

TO BE FREE

A BLACK MALE EDUCATOR'S QUEST & THE SHARED INTELLECTUAL DILEMMA OF BALDWIN, DU BOIS, AND WRIGHT

By Paul Collins

Florida A&M University

Liberating the body is a powerful thing within the context of a system designed to dehumanize based on skin pigmentation, where Whiteness is codified as superior. The aforementioned is a most cynical ploy enacted on those of Black/African ancestry. Scholars direct our attention to critical junctures in U.S. history, such as 1619 and Bacon's Rebellion of 1676, as critical points of entry into a world where skin color and ancestry relegate people to the bottom rungs of a socially constructed, racialized hierarchy designed to perpetuate the most sinister of atrocities—stripping away the humanity of others to rationalize bondage and servitude (Hannah-Jones, 2021; Tatum, 2017).

James Baldwin, W. E. B. Du Bois, and Richard Wright are three prominent intellectuals of African ancestry who, during their lives, chose to do something not done by most formerly enslaved Africans during the 20th century. They acted upon the urge to leave the United States of America. Although not the first or only men classified as Negro or what is more commonly referred to contemporarily as African-American or Black men to do such, they do represent a uniquely small minority of descendants of the formerly enslaved to find this strategy a remedy to their life's circumstance. I have always been intrigued by the clarity gained through years of study, writing, and teaching that ultimately led such reputable American intellectuals to decide they had had enough. These prominent 20th-century literary intellectuals would ultimately exit the United States of America to take up residence in other countries. What drives such a desire and, ultimately, the radical initiated action? Through the *currere* method, I examine this within the context of my own lived experience as an educator inspired by these historical figures to do likewise.

CURRERE

The autobiographical approach of *currere* to curricularizing has been a valuable tool of meaning-making in the field of curriculum studies for quite some time. As an introduction to and definition of the method, Pinar (2019) states, "The Latin infinitive of curriculum—*currere*—I invoked in 1975 to emphasize the lived experience of curriculum, embodied potentially educational experience that is structured by the past while focused on the future" (p. 50). To study such experience, he devised a method in four moments or phases.

In further unpacking the method of *currere*, in the first-regressive phase, one returns to the past or to aspects of it: for instance, one's school experience, the experience of an influential teacher or text, or one's ongoing relationship with an academic discipline. In the second, the progressive moment, one imagines their future in a personal, social, and political way. In the third, the analytic moment, one studies these texts and the experiences they engender to understand better what before might have been obscured by one being submerged in the present moment. In the fourth, synthetic phase, one pulls oneself together so as to act anew in the private and public worlds



one inhabits. This subjective coherence becomes plausible as a new site from which one can again reinstitute the *currere* cycle (Pinar, 2019).

I, along with other scholars in the curriculum field, continue to interrogate the question of how my life history matters in the understanding of my academic writings. It remains risky to write about ourselves in our shared academic world (Morris, 2019). The very topic of this manuscript speaks directly to how my identity shapes and has shaped my work in the educational field. The following questions helped in this process. Does who I am matter in my production of knowledge? Is it important to know who the writer is as a person? Should I strive to erase myself from my iterations and analysis? We must resist the ivory tower's historical politic of traditional academic scholarship being totally about the erasure of I/scholar (Collins, 2022). By relying upon *currere*'s four channels of inquiry—regressive, progressive, analytic, and synthetic—I am equipped with a method of processing the impact of James Baldwin, W. E. B. Du Bois, and Richard Wright's decision to lose faith in the United States of America's ability to do right by Black folk to the point of physically removing themselves from this country's landscape.

Speaking of removing oneself from this country's landscape, I pinned the following words to my daughters while living abroad in pursuit of my own wellness and sanity after being a Black male educator for over two decades. I entitled the letter, "Hey Black Girl Magic—Father to Daughters," stemming from a writing technique invoked by Richard Wright that later inspired Tanehisi Coates (Coates, 2015; LitCharts, n.d.). Inspired by Wright's poem, "Between the World and Me," Coates connects to this literary work of the early to mid-20th century, ultimately borrowing the title for his own critically acclaimed early 21st-century book written as a letter to his own son (Coates, 2015). Below are those iterations stemming from an impetus to exit my homeland just as Baldwin, Du Bois, and Wright had done decades before. The letter begins:

Girls, I don't believe it wise to move through life in an unexamined fashion with blissful ignorance. Actually, although some people do live like that and benefit from such blissful ignorance, you don't have that luxury. Keep reading. I am going to elaborate on that point so that you know exactly why I find it important that you know and understand who you are. I know that you are probably saying to yourself, "Well, that's not fair." Well, I'm also going to teach you about an old truism that your grandparents taught me a long time ago that goes like this—"life ain't fair." Blurry, vague, and unclear? Well, my beautiful Black princesses, things will come even more into focus as you read along.

