Journal of Co-operative Studies

Vol 59 No 2, pp. 75-81

https://doi.org/10.61869/SPIH3783

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Mutual aid as lament

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This essay considers the practice of black mutual aid as a form of mortuary politics. It examines a proposal for the creation of a 100-acre cemetery for the black dead that famed writer and anthropologist Zora Neale Hurston sent to famed writer and activist W. E. B. Du Bois in 1945. The cemetery would function as a space for sanctuary, funerary ceremony, and artistic practice. Situating the letter within the history of black mutual aid societies, the essay argues that the interaction between the dead and the living, the purposeful and consequential role the dead play in the life of the living — in other words, mortuary politics — compels us to fundamentally rethink the defining features of mutual aid itself, from its temporality to the communities on which it focuses its care. The assistance in laying the dead to rest was the most important feature of black mutual aid societies since their founding in the early 1600s, and Hurston not only recalls this history of care and resistance, she invites us to reimagine its future.

Mutual Aid as Lament

"The lament is an obituary that has forgotten its manners"
Two Elegies (Cole, 2021, p. 56)

What if we think of mutual aid as care for the dead? By definition, mutual aid is essentially coordinated triage, a purposeful and collective distribution of resources according to relative need. In its more deliberative iterations, it provides the space on which to convene consensus or dissent to the mechanisms of its care. Mutual aid, in short, is a commons in both method and place. Since the early 1600s, black mutual aid as it formed within transatlantic slave economies, from the United States (US) to the British Caribbean, distinguished itself by giving special attention to the dead and to those increasingly proximate to death (so pervasive was this distinction that they were often shorthanded as "burial clubs" (Ergood, 1971, p. 25)). In plantation structures, mutual aid before and after emancipation emerged as a set of operations (co-operations) to mediate and manage, steward, and sustain, relations with the absent. This mortuary dimension of formalised support begs numerous questions significant for what it means to survive captivity, or not, and with profound cultural implications for what it means to create and imagine a world beyond. How does connection to the departed become essential to the survival of the people left behind? These questions carry over to reorienting our understanding of mutual aid at large. What shifts are entailed in how we understand the care that mutual aid produces and extends when that care is directed to the dead as much as to the

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living? What happens to the experience of time? We generally envision mutual aid as forward facing. It establishes security against potential fluxes in a capitalist market. What happens, then, when that security is possible only by way of — and within — a return to the past, when looking forward means looking back?

The death benefit, as it is often called, in black benevolent societies, is remarkably pervasive across the Atlantic slave world. The women-led and centred Saint Lucia Mutual Benefit Association was organised, for instance, “to make provision for the decent burial of deceased members and their lawful dependents [and] to afford members a ready means of social intercourse” (as cited in Maddox, 2024, p. 34). Notice the link between mortuary rites and social wellbeing, the “decency” of the first tied to the quality of the second. Within the US, the prominent Free African Society, formed by Richard Allen and Absalom Jones in Philadelphia, equally prioritised care for the dead, the dying, and the bereaved. They came together in 1787 to “support one another in sickness, and for the benefit of their widows and fatherless children” (Free African Society, 1787, as cited in Douglass, 1862, p. 15). The lesser-known Humane Brotherhood, to take yet another example, was established in 1843 with forty-two members in South Carolina and a similarly stated mission in their founding papers. “We, free dark men of the city of Charleston, do form ourselves into a compact body for the purpose of alleviating each other in sickness and death” (as cited in Hughes Wright & Hughes, 1996, p. 275). No doubt, funerary and chronic health considerations were far from the only concerns that inspired collective assistance. Between their founding in 1600s New England, their apex in the Great Depression of the 1930s, their decline in the 1960s, and their resurgence today, these societies established free adult education programmes, health care clinics, childcare support, political mobilisation for voting rights, and space for communal congregation (Hunt, 2022). But note: as indicated in their names, usually geographic, overhanging all their enterprises was a genealogical imperative to return home: “Africa” was a long way away, “Africa” was right behind them. Allen and Jones, of the Free African Society, had never been. That aside, what I find most striking in the paramount and inaugural aims of the death benefit is the implicit assumption of premature terminality in the very context of sustaining life (the members are already imagined as “fatherless” before they join, the women already imagined as “deceased”). Black mutual aid was as much a pooling of resources as it was of remains.

