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Poetry and Praxis: Lessons From an Activist Educator

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Poetry and Praxis: Lessons From an Activist Educator

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Blackness in Canada: An Introduction to a Continued Struggle

Despite Canada's projection of racial harmony, equality, and multicultural attitudes and beliefs, a long history of anti-Blackness, genocide of Indigenous bodies and communities, and slavery of Indigenous and Black people (Austin, 2013) remains. Canada's social imagination has been filtered through a White supremacist, colonial lens that views Black people and communities in problematic and racist ways, and often deems them as threatening subjects who must be controlled and criminalized (Cooper, 2006; Razack, 2013). Such myths and attitudes have a strong influence on how Black people in Canada are employed, educated, incarcerated, and policed (Dei, 2006; Khenti, 2013), leading to many difficult social and political outcomes and realities for Black individuals and families (James & Turner, 2017; Walcott, 1997). The methods through which race continues to be socially constructed by dint of institutional, political, and social actions have proven to be harmful and detrimental to Black people in Canada (James, 2009). Many Black youths continue to resist the oppression and marginalization produced and reproduced through institutional hegemonic practices that negatively impact their mental health, well-being, and aspirations (Ibrahim, 1999; James et al., 2010), trapping many Black youths in a violent and vicious cycle. Growing up as a Black man within these systems, I am far too familiar with the impacts of racial

oppression, experienced by myself and my friends. Though I grew up in an upper middle-class family, our class privileges did not shield me from racial oppression, but instead provided me with a means of navigating it in ways that were not available to many of my friends.

Conceptual and Theoretical Frameworks

Critical Race Theory

An integral goal of critical race theory is to (re)present narratives of racial oppression and discrimination as told by people and communities who are not racialized as White. As a strategy of resistance, critical race theory names race as a social construct, thus shedding light on the historical, social, and cultural factors that continue to (re)establish racial constructs and markers of identity (James, 2009; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; López, 2000; Solorzano & Bernal, 2001).

Institutionalized racism continues to negatively impact the social lives of Black people in Canada, including quality of education, employment, and health and well-being (James et al., 2010). Critical race theory serves as a conceptual framework for this study as it provides counternarratives to how Black people are imagined and spoken about (Ladson-Billings, 1998). Historical depictions of Black people portray them as animals, chattel, and in need of subjugation (Austin, 2013; Cooper, 2006; Razack, 2013), and not in the ways we experience joy and gladness, educate ourselves, and resist institutional racism (Hudson & Tabi, 2016; Fisher, 2003; Kirkland, 2013). This study centers on the narrative of Ebele and the ways he cares and serves his community and overcomes various hardships in his life—a narrative that stands in opposition to the

ways in which Black young men are often described. As such, critical race theory continues to (re)produce how racial identities are conceptualized, socially constructed, and imagined (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995).

New Literacy Studies

New literacy studies (NLS) as a theoretical framework supports this study as it makes known the many ways in which literacy takes place outside of the four walls of a classroom, and how youths participate in their own personal literacy practices that are founded within culture, identity, history, and social context (Gee, 1999; Kirkland, 2013). Furthermore, NLS esteems youth engagement with language and literacy—often focusing on how literacy evolves, expands, and transforms—as it addresses youths’ personal needs (Simon, 2013). As such, literacy is not singular, nor is it neutral; it must be understood as a social and ideological practice that is deeply influenced by various structures of power, politics, and identity (Tabi & Gosine, 2018; Street, 1993).

NLS thus is an important lens through which children, who in many ways have often been regarded as lacking literacy skills (and whose respective families likely live at or below the poverty line), are (re)imagined as having “large vocabularies, complex grammar, and deep understandings of experiences and stories” (Gee, 1999, p. 367). It is through the work of community educators and activists that these children and youths are also spoken about in ways that build their self-esteem and highlight the many ways in which they are resilient and courageous. Such experiences work to change the ways in which these youths and young people (re)imagine themselves and

speak to their many hopes, dreams, and aspirations.

Rhetoric of Cultural Production

When considering the many complex and dynamic methods in which cultural expression is observed and spoken about in conversations around anti-oppression and education, the rhetoric of cultural production redirects the conversation from one that focuses on academic outcomes to one that interrogates the social, political, and cultural conditions that shape individual experiences (Gaztambide-Fernández, 2013). As such, experiences around learning are observed through a non-traditional lens, leading researchers and educators to take note of the “symbolic exchanges involving creative work” (Gaztambide-Fernández, 2013, p. 229) and shift the focus away from hegemonic, elitist ideologies around the arts that stem from colonial roots.

