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“The Classroom Must be Turned into a Riot”: The Necessity of Teaching Afrikan Students in Afrikan Ways (A Pan-Afrikan View)

Jordan McGowan

In 1964, Malcolm X, also known as el-Hajj Malik el-Shabazz, called on Afrikan people inside the empire of Amerikkka to intentionally utilize education to bring us closer to liberation. In his inaugural speech announcing the Organization of Afro-American Unity (OAAU), Malcolm declared: “We must unite our efforts and spread our program of self improvement through education to every Afro American community in America. We must establish schools all over the country, schools of our own to train our own children.”¹ While reading and reflecting on *Ufahamu*’s first publication, it became abundantly clear what the Ancestors were saying through their essays in that groundbreaking issue over 50 years ago. A community-controlled, Pan-Afrikan, Black Radical, Liberated Learning Environment, and education system are essential in the quest for liberation. It is vital for us to organize the masses, taking up our human right to teach and educate our People without the influence of colonial institutions. Their message was no different than Malcolm’s 1964 call to action¹, as it is still up to us to answer that call to have Afrikans take control of educating ourselves.

In Nisenan Land, currently known as Sacramento, California, our effort through the Neighbor Program to advance the Afrikan liberation struggle is rooted in trying to answer the call to create schools and build Pan-Afrikan People Power, this past 16 months at the Shakur Center, and now moving forward at a new location in Oak Park, a home on 33rd, we will call the Shakur House. The Shakur name stems from the revolutionaries whose lives and work have influenced our programs and beliefs: Assata, Afeni, Tupac, and Dr. Mutulu Shakur. We have strategically located ourselves in the Oak Park community of Sacramento, a historically Afrikan community, but in the last decade, Oak Park has faced aggressively-paced gentrification. The Oak Park community also

was the location of the Sacramento branch of the Black Panther Party, which served as a unifying space for Afrikans throughout the city of Sacramento. The current climate of inter-communal violence within Sacramento is a direct consequence of the dismantling of the Panther office in Oak Park. It has aided the continued divide of neighborhoods and sectional tribalism throughout Sacramento for decades. One of the ways we see this tribalism show up is in the hip-hop music coming out of the city; Sacramento has become known for “murder music,” with arguably the West Coast’s hottest rapper, Mozzy from Oak Park, a key contributor to these tribal feuds. This tribalism claims hundreds of lives a year. Oak Park is one of the main communities impacted by oppressive conditions such as high unemployment, gentrification, food apartheid, and colonial education models that lead to inter-communal violence and crimes of survival. Through building in Oak Park, Neighbor Program as an organization can stand and serve as a visible example of the power of Pan-Afrikanism. Despite facing similar attacks to the FBI’s notorious CounterIntelligence Program (COINTELPRO) run on Afrikan Liberation groups within the Amerikkkan empire, Neighbor Program, continues to serve and build with the community.

The Shakur Center has served as the home base for Neighbor Program’s operations for the past 16 months. Through honoring the Black Panthers’ 10-point program, we have built programs to meet the material needs of the Afrikan community in Sacramento. This includes providing over 6,000 free groceries boxes, over 7,000 hot meals, hosting 35 community learning classes, reopening the Assata Shakur Urban Freedom Farm, opening the Afeni Shakur Legal Clinic and the Dr. Mutulu Shakur Health & Wellness Clinic which have both run for over a year, opening the Tupac Shakur Performing Arts Theater which housed film screenings for political prisoners, open mics, a student art gallery and an archive of Malcolm X Academy for Afrikan Education(MXA), a full-time K-8 community school that opened in October 2022 and peaked at 15 students in its first year. The Malcolm X Academy for Afrikan Education is modeled after the Black Panther Party’s Oakland Community School (OCS), which operated from 1973-1982. Malcolm X Academy has worked to educate our children in traditional Afrikan methods, praxis, theory, and history, using Liberation pedagogy as our theoretical framework. Students

have been able to learn through action and practice, creating and building, genuinely embodying the natural learning process of trial and error. As the Panthers have taught, “the People learn through observation and participation”; with guided feedback from elders and peers. The Malcolm X Academy stands on the shoulders of every revolutionary who declared the importance of education, started literacy programs for the masses, and built schools for the people. As the Panthers declared in their 10-point program, “We Want Education For Our People That Exposes The True Nature Of This Decadent American Society. We Want Education That Teaches Us Our True History And Our Role In The Present-Day Society.” In true Panther fashion, we are not waiting for the amerikkkan empire to give us that education. We have built it ourselves.

Why Is MXA Necessary?