"But daddy, we're not black ... we're brown. Why are you calling us "Black princesses"? This was a question that I asked myself repeatedly as a young boy. Not the princess part, but the taken-for-granted black labeling of me when my skin complexion is actually brown. No answer persuasive enough to make good sense of why people called us Black ever came until I went off to college. Why? Why did we call ourselves something and not know why? During this pre-internet era, there were unpersuasive attempts at answers from family and others but nothing that triggered a lightbulb moment of understanding in my mind. Now, back to the letter.

Girls, this is one of the important things that I want to tell you. This is one of those things that you really don't have the luxury of not deeply understanding. You will struggle with making sense of the senseless killing of Ahmaud Arbery. This was just an incidence of disregard for the life of a person categorized as Black in our country. Eldest child, in your teens, you are old enough to ask the right questions and question why White men, like in the case of Ahmaud Arbery, killed the Black young man like his life did not matter. Keep asking the right questions. Don't shy away

from knowing. You are not afforded that luxury. It would be dishonest to tell you that this is where such atrocities ended. One day, you will come to realize that there are many more. You come from an extremely resilient people.

At the tender age of four, the youngest has already begun to ask about skin color. She wants to know why folks say “Black people” and why folks say “White people.” Interesting.

REGRESSIVE – AN EMERGING PATTERN

Upon reflecting, I realized that I had not been an avid reader throughout my childhood and a large portion of my collegiate experience. So enthralled with sports, I would read what was assigned and was able to make good grades by doing well on what was required, thereby maintaining athletic eligibility. It was only after attending a campus lecture sometime between junior and senior year of college that I was challenged and the spark lit to become more knowledgeable about the world and my place in it by reading more than what was required. The invited lecturer to our campus was Kwame Ture. Formally known as Stokely Carmichael, he, like Baldwin, Du Bois, and Wright, had also chosen to reside outside the United States, in his case choosing to live in Guinea, West Africa. Kwame Ture’s presence yielded a fully packed auditorium with an accompanying overflow audience. The energy in the large university campus room felt electric that night.

The former Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) leader’s rhetorical tools and oratorical skillset captured the audience’s attention. At one point, he asked the audience to raise a hand if they were Christian. I was one of the overwhelming majority who raised my hand. Nearly the entire room raised their hand in response, not prepared for his follow-up question. He then asked how many had read the bible in its entirety. This question left the huge, jam-packed with less than a dozen or so hands still in the air. This line of questioning on that night was the spark that lit a fire in me intellectually and began my quest for greater knowledge of the world and my place in it.

Growing up in a Christian family split by the congregations of the Southern Baptist and the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) churches, all I knew was the dogmatism imbued in the ideological responses to the existential quandaries of life, death, and how to comport oneself in between those occurrences. My mother’s side of the family attended the Baptist church within walking distance from the rural housing project in which I was raised. My father’s side of the family attended the AME church just a short car drive away to the small town to which the housing project was annexed. Although my mother was a regular attendee of the Baptist congregation, my father was nomadic in his church-going practices. He might be found at either church or another church on any given Sunday. Ultimately, my parents settled into the Baptist congregation. I had many questions about religion as a child that went unanswered. I took much of this theological naivete on to university life and into that room on the night of that collegiate lecture. The next day, I went to a local bookstore and purchased some of the first books of my life that were not an academic requirement. The journey of self-discovery through literature had begun.

What follows is a series of three selected “fragments,” or story-bits, that delve deeply into my childhood educational experiences with the intent of using *currere* to present a deeper discussion of my lived experience and meaning-making as an educator (Poetter, 2017). I am hopeful that revisiting my experiences with these particular Black male scholars with significant

literary impact on the world will be revelatory in the progressive, analytic, and synthetic phases of my *currere* journey.

