



Gravity's Volume

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Abstract

This poem is dedicated to Geoffrey Canada and the Harlem Children's Zone and to Luis Rodriguez. I wrote this poem in response to the frustration I was feeling while delving into policy questions and strategies with various community leaders and think tank wonks about how to reverse the disparities of young men and boys of color in California. I am an original member of the Alliance for Boys and Men of Color, a coalition of community based organizations, researchers, foundations, and public systems engaging in a 10-year strategy to improve outcomes for boys and men of color, which was started by The California Endowment. I noticed and felt a number of things during the first two years of this work. There was a lot of deficit-focused talk and a lot of attention paid to the overwhelming negative elements affecting boys of color (African-American = Black, and Latino = Brown), including health disparities like disease and violent death, a 50% high school dropout rate, a lack of knowledge of cultural identity and history, etc. Though we were talking about breaking out of system silos (i.e. ways of evaluating and treating these youth from institutionalized perspectives – hospitals, schools, prisons, social services – without sharing information), I felt like we were not focusing on what Black and Brown communities have in common. It seemed to me that once we had identified our shared problems, we needed to identify our shared assets. However, many of the solutions were not focused on healing, or common strengths, or even culture as a solution. The focus was often on money and laws. I felt that I needed to write a poem that also addressed the demographic shift towards a brown America, where the questions of race and how these questions were applied to policy and political discourse should no longer be dominated by a Black-White dichotomy. Our reality forces us to move toward a discussion of a brown America. Brown mixes all the colors. We need to use our shared history as an asset, a means to heal, and a trusted guide into the future.

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I work in East Oakland. I carry a brief case and code switch for a paycheck, pushing Black and Brown equity at meetings with deputy superintendents, regional task forces, and symposiums on structural racism and violence prevention.

I be in these meetings talking about systems.

The gravity of Black boys in these systems is nothing like Newton's apple. The gravity is more like the Grim Reaper's sickle. Maybe that's why the street signs in East Oakland sometimes look like tomb stones.

- 1 in 3 will be incarcerated
- 7 out of 10 will recitimize
- 25% survive on \$10,000 a year
- Half won't graduate high school
- 35% are unemployed
- 16 times more likely than White boys to die from homicide

The gravity . . .

For the first time ever in Oakland, Latinos are the majority in public schools. We have the highest birth rates, eclipse all ethnicities in the state. But severely disproportionate to graduation rates. Schools be hostile like the Alamo. No translation services. Mamá's request to speak to the principal falls on monolingual ears. *Wait here, please*. Her cultura held hostage by bankrupt state policies and disrespected by an incompetent curriculum and culturally chauvinistic administrators. She becomes deaf to the system. Her babies cry for attention by waving gang signs.

The volume . . .

I be in these meetings talking about systems.

I'm often the only Latino in a room full of Black friends. And if someone decides to call me *hermano*; ask me what Latinos think of Obama; or where they can get the best steak burrito in Oakland — I say that steak is *carne asada*. I tell them to go to *El Ojo De Agua* taco truck on Fruitvale Ave. and E. 13th. Because I represent my *raza*. It's what we all want: To represent.

Then I say: The volume is rising. Listen! We been saying the same thing for 10 years. The system is a placebo. An inertia. Apathetic. I've even busted poems in these meetings. *I even busted poems in these meetings . . .* but all I hear is business cards dancing on gravity.

The fact is Black boys are at the bottom of every measure of success, every standard of achievement, every level of society. If the gravity of their situation don't move you to do something different, then the volume of Brown demographics are gonna hit you like a Tsunami.

So when we say Black and Brown Unity what could we be talking about?

Are we talking about getting treatment for our issues with good hair and bad hair?

Pelo bueno, pelo malo?

Do we all just need to learn to speak American?

America. Yes. The continent.

The first recorded African slave uprising in the Americas happened in México in 1546.

The first African, free pueblo in the hemisphere was founded and named after Yanga, an African prince, freed slave in Vera Cruz, México in 1609.

Mexico's second president, Vicente Ramon Guerrero was an African-Mexican who abolished slavery in 1829.

During the U.S.-Mexican war of 1848, Mexicans refused to force runaway slaves back to their U.S. slave masters, and so México lost half her territory.

Mexican and African. Black and Brown. These brothers enjoy a rich legacy of alliance. But we don't teach that in school. So Black and Brown don't see each other as equal.

In 1965, African-Americans celebrated the Voting Rights Act that ended Jim Crow prerequisites to vote. At the same time Chicanos began the Delano Grape Strike and for the first time Mexican-Americans grabbed the national spotlight.

Today there are more than 200 public schools, 500 streets throughout the country named after Martin Luther King Junior and Cesar Chávez.

Still, every February Latinos learn civil rights were invented by a Black man's dream. And Cesar Chavez, who was born in Arizona, must struggle to be seen above Bud Light girls celebrating *Cinco de Mayo*, and the hateful speech diving the country over illegal immigration.

When I hear the undocumented scapegoated as a threat to African-American livelihood, the problem is not just lack of mutual respect. There is a financial interest invested in our lack of knowledge of each other.

Who is who?

What's my name?

Is Brown the new Black?

It's not about who owns the bottom, but who's got my back.

Who. Represents. Me.

Blatinos in New York will tell you. Afro-Cubanos will tell you. *Los Rakas* will tell you. Soledad O'brien. Daddy Yankee will tell you. Know the soul of black Peru.

Know that Africans are immigrants in Oakland, too. Know our common history.

The interdependence of Black and Brown is a reality now in Oakland, Fresno, Salinas, Los Angeles. At every level, Black and Brown need to be at the table representing. Like Yanga. Like Guerrero. Like Martin and Cesar.

If we are all going to thrive we have to represent and ri-i-i-i-de together.

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