Focus on Policy

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Listening to Echoes: Teaching Young Black Men
Literacy and the Distraction of ELA Standards

“Yet they must believe. They must believe, if only to free the mind, if not the body. Only when
the mind is free has the body a chance to be free.”

—Gaines, 1993 (p. 251)

For young Black males, the current standards
movement in English language arts (ELA) is dis-
tracting because it is rooted in a conception of
ELA that fails to consider how Black males live
and learn. Further, this movement should be seen
as limiting because, as Ernest Gaines would have
it, it has been less about inspiring belief as to free
the mind so that the body can be free than about
inspiring doubt as to cage the mind to the echoes
of the past. In the process, the educational trea-
tise on which “standards” are based seems bare
and bound by the exclusive demands of tradi-
tion and uniformity and the stale taste of the
elite as opposed to the concerns and unique attri-
butes of all people—particularly people of color.
As long as ELA standards remain fettered to
the past and rooted in the narrow master narra-
tives of its “elite” citizens, the teaching of literacy
will remain shackled there too. And young Black
men will continue to struggle to learn in ELA
classrooms.

The recently released Core Curriculum Stan-
dards (CCS) for ELA is just another iteration of
educational “reform” that retraces the structural
injustices of the past. As progressive as it might
seem, CCS provides no antidote to the stubborn
inequities that plague schools. Simply put, it too
staples academic conceptions of literacy to the
doorpost of yesterday—to those narrowly-con-
ceived traditions of thought that fail to consider,
for instance, how contemporary young Black men
actually experience and learn literacy. Further,
CCS does not account for the ontological reali-
ties of young Black men who more often than not
leave their school experiences wounded (Noguera,
2008). Unless they are designed to heal, ELA
standards, such as the newly released CCS, may
not be helping teachers more effectively reach
their Black male students; they may in fact be
rubbing salt into longstanding wounds that have
historically distracted Black males from learning.

According to CCS:

Just as students must learn to communicate ef-
ficiently in a variety of content areas, so too
must the Standards specify the literacy skills and
understandings required for eventual college and
career readiness in history, social studies, and
science as well as ELA. By their structure, the
Standards encourage curriculum makers to take
a comprehensive approach that coordinates ELA
courses with courses in other subject areas in or-
der to help students acquire a wide range of even-
more sophisticated knowledge and skills through
reading, writing, speaking, and listening. (CCS,
2010, p. 1)

By leaving the question of means (or peda-
gogy) open and without speaking to those things
that make students unique, CCS’s suggestion for
“a wide range of ever more sophisticated knowl-
edge and skills” could be interpreted narrowly
and theoretically loose as traditional print-based
literacies that would, predictably, tread back-
wards to conventions of “standard spoken as well
as written English” (p. 2) as opposed to what
Tatum (2008) sees as “a more anatomically com-
plete model for literacy instruction.” Moreover,
since CCS—like most standards documents—
fails to consider (1) the uniquenesses of stu-
dents of color and (2) the need for differentiated
and socially relevant instructional approaches to
meet their pluralistic needs, I fear a “back to the
basics” approach to literacy. This approach would
essentially promise to reinforce scripted prac-
tices, skill and drill on rules of traditional print-
based literacy, isolated (and exclusive) readings
of and writings on a narrow range of literatures,
and so on—thus doubling down on conceptions
of literacy that we know do not work with Black males (cf. Tatum, 2008). So the basic logic of the current standards movement is to continue to legislators an educational agenda that has never worked for young Black men in the first place.

In recent years, a growing number of scholars-activists has initiated an intellectual campaign to push for new standards and culturally and socially sensitive learning models based on current knowledge of how young Black men read and write (Kirkland & Jackson, 2009; Tatum, 2008). In addition, scholars such as Watson and Smith erman (1997), for example, have maintained that culturally and socially sensitive literacy principles and instructional models are needed to assist in the continuing effort to help Black males arise from the academic abyss of low performance, a place that may intensify the social trauma many experience on any given day.