REGRESSIVE FRAGMENT #1: OFF TO FRANCE GOES JAMES BALDWIN

Arguably one of the most impactful writers of the 20th century, James Baldwin's writing continues to reverberate in modern academic circles and public thought. I found it fascinating that a Black, gay man could have such a powerful impact on the socio-political culture of a country via his typewriter. Even more intriguing was the courage it must have taken to uproot himself from his own country and, with meager means, relocate to a foreign land with a foreign language. Once my motivation had intersected with a new thirst for knowledge sparked during my undergraduate and graduate years of university life, the work of literary scholars such as James Baldwin became essential reading. Feeling extremely behind in any kind of sophisticated understanding of what had been written about my people, those who have been historically socio-politically classified as Blacks, I continued to frequent bookstores in pursuit of reading recommendations. The recommendations were many and overwhelming, but the works of James Baldwin were a part of the many recommended readings provided.

Also powerful and intriguing was the biographical commentary found in audio and video archives about James Baldwin. To hear Maya Angelou speak of him or to see him in conversation with Nikki Giovanni poured into my visual and auditory senses like fresh paint on the canvas of my mind (Giovanni & Baldwin, 1971). When speaking of Malcolm X, I vividly recall watching a video interview of James Baldwin where he expounded on how living in the United States challenged him so mightily. He told the reporter that he was deeply challenged by America because it was killing his friends. This was the type of sensibility, boldness, and candor that James Baldwin possessed during the racially tumultuous years of the 1950s and 1960s. It appeared that he did not fear the repercussions of the media or the physical harm that was possible when he told the reporter with such conviction on nationwide television, in essence, that the dominant culture in the country might hate El Hajj Malik Al Shabazz (Malcolm X), but he was his friend.

There are several notable revelations in reflectively analyzing James Baldwin's impact on me as an educator, academic, and one socio-politically classified as a Black man. He, like I, grew up in a Christian family. Both Baldwin and I could not find comfort in the application of the Christian doctrine as practiced in the United States, like the most segregated hour of the week being on any given Sunday when most attend church. Unlike me, Baldwin was vocal and visible in challenging those socio-politically classified as Whites to prove that they were really practitioners of Christianity. His television appearances and public debates of the 1950s – 1980s rendered Baldwin's positions on religion and American life readily apparent.

These were the same challenges I struggled with as a child and through the early stages of my collegiate experience in the early 1990s. The liberation theology of some religious movements of the north has been slow to spread to the southern regions of the United States (Cone, 1970). As a high school senior preparing to depart for college, I can vividly recall the day in church when my childhood pastor had all high school seniors stand for some going off to college instructions. A summation of the overall message was that we find a church to attend while away in college. If the church used the King James Bible, then the church was fit for worship. I found this pastoral wisdom good counsel and did adhere. In being obedient, I visited a variety of churches in proximity to the university. As an impressionable college freshman who started college at a Predominately



White Institution (PWI) before transferring to a Historically Black College/University (HBCU), I was fresh from the incubator of my small, rural, southern town upbringing where my high school was about 95% and my church congregation 100% Black.

This context opened the door for the discovery of James Baldwin's frequent repetition of an undisputed American truism regarding the most segregated hour of the week in America, being on Sundays. Naïve to such an observation of our country's segregated racialized worship practice, I did not discriminate in my nomadic Sunday church-going practices during my first year of college as I heeded the instruction of my hometown pastor. Being able to report successful attendance at church on Sundays was also a sign of obedience to the ritual, which was deeply important to my parents. Their worries about the plethora of things that could go wrong while away from home engaging in university life were lessened by my church-going practices. While the fear of going to hell was lessened, the new awareness of racially segregated religious practices had been experienced, leading to many questions. Although I never experienced anything overtly inappropriate during my nomadic journey amongst several all-White church congregations, the curiously inquisitive kind glances, awkward feeling, and futile attempt to ignore my being the proverbial elephant in the room were undeniable.

