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Furious Flowers: Using Black Arts Inquiry and Pedagogy to Engage Black Males

Lasana Kazembe
Kennedy-King College

Knowledge and ways of knowing derived from African American history and traditions have typically been marginalized or excluded from the learning landscape of African American students. This essay urges a turn to ways of knowing, valuing, and meaning making based on inquiry and teaching around cultural ideas espoused during the Black Arts Movement (1965-1976). As an alternative paradigm, Black Arts inquiry and pedagogy is presented as a functional extension of African American cultural knowledge and life praxes. The author draws from two sources: (a) the ideological mission undertaken by the cultural architects of the Black Arts Movement and (b) his extensive experience as a teaching artist. Both sources are interpreted and situated as modalities to encourage: (a) critical resistance to ideology and psycho-cultural models imposed by the dominant culture; (b) development of culturally based aesthetic and materialist approaches that make worthwhile use of African American cultural knowledge; (c) culturally-situated curricula to engage the intellectual and aesthetic sensibilities of Black males; and (d) the development of an apprenticeship tradition to appropriately interpret the African American intellectual genealogy to successive generations.

Keywords: Black Aesthetic, Black Arts Movement, Black Arts Inquiry, African American, Intellectual Genealogy

Without question I argue the most critical issue in public education is the worsening national crisis affecting young Black males within the nation's school system. Despite the tens of millions spent on annual conferences, glossy publications, and psychotropic drugs; despite the dizzying blitz of panel discussions, press conferences, and the popular emergence of so-called experts; despite the development of special urban zones, band-aid zero tolerance policies, "hip" Hip-Hop curricula, and the popular elevation of the "high priest" of educational reform – charter schools – no one seems to know of a way to effectively and consistently engage young Black males in urban classrooms. Numerous studies (e.g., Bell, 2010; Moore, 2006; Thompson, 2002;

Correspondence regarding this article should be directed to Lasana Kazembe at kazembe1@gmail.com

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Toldson, 2008) have identified the resistive attitudes of many Black male students based on their reactions to classroom experiences and curricula that they describe as boring or culturally irrelevant to their lives and experiences.

As early as 1937, Richard Wright (1937/1994) reflected on the primacy of the Black existential experience as an authentic and authoritative source for developing and articulating our cultural narrative and unique voice. Widely considered the "Father of the Harlem Renaissance," Alain Locke categorically insisted throughout his career that Black scholars and artists employ a theoretical, philosophical, and methodological approach rooted in African/African American epistemology, independent historiography, and indigenous cultural folk knowledge. Lerone Bennett, Jr. (1993) has consistently admonished us to "burrow deep into the veins of the Black experience" (p. 28) to locate and position ourselves within a viable framework of purposeful existence, historical reality, and authentic cultural development. Carter G. Woodson (1922, 1926, 1933); Sterling Brown (1941, 1946); Darwin Turner (1978); Sonia Sanchez (1970, 1971, 1974); and Haki R. Madhubuti (1972, 1973, 2011) are among the many influential Black writers and thinkers sharing this cultural point of view. At once, it represents a vital reclaiming of intellectual and psychic space for the preservation of culture and consciousness (Ani, 1994).

The present essay urges a return to worthwhile ways of knowing, valuing, and meaning making based on inquiry and teaching around the cultural ideas and values espoused during the Black Arts Movement (1965-1976). As a coercive center and alternative learning paradigm, Black Arts inquiry and pedagogy is presented as a functional extension of African American cultural knowledge and life praxes. I draw inspiration from two sources: (a) the ideological mission undertaken by the cultural architects of the Black Arts Movement and (b) my decade-and-a-half experience as a teaching artist. Both sources are interpreted and situated as an alternative learning modality to encourage: (a) critical resistance to and escape from ideology and psycho-cultural models imposed by the dominant culture; (b) development of culturally based aesthetic and materialist approaches that make worthwhile use of African American cultural knowledge; (c) culturally-situated curricula to engage the deepest intellectual and aesthetic sensibilities of Black adolescent males; and (d) the development of an apprenticeship tradition to appropriately interpret, sustain, and convey the African American intellectual genealogy to successive generations.

