

The Gift of Kente Cloth: A Chronicle of Black Life at Vassar
By Karla Brundage Vassar College, '89

While at Vassar I wrote for the *Miscellany News* (The Misc.) and *Unscrewed*. I was part of the newly formed "Improv Company" and read poetry at the café the year it opened. I went to the Mug, and was captain of the Cross Country Team and helped start the Track Club which is now a team. I also drank too much and found myself in many compromised places. But when I ask people what they remember about me at Vassar they say, "Your hair." I have asked male and female, men and women, friend and foe. What I struggled with at my years at Vassar was my perceived exoticism, being mixed race from Hawaii. The other things people say they remember is that I had seizures on campus. I spent many nights in the infirmary after binge drinking.

Coming from the graduating class of 1989, I believed my acceptance to Vassar College was a result of Affirmative Action. I was amongst the select few Black identified students at Vassar in those years. Coming from Hawaii, even then I was aware that I checked many of the diversity boxes. What I was not prepared for was how checking boxes would define my experience at Vassar. In the 80's and before, so many small things mattered. If you checked the box that you wanted to be in a women's dorm and wound up in Strong House, as a Black person, you were instantly part of a community. If you checked the box to go to the AAACV orientation, you met the incoming class. I did not check any of those boxes. Like many of my classmates coming from states other than New York, I could not see beyond the parental pressure of attending a school like Vassar. The isolation I felt often overshadowed many of the opportunities laid out before me in what appeared to be a foreign land.

This past summer, after a year of sheltering in place... after the death of George Floyd sparked uprisings... after marching in the #metoo parades, I returned to Vassar to seek healing. I stayed in Poughkeepsie on Vassar Street with friends. I was able to connect with one of the Vassar Professors who had a great impact on me through a chance meeting at an art show. I wanted to find a copy of an article I had written in the Misc. In 1988, there was a controversy about a "threatening Black man" in the dorms and he was going to be banned from campus. Because I was an aspiring journalist, I heard that there was more to the story. What I discovered was that he was actually the brother of one of the black (mixed) women, living in the dorm. I wanted to know more. I found out the name of the woman and interviewed her. She shared with me that her mother, who was white, was cooking something in the dorm kitchen and had a misunderstanding that created an exchange of words with another student who also lived in that dorm. Coincidentally this student was also Black. This story had two sides. I am not sure what the white woman said to upset the student or vice versa. I remember it being stated to me that the student approached the woman and asked if she belonged there and an argument ensued. Then the young man, who was visibly Black, but the son of the white woman, came into the kitchen and defended his mother. This was (to my recollection) written about in the Misc. and then I wrote an essay about being mixed race. News got out that I was going to publish an article, and there was a special council held by at the Black Student Union. Because of the tensions at Vassar at that time, I felt torn. What side was a really on?

After talking with my (now retired) professor about my Black life at Vassar, an incredible reversal happened! I opened up to him about the above incident and about the Black Barbie

poem I had published in Unscrewed that had caused me so much pain. I had carried so much shame for some many years about my Vassar experience and felt I failed. He said, "I have a mixed race daughter and she has a story. I think you should talk. I think you should write." He also put me in touch with her and she put me in touch with other Black alumni and the stories started coming. This summer, I had several calls, zooms and interviews with Black grads from the 80s who have a lot to share about their experience.

However, it was not only Black graduates that I spoke to. I called my dorm mates and I called acquaintances. One man said, he remembered going as you (meaning me, Karla) to a Halloween party. While he has great remorse, I have no anger at him. Instead we took this opportunity to heal. If we are in a great reckoning, isn't healing also an option? Another man I called asked me, he said, "Is an apology in order?" Neither of us could remember, but what is significant is that both of them are white men. While at one time I was objectified and exotified, this is a time of reckoning. I am seeking ways we can heal these traumas that we lived.

I also connected with May Mamiya, the wife of the late Larry Mamiya, a professor in the Africana studies department who was instrumental in my growth as a Black woman. Mamiya co-authored "The Black Church in the African American Experience" with C. Eric Lincoln. He also did extensive studies of African Americans and Islam. In his class we took field trips to mosques and Black churches in New York City. We read the Koran. We learned about pan-Africanism. It was Dr Mamiya whose Green Haven Pre-Release Program taught me so much about compassion and inequity. He also sponsored the visiting professorship of Dr. Nkondo, my thesis advisor, who was in exile from South Africa at the time. They were pillars in my Vassar education both intellectually and emotionally, and to this day are two of the most influential people in my life. Lawrence Mamiya was born in Honolulu, Hawaii and we had that connection. Dr. Nkondo taught about Blackness and used bell hooks to shift the center. Later in 2001, I would move to Zimbabwe and in 2013-2016, I lived and taught in Cote d'Ivoire, West Africa. During this time I conceived of an idea of a poetic exchange and slam and launch my organization West Oakland to West Africa.

Looking back with a critical lens, I see that although my parents were both educators, I was not prepared for the class differences and the isolation I would face, nor was I ready to be exotified the way I was being from Hawaii. Vassar did not have the tools to support me. My experience at Vassar was further complicated by my seizure disorder which I sought to hide, but which wound me out in the infirmary several times due to alcohol induced seizures.

Because I graduated in 1989, I was not there, at Vassar for the Main Hall sit-in of 1990, but graduates of all races mention the impact of this event. I feel like I was part of that sit-in, because things had hit such a crisis point in 1989, it was inevitable. 1990, was the first year they offered a Black Graduation and a Kente cloth. When I saw May Mamiya this summer, she said to me. Write your story. I can give you access to Larry's papers. Then she said. I have a gift for you because I do not think they were doing this when you were at Vassar. And she gave me a Kente from the class of 2000. I cried tears of joy.