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Ataraxia¹ & Placemaking BlackMothering in the academy

Julia Lynch and Monisha Atkinson

This poetic writing calls in the Ancestral mothers (female truth sayers/storytellers) that allow passage of a writing performance that tells of how BlackMothering cultivates a way to resist grief within the academy to access peace and joy. This piece speaks to how BlackMother-Scholars use peace and place as a fugitive praxis of resistance that provides a network of navigation for others and themselves in a place that has worked to exclude a Black women's identity as a mother, a Black women's intellectualism, and Black women's teachings. We offer a Black spiritual call-and-response aesthetic to continuously engage ourselves, fully in our work, while also helping our readers become one with feeling, emotionality, and reckoning that seeks to use text as a transformational act to justice. An invitation to be evoked.

Call

As BlackMothers in the academy, we have made attempts to locate ourselves on a campus dominated by Westernized teaching, knowledge, research, and the gaze of whiteness during our first few years as faculty. We have sorted through thoughts about our identity as it relates to our location on a campus constructed by our people but not for our people. It was a struggle, and our hearts grew heavy with grief. In our search for belonging, we thought deeply about the labour of Black folks, and then we remembered the labour of the Black folks who built many of the institutions where we were working. Sifting through the gaze in search of a safe haven, we thought that somehow our being mothers would create a common thread, at least among our white counterparts. We thought that our mothering commonality as part of our Black identity would position us to seem less threatening. To be sure, being a mother, and then a Black mother would offer some sense of relief for our desolate spirits. Instead, what we discovered in the sorting and sifting was the way the academy viewed our mothering as a sign of ineffectiveness, illness, and a production-line malfunction. We often felt that our social class didn't matter within the academy; as Black mothers, we still faced implicit and explicit biases. In what manner was the exchange of money equivalent to labour, the laborious conditions, and the dehumanizing effects of working within an organization that constituted such? Our thoughts and the labour of being Black and a mother, the expectations of motherhood that society places, and the exclusion of mothering in an institution that holds true to their capitalistic governance. Mothers expect to uphold

an institution with their labour while neglecting their home, mental health, and sense of self. There are multiplied layers of stereotypes that a Black woman mother continuously reckons with trying to prove her capabilities, intellect, and worthiness of place in the academy.

As we call in our Ancestral mothers (female truth sayers/storytellers) who allow passage of a writing performance, we also tread along the same path as our theoretical scholars who help us to conceptualize *BlackMothering* Scholarship (BMS), drawing closely from mothering (Lorde 2007; Walker 2004), motherscholars (DePouw 2017; Matias 2011), and ParentCrit (Matais and Bitz, 2021) that are rooted in love and justice. With much respect to this body of literature, our work is situated within the same Mothering Diaspora, locating us specifically within the US Black Rural South, which helps posit our *BlackMothering* parallel to the ways our location, in previously colonized states, have situated us in the US Rural Black South. It is here we (re)member rural to mean the ways Blacks were and still are isolated and excluded, without access to freedom, and therefore excluded from the freedom that education brings. This very distinct niche helps us to further conceptualize how *BlackMothering* is posited and how it is interculturally dependent on community for the preservation of life. This project draws upon BMS as a critical theoretical framework to fully capture the historical and contemporary practices of *BlackMothering* that attend to the needs of their family and community. BMS helps frame the beliefs, practices, attitudes, knowledge, and behaviors of mothering (regardless of gender or parental familial considerations) that Blacks take up as a way of cultural sustainability. This framework also acknowledges how *BlackMothering* as scholars is extended outside of academia to fully encapsulate the ways Black mothers use their communal and cultural intuition as knowledge to read, understand, and engage in the world. We see this emerging theoretical framework in five specific areas: protection, care, spirituality, mobility, and socio-political awareness. As Black faculty researchers, this theoretical framework was used to help posit our own identities along with how we see ourselves engaging in critical teaching pedagogy. Therefore, in this (re)membrance, we draw our readers also into (re)establishing how US Black rural education is also defined within the US Black South and the implications for how colonialism pervades our educational systems, the ways Blacks continuously suffer because of the colonial project persistence, and how colonialism extends post-colonial as rurality.

