

Dreaming a Joyful School: Black Disability Politics in Virginia

Hamilton's *The Planet of Junior Brown*

By Elizabeth Maher

Children's book author Virginia Hamilton opens her Newberry nominated 1971 novel *The Planet of Junior Brown* with her protagonists Black middle schoolers Junior Brown and Buddy Clark and former teacher and current janitor Mr. Pool "hidden in the dark" in "the forgotten basement room" of an unnamed New York City public school. Her protagonists Hamilton tells us exist "out of our time." Hamilton's characters have transcended our standard notions of time and instead exist in a world that is at once an underfunded and segregated school in the deindustrializing New York City of the late '60s and early '70s in the wake of contentious clashes over school reform, including fights for (and against) integration and community control of schools, and a potent space of possibility where they can begin to build a world "yet to come" where the needs of Black neurodivergent/neuroexpansive children are centered and "the highest law" is to "live for one another." The three

main characters are equal partners in this endeavor. In a talk given in 1972 Hamilton described how they “teach one another in a joyful school.”¹ Through these characters Hamilton dreams Black Disabled futures in a manner that challenges the pathologization of Black bodyminds by white contemporaries while simultaneously rejecting debilitating white supremacist capitalist demands for ever greater capacity, competency and productivity. In doing so she presents neuroexpansive Black children as being central to the creation of a new world, a new planet, a new solar system. This paper analyzes Hamilton’s work utilizing literary scholar Sami Schalk’s concept of Black Disability Politics and historian Robin D.G. Kelley’s idea of Freedom Dreams to explore how Hamilton dreamed her own radical Black Disability futures in the context of the Black Power Movement, the Black Arts Movement, Black school reformer’s work to gain community control of schools, and the pathologization of Black bodyminds by white dominated educational and medical institutions.

¹ Virginia Hamilton, *The Planet of Junior Brown* (New York : Dell, 1978), 273–79, 414 ; Virginia Hamilton, *Virginia Hamilton : Speeches, Essays, and Conversations* (New York : Blue Sky Press, 2010), 27.

A note on language neurodiversity, neurodivergent, and neuroexpansivity:

The term neurodiversity was first coined by autistic activists in the late 1990s but has expanded over the years to include virtually all “variations in neurocognitive functioning.” Neurodiverse and neurodiversity are meant to serve as non-stigmatizing descriptions of mental difference. Having arisen out of activist movements, these terms are explicitly intended to evoke the idea that mental difference is not a tragedy to be mourned or cured but a natural variation in human experience that should be acknowledged and celebrated. Within the neurodiversity paradigm, people who experience mental differences are perceived by society and/or the medical establishment as varying significantly from the accepted “norm” of mental/cognitive functioning are referred to as “neurodivergent” or “neurodiverse.” Neurodivergent is a term coined by multiply neurodivergent blogger and activist Kassiane Asasumasu (nee Sibley). Asasumasu has emphasized that they intended

the term neurodivergent to be used as a tool of inclusion and thus that they wanted it to be applied as widely as possible.²

The term “neuroexpansive” was created by Black disability activist and community organizer Ngozi Alston as “a rejection of the term “neurodivergent” and the ideology that undergirds it.” Alston describes neuroexpansive as a term specifically designed for use by Black disabled people. They argue that terms like neurodivergent, and its opposite neurotypical, do not apply to Black bodyminds since Black bodyminds are inherently viewed as atypical and pathological within white supremacist society. They reject the idea that the “white nondisabled bodymind” is the line from which Black bodyminds, disabled or nondisabled, diverge and thus reject the idea of a “typical” bodymind. They note that it is impossible for Black bodyminds to be neurotypical since the psy disciplines and dominant white society inherently categorize Black bodyminds as inferior and pathological. The norm of

² Steven K. Kapp, *Autistic Community and the Neurodiversity Movement: Stories from the Frontline* (Singapore: Springer Singapore PteLimited, 2019), 1–3.

Kassiane Asasumasu(sherlocksflataffect), “PSA from the actual coiner of “neurodivergent”,” Tumblr Post, Accessed December 1st, 2022.

