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Tribute to Jerome

UNDER CONSTRUCTION

ANGELA P. HARRIS*

JEROME McCristal Culp, Jr., Professor of Law at Duke University and founding member of LatCrit, died in Durham, North Carolina on February 5, 2004, of complications associated with kidney failure. The essays in this cluster—written by people he loved—celebrate his many gifts.

Adrienne Davis and Bob Chang reflect upon Jerome as scholar, mentor and friend. Adrienne discovers that an emergent theme of Jerome's later writing was "love." Bob remarks on Jerome's willingness to do the hard political and personal work of engaging with those who are not us. Both advert to the closing line of Walter Dellinger's powerful remarks at Jerome's memorial service: "Oh, how he fought."

He did fight. Those who knew him will remember hearing the spiraling cadences and rising volume of Jerome's voice as he worked himself into a rant over some fresh outrage. Jerome fought against racism, against homophobia, against bigotry and stupidity all his life, as hard as he could, holding nothing back. But the power and purity of his anger, I think, lay in the way it came from the same place as his love. Scott Lee, quoting from Derrick Bell, notes that Jerome was one of the most ethical people he has ever known. Jerome's standards were high, and he applied them across the board: to himself as well as to others, with no concessions to ego, status or expediency. He was able to do battle without reservation because he was fighting in the defense of things he loved without reservation.

Jerome always looked for the honorable path, not the easy path. But his love, his empathy, his anger and his ethical ambition were always rooted in an awareness of how deeply fallible humans are. Jerome recognized the fact that we are all under construction. In the time I was privileged to spend with him, he and I discussed our self-hatred as well as our aspirations, our inability to meet the standards we set for ourselves, our moments of vanity, delusion, and self-importance, and we laughed at them and at us. We laughed at the imperfect parts, the unfinished parts, the things we could not articulate, the things we tried and failed at: Jerome had a laugh that encompassed disaster that was bigger than catastrophe.

I will miss his laughter most of all.

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