From annual arguments against the continuation of Black History Month to systematic institutional attacks on departments and centers of Black/Africana culture around the country, it seems as if the marginalization of African Diasporic culture (including African American history and cultural thought, Black rhetorical traditions, etc.) is becoming more and more pervasive. It is through such cultural hegemony that the values, perspectives, dispositions, and doctrinaire of the dominant group are translated through textbooks, curricula, classroom practices, popular culture, electronic media, interpersonal experiences, and other channels. It is not enough to simply engage in endless, eloquent critiques of the dominant culture. Nor is it enough for educators to engage in reactionary praxis. Both of these tactics have limited shelf life and do not allow educators to proactively or critically leverage the resource of our cultural inheritances and worthwhile traditions.

The collective epistemological and theoretical frameworks, accumulated folk knowledge, and historical experiences of African Americans have long been marginalized and/or under-utilized as a site of possibility for curriculum theorizing, development, and practice (Woodson, 1933; Du Bois, 1960; Sizemore, 1973; Hilliard and Sizemore, 1984; B. M. Gordon, 1993; L. R. Gordon, 2000; Lee, 2008). For King (2005), epistemological concerns reflected the "nature,

origins, and boundaries of knowledge," (p. 6) as well as the subjective process involved in determining whose knowledge is worthwhile.

The incessant marginalization, mishandling, and muting of African American intellectual traditions, historical experiences, and cultural practices has ongoing contemporary reverberations and contributes to a widespread and exceedingly dangerous cultural illiteracy. Gordon (1993) related that "acts of liberation and empowerment" (p. 456) occur when Blacks resurrect, (re)claim, and (re)situate our unique cultural paradigms, and, theoretical and methodological frameworks as normative. It is the job of committed cultural workers (artists, scholars, etc.) to build on and resonate our *normativeness* to successive generations of African American students.

Black Boys and Urban Schools: Pedagogy of the Dominated

The challenges within public education are numerous and well documented. Broadly, these challenges include underfunded public schools, inadequately prepared/ineffective teachers, and government (state and/or federal) imposition of one-dimensional corporate-borne educational policies that ultimately serve to sift and sort young (predominantly African American) people through the educational system (Spring, 1976). Shujaa (1994) has proposed that the primary goal of public schooling is to reproduce "the value system of the politically dominant culture" (p. 22) and the "social ordering that serves its elite" (p. 22) at any cost. Without question, I argue the most abhorrent issue in public education is the worsening national crisis affecting Black males.

In addition to academic obstacles, an overwhelming number of young African American males are routinely challenged by the allure of urban street life, which often means early and fast exposure to drugs, violence, negative media, gang activity, poverty, poor education, incarceration, and death (Mukku, Benson, Alam, Richie, & Bailey, 2012). Northeastern University's Center for Labor Market Studies reports a 22% of daily jailing rate for young Black males who drop out of high school (Sum, Khatiwada, McLaughlin, & Palma, 2009) and the Bureau of Justice Statistics (2011) revealed that the incarceration rate for Black males is six times the national average. Criminalizing Black male children now starts in elementary schools with those as young as four and five years young being overrepresented in terms of exclusionary discipline practices (Darensbourg, Perez, & Blake, 2010; Lewis, Bonner, Butler, & Joubert, 2010; Losen & Martinez, 2013).

The challenges plaguing young Black males are copiously recorded in any number of studies, journals, special reports, and scholarly pieces. In Chicago, during the 2008-09 school year, Black males comprise nearly one-fourth (102,000) of the public school student population of over 435,000; the graduation rate for Black males in Chicago is 39% (Schott Foundation for Public Education, 2012). Over the last three decades public and private entities have spent hundreds of millions of dollars and hours in the attempt to address these problems and correct the course of young Black males whom appear to be on a disastrous downward trajectory. Indeed, the grim statistics beg one to wonder whether the public school system can educate Black males according to standard means and if it has the creative or political will to do so.