<https://sherlocksflataffect.tumblr.com/post/121295972384/psa-from-the-actual-coiner-of-neurodivergent>

neurotypicality as it has been constructed under a white supremacist patriarchal capitalist system is antithetical and exists in opposition to Blackness and Black experiences. Alston argues that the term neurodivergent centers the “white nondisabled bodymind” as the standard by which all other bodyminds are measured thus perpetuating white supremacist violence. In contrast the term neuroexpansive acknowledges the multitude of ways that bodyminds function without centering any one type of bodymind.³

This chapter draws on the concepts of neurodiversity, neurodivergence, and neuroexpansivity, even though these terms were not in use during the 1960s and 1970s, the periods under discussion. I have chosen to use the terms neurodiversity/neurodiverse, neurodivergence/neurodivergent and neuroexpansivity/neuroexpansive because they are capacious enough to hold Hamilton and other members of the Black Arts Movement’s complex representations of mental difference. Hamilton, a Black woman, refrains from using diagnostic

³ Ngozi Alston, “Neuroexpansive* Thoughts,” published January 12th, 2022. <https://medium.com/@ngwagwa/neuroexpansive-thoughts-9db1e566d361>

language in describing her characters possibly to avoid/undermine hegemonic white societies persistent pathologization of Black people.⁴ Yet, it would be a mistake to exclude Hamilton's work from conversations about the history of neurodivergence and mental difference because she chose not to utilize medicalized language to describe her characters. As disability scholar Sami Schalk and others have argued Black disability politics have often been ignored by both the disability rights movement and by disability studies because Black authors and activists refuse to be bound by the same rhetoric used by either the white medical establishment or the white dominated disability rights movement. If we allow the language of white dominated organizations and institutions to limit the terms of the discussion around neurodiversity, then we inherently silence alternative interpretations of mental difference. Drawing on literary scholar Stephen Knadler's

⁴ During the '60s and '70s white psy professionals, educators, and politicians sought to justify racial inequality and demonize Black protest movements by using rhetoric of Black pathology, particularly ideas of deprivation and attempts to associate Black protest with schizophrenia see Jonathan M. Metzl, *Protest Psychosis: How Schizophrenia Became a Black Disease* (Boston, UNITED STATES: Beacon Press, 2010), <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/uic/detail.action?docID=3118070>; Mical Raz, *What's Wrong with the Poor?: Psychiatry, Race, and the War on Poverty* (Chapel Hill, UNITED STATES: University of North Carolina Press, 2013), <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/uic/detail.action?docID=1663513>; ELIZABETH TODD-BRELAND, *A Political Education: Black Politics and Education Reform in Chicago since the 1960s*, Justice, Power, and Politics (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2018), https://doi.org/10.5149/9781469647173_todd-breland.

analysis of representations of neurodiversity in Pauline Hopkins' work I use the terms neurodiversity, neurodivergent, and neuroexpansivity to describe Hamilton's characters "to trace an unmarked African American neurodiverse disability history."⁵

As a white autistic scholar, I know that neuroexpansive is not a term that is meant for my use. I am a guest within this rich discourse of Black queer neuroexpansive theorizing and I strive to be respectful and aware of my own limitations. With this in mind and having consulted with Alston on my use of the term in this paper, I think that Alston's term, Neuroexpansive, is particularly well suited for understanding Hamilton's work because Hamilton herself utilizes a rhetoric of neuroexpansivity. In an essay discussing her tendency to write characters often deemed as "peculiar, odd and queer," Hamilton theorized that the cultural experiences of Black Americans potentially breed a kind of neuroexpansivity as a means of coping with intergenerational trauma.

Hamilton stated, "The characters I create are descendants of slaves and

⁵ Sami Schalk, *Black Disability Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2022), 13–14, <http://muse.jhu.edu/pub/4/monograph/book/102121>; Stephen Knadler, "Neurodiverse Afro-Fabulations: Pauline Hopkins's Counterintelligence," *American Literature* 94, no. 2 (June 1, 2022): 301, <https://doi.org/10.1215/00029831-9779050>.

freemen. All carry with them the knowledge of former generations who were born as livestock, as property. That sort of knowledge must corner reality for them and hold it at bay. It must become in part eccentric and in part symbolic for succeeding generations.” Hamilton framed the Black American experience as inherently neuroexpansive, as being unable to be fit within the bounds of white social norms of neurotypicality. Hamilton did not argue that this eccentricity was inherently liberating or debilitating rather she acknowledged it as part of the reality of the Black experience in the United States. Hamilton’s use of the terms peculiar, odd, queer, and eccentric do similar work to Alston’s use of expansive. Both authors emphasize the importance of recognizing Black bodyminds in all their uniqueness and the impossibility of understanding Black bodyminds using standards that center whiteness.

