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NOTES ON EDUCATION FOR LIBERATION PEDAGOGY IN THE PAN-AFRICAN / BLACK INTELLECTUAL TRADITION*

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I woke up this morning with my mind
stayed on freedom. . .
I'm walking and talking with my mind. . .
I'm preaching and teaching with my mind. . .
stayed on freedom. . .
African American Spiritual

(Woke Up this Morning with My Mind Stayed on Jesus)

African American Studies gave me the confidence to respond critically in favor of my own education when, as a student at Stanford University, I experienced numerous examples of curriculum violence.

—Joyce E. King

ABSTRACT: The article analyzes the North American context and strategies of the past and present Black American liberation. The author argues that despite the terror experienced by Black Americans during the process of slavery, in the struggle for civil rights, and in overcoming institutionalized racism, in their daily lives they experienced forms of psychic resilience nourished by the spirituality of the Black people, their thought informed by the Spirit. The collective courage of Black Americans and liberation pedagogy in the freedom struggle emerged out of this spiritually informed thought. All of this can be understood as an essentially liberating educational process. The Pan-African/Black intellectual tradition, understood as education for the pedagogy of liberation, offers a theoretical lens for the analysis and interpretation of this movement and struggle for freedom. This interpretive lens is absent from the curriculum and the professional

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* ORIGINAL VERSION.

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preparation of educators and researchers in the United States. The author discussed the activism of Pan-African intellectual and Guyanese historian Walter Rodney (1942-1980) to synthesize this theoretical lens.

Keywords: Education. North American Black people. Pan-Africanism.

NOTAS EM EDUCAÇÃO PARA A PEDAGOGIA DA LIBERTAÇÃO NAS TRADIÇÕES PAN-AFRICANAS /INTELECTUAIS NEGRAS

RESUMO: O artigo analisa o contexto norte-americano e as estratégias da luta de libertação dos negros norte-americanos. Discute que, apesar do terror experimentado pelos negros norte-americanos no processo da escravidão, na luta pelos direitos civis e pela superação do racismo institucionalizado, eles experimentavam em suas vidas diárias, formas de resiliência psíquica nutridas pela espiritualidade do povo negro, ou seja, o pensamento informado pelo Espírito. Desse pensamento surgiu a coragem coletiva na luta. Tudo isso pode ser entendido como um processo educacional essencialmente libertador. A tradição intelectual pan-africana/negra, entendida como educação para a pedagogia da libertação, oferece uma lente teórica para a análise e interpretação desse movimento e luta por liberdade. Esta lente interpretativa está ausente do nosso currículo e da preparação profissional de educadores e pesquisadores. O ativismo do intelectual pan-africano e historiador guianense Walter Rodney (1942-1980) sintetiza esta lente teórica.

Palavras chave: Educação. Negros norte-americanos. Pan-africanismo.

INTRODUCTION

What can we learn from reflecting upon a theoretical interpretation in the Pan-African/Black intellectual tradition of the Spirit/spiritually informed thought as well as the practice of education for liberation pedagogy that fueled the civil rights/Black freedom struggle? The civil rights movement's voting rights and desegregation campaigns, part of the larger Black freedom struggle's mobilizations against discrimination and dispossession are instructive: movement campaigns and mass mobilizations that secured legislation to counter decades of blatant disfranchisement, economic deprivation, and the violent reign of dehumanizing lynching and rape that continued after slavery was formally ended consisted of and were sustained by various forms of liberation pedagogy. Out of mass church meetings, where sacred songs like—"I woke up this morning with my mind stayed on Jesus"—expressed humanity-affirming thought, citizenship schools and freedom schools evolved in the context of community resistance

as the people sang a new song: “Woke up this morning with my mind stayed on freedom.” This movement anthem embodied Black people’s collective vision of liberation (KING, 2016).