Black Arts Inquiry and Pedagogy: Possibilities for Practice

Stimulated by the assassination of Malcolm X, the Black Arts Movement (1965-1976) was a cultural movement initially influenced by writer and activist Amiri Baraka. The movement was borne out of the synthesis of creative energy, Black consciousness, and political activism among young Black artists residing in New York during mid-1960s (Thomas, 1978). While concentrated primarily in New York City, Black Arts activities were also quite popular in other American cities including Chicago, Cleveland, Detroit, Houston, New Orleans, and Oakland. For Black jazz artists of that era such as Jayne Cortez and Phil Cohran, themes such as health, love of self, spiritual reality, historical connections to Africa figured prominently in music, poetry, and performance.

Thus, by realizing and creating conscious connections between creative art, African culture, and politics, Black artists (e.g., poets, writers, sculptors, musicians, painters, performance artists, etc.) sought to articulate and assist in the physical, psychological, and spiritual liberation of Black people in America and throughout the African Diaspora. Addison Gayle, Jr. (1970, 1971, 1972), Larry Neal (1968, 1989), and Hoyt Fuller (1972) were the major philosophical voices of the Black Arts era and argued for, and subsequently developed, a theoretical basis and philosophical framework referred to as The Black Aesthetic. In some sense, the need for a Black Aesthetic evolved with a growing emphasis placed on the particular western socialization of the Black psyche, as a patterned response to institutionalized racism, and the need for positive social change (Emanuel, 1972).

Black artists pursued what Benston (2000) called a "speculative quest for a distinctively Black modality of cultural assertion" (p. 251). Black artists sought to situate their creative products (literature, drama, music, theater, portraiture, etc.) as cultural assets. This new aesthetic encouraged Black artists to resist White artistic norms while simultaneously articulating and confirming the cultural uniqueness of Black identities, art forms, purposes, and impressions of social reality (Van DeBurg, 1992). Thus, Black artists representing multiple genres engaged in a structured, geographically diverse, decade-plus-long revolution of ideas and recapitulation of thought forms, theoretical considerations, and philosophical (op)positionality. Calling for cultural nationalism and aesthetic concern among Black artists, poet Eugene Useni Perkins (1970) argued compellingly that their art should "awaken" people and that artists should automatically be

> concerned with creating authentic images of Black people and dealing with the realities of black life as they actually exist… They must be committed to describing the total feelings, emotions, attitudes and values of black people so that black people can better understand themselves within a black frame of reference. (p. 88-89)

Adding to that idea, Neal (1968) likened Black artists to missionaries and rejected "any concept of the [Black] artist that alienates him from his community" (p. 1). It is clear that Black artists influenced and activated by the Black Power Movement, understood the vitality and function of culture and self-investigation (i.e., probing and leveraging of shared heritage, traditions, epistemologies, and cultural inheritances) relative to gaining recognition afforded other groups in the United States (Jařab, 1985). Artist-activists, or activist-artists, of the Black Arts Movement generally believed that their art (i.e., production, function, dissemination) was connected to the global Black community and should, by dint of political and cultural expediency, reflect and resonate its beliefs, attitudes, values, and interests.

In numerous books, articles, and essays Gayle (1972, 1974, 2009), Neal (1967, 1989), and Fuller (1967) sought to define and articulate contours of Black Arts theory and philosophy. They urged Black artists to first look inward and turn toward the African American cultural epistemology (i.e., the Black experience) for inspiration. This *inward odyssey*, they argued, is both natural and necessary for Black artists seeking optimal cultural inspiration, creative nourishment, and artistic vision. In this sense, it puts flesh on the bones of the type of critical reflection espoused by Carter G. Woodson, W.E.B. DuBois and other intellectual pioneers, which encourages us to travel in a similar inward direction. Ani (1994) described this as the life-affirming quest for psychological consensus, complementarity, and oneness with ourselves and our culture.

