

In graphic poem, Charlottesville mayor compares her city to a rapist

A statue of Thomas Jefferson stands in front of the Rotunda at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville. (John McDonnell/The Washington Post)

By

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RICHMOND — Charlottesville Mayor Nikuyah Walker on Wednesday tweeted a poem she'd penned about the college town she leads, one so spare that it approached haiku, and yet abundantly shocking.

“Charlottesville: The beautiful-ugly it is,” it reads. “It rapes you, comforts you in its [graphic word] stained sheet and tells you to keep its secrets.”

Her tweet created an uproar, with critics wondering why any mayor would compare her city to a rapist, much less in such blunt terms. Criticism ranged from earnest condemnation to deadpan skewerings.

Recounting a day of rage, hate, violence and death Christopher J. Scalia, a Virginia resident, former English professor and son of the late Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia, retweeted Walker's poem as if it were a conventional public service announcement: “And now, a word from the mayor of Charlottesville.”

Walker, the city's first Black female mayor, did not respond to requests for comment. But amid the backlash online, she posted a longer version of the poem, absent the most offending word but with the rapist analogy intact. “Charlottesville is void of a moral compass,” the longer version says in part. “It's as if good ole [Thomas Jefferson] is still cleverly using his whip to whip the current inhabitants into submissiveness...Charlottesville is anchored in white supremacy and rooted in racism.” *Two centuries ago, University of Virginia students beat and raped enslaved servants, historians say.*

She indicated that the poem had initially been posted to Facebook but removed, writing: “Is this better? I'm asking the person who reported my short poem to FB.”

Brian Wheeler, a spokesman for the city, declined to comment. So did Larry J. Sabato, a University of Virginia political scientist who said staying mum might be best for town-gown relations.

“I don’t want to get into that,” he said. But supporters also rallied behind the mayor. By Thursday afternoon, the short poem had nearly 1,000 “likes” on Twitter. The long version had more than 300. “Y’all white people are so mad that finally a black person in a position of power is telling y’all what’s up,” Daniel L. Thompson, who grew up in Charlottesville, wrote on Facebook. “She is speaking the facts for millions of us.”

Walker became mayor of her hometown in November, 2017 after fellow members of the City Council appointed her to the post. She’d previously served for years as an advocate for racial and social justice, according to her online biography. It is not clear what prompted the poem, but recently Walker has been embroiled in controversy. She announced in February that she was under investigation for using her city credit card to buy gift cards that she’d given to community members who spoke at City Council meetings, the Daily Progress reported at the time. Walker said then that no one had ever told her that might be considered a misuse of city funds.

“Nikuyah’s commitment has been to authentic inclusion, equity, and progress,” her online biography states. “Her primary goal...is to help create a city that deserves its World Class designation.” *White supremacists made Charlottesville a symbol of racism. Black residents say it still is.*

In the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains, Charlottesville is a deep-blue city of 47,000 where President Biden won nearly 86 percent of the vote in November. It regularly garners accolades for its quality of life. “Healthiest, Happiest City in the U.S.,” NBC’s “Today” show declared in 2017, for instance, while Condé Nast Traveler in 2014 deemed it one of the “Best College Towns for People Who Aren’t in College.”

Some of Walker’s critics on Twitter acknowledged that the city has its flaws. Like many communities across the country, it has been undergoing a painful reckoning over racial injustice. The city’s plan to remove a statue of Confederate Gen. Robert E. Lee from a downtown park led to the deadly Unite the Right rally in 2017. The University of Virginia, the college launched by Jefferson, the Founding Father and enslaver, has been grappling with its historic ties to slavery.

“No community is perfect, including Charlottesville, but progress is being made,” tweeted William Crozer, a U-Va. graduate who served in President Donald Trump’s Office of Intergovernmental Affairs. “What we need now is leadership, which is sadly lacking to the detriment of the community.”

Correction: An earlier version of this article reported incorrectly that Charlottesville Mayor Nikuyah Walker is the city’s first Black mayor. She is the city’s first Black female mayor. The story has been updated. Alice Crites contributed to this report.