

# DIARY OF AN ANGRY BLACK MAN: MY *CURRERE* JOURNEY WITHIN THE CURRICULUM OF HIP HOP CULTURE AND THE LIFE OF MALCOLM X

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I couldn't believe it. There I was, wrapping up my first year of a doctoral program—a PhD program! Being educated as a Black male in America, I constantly feel the pressure to prove my worth in a society that ignores the legitimacy of my very existence. If someone had told me years ago that I was destined for a doctoral program or would be admitted to any college for that matter, I don't know how much I would've found their prophetic claim to be credible. Sitting at my laptop, patiently waiting on some profound thoughts to make their way onto the computer screen for a paper that was assigned, I received a text from my little sister Ashley. It was a picture message. Ashley had sent me a photo of myself from January of 1993 that, to this day, is attached to the refrigerator inside of my parents' home in DeSoto, Texas. The photo sits inside a flat, hand-crafted frame. Above the photo of 4 year old Courtney RaShad Allen are the words "Courtney's Dream." Below the photo is a sentence that I assume is a direct quote from my past self: "I want to be a big firefighter."

Ashley asked, "What happened to you being a firefighter?" Immediately, I thought about how my Black male experience of the curriculum may have shaped my thoughts

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and ideas to no longer aspire to be a big firefighter. Maxing out at 5 feet and 6 inches, by the age of sixteen, my hopes of being a “big” firefighter may have been genetically impossible, but what was it that really changed those desires I once had? Jackson (1968/1990) suggested that part of learning how to live in school involves learning how to give up desire, as well as how to wait for its fulfillment (p. 15). I thought about *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, reflecting on the story of “Malcolm’s Dream”—when an eighth-grade student named Malcolm Little shared his desires of being a lawyer with his teacher, only to be met with the following response: “...you’ve got to be realistic about being a nigger. A lawyer—that’s no realistic goal for a nigger” (p. 37-38).

Woodson (1933/1996) argued, “There would be no lynching if it did not start in the schoolroom” (p. 3). While I never experienced such direct denial of my desires from an educator, as young Malcolm did, I have encountered, through observations of others and personally, subtle nuances of disregard for Black life in classrooms. In response to Carter G. Woodson’s argument, if our students are being murdered in schools, by way of schooling, and beyond the walls of our educational institutions, how do we as educators determine what kind of curriculum work is imperative in order to convince upcoming generations of students that liberation is their human right—when they are witnessing via the Black Lives Matter movement, history, social media, etc. the refusal of that right to so many who do not fit the heteronormative, Eurocentric ideas and ideals?

This is the “fire” that we, as educators, have to put out. “Just as the official school curriculum represents a dominant onto-epistemological perspective, so too does hip hop” (Baszile, 2009, p. 6). According to Bailey (2014), “Hip hop, one of the most far-reaching of post-modern insurgencies, is mistakenly tagged solely as an art form. In essence, it appears in every sense of the word to be a revolution and a renaissance” (p. 103). From the underground hip hop that is created, circulated, and consumed by the marginalized to the mainstream million-dollar records, the curriculum of hip hop culture is the water hose that has given a voice, through counterstories, to many who have been silenced by a burning societal problem. Living in a delicate time, fueled by racial tensions, Malcolm X was the epitome of an angry Black man long before he was posthumously recognized as revolutionary. The “homemade education” detailed in *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* and hip hop culture are just a couple of examples of counter-curriculum work that can be used to challenge dominant ways of knowing and validating other truths. Furthermore, understanding the contradictory relationship between the traditional school curriculum and that of hip hop culture is a fundamental precursor to raising and addressing important questions (Baszile, 2009). One predominant question posed by Pinar and Grumet (1976) is: “What has been and what is now the nature of my educational experience?” (p. 52). What happened to my dream?

