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Mentoring While Black: A Testimony

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Abstract

After briefly exploring my experiences with being mentored, this short essay highlights how I strive to manage the politics of graduate student mentoring. Such politics involve managing the racial implications of faculty competition to attract graduate students and implementing mentoring strategies that have been uniquely informed by my own racial experiences within and outside of academia.

Keywords: Race; me-search; graduate writing success; academic writing; mentoring.

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1 From Mentee to Mentor

My approach to mentoring evolved after realizing how much my experience as a mentee shaped my personal and professional life. Throughout my life, I benefited from the contributions of many men and women who have selflessly mentored me. However, a pillar of four mentors was pivotal for my growth and development as a scholar (even as only one of them was an academic). All were central in equipping me to think about race as a societal phenomenon as well as how to manage it in my own life. Three of them were African American. All four were deeply concerned about racial equality and each contributed to my capacity to live as efficaciously as possible in a social world that remains steeped in racial inequality.

The first of these four was my late father, Alford Young. He was my first model of intellectual curiosity, even as his own professional life as a Certified Public Accountant compelled him to focus most of his mental energy on balance sheets, bookkeeping, and auditing. He was immensely curious about the history of Black people and their future possibilities. When I was very young, he encouraged me to sit with him in front of the television set to watch documentaries and news shows exploring African American history as well as the history of African civilizations. I was always puzzled and sometimes frustrated by having to consider the relevance of African societies existing centuries ago to my life as a child of East Harlem in the 1970s. However, about a decade later, close to the time when I determined to become a scholar, the value of those insights and reflections began to surface in my thinking.

Another pivotal mentor, Fred Wallace, was one my father's best friends during his later years of life. He was a constitutional lawyer. Mr. Wallace began his career serving civil rights leaders in the American South and ended by serving African Americans in Harlem until his death in 1997. His decision to settle in Harlem in the late 1960s was a compromise action. He told me that his experiences in the movement left him doubtful about the prospects for Black Americans in the United States. He turned his attention to Africa. Having never made it there, Harlem was his next best option.

Mr. Wallace enjoyed late-night dinners where he urged me to offer my opinions about various issues pertaining to the African American community. He then would challenge me to argue about my convictions and to consider alternative arguments, even if he did not hold to them. I imagined that this was indicative of his approach to litigation. These encounters fostered in me a keen understanding of the distinction between presenting an opinion and making an argument.

Another mentor was Fr. John Meehan, an Irish American Catholic priest who directed a leadership program for African American males in New York City; the *Archbishop's Leadership Project* (ALP). The ALP was initially designed to attract young African American males to the priesthood. That plan was abandoned almost as soon as the program was launched in the late 1960s, as the first participants expressed no interest in the priesthood. From that time through the early 1980s, when I joined the Project, it served as a leadership and service training program for young Black men. This opportunity equipped me to begin thinking about the role of servant leader, especially in regard to the African American community. The ALP's summer reading program — a part of a Project principle that education would not cease during the summer simply because school was not in session — brought me into contact with an extensive array of African American literature and non-fiction writings. Ultimately, I completed the ALP at the end of my high school years highly informed (at least in comparison to my peers) about the African American experience and in deep thought about the professional pursuits that I could commit to that would enable me to offer something to the African American community.

My fourth mentor, and the only professor among the pillar, was one of my undergraduate professors, Jerry G. Watts. I met him in the mid-1980s when enrolled at Wesleyan University. Jerry brought me into deep awareness of how my status as a cisgender, heterosexual African American male embarking upon extreme upward mobility placed me in a position of advantage. My emerging consciousness about this enabled me to begin thinking about myself as a potential victimizer in American society rather than only a Black male victim of it. My privileged statuses, Watts informed me, positioned me to benefit — and potentially (even if unintentionally) inflict harm — in the course of my interactions with less privileged people. Equally importantly, Watts taught me not only the virtues of self-awareness and self-criticism, but also how to become more courageously critical in my engagement of the social world.

A vivid moment of my developing that capacity occurred during one of my visits to his office. That day our conversation turned to my questioning an argument made by political scientist Martin Kilson, one of Jerry Watts' own mentors during his undergraduate studies at Harvard. After making my case, Jerry picked up his telephone and called Kilson. Watts explained to him that he had a student in his office who had something to share about his work. Jerry put me on the phone. I took the conversation to be opportunity to express to Kilson my admiration for him. I told him that I was aware that he was the first African American to be tenured at Harvard University and that I was thrilled with the chance to talk to him. I do not precisely recall what else I said to him, but I will always remember the aftermath of that conversation.

