

Songs caged birds sing: Letters between brothers and sisters

by

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Abstract

In an open letter originally addressed to Rocco, a Black man and childhood schoolmate subjected to the ills of the School-to-Prison Pipeline, I felt compelled to ask the “unasked question” W.E.B. Du Bois confronts in *The Souls of Black Folk* - “How does it feel to be a problem?” While I pose the same question to Rocco specifically, I also invite other Black brothers and sisters to put words to the struggle to get free and be free. By speaking to our lived experiences as Black youth navigating systems of oppression, I underscore the subtle and overt ways Black bodies are rendered dispensable and valueless. Knitting together our stories and voices culminates in a counter-narrative that calls for justice. Rejecting education as the practice of modern day slavery, we instead call for education as the practice of freedom—a call, which counters the never-ending violence inflicted on the Black body, mind, and spirit.

Keywords: Black youth, counter-narrative, School-to-Prison Pipeline, education as the practice of freedom

Introduction

Originally written as an open letter to Rocco—a childhood schoolmate implicated in the School-to-Prison Pipeline—this piece has since evolved into a counter-narrative—one which disrupts the memories and lived experiences that have shaped the life trajectories of Rocco and me. By using Maya Angelou’s “Caged Bird” as the metaphorical backdrop, I underscore the gravity of James Baldwin’s declaration that “To be a Negro in this country and to be relatively conscious is to be in a rage almost all the time.” By drawing upon popular culture, as well as literary and academic texts to engage multiple voices and perspectives, I channel this rage and in so doing, center possibilities for how education for liberation can still fly in the face of education for imprisonment.

Literature Review

Scholarship on the (mis)education and incarceration of Black youth has offered critical insight into the factors, which sustain the School-to-Prison Pipeline and perpetuate the hyper surveillance and criminalization of Black youth.¹ While various iterations of the School-to-Prison Pipeline point to its ongoing evolution (i.e.: Schoolhouse-to-Jailhouse Track and Cradle-to-Prison Pipeline), contemporary frameworks continue to emerge, which challenge preexisting ones.² In fact, rather than work within the confines of the School-to-Prison Pipeline as we currently know it, Fasching-Varner et. al., instead work toward a theory of educational and penal realism that not only shifts discourse on schools and prisons, but also “empower[s] those interested in critically engaging issues of racism that permeate U.S. orientations to education and justice.”³

Thus, as educators, scholar-activists, practitioners and community members invested in the learning, growth and survival of Black youth within and beyond formal school contexts, we should feel compelled to critically examine the strengths and limitations of such frameworks. In so doing, we can feel more empowered in our efforts to bridge the gap between theory and praxis. Furthermore, working in solidarity to disrupt educational spaces currently functioning as sites of violence and repression for Black youth is but one way to realize education as the practice of freedom.⁴ In building a sense of urgency for this work, Love⁵ declares the following: “It is thus fundamental to call attention to the fact that our education system, built on White supremacy and enforced by physical violence, is invested in murdering the souls of Black children, even if they are not physically taken.”⁶ To you I ask the following question: How many more of our Black youth will we bury—alive?

But a caged bird stands on the grave of dreams
his shadow shouts on a nightmare scream
his wings are clipped and his feet are tied
so he opens his throat to sing

~Maya Angelou

Brother,

“Welcome! We’ve been waiting for you,” says the clink, clink of the cuffs as they’re placed around your small wrists. All Man, yet still a Child wandering in the “Promised” Land.⁷ They had you all figured out. Tracked even before you officially entered the system. You got caught up—*they say*. But *they* placed a trap in your way; made sure you’d fall into it, and strategically absolved themselves of any blame. So let’s talk about the system. How YOU worked it. How IT worked you.

I remember when we were in school. How you roamed the halls, looking for what was never hard to find—trouble. Yellow uniform shirt hanging loose, shoelaces untied. Forever on a mission to disrupt, dismiss and defy. You were invincible—always in school, but not “in school.” Always suspended, but not “suspended.” How does it feel to be a problem?⁸

We were a community...back then. Remember Rosa’s mother who used to sit on the steps of my building? Mikey from Pah-NA-mah? Before Uber was a thing, your father was the one hustling to get fares, working so damn hard to ensure that rent was paid. Your mother? Honestly, who knows? You were simply following in your brother’s footsteps—and you were doing it well.