For artists and theorists of the Black Arts Movement the ontological question comprised the living center of an ongoing and nuanced philosophical inquiry into *Blackness in being* and *being in Blackness* (Kazembe, 2012). Hence, the dual, articulating thrust of the Black Arts Movement urged Black artists to reject non-African (especially European) artistic norms, cultural fixities, and thought forms and to instead create more worthwhile norms based on Black intellectual and aesthetic models. The movement also called for and challenged committed Black artists (writers, musicians, spoken word artists, visual and performance artists, etc.) to interrogate, interpret, convey, and shape the worthwhileness of a cultural epistemology informed by dying and living; beckoning and reckoning; struggling and striving; creating and *re*creating in the shifting expanse of the African Diaspora. Addison Gayle, Jr., Larry Neal, Amiri Baraka, and other Black Arts thinkers came to describe this inquiry and praxis as the *Black Aesthetic*.

I contend there is a need for marginalized groups to engage and leverage indigenous cultural knowledge. Most assuredly this includes African Americans. Such an orientation serves to psychologically and physically relocate out of a dire context of mental colonization, political oppression, and cultural hegemony. In my own work as a teacher and educational consultant, I have incorporated literacy interventions drawn from Black Arts poetics. For example, in afterschool creative writing workshops, I teach the poetry of Amiri Baraka, Etheridge Knight, and Sonia Sanchez to engage Black males around ideas such as resistance, identity, and power.

One specific form of reality politics emphasized in Black Arts inquiry and pedagogy is a segment referred to as “Pedagogy of the Streets.” This component of the curriculum was inspired by Amiri Baraka’s (1979) poem “Black Art” wherein Baraka deals with themes such as revolution, Black community empowerment, and questioning, detangling, and challenging hegemonic forms of established authority. Other curriculum segments inspired by Baraka’s poem have included discussions of potential sources of creativity, and artistic responsibility. During “Pedagogy of the Streets,” facilitator and participants engage a vigorous historical interrogation to study the origins of street, community, and school names throughout Black neighborhoods in Chicago. Participants are provided with brief background on particular names (i.e., Roosevelt, Dan Ryan, Jefferson, Columbus) and attempt to link surnames to their owners. During this phase, we then proceed to locate African Americans within a particular historical, political, and temporal context while simultaneously attempting to reconcile our “unreconciled strivings” (Du Bois, 1903, p. 2), after which participants re-read and discuss the Baraka poem. Next, students are encouraged to engage in research (i.e., interrogate the past) in order to locate themselves within this same context and then to analyze and discuss the politics of (a) how building and street names (and Black communities for that matter) came to be; (b) how Black people’s historical and social experiences factored into the naming of Chicago streets; (c) the social and material impact of activity (street drug transactions, gentrification, foreclosures, police brutality,

student brawls, etc.) taking place on those streets; and the (d) reverberations and contemporary political significance of place names vis-à-vis domination, social justice, and racism (White supremacy). In a recent critical conversation, we examined the tragic irony of how and why so many historically underfunded Black public schools (named after high-achieving Black people) have been targeted for closure by the Chicago Public Schools and Mayor Rahm Emanuel's administration. Used in this way, Black Arts inquiry and pedagogy serves as a gateway to critical conversations around issues touching and framing the everyday reality politics of young Black males. Thus, for theorists, criticalists, and especially Black teaching-artists, such a stance functions as a liberating, consciousness-promoting praxis and the *stuff of culture* informed by what poet Sandra Jackson-Opuku (1987) calls a "history that coils itself around us" (p. xiii).

There has been contemporary frontal assault on Blackness evidenced in tactics such as defunding and phasing out of Africana/Black cultural centers on many U.S. college and university campuses (Hefner, 2002); disappearance and/or blanket omission of Africana history from U.S. classrooms (Lee, 2013); Civil War revisionism (Coard, 2011); frightening increases of extra-judicial killings of Blacks nationwide (Malcolm X Grassroots Movement, 2012); harrowing rates of Black dropouts (Schott Foundation for Public Education, 2012); mass incarceration (Alexander, 2010); increasingly rampant and openly hostile acts of racial terrorism on the Black family (Leadership Conference on Civil Rights, 2009). Given such critical attacks on cultural awareness and survival, a critical "inward odyssey" into Blackness seems almost compulsory.