Notwithstanding the sheer terror they experienced in their daily lives, the forms of psychic resilience that Black people’s spirituality nurtured—Spirit-informed thought that was the fertile ground out of which collective courage in the struggle emerged—can be understood as a quintessentially liberating *educational* process. The Pan-African/Black intellectual tradition offers a theoretical lens for the analysis and interpretation of the movement/freedom struggle as education for liberation pedagogy. This interpretive lens is missing from our curriculum, from what is taught in schools and it is missing from the professional preparation of educators and researchers.

WALTER RODNEY SPEAKS: THREE KEY POINTS

The scholarship and activism of the Pan-African intellectual /freedom fighter, Guyanese historian Walter Rodney (1942-1980) epitomizes this theoretical lens. Rodney was born into a working class family in (British Guiana) Guyana. A brilliant student, champion debater and athlete, he attended the University of the West Indies in Jamaica on a scholarship. He graduated in 1963 with a prize in History. At the age of 24, Rodney earned a Ph.D. in African history from London’s School of Oriental and African Studies. His dissertation was a study of the slave trade, followed a few years later by his most influential book, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (RODNEY, 1972/2011). First published in 1972, this research broke new ground intellectually by showing how the intentional exploitation of the African continent laid the foundation for the development of Europe. The description on the back of the 2011 edition of the book is illuminating:

“How Europe Underdeveloped Africa” helped to transform the thinking of a generation of activists around the world. Using a concrete analysis Rodney examines the impact of slavery and colonialism on the continent, thereby laying the foundation for strategies for genuine liberation. This publication should not only inspire a new generation of activists and scholars but also help in the development of updated strategies for challenging neo-liberal globalization and neo-colonialism (RODNEY, 2014).

Walter Rodney’s intellectual work was linked to political struggle while developing his thinking in close relation—“grounding” or “reasoning”—with urban activist youth, Rastafarians

in Jamaica and workers in his home country. He epitomized the radical intellectual-activist whose scholarship focused on analyzing racism and class exploitation toward decolonizing African and Diaspora societies and overturning ideological narratives of African history and political economy. In addition to his influence as a pioneering scholar, as a political activist Rodney's teaching and activism—whether in the Caribbean or Dar Es Salaam in Tanzania where he also taught—reached everyday people outside the academy through his community “groundings” approach to mass education. He took his message of African liberation, people's power for self-emancipation and African consciousness directly to the people. Recognized as a revolutionary thinker and a revolutionary activist, Rodney was assassinated in Guyana in 1980.

In the aftermath of the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in 1968, from 1969-1983 a collective of African Diaspora activist-intellectuals established a think-tank in Atlanta, Georgia to further the Black freedom struggle (WHITE, 2011). In 1975 Professor Rodney participated in a roundtable discussion at the Institute of the Black World with Vincent Harding, Robert Hill, William Strickland and others. In *Walter Rodney Speaks*, the record of Rodney's participation in the Roundtable, Editor Howard Dodson stresses our collective responsibility for Walter Rodney's legacy. It is our responsibility to promote the continuing study of his life and making what we learn from Rodney available for study and careful assessment (RODNEY, 1974:1990).

In his broader discussion of race and class in Black struggle, Rodney stressed three key ideas. First, Rodney expressed his **confidence in the people's capacity** to create a movement, to create change. Second, he explained the importance of **distortion in scholarship**—“that it was necessary to come to grips with the way in which one's being and the presentation of one's being was so hopelessly distorted by the sources to which one went for scholarship.” On the other hand, Rodney explained what he found so “intellectually and emotionally appealing” about historical analysis in the Pan-African /Black intellectual tradition—like C.L.R. James's *Black Jacobins* and Eric Williams's *Capitalism and Slavery* (RODNEY, 1990, p. 13-15). Third, Rodney emphasized the dual **responsibility of those in the intellectual and the academic class**. As “guerilla intellectuals” we have the responsibility to transform the institutions we are in and to engage in precise analysis directed toward accountability to working people—to the Black community at large while being open to allies.