The amerikkkan empire has weaponized its education system through euro-colonial power structures prioritizing indoctrination over learning that seeks to maintain control through compliance. Students who dare to rebel are forced into the school-to-prison pipeline as another means of our continued genocide. This attempt to force conformity and assimilation into Euro-colonizer ways of thinking for Afrikan youth is present in the most mundane policies and tasks, from dress codes and the pledge of allegiance to the complete erasure of Ebonics as a legitimate English dialect. In *Ufahamu's* first issue, Harry C. Meserve argues that to understand the current condition of Afrikans, we must study and come to analyze the historical material conditions that have brought us to this present moment. Analyzing the “all-pervasive nature of colonial rule”³, he reminded those first readers, “We must understand what the loss of land and cattle, of forced labor and high taxes means to a people.”³ It is the gentrification, it is the historic inflation, it is the wage slavery, it is the cost of living that creates this genocide against Afrikans. This dictates why now is the time to fight for our right to reclaim ownership of our education.

Meserve writes, “as A.B. Davidson has put it, ‘African peoples have a right to demand that the most forgotten and sometimes deliberately counterfeited pages of their history be re-established.’ (15). Few topics in African history have been less fully

dealt with by European historians. And quite logically so; why should the ruler document the struggles of his captive peoples against him?"³ Through a proper understanding of the "constant and recurring liberation struggle between African peoples on the one hand, and Europeans and their African allies on the other"³ it is the logical conclusion to expand this nature of the struggle to Afrikans inside of the amerikkkan empire as well; and as Assata Shakur wrote in her autobiography, "The schools we go to are reflections of the society that created them. Nobody is going to give you the education you need to overthrow them. Nobody is going to teach you your true history, teach you your true heroes, if they know that that knowledge will help set you free."⁴

The colonial education system works to force Afrikan youth into assimilation, "attempting to force men to conform to wholly foreign modes of thought and feeling."⁵ This is evident in Fritz Pointer's "An Appeal to African Writers to be African" from *Ufahamu's* first issue. "Black people the world over are systematically denied . . . education for any number of reasons, among the primary being communication."⁵ Pointer lays out how European thinking is limited in understanding oral literacy as a legitimate form of literature and communication even though "[h]istorically, African people have an oral tradition, and oral literature is still alive and well—right here—, right now. It lives and will always live—I know because, 'I heard it—through the grapevine. ' All people have oral literature—and some non-people. Yet Europeans persist in trying to establish written literature as the only literature."⁵ Pointer's argument to Afrikan writers is to be true to their Afrikan identity and what that means concerning our traditions. This is the only logical conclusion if we wish to be free, if we are really to be in pursuit of Afrikan Liberation. "African Freedom is about Change; the destruction of Western values at all levels; the rebuilding of the African soul; the reshaping of our attitudes"⁵ for us to "develop the political awareness that what we learn and how we express our knowledge relates directly to political issues. The cause of human liberation will best be served by activism—activism of the gun, the picket line, the pen and the vocal cords. The classroom must be turned into a riot, subdued and controlled perhaps, but a riot nonetheless of feeling, emotion, and analysis united towards the search for reality."⁵

Within this understanding and rationale, I present what must be our focus as students of Pan-Afrikanism, Afrikan studies, The African continent, and servants of the People. Again I will reference Meserve's assertion in the inaugural issue of *Ufahamu*: "In the case of African resistance and rebellion, then, we must first look to these objective conditions. We must understand what the loss of land and cattle, of forced labor and high taxes means to a people. Such conditions must maximize tension within the social group, testing its traditional ways and demanding of them new responses to new problems. Let's look at African societies and the resistance (armed and otherwise) that they offered to Imperialism. We will find that resistance has been an important stimulus to African historical development. In the course of resistance, states were built (Lesotho, Samori Toure's Mande), and new social ties created."³

While Meserve was speaking to continental Afrikans' liberation struggle, the same analysis can be applied to Afrikans inside the amerikkkan colonial empire. We must understand what these genocidal conditions do to human beings. What must be understood is that we must throw off the ways of the colonial empire and move to create new ways of living and being in community with each other. Meserve says that we find that through struggling together; in fighting the colonizer, we will be able to build ourselves to become self-sufficient. This, again, is rooted in a Pan-Afrikan, Black Radical politic, as Malcolm is quoted as calling the politic a "self-help program."

The Importance of Understanding Afrikan Oral Literature

Where is my daddy at? Mama, why do we live so poor?/
 Why are you crying? Heard you late night through my bed-
 room door/Now, do you love me, mama? Why they keep on
 callin' me nigga?/Get my weight up with my hate and pay
 'em back when I'm bigger/And still thuggin' in this jail cell,
 missin' my block/Hearin' brothers screamin' all night, wishin'
 they'd stop/Proud to be Black, but why we act like we don't
 love ourselves?/Don't look around, busta, (you sucka!) check
 yourselves/Know what it means to be Black, whether a man
 or girl/We still strugglin' in this white man's world.