Alston and Hamilton both come up against the limitations of a system of understanding the human mind/human behavior that centers white, middle-to-upper class, cisgender, straight men as the norm. They

work to move beyond this system by creating new words and new worlds. In doing so they ask how we can begin to explore the inherent expansiveness of human minds and human experiences in a way that does not center or reify an idealized version of the white male bodymind as the “norm?”⁶ Drawing on their work this paper begins to explore what it means to desire neurodivergence when the norm being diverged from is an imagined, ultimately unachievable, white middle-class male bodymind? How might it benefit us to understand neurotypicality not as an individual identity inherent to the bodymind but as an idealized status that is meant to be ceaselessly pursued but never truly achieved, yet one that not only individuals but whole groups of people are excluded from to vastly varying degrees?⁷ What are the stakes of acknowledging that the concept of neurotypicality was designed in opposition to the experiences of people of color? Who can begin to approach neurotypicality as determined by educational and medical institutions

⁶ Virginia Hamilton, “Illusions and Reality,” in *Virginia Hamilton Speeches, Essays, and Conversations*, ed. Arnold Adoff and Kacy Cook (New York: The Blue Sky Press, 2010), 55, 57.

⁷ My framing of neurotypicality as an ultimately unachievable ideal that various groups and individuals are marked as being closer to or further from is influenced not only by Alston and Hamilton’s work but also Jasbir Puar’s writing on the relentless demand for ever greater capacity under neoliberalism, and Jules Gill-Peterson’s discussion of cisgender as an ideal rather than a useful way to categorize individuals.

and how can we move beyond it towards what Hamilton calls a world yet to come?

Plot Summary: *The Planet of Junior Brown* focuses on the friendship between two Black middle schoolers living in New York City, Buddy Clark and Junior (Virgil) Brown and their relationships, both nourishing and restrictive, with various adults. Neither Buddy nor Junior thrives in the standard classroom environment of their crowded public school. Instead, they skip class to have secret math and science lessons with janitor and former public school teacher Mr. Pool. Alongside Mr. Pool, the two boys construct a rotating model of the solar system in a secret room in the school's basement. In addition to the standard 9 planets, Buddy and Mr. Pool add a 10th planet, which they dub the Planet of Junior Brown in Junior's honor. The addition of this tenth planet represents Hamilton's emphasis on the importance of supporting and uplifting neuroexpansive Black youth, even if it means remaking the universe.⁸

⁸ Virginia Hamilton, *The Planet of Junior Brown*, in *Virginia Hamilton Five Novels*, Ed. Julie K. Rubini, (New York: The Library of America, 2021), 271-275.

Buddy and Junior come from vastly different backgrounds. Buddy has been unhoused and without any familial support since he was nine. He is part of a network of unhoused children living secretly in abandoned buildings throughout New York City. Buddy serves as a “Tomorrow Billy,” an older child who teaches children new to life on the streets how to survive and disappears when the children become self-sufficient. Acting as a Tomorrow Billy, Buddy initially tells other children, “We are together only to survive...the highest law is to learn to live for yourself.” This promotes an ideal of independence. The children call the abandoned buildings where they stay planets. To support himself, Buddy has a part time job at a news stand run by Doum Malach, a 24-year-old college graduate who inherited the stand from his father. Doum is unaware that Buddy is unhoused and tries to look out for Buddy and instruct him in Black radical politics. Buddy is a devoted friend to Junior although he is initially wary of telling Junior or Mr. Pool about his living situation or the existence of the planets.⁹

Naomi Lesley, “Solar Systems and Power Systems: Decentering the Naturalized Universe in Virginia Hamilton’s *The Planet of Junior Brown*,” *Children’s Literature Association Quarterly* 36, no. 2 (2011): 124–46, <https://doi.org/10.1353/chq.2011.0017>.

⁹ Hamilton, *The Planet of Junior Brown*. 278, 314–315, 320–327, 335–338.