Rodney's statement on this third key point is worth quoting at length: the first level of struggle for the intellectual is in his/her own sphere of operation... our task is mastering bourgeois knowledge from a different perspective.

This is to say,

...our first responsibility is to address ourselves to our own people—this is how we analyze where we're at. . . [This is] how we define our own situation[and then how we]help others in a different section of the black world to reflect upon their own specific experience. (p. 81)

And his explanation from the last section of the book about his understanding of the intellectual struggle is also worth presenting at length:

The struggle to which I am trying to refer when I use that concept of the "guerrilla intellectual". . . is where the class question comes in, not by running in there and thinking that our metaphysics are better than their metaphysics, but by understanding that there is a science in the analysis of society and that we should utilize the opportunity within these particular structures of learning and ideas to subvert the intention of the capitalists to reproduce us as members of their service class. The petite bourgeoisie is a service class, a managerial class with respect to ideas and administration. (p. 114)

Rodney goes on to note: "We need a more positive orientation than simply reacting to white scholarship". He observed that wherever we are in operation, "in black schools or in white schools" or independent institutions (like IBW), our constituency is first and foremost a black constituency. For Rodney, our task is "firstly to influence black people, young black minds above all else". And, according to Rodney: ". . .in doing so, we have to begin to develop a way of perceiving our own history and our own society"(p. 114).

REFLECTIONS ON RODNEY'S LEGACY: CONFIDENCE IN PEOPLES' CAPACITY

With this sense of our collective responsibility in mind, I offer some personal reflections on the significance of Rodney's place in the Black/Pan-African intellectual tradition.

1) **Confidence in people's capacity** is linked to our understanding of ourselves as African people—as one big family—our shared heritage, which includes consciousness of our struggles for justice as African Americans in the context of the United States and in the broader context of the Americas—north and south—as well as the Caribbean and Africa.

2) **Education for Liberation** involves re-writing distortions in scholarship, textbooks, and the curriculum that is being taught in schools.

3) **Staying Human** refers to education that affirms our cultural centeredness, our humanity, and rejection of the colonized mentality—especially claims that have undermined our humanity.

I can recall key moments in my life that have impressed the importance of our identity as one big family of African people upon me. I grew up in California—as a very young child, before I went to school, I had a baby sitter who was different from the other elders in my community. I remember that her hair was completely white. She lived by herself in a mobile trailer; she smoked a pipe, and she called me “Jiyce.” Her name was Miss Laurine. Years later, after I left home and I was a student at Stanford University, my professor, St. Clair Drake, brought “Bobby” Hill to talk with us about his research on the Honorable Marcus Garvey. He was a graduate student then. Now Professor Robert Hill is the pre-eminent scholar on Garvey (GARVEY & HILL, 1987). As we were walking across campus that day, Bobby said to me, “You know, back in my country, Jamaica, we would call you Jiyce.” Only then did I realize that my baby sitter in my hometown was also from Jamaica. I never knew how she came to live in our community—back in the 1950s --a Jamaican woman living by herself among Black Americans. She was like a second mother for me. That experience made me feel like a daughter in the larger African family.

EDUCATION FOR LIBERATION

Robert Hill also had a prominent role in the Institute of the Black World. The IBW had a significant role in the development of Black/Africana Studies programs in the United States and the IBW was a space where Walter Rodney made a significant contribution (RODNEY, 1974; 1990).

St. Clair Drake also brought C.L.R. James to Stanford University to talk with us. Our introduction to the Black/Pan-African intellectual tradition that includes liberation thinking and theorizing is well-represented in the work of C.L.R. James. He is widely recognized for his book on the Haitian Revolution, *The Black Jacobins*. However, his 1970 essay published in the *Amistad 1* anthology was another bombshell for my consciousness (James, 1970). The essay is titled: “The Atlantic Slave Trade and Slavery: Some Interpretations of Their Significance in the Development of the United States and the Western World.” James wrote: “Every people, every race, has

passed through a stage of slavery” (p. 119). This simple declaration was profoundly liberating.

