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Dear Abolition For Uncle Ralph

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Article abstract

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Dear Abolition: For Uncle Ralph

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Abstract

In the wake of her uncle's 2021 death from COVID-19 in a Michigan prison, Danielle Purifoy reflects on what his life and art taught her about abolition, and what kind of place could have given him a different life...and death.

Keywords

abolition, incarceration, imagination, speculative fiction, art



Ralph Pierre Purifoy, 1950-2021. Collage by Ralph Purifoy. Photo courtesy of the author.

Dear Abolition,

I caught a glimpse of you at my uncle's memorial in 2022. There, in a collage of photos he sent from prison across 42 years, I could see you reflected in the places he wanted to be, far away from Saginaw, Michigan—a place named by the Ojibwe people that I read means “at the outlet” or “to flow out.” Uncle Ralph used to send us copies of his face placed on a range of landscapes, sometimes on different bodies, sometimes in the middle of the many family photos he missed. He meant to be funny, but I didn't realize until that day that you were there, too.

Every time he projected himself outside of that space, he was practicing with you. Practicing for a life that could never be sentenced, practicing life where he was not disposable. In this practice, he could flow out. He would be downtown Detroit by the Renaissance Center, not far from where so many of our ancestors escaping the carceral plantation crossed the river into Canada. He would be sending us a hug from a faraway lakefront. He would be at a Reba McEntire concert. I didn't even know he was into country music, but his practice helped us imagine who he was outside of those walls, too.

Walidah Imarisha wrote that every time we imagine the world without prisons, without disposability, we are practicing speculative fiction (brown and Imarisha 2015, 3). Because time isn't linear and possibilities for living remain uneven as ever, the life I am able to live today as a legally free, Black, queer woman, is always someone else's speculative fiction. Whether it's

the Black women Saidiya Hartman (Hartman 2019) encountered in the archives of Philly's and New York's underclass— fleeing what they thought were dead futures in the Down South and Deep South to uncertain lives of the Up South industrial cities—or Black people I encounter on a daily basis in Durham, North Carolina who have no place to live, or who were not privileged with the experiences and education I have.

I also speculate on possibilities not yet available to me, my loved ones, or my community. A place where my uncle died a free person at home with his family rather than alone and incarcerated in a hospital. A place where his son and namesake would have lived beyond 50 years. A place where life is made possible through mutual aid and re-integration into our ecosystems, rather than through wage labor and consumption. A place where we are able to learn how not to harm each other by learning from harm instead of punishing or isolating ourselves from ourselves.

A place where care is just how we do life, not another “economy.”

To me, but not me alone, you are not simply an idea. You are a place. A speculative geography gathering by the molecule, mobilizing through bodies like mine, an insistent, gripping presence. A vivid and irresistible dream. You are mostly speculative fiction, for now.

Fortunately, you are nothing new. You have precedent, and so do we.

The maroons knew you better than many who called themselves abolitionists. They wanted more than futures like me, legally free but inexorably tethered to racial capitalism. Many speculated on the places where they had been—Benin, Ghana, Senegambia, Angola—and I imagine still others dreamed of places that did not then exist. Places where they imagined healthier relationships, greater peace, less fear. I've seen you in practice in White Hall, in Navassa, in Princeville—in any place where Black people have attempted to create a vision of freedom outside of the system we were bound to via legal [un]freedom.

Those places are lessons, rehearsals for places to come.

I hope to see you there.

Danielle

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