In contrast Junior Brown lives a middle-class existence with his mother Junella Brown. Junella is determined to raise Junior to be cultured, taking him to modern dance concerts at the Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts, and “uplifting plays.” She tells Junior that it is important for them to “get out of our black world more.” Junella also takes Junior to Weight Watcher’s meetings. Junior is uncomfortable at both the concerts and at Weight Watcher’s meetings, partially due to the (pervasive, cultural) whiteness of these spaces. Junior’s father lives and works in New Jersey. At the beginning of the book, Hamilton implies that he has not visited his wife or son for some time, although neither Junella nor Junior fully acknowledge his long absence, and instead wait excitedly for his potential Saturday visits. Junior has a great passion for music and is a talented piano player, having participated in a concert in Central Park. His piano teacher Miss. Peebs encourages him to work to become a concert pianist. Junella provides Junior with piano lessons, and even a piano in his room. However, the strings of the piano in Junior’s room have been cut so that it does not make any sound because

Junella cannot tolerate the noise due to her own poor health. Junior also paints as a means of self-expression and self-exploration.¹⁰

Junior is very close to his piano teacher Miss Peebs, who along with Buddy and Mr. Pool is one of the few people he feels he can be himself around without being judged. Yet, at the beginning of the book he is worried because Miss Peebs has been acting differently than she had in the past. When he comes to her house for his piano lessons, she tells him that she destroyed her prized grand piano and refuses to let him see the instrument, nonetheless play it. She also shows signs of great anxiety. When Junior asks her why she does not want him to play her piano, she eventually claims (with Junior's prompting) that a sick, menacing relative has forbidden her from playing the piano or having anyone else play it. It becomes clear throughout the book that the relative only exists within Junior and Miss Peebs' minds. Junior is worried for both Miss Peebs and her piano, and despite his fear of the haunting presence of the relative he is determined to help her.¹¹

¹⁰ Hamilton, *The Planet of Junior Brown*. 287-293, 297, 304, 340, 350, 364-365

¹¹ Hamilton, *The Planet of Junior Brown*. 300-308, 358.

Hamilton emphasized that much of Junior and Miss Peebs distress was a result of the double bind of living in a deeply anti-Black society that at once demanded that Black people work to assimilate to white society and denigrate their own Blackness while simultaneously refusing to accept them. In a 1971 essay Hamilton wrote that *The Planet of Junior Brown* was about “the failure of a black, quite obese, junior high school youth to develop any area of successful contact with the white world that determines the limitations of his life.” Miss Peebs’s and Junior’s complicated feelings about how white society disdains and pathologizes Blackness can be seen in their mutual construction of the figure of “the relative.” Miss Peebs claims that her sick relative has barged into her life and is demanding to stay with her and keeping her or Junior from playing her piano. Junior compares the relative to a cousin always asking for a loan. Junior describes the relative as dirty and as using a lot of slang in his speech. Miss Peebs emphasizes that the relative is infected with a vague but highly contagious illness, but that he refuses to acknowledge how sick he is. The relative’s supposed sickness and risk of contagion symbolize the idea that Black culture is

pathological and that association with stigmatized Blackness is seen as a constant threat to middle-class Black people like Miss Peebs, Junella Brown, and initially Junior who try to subscribe to white norms of respectability. No matter how much Miss Peebs tries to live within the ideals of white society, she remains haunted by white societies, and her own internalized view of her own stigmatized Blackness.¹² Junior eventually runs away from home after his mother destroys a painting Junior has made titled “The Red Man.” In this painting Junior has carefully drawn “inch-high people of all shapes and colors living their lives” in New York City. He includes depictions of the classroom he shares with Buddy and Mr. Pool, his piano lessons with Miss Peebs, and his experiences “on the street” with Buddy. “The Red Man” serves as a representation of Juniors neuroexpansivity, his unique way of moving through the world that is inherently shaped by his relationship with Black culture. Junior runs away from home because Junella’s declaration that Junior must be “sick” to make such a painting demonstrates that she refuses to fully accept him.¹³

¹² Hamilton, *The Planet*, 304, 396, 404. Hamilton, “Portrait of the Author,” 20.

¹³ Hamilton, *The Planet*, 383-384.

In the climax of the book Junior tries to help Miss Peebs by taking on her delusion, bringing her relative with him as he moves through the world. Junior talks to the unnamed relative of Miss Peebs' almost constantly, which worries Buddy. While Mr. Pool initially suggests that Junior needs immediate medical attention, Buddy is incensed at the idea of taking Junior to a hospital as he fears that Junior will be institutionalized permanently. Buddy argues that the psy professionals at the hospital will blame Junior's mental distress on his Blackness and his fatness and try to destroy those parts of him. Instead, Buddy finally confides in Mr. Pool about the network of unhoused children he is a part of, and he and Mr. Pool take Junior to stay at Buddy's planet. Buddy reevaluates the role of the planets and tells Junior, Mr. Pool, and the other children at the planet that from now on the planet will function on a model of interdependence, where everyone who stays there gets a voice in what they would do, and where the highest goal would be not to "learn to live for yourself" but to "live for one another." Buddy dubs the planet "the planet of Junior Brown."¹⁴

¹⁴ Hamilton, *The Planet of Junior Brown*. 394-303, 320, 415.