Upon finishing the phone call, I noticed that Watts was looking at me with disdain. "What was that all about?", he asked me. I said that I was just expressing my appreciation for being granted some attention by such a distinguished scholar. With a strained face, Watts then scolded me for not taking the opportunity to raise my concerns about Kilson's paper. He made it clear that I wasted my time praising this individual when I should have used my brief time to challenge him. Through this and other moments Watts impressed upon me that I should never let preoccupation with status interfere with engaging critique. This was a lot for a teenager to take in, but since my undergraduate years I tried to fully embrace that thesis. Thus, I began to grow confident about taking critical stances. One of many lessons shared with me by Watts was that commitment to responsible but confident criticism was a necessity for the social and emotional health and prosperity of African Americans.

It was after my exposure to this bedrock of mentors that I entered graduate school at the University of Chicago. There I benefited from the mentorship of William Julius Wilson, Edgar G. Epps, and several others as I moved along the pathway of becoming a sociologist. This legacy of individuals has made it clear to me that despite whatever I've accomplished in the academy, I never, ever did any of it by myself. Accordingly, I embarked upon my career determined to try to serve others as I was served. This became for me both a personal moral obligation and a strategy for cultivating and contributing to future generations of scholars, especially African Americans.

2 The Micro Politics of Mentoring While Black

Having cultivated a robust ideology about mentoring, I have also experienced an institutional culture at the University of Michigan, my only employer since I entered the professoriate, that has circumscribed my efforts. During my nearly thirty years at Michigan, I have come to terms with the understanding that faculty rarely receive substantive training in the craft of mentoring. Consequently, we apply approaches and techniques that we felt benefited us when we were stu-

dents and then try to avoid (or else develop in extreme opposition to) those which we believe did not. Despite all that I have learned from my pivotal mentors and others. I learned quite early that mentoring largely is an on-the-ground training experience. My graduate student mentoring most often involves a level of intimacy and consistency that has not been as evident in my experiences with undergraduates. Hence, I now turn to it to provide some insight into my experiences in mentoring while Black.

My graduate student mentoring has involved serving on over 100 completed committees and close to a dozen more currently in progress. It also includes service on master's theses committees and countless hours talking to students about how they might consider navigating race or class status while figuring out their career and life goals. The challenges of getting it right when it comes to mentoring are often exacerbated by situations involving students of color or, in most of my cases, African American students. Even as I have drawn from my experiences as a mentee to determine what I believe to be the best practices, I have come to discover some institutional dynamics circumscribing such mentoring that I did not imagine when in graduate school.

The stories told here are similar to ones shared with me by my African American colleagues. Therefore, I do not consider my experiences as serendipitous or unusual. Instead, I see them as a pattern of circumstances and behaviors that merit more substantive investigation (and, in fact, some have been referred to in analyses of the emotional tax placed upon faculty of color in their service as mentors; see Joseph & Hirshfield, 2024; Moore & Wagstaff, 1974; Padilla, 1994; Trejo, 2020). I consider them to be core elements of the micro politics of racial mentoring.

The most common of such occurrences pertain to African American students who have turned to me to help them manage the wounds that they have received at the hands of white American peers and faculty. Sometimes those wounds emerge from explicit or subtle racist acts. Other students have come to me because they have been outright abandoned by their original advisors. Even if those faculty originally argued for the admission of such students to the graduate program, they no longer had the wherewithal to support those students if more effort was required than they initially believed would be the case. This rescue and resuscitation work is a crucial part of the extra effort that goes into mentoring while Black.

A more complex version of the rescue and resuscitation work involves African American students seeking me out because they believe that their original advisors were unwilling to critically engage them about their work. An unfortunate consequence of the racial politics of student interaction has resulted in some students feeling that some faculty believe that an aggressive push might be perceived to be a racially offensive one. Whatever the case, these students feel that there isn't enough of a push made with them.

I accept that some of my work as a mentor involves being the repository for students who felt insufficiently challenged, or who I recognize have not been challenged enough (I experience the most acute sense of this with students who are working in my own areas of research). In many of these cases, mentoring does not simply involve providing support, but also committing to emotional and intellectual repair. It involves more than providing students with a kind of affirmation that enables them to prosper in their graduate studies. The work really involves a meticulous effort to help students develop skills and capacities that were underdeveloped in their early interactions, or that they, themselves, did not realize they could develop until they were exposed to new mentors.

