her classroom was a space
inside the school that she made all hers
and somehow yours, too (Warren & Coles, 2020).
And even though you were always reading
and proving you read and understood something
and answering questions that made you think,
sometimes it felt like you were getting something
finding something new in the book
or about yourself (Baker-Bell, 2013)
or about how you were tryna live
in your own skin.

In AP Lit, all seniors, she’d call it AP Life, re-
minding everybody in the room
that life’s gon get real in the next few months.
Reminding us that graduation was a beginning
and that the struggle is real for everyone
but it can be real endless for us (Tuck & Gorlewski, 2016; Tyson, 2003);
that our lives were permanently marked
by an inescapable racism (Love, 2016),



Sharpied with anti-Blackness,
 but also freshly tattooed with
 the care and criticality of our classrooms.
 We were going to need to make choices
 but also dream some liberation dreams (Dumas & ross, 2016)
 make some plans and plan to make it
 and feel a little prepared for success (Rólon-Dow & Davison, 2020)
 and even a little scared was okay
 and absolutely, without a doubt,
 we were gonna have to think.

TO 801, ON THE FIRST DAY OF CLASS OR, A LIBERATORY FANTASY

Prepare: to give love in the learning
 To show health in your hearing
 To post bravery on bulletin boards
 To draw dreams from your data
 Be ready to be surprised.

Assume:
 endemic anti-Blackness (Dumas & ross, 2016)
 you are the glitch, not racism (Busey & Dowie-Chin, 2021).
 You have work to do here,
 assume it will be tough.

Position yourself as the gate-keeper ~~keeper~~ opener
 Your students as key-holders, space-takers, time-travelers (Tuck & Gorlewski, 2016)
 Yourself as a learner, a novice, a mirror, a means
 Your classroom as a hope exchange, a knowledge drop
 A portal to a new kind of space – beyond safe, beyond brave
 Position your pedagogy to transform (Rólon-Dow & Davison, 2021).

Wonder every day if you are ready
 Every night if you're successful
 Wonder if your tears are shame or sorrow
 Wonder if your hugs are pity or protection
 Pity yourself instead.

Know this:
 Black bodies are fragile and fierce
 are hated and held
 are worlds and weary
 are knowable and new
 are precious and prodded (Dumas, 2018)
 fungible/indisposable

product/process
 Write lesson plans that hold Black minds as standards
 Black thought as philosophy
 Black nations as empires
 Ask them how they govern
 how they live
 how they move
 They are walking literacies, embodied texts (Coles, 2019)
 legacies of fugitive funds
 encyclopedic grasps of this world
 speculations on the next
 Their practices span beyond definitions, beyond grammars
 Read them as the canon, scribed and reinscribed
 Shape your practice in service of sustenance
 Counter your stories with theirs and reread
 Annotate their lives in conversation with books

Hear me when i tell you:
 Nothing about us is broken
 We are worlds folding up to freedom.

NOTES

1. I use the lowercase i in personal and artistic communications; this is both intentional and purposeful.

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