

## *A search past silence: The literacy of young Black men*

David E. Kirkland

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A fistfight breaks out in the hallway of a Lansing, Michigan, high school before quickly breaking up, its participants and spectators sent scattering by an approaching teacher. Surveying the scene, the teacher discovers a journal resting on the floor. It belongs to Derrick, her student, and one of the young men who had been watching the altercation. The teacher flips through it, finding the journal full of Derrick's symbol-littered, handwritten rhymes, an "artifact of his literacy life" (Kirkland, 2013, p. 18). She thinks to herself, "Why doesn't he write like this in class?" The teacher's question didn't arise from nowhere. Conversations had been broiling at her high school around literacy and Black males... [M]any at the school described quite a few of their Black male students as struggling readers and writers—what the school described as a "crisis" for which it seemed to have no solution. As a consequence, some of the other teachers in the school complained, "The [Black] boys won't read or write anything" (p. 18).

Two days later, the teacher approaches Derrick after class, asking for a moment of his time. She returns his book and admits to having read from it. Before Derrick can leave, his teacher uses this opportunity to engage him in a conversation about her perceptions

of his academic performance. She tells him, "You're not doing great in my class, and it's not because you can't do the work. That book in your back pocket says that you can. I just want to understand how I can help." Derrick knew what the teacher's statement had asked: How can I get you to do what I expect you to do in school? To this point, Derrick wondered if the sentiment of his teacher's comment came from a place of twisted compassion instead of sincere interest.

Did it emanate from a missionary desire to 'save' him from the bondage of his own savage complacency—a radical misinterpretation of him and the world surrounding him? In her comment, she'd positioned Derrick not only as helpless, but also as powerless—as wasted potential. Her perspective... represented the same delusion that characterizes the tension between Black males and schools. From this perspective, (Black) boys are painted as 'bad,' rebelling against the authority of the academy. Of course, this has never been an accurate picture to begin with. From a profit perspective, the teacher might have asked Derrick, 'How am I hurting you?' or 'How does the school impede you from writing with the liberty with which you wrote in your journal?' But to her eyes, neither she nor the school was complicit in the design of his

miseducation or in failing to encourage his hopes, aspirations, and opportunities to learn. Behind her quiet voice, the Black male that she could imagine was at fault for his own failures and was at risk due to his own faults (p. 19-20).

How could she help her student? What could she say or do to encourage Derrick to want to succeed? Unfortunately, the teacher was not posing appropriate questions. For Derrick, neither success nor literacy was about scoring higher grades in English class. Rather, literacy was richer and deeper, “more complex than his experiences with books [and classrooms] could reveal” (p. 4). Derrick’s literacies – as with many young Black men – were typified by dynamism and fluidity, shaded with urgencies and fears, and enacted “in the contexts of utility and imagination... through the deep histories interwoven into the polymers of [his] social DNA” (p. 138). As practiced by Derrick, literacy was “intimately connected to [his] stories” (p. xiv), and overflowed with a creative language that grappled with issues of race, class, gender, sexuality, and power, and explored “places no one goes in school” (p. 138). If literacy was only about the ability to “do the work,” as his teacher had implied, then Derrick had little use for it.

There is a fatal assumption made when literacy is regarded as a possession, usually owned by schools and the dominant group. In making such assumptions, we disregard the linkages between language and discourse, between discrimination and racism... The mechanisms of society, including schooling, become ways of enforcing the perspectives of

the privileged (p. 148). Narrow institutional definitions of literacy and success were of minimal interest to Derrick, and neither was the “narrative of pity that plays leitmotif in the lives of too many people of color” (p. 120). So Derrick smiled at his teacher and responded, “Miss, thank you, but I don’t need your help.”

From atop soapboxes across the political spectrum, it is perhaps the most dependable narrative in American education that young Black men do not measure up to their White counterparts (e.g., Darling-Hammond, 2010; Fordham, 1996; Gadsden & Wagner, 1995; Noguera, 2008). Indeed, much of our national educational policy is predicated on – and simultaneously validated by – this narrative, as policymakers and practitioners claim the urgency of leaving no child [of color] behind, of racing those ‘at the bottom’ to ‘the top,’ and of closing the persistent ‘achievement gaps’ that have long graced American schools’ statistical rap sheets. Strictly quantitatively speaking, the reportage of these test score gaps is not necessarily without justification. “According to national assessments of literacy,” writes Kirkland, “boys fare worse than girls in American education, and Black boys fare worst of all. Black male students perform well below all other students in almost every basic subject area” (p. 18). Quantification of ‘achievement,’ however, leaves far too much unseen, simultaneously failing to account for the contexts that produce test score disparities and failing to honor the epistemic resources that tests are unable to assess (see, for example, Campano, Ghiso, & Sánchez, 2013; Compton-Lilly, 2007; Nieto, 2010; Willis, 2007).