For African Americans, ours is a world of sophisticated linguistics transmitted through such mediums as playing the Dozens; telling folktales; barber/beauty shop banter; Ebonics; Baptist church rhythm and rhetoric; belief in Hoodoo and Root Rituals; street corner conversations; kitchen table dialog; articles in *Ebony, Black World,* and *Jet* magazines; and the sentient wisdom of Black writers, musicians, and preachers. This is the world that African American children have inherited and inhabit simultaneously. Black Arts pedagogy offers itself as a transformative process in which participants engage in ever deepening levels of reflection and interaction in order to orient, locate, and situate themselves within critical and culturally relevant knowledge spaces.

So who are young Black males anyway? How are they connected socially, historically, and politically to the unique history and cultural experiences of Black people in the United States and abroad? Aside from musical genius and athletic prowess, what unique cultural markers exist in the DNA of young African American males to be recognized, analyzed, and *curricularized*? In what way(s) could a progressive Black Arts Movement curriculum engage Black male students and encourage them to develop a critical posture toward literacy and learning?

As Freire (1971, 1978) encountered, positioning critical literacy as a form of *cultural politics* meant providing an effective framework for making literacy accessible to the masses. It is a paving stone on the path to the development of human agency and possibility. To relate literacy directly to people's lives is to offer them direction and encouragement. It is to inspire confidence in them and usher them toward the path of personal empowerment by exposing them to the richness of reflection, cultural memory, and applicability. Critical literacy, then, is essentially an ongoing human synthesis that *must* be political and *must* be cultural. It should be more than obvious that for young African American males to assume a *critical posture* they must be educated and socialized in a way altogether different from that undertaken with traditional public education. The precursor for critical consciousness among and within adolescent Black

males is to engage in reflective dialogue appertaining to their unique histories, personalities, and social experiences in the local and wider world.

The rationale for orienting Black Arts inquiry and pedagogy toward young Black males is connected to four main aspects of Freire's educational philosophy: (a) reading the word and the world; (b) building collective critical consciousness through dialogue; (c) using historical memory as a tool for liberation; and (d) critical praxis. Another aspect of the Freireian approach challenges educators to address problems in ways that encourage people to grasp issues in relation to other factors (Freire, 1999).

The Black Arts Movement as Critical Literacy

As a praxis model, Black Arts inquiry calls for a conscious, committed, and consistent interrogation and integration of both the Black Arts Movement and its relationship to the collective African Diasporic experience. This, of course, includes the nuanced leveraging of Black cultural voices, realities, political language, creative expression, history, perspectives, and psychosocial phenomena. Such a model is culturally responsive, worthwhile, and immediately recognizes and affirms the strategic value of African American epistemology and ways of knowing. More, it intentionally functions to interrupt and dismantle inequality, cultural hegemony, and White supremacy. Even a cursory glance reveals that these worthwhile efforts are rooted in resistance, struggle, and transcendence and therefore broadly and acutely reflect the historical and social experiences of African Americans. The Black struggle for self-definition (freedom) and self-determination (liberation) is a strategic method of reclaiming and recasting history and culture, orienting ourselves to reality, and instituting revolutionary social transformation to the benefit of the African Diaspora.

Pedagogical Dimensions of Black Arts Inquiry

By design, Black Arts curricula represents a functional model based on a *systems analysis* that is responsible and responsive to the unique social, cultural, and cognitive needs of African American students. Such an approach is highly beneficial for understanding the role of consciousness and for exploring the context of relationships and other phenomena affecting the lives of African Americans. As critical pedagogy, the curriculum seeks to encourage young people to move toward assuming a critical posture and taking responsibility for crafting what Bakhtin (1990) called "the humble prose of living" (p. 1). The Black Arts curricular framework is the vehicle through which African American students listen, learn, evolve, and speak in voices that are intimately and contextually aware of the living past and present. The broad pedagogical aims of the Black Arts curriculum include encouraging and preparing African American students to:

1. Access and leverage the Black Arts literary genealogy (shaped primarily by the critical tradition of Black intellectual thought and critical praxis) to broaden their sensibilities and deepen political, social, cultural, and academic literacy;
2. Learn about the Black Aesthetic; engage the socially responsible (committed) poetry of the movement as a site for students to gain voice and use it to frame and contextualize discourse and action around liberating ideas and to reflectively problematize contentious issues;