Since our early days as students and employees at a Western-dominated university, we were plagued with the persistent odor of imposter syndrome. On campus, instructional and research activities, as well as recruiting practices, all contribute to an environment that reeks of colonialism. A scent of melancholy permeates the air whenever the thought of how Black folks were banned from attending and working on a campus our Ancestors built. Due to the historical brutality of white hegemony and white supremacy, the vivid images of their arduous labour are stamped inside our memories, despite the absence of

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documentation. As a result, we navigate this space, ensuring that our Black identity is no longer overshadowed by imposter syndrome or the status quo.

Response

On Black & Inclusion

The days went by like a picture of Fall...
then Winter...then Spring.
in a timestamp and I
 wondered
about what lies over there.
From sun up to sun down, I get up
get dressed
and go to work
Building
brick by brick...for others-
I went over there one day and touched the wonderings I'd painted in my head
of the building and the bricks,
It almost made me sick-
To think,
again
From sun up to sun down, I get up
Get dressed
And go to work
 Building...
Cause what is affirmative action?
The performativity of inclusion
Is all but an illusion
A mythical third space of delusion
That's why I get sick there
Sick with grief
Sick with pain
Sick with anguish

The next time I go over there, i'll be sure to build an altar
A place of cool & calm
A space where i/I belong
A place and space for my people
 Placemaking...

Call

Where do Black woman identity, Black woman intellectualism, and Black wom-an knowledge belong in a white colonial space? A space that only wants my labour and not my Black*Mother* scholarship? A space where the Black woman's effectiveness is measured by invisible lines of production-metrics that we are

never privy to seeing. Black familial relationships create networked communities where often the title “mother,” “aunt,” or “sista” is used to describe a Black woman whose characteristics and roles supersede the formal relational position. In other words, although a formal mother, aunt, or sister may exist, the family may rely on villagers to also stand as such. *BlackMothers* work tirelessly for their community and often take on other children as their own.

Is our labour recognized in these white colonial places, but the instruments we use to express our identification as *BlackMother* scholars, our intellectualism, and our expertise are not? Does the cord of our Ancestral village elicit for white colonizers the perilous vocalizations of dehumanization, anti-Blackness, and enslavement? What is it about the production norms of white colonialism that systemically ensure that Black familial melodies such as “mother,” “aunt,” and “sista” are never even considered? Is it the rhythm of the community that evokes fear in the heart of the white colonizer? When in harmony with our community, the melodies we sang become a hymn of togetherness and reverence. Our positionality as “mother,” “auntie” or “sista” takes joy in knowing we are each other’s sanctuary, just as the musical discourse is. Any deficit ideologies are muted by the resonance of our Black woman identity, Black woman intellectualism, and Black woman knowledge, and the uniqueness of my community is amplified.

Response

On *BlackMother-Scholas*

Looking out at daybreak this morning
i woke up
to the stillness peace brings
i woke up
To the smell of fresh cut grass
And butterfly wings (they visit me often)

i whisper a word of prayer to strengthen my soul
Knowing what the workday could hold

The acrobatic play in my brain
Got me working,
Got me sweating,
Got me labouring
long hours
Trying to decide on how to prioritize
Got me competing for the Gold

Lifting my head from my prayer I breathe deep

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Exhaling grief
I know what they think of me
A *BlackMother*
I know what I know us to be
A *BlackMother* of the universe
Humanity

I know they take my love for humanity
And use it against me
Work me till the sun goes down
Got me wearing aprons
Cleaning up the filth
Got me going the extra mile
Faking smiles
All the while
Hurting, grieving
Got me doing what others won't-

like breastfeeding the others
BlackMothers

They love to hate us
Rape us
Use us

We spend long hours in labour
We spend long hours laboring
We spend long hours birthing

To not even be considered the owner
Stolen intellect
Stolen labour
Stolen property

Alter Call

We call on our other *BlackMother* scholars to help us make a place in the space that we occupy. A misogynist place of patriarchy that wasn't ever meant to include us. *BlackMothering* is resistance. It is the strong understanding of Black knowledge, Black intellect, and Black familial that understands the ways of colonialism yet creates a fugitive praxis of dwelling that prevents spirit murdering. Working in an uninvited place, yet not pulling up to a table forcing inclusion, however engaging in placemaking. We use each other as guided navigation to access success without forsaking who we are.