A culturally and socially sensitive frame for literacy, thus, moves standards and instruction beyond the hegemonic past, but also keeps them from gravitating to other extremes, such as posturing literacy in Blackface. In this way, Brown (2005) critiques the kind of surface matching where Black youth are encouraged and sometimes forced to read books by people who share little in common with them besides skin. For Brown, such approaches to literacy lack social and cultural sensitivity and do little to recognize how Black youth, males in particular, actually practice literacy.

As I hope to illustrate in this article, certain young Black men understand and experience literacy deeply and intimately through other young Black men. Their principles for learning literacy are not guided by a sequence of sound bites misaligned with the particulars of their lives. Rather, they learn literacy through and in relation to one another, as echoes in the screeching chambers of Black masculinity, not as a matter of mimicking flesh but through a dialogic system expressed in the cultural roots of call and response (Bakhtin, 1981; Smitherman, 1977). These young men—and perhaps all young men—read and write in and about a shared world that speaks to the concerns of their collective realities as young men (Dyson, 2003). They practice literacy beyond the pale of elite heuristics (Block, 2010), but on the collective pulse of a common heartbeat that binds them. To illustrate this point, I invite you to consider the story Rashad—a research participant from a larger study—and his brother Damon.

**BEHIND THE ECHOES: THE CASE OF DAMON AND RASHAD**

Damon loved his younger brother, Rashad. And for that reason, the eleven-year-old Rashad idol ized Damon. Damon had been a mentee in MBK while at Malcolm X Academy, one of Detroit’s first K–8 African-centered schools. Damon attended Malcolm X Academy two years before I arrived to conduct a study of literacy among the young men at MBK. He had since moved to high school, where he barely attended.

His younger brother, Rashad was still attending MBK when I arrived two years later, but had become increasingly quiet after Damon left. Generally quiet, Rashad would gladly boast about his brother, whom he adored. In his words, his “big brother” was a best friend to him, but hearing Rashad talk about Damon made Damon seem more like a teacher. The lessons Rashad learned about life mostly came from Damon.

“He not as bad as people say,” recalls Rashad. “People just don’t understand him, that’s all. He love his family just like anybody else do, and he be out there doing whatever it take to make it.”

Everyone—Rashad’s mother, teacher, sister and friends—all commented that Rashad began to sound like Damon. According to them, he echoed some of Damon’s words. “I learn a lot from Damon,” Rashad reflected. “He taught me what [the word] exuberant means. It means . . . great in like an exciting way. So now I be using that word all the time. Damon even made up a word *exu* which means great too.”

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1 Names of all individual in this article are pseudonyms to protect participant identities. The name and location of Malcolm X Academy is provided with the expressed written consent of the Principal of Malcolm X Academy.

2 The My Brother’s Keeper (MBK) project, in conjunction with Michigan State University’s African American Language and Literacy Program, explored issues of language, literacy, and identity among a group of adolescent Black males in Detroit, MI. This work sought to understand how the young men of MBK viewed themselves in relation to language and literacy, as larger social and political structures influenced their subjectivities.

3 My Brother’s Keeper is a mentoring program founded by Drs. Clifford Watson and Geneva Smitherman. The purpose of the program is to provide early social and academic intervention for Black boys, preparing them for college and life. The program is currently directed by Drs. Geneva Smitherman, Austin Jackson, and Jeffery Robinson.
The word did not just exist in Rashad’s explanation; it survived in a crumbled note that Damon had written and that Rashad had folded and tucked away in his pocket. “Here’s an example,” he said as he dug into his front pocket to share the note with me:

Life is hard and then you die
Tears don’t last, so how you cry
I gotta get through, it’s due, man
Gotta get good, *exu* man
Learning new lines, exuberant
Knowledge is the key, a new man
So I’m getting my street degree, instant
Open up your mind
Then we all get free
Nigga on the grind
Don’t bother me
Cause I ain’t got time
Can’t be a causality . . .