Black Activist Challenges to the Rhetoric of Black Pathology:

Black activists, reformers and creatives, including Hamilton, challenged the nearly all-pervasive rhetoric of Black deficiency and pathology expressed by white society in a myriad of ways. It is helpful to read Hamilton's own complex challenge to assumptions of Black pathology in *The Planet of Junior Brown* in relationship to similar challenges made by the Black Power Movement, the Black Arts Movement, and by Black education reformers. Hamilton references the Black Power Movement in the text having Junior state that "Black is Beautiful" and Buddy reference Malcolm X. Buddy's boss at the newsstand Doum shares Black Power periodicals with Buddy and lectures him about white oppression. This indicates that both boys are aware of and seem to feel positively towards aspects of Black Power ideology. The Black Power Movement and the affiliated Black Arts Movement directly challenged white supremacist assumptions of Black pathology while also critiquing white supremacist capitalist demands of Black reasonability, respectability and capacity. Proponents of these

movements instead celebrated Black communities, cultures and experiences. Black artists and scholars such as Amiri Baraka, and Adrienne Kennedy, called for the creation of radically new kinds of art that were both grounded in and celebrated the Black experience, rather than seeking to mimic or assimilate to white culture. Literary scholar La Marr Jurelle Bruce has written about how members of the Black Arts Movement challenged white supremacist definitions of Reason and sanity. Rather than counter ideas of Black pathology by invoking claims of competency/capacity authors like Amiri Baraka and Adrienne Kennedy were dedicated to creating complex images of Black madness that at once acknowledged the mental unruliness caused by living in a white supremacist society, celebrated the aspects of Black American culture that white society deemed as mad, or pathological, and imagined both Black cultures and even Black suffering not as inherent sites of resistance but as sites/spaces from which resistance could be cultivated. This chapter draws on Bruce's analysis of the Black Arts Movement

while expanding it by examining how Hamilton models the creation of new interdependent Black communities.¹⁵

In a 1972 essay, Hamilton explained that she saw “the principal fact of my life and all life as the mind at liberty.” She wanted her books to serve as tools to help liberate the minds of her young readers. Hamilton believed that it was important for her to create images of freedom in her books to show readers that “if my mind can conceive of freedom, so can theirs.” Hamilton was deeply influenced by the desire to create a new literature to help liberate children and create a better world for them. She was inspired by what she described as the “new black revelation,” that was occurring in the late ‘60s and early ‘70s which celebrated Black existence and refused to accept entrenched American ways of life. She was dedicated to creating new worlds through her writing, to engaging “not with what is but what might become.” Her first two books *Zeely* (1967) and *The House of Dies Drear* (1969) both drew on the history of Black people in the United States and emphasized the

¹⁵ Hamilton, *The Planet*. 289, 324, 337-338, 386. Larry Neal, “The Black Arts Movement,” *The Drama Review: TDR* 12, no. 4 (1968): 29, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1144377>; Bruce, *How to Go Mad without Losing Your Mind*, 7-10, 23-24.

Black family and the Black community as crucial sites for the transmission of knowledge and of support.¹⁶

It is fruitful to understand Hamilton's work in the context of Black Power rhetoric of Black self-determination and work by Black education reformers to achieve community control of schools. These movements can provide context for Hamilton's dreaming of alternative Black futures where neuroexpansive Black people could live freely. Hamilton emphasized the role of formal and informal education in the lives of Black youth. Hamilton may have been inspired by the fight by Black education reformers in New York to gain community control of schools when writing *The Planet of Junior Brown*. Historian Elizabeth Todd-Breland tells us that during mid '60s some Black educators and community leaders questioned the effectiveness and desirability of school integration as a central goal of Black education reform. They rejected white liberal rhetoric that pathologized Black students in their

¹⁶ Virginia Hamilton, "Thoughts on Children's Books, Reading, and Ethnic America," in *Virginia Hamilton: Speeches, Essays, and Conversations*. Ed. Arnold Adoff and Kacy Cook (New York: The Blue Sky Press, 2010), 23, 25-26, 28.