### THE LIFE OF MALCOLM X AND THE CURRICULUM OF HIP HOP CULTURE

You going over niggas heads, Lu (Dumb it down)  
 They telling me they don’t feel you (Dumb it down)  
 We ain’t graduate from school, nigga (Dumb it down)  
 Them big words ain’t cool, nigga (Dumb it down)  
 -“Dumb it Down,” Lupe Fiasco (2007)

As I return to the past to capture what might have happened to my dream, in this present moment, I arrive at my earliest memories of learning to “dumb it down” during my elementary years. Ravitch (2010) alleged that the American public education system is in peril due to the overemphasis on testing and choice, which she argues undermines education. As a student who is a product of that system, my primary and secondary years of schooling (as most public schools still are today) used standardized test scores as the core measure of school quality, accountability, and student success. A few scholars had warned in 2000 (my sixth grade year) that the gains made in test scores in Texas were a mirage; they said the testing system actually caused rising numbers of dropouts, especially among African American and Hispanic students, many of whom were held back repeatedly and quit school in discouragement (Ravitch, 2010, p. 96). While I had managed to attain a perfect score on these state standardized tests, I witnessed many of my peers enrolled with me in our predominately Black school struggling to succeed in the same manner. Their discouragement led to teasing students like me, who were recognized for our “academic excellence,” for “acting white” and provided an early lesson on how to dumb it down. Malcolm, known in Harlem as the hustler they called Detroit Red, explained,

so many of those so-called “upper-class” Negroes are so busy trying to impress on the white man that they are “different from those others” that they can’t see they are only helping the white man to keep his low opinion of *all* Negroes. (p. 109)

Scholars have recently examined how Black men are socialized to value sports over academics at a young age (Harper, 2018). My love for my community outweighed my love for schooling, and on through high school, a change would take place in my educational journey. I would continue to dumb it down, as I only needed a C average to play sports and have my street knowledge legitimized by my “homeboys.”

“You are now about to witness the strength of street knowledge” (N. W. A., 1988). This classic line from N.W.A. could have been a statement made to Mr. Ostrowski after he shared with Malcolm the foolishness of his aspirations to be an attorney. “It was then that I begin to change—inside” (X & Haley, 1965, p. 38). During his time, Malcolm was highly criticized and misrepresented by the media for his rebellious nature and attitude. Initially, and still today by some, hip hop was often criticized for its rebellious nature, promotion of violence, and not being as infinitely rich in aesthetics and emotion as other genres of music. Many Blacks in America recognize this rejection of hip hop as a systemic attempt to exclude our cultural narrative, creating a hip hop subculture through resistance. Ironically, we can credit Mr. Ostrowski as the one who gave birth to Malcolm’s resistance. Similarly, N.W.A. resisted by expressing through their music a critical outlook that countered the narrative being used by the media during that time. Since its inception, hip hop has struggled within a power structure, but it is in that struggle that hip hop culture was established and has been maintained. Likewise, it can be seen that the angry Black man Malcolm X had been perceived to be was socially constructed by a society that perpetuated the disgust, disdain, and disregard of Black life, beginning with his contradictory relationship with the traditional school curriculum.

In an effort to distinguish some of the terms that can often get conflated, it is imperative that I define those central to the rest of this *currere* journey: curriculum, education, and schooling. While it is important to acknowledge that there is not a consensus within the field of curriculum studies on the definition of curriculum, I would like to highlight the definition used by Au (2012):

Ultimately, and in sum, the curriculum can be conceived of as the tool that structures the accessibility of knowledge in environmental form, where framing and classification, respectively, communicate the accessibility and structure of knowledge. (p. 49)

Similarly, there is no universal definition of education. Therefore, if curriculum structures the accessibility of knowledge, then knowledge obtained through a particular curriculum, whether it is the traditional school curriculum, the curriculum of hip hop culture, or some other form of curriculum, can be considered education. Furthermore, Woodson (1933/1996) warned of the miseducation by way of schooling:

The same educational process which inspires and stimulates the oppressor with the thought that he is everything and has accomplished everything worthwhile, depresses and crushes at the same time the spark of genius in the Negro by making him feel that his race does not amount to much and never will measure up to the standards of other peoples. (p. 5)

Schools represent one of the educational environments in which curriculum finds itself situated. In these schools, students may be both educated and miseducated, just as Malcolm was miseducated in the eighth grade and I was in my primary and secondary schools. Two burning questions are: What does curriculum look like when Black lives matter, and how do we fill the void that currently exists? While the curriculum of hip hop culture is not the sole solution to a larger societal problem, it does provide an alternative to traditional schooling and access to education. Moreover, hip hop artists from all eras have been critical of education solely by a way of schooling.