When your dad left Ayiti,⁹ crossed the waters to the shores of the land of the free, never did he think that his dreams for you would forever remain just that—a dream. Now you’re in and out of a cell, forever singing the songs caged birds sing. Who taught you the melody of oppression? Remember Chrisley? Amber? Jigga? Their blood on the same concrete where dreams are supposed to be made of¹⁰—where roses are supposed to grow from between the cracks. Their names graffitied on the walls of the block. Their legacy? Faded memories, broken-hearted mamas, and left behind little brothers desperately trying to pick up pieces that don’t make a whole.

And though your name is not graffitied on the walls of remembrance, don’t you know that your death has already been staged?

“And the Oscar for best drama goes to....”

drumroll please

“The State!”¹¹

The violence enacted is ongoing, cyclical—never-ending. Ever wondered why you struggled in school? Why you continued to get left back? The educational system was “designed to produce a hierarchy.”¹² Don’t you *know* your place?¹³ Limited access to resources, interrupted formal schooling and increased presence within the criminal (in)justice system facilitates another form

of (non)existence. Your resistance, refusal to conform, and continuous challenging of the powers that be,¹⁴ renders you ineligible for personhood. And, “To be ineligible for personhood is a form of social death; it not only defines who does not matter, it also makes mattering meaningful.”¹⁵

Yet, you from the same school of the hard knocks. Hov spits the anthem for the streets and you nod your head in solidarity.

Steady treated, *you* got tricked.
Steady kisses, *you* got kicked.
It's the hard knock life.

Son, let's talk about the pipeline that got you f*****. Tell me; how does it feel to be a problem? They set you up in the worst way brother. Let's talk about the School-to-Prison Pipeline. How you became a man in the very systems set up for you to fail. The product of a system that imprisons, miseducates and kills—liberates, empowers and restores. How can we emancipate ourselves, brother? How can you sing the songs of freedom¹⁶ when you forever fit the description: Young. Black. Male. The struggle will forever be real. You *gotta* be tough 'cuz you *gotta* survive.¹⁷ You *gotta* survive because _____. Can you fill in the blank? 'Pac and Biggie's track—a profoundly deep yet broken record.

And I wonder if they'll laugh when I'm dead?
Why am I fighting to live if I'm just living to fight?
(You don't know?)
Why am I trying to see when there ain't nothing in sight?
Why am I trying to give when no one gives me a try?
Why am I dying to live if I'm just living to die?¹⁸

'Pac and Biggie theorized about this social death with nothing but bars! They talk about the hopelessness and the struggle to just *be*. Their right to humanity always in question.¹⁹ Answer me this, when have you ever felt free “To Be Young, Gifted, and Black?” Or, like our sister Simone, are you simply haunted by your youth? Trying to navigate a system that entices you, rejects you, welcomes you back in with open arms, and then kicks you right back to the curb again. Funny thing is, I'm not quite sure which system I'm talking about anymore. School or Prison? The lines so blurred—the distinction impossible.

But the sheer audacity of you to think about possibilities. Expect access to opportunities.²⁰ The way our parents' bank accounts were set up and the color of our cocoa butter creamed skin did not allow us the same freedoms as students whose parents never struggled to make a dollar out of 15 cents or whose skin color afforded them privileges we were daily denied. How does it feel to be a problem?

I want to say your name. But how can I? You don't exist right? You died a long time ago. No memorial. No service. Still alive, but resting in peace. But I—I remember you. Though we live in a world that says otherwise, your life matters, your story matters, your experiences matter. Let's shift the paradigm. Even Lazarus²¹ was dead four days and Jesus called him by

name—beckoned him to rise up. He had a plan. A purpose. A story to tell. What's yours? You a dead man *still* walking. Speak your truth to power. All you need is one mic.

Signed,

The sistah from 4C

A free bird leaps
on the back of the wind
and floats downstream
till the current ends
and dips his wing
in the orange sun rays
and dares to claim the sky

~Maya Angelou

Brother,

All I have are questions.