Then, describing Africa before European enslavement and African people’s resistance to enslavement, James also made this powerful observation: “The capacities of men were always leaping out of the confinements of the system” (p. 136). But here is the even more powerful observation. James wrote:

One of the great underestimations in the whole sphere of historiography is undoubtedly the contribution of the slaves to the making of America as a civilization . . . The element of order in the barbarism (of slavery) was this: the rationalization of a labor force upon which the whole process of colonization depended had the African at its most essential point. If he/she had not been able to work or sustain himself or learn the language or maintain cooperation in his social life, the whole question of America as a distinct civilization could never have arisen. We might then be talking about a sort of New Zealand or perhaps Canada. (p. 150)

In other words, “the fate of America had depended upon the blacks as laborers. . . To give the slave his actual historical due is to alter one’s notion about the course of civilization itself” (p. 150).

James concludes by observing that justifications for American slavery, “whether borrowed from the Bible or the instances of Greece and Rome, raise a compelling challenge to the whole matter of what indeed constitutes a civilization” (p. 164). This is the crux of the matter: His interpretation of the historical record not only gives us our “due” when teaching and writing history, but he provides a theoretical interpretation that has the power to alter our consciousness about what it means to be “civilized”.

Reading James in the early 1970s, when I was an undergraduate, was indeed an intellectually and emotionally liberating experience—because we had been made to feel ashamed of what has happened to African Americans—namely enslavement. This “reading” of enslavement is still missing from the education system today—in the United States and globally. That is why I can identify so strongly with Rodney’s point about C.L.R. James’s scholarship, which was also very important to his own thinking and development as a scholar-activist: James’s analysis was both “intellectually and emotionally” appealing.

THE AFRICAN AMERICAN CONTEXT—GOING A LITTLE DEEPER

I want to go a bit deeper here into particularities of the African American context with regard to the importance of this emotional aspect of the role of knowledge in the Black/Pan-African

intellectual tradition for the development of our consciousness as African people. Rodney advised African people where ever we are to use this knowledge to analyze our own particular situation.

Rodney spoke (and wrote) with great insight about class *and* race—categories of analysis that remain sources of conflict among intellectuals and activists throughout the Black/Africana world. We can think of the conflict between the Black Panthers for Self-Defense and Maulana Karenga’s US organization, for example, or recent debates between Cornell West and Molefi Asante about Afrocentricity, or the way some activist scholars on the left who are supporting the Movement for Black Lives nevertheless privilege social class or feminism, for that matter, over racial identity. Debate and critiques of the just-released blockbuster Hollywood film, “Black Panther,” also reflect another perceived duality represented by King T’Challa’s decision to “accommodate” as compared to Killmonger’s preference to fight white supremacy with violence. What is critical is the prevailing “Afro-phobia” in our society and abroad.

The United Nations Working Group of Experts on people of African descent used the term “Afro-phobia” in their report on their fact-finding visit to the United States in 2016. “At the invitation of the government of the United States” the UN’s Working Group of Experts on People of African descent, then chaired by Frantz Fanon’s daughter, Mireille Fanon Mendès-France (from France), visited Washington, D.C., Baltimore, Maryland, Jackson, Mississippi, Chicago, Illinois and New York City on a fact-finding mission January 19-26, 2016. The media reported their findings under banner news headlines such as: “U.N. Experts Seem Horrified By How American Schools Treat Black Children” and “UN Committee Urges US Government to Pay Reparations for Slavery.”

