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Review of *A Search Past Silence: The Literacy of Young Black Men*.

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A Search Past Silence: The Literacy of Young Black Men, is David Kirkland's bold, poetic, and insightful look at Black male literacy in America. Kirkland's research explores the social, historical, and cultural phenomena of the Black vernacular and Black literacy. His research skillfully identifies and articulates ideologies and philosophies necessary in his exploration of the intersections of urban youth culture, urban teacher preparation, language, literacy, and digital media.

Kirkland's research adds an authentic perspective to the history of Black literacy, culture, and scholarship that fits nicely with the academic traditions of scholars such as Geneva Smitherman and bell hooks. Historically, there has always been a critical need for Black people to tell their own stories, from slave narratives to neo-slave narratives, from the Harlem Renaissance to the Black Arts Movement, from W.E.B. Du Bois to Houston Baker, Cornell West, and Henry Louis Gates. Continuing this scholarly tradition, Kirkland's work reiterates and reaffirms the importance of griots¹ in modern Black culture. His work also demystifies the complex language and literacy of Black folk in America. It is often scholars, in the roles of griots, who ensure that we understand why narratives like Frederick Douglass' are very different from Uncle Tom's. Even though both are protagonists, the authors experienced the American institution of slavery and the society that created it, nurtured it, and fueled it very differently.

Kirkland wrote *A Search Past Silence* "to provide a humanizing narrative of young Black men that illustrates the sensitivities and intimacies of the ways in which they shape their ways with words" (Kirkland, 2014). His themes of silence and voice are reminiscent of the historical struggle for equality for Blacks in America. Kirkland, who cites Paulo Freire, and like Freire, he views these young men's acts as acts of defiance, "liberation," and "authentic thinking" (2011). In his preface, Kirkland calls *A Search Past Silence* "an attempt to uncover the science of Black male literacy" (p. 1). In his observation of Black urban youth culture, Kirkland explains that "Literacy in the lives of Black men has never been about French and Russian thinkers or banal analysis of data" (p. xiv) but rather about stories and circumstances that move and motivate Black men not to read and write. "It is in response to these things," says Kirkland, that "Black males read and write, casting memorials on skin to fallen brothers, staining walls with spray paint and blood to reclaim space" (p. xiv). The literacies of Black men tell their stories, acknowledge their truths, and make their voices heard in a world where they have been silenced, written off, and left for dead in institutional cages and urban dystopias.

David Kirkland's authenticity, at times, gets lost because of his decision to refer to himself only through the experiences of his participants. Sometimes his voice seems distant, even though he is eerily close to this topic and the young men who give him data. Even though the text is ethnographic and not auto-ethnographic, Kirkland claims that he does exist in the text, if only to "reiterate the humanity of young Black men, a demographic that through false media representations and the like, come to many of our minds dehumanized" (p. 5). Kirkland explains that he is represented in the text in two ways: the process of researching the literacies of the young men and in the process of writing this book. (p. 5)

¹ Wikipedia defines the griot as a West African historian, storyteller, praise singer, poet and/or musician. The community figure was also considered a repository of the oral tradition and could be social leader and advisor to West African royalty.

Structurally, *A Search Past Silence* is divided into sixteen chapters; it also contains a forward by NYU sociologist and education professor, Pedro Noguera, a preface by the author, a conclusion, and a discussion of methods section. In the preface Kirkland establishes an Afrocentric tone by moving beyond theorists like Bakhtin and Foucault, whose theories alone are insufficient and ill-equipped to address the sociohistorical and sociocultural complexities of Kirkland's participants. Kirkland explains that teaching literacy to Black males involves channeling Black male literacy potential in classrooms and beyond. It will also involve, says Kirkland, "understanding Black males deeply to acknowledge within the pedagogical discourse the meaningful sociologies of Black male literacy practices" (p. xv).

The introduction of the book is broken down into five parts; in these five areas, Kirkland introduces Lansing, Michigan, explains how he gains access to his participants, how he shifts from observer to participant, and demonstrates his research as a system of inquiry. Through his ethnographic methodology, Kirkland describes how his research grows. After Kirkland gained access to his participants, they began to expect his visits to their class. They would even save a seat for him (p. 3). Over the years of contact and interaction, they grew closer and Kirkland became more familiar with the details of their lives (p. 3).

