

TRIBUTE

GAY L BYRON

1961-2023

The situation—the student preceding the teacher in death—is, of course, not the way I or most folk think things should be ordered. But here it is. Alas.

From the time I met and began working with her at Union Seminary New York City in the early 1990s, as she was completing her M.Div. degree and entered the doctoral program (NT & Christian Origins, as it was so dubbed for the times), she was considered a fireball. All who encountered her during those years were likely to recognize and acknowledge that she was always intense, passionate, going about things as though in a hurry. Indeed.

Gay became during those heady years, in official relation to me, advisee/research assistant/protégée: she contributed to collaborative research projects I directed; participated in academic and professional guild committee meetings; and she was first among doctoral students I advised, her dissertation being the first I signed off on as chair of committee, this being, as far as I can tell, an event, although not mentioned at the time, that has earned a likely historical note (viz, the first Black doctoral advisor and Black student relationship in the field of the academic study of the Bible, in any of the major stations, at least). She was in terms of the categories of working relationships a most important and smart and savvy colleague, friend, partner in assessing and engaging courses, institutions, programs, and organizations for the sake of advancing collaborative projects and shared interests.

Although in the throes of demanding course work, language study, and then dissertation research and writing in the mid to late 1990s, Gay was a critical discussant in the research projects in which I was involved--first, the Asceticism project; then, the complex multi-year African Americans and the Bible Project, including the Conference that was convened in 1999. After 1999 and the formal commencement of her professional academic career with her right to wear doctoral bars, it was clear to me that even from a distance and with the development of her own professional voice and projects, she kept herself aware of and supported—doubtless, many times even scratched her head over—the next big project with which I was associated, the Institute for Signifying Scriptures.

Gay's own creative and path-breaking scholarship on the politics and psycho-socio-logics of symbolization in relation to Black-fleshed figures in ancient (and later historical) worlds and her contributions to modern world womanist discourses and practices were, to be sure, different from, but not antithetical to, my interests as they had developed over the years. I continue to be

very proud of and excited about the promise of her academic-intellectual accomplishments. Her dissertation, revised as monograph, *Symbolic Blackness and Ethnic Difference* (2002), is likely to become in many circles something of a classic. I think we both accepted the differences in interests and approaches and emphases held by two mature scholars yet had hunches that there were important overlaps and complementarities to be addressed; we simply needed more time for conversation. Sigh.

Even as our professional work and investments and personal lives rightly developed in different directions in the first two decades of the twenty-first century, I realized and took comfort in knowing that Gay and I could always pick up on the basic friendship and love and honesty that defined our relationship. One example cries out for referencing here: I shall never forget her activist good offices in once helping me back in the 1990s when as a doctoral student she was working as a tutor under my supervision. I was a still relatively young all-too-earnest-guild-laden but also guild-ambivalent/critical teacher of the (always psycho-socially loaded and politically fraught subfield) “Introduction to...” course. After I had responded on an occasion to a student question in frosty tones Gay in her brave and smart and loving intervention, saved me, if not from a disaster, at least from some long-term chilly winds. Her honest sisterly touch made the difference as all parties were able to move forward honestly and with clarity. Did she “sign off” on me as older brother worthy of care *before* I “signed off” on her as scholar?

And, of course, I shall also always cherish Gay’s long-term gestures of personal support and love extended even more broadly into family matters. She was my daughter Lauren’s first babysitter (in the 1990s) and agreed to participate in Lauren’s recent wedding (in 2022). A most significant arc of a loving supportive relationship. What is this if not family?

Gay was in a hurry. It’s as though she realized—in her professional and in her personal life--the import of what now long-deceased preacher-song-stylist Reverend C. J. Johnson, recognized recently by the Smithsonian as a creative and compelling translator of African American folk traditions, may have been translating when he sang “You Better Run!” My dear young sister Gay Byron did indeed run. I consider myself fortunate that I was able to run part of her distance with her.

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