Virginia Hamilton, "Literature, Creativity and Imagination," in *Virginia Hamilton: Speeches, Essays, and Conversations*. Ed. Arnold Adoff and Kacy Cook (New York: The Blue Sky Press, 2010), 34.

calls for school integration. Some Black education reformers argued that the overwhelming focus on integration presumed that the only way that Black children could receive a quality education was if they were sitting alongside white children. In contrast educators like Barbara Sizemore believed that Black children could thrive at entirely Black schools and challenged the idea that proximity to white people was a necessary component of Black students' success. Disillusioned with the glacial pace of integration in the face of ferocious white opposition (New York Public Schools were more segregated in 1966 than they were in 1954) and white liberal rhetoric about Black cultural, intellectual, and individual deficit in the mid-1960s, and inspired by Black Power rhetoric of self-determination, Black education reformers increasingly called for community control of local schools. Black educators and activists such as Jitu Weusi in New York argued that Black teachers and Black community members must work together to transform schools into tools to mold and shape their communities. They demanded that Black communities be able to determine how their children were educated and what they learned. They argued that the struggles of Black

schools were not caused by racial isolation but by racist underfunding and neglect by white supremacist power systems. They also critiqued existing schools' curriculums for indoctrinating Black youth into the white supremacist social order.¹⁷

One of the most famous struggles for community control occurred in New York City where in December 1966 more than 50 parents and community leaders from predominately African American and Puerto Rican neighborhoods occupied the Board of Education Headquarters appointed themselves the People's Board of Education and called for community control of New York City's underfunded public schools. In response to their sustained advocacy the mayor's office, and educational officials established three experimental districts in Harlem, the Lower East Side in Manhattan, and in Ocean Hill-Brownsville in Brooklyn. The Board of Education granted residents in the experimental districts the right to elect a school-governing board. Yet, opposition by white dominated teacher's and principal's unions made it difficult for the

¹⁷ ELIZABETH TODD-BRELAND, *A Political Education*, 7–11, 47-54. ; Jerald E. Podair, *The Strike That Changed New York: Blacks, Whites and the Ocean Hill-Brownsville Crisis* (New Haven, UNITED STATES: Yale University Press, 2002), 22

governing boards to exert real control over local schools. A teachers strike in Fall of 1968 over employment practices by the Ocean Hill-Brownsville governing board led to the termination of the demonstration districts.¹⁸

In 1966 at the time of the formation of the People's Board of Education Hamilton had been living in New York since 1958, working as an accountant and occasional jazz singer and taking classes at The New School of Social Research. In 1960 she married Arnold Adoff, an Ashkenazi Jewish writer who worked as a substitute social studies teacher in Harlem and the Upper West Side. In 1963 Hamilton's first child, Leigh Hamilton Adoff, was born. 1967 saw the publication of Hamilton's first book *Zeely* and the birth of her son Jaime Levi Adoff. In 1969, Hamilton, Adoff and their children moved to Yellow Springs Ohio to be near Hamilton's family.¹⁹ Hamilton would likely have been aware

¹⁸ Heather Lewis, *New York City Public Schools from Brownsville to Bloomberg: Community Control and Its Legacy* (Teachers College Press, 2015); Jerald E. Podair, *The Strike That Changed New York: Blacks, Whites and the Ocean Hill-Brownsville Crisis* (New Haven, UNITED STATES: Yale University Press, 2002), <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/uic/detail.action?docID=3420156>.

¹⁹ "Biography" Virginia Hamilton. Accessed November 15th, 2022. <https://www.virginiahamilton.com/biography/>

of Black education reformers efforts to gain community control of schools in New York City.

In his 2002 book, *The Strike that Changed New York*, Jerald E. Podair argues that Black education reformers in New York sought to challenge what they saw as middle-class white values of individualism, competition and materialism and replace them with what they viewed as Black values of mutuality, cooperation and community. These values of mutuality, cooperation, and community can be seen both in the “joyful school” that Mr. Pool, Junior and Buddy form in the basement, and in the founding of the Planet of Junior Brown. Hamilton’s characters reject formal institutions that operate under values of individualism such as public schools, believing such institutions to be inherently exclusionary.²⁰

The Planet of Junior Brown addresses Buddy, Junior and former teacher Mr. Pool’s disillusionment with the formal educational system. While all three are clearly dedicated to learning and education they do

²⁰ Podair, *The Strike That Changed New York*, 7–8.
Hamilton, “Thoughts on Children’s Books,” 27.