REGRESSIVE FRAGMENT #2: THE RENOUNCED CITIZENSHIP OF W. E. B. DU BOIS

How fascinating it must have been to be the first person of African ancestry to receive a Ph.D. from Harvard, arguably one of the country's most prestigious universities then and now. In a quest to understand better the historical implications of Harvard's first Black Ph.D. earner, I also discovered that W. E. B. Du Bois' disenchantment with the United States ultimately led to him renouncing his citizenship and relocating to Ghana, West Africa.

My first knowledge of W. E. B. Du Bois came through a college debate highlighting the philosophy and ideas of Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. Du Bois. Once again, the cognitive dissonance of such provocatively new ideas being debated sparked a deep interest in the two powerful historical figures. This led me on a path of discovery that nurtured my intellectual curiosities regarding the history of those in the United States of African descent.

Born in Great Barrington, Massachusetts, W. E. B. Du Bois was ultimately responsible for a voluminous number of publications (Asante, 2008). It appears almost criminal to have not been exposed to one with such literary impact through my public schooling experience. Perhaps, it is not so surprising when I think of knowing so little about Martin Luther King Jr., that, during middle school, I had to be disabused of the notion that his name was not Martin Luther "The King" by a group of Morehouse College student volunteers who visited our school during Black History Month. As a middle schooler of the 1980s who had successfully matriculated through the elementary school years, I thought that Martin Luther King was actually a king who had been killed. After all, who was commonly called by their first, middle, and last names? This was baffling to me. Carter G. Woodson writes about this kind of miseducation (Woodson, 1933).

Du Bois was a great defender of the souls of African people and an answer to many critiques of the inherent inferiority of Blacks post-enslavement (Du Bois, 1903). He gave us the first scientific and systematic study of the Black community. Du Bois's *The Philadelphia Negro* was one of the first sociological studies of its kind written in America (Du Bois & Eaton, 1996). W. E. B. Du Bois was critical in internationalizing the African diasporic struggle for freedom. He was able to connect the American experience of African oppression to the African experience in



South America, Africa, and Europe (Asante, 2008). He was a central figure in the movement of Pan-African Congresses that initially convened in Manchester, England. Many of the young African intellectuals, such as Kwame Nkrumah, that joined the older Du Bois at these meetings would soon become leaders of their countries.

A reflective analysis yields that, with all that has been stated and is known of W. E. B. Du Bois, the question of why he renounced his citizenship remained fascinating to me. Here we have the first Black to receive a Ph.D. from Harvard, having also studied internationally in Germany, who was one of the most respected intellectuals of his era. With all of the accolades of a historian, arguably one of this country's first sociologists, a progressive organizer, and a public intellectual, W. E. B. Du Bois ultimately found his country of birth untenable and a place where he no longer wanted to claim citizenship. This one fact has resonated over the years as the highest of indictments against one's own country. After achieving the highest levels of academic success from one of the country's preeminent institutions of higher learning and living well into his nineties, W. E. B. Du Bois concluded that there was no American dream for the Blacks.

I was able to reflect deeply on the weightiness of such a decision during a visit to the W. E. B. Du Bois Mausoleum, which was his last residence located in Accra, Ghana. The mausoleum is the final resting place of Dr. Du Bois and his wife, Shirley Graham Du Bois. Is this what it takes to be free? This question reverberated through my mind as I walked the mausoleum grounds. Is this what it takes to be free?

REGRESSIVE FRAGMENT #3: RICHARD WRIGHT GOES TO PARIS

A historical marker can be found in Natchez, Mississippi, communicating to anyone passing through that the noted African-American author of *Native Son* and *Black Boy*, Richard Wright, was born in the first decade of the twentieth century near Natchez. Natchez is also where he spent his early childhood. Wright's lifelong quest for freedom ultimately led to his departure from the United States of America to reside in Paris, France. Born the son of a sharecropper and a school teacher, Richard Wright's start in this world resembles mine but in a different historical timeframe. I was born approximately sixty years after Wright to a father whose family fled the state of Mississippi in pursuit of a better life beyond the plantation fields where his family sharecropped during the early twentieth century. My mother, like Richard Wright's mother, would work her way up from being a migrant field laborer to becoming a teacher.