In Kirkland's transformation from observer to participant, he develops a phenomenon he calls "I-us" reflexivity, which illustrates "the ways in which the fragmented bits and pieces" of his time in the field merged with his reflections on his participants: Derrick, Shawn, Jose, Sheldon, Keith, and Tony, the six young men in the study. The author reveals:

Looking into myself and impelling a coherent image of my own Black masculinity onto theirs, I was able to see them, to situate the young men in a history of readers and writers who espouse literate dispositions much like them and based on particular social and cultural models for engagement... Though I wore the figurative clothes of critical ethnographer, stripped of my academic gear I resembled the young men both historically and culturally... As I began writing about the young men, I began reconstructing them, but only as I knew them based on years of data collected. Indeed the literacy in their lives was far more complex than their experiences with books could reveal. (pp. 3-4)

Kirkland's methodology took him beyond his initial year of collecting data. He found himself at his participants' jobs, at their homes, and anywhere they would invite him (p. 8). After his study became more formal, it progressed beyond classrooms and into their community. Kirkland says the process was messy but necessary to reveal the "multiple worlds" in which the young men practiced literacy (p. 8).

A very interesting element of the text is Kirkland's discussion of African-American matriarchy and his decision to only feature males in his work. He says that Hortense Spillers' work with narratives of African-American families helped him with this decision (p. 11). He writes:

The lives of the young men that I studied stood in the shades of Spillers' African-American paradox—mostly behind the wills of single mothers, who occupied the roles of mother and father and therefore a gender-fluid performance of parenthood, where young Black males quite literally and paradoxically learned to be men from women. In doing so

I describe a story of literacy that, wrinkles the pages of time. It is here that the female stands “in the flesh” as both mother and teacher-dispossessed. (p 11)

Kirkland’s world of Black male literacy is revealed through what he calls an “Organic pheminist lens,” which he defines as feminism situated in hip-hop ideology² that is “taught to us through the particular stories and lives of the females each of us encounter and know” (p. 11).

The body of Kirkland’s text consists of sixteen chapters, divided into three sections: “Silence,” “Language,” and “Identity.” The Silence section contains the book’s first six chapters: “Artifacts of Life,” “Cypha,” “Peering,” “Laughter,” “Silence,” and “Searching.” Section one explores Kirkland’s participants’ experiences from October and November of 2003, after the participant, Shawn, suffers a traumatic, life-altering experience. “Artifacts of Life” introduces Derrick and powerfully captures the tension between Black males and schools with the book’s most memorable artifact and symbol, Derrick’s diary. In a telling scene, Mrs. Cranshaw, one of Derrick’s teachers, discovers the young man’s diary in the hallway, near her classroom. Her discovery establishes a conflict. As she examines the diary, she reads seven letters that become a major theme in the study: S-I-L-E-N-C-E.

Throughout the text, Kirkland articulates how Black males are viewed as bad, threatening, and lacking literacy; the conflict between Derrick and his teacher exemplifies this (p. 19). Mrs. Cranshaw does not view or perceive Derrick as a writer, initially, and does not see potential his potential—as Kirkland does. When she returns his diary and somewhat reluctantly concedes he is a writer, she can only wonder why he doesn’t write in her class the way he writes in his diary (p. 17). Although she asks what she can do to help, Derrick responds that he doesn’t need her help (pp. 18-20). Kirkland’s narrative reveals that Derrick’s diary is full of writing and analysis; but, because of a disconnect and distrust between teacher and student, she has difficulty accepting Derrick as a writer and he has difficulty trusting her as a person genuinely concerned with his well-being, or what he knows, or has to say.

The other chapters in Section One focus on Shawn and Derrick and include Shawn’s experience as a victim of police brutality. Chapter Two, “Cypha,”³ functions as a transition from the teacher-student conflict to the symbol of the cypha, which in hip-hop is connected to freestylin’ (a form of rapping). Kirkland describes the cypha as an “organic instrument of spirit and soul” that hip-hop heads summon to give voice to their literacy (p. 23). In the cypha the participants freestyle and invoke the universal force of Nommo, which in some West African religious traditions represent the power of the word (pp. 22, 161; Smitherman, 1999). While performing these rituals, Kirkland informs us that Derrick, Shawn, and the other members of the group connect with other emcees⁴, street poets, and word entrepreneurs and fuse “lexical elements through the transformation of sound into spirit”; Kirkland continues, saying, they turn “Ebonics into standard speech, pain into poetry, and lead into gold” (p. 23).

² The influence of hip-hop ideology is denoted by replacing the “f” with “ph”; hence a word like fat world become “phat” in the hip-hop vernacular.

³ The participants pronounced “cypher,” “cypha,” and this word should not be confused with the word cipher.

⁴ Rappers and hip-hop artists.