For the rest of this essay, I’d like to turn to a letter from 1945 that elucidates the stakes of navigating the relationship between sustaining survival and reclaiming the dead. Penned on June 11 with almost extrasensory timeliness, less than six months before the US would enter World War II, the letter was from the enormously gifted writer and anthropologist Zora Neale Hurston, who sent it to one of the most influential intellectuals of the twentieth century, writer and activist W. E. B. Du Bois. Hurston (1945) proposed that Du Bois help construct a cemetery for every “wellknown Negro” [sp.] that would double as a black commons. All prominent blacks would “contribute” to its cultivation. The cemetery would sit on a hundred acres in Florida as a countervailing force to the gratuitous desecration of black lives and their dead, of black living, and its remains. Hurston is most renowned for her novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (Hurston, 1937), a suspenseful bildungsroman about a series of deaths and the life these make possible in the growing female protagonist. By 1945 Hurston had written not only her most famous novel (of five), but also her groundbreaking anthropological study (of two, and a plethora of essays), *Mules and Men* (Hurston, 1935). Du Bois had co-founded the NAACP, the first Pan-African conferences, the *Crisis Magazine*, the Niagara Movement, the first conference on economic co-operation in black American history, and an international network of mutual aid organisations called the Negro Cooperative Guild. Suffice to say, Hurston was well positioned to speak to and defend the cultural moorings of black people. And Du Bois was perfectly poised to actualise her project and garner broad support.

Hurston’s conviction was that this cemetery should be a refuge. “The reason that I suggested,” she wrote toward the close of the letter, “so much as 100 acres was because it would prevent white encroachment” (Hurston, 1945). She believed that this place of a safe-keeping and keeping people safe should be singular in its proportions, a kind of capital city in a state of

mourning and remembrance. It would be “something like Pere la Chaise” (Hurston, 1945), the largest cemetery in Paris. Her ambitions did not stop there. The space would also serve as a landscape for artistic practice: an “artist colony” and a site of general adornment (“it lends itself to decoration easier than any other part of the United States”), a canvas for all forms of creativity. Evoking the voice of *Genesis*, as though to prefigure the plans, she said “Let there be a hall of meeting, and let the Negro sculptors and painters decorate it with scenes from our own literature and life. Mythology and all” (Hurston, 1945). The bedfellows of creativity and mortality, art and loss, would find a new meeting place on unprecedented grounds.

Let’s pan out. The creativity at the heart of Hurston’s co-operative space, concretised by the artist colony, registers the critical role co-operatives have played in black cultural production, from the ways in which they have been imagined in poetry, novels, hip hop, comic strips, personal essays, and more to the authors who went so far as to even establish them (Hunt, 2026). All articulate an im/possible escape, a place just behind them, a place out of reach. Consider one example. Satirist George Schuyler, the most widely recognised black journalist in his day and one of the first writers of black speculative fiction, teamed up with burgeoning activist Ella Baker in 1930 to launch their “Young Negroes’ Cooperative League.” They built into their bylaws their own mortuary rite of passage: in their membership requirement nobody older than thirty-six could join, but Schuyler, their founder and president, was already thirty-five and would go on stewarding them beyond this age, meaning they contemplated an organisational collapse as soon as the organisation began its ascent. And even in its life, they contemplated its expungement. Similarly, Schuyler (1936-1938) would end his serial novel *Black Empire* with the construction of a co-operative commonwealth that bore in its bones the death of his co-operative dream launched with the League (it all but disappeared by 1936): the commonwealth was an imperial masterpiece commandeered by a sultan. It was the very opposite of the mutual aid it evoked, it remembered. My point is twofold: all these projects were massive — in scope and affect. A countryless people longing for country, they pioneered more than individual co-operatives: they, like Hurston, sought to restore, reimagine, create whole lost societies all in one go, using every possible resource they could imagine. And all these projects navigated oceanic loss.