### WHAT'S BEEF?

A project minded individual, criminal tactics  
 Us Black kids born with birth defects, we hyperactive  
 Mentally sex-crazed, dysfunctional, they describe us  
 They liars, at the end of the day, we're fuckin' survivors...  
 My junior high school class, wish I stayed there  
 Blamin' society, mad, it wasn't made fair  
 I would be Ivy League if America played fair  
 -"Triple Beam Dreams," Nas (2012)

So what's hip hop's beef with education by way of schooling? "What's Beef?" is a song by written hip hop artist, The Notorious B.I.G. (also known as Biggie Smalls) that is believed to have been written to describe the conflict between the rapper and his friend turned rival, Tupac Shakur. Only three years apart, my sister and I had our fair share of beef growing up. Eventually, Malcolm X would find himself beefing with "the white man" and other prominent leaders during the Civil Rights Movement. Through counterstories, hip hop artists have used their platform to address the beef with education by way of schooling. Counterstories are a way to both "uncover the subjugated stories of the marginalized and a strategy for analyzing the stories of the marginalized and as a strategy for analyzing the stories that work to maintain racial and other forms of domination" (Baszile, 2008, p. 260).

For another example, Nas, one of the most socially conscious rappers from the early years of hip hop, was featured on Rick Ross' single, *Triple Beam Dreams*.

A couple of points can be taken away from Nas' rhymes. First, Nas has his own regressive moment as he goes on to mention his desire for education and expresses a critical view of the presumption of equity in education by referencing his potential admission into one of the Ivy League institutions that sit atop America's educational, hegemonic hierarchy. Coming out of high school as an "average" student, as reflected in my grades and placement in my graduating class, college was an afterthought for me. I enrolled into a Historically Black College and University (HBCU). HBCUs carry with them stigmas of being associated with Black, hip hop culture. While an Ivy League education might have changed the trajectory of my present life, I found being educated in an affirming and empowering, predominately Black academic setting far more rewarding. Initially, I planned to transfer after my first year because of how many "educated" people questioned the legitimacy of these institutions. These institutions are undervalued in American culture because Black people themselves have been undervalued in America for so long. Having matriculated at two other types of institutions, in hindsight, I realize there is more to higher education than institutional rank. Ravitch (2010) explained that, when we define what matters in education only by what we can measure, we are in trouble. Everything that matters cannot be quantified. There is more to education than the things we can turn into quantitative data. Beyond endowments and facilities, there lies a socio-psychological benefit of being in an environment where you are the racial subject rather than the racial object.

Secondly, Nas begins his verse detailing the preconceived deficit narrative of Black children that stems from being the racial object. This shapes the ideas and ideals of some teachers inside our school classrooms (as seen with Mr. Ostrowski and Malcolm Little) and, consequentially, impacts their effectiveness to work with children of color. I, too, had a "Mr. O moment" in graduate school, where I was no longer in a predominately Black academic setting. Upon completion of coursework, master's students were to complete a comprehensive exam. The exam was comprised of four essays on various topics that had been covered throughout the program. I worked diligently on my comprehensive exam, refining and revising my writing until I felt comfortable submitting my work. While waiting on my results, I was informed by one of the only two Black doctoral students that my advisor questioned if I had received assistance writing my comprehensive exam from either of them. Immediately, I was furious, having been misrepresented as someone incapable of doing the work necessary to earn a master's degree.

However, I also found validation in my advisor's misrepresentation of me. It led me to consider that perhaps I was just a damn good writer. Royster (2016) stated that hip hop exists in a struggle between the will to become an agent of justice and submission to external pressure to conform to a pre-constructed narrative. Similarly, Black males struggle to exist and resist within a pre-constructed deficit narrative. The overwhelming majority of published literature on Black male students inside and outside of the classroom focuses on reinforced deficits that highlight inadequacies, instabilities, violence, and underperformance. By further validating the collective marginalization of a people within an American educational structure, Nas challenges this kind of misrepresentation.

