

A letter from Ayanna Drakos

Class of 2011

The following is a letter to the faculty, staff, and community partners who were all essential to my experience as a student of African American Studies and as an organizer with the Race & Pedagogy Initiative (now Institute!). The subject “you” is plural, and refers to those mentioned above.



Before I entered my first African American Studies class with Professor Grace Livingston in 2007, I had never considered staying in Education or becoming a teacher. Now, deep into graduate school, it is impossible to differentiate my trust and belief in the transformational potential of the classroom, and my now ongoing process of becoming as a teacher, from all I learned as a student of African American Studies and through my participation with RPI.

As a student at Puget Sound, you redefined for me what conversations are possible to have in public. Through my involvement as a student at the intersections of planning for the 2010 RPNC, the 2010 R&P Youth Summit, and as a leader within the Black Student Union, I learned from you what the long work of repair and trust-building entailed, what it meant in the everyday to relationally attend with one another, across historical and ongoing structural difference and injury, in order to work together.

I learned that change cannot be created in the present without reckoning with the histories that are alive in our bodies and material realities, structuring our sense of what's real, of what we can and cannot see, and of each other. As students, you supported us in the complexity of these questions, often spending many hours with us in the in-between spaces of difficult campus conversations. You held space with us to process instances of overt anti-blackness on and off campus. You were also there when something would go well and we just wanted to sit with you awhile to make the moment of celebration last longer.

The questions that I began to form as your student would start me on a path that I remain on still. This path grapples with how I can best contribute toward collective healing (from) the ongoing violence(s) of gendered anti-blackness; how to attend to the historical silences that shape and continue to structure our present; how to stay present, with myself and my students, listening and learning deeply; it asks how I can make and live a life that holds all of these things - while caring for myself, my family, and my community - at its center.

Inside of classrooms where I have now been in the role of teacher, the ones I was in with you as a student have been my guide-posts. In my first semester teaching as a grad student, I experienced (and would continue to experience in subsequent semesters) being rattled and re-rattled with every class. I was both excited to be doing the thing I had sought out to do, and overcome with worry about the potential for injury I could cause holding a position of such weight. And yet, I felt lucky to know this position as one of weightedness, of its potential power to facilitate pathways for transformation, which I came to know through you. In contrast, I also knew of its power to do much harm, to kill the spirit and shut down imagination, creativity, and self-regard, through my experiences as a student elsewhere. As a new teacher, I have been grateful to know these stakes and be awake to them.

You not only made space for us to witness your everyday work, you invited us in, and allowed space for it to be ours, too. You inspired in us collective ownership of the histories that are our inheritance while giving us another inheritance, that of being a part of generative, anti-racist work, with an institutional space and home. I will continue to hold how best to honor and pass on this gift.

Ayanna is a graduate of the University of Puget Sound, class of 2011, in History and African American Studies. She earned her MA in Afro-American Studies and is a PhD student in History, at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. Their research explores histories of black feminism, black queer histories, interiority, and embodiment. She currently serves as the Research and Development Operator for the Nat Turner Project, a “fugitive gallery space” for black and POC artists based in Portland, OR.