The enormity of Hurston’s (1945) proposal should, therefore, ring no surprise. One way of accounting for its outsized proportions is to address the enormity of the problem motivating them: the inability to locate the lost life Hurston seeks to honour. If blackness in modernity is defined by subjection to general dishonour, gratuitous violence, and genealogical alienation, then how in the same setting can one make space for redress? To what ends would one have to go? “As far as possible,” Hurston (1945) said. “As far as possible, remove the bones of our dead celebrities to this spot.” She continued,

> Let no Negro celebrity, no matter what financial condition they might be in at death, lie in inconspicuous forgetfulness. We must assume that responsibility of their graves being known and honored. You must see what a rallying spot that would be for all that we want to accomplish and do. There one ought also to see the tomb of Nat Turner. Naturally, his bones have long since gone to dust, but that should not prevent his tomb being among us. Fred Douglas and all the rest. (Hurston, 1945)

The problems clearly mounted in the process of sketching out their solutions. It is one thing to build a broad site of memory and rest. It is another to do so without the ability to locate the people you want to remember, to know where they rest at all. No one knows where Nat Turner’s body lies: Turner, the very symbol for black rebellion and the failure of dissent. What could these efforts of memorialisation amount to if not the memorialisation of what cannot be remembered (remembered, re-membered)? After all, Turner’s “tomb” marks a general absence, or to nominalise Hurston’s (1945) description, a “long since gone.” Further and paradoxically, this absence is a “being among us.” Clearly black mutual aid encounters huge stumbling blocks at the nexus of catastrophe and invention, recovery and justice.

The significance of the letter for our times is that it ultimately invites us to dwell within this crisis, rather than trying to step over it. Dwelling in the crisis is what it would take for Hurston’s plans to come true, and perhaps this dwelling is her true plan. Let’s return to the phrases I just

quoted, “the long since gone” as the “being among us” (Hurston, 1945). By reading the latter as equivalent to the first, by arguing that it is not the absence of blackness but black absence that is being commemorated, I am contending that Hurston suggests we think of recovery, and by extension mutual aid, in greater complexity than as a purely, necessarily failed endeavour. Things change depending on who is being cared for, who or what is being recovered. Hurston may not be seeking to recover a life lived at all, but a life that could not have been lived in, permitted to emerge from, the existing historical conditions. To keep with her words, she proposes commemorating the life that could not have possibly been “known,” let alone known “well” (Hurston, 1945). Put plainly, it is not black bodies she wants to remember. It is their disappearance. In a cemetery of, in a sense, open graves, a society of open secrets, mutual aid is the attunement to the meaning of mutual absence.

With implications for how we think of co-operation, Hurston is navigating the dilemma of creating a new world inside a world whose survival requires its exclusion. No wonder her hopes are somewhat fantastical. To the extent a co-operative is an assimilative venture, a struggle for the rights and protections of citizenship otherwise unafforded, then it is always at least two operations in conflict with each other. The impossibility of elevating blacks to the status of a human being, the universal signifier for community and incommensurate value, defines blackness in modernity. Blackness functions as the negation of the human, its necessary counterpart, something the logics of the human cannot obliterate without obliterating itself. Blacks inhabit the contradiction of being included in a polity as the always excluded. So when Hurston (1945) says we have to go “as far as possible” to transcend, resolve, or unsettle this enclosure (literally digging up remains), she’s saying we have to go to its very end, possibility: to meeting point of what cannot be done. What if this antagonism between aspirations for freedom and their impossible conditions, or between, more humbly, maintaining one’s life and losing it, is itself the co-operation that potentiates the imagined (and unimaginable) tomorrow, “the rallying spot ... for all that we want to accomplish and do” (Hurston, 1945)?

