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Dr. Marcellus Blount

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News of Blount's passing shocked the literary and academic worlds, including colleagues and students who remembered him as brilliant, revolutionary and compassionate. His scholarship in African-American studies reimagined poetry, pop culture and gender and sexuality studies, particularly Black masculinity.

"We are devastated by the loss of our beloved friend and colleague Marcellus Blount," a statement on the Columbia Department of English and Comparative Literature's website said in part. "This news comes as a terrible blow to everyone who knew, worked with and studied with Marcellus. Our thoughts are with his family and friends, and we will miss him."

Blount, who died in New York last week while on leave for the spring semester, received his bachelor's degree from Williams College in 1980 and his Ph.D. from Yale in 1987. At Columbia, he served as associate professor of English and Comparative Literature, a faculty fellow and former director at the Institute for Research in African-American Studies (IRAAS) and former director of the graduate program in African-American studies.

Dr. Farah Jasmin Griffin, a longtime friend to Blount and the William B. Ransford Professor of English and Comparative Literature and African-American Studies at Columbia, said those who knew that Blount was ill were still "stunned" by his death.

"Until the very last, he was just full of life and joyful," she said. He was "someone who took the scholarly side seriously, took the theory seriously, but also took being in the classroom very seriously ... [He was] very devoted to his students to the very end. He made it all seem joyful."

Upon meeting Blount for the first time in graduate school at Yale, Griffin recalled that the scholar was not callous even though he was a "legend" as a graduate student, she said.

"He was just so kind and generous and always trying to think about how he could help you," Griffin said. This characteristic of Blount stood out to Griffin, who would eventually become his colleague at Columbia years later.

Blount's peers at IRAAS described him in one word - "life" - and added that he "lived and worked in his life in the fullest to the enrichment of all who knew and learned from him."

A pioneer in Black masculinity studies, Blount's work explored the nuances of gender, depictions of Black men in society and racialized masculinity and trauma. Griffin added that Blount was someone who had read James Baldwin "more widely and more deeply than anyone I had met."

Significantly, Blount's work in poetry as a literary scholar set him apart from others in the field.

His article "The Preacherly Text: African American Poetry and Vernacular Performance" was published in *PMLA*, the journal of the Modern Language Association of America (MLA). Blount's works can be also found in *Callaloo*, *American Literary History* and other scholarly journals.

He co-edited the book *Representing Black Men* with Dr. George P. Cunningham, and finished another project titled "Listening for My Name: African-American Men and the Politics of Friendship."

Dr. Paula M. Krebs, MLA's executive director, said that not only was Blount a contributor to PMLA and a member of the MLA's Committee on the Literatures of People of Color, but he also had a "talent for connecting to an audience outside of the academy."

"My colleagues and I at the MLA are deeply saddened to hear about the death of Professor Blount," Krebs said by email. "MLA members whom we have heard from are clearly shaken by the news and have shared how much they loved and admired him. We will miss his voice and his humanity."

Other literary and African-American Studies scholars and students took to social media to express their grief and disbelief in Blount's untimely passing.

"Saddened to learn of the death of Marcellus Blount – whom I knew many years ago as an always kind and compelling colleague," Dr. Deborah E. White, associate professor of English and Comparative Literature at Emory University, wrote on Twitter.

Dr. Rosemary G. Feal, Executive Director Emerita of the MLA and visiting professor at Wellesley College, posted, "Very sad news for the scholarly community. Marcellus Blount, taken too soon."

"So so sad to learn that Dr. Marcellus Blount has passed. He was an incredible professor, revolutionary academic and all-around magnificent person," wrote Sophie Ellman-Golan, deputy head of communications for the Women's March and a former student of Blount. "Rest in power, Dr. Blount. Thank you for everything you taught me. Thank you thank you thank you."

Griffin said that the last time she saw Blount, the faculty of arts and sciences at Columbia were gathering to vote on the departmentalization of an African-American studies program at Columbia.

"He wasn't well," she said, "but he came to that meeting and was there and just was very enthusiastic [and] really supportive of those of us who had been working on this."

On being a pioneer and champion for the program, Griffin added that Blount "just wanted to share his enthusiasm for the material that captivated his imagination with students and colleagues alike, and that one can be a serious intellectual but also a kind and joyful person."

A university-wide memorial for Blount will be held in the fall. Columbia's African-American Studies program plans to host a series of events related to his subjects of interest around the time of the memorial.

A personal goal for Griffin is to institutionalize Blount's legacy through the naming of a building on the university's campus.

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Beyond this, she hopes that others will carry on "his joy for life, his sense of being very positive and of seeing this project that we're all engaged in - this project of African-American Studies, African-American literary studies - as a collective project."

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