Understanding curriculum also requires some attention to how we understand consciousness (Au, 2012). The curriculum of hip hop culture raises the consciousness of its students by focusing on the murdering of Black bodies that takes place inside of the classroom (Woodson, 1933/1996) and outside of the classrooms, while the traditional school curriculum continues to refuse to address either. From homeboy to Harlemiter, Detroit Red to hustler, Malcolm was "schooled well" in street knowledge,

which added to his “homemade education” and essentially shaped his consciousness and ways of understanding the curriculum of life (X & Haley, 1965). Eventually, the street life caught up with Malcolm, and he found himself trapped in prison. However, it was in prison that yet another metamorphosis would happen for Malcolm. Similarly, it wasn’t until I found myself in a predominately white setting (my prison) that another transformation would take place.

While in prison, Malcolm experienced a curriculum that provided access to knowledge not as easily accessible to a street hustler like himself. He began to study the teachings of Elijah Muhammad and would eventually become a minister in the Nation of Islam after his release from prison. Additionally, we can see how exclusionary curriculum can be. Would he have learned these teachings had he not experienced the prison curriculum? Nevertheless, through his public speaking, Malcolm would propel himself to become one of the Nation of Islam’s most influential voices by the middle of the 1950s, going by the name of Malcolm X. Often perceived as an angry Black man, X’s beef extended beyond white America:

Who ever heard of angry revolutionists all harmonizing “We shall overcome ... Suum Day...” while tripping and swaying along arm-in-arm with the very people they were supposed to be angrily revolting against? Who ever heard of angry revolutionists swinging their bare feet together with their oppressor in lily-pad park pools, with gospels and guitars and “I have a dream” speeches? And the black masses in America were—and still are—having a nightmare. (X & Haley, 1965, p. 286)

Perhaps, Malcolm’s beef with Martin Luther King, Jr., was part of a hidden curriculum. Au (2012) described hidden curriculum as the tacit reproduction of social and curricular stratification (p. 49). This dichotomy between the two prominent leaders, I advocate, was socially constructed through the different experiences of Malcolm’s homemade education and Martin’s more traditional education. Woodson (1933/1996) called for institutions to teach and learn how to tolerate differences of opinion and to cooperate for the common good. After his return from Mecca, Malcolm (then El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz) recognized his misplaced rage and acknowledged that Dr. King and he were advocating for the same common good.

### DIARY OF AN ANGRY BLACK MAN

Trayvon over Skittles, Mike Brown Cigarillos  
 History keeps repeating itself, like a Biggie instrumental  
 America’s a glass house and my revenge is mental  
 Rather use my brain than throw a cocktail through a window  
 –“Don’t Shoot,” Diddy (2014)

Shabazz was able to wield that misplaced rage with self-restraint and poise through progressive moments. “I was no less angry than I had been, but at the same time the true brotherhood I had seen in the Holy World had influenced me to recognize that anger can blind human vision” (X & Haley, 1965, p. 382). “For many, hip hop emerged as a vehicle of artistic discourse which echoed the concerns, anger, hate, love, pain, hope, vision, anxiety, desire, and joy which had gone unheard in the public sphere known as the American media” (Miller, Hodge, Coleman, & Chaney, 2014, p. 6). Just

as N.W.A. used the strength of street knowledge to offer voice to those who had gone unheard in South Central Los Angeles, California, Malcolm X gave voice to a group of marginalized people whose anger was fermenting. He felt compelled to plan and build an organization that would uplift Black culture through his vision of what curricular experiences were necessary. Shabazz showcased a moral high ground necessary for mobilizing his anger into activism by advocating for a more socially just vision of education for Black Americans. Hip hop is a great vehicle for applying theoretical concepts and visions to concrete societal issues.

I had gone through a name change myself, adding M. Ed. to follow my last name, as I entered into my professional career in higher education. If graduate school was my prison, becoming a student affairs educator was my Mecca. On February 26, 2012, George Zimmerman fatally shot an unarmed Black teen by the name of Trayvon Martin. While in training for my new role as a student affairs practitioner, my colleagues and I discussed the possibilities of what could result from the trial that was set in that summer of 2013. Many of my colleagues were sure of a guilty verdict for Zimmerman. However, on July 13, 2013, Zimmerman was acquitted of all charges, and what followed would become the Black Lives Matter movement. Tamir Rice, Tanisha Anderson, Mya Hall, Walter Scott, Sandra Bland, Alton Sterling, Philando Castile, Mike Brown, and a number of other Black lives were lost during my time as a professional. There was an anger fermenting across campuses throughout the country, and I worked to provide the necessary support for all of the students with whom I worked. Indeed, I, too, felt angry inside. While hundreds of students filled my office to vent and express how they were feeling during these times, hip hop was the office I went to for myself. Songs like “Don’t Shoot” helped me feel empowered to work towards justice.