The implications of Hurston’s project for the futurity of mutual aid return us to the fact that projection into the future or construction of a new future necessitates a reconstruction of the past. In this vein, Hurston calls us to rethink what memory means in the afterlife of slavery. What, she asks, if the memory of those we lost sustains our survival precisely to the extent it does not operate as memory? Let’s go back to Hurston’s (1945) instruction, “Let no Negro celebrity... lie in inconspicuous forgetfulness.” That word “inconspicuous” stands out in the context with the word “celebrity.” Does she mean to make forgetfulness noticeable, in the open, rather than hidden, “inconspicuous”? A forgotten celebrity, it seems to me, would naturally be quite obviously forgotten. Would the “funerals ... held” in the space, as she writes elsewhere in the letter, correct the issue by foregrounding the failure to remember the dead, this failure to remember as how we honour the dead?

If we grant this implication, then again staying inside the vexed predicament, inside the co-operation here playing out between memory and forgetting, avails a few upsides. Difficult to bear as it may be, one of the virtues is a redefinition of what it means to remember, of what collective or mutual remembrance can be. Instead of a haven for memories that inspire freer futures, Hurston’s mortuary landscape may protect a forgetting that inspires new pasts, that gives access to pasts that refuse representation. It is as though one must forget the life of the departed to re/member the departed at all, the life, it bears repeating, ante and antithetical to the one they lived. If blacks appear in society by way of their erasure, a calculus that benevolent societies too often reenact, then it is on the erasure and on what is erased that their survival im/possibly depends.

It is a tricky thing to imagine an absence as the basis for a commons, and in Hurston’s case, for artistic practice at large. Hurston at first works to create an eco-critical solution, but that too produces more problems, leading her to reinscribe the logics of dispossession and capture in the very “wondrous beauty” she imagines. Instead of a co-operative of simply pooled resources, her intention is to re-source them, gleaning them from putatively new relationships with the environment, rather than from human relationships alone.

> [Florida] lends itself to decoration easier than any other part of the United States. I think that was why Edward S. Bok chose Florida for that world famous Bok Tower ... it is a thing of wondrous beauty. And the thing I want you to note is that two-thirds of the beauty is not in the Tower itself, but in the surroundings. You see, Dr. DuBois, the very woods of Florida afford trees and shrubs free that would cost a fortune north of here, even provided that they could be made to grow. Magnolias, bay, oaks, palms, pines, all free for the taking. Beautiful shrubs while not wild, so plentiful that you could get thousands of cuttings of hibiscus, crotons, oleanders and the like for the mere asking. And don't forget the beautiful, disease and insect repelling camphor tree which grows here so free and quickly. By the time that each wellknown Negro contributed a tree or two, you would have a place of ravishing beauty. (Hurston, 1945)

It is almost overwhelming, certainly enveloping, the description of the flora, "hibiscus, crotons," etc., a list so extensive it leaves no space for conjunction, its commas seeming to have run out of breath. It is possible that the "contribut[ion]" made by the well and the known is not a physical transplanted tree. It is a tree that sprouts from physical remains. Underlying the limits of the cultural imaginary in co-operative formations, whatever redemption Hurston envisions is just as soon lost in the description of its creation. The wonder and the beauty are "all free for the taking" (Hurston, 1945). Restaging the ways in which blackness is always already made available for consumption, the "all" who are "free" in this space lack the capacity to withdraw consent. The plenitude collected is "free for the taking" and obtainable by "the mere asking." Furthermore, the land that generates the collective supernatural and material imagination would cost "a fortune north of here," but here it is "cheap."