Pointing to the word “*exu*,” Rashad turned to me, “See how it work.” There was a story in his pointing and articulation of the word. The story was instructive and consistent with the tenor of Damon’s rap—an urgent struggle that crossed over from brother to brother. Rashad wanted Damon’s words because they explained him, helped him to make sense of life as brothers linked in a long chain of other brothers. While it still didn’t mean much to me, the word “*exu*,” with its rich range of possibilities, quite literally meant the world to Rashad. He understood it because it represented the good in his life “like an exciting flow.” It was as if Damon had planted in him a word that would grow and become part of Rashad’s own vocabulary: “My family went to the Detroit Zoo two weeks ago. The animals at the zoo were *exu*, which means great in an exciting way. Another way to say it is exuberant. The animals were exuberant . . .”

Rashad was sympathetic to Damon, who after leaving Malcolm X Academy picked up a few bad habits. According to his former teacher, Damon got caught up with the “wrong group of boys.” “He’s a good kid,” his teacher remembered, “but you know how it is when you want to fit in—he quit school, started selling dope. I guess he needed the money. His family is poor. But for a while, didn’t nobody know where he was.” Damon wasn’t lost; he didn’t want to be found.

Damon’s story is like the stories of millions of young Black men, who read and write through each other’s whispers. I first learned about Damon, reading Rashad’s notebook. “When I grow up, I want to be like my brother,” Rashad would write. This singular sentiment appeared at least a dozen times in the twenty or so writing assignments Rashad completed while in the MBK program. When he mustered the courage and conviction to write, Rashad usually wrote through Damon about Damon and the things Damon had taught him. Rashad’s standards for writing, thus, included Damon; the ELA standards did not.

**CAPTURING ECHOES: THE QUIET NOTES OF A YOUNG BLACK MAN**

Rashad’s notebook recorded the quiet notes of a young Black man, who was himself responding to the even quieter story of a not-to-be forgotten brother. Damon’s words seemed to whisper onto those tragic pages that autumn, hoping to find an ear beyond the unbearable conditions confronting them (Smitherman, 1999). Indeed, social pressure points have propelled many young Black men into writing about a life that would be as opposed to a life that truly is (Haddix, 2009; Kirkland, forthcoming; Smitherman, 1999). This type of rhetorical maneuvering is equivalent to rewriting history and sometimes used as a strategy for coping in order to preserve a fragile psychology under siege (Kirkland, 2009).

Damon did not want Rashad to go where so many Black men, such as himself, have gone. He did not want his younger brother to grow up suffering the pain he too well knew or be trapped by the dark forces of street life (Fuller, 2003). Damon wanted something better for Rashad—a more possible future. Rashad remembers, “Whenever I wanted to go with him . . . to make some money or something like that, he would never let me go. He always was on me about going to school [and] doing something with my life. He wanted me to do good [in school] so that I didn’t have to be out there like that doing wrong to get by.”

Damon was as complex as he was contradictory. Contrary to how some people labeled him, there was a direction of which Damon knew that could lead one out of despair. It was a direction that
Damon tried to push Rashad in, yet it was not a direction that he himself decided to pursue.

The contradiction of Damon was clearly becoming Rashad’s. Rashad, frail and no more than about five feet high, became less engaged in school and more quiet in the MBK program as the semester passed. His teacher faulted his declining engagement in school on his increasing desire to be like his older brother.

“He wants to be a rapper now,” his teacher complained. “He ain’t never want to be no rapper until Damon started calling himself a rapper.”

It wasn’t clear to me that Rashad wanted to be a rapper, though he did love rap. Rashad wanted to be Damon and began to exist in the world that Damon inhabited.

Rashad’s demeanor was a causal cool pose (Kirkland & Jackson, 2009; Majors & Billson, 1993), mirrored in the eyes of his older brother. According to another teacher, “He want to be like his brother. He’s becoming more and more mannish.” Rashad’s teacher was referring to a posturing of manhood, emblematic of the “mannish” pose Rashad was learning from Damon (cf. Majors & Billson, 1993). It was “cool,” Rashad thought, to be indifferent to school. He was finding the cultural politics of his social location simply made it not cool to submit to anything, particularly the oppressive norms and strictures of society standards laced to them (Kirkland & Jackson, 2009). Though he read and wrote, he only did so now on terms mostly defined by how Damon was reading and writing.