After all, this wasn’t some new American phenomenon. N.W.A., which was known as “the world’s most dangerous group,” was comprised of five angry Black men from Compton, California. They truly embodied their name, which was short for “Niggaz With Attitude,” by channeling their anger with what was going on in their neighborhoods with tenacity, bravery, and powerfully vivid depictions of Black life in the early 1990s. Just as many rational thinkers were very critical of Malcolm, debating whether his claims were real or fictitious, N.W.A. was exposed to the same criticism, including but not limited to threats of torture and death for simply sharing their truth. After footage surfaced of a Black man being brutally beaten by the Los Angeles Police Department in 1991, it affirmed the narratives being told in hip hop music that challenged the dominant ways of knowing. Furthermore, by practicing epistemological disobedience, the curriculum of hip hop culture is one way people struggle to be human in a dehumanizing space. Hip hop encourages us to see the beauty in the struggle. For it is within the struggle that that people make culture. For it is within the struggle that people become educated, rather than miseducated. For it is within the struggle that curriculum studies can escape the whiteness of its roots. For it is within the struggle that we can construct visions of what education and curriculum could look like, if Black lives matter—and herein lies the hope.

### **CARRYING ON THE WORK OF THE ANGRY BLACK MAN**

Brother, look, you don’t need to go to jail just to read you a book  
 I wonder what Malcolm found after goin’ to Mecca  
 Or the mindstate of Martin after visitin’ Selma



Two leaders that were slain for speakin' the topic  
On the schemers and the reapers of forbidden knowledge

-“Forbidden Knowledge,” Big K.R.I.T. (2015)

The truth is that disconnecting the curriculum from students' interests and teachers' intellectual passions ensures the “failure to learn” (Pinar, 2004). The curriculum has to be connected to the learner, in order for learning to take place and knowledge to be produced. If students and teachers are not connected to the curriculum, education is no longer taking place in our schools; intellectual freedom is taken away, and learning is reduced to something less meaningful for students and teachers. These are people and, thus, their personhood must be factored into the educational experience.

Hip hop artist, Tupac Shakur spoke with brilliance and insight as someone who bears witness to the pain of those who would never have his platform. Dyson (2001) said, “[Tupac] spoke truth, even as he struggled with the fragments of his own identity” (p. 27). Tupac's words have resonated with many, including myself. I now find myself in a doctoral program, bearing witness to the pain of many who would never have this platform. Since before enrolling, my goal has been to complete my doctorate and contribute to the practice of knowledge for Black Liberation. I have a commitment to modeling diversity in education within a context of social justice, driven by a desire to positively impact and perhaps change the world.

Over the past thirty years, my *currere* journey has been defined by a racial crisis in American higher education, portraying myself and others as angry Blacks, while institutions continue to espouse values of diversity. While on campus, I read the definition of the adjective “sustainable” on the wall of the student union. It read:

Sustainable – meeting our present needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own.

So, again I ask: How do we as educators determine what kind of curriculum work is imperative in order to convince upcoming generations of students that liberation is their human right—when they are witnessing via the Black Lives Matter movement, history, social media, etc. the refusal of that right to so many who do not fit the heteronormative, Eurocentric ideas and ideals?

As an angry Black man, it is my moral obligation to build on the work that the angry Black men before me have done. Growing up, I never had a Black male teacher in schools. While hip hop provided me plenty of Black male teachers, both good and bad, perhaps the absence of a Black male in the classroom contributed to me no longer wanting to be a firefighter. I wonder what the outcome of that conversation could've been had Mr. Ostrowski been a Black man talking to a young Malcolm Little. When I responded to Ashley's text message, I realized “Courtney's Dream” had not changed at its core, but rather transformed and adjusted with the changing political landscape of society today. That is why it is my dream to open a school that uses a curriculum designed for young Black men and is taught by angry Black men, in an effort to cooperatively collaborate for the common good of all mankind. Instead of allowing my indignation to be detrimental to myself and others, I am compelled to foster an environment that reflects my dear fraternity: the College of Friendship, the University of Brotherly Love, and the School for the Better Making of Men.



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