How often do you tell the story of how you got over? Of how you had to (un)learn what you once believed to be true? When last have you felt the texture of your testimony? Carter G. Woodson talked about the miseducation of the Negro, Lauryn Hill laid the tracks to the flow of our critical consciousness, and now here you go. Proving that Black boys always did know how to write—and think and dream. How long has it been since we last spoke? Since we last chuckled over childhood memories—some of which still haunt me. Though you sound hopeful, there's still a feeling I can't really shake. I know you've been out for some time now, but tell me—when last have you *really* felt free? I won't keep you brother. Just wanted to say that I love you and I'm praying for the safe delivery of your baby. This is a cold world. Hold them tight and never let the streets love them more than you.

Signed,

~Your sistah from another mother

The caged bird sings
with a fearful trill
of things unknown
but longed for still
and his tune is heard
on the distant hill
for the caged bird
sings of freedom

~Maya Angelou

Dear Brother,

Texted: No Response
Called: No Response

Our sister Tina once said that sometimes, there are no words to articulate how the system claims lives. In the spirit of our sister Audre, I pose the same questions she once asked: “What are the words you do not yet have? What do you need to say? What are the tyrannies you swallow day by day and attempt to make your own, until you will sicken and die of them, still in silence.”

I’ve tried. Tried reaching out. Tried texting. Tried calling.
Silence.....

You’re supposed to be my brother, but I’ve come to realize that though we look alike, share the same language, and grew up on the same block, we have become perfect strangers. My brother, “we [are]...dying[.] [O]ne breath at a time.”²² Speak. Your story is our lifeline—and right now, I.....can’t.....breathe ²³

Signed,

Your Sistah

But a bird that stalks
down his narrow cage
can seldom see through
his bars of rage
his wings are clipped and
his feet are tied
so he opens his throat to sing

~Maya Angelou

Dear Brother,

We don't need permission to be human. Yet we are longing to get free—*still*. We open our throats to sing the songs caged birds sing—*together*. You cannot unhear our pain, agony, hope. When last have you allowed yourself to feel what we have learned to grow numb to? Stumbled upon *A Stone of Hope: A Memoir*. Tell me, when last have you embraced your brother? Our brother? He's singing the same song as us—just a slightly different tune. Isn't it time to confront the demons that have emerged from our closets—the very ones, which failed to be casted out like the unwanted weeds in our mothers' gardens? Receive the words 'Pac urgently scribbled down on a piece of paper as a memorial of our truth—

“Long live the rose that grew from concrete when no one else ever cared.”

My brother, never mind the thorns—
WE ARE THE ROSES.

Epilogue

20 years. That's 239 months, 3 weeks, 3 days, 21 hours, 13 minutes and 20 seconds. That's another Black man. Another father. Another partner. Another friend. Another smile. Another hand. Another number on the never-ending list. My brother, I *need* you to survive.

Signed,

The sistah you never really knew, but always wanted to know you—Your keeper.

Conclusion

The caged bird—still holding fast to dreams²⁴—longs for freedom. Sings of freedom. These songs tell stories of struggle and resistance, knowledge and power. Maya Angelou once said that “There is no greater agony than bearing an untold story inside you.” For many Black youth whose lived experiences mirror that of Rocco's, bearing the burden of social and educational injustice *always* comes with a cost. And while we are repeatedly told that we have the right to remain silent, Audre Lorde, in the closing lines of “A Litany for Survival” reminds us:

“So it is better to speak
remembering
we were never meant to survive.”

This piece is my way of remembering all those who have been forgotten. All those who bear the unbearable—an untold story of how education for imprisonment steals, kills, and destroys. I have heard the songs of Black youth longing to be free. And like Maya Angelou, I too know why the caged bird sings.

¹ Please refer to the works of Noguera (2003), Giroux (2003), Rios (2006), Laura, (2014) and Love (2016) for more nuanced analyses of how the hyper-criminalization and hyper-surveillance of Black youth sustains the School-to-Prison Pipeline.

² Fasching-Varner et. al., (2014) challenge us to rethink current conceptualizations of the School-to-Prison Pipeline and instead beckon us to consider how “The economy [functions as] the driving force behind the maintenance of oppression through schools and prisons” (Fasching-Varner et. al., 2014, pp. 421-422). McGrew (2016) on the other hand, delves into the limitations of literature that employ the pipeline metaphor and instead calls for “a more complex theoretical orientation grounded in critical scholarship” [Abstract].