Black Feminist Thought and The Performance of Black Masculinities

Corprew and Cunningham (2011) explain that young men who at times perform social identities that reflect and align with hypermasculinity, do so as a means of coping with being harassed, feeling vulnerability, issues of depression, and sensitivities to triggers within their socioemotional worlds. It is often through the resistance of various historical forms of marginalization and oppression that many Black young men escape and, simultaneously, submit to problematic hegemonic and patriarchal performances of masculinity (James, 2009) in ways that perpetuate misogyny and sexism (Baszile, 2009). Subsequently, it is Black feminist ideologies such as intersectionality

(Crenshaw, 1991) that clarify how Black men can face various forms of oppression and still be oppressors themselves (Collins, 1990). It is also from the Black feminist concept of intersectionality that we understand that these forms of oppression are not unrelated, but instead are instrumental in constructing, informing, and maintaining various forms of subjugation (Collins, 1990). As such, systems of oppression can – and often do – overlap with one another. Yet, Black women continue to experience, navigate, and resist both race and gender discrimination in ways that are different from the ways Black men experience racism. Similarly, White women, while not subjected to racism, may experience gender oppression (Collins, 1990; Cooper 2006). Thus, what is needed in the fight against oppression is a continued disruption of the systems that categorize our identities through hegemonic, patriarchal, and racist lenses and viewpoints (Cooper, 2006). The outcomes of such investments into hypermasculine identities, and the subsequent toll on the emotional life of a young Black man named Ebele will be addressed further within this article.

Cultural Production and Youth Resistance

The discourse around poor Black, Brown, and Indigenous youths (Tuck, 2009) is often problematic and suggests that “young people create more problems than possibilities” (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002, p. 82). Such narratives impose an unrelenting burden on these youths, who are also navigating class dynamics, racial and gender identities, and poverty and underemployment—issues that have lacked equitable responses from policymakers, educators, and youth workers (Ginwright &

Cammarota, 2002; James, 2019). These youths continue to be marginalized, and the problems they face are often overlooked despite the negative impact on their socio-emotional health and well-being (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002). It remains that the young people who historically have faced discrimination often shift their attention and emotional labor towards social justice initiatives (Sherrod, 2006), using their cultural production to speak of and to their oppression (Noguera & Cannella, 2006). They often draw on rapping (Hudson & Tabi, 2016; Mahiri, 1997) and spoken-word poetry (Jocson, 2011; Kirkland, 2013) to do so. Elements of hip-hop culture and spoken word poetry continue to be cultural and social devices that support youths as they make sense of the many complex issues they face (Tabi & Gosine, 2018). As such, critically and intentionally employing elements of hip-hop culture can be an important asset when working with disenfranchised youths and supporting them as they negotiate their social, cultural, and political realities (Kuttner & White-Hammond, 2015).

Methodology

In this article, I draw on data from a larger project based in Toronto, Canada. I chose multi-case study as a methodology because of its saliency when exploring and theorizing the lived experiences, realities, attitudes, and emotional lives of individuals and communities within small group settings (Yin, 2009). Multi-case studies are often robust and reveal the inherent nuances and complexities of participants’ narratives, providing the researcher with multiple and dynamic viewpoints (Creswell, 2007). This is particularly important when exploring how Black activists in this study spoke of

their lived experiences and socio-emotional lives through their rap lyrics and poetry.

Participants

In this article, I will focus on one of four case studies. The pseudonyms of the other individuals are Efe, Remy, and Kofi. Like Ebele, these Black young men were local activists within the Greater Toronto Area who mobilized rapping and spoken word poetry within their activism, community organizing, and education work. Having performed with these young men in various capacities, I was familiar with their symbolic creative expressions, political identities, and professionalism. They all were reliable, trustworthy, and cared about the communities they served and supported.

Demographics

The demographics of these four Black young men show how Blackness is not a monolithic concept (see Table 1). Instead, the African Diaspora is a complex, fascinating, and vibrant mosaic of identities, histories, and lived experiences. Viewing Canada through a Eurocentric lens often leads to the assumption that Black individuals, families, and communities are recent immigrants to Canada (Walcott, 1997). However, for example, Efe is descended from Black Loyalist and freedom fighters who were given land by the Crown in the late 1700's. By conducting narrative case studies, this research project captures Ebele's lived reality, presenting a counter-narrative to hegemonic depictions of Afrodiasporic people in Canada.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected through one-on-one interviews; focus groups; attendance at concerts, studio sessions, protests, family

gatherings, and conferences; community conversations; after-school programming sessions that participants had organized. I transcribed the one-on-one interviews and focus groups as a form of preliminary analysis. The data for this study also came from my field notes, participant observation, and a textual analysis of the participants poetry and rap lyrics. It was through this process that themes and patterns began to emerge. I began to thematically code the data, creating a codebook. I conducted a cross-case analysis and created portraits of the four cases (Creswell, 2007; Yin, 2009).