The alternative case involves students who I find are less conscientious about the lack of push delivered to them. These are students who are subjected to faint praise about their scholarship, or else are lauded as delivering "the best that they can", even if it is not what would be

expected or even tolerated from other students. Consequently, these students believe that they are better equipped than they really are for engaging the academy as professors.

Some African American or other students of color who experience such validation by faculty come to believe that involving Black faculty in their scholarly development would corrupt their self-perceived status as outstanding students. Fortunately, I have not seen very many of these students, but I have encountered several. Upon doing so, they have made it clear to me that they need not incorporate any *racial* mentorship because they believed that they have gotten it all figured out. What is most unfortunate is that I have encountered several such individuals in the years following their graduate study who have reported experiencing problems in career mobility and/or success in research. They have sought me out for what becomes *remedial racial mentoring*.

Finally, at Michigan I have had the pleasure of working with many students who came to the institution with the intention of studying under my guidance. I have taken immense pleasure in working with and learning from them. Yet, with some of them I have been exposed to a subtle politics of student engagement that I did not anticipate before embarking upon my career. Some of this pertains to the bid and barter that occurs among faculty for highly performing students. As an African American scholar, I have been uniquely situated in that process.

Here I refer to my experiences with several white American students whom I've mentored. These are students who have been approached by one or more of my colleagues to be told that they should replace me with themselves as their advisors. Some of these students have been told by these colleagues that I'm too busy to serve them effectively. It remains unclear to me how that determination was made. What has been clear to me, however, is that there often is intense competition for the most excellent students. This is how that competition had surfaced in my involvement with some white American students. Interestingly, I have never had an African American student nor a student of color report having such an experience (and to be clear, these students have been as outstanding in their performance as have the white American students who have been approached).

What I have learned through these and many other experiences of mentoring while Black is that intense commitment to that service does not much minimize the challenges and hardship associated with performing it. Despite this, I've also realized that mentoring while Black can bring about immense personal pleasure. I conclude with one such account of how my racial lens informed my practice such that a pleasurable outcome resulted.

3 Reaching a Student via One Sentence at a Time

Thus far, it may appear that I have painted a portrait of mentoring while Black as an experience steeped in constraint, anguish, disappointment. This has not always been the case. Sometimes, the special place that one stands in as an African American scholar affords unique opportunities for forging a connection with students, especially those who are African American. As may be the case for many faculty who occupy underrepresented statuses, sharing that status with students can be the basis for connecting in ways that are not as readily imaginable or applicable for students from more traditional backgrounds. Occupying that shared space sometimes enables faculty to hear and see things that are denied to other faculty, which can facilitate an intimacy that allows for unusual moments in mentoring. I now turn to one such case.

One afternoon many years ago, I received a phone call from a student with whom I've had a long-standing relationship. Unlike his normal disposition, he began the conversation in a very reticent tone. I asked him if something was wrong. He replied to me that, indeed, there

was something very wrong. He went on to say that he had been deceptive for the better part of several months about his progress with his dissertation. The student told me that since the completion of his field work and analysis, several months prior to this phone call, he failed to write a word of his dissertation. He had been frozen.

I was thoroughly surprised to hear this. Over the past three or four months since the student supposedly began writing he periodically informed me of the sections he was drafting and the claims he was developing. After the first month or so of this reporting I asked him to send me some of his material. His replies wavered between expressing an interest in further polishing up the material before sending or preferring to hold onto it so that he could incorporate new ideas or themes that emerged in his thinking. Soon thereafter, the rationale for withholding was to argue that he wanted to complete major portions or full chapters of the material before sending it along.

The confessional phone call came after a winter of stalling. He did not know what to do or where to turn. I was not immediately sure what to tell him. This uncertainty did not prevent me from inviting him to my home so that we could talk more directly. I told him that we could talk while I walked my son's dog. Why take him for a walk with that dog? I offered this because I recalled that he and I had shared stories in the past about Black men walking their dogs in predominantly white American residential communities.

It is at least an urban myth, but possibly an unverified empirical case, that African American men walk their dogs — especially small dogs — in the communities in which they reside as a way of presenting a non-threatening identity to those neighbors with whom they are unfamiliar. I have had several conversations with African American men, some of whom were faculty or students at the University of Michigan, who made that very argument. As part of my daily behavior (begun during the COVID crisis when I was struggling to find something to do in the outdoors that would not threaten my or anyone else's health), I committed to extended walks with this dog.