As the school year waned, Rashad started wanting things he could not afford. In addition to writing about his brother, he began writing about those “new J’s” or his dreams of “Cadillac Escalades rolling on forties.”

He began skipping school and writing less, attending the mentoring program less frequently. His absences from school and the mentoring program, like his brother’s absences from high school, became more constant. Instead of attending school sporadically, he eventually stopped attending at all. On the few occasions, when he did attend school, he wasn’t very engaged. In the process, Rashad became increasingly reckless—and even more silent.

Rashad’s silence was always deafening, for when he spoke, his words arose with such care and clarity. He had insight into the world that very few young men his age shared. He was Claude Brown’s (1965) “manchild in the Promised Land” or Alex Kotlowitz’s (1992) “there are no children here.” Like a man well beyond his years, he understood well what he called “the economics of the streets.” To Rashad, street economics easily translated into the economics of the world. He wrote:

Life is this way: you either a pimp or a ho, and some people be both. You see, most folk are getting used, selling their body for a dollar. Some people sell and still get sold. But me, I’m gonna sell . . . That’s why people my age like pimps . . . ‘cause they sellers, and sellers get paid. That’s the American dream . . . to get paid. See, people like Bill Gates, they pimps; Jay-Z, he a pimp; and all the dudes that be making money, they [are] pimps too. The one thing they got in common, they don’t need school to teach them how to make it. They learn on the street or wherever, but not in school. They be wanting us to go to these colleges, taking out loans, so y’all can pay y’all pimps. See, in life you got two kinds of people, pimps and hoes, and I ain’t gonna be no hoe.

While his graphic articulation of pimps and prosperity might be off putting to some, Rashad’s perspective reflected Damon’s views of the world. Such views were the sad truth of both of their realities, of the exploitative nature of capitalism and its stranglehold on American society, not excluding young Black men (Kindlon & Thompson, 2000; Noguera, 2003). Appropriating Damon’s voice, Rashad, like so many social theorists before him, joined the intellectual work of acknowledging the contradiction between meritocratic education and economic prosperity, the dichotomy between the rich and the poor, and, for him, the difference between being “a pimp” and “a ho” (cf. Althusser, 1969; Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Gramsci, 1971).

Writing through Damon, Rashad offered a literacy critical of the world, a literacy capable of resurrecting his brother’s voice. While many in the academy would dismiss such literacy as dogma or liberalism gone awry, I regard it, here, as central to Rashad’s thinking and being. It helped him uphold “a humanistic philosophy, a scholarly methodology, and a model of practical action” (Abarry, 1990, p. 123). Rashad exhibited a cultural and social sensitivity that embraces...
a logic of reason. In so doing, he seemed to have both recognized and challenged the various constructions and representations of injustice in our world (McLaren, 2002; Morrell, 2009).

For Black males, such literacies live through others and in relation to real events. Rashad’s “critical” literacy, for example, was a performance of Damon’s life. Though incomplete and controversial, he acquired this practice of reading and writing through the whispers of beloved others (Stinson, 2008). His appropriation of their echoes, the traces of sound that reverberated through the core of his being, suggests a culturally and socially sensitive model for literacy that emphasizes the importance of the experiences of Black males that are shaped in the company of other, respected Black males. Such an approach to ELA borders on pedagogical therapy, which centers on building awareness (Kirkland, 2010), or what Freirian-inspired scholars have termed “critical literacy” (Jongsma, 1991; Morrell, 2008; Soares & Wood, 2010).

My articulation of critical literacy here, however, is limited to the franchise of possibilities that one begins to own through culturally and socially sensitive literacy acts. It suggests something more than political literacy. Critical literacy, as a culturally and socially sensitive practice, can be viewed as a process designed to promote healing, social awareness, and understanding (Kirkland, 2010). This dimension of literacy includes therapy, and follows a similar process as Freire’s (1995) notion of praxis. It seeks first to empower the individual to knowledge of self, other and one’s surroundings by introducing the substances of those things from where they are best found. Had Rashad been given an opportunity to interrogate his own texts and, thus, integrate his brother’s views in official spaces, he might have risen above the injustice that spoke through his writings. Nonetheless, he was fully aware of the world that he was in, and he had Damon’s eyes to thank.