The traumas of Richard Wright's childhood were such that any sense of formalized schooling did not occur until around the age of twelve. The gradual continued relocation of Wright from place to place, the departure of his father from his matriculation to manhood, and the traumas of being raised as the descendants of enslaved Africans in the sharecropping Jim Crow South heavily shaped Wright's outlook on life. His mother's departure from Mississippi and brief stints of residence elsewhere ultimately landed the family in Chicago. Wright would learn of the challenges of the mean streets of yet another city and its challenges of poverty and white supremacy. Through all of this, Richard Wright would go on to become one of the most notable American writers of the 20th century.

Once again, I was forced to grapple with yet another prominent historical, intellectual figure of African ancestry who had, upon thorough analysis, concluded that the pursuit of well-being must occur in a foreign land. Most telling is the fact that Wright, like James Baldwin and W. E. B. Du Bois, acted on the existential crisis of a loss of faith in their country of birth, relocating



to foreign countries to take up residence. Richard Wright spent time living in Mexico before ultimately moving to France, where he would live out the remainder of his life. He died in 1960 at the opening of a very turbulent decade in his native land.

THE PROGRESSIVE: FORECASTING

After more than 20 years of being one of the scarce few African-American male educators in the United States, I began to imagine the “what ifs.” I was disenchanted with the direction in which my profession was headed, and some qualified Black males are taking their talents to foreign lands and wondering what if (Etheridge et al., 2019). It was tempting to be optimistic about the next 10 years. Yet, there appeared to be no signs of empirical evidence to support such optimism, so much so that I found myself in the same intellectual and existential crisis as James Baldwin, W. E. B. Du Bois, and Richard Wright. In responding to this crisis of well-being, I, too, departed my home country to take up residence in a foreign land. As Baldwin had chosen during the 20th-century a life in France and Turkey, Du Bois in Ghana, and Wright in France and Mexico, similarly, I delved into the life of an expatriate in the United Arab Emirates as a 21st-century Black man.

Black storytelling through the use of *currere* can assist in illuminating the trend of African-American expatriate-ness as a multi-century historical phenomenon. Perhaps more work in this area of scholarly production can be a force in highlighting what factors create the need for such a pattern and what might be done to mitigate against the need for such. From one perspective, the notion of African-American “brain drain” in the educational field becomes apparent. With the increasing challenges of life in the United States, the increased gap between the wealthy and the rest of the country, and the disproportionately negative impact of such on the African-American community, the loss of intellectual capital to the life of expatriate-ness presents yet another challenge. How must such challenges be approached? Baszile (2015a) notes regarding the addition of voices, in her work of critical race/feminist *currere*, “the others who are invited into the conversation represent the voice/s that have been absent, ignored, misconstrued, distorted, repressed in the curriculum/s that shapes our lives—the curricula of schooling and media, in particular” (p. 120).

Being a bright-eyed, optimistic college student filled with the passion I thought adequate to change the world, my introduction to the literary ideas of James Baldwin, W. E. B. Du Bois, and Richard Wright was transformational. After all, it was Kwame Ture’s (formerly Stokely Carmichael) lecture appearance at my university during the mid-1990s that started my journey into the world of Black literature. Imbued with much irony is the fact that Ture, too, ultimately departed the United States of America to take up residence in Guinea, West Africa. How does this nourish one’s well-being? Years from now, I envision being well into my 3rd decade in the educational profession, advocating for schools to be institutions of progressive change. I would like to envision fledgling Black male educators not having to look abroad for the solace that should be found in their native land (Etheridge et al., 2019).

THE ANALYTIC: BEING MINDFUL OF THE PRESENT

I write this manuscript as a university faculty member having recently returned to the United States. In this moment, an analysis must be brought to bear on the conundrum of the Black



male educator exodus to be expatriates using their expertise in foreign lands (Etheridge et al., 2019). As was noted in my regressive moments, well-known historical intellectual and literary leaders of the African-American community have found expatriate-ness to be the choice for a better existence during life in the 20th century.

Through the use of *curre*, it becomes clearer that, with such limited numbers of Black male educators, viable global opportunities at better life circumstances abroad challenge the chances of increased Black male educator numbers. This raises further questions about how long it will take for the United States to mature as a society suffering from a legacy initiated by the maltreatment of the natives of this land and the forced enslavement of Africans through the transatlantic slave trade.

