

UB art student's racial provocation adds to trauma

On Wednesday, University at Buffalo graduate student Ashley Powell set off a campuswide controversy when she posted several racially provocative signs in Clemens Hall on UB's North Campus in Amherst, according to the UB Spectrum.

The signs, which she posted outside the men's and women's restrooms in the building, read "White Only" and "Black Only." Powell's poorly conceived art project, completed as part of a course on urban installation art, was calculated to evoke a specific response on UB's suburban campus. And so it did: Students, upon encountering Jim Crow language at their school, feared for their safety, felt deeply traumatized and aired

their anger on social media and through the university's Black Student Union. They also quickly alerted UB officials, who promised to review the matter.

Powell, who is black, got exactly what she wanted, which was attention. It came in the form of a rambling letter to the Spectrum and an audience in front of her victims Thursday night at a meeting of the Black Student Union.

According to Powell's self-aggrandizing non-apology, the project was designed to shock the university community into



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recognition of the experience of black Americans like herself who suffer from "self-hate, trauma, pain and an unbearable and deafening indignation."

"I understand that I forced people to feel pain that they otherwise would not have had to deal with in this magnitude," Powell wrote in her

screeed. "But I ask, should nonwhite people not express or confront their trauma? Should we be content with not having to confront that pain?"

But here's the thing: Powell did not "express or confront" her pain or trauma at

all. She instead chose to deploy a particularly painful instance of historic oppression as a psychological weapon against her fellow black students. She then had the temerity to characterize that assault as "an antidote that brings about healing."

In that way, quite contrary to her goal of addressing cultural pain, she exacerbated it. What's more, the project's glaring lack of context ensured no segue to a deeper conversation about how the overt racism of Jim Crow has morphed into more insidious and covert forms.

Aside from the self-delusion at its root,

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There are useful ways to funnel one's rage

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Powell's astounding attempt to justify her project contains a clear false dichotomy. That somehow the only way to face up to the violent realities of race in America or to "vent" about the daily terror of mere existence for black Americans is to physically bring past traumas back to life.

Though it fits the broad definition of art, Powell's project boils down to a cruel and counterproductive act of psychological violence against the every group of people she purports to represent.

None of this is to say that there aren't useful ways to funnel one's rage about the unfathomable injustices perpetrated upon black America or the numb horror of daily existence for this historically marginalized community into something resembling thoughtful commentary. There certainly are, including plenty of examples right here in Buffalo, where there continues to be a disturbing paucity of practicing minority artists.

Take Dana McKnight's recent film, "White Consumption Mac and Cheese," a short piece about the white commodification of black musical culture, in which a young white man simply eats dish after dish of macaroni and cheese to the sounds of Stevie Wonder, Michael Jackson and other artists. Or take Stacey Robinson's performance as part of his studies at UB, during which he stood in a corner of the Albright-Knox Art Gallery in 2014 and asked methodically and passionately about the lack of black artists included in the collection. (These two projects happen to be polite, but politeness need not be a feature of such art.)

If your practice involves intentionally retraumatizing a population that is already deeply scarred from centuries of systematic abuse and violent oppression hardly salved by the accomplishments of the civil rights movement, you are not making

thoughtful art or launching a smart conversation; you are throwing an adolescent tantrum and, in this case, desperately scrambling to dress up your ugly, subsophomoric gut instincts in the see-through clothing of academic art-speak.

"I understand my art project has exhumed our shared pain," Powell wrote. "However, our society cannot heal or change until nonwhite people are able to confront and gain agency through our burdens, and white people are able to confront and become accountable for their privilege. It is a delusion to believe that we can change society without first changing ourselves."

Powell's jargon-filled display of intellectual acrobatics may impress some, but to me it smacks of a base and uncritical desire to light a fire and damn who it burns.

What's more, the idea that this project has accomplished its function as some kind of progressive conversation starter is laughable. The conversation that's been started in the wake of the stunt is largely about the narcissism of its progenitor and the emotional well-being of the stunt's black victims. While those victims recover, the deep roots of systemic oppression and institutional racism remain very much unshaken.

You also could start a "conversation" by yelling "fire" in a crowded building, or throwing a tantrum in Wegmans. The trouble is that the conversation will rarely be about the topic you purport to be "interrogating" with your genius avant-garde strategy, but about the severe limits of your critique.

As a white, male critic, I understand I am writing from a position of privilege. I am in no way pleading for black artists to make their work more palatable in order to satisfy mainstream tastes. I'm arguing against inflicting another round of psychological trauma on a community that can hardly bear any more.

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