Findings

'The Exile of My Life': An Introduction to Ebele

Ebele is a spoken-word poet, visual artist, and activist from Toronto, Canada. Born to Jamaican parents, Ebele often draws on the stories and music of Jamaica within his cultural production. Having grown up in an urban neighborhood where many of the residents were working poor or lived just above the poverty line, Ebele witnessed many difficult situations and realities as a child and teenager. As a child, Ebele was identified as being gifted; however, as he continued through the education system, teachers did not cater to (or perhaps recognize) his strengths in the classroom. Ebele became disinterested in school and began spending time with gangs and participating in the local drug trade. Ebele subsequently dropped out of school, ultimately causing his parents to give him the choice between a juvenile detention center or a prison reform school in the United States. Ebele felt deeply misunderstood and alone, and it was during

such moments that he would write about his freedom in his poetry. As Ebele shared during a one-on-one interview:

I really started to write poetry on a serious level and on a professional level when I was roughly around 17 or 18 and when I went through what I like to call the exile in my life, when my mom sent me away to a reform school, the only way I knew how to express myself was through my poetry.

Ebele's early experiences with poetry are an example of how young Black men mobilize their personal literacy practices to theorize and cope with various transitions within their lives, and the impact it has on their socio-emotional well-being (Street, 1993). When considering the cultural production of the African diaspora, particularly that of griots—what some may refer to as troubadours (Bebey, 1975)—and the latter's historic and ongoing influence on the blues, jazz, spoken-word poetry, and rapping (Keyes, 2008; Kirkland, 2013; Strode & Wood, 2008), literacy continues to be an important vehicle in which Black folks make sense of and express our identities in ways that support our agency and resistance (Cope & Kalantzis, 2009; Fisher, 2003).

‘This Is the Goal I Am Creating for Myself’: Ebele’s Educational Trajectories

Feelings of hopelessness and marginalization, coupled with the threat to his life due to the consequences of living what Ebele referred to as the *street life*, Ebele did not believe that he would live past the age of 25. As Ebele grew up, he started attending community arts events. With the support he received there in relation to his poetry, Ebele meditated on the reasons he

had to live. He began to invest more of his time and energy on spoken-word poetry and visual art, leading him to form a new goal: finishing high school. As he explained:

When I got back to high school and I was doing better and stuff, my only goal was to finish high school. I was saying to a friend of mine that I only made short-term goals. So, I was like, okay, yo ... if I might die at 21, I need to get my education at 20, so let me bust my ass so in one school year I will earn 14 credits because I could die at 21. This is the urgency I was creating for myself; this is the goal I am creating for myself.

As policymakers, educators, and researchers strive to centralize the narratives and lived experiences of Black young men (such as Ebele) in Canada, it is important that they are aware of how they write about the Black young men who navigate the prison-industrial complex and that they understand the circumstances that led to their current condition. It is also important that we, as a society, view these men through a lens of hope, care, healing, and courage. It is through their cultural production that we can be made aware of the issues they navigate and the emotional impact these issues have on their lives and their analysis of life and death. As we become increasingly aware of their stories, these individuals are (re)positioned from their label as criminals, and we become cognizant of their resilience and how they construct their own worlds in ways that foster healing. As Ebele explains:

Realizing that being an artist and being a creator is my calling, and there is a sole purpose as to why I am here, and why I am still alive. So my

whole journey with art is I had potential with it, and then it became the thing that saved my life. Now it is the thing that is making me have a life because I make money off of it, but also helping other lives.

As Haddix and Sealey-Ruiz (2012) remind us, when youths engage with the tools and methods that directly oppose the many barriers and oppression they contend with, they are made aware of their innate power and agency. Ebele's journey with his personal literacy practices is evidence that poetry is not a luxury for many Black young men (Lorde, 1984) but rather a tool that can be used to speak to the hopes and dreams that youths have for themselves and their community. Ebele's realization of his own personal power is evident within the following poem he wrote about his growth and aspirations:

Out here many would swear that life
ain't fair

Because the streets don't care about
you or me

For ultimately, it's about the survival
of the fittest

And survival in these streets ain't a
right it's a privilege

Especially when you're a product of
your environment

Or a child of the village

Whereas wisdom and experience
usually exceeds (your) age limits

Especially when you come...

From the place where love is hardly
home ...

It's about taking the prose of pain
and turning it into poems...