The Final Report the Working Group of Experts submitted to the Thirty-third Session of the Human Rights Council of the UN General Assembly includes a focus on structural barriers ranging from criminal justice, police brutality, housing discrimination, food insecurity, to school closings and disparities in access to health and employment, as well as reparations for slavery (Report of the Working Group of Experts, 2016). For example, “to assist the United States in its efforts to combat all forms of racism, racial discrimination, Afrophobia, xenophobia and related intolerance. . .” the report recommends, among various life and death matters pertaining to mass incarceration, police killings of unarmed African Americans with apparent state impunity and racial discrimination in the justice

system, as well, making sure curricula “appropriately reflect the history of the transatlantic slave trade in Africans, enslavement and segregation” (Number 118). The Report states:

In school curricula, the historical facts concerning the period of colonization, the transatlantic slave trade in Africans, and enslavement, which have been crucial to the contemporary organization of American society, are not sufficiently covered in all schools. The curricula in some states fail to address adequately the root causes of racial inequality and injustice. This contributes to the structural invisibility of African Americans. (Report of the Working Group of Experts, 2016, Number 46)

One of the most emotional aspects of school knowledge that continues to wound African Americans is the narrative of slavery. Children are still painfully challenged and alienated by the false narrative that our “own brothers and sisters”—Africans—sold our ancestors into slavery. African-centered scholarship corrects this distortion of the historical record—but the damaging narrative persists.¹ Scholars have begun to emphasize that the way “slavery” is taught in the United States is fraught with distortion and missing information. Asa Hilliard was correct to warn us that we “should not start our story with slavery”.

THE MEANING OF BLACKNESS: LEARNING BY MIND AND HEART

Embracing our “blackness” consciously and conscientiously is an antidote to “Afro-phobia” and anti-black ideological knowledge. For African Americans during the 1960s and 1970s, engaging with concrete analyses of Blackness, which was affirming and liberating, was particularly important with respect to recovering our human dignity. This is because of the curriculum violence we experienced as cultural assaults in academia, in school curricula, and social life in America (IGHODAR & WIGGAN, 2010). Thus, we can appreciate the significance of James Brown singing “I’m Black and I’m Proud.” This affirmation also relates to what Walter Rodney said with regard to his work as a scholar-activist: “I still see the constituency (for my work) as first and foremost being a black constituency.”

C.L.R. James’s writing constituted what Rodney described as a *nationalist* breakthrough. Another powerful analysis along these lines in *Amistad 2*, written by the critic and social historian Mel Watkins (1971), which I read during this period is titled: “The Lyrics of James Brown: Ain’t It Funky Now, or Money Won’t Change Your

Lickin' Stick". Of course, like so many of my generation, I had actually *experienced* James Brown's dynamic "dance and show" live. In those days you could *dance* at the show—but I had never read an intellectual *analysis* of James Brown's performances as artistry and an interpretation of the social meaning and philosophical significance of his lyrics as poetry from the intellectual perspective of *blackness* as thought and cultural praxis. Watkins wrote:

The poetry of James Brown pales under the icy lens of ivory-tower objectivity . . . What his songs characterize is the physical, emotional and down-front nature of black life. . . For most white and whitenized-black listeners the phenomenon is baffling, even threatening. Their reaction, of course, is only a testament to Brown's talent, for it reflects the expressive intensity of his music. He creatively conjures up an aura, an image that is often as despised and feared as the community that it defines . . . It reflects the life style of what LeRoi Jones has called the "lowest placement" of American society, the bad niggers, the blackest segment of Afro-America. . . The audience to whom James Brown appeals most—the majority, or grassroots segment of the black community [demeaned as uncivilized]—is antithetical to America's mainstream society in both lifestyle and point of view. . . (p. 23) [However] From the rape of black women and mutilation of both black males and females during slavery, through post-Emancipation exploitation and lynchings and onto the casual present-day stirrings of quasi-genocidal tendencies and outright flaunting of "civilized, democratic principles," even the most "primitive" eye can spot the sham. . . (WATKINS, 1972, p. 26)

Taking our culture seriously as a site of struggle and intellectual analysis gave us a new feeling about ourselves and what we could accomplish. The Pan-African/Black intellectual tradition offered us then and still offers possibilities for liberating education and consciousness. As African people, we learn by mind *and* heart. That is African ontology (KING & SWARTZ, 2018).