—Tupac Shakur: "White Manz World"

Historically, Afrikans have used music in various healing and spiritual practices and as a source of oral history and form of literature. Specifically for Afrikans within the death grip of euro-colonization, the oppressive conditions our People face have always been voiced in our music: from rebellion cries on the ships across the middle passage, field hymns & spirituals, the blues, soul, R&B, and hip-hop. Our People have always had the ability to find freedom in their voice, documenting our struggles in our music, allowing music to serve as a historical record, a primary source of our community, our conditions, and our celebrations. Since its birth, hip-hop has been a storytelling medium, leading Hip-Hop to become the newest genre and iteration of our Afrikan literature. Given this, we should examine just how Hip-Hop can be used to teach Afrikan students and provide evidence of why learning how to teach students through hip-hop is critically important at this stage of struggle.

Tupac Shakur is an excellent example of an Afrikan writer who has utilized hip-hop as a tool to have a profound impact on the world. Tupac, as mentioned earlier, came from a revolutionary upbringing and tribe and was able to utilize his artistic talents and skills to further push forward his political ideology. Tupac, much like his Panther tribe, was able to have a global impact on the way Afrikan/Black People, especially within the amerikkkan empire, felt about and saw themselves. Although Tupac's life was cut short by COINTELPRO-Esq tactics and operations, his ideology influenced generations of Afrikans through his words long after his assassination.

The evolution of Tupac, not only as a man but as a revolutionary Pan-Afrikanist: his duality, strengths, and weaknesses can be heard throughout his music and interviews. "When we manifest the best of the west side and the best of the east side, and we bring that together. . . that gon be the new breed. When we mix this culture with this gang bang shit. That's the new breed."⁶ Although Tupac was referring specifically to "Black amerikkka" in his last interview, it is easy to see how Ermias Asghedom, creatively known as Nipsey Hussle, was an embodiment of this belief Tupac had regarding a "new breed of G."⁶ Hussle, was the evolution of the THUG LIFE politic that Tupac envisioned. Hussle's family make-up, his journey back to The Continent, the genocidal conditions of his childhood neighborhood, and even the history of

revolutionary leadership from his locale, found in Slauson Leader & LA BPP founder Bunchy Carter. Nipsey Hussle had begun to put into practice the theories Tupac had preached, building up Afrikan resistance through community self-determination.

This collective Afrikan resistance allows us to build a shared identity. This Revolutionary Pan-Afrikan ideology was brought to the masses in the streets by Nipsey Hussle when he rapped, “How we go from the best to less then average//We used to be connected, who detached us//With no collective identity, it’s every man for himself//We need a black mafia”⁷. Nipsey Hussle may not have waved a Pan-Afrikan flag in his music videos, still, we would be doing a disservice to students to omit Nipsey Hussle in our study of Afrikan liberation movements and Afrikan literature. In the same way, it would be unwise not to teach Afrikan youth Tupac Shakur’s words when speaking about how we will find our freedom: “[when] all of us, everywhere see it as a necessity that we struggle and fight back.”⁸

This Afrikan literature coming from Tupac Shakur, Nipsey Hussle, and Mozzy only reinforces the legitimacy of Afrikan music and griots as a traditional form of not only communication but of history, poetry, metaphors, and all the other intricacies vital to a nation’s culture. Mozzy can describe the local landscape in the city of Sacramento for Afrikans. Mozzy raps in “Seasons,” “She worked her ass off just to feed us/She went to Ross to cop the new Adidas/She used to tap in with all the teachers/They wasn’t teaching’ nothin’, it’s no secret.”⁹ If we critically analyze what he is describing, what we are hearing is the oral history of a life similar to that of a young 8th-grade Malcolm (X) Little describing his educational experience in his autobiography:

“One day, just about when those of us who had passed were about to move up to 8-A, from which we would enter high school the next year, something happened which was to become the first major turning point of my life. Somehow, I happened to be alone in the classroom with Mr. Ostrowski, my English teacher. . . I had gotten some of my best marks under him, and he had always made me feel that he liked me. . . I know that he probably meant well in what he happened to advise me that day. I doubt that he meant any harm. It was just in his nature as an American white man. I was one of his top students, one of the school’s top students-but all

he could see for me was the kind of future “in your place” that almost all white people see for black people. He told me, “Malcolm, you ought to be thinking about a career. Have you been giving it thought?” The truth is, I hadn’t. I never have figured out why I told him, “Well, yes, sir, I’ve been thinking I’d like to be a lawyer.” . . . Mr. Ostrowski looked surprised, I remember, and leaned back in his chair and clasped his hands behind his head. He kind of half-smiled and said, “Malcolm, one of life’s first needs is for us to be realistic. Understand me now. We all here like you, you know that. But you’ve got to be realistic about being a nigger. A lawyer-that’s no realistic goal for a nigger. You need to think about something you can be. You’re good with your hands-making things. Everybody admires your carpentry shop work. Why don’t you plan on carpentry? People like you as a person-you’d get all kinds of work.” The more I thought afterwards about what he said, the more uneasy it made me. . . . What made it really begin to disturb me was Mr. Ostrowski’s advice to others in my class—all of them white. . . .those who wanted to strike out on their own, to try something new, he had encouraged. . . . They all reported that Mr. Ostrowski had encouraged what they had wanted. Yet nearly none of them had earned marks equal to mine. It was a surprising thing that I had never thought of it that way before, but I realized that whatever I wasn’t, I was smarter than nearly all of those white kids. But apparently I was still not intelligent enough, in their eyes, to become whatever I wanted to be. It was then that I began to change inside.”¹⁰