Taking negativity and turning it into
positivity

For one does not have to be in
University in order to overcome
adversity

In this poem, Ebele speaks to the harsh reality of living the street life. During our conversations, Ebele spoke about how difficult it was to come to terms with the reality that living this life in most cases leads to jail—or death. Having witnessed many of his friends murdered, or facing many years in prison, the allure of the street life faded quickly for Ebele; however, he still felt lonely. The brotherhood that he imagined would accompany the street life was absent. Ebele used his poetry to make sense of the environment he grew up in, along with the poverty, loss, and disenfranchisement that together had such a detrimental effect on his mental health. It was through writing that Ebele was able to acknowledge the pain he lived with, and he began to seek the support he needed to heal.

'Make Them Feel as if They Are a Learner for Life': Supporting Marginalized Youth

As Ebele continued his healing journey, he began to create workshops for children and youths in some of Toronto's lowest-income communities. Through these workshops, Ebele would speak about the importance of mental health and well-being. He would also use his poetry to share stories of the resilience of people within the African diaspora, and their history before colonization and slavery. These workshops caught the attention of administrators at a

local school board, and Ebele was invited to consult teachers and administrators about the ways in which they could support marginalized youths. As a student who had been marginalized, ostracized, and in many ways ignored within this same school board, Ebele did not hold back his opinion. He emphasized the strengths of the students and the importance of teachers and administrators fostering agency within them, particularly for those most vulnerable and susceptible to dropping out of school:

They asked for a suggestion or advice that I could give to principals and educators across the [local school board]. What would it be? I am like, yo ... first suggestion is fire whoever is on top of the board, and hire a young person ... because you will not know what young people need unless you are hearing it from a young person. And two, stop making students feel like students, because when a student feels like a student, they don't feel like they can learn. Make them feel as if they are a learner of life, that they can learn something, that they can apply in everyday living ... and that is something spoken-word poetry and rapping allows for.

Ebele's analysis of the education system mirrors what Paulo Freire (1968/2005) refers to as problem-posing education. An important concept within problem-posing education is that teachers do not participate in traditional hierarchal dissemination of information; rather, knowledge is shared between the educator and the student. As such, knowledge is shared in ways that are relevant to the lived realities of students and teachers alike.

Ebele's call for this school board to hire a student advisor is a call for students to become (co)creators of the content and process of their education. Such a transformation to the education system will not only foster students' agency—thus providing for a more robust learning experience—but will also provide both a liminal and physical space for students to share their incredible stores of knowledge.

Conclusion and Future Directions

Ebele's conversation and critique around the current practices that are used to educate children and youths is an issue that is very real for him. He has personally experienced the consequences of being a Black boy in an education system designed not for him but rather for students who have been inculcated to satisfy the demands of what Ebele referred to as the *formula*; it is they who will succeed, not Ebele. Such formulas often align with hegemonic standards of schooling. Because of the diverse cultures, gender identities, ethnicities, and personalities within schools, it is dangerous for educators to continue to engage with a pedagogy that is stagnant and privileges a select group of students. If we are truly concerned about the well-being and education of youth (Watson, 2011), there needs to be substantive change. The cost, as Morrell (2006) notes, continues to be a child who is left behind and labeled as a problem simply due to the limits of the teacher and the curriculum. Echoing this idea, Ebele calls for a curriculum that responds to the needs of the individual student as opposed to a curriculum that oppresses them.

Ebele, along with Remy, Efe, and Kofi, explained that cultural production is something that they need to do, as it continues to be an important method of

caring for their mental health and well-being. Their personal literacy practices are an important method in which they speak to their freedom. A freedom that though wounded, devalued, and overlooked, continues to grow. For these young men, poetry was more than just writing; it was a process of learning to live again, feel again, love again, and be free again. A freedom that they felt at times as children, an innocence they continue to seek despite the difficulties they continue to experience, survive, and overcome. A freedom that requires vulnerability and courage to cultivate as they continue to work to support programs and initiatives that are founded on anti-oppressive social change. By continuing to learn more about the socio-emotional lives of Black young men, we will be able to better serve, educate, and speak to their specific needs in equitable and ethical ways.

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Table 1

Participants' Biographical Histories and Chosen Forms of Cultural Production

<i>Pseudonym</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Ethnicity</i>	<i>Generation</i>	<i>Where did they grow up?</i>	<i>Form of cultural production</i>
<i>Ebele</i>	25	Afro-Jamaican	2nd	Malton	Spoken word poetry and rapping
<i>Remy</i>	28	Afro-Jamaican	2nd	GTA* (moved a lot)	Rapping
<i>Kofi</i>	25	Identifies as Afrodiaspora, multiple ethnicities (Afro-Caribbean-born father, White Canadian mother)	5th	Halifax, NS	Spoken word poetry
<i>Efe</i>	21	Black identified, multiple ethnicities (First Nations, Black Canadian from Nova Scotia & Afro-Jamaican)	9th	GTA* (moved a lot)	Spoken word poetry and some rapping

* Greater Toronto Area (GTA)