³ The citation for the following quote is as follows: Fasching-Varner et. al., 2014, pg. 410.

⁴ In bell hooks’ *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*, she underscores the conditions necessary for true learning to occur. Not only does hooks speak back to Paulo Freire’s work on critical liberatory pedagogy, but she also challenges both educators *and* students to transgress boundaries that inhibit the realization of education as the practice of freedom.

⁵ Bettina L. Love’s (2016) work magnifies the ways in which Anti-Black state violence comes to bear on how Black youth are treated within and beyond the formal school setting.

⁶ Love, 2016, pg. 3.

⁷ This statement alludes to Claude Brown’s autobiographical novel entitled, *Manchild in the Promised Land* (1970).

⁸ This question is the same one W.E.B. Du Bois considers in the beginning pages of *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903). Throughout this piece, I attempt to provide dialogic spaces wherein my fictive kin can consider, speak back to and reframe this problematic “unasked question.”

⁹ Ayiti is the Haitian-Creole pronunciation of Haiti.

¹⁰ This sentence aims to juxtapose the possibilities Jay-Z and Alicia Keys illuminate in *Empire State of Mind* with the sobering reality that for many Black and Latinx youth across New York City, systemic violence facilitates the shattering of possibilities as well as the death of countless numbers of said youth.

¹¹ Cooper, 2018, pp. 211, 226-229: Throughout these passages, Cooper unpacks how “tough on crime” policies enacted during the 1990s not only informed zero-tolerance policies across schooling contexts, but also heavily impacted the educational and life trajectories of many Black male teenagers. In fact, such was the case for many of my fictive Black brothers who, on a daily basis, were surveilled and criminalized within and beyond the formal school setting.

¹² Ferguson, 2000, pg. 49

¹³ Ferguson, 2000, pg. 59

¹⁴ Ferguson (2000) talks about her observations in a compensatory education classroom. Ferguson “...found that students were being trained to follow directions, to conform, to be passive, to take standardized tests rather than to think creatively and independently” (pg. 59). Rocco and other young Black brothers to whom this letter is addressed rejected this form of “training” and in many ways, experienced punishment for their resistance.

¹⁵ Cacho, 2012, pg. 6

¹⁶ This reference alludes to Bob Marley’s 1980 single, “Redemption Song.”

¹⁷ Rios, 2009, pg. 153

¹⁸ Shakur, T., & Small, B. (2003). *Runnin’ (Dying to Live)*. *Tupac Resurrection CD*.

¹⁹ Cacho (2012)

²⁰ Brown, 2011, pg. 132

²¹ This alludes to the biblical account of Lazarus and his resurrection from the dead, which can be found in John 11:1-45. In this account, Jesus resurrects Lazarus after being dead for four days. For lack of faith, many of the Pharisees did not believe that it was possible for Jesus to bring Lazarus back to life. In the same way, many struggle to maintain hope when the plight of many young Black men subjected to the ills of the School-to-Prison Pipeline appears riddled with hopelessness.

²² Danticat, 2007, pg. 61. This statement is in conversation with the assertion Danticat’s uncle makes towards the end of the chapter entitled, “We’re All Dying.” As readers, we are left with Danticat, contemplating the gravity of her uncle’s statement. What did it mean to celebrate the upcoming birth of her first child amidst the news that her father was dying? Likewise, how do we process and produce meaning of the ongoing incarceration and death of so many young people within the Black community?

²³ This statement alludes to Eric Garner’s desperate gasps for air when placed in a deathly chokehold by NYC police officers after being detained on a Long Island sidewalk. When a Black brother or sister cannot breathe because the life is literally being choked out of their very bodies by actors of the State, a piece of me also dies with them. Similarly, counter-narratives that attest to the resiliency, vulnerability, and strength of our Black brothers and sisters, in many ways, keep us alive and help us keep on keeping on amidst ongoing struggles for justice.

²⁴ “...holding fast to dreams” is a line inspired by Langston Hughes’ poem “Dreams.”

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