These oral histories are important culturally to Afrikans, as we can see the continued significance of griots throughout West Afrika and the Diaspora. If we fail to identify the traditional ways Afrikan People have lived with and learned from each other, we will continue to be subjected to colonial rule. However, once we embrace our Afrikaness, once we acknowledge the genocide against our people, once we reject the empire and come to a conclusion that “we Black people, Africans all, we are not yet free.”³ then we can begin to throw off the colonial assimilationist ideology and build our people up.

You have an obligation to yo folks, to the niggas that fell before you, to handle ya business, no matter what it is. All of it ain’t gon be pretty. . . . Some of that is going to be staying yo ass at

*home with yo kids, putting some knowledge in yo kids' heads..
ain't no struggle if you don't take care of yo babies. Not just
yours but the other soldiers.*

—Tupac Shakur (1993 Indiana Black Expo)⁸

When we think about the state of Afrikan students in this current educational terrain, the genocidal attacks against our children are obvious. Afrikan children deserve a healthy, nurturing learning environment away from the attacks on any curriculum teaching Afrikan history, from racist policies and harassment on campus and the school-to-prison pipeline. Again we must follow the logical conclusion that understanding colonial rulers would only allow for colonial education to uphold colonial standards. Then we know how this colonial institution is utilized as a vessel for the genocide of the Afrikan People.

Historically, when an enemy strategically attacks the youth, it is to prevent the uprising of a leader. This is precisely why Malcolm said, “The Organization of Afro-American Unity will build original education methods and procedures which will liberate the minds of our children from the vicious lies and distortions that are fed to us from the cradle to keep us mentally enslaved. We encourage Afro-Americans themselves to establish experimental institutions and educational workshops, liberation schools and child-care centers in the community.”¹ While Malcolm is no longer physically with us, we recognize his contribution to our struggle for human rights and Afrikan Liberation and stand on his ideological shoulders. What that means for me is the same thing it meant for Fritz Pointer. I am going to appeal to Afrikan educators to teach as Afrikans and for Afrikan students to learn as Afrikans. “Resistance to colonial rule and to neo-colonial domination has been and remains the key to the liberation of African peoples.”³

Afrikans in the west have been subjected to cultural terrorism and the theft of our identity through the 14th Amendment, so we must struggle to reclaim ourselves and be recognized as Afrikans. We must reclaim our Afrikanity, and the first step in doing that is through teaching our children they are Afrikan, and we can only do that by providing our children with an Afrikan education. This is a critical step in building a national liberation struggle, as taught by Jalil Muntaqim in *We Are Our Own Liberators* in “National Strategy for FROLINAN—The Front for the Liberation of the New Afrikan Nation.” Muntaqim provides his political

ideology and strategy for Afrikans within the amerikkkan empire to advance the Afrikan Liberation struggle by establishing the Republic of New Afrika as an independent and free territory from the euro-colonial amerikkkan government. Muntaqim's focus on education should remind us how important educating our children must be to us. Muntaqim purposes:

Liberation schools established for the purpose of teaching and training New Afrikan youth, adults, and members of FROLINAN in the political direction of the independence movement. . . It is FROLINAN's position that the New Afrikan community should have universities which are in support of the New Afrikan independence struggle and against national oppression, cultural imperialism, and colonialism; where such universities do not exist, the New Afrikan Independence Academy will serve this program. These academies will be education centers established in urban and rural communities to forge education in Afrikan history, political and social science, economics, business and organization administration, and technical training conducive to the preservation of the independence movement.¹¹

We must be building Afrikan learning institutions, and the time to act is now. I urge those of us who pontificate on Pan-Afrikanism, those of us who preach about pedagogy, to go back and read the first issue of Ufahamu and examine what is being said. Sit with Malcolm's 1964 call to action¹, and allow these modern griots like Tupac, Nipsey Hussle, and Mozzy to express just how genocidal the material conditions of our communities are for so many of our children. It is time to fight for our babies, it is time to reclaim our Africanity, and let us build our People's dignity through an education that is rooted in love. Let us return to our roots and learn from the babies; because as Assata told us R/evolution Is Love.

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