Hurston recalls a long history of mutual aid formations trapped in double binds, enclosed within slavery's presumptive logics. Consider again the Free African Society I mentioned above. They were focused almost exclusively on fallen or falling men and, as written in their preamble, only men of "orderly and sober" (Douglass, 1862, p. 15) disposition. Almost all the institutionalised forms of mutual aid, lodges, secret societies, freemasonry clubs, burial societies, and so on, reproduced injurious moral codes. If only there was a way to act that would secure their protection, that would make racially sexed violence "free for the taking" (Hurston, 1945). It is the old story that never ends well: respectability politics contaminating black civic associations, the way into full citizenship, the way out of collective power. Or to keep with Hurston's parlance, adopting dominant values means "*ravishing beauty*" (Hurston, 1945, emphasis mine).

But what makes me pause is less the familiar rehearsal of cultural decorum and proprieties. Reading through the founding documents of mutual aid associations, I am staggered by what happens at the interface between these proprieties and relationships to the dead. Some took these restrictions on self-expression so far as to punitively force kinship ties at the very moment they were most susceptible to loss, at the site of the grave, which is to the moment they needed the gentlest touch. I am thinking of one glaring coercion of social life, the bylaws of the Brown Fellowship Society, a group that was established in 1790 and has persisted remarkably, instructively, into the present. Its membership was limited to mulattos and quadroons, and, as stipulated in Rule XII, to those who attended the funeral processions. As cited in Hughes Wright and Hughes (1996):

> Every member in Charleston shall attend the funeral, with a Black crepe around the left arm, by invitation from the Secretary; and on neglect (if able) to attend, he shall be fined in a sum not exceeding twenty-five cents, payable at the next meeting, unless a good and sufficient excuse be then made. (p. 274)

Mutual aid organisations were no doubt efforts to suture broken kinship ties endemic to the social death of enslavement (kinship in the broad sense of the word). Yet it may go without saying that imposing these ties to the dead and the missing under the threat of punishment not only bespeaks the profound precarity of black social cohesion. It also reanimates, in another form, the machinery of ancestral alienation. To coerce connection is to foreclose it. These symptomatic returns of slavery's assumptive logics, in Hurston, in history, caution us to pause before concluding that black mutual aid exemplified agency, dignity, self-determination, or even momentary triumph over abject conditions. To encounter mutual aid at the nexus of necro-politics is to rethink the limits and possibilities of resistance.

There is one record of Du Bois responding to Hurston's request. He remarks on its practical difficulties and its transgression of even his capacities. "The idea of the cemetery for illustrious Negroes has its attractions but I am afraid that the practical difficulties are too great" (Du Bois, 1945). He suggested contacting Walter White, the president of the NAACP, with whom, he said, "you might be able to carry it through" (Du Bois, 1945). There is no record, however, of Hurston sending her inquiry to anyone else. Nor is there a record of her wrestling with the practical problems of the project. The tragedy is that she became one of the very forgotten celebrities whose legacy she was trying to secure. She died in near penury in 1960. Her papers upon her passing were nearly all burned in the front yard of her almshouse (someone fatefully passing by noticed these were Hurston's papers and put out the flames). Her grave sat beneath bramble and forgotten until novelist Alice Walker rediscovered it in 1973. Yet perhaps Hurston's contribution, in light of these recoveries, to this troublesome terrain of mutual aid is her refusal to resolve the trouble, her insistence we sharpen our attunement to the foreclosures of repair.

Another way of putting this is that black mutual aid laments its own making. Its every assertion of resistance documents its breakdown. Co-operative enterprise arrives brokenly, lamentably. I am reminded of a line by poet Erica Hunt (2020). In her volume Veronica, she writes about black mothers mourning their children slain by the police. About one of these mothers, she says,

> lamenting in an
> appropriate structure has
> rendered her hoarse from
> not screaming. (Hunt, 2020, p. 162)

If Hurston is any sign, black mutual aid laments both the inability to attend to the lost and the no less disquieting incapacity to locate them in the first place. If there's any mutuality and care to enjoy, it may be in bearing this recursive lamentation, bearing this lamentation that cannot speak.

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