In Chapter Three (“Peering”), Shawn and the group experience a run-in with the law, while performing a cypha (pp. 25-28). The scene is reminiscent of the recurring story of Black men, police brutality, powerlessness, and silencing. Shawn’s victimization and this brutal act adds his name to a long list of Black men who have suffered similar fates, a list that includes the Scottsboro Boys, Amadou Diallo, Rodney King, Trayvon Martin, and countless others.

In the book’s second section, “Language,” Kirkland focuses on the period between November 2003 and January 2005. This section begins with Chapter 7, “Proverb,” which focuses on Black narratives. In this chapter Kirkland introduces Grandma Ida, Shawn’s maternal grandmother, who loves to tell stories. Grandma Ida provides the boys with a historical Black literacy that includes Black porch culture, Nommo, griots, and the knowledge that the Black storytelling tradition is embodied in the language of Black people, which starts with community and what Kirkland calls a “parade of proverbs,” handed down “through the ages from one oral messenger to the next” (p. 47).

The text’s third section, “Identity,” focuses on “The Present...and the Past” and the chapters convey an overwhelming sense of hopelessness, at times. In Chapter 12 (“Being”), Shawn says, “Man, I just don’t give a fuck no more. You ain’t gonna make it out here, as long as they got a foot on your neck” (p. 83). Kirkland explains that Shawn is striving for subjectivity. He is aware of who he is, as a Black man in Lansing, the way that he is perceived by the community, and his ability to act or have a say in his story (p. 83).

In the “Resistance” chapter (chapter 13), the group’s quest for subjectivity is tested. In a scene that takes place at a mall, Kirkland explains how the mall represented, or exemplified, the epitome of the community’s fear and how the young men became objects of scorn and ridicule. Kirkland explains that during the incident the young men “felt that people stared at them like ‘monsters,’ as if they were a threat to the casual, ‘peaceful’ reality of the common world”; he states how they felt violated, defeated, and helpless afterward (p. 92).

The book’s conclusion, “Beyond Silence,” nicely summarizes Kirkland’s study. In a documentation of Black literacy as “social memory and cultural ideology” (p. 146-147) Kirkland helps us to understand a Black male literacy that is sometimes hidden from us because of our attempts to view students through the same lenses. “Blacks, particularly Black males, are understood and come to understand themselves in racist terms,” says Kirkland. He continues, Black men are not perceived as people who read and write (p. 140). Certainly Mrs. Cranshaw felt this way. She had difficulty seeing Shawn as a writer, which contributed to Shawn’s belief that what teachers like Mrs. Cranshaw taught in school represented oppressive, White values. For Shawn, Black males who submitted to the dominance of whiteness and its (literacy) practices consented to their own oppression (p. 140).

As I mentioned previously, Kirkland’s work does not focus primarily on banal analysis of data or rest on traditional and sometimes antiquated theoretical approaches to literacy (p. xiv); instead he seeks to persuade his audience that the theories of white philosophers and linguists such as Bakhtin, Foucault, Chomsky, Derrida, and Jung are insufficient in interpreting data about Black literacy. New Literacies, Critical Literacies, positivism of modernity, and psycholinguistics are important and relevant, but as Kirkland demonstrates, equally important are the theories of Black theorists and scholars that have already problematized the phenomena of Black literacy. A few examples include Carter G. Woodson, W. E. B. Du Bois, Cornell West, James Baldwin,

Frederick Douglass, Malcolm X, and Geneva Smitherman (pp. 20, 83, 96, 140). These scholars and intellectuals are vital to understanding Black literacy, the Black vernacular, and the cultures that they serve and enrich. These theories are the essence of Black language and Black thought. Kirkland implores us to move beyond the deficit perspective of Black males lacking literacy. His call is for us to move to a profit perspective, because young Black men, by the nature of their humanity and by the textures of their human experiences, are literate (pp. 7-8).

Hopefully, Kirkland's next step is practical application for this data. We need to learn how knowledge from lessons learned from Kirkland's and Mrs. Cranshaw's experiences with Derrick, Shawn, Jose, Sheldon, Keith, and Tony can be disseminated to pre-service teachers and teacher education programs? What strategies can teachers apply in their classrooms? Where can they learn these strategies? How can this information be provided to school administrators, school boards, state and federal politicians who control monies and develop policies for programs and standards? With the emergence of critical pedagogies and Critical Hip-Hop Pedagogy, coupled with increased knowledge that more educators are learning about young Black men and their rich traditions of cultural literacy, we need more research about these young men in order to understand how to equip teachers with the skills to teach young Black males to continue to develop their literacies and use them effectively.

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