While acknowledging national assessment statistics, Kirkland writes that this is but one story, the “single story” (Adichie, 2009) that has been told, over and over, about the literacy ‘failures’ of young Black men. Kirkland argues that a perspective on Black male literacy informed only by so-called “achievement” tests necessarily relies on very narrow views of what counts as literacy, and thus tells “a single story that faults Black males for not performing well in mainstream literacy settings” (p. 136). Kirkland counters that there is “an unknown story that is rarely told in the ‘science’ of Black males and literacy” (p. 1). By looking ethnographically, rather than numerically, at the lives of six young Black males in Lansing, closely and in context, over the course of years, Kirkland has produced a monumental achievement in the field of urban literacy education. By honoring the complexly nuanced ways of reading and writing practiced by these six individuals, Kirkland authentically reflects the “ideas, voices, meanings, imaginings, and systems of knowledge guiding practice and performance within” their group (p. 2). In so doing, he challenges two ‘single stories’: one, that to be a young Black man is to exist in a state of perpetual crisis, and two, that literacy is a skillset that can be reasonably evaluated by quantifiable means.

*A Search Past Silence* offers a powerful counter-narrative to the young-Black-male-as-failure trope so omnipresent in the dominant narrative of American education. Rather than problematizing Black men or lamenting their supposed lack of literacy, Kirkland dares to ask: “What might the stories of [Derrick and his peers] tell us about the nature of literacy

in Black male lives? How do their histories and relationships reveal this nature?” (p. 137). Clearly, Kirkland eschews the sort of subtractive (deficit) thinking that frequently pervades discussions of Black men and literacy. He instead begins from the additive (profit) assumption that, “by nature of their humanity and the textures of their human experiences, Black males are literate” (p. 7). Kirkland’s book provides these six young men’s literacies, their vaults of knowledge, their voices – too often silenced – an acoustically sound amphitheater from which to be heard.

One of Kirkland’s frequent findings is that young Black men’s practice of literacy does not begin or end at the schoolhouse. Kirkland contrasts his book from other literacy studies in education, which tend to focus exclusively on either in- or out-of-school settings, explaining that “the arbitrary binary that many researchers set up between the school and the home seem[s] contrived and limiting... Like their lives, the young men’s literacies were hybrid and dialogic in nature, constitutive of the situations of the multiple spaces they traversed in our time together” (p. 8). For several years, Kirkland followed the six young men from their classrooms to their homes and workplaces, from the street cypha (“the organic instrument of spirit and soul forged in a ring of bodies,” p. 23) in which they shared the rhymes and beats of their hearts, to the prison cell where one young man tragically found himself locked up. An ethnographer, Kirkland endeavored to know the young men’s families and friends, tracing their (hi)stories of literate activity over generations. The import of this, Kirkland argues, is that, to understand the

fullness of literacy in people's lives, "one must study the many stories—not the single story—of literate beings" (p. 136). He spoke to these young men about the various ways they read and write the word and the world, discussing Hip-Hop and poetry (chapters 1-5), body art as raced identity text (chapter 16), and the language and action of social protest (chapters 4 and 13). To this reviewer's knowledge, no national assessment of literacy is equipped to evaluate any of these items. Kirkland explains that knowing these young men in a meaningful way – as more than disaggregated test data – articulated for him "a new and needed narrative that raised serious questions about what it means to be literate in the 21st century—a question that yields greater importance especially in a world that constructs too many young Black men as the opposite" (p. 138).

Stylistically, Kirkland's book reads unlike any I have encountered before. There is a poetic quality too rarely found in social science research (Richardson, 1997), and it is wonderfully humanizing. As Kirkland explains, each chapter in his book "plays with genre, interspersing claim and reason, evidence and warrant, qualification and conclusion, with elements of art" (p. 154). Kirkland's writing also "plays with the idea of the research report, blending findings, analyses, and discussions with creative storytelling" (p. 154). He has thus created a reader-friendly text that, rather than camouflaging wounds, is allowed to feel and bleed, to laugh and mourn and rage. As Ruth Behar (1996) wrote in *The Vulnerable Observer*, "Anthropology...is the most fascinating, bizarre, disturbing, and necessary form of witnessing left to us" (p. 5). Kirkland,

in his steadfast devotion to documenting the literacy lives of six young men, demonstrates how and why this is the case.

In *A Search Past Silence*, David Kirkland has created a work of enduring conceptual and methodological significance, its topic of paramount importance to literacy practitioners, researchers, and policymakers in the 21st century. In the book's preface, Kirkland confesses his struggle to determine how to balance the details of six men's lives with the obligatory citations of Foucault and Bakhtin that have so come to characterize literacy research. Ultimately, Kirkland decided that

Literacy in the lives of Black men has never been about French and Russian thinkers or banal analyses of data... [T]heir literacies have been about friends and families – the haunting presence of mortality, the endless threats of being victim while being cast as villain...of complex tongues and bodies simplified and reduced to fit deficit presumptions that refuse the fullness and beauty, the triteness and tragedy of the lives Black males compose (p. xiv).

In the end, this is the book Kirkland produced, and he did so with marvelous beauty, advancing a "theory of literacy located on the edges of hope, where young Black males are finally heard as members in the long chorus of justice that defines our humanity" (p. 12). Through his words, and through the words and deeds of Derrick and his friends, whose experiences of literacy Kirkland so determinedly documents, it becomes clear not that there is no literacy crisis in the lives of young Black men,

but that it is a very different crisis than many people think; rather than a crisis of complacency, struggle, or failure, it is a crisis of being perpetually misunderstood.

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