I did not think about the special social utility of walking a dog as a Black man until I began having these conversations, including with this student. Up until the moment of the crisis phone call I considered our exchanges about dog walking to be a quotidian element of life experience for African American men living in predominantly white residential communities. However, at the time in which the crisis phone call occurred, I thought that offering a walk with my son's dog might inspire the student to engage with me in what we recognized, albeit in a different context, as a culturally meaningful situation. This was a bit of a stretch, I realized. However, although not fully certain, I imagined that during this walk I could provide some degree of emotional support and comfort. Aside from the association with comfort that came with African American men walking a dog, I also believed that our remaining outside of my house would prevent the student from feeling too locked into a conversation. He could, quite literally, find recourse to escape if he found the conversation unbearably threatening or even moderately uncomfortable.

When the time came for our meeting, I leashed up the dog and met my student in my driveway. We then went off for a walk. What he initially told me during that walk was not all that surprising given the experiences I had with other students. He talked about having no idea about how to write with confidence about his research. He was overwhelmed with the idea that he was to deliver hundreds of pages about it, even though he had thoroughly researched the topic over the past two years. He went on to express extreme doubt about completing the dissertation and establishing a career. He was angry at himself and embarrassed before me.

I felt as if I had no sense of expertise to draw upon as we began walking through several cul-

de-sacs. Yet, soon into our conversation it occurred to me that the only way to encourage him to begin writing any words was to get him to focus on writing, well, his first word. With that in mind, at the end of the walk I told him how proud I was that he was so willing to share. I told him that men, and Black men in particular, do not often share much when it risks emotional vulnerability. I validated the importance of his having done so. Finally, I told him to go home and write one sentence. That sentence should be a response to the question: "What did you learn from doing the research that you did for your dissertation?".

Not surprisingly, he was befuddled by my request. "What would that achieve?", he asked. I told him that it would achieve for him what he lacked thus far. It would enable him to complete one sentence of his dissertation. I told him that no dissertation has ever been written by completing more than one sentence at a time. That first sentence may not actually appear as the first sentence of the completed dissertation, but it would be the first sentence in the start of writing one.

The following day, the student called me to say that he had written several paragraphs about what he learned from his research. He connected that writing to including a revised statement about why he chose his dissertation topic (the original of which was in his dissertation proposal). I responded by congratulating him on where he stood; the author of several paragraphs of a dissertation rather than an anxiety-ridden student who for many months had written nothing. As I told him, he was, in fact, now in the process of writing his dissertation.

I ended that conversation by asking him to reply to several new questions about his research. This motivated him to continue writing, first several paragraphs a day, and then several pages in a day. By the end of the week that began with the walking of a dog, he had completed over a dozen draft pages of his dissertation. By the end of that calendar year, a little more than six months after our conversation, a full first draft of the dissertation was completed. Within the next calendar year, the dissertation was successfully defended. Along the way, there surely was commentary from his additional dissertation committee members that were indispensable in enabling a high-quality product to emerge. However, as I look back to my interaction with that student, and especially that very intense period in his life when he admitted to being frozen, I marvel at how a relatively simple piece of advice seem to be enough of a trigger for addressing a very distressing condition.

4 Conclusion

The general lessons that I have learned while mentoring while Black include realizing that I will often be called into situations that I did not create nor do not always desire to enter into, but feel compelled to do so to help ensure that the most positive outcome for African American students might emerge. It also means that I may have to assertively defend my involvements with some students because others may determine my place in their lives as interfering with their own goals and objectives. However, there also are a few lessons that I've drawn from the day that I took a student on a walk with my son's dog. An implicit one is that drawing from behavior that has significant cultural meaning to people can serve as a segue into reaching them in their own comfort zone.

Being an African American invites having experiences in or making realizations about the social world that enable recognition of the value of selected interventions that can reach African American or other students from underrepresented backgrounds. This is at the heart of the value of having a racially, ethnically, and culturally diverse faculty. I surely support institutional mandates for cultivating every faculty members' capacity to relate as effectively and meaning-

fully as possible to every kind of student. However, this does not arrest the need for deep reflection about both the stakes involved in mentoring from positions of underrepresentation and the unique benefits that are delivered to students from those mentors.

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