3. Develop Black Arts Culture Circles (BACCs) that are culturally affirming and rigorous and within which students may scaffold rich, radiant, and realistic dialog about important issues;
4. Utilize BACCs to promote critical media literacy and to sustain the Black Arts literary genealogy;
5. Situate Black Arts inquiry and pedagogy as anti-colonial media to help analyze and understand the dynamic interrelationship of complex social, political, and historical phenomena undergirding and critically informing the lived realities of African American youth;
6. Challenge and dismantle attitudes and practices that seek to/tend to position the creative artifacts (ex., poetry, music) of Black artists as cursory, non-cerebral, and evanescent;
7. Engage alternative modes of thinking about text and ideas within text; foster shared understandings and collaboration via exploration of relevant themes within RSRP;
8. Understand the relevance and transformative potential of creative arts as a tool to encourage meaningful reflection and critical dialog, analyze and decipher negative cultural messages emanating from popular media and initiate radical, transformative, and socially responsible action in lives, families, and communities; and,
9. Use Black Arts inquiry and pedagogy to encourage African American students to think critically and reflectively about the larger social reality and about their personal experiences and inherited epistemological traditions.

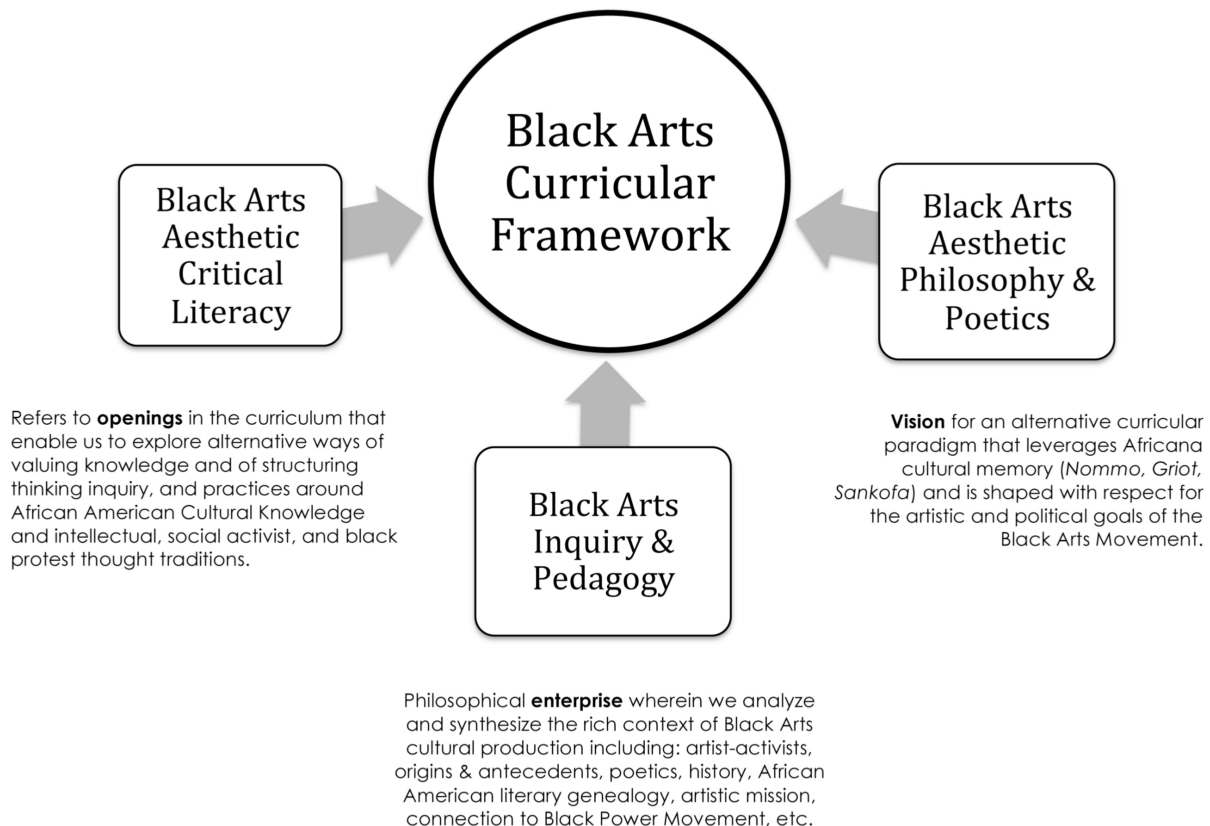

Figure 1. Black Arts Curricular Framework.