The African American Studies programs that students in my generation had brought about - inspired by Pan-African intellectual-activists like Walter Rodney - transformed higher education. Civil rights movement activists created freedom schools in Black communities not only in the South but across the United States that have left an enduring legacy as models of liberating education (HOUSE, 2012; PERLSTEIN, 2005). Through our intellectual activism, Black Studies became a site for transformative knowledge within the university. In this intellectual and activist space, we forged our consciousness as African people. African American Studies is where we engaged scholars and scholarship that gave us confidence in the capacity of Black people to create change, as Rodney understood so well, based on analyses and interpretations of our history and culture centered in African perspectives (KING, 2016).

STAYING HUMAN: REJECTING IDEOLOGICAL HEGEMONY

Today, young people continue to be mis-educated about our history and our heritage, particularly when it comes to slavery (KING, 1992). A recent study documents how students are being taught that Africans were responsible for slavery. A teacher told a predominately Black class:

Most people don't know that the Africans back in Africa had tribes and when they went to war, they would take the other soldiers they beat and sell them or give them off to whoever wanted or paid for them And that's how we came over here (THORNHILL, 2016, p. 1142).

And the student has no other point of reference or intellectual recourse than to accept this partial and distorted version of our history. The historical reality of African people's enslavement is much more complex. The hegemonic narrative not only ignores the long history of Europeans enslaving each other before they became "white" (whether Vikings, Britons, Greeks and Romans), it omits an accurate account of how the brutal exploitation and dehumanization of Africans and Indigenous people that made the extraordinary wealth of Europe and her colonies in the Caribbean, Brazil, and the Americas possible (HORNE, 2018; RODNEY 1972/2014). As Thornhill further explains:

US history can be used to cultivate in adolescents of all races the belief that White Americans bear no particular responsibility for and gain no unique benefit from historical racial oppression or its contemporary effects. And, in this case, it is because Black Americans' ancestors were at least equally as responsible for the transatlantic slave trade as Europeans (p. 1142-1143).

Staying human is about learning to become "intellectual guerillas" in order to resist such ideological knowledge and use what we learn for the benefit of our community (CRAWFORD & PATTERSON, 2016; KING, 2005, 2016; MCKITTRICK, 2006; WYNTER, 2003).

Ama Mazama, one of the foremost thinkers advancing the Afrocentric Paradigm in research and education practice, notes:

Afrocentricity... contends that our main problem is precisely our usually unconscious adoption of the Western worldview and perspective and their attendant conceptual framework (MAZAMA, 2003, p. 4).

Molefi Asante, author of *The Afrocentric Idea*, emphasizes cultural centeredness as the necessary corrective to regain "our own platforms, stand with victorious consciousness in our own cultural spaces," and believe "that our way of viewing the universe is just as valid as any" (ASANTE, 2003, p. 41.)

In conclusion, this precept actually informs teaching and research in the Pan-African/Black intellectual scholar-activism tradition of education for liberation that Rodney represents so well. In his book on Walter Rodney, Rupert Lewis (1998), professor of Political Thought in the Department of Government at the University of the West Indies, wrote and I concur:

The clues to Rodney's appeal may be found not simply in the status derived from his academic achievements but in his personal conduct, ability to connect history and contemporary politics, and his articulateness. . .[and the way] he helped to clarify the past and challenge the interpretations of colonial and bourgeois historians (p. 86).

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NOTES

¹ See Molefi Kete Asante's discussion: "Henry Louis Gates Is Wrong about African Involvement in the Slave Trade" (<http://www.asante.net/articles/44/afrocentricity/>). Also, Sylvia Wynter reminds us: "There were no 'Africans' then"—the nations of people on the continent who were involved did not see themselves in Pan-African terms. See J. King (1992) "Diaspora Literacy and Consciousness in the Struggle against Miseducation in the Black Community," *Journal of Negro Education*, 61(3), 317-340.

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