SYNTHETIC: I AM

In this exploration, the method of *curre* has allowed for educative pauses where I reflected, intending to gain insight into the lives of James Baldwin, W. E. B. Du Bois, and Richard Wright (Kuhnke & Jack-Malik, 2021; Poetter, 2020). Specifically, I wanted to interrogate the trend of these three well-known intellectual figures who ultimately chose to leave their home country of the United States of America to reside in foreign lands. I wanted to use the method to deeply examine my more than 20 years in education as a Black male educator—who has also been known as one of the approximately 2% of Black male educators in the field, especially within the context of my sharing the experience of leaving the U.S. to live abroad in search of a deeper understanding of what it means to be free (Chillag, 2019).

While living and working abroad, I often noted this experience as a time when I felt most free from the stigma associated with blackness that was pervasive in my country of birth. Abroad, I was able to walk outside and through a major city at any time of the day or night and not feel the sense of timidity that accompanies doing such, especially at night, as a male classified as Black in the United States. How freeing it felt to not feel oneself to be deemed suspicious while walking through neighborhoods or city streets in the deep of night. The unwritten rules of not being in certain spaces during the hours of the night due to the possible negative implications, whether real or imagined, is a freedom-limiting fear that I know all too well, having been reared as a Black male in the United States.

The glaring missing ingredient to life as an expatriate in the United Arab Emirates was the absence of the commonness of violence that comes with the terrain of U.S. citizenship—especially gun violence—especially school shootings. Much of the senseless gun violence is becoming more tolerable and normalized in my home country. The United Arab Emirates has been a global exemplar as one of the safest places to live. To make the point quickly, picture an African-American female in her mid-twenties riding her bicycle through the streets of any major U.S. city at approximately 10 p.m. in the dark of night, appearing not to have a care in the world. My expatriate teacher colleagues did so as common practice. When asked if they would be out in that manner while back home in the United States, their answers were consistent—“no”—with variations in the degrees of intensity that could be as intense as “absolutely not” to an explicative being placed in front of the “no” in communicating such.

I had a similar experience in the mid-1990s during my collegiate years when completing a summer abroad program in Japan. I could ride the Japanese monorail system for hours in a country where I could not speak the language and minimally read the signs and feel a level of safety and



freeness that I had never experienced doing the same in my home country. Where it was not uncommon to step onto public transportation or on an elevator and note the gentle clinching of purses or the looks of fear by others in my home country, I did not experience such during that summer in Japan. For the first time, other African-American males and I could sit in conversation for hours, simply discussing how good and freeing it felt to not be deemed a likely perpetrator or victimizer or guilty until proven innocent on sight simply because of the high melanin concentration of one's skin.

I realize that memories are not exact; reconfigurations of experiences can occur as time passes and become fictionalized, at least to a degree (Poetter, 2012). Even so, we live in troubled times in the midst of social unrest tearing at the fabric of socially just democratic life as the gap between the haves and have-less continues to widen. These troubled times demand voices from the numerical margins of our profession. Bringing the counterstorytelling as a dimension of Critical Race Theorizing (CRT) to the conversation, Baszile (2015b) helps to highlight the importance of the need for more voices from the numerical margins stating,

Knowledge, of course, is never neutral, which means it is always a story of some kind produced by a situated knower. Given the storied nature of knowledge, it seems implausible to me to suggest that stories do not matter or they are somehow less significant in knowledge production and meaning-making than those things we call facts, data, and evidence. These things, in fact, cannot survive without being couched in some kind of narrative. In academia, for instance, we refer to our narratives as paradigms. CRT, in this respect, is no more or less about storytelling than any other paradigm. What it is, however, is far more transparent about its politics of counterstorytelling. In this vein, it does not pretend to be neutral, objective, or apolitical. It embraces the realization that knowledge comes from thinking and feeling bodies, from bodies that are raced, gendered, and sexualized, among other subjectivities, from bodies that are located in hierarchical relations and places of difference. (p. 239)

Change can be initiated through storytelling, and *currere* is about the theorization of storytelling (Morris, 2019). This exercise is not simply theorized storytelling for academic romanticism. On the contrary, *currere* is a tool for critically positive individual and social change so desperately needed in our field.

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