not see existing public-school classrooms as nourishing places for Black youth. Mr. Pool notes that while he tried to make his classroom a place where “Tough, black children of city streets could lay bare their minds,” he eventually “lost heart” and felt he “could no longer teach in so rigid a regime.” Mr. Pool believes that the only way he can truly prepare Black youth for a better future is in a furtive classroom hidden under the school. A classroom where Mr. Pool and Buddy are willing to remodel the universe to give Junior a place in it. Mr. Pool is a strong advocate for what historian Elizabeth Todd-Breland refers to as the politics of Black achievement, but he believes that Black children can only receive a truly liberatory education, one that prepares them for freedom and the world yet to come, outside of the formal public education system as it existed.²¹

Buddy is also shown to be deeply disillusioned with the formal educational system as it exists. This is best shown in Buddy’s interactions with the Assistant Principal, Mr. Rountree. Mr. Rountree

²¹ Hamilton, *The Planet*. 279.

ELIZABETH TODD-BRELAND, *A Political Education*, 50.

lectures Buddy and Junior for their truancy and threatens to invoke legal action if they do not begin attending class. Notably Mr. Rountree is a Black man and Buddy believes that he truly wants what he thinks is best for Junior and Buddy. Mr. Rountree notes that he is, at least somewhat invested in Buddy and Junior's futures because "They aren't ordinary kids on the hook; they get good grades." That is, Mr. Rountree believes that Buddy and Junior have the potential to excel in an academic environment which raises their value in his estimation. Yet, Mr. Rountree and Buddy have incompatible understandings of what Buddy and Junior need. Mr. Rountree believes that "school is all you've got." Mr. Rountree argues that it is critical that Black youth like Junior and Buddy receive a formal education if they are to succeed in the world. Buddy does not believe that education necessarily provides a path to success for Black people noting to himself that "Half of the educated cats on the street couldn't remember the last time they had even a lousy job." Rather than preparing for a future in a white supremacist capitalist system Buddy focuses on both surviving and finding fulfillment in the present in part through his lessons with Mr. Pool. Hamilton contrasted

Mr. Pool, Junior and Buddy's lessons with the formal education system. Describing Buddy's work with Mr. Pool and Junior, Hamilton claimed that Buddy, "finds others like himself. They teach one another in a joyful school. They go beyond survival, beyond institutions, families, lack of families, and deprivation to that joyful sense of cooperation and communication, of learning together." Hamilton contrasted this learning process with institutional education that focuses on deprivation. Buddy, as Hamilton made clear, does not want to learn to participate in a white supremacist capitalist society, he wants to participate in education for liberation.²²

Buddy's critique of the idea that formal education would uplift Black people and allow them to thrive under white supremacist systems mirrors radical Black psychiatrists' William H. Grier and Price M. Cobbs' critique of formal educational systems in their influential 1968 book *Black Rage*. Grier and Cobbs argued that "In spite of the yammering of naïve observers, education has never offered a significant

²²Hamilton, *The Planet*. 371-371.
Hamilton, "Thoughts on Children's Books," 27.

solution to the black man's dilemma in America" because the goal of schools was "to train children participate in the work of the society and to impart to them a certain attitude about the nation." Thus, Grier and Cobbs believe that attending school within a white supremacist society could only indoctrinate Black children into a belief in their own inherent inferiority and prepare them to participate in systems that oppressed them. Their criticisms reflect arguments made by Black education reformers who called for community control of schools and the founding of independent Black educational institutions.²³

Hamilton also expressed her views on the kind of education that was needed to create a new world in her non-fiction writing. In her 1972 essay prepared for a Joint Committee of the International Reading Association and Children's Book Council, Hamilton expressed her belief that school systems needed to undergo radical change in order to prepare children to build a freer society. She claimed that just as writers "must deal in possibilities, not with what is but what might become...so must

²³ William H. Grier, *Black Rage* (New York Bantam Books, 1976), 113, http://archive.org/details/blackrage0000grie_k9j9.

institutions of learning.” Hamilton noted that while “Our institutions are not equipped to solve four-hundred-year-old grievances...there is the distinct possibility that they may well have to become so.” Hamilton believed that “Our children can and do progress beyond us” and that educational institutions needed to be remodeled to support children’s progression beyond the barriers of white supremacist society and prepare them for what Hamilton referred to as “a world in constant creation.”²⁴

The Planet of Junior Brown as a Work of Black Disability Politics:

Hamilton’s essays and *The Planet of Junior Brown* were examples of Black Disability Politics. Hamilton framed Junior, a neuroexpansive character, as having agency and interiority, without demanding that he meet the ever-heightening criteria for capacity demanded by the modern neoliberal world. He never has to embody the role of an independent rational actor or demonstrate the allegiance to Reason that is seen as mandatory to be categorized as a fully human under ableist white supremacist systems.²⁵ Hamilton presented Junior both as a character

²⁴ Hamilton, “Thoughts on Children’s Books” 23-24, 27-28.