Black

Julia Lynch and Monisha Atkinson

women
and mothers-
Whole...*selah*

We use our mothering as a symbolic underground railroad compass that draws in others to help facilitate the journey through academia. We use our scholarship to help advance our communities, providing advocacy for parents and students in ways that reduce the access gap to higher education. As Black-Mother Scholars, our community remains within us, as we create a place within the academy for those who trail behind us. We use our mothering of others, to create an atmosphere of a sustained networking community that doesn't have to fight against the oppressive structures of higher education. There is a fugitivity of BlackMothering that resists the divide and conquer mechanisms that seek to unarm united power.

Trickle
Trickle
Drip
Drop

Trickle
Trickle
We'll neva stop

Neva cut off our feet
Our hands
Our noses
No- every piece of our body
goes

In-to victory-

Pouring our BlackMothering in-to others
So that our Ancestors' sufferings
were not in vain
The blood *still* works-
Amen.

Biography

Julia Lynch is a Visiting Assistant professor at the University of North Carolina Wilmington who earned her Ed.D. in Curriculum and Instruction from the

University of North Carolina Wilmington, her MAEd in Reading Education, and her BS in Elementary Education from East Carolina University. As a Black public educator, Julia's tenure was focused primarily on under-resourced rural schools that served Black and brown communities. There, she was able to become a teacher leader in her district, building critical communities around conversations of culturally sustaining practices for the advancement of Black and brown student success.

Julia's interests are guided by a focus on the identity of Black women teachers and students, and their lived experiences across their educational experiences. Generally speaking, her scholarship explores teacher identity and pedagogical practices within rural education contexts. She operates primarily from a Black feminist epistemology with a critical sociocultural framework to engage in critical qualitative research that promotes equity and social justice in rural education teaching and learning. Using culturally sustaining pedagogy as a foundation, Julia's teaching/scholarship allows students to begin to construct, perform, and assess their own knowledge as they engage in critical reflection that challenges them to (re)imagine equitable teaching that may counter their cultural identity and interrogate race and racism. Reconciled cultural identity creates a more liberatory teaching practice that is inclusive of academic freedom for teachers and students. A Black poet scholar, she engages in critical qualitative research that attempts to center the lives and experiences of other Black scholars while also disrupting normative research that doesn't honor the authenticity of the researcher or culturally sustain the community of participants.

Monisha Atkinson obtained her Doctor of Education degree in Curriculum and Instruction from the University of North Carolina Wilmington. She also has a Master of Arts in Adult Education and Training from the University of Phoenix and a Bachelor of Science in Family and Community Services from East Carolina University. As a Black woman educator, Monisha serves as a courageous champion for Black and brown students, who have historically been marginalized due to a disparity in opportunities. Monisha's major focus as a Black woman educator has centered attention on implementing culturally affirming pedagogy and fostering linguistic justice in learning environments.

Dr. Atkinson's research interests revolve around cultivating a feeling of belonging among Black students in educational settings and promoting linguistic justice. Her schooling as a former student in the Not Yet united states school system has informed her study of linguistic justice. She conducts critical qualitative research focusing on disrupting anti-Blackness in education by drawing on a Black-Crit epistemology and critical sociocultural framework. Monisha's teaching and scholarship are grounded in culturally affirming pedagogy, encouraging students to engage in critical reflection that pushes them to challenge normative instructional practices.

Notes

1. Here we are overamplifying the ways that practicing Black *Mothering* creates a state of uninterrupted peace and calmness.

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