Thus, consciousness, collective awareness, and a nuanced understanding of social and cultural reality serve as intellectual and spiritual resources to empower African American students to transform structures by removing strictures. For committed educators, these approaches illuminate opportunities for us to reconsider (and in a Woodsonian mode question) the relationship between African American history, orality, and reality and why such a relationship matters for/to the African American students that we instruct and interact with daily. The transformative, praxis-promoting artists of the Black Arts Movement and the African American literary genealogy from which they emerge inform this critical vision of socioculturally empowered students and educators.

Building a Critical, Cultural Literacy of Blackness

Black Arts inquiry and pedagogy has the potential to encourage young Black males to become (wide)-awakened to the immediate political reality undergirding their very existence. One important aspect to Black Arts pedagogy is to promote *critical literacy*, which may be used as a starting point for liberation from oppressive forms of thought, stifling academic experiences, cultural ignorance, and physical domination. Radical political literacy, according to Freire (1987),

> must be seen as a medium that constitutes and affirms the historical and existential moments of lived experience that produces a subordinate or lived culture. Hence, it is an eminently political phenomenon, and it must be analyzed within the context of a theory of power relations and an understanding of social and cultural reproduction and production. (p. 98)

Russell Atkins, one of the Black Arts Movement's major theorists, observed that what typically passes for education and critical thinking is often the "mere objectification of one group's thinking processes" (as cited in Nielsen, 1996, p. 89) layered onto the contextual experiences of another group. Atkins called for the development of *"non-dominant group" epistemologies* (Nielsen, 1996, p. 89) which might have to assume the necessary burden of defining and defending knowledge.

A liberatory curriculum based on Black Arts philosophical considerations places due emphasis on the effective and strategic role of culture to identify and surmount challenges (environmental, academic, personal, interpersonal, emotional, etc.) confronting humans. Additionally, Black Arts inquiry and teaching emphasizes and builds upon African-centered cultural models (i.e., language, historical achievements and actors) that perform several functions including: (a) presenting a functional, practical, and dignity-affirming cultural synthesis; (b) encouraging the development of unique problem-posing and solving techniques; and (c) presenting innovative instructional models that stress and magnify the role and value of cultural literacy and cultural identity to help young Black males assiduously interrogate and respond to their immediate and long-term contexts.

Taken literally, Freire's (1987) "dynamic interconnection of language and reality" (p. 20) and Du Boisian radical political praxis comprise a synthesis for seeing the world in a way that is more expansive and worthwhile. Similar to *deep* reading, the effective use of language requires critical perception, interpretation, and rewriting (*respeaking*). The rationale for Black Arts curricula is to provide Black male students with "high-octane," culturally grounded educational experiences that are contrary to the '*education for service'* model and lean more toward the

'education for power' model. Students are exposed to Black Arts aesthetic philosophy and poetics that challenge them to engage in deep, serious, and systematic mining of African and African American historical experiences and Pan-African cultural traditions. An appropriately situated Black Arts curricular framework places due emphasis on essential questions informing Black peoples' well-documented epistemological, artistic, and radical thought traditions.

At the crux of Black Arts inquiry and teaching is a critical literacy rooted in exploring, embracing, and elucidating African American historical memory as a cultural asset of limitless value and educative potential. It is, in essence, a worthwhile enterprise for intellectual development not survival; for self-reliance and away from patronage and paternalism.