“Damon understands how the game is played,” Rashad wrote. “He’s doing good for himself. He’s an M.C. because going to school can only get you a nine to five.” Of course, Rashad’s naïveté in celebrating the “wisdom” of his brother was doing him little good. He was failing all his classes, and his suspicion of school, which was leading him to neglect it, would ensure that he too would succumb to the tragic stats that haunt too many young Black men (Noguera, 2008). Instead of doing a nine to five, some would argue that Rashad’s disregard for schooling was surely putting him on a path to doing nine to life (Kennedy, 2001).

In spite of what some might see as Rashad’s downfall, he was getting a lot of help from the system. It seemed reasonable that Rashad would resist a system that shunned his brother and, in so many ways, alienated him. Responding to a prompt about the controversy of Jay-Z visiting Cass Tech High School as principal-for-a-day, Rashad wrote: “It’s only a controversy because he [Jay-Z] is Black. They don’t want you to see powerful Black men in school because they don’t want Black men to believe that they can make it without school.” Again, Rashad read the controversy of Jay-Z at Cass Tech through the eyes of Damon. “Damon would go to school if Jay-Z was there.” His message declared a logic worth exploring: if schools engaged them, would Black men do better in school?

I am uncertain whether or not having Jay-Z or any other rapper as principal for a day would significantly alter the fortunes of Black men in school. However, it seems clear to me that the importance of school diminishes in the face of other more impressionable forces. It was through such forces (e.g., an older brother who wanted to be a rapper) that Rashad learned wealth can be attained outside hard honest work. This idea alone challenged the idea that one needed to do well in school in order to make it.

Sometimes when talking to children as young as Rashad (he was twelve when I ended the study), you almost know when something bad is about to happen. Words stand still out of the open mouths of children and drop like falling lumber into the unsettled laps of the comfortable. The sound is all the same; though quiet, it is loud, louder than the squelch of weeping mothers crying for their dying sons, and as tacit as the speechless accent of a deafening yell that precedes a cry. In the thunderous silence, you can hear the echoes of diminished hopes, the sigh of uncertainty, and the blistering beats of stopping hearts. The sounds fall upon us so quickly, and in the case of Black males, too often.

In the cold fall of November 2004, an altercation broke out at Rashad’s home. Rashad’s sister was arguing with a friend or a boyfriend (I am unclear about this detail). Something happened strange and wrong. I am listening to the
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conventions incorporate the theory of echoes (see Bakhtin, 1981) that seem to explain how young Black men read and write.

I have used Rashad’s narrative to illustrate the distance between what we know about Black males and the standards that govern learning in schools. CCS, for example, connects literacy knowledge squarely to college readiness, but Black males such as Damon and Rashad are not acquiring literacy for college purposes, but to understand and explain their lives. Hence, the variant social forces that impact the Black male beyond the classroom are lost in the standards, and the social and cultural sensitivity needed to attach literacy learning back to them also seems missing. I would add that because we miss them in school, schools become complicit in the stew of forces that actually limit Black male college readiness. In order to get them ready for college, we must first get them ready for life.

Therefore, a rethinking of ELA standards is needed. Can we write ELA standards that honor the echoes of American youth, while also fostering rigor and social readiness? Can we write ELA standards that help to heal the socially wounded, while also expanding youths’ social horizons? These are the questions we must ask ourselves, and then dare to answer, if we are serious about truly reforming ELA education for the better. If we are serious about educating Black males, then we must have the courage to move beyond the standards that limit what teachers can do with students—and toward the present (as opposed to the imagined) lives and aspirations of youth. The current educational crisis surrounding Black males require us to do so.