²⁵ Jasbir K. Puar, *The Right to Maim: Debility, Capacity, Disability*, 2017, 13, <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822372530>; Bruce, *How to Go Mad without Losing Your Mind*, 4–5, 15.

who shapes the direction of his own life as well as that of others, and as a character who is reliant on others for help and support. He exists within networks of interdependence.

While Buddy is the one who decides to bring Junior to live at his planet, Junior does make decisions that shape the course of his life throughout the book. He chooses to spend his days in the basement learning with Buddy and Mr. Pool rather than going to class. He chooses to run away from home after his mother makes it clear that she will never accept him fully. Perhaps most notably Junior is determined to help relieve Miss Peebs' distress. In her 1971 essay "Portrait of the Author as a Working Writer," Hamilton gave a fairly heroic description of Junior's attempts to help Miss Peebs, explaining that Junior "tries desperately to save the sanity of Miss Peebs by entering her fantasy and dealing with the apparition who lives there. Junior Brown and Miss Peebs both live in the same isolation caused by the same conditions, and Junior instinctively knows that by saving her he may save himself."²⁶

Hamilton thus portrays Junior's interactions with the relative as a

²⁶ Hamilton, "Portrait," 20.

necessary part of relieving both his own and Miss Peebs' mental distress.

While Hamilton description of Junior trying to save Miss Peebs' sanity upholds ableist notions of sanity, Junior also describes Miss. Peebs as "different from all other people" which is part of what allowed the two of them to connect. Junior does not want to erase Miss Peebs' difference but to relieve her distress and return to the relationship they once had. Hamilton attempted to balance Junior and Miss Peebs' neuroexpansiveness and give weight to their experiences of mental distress. Hamilton was uninterested in contributing to what Bruce describes as "the project of Reasonable blackness" that demands that Black people conform to white norms. In fact, it is this project of "Reasonable" respectable Blackness that causes much of Junior's and Miss Peebs' distress.²⁷

Hamilton refused to ground her critique of rhetoric of Black cultural/familial/individual pathology by making claims about Black

²⁷Hamilton, *The Planet*, 311, 385.

Hamilton, "Portrait of the Author," 20.

R. D. Laing, *The Politics of Experience [by] R. D. Laing*. (New York: Ballantine Books, 1968), 134–35; Bruce, *How to Go Mad without Losing Your Mind*, 15.

capacity. Rather, then arguing that Black people universally meet white supremacist norms of sanity and productivity she, along with other members of the Black Arts Movement, rejected these norms. Hamilton did not demand that Junior overcome or be cured. Rather, Junior is allowed to experience mental distress and be cared for by members of a shared Black community. When Junior becomes overwhelmed by his interactions with the relative, Buddy and Mr. Pool take him to Buddy's planet where Buddy asks the other children at the planet to make sure that Junior does not hurt himself. The book ends with Junior listening to Buddy describe the new ethos of the planet, taking comfort in memories of his friendship with Buddy and in the feeling of closeness he derives from being a part of the planet, recognizing and basking in "the closeness of all of them together." This experience of closeness at least temporarily relieves some of Junior's mental distress. The relative becomes less clear to him and seems to disappear into the wall "part way," and Junior can relax. This disappearance remains "part way," it is not a moment of cure but of relief, of finding ways to make life more livable. This relief is only possible through the creation of an

interdependent community whose “highest law” is to “live for one another.” Hamilton argued that in order to survive the debilitating nature of white supremacist capitalist systems, including demands for assimilation, and rhetoric of Black pathology, it is necessary to form alternative communities based on mutual care. Hamilton thus espouses a similar community focused ethos to that of Black education reformers.²⁸

²⁸ Hamilton, *The Planet*. 332, 361, 412-414.

For a discussion of the concept of making lives more livable for disabled people see Eunjung Kim, *Curative Violence: Rehabilitating Disability, Gender, and Sexuality in Modern Korea*, Illustrated edition (Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2017).