The overall purpose of this project is to enhance academic, cultural, and political literacy among Black male students and to thereby increase their sense of self-worth, social status, and options for better and more wholesome lives. The curriculum is organized strategically and presented as an attitudinal and structural process whereby students gain the ability, authority, and agency to make decisions and implement positive change in their lives and the lives of others. As radical literature, our Black Arts curriculum must, as Neal (1989) insisted, be "integral to the myths and experiences underlying the total history of Black people" (p. 653). As Whitehead (1954) intimated, it is not enough, therefore, to merely introduce generic ideas to students. Ideas must have have context and then be acted upon. The operative word in that sentence is *done*.

Theoretical and Philosophical Considerations of Black Arts Inquiry and Pedagogy

Important philosophical and theoretical connections are glimpsed between the Black Arts critical literacy curriculum and the leitmotifs of Freire (1971) and Du Bois (1903, 1960). Freire's approach to *praxis* (reflection + action) is important relative to curriculum design, classroom practice, student engagement, philosophical stance, implementation, and other educational considerations. Du Bois' dialectic of oppression and liberation underscores the urgency of Black educators' (especially) political engagement and their desire to seek and implement culture-centered solutions (progressive social praxis) to the problems plaguing humanity – especially those stirring in the souls of Black folk. For our curricular purposes, the insights, educational philosophy, and intellectual complementarity of both Freire and Du Bois hold fascinating alternative pedagogical possibilities when considered alongside the liberatory aims of critical literacy and curricula based on exploring the literary genealogy and aesthetic goals of the Black Arts Movement. As Rabaka (2006) suggested, engaged critical theorists and practitioners must do more than simply claim the thoughts and so-called radical legacy of Du Bois, Douglass, Delaney, and other remarkable folks. Rather, people must be empowered to act and build upon these intellectual legacies if transformation is to occur. Our Black Arts curriculum is grounded in critical literacy, cultural empowerment, and the thought traditions of African American intellectuals, activists, and creative artists who sought/seek to raise awareness, transform society, and improve the lives of African Americans. The curriculum moves beyond capriciousness and is situated as a vehicle for literacy, consciousness-raising, and cultural empowerment.

For Benston (2000), the Black Arts Movement was never static but instead represented a "continuously shifting field of revision and struggle" (p. 3). My approach, therefore, is to expand and broaden consciousness by introducing new ways for African American students (beyond merely seeing themselves in the text) to perceive and negotiate the sifting challenges and complex demands of reality. Following reflection and critical dialog and in tandem with the development of critical consciousness, ours is a teaching and practice methodology rooted in a

culturally situated liberatory framework that promotes socially responsible thought, speech, and action. African American epistemology can be organized and presented whereby African American students become excited about and invested in their own education and intellectual development. This approach encourages students to develop a meaningful appreciation for learning and cognition as they come to understand the relevance of cultural knowledge, historical memory, and transcendent folk traditions to their everyday lives. More than ever, thinking and practice developed for Black males must be imaginative, creative, functional, and culturally based.

Finally, a Black Arts-inspired critical literacy curriculum is a deliberately revolutionary model designed to empower, educate, and uplift. Such a curriculum encourages African American students to develop critical consciousness through dialogue and the utilization of historical memory as a tool for their ultimate liberation from domination, cultural ignorance (i.e., *not knowing*), cultural alienation, and the intellectual lethargy imposed (and in some cases encouraged) by the current system of public education. Given the current political reality and the prevailing status quo, the education given to young Black males should encourage them to learn the art and value of critical reflection in order to interpret reality. This means, of course, a total break from the limitations imposed on them through cultural hegemony and ignorance, which causes them to deny reality, mock their own culture and background, and fail to participate in the building of a sustainable, equitable future. In another sense, a proper education for young Black males means preparing and grooming them to compete and overcome obstacles and roadblocks whether political, economic, academic, or social. Black Arts inquiry and pedagogy represents an education for power – intellectual power, political power, cultural power, and social power. Ultimately, the practical goals for the curriculum square with Freireian and Du Boisian approaches that (a) critique and resist oppression and domination stemming from any source; and (b) leverage African American existential knowledge as a valuable resource and cultural asset offering unlimited pedagogic, educative, and transformative potential.

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Author Note

Lasana Kazembe is an adjunct professor in the Department of Social Sciences at Kennedy-King College in Chicago, IL.