The Center for the Study of Social Policy (1994), for example, reports that close to 40 percent of working-age Black men are without jobs, either unemployed or incarcerated (pp. 7–9). Petit and Western suggest that, as early as age 14, one in three Black males will enter some phase of the incarceration process. Equally as bleak are the homicide statistics. According to Watson and Smitherman (1997), “Homicide is the leading cause of death among African American males in the age group 15–24, and a Black male is twice as likely to die before the age of 45 as a white male” (p. 10).

In education, Black men are at the bottom or near the bottom of all academic achievement categories and are grossly over-represented among testimonies of what sounds like a thousand people murmuring, including Rashad’s friends—some of whom he knew, and others whom he had never met. There is Rashad’s teacher who was with him the night before the altercation. There is a cascade of voices and perspectives rushing toward me, inventing a collection of mythologies and tragic testimonies. I try my best to hear them so that I can piece them all together.

“This man smashed Rashad’s sister’s face with his first.”

“No, Rashad’s sister ran into the house to get her brother.”

The stories begin to converge. “Damon ran out the house and confronted the girl that hit his sister.”

“Damon was running because he owed somebody some drug money.”

“Damon used drugs so the dope man got him.”

At once, all the voices come together, arranging themselves in dark harmony.

“Damon ran out the house. He got shot in face and in the chest.”

“Damon got killed because of dope.”

“Damon got shot.”

“Damon dead.”

Hearing about the death of Damon was like hearing about the death of Rashad. I could hear Rashad’s absent young voice echoing tears, spilling in the memory of his slain brother. Having gotten to know Rashad, I surely knew that the death of his brother would lacerate his heart like the gunshot that split his brother’s once-handsome, once solid-as-a-rock face. At that point, it became clear to me that the night we lost Damon, we also lost Rashad. I never saw Rashad again, but I learn a lesson in his absence: young Black men are linked in a chain of others and reside in the echoes of their brothers’ voices.

MAKING SENSE OF ECHOES

Rashad’s story is illustrative of millions of young Black men, who attend our nation’s schools—who are subsequently crippled by standards like CCS not written with them in mind. There is no place in the CCS to find youth like Rashad because they do not exist there. CCS does not extend beyond those fallow shadows of convention that have long loomed over ELA classroom. Rarely do such
school suspensions, dropouts, and special education tracks (Noguera, 2008). Given the unbelievable scale of the problem (and I have only begun to scratch the surface) and the discouraging statistical picture it paints, we, in language and literacy studies, can no longer afford to ignore the crises confronting young Black men as CCS (and a litany of other ELA standards) seems to do.

* * *

I haven’t spoken to Rashad since before Damon passed. His teacher gave me the notebook Rashad used when he was in the MBK program. Of course, reading through Rashad’s notebook made me curious about him. I heard from his teacher and others at his school that Rashad had taken Damon’s death hard. He never returned to MBK and eventually left Malcolm X Academy altogether.

While schools and programs like Malcolm X Academy and MBK are official sites for preparing American youth to participate in our democracy as empowered citizens and in America’s economy as competent workers, my short time with Rashad suggests that schools and society would be greatly served by examining Black boys beyond school contexts. We need to locate such contexts in our standards. Until we do so, the construction of new standards will remain part of an endless shell game where everyone loses—schools because of their failure to teach Black males, and Black males because their schools will have failed them.

It was no mistake that Damon’s voice, which I have never heard but only imagined, reverberated in Rashad’s voice, which I will never forget. Their voices, like the two points on the unit circle, 0º and 360º, moved through one another in fluid synergy, occupying the same but very different places on the social plane. Rashad, in writing Damon, was writing through him, intimately touched by the echoes of his brother’s voice. For young Black men, literacy can be many things—social, cultural, political. Yet, it is always connected to others through whom young Black men read and write. In reading and writing through one another, young Black men finally find a way to believe, if only to free the mind, if not the body. Because only when the mind is free has the body a chance to be free and write and read freely. We need standards and a standards conversation not held captive to the past, but rooted in the realities of our students’ presents and the possibilities of their futures.

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