

What's a Hip Hop Feminist Doing in Teacher Education?

A Journey Back to Curriculum Theory in Three Acts

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Intro: Intellectual Boundary-Crossings

CURRICULUM THEORY and I have a complicated history. When I was asked to declare a major in graduate school, curriculum theory was not an immediate choice even though none of the school subject-specific education programs offered intellectual space for answering the interdisciplinary questions I wanted to explore. Curriculum theory seemed an unlikely fit because many of the discourses to which I was introduced through required course readings did not include theorizing about Black women's epistemologies. My fellow graduate students had much to say as we studied postmodern, postcolonial, and psychoanalytic theories, but I did not feel the same excitement they seemed to have after reading theory that I concluded was much too Eurocentric. I did not find it liberating or revolutionary like my peers did; instead I found too much of it elitist and inaccessible.

I continued to take curriculum theory courses, however, because they offered intellectual spaces in which I could grapple with questions that made the most sense in my life as a Black woman teacher and beginning scholar. When I took a "Queer Theory in Education" course together with a "History of African American Popular Culture" course, my decision to claim curriculum theory as my intellectual home was solidified. I was hopeful that Black women's ways of knowing and being would be theorized somewhere in the required readings across the two courses. Disappointed with the absence of Black women's voices in the literature on gender and sexuality as well as African American popular culture, I learned an important lesson about the construction of academic knowledge that semester: Black women's ways of knowing could still be marginalized even in those discourses by/about marginalized groups. I took note of some very loud silences about Black women in curriculum theory, and I made a commitment to ground my scholarship in Black women's theorizing from that point forward.

In my search for Black women theorists who wrote about Black women's ways of performing identity, I settled on writing a dissertation about the public pedagogies of Black women rappers. I brought together the voices of Audre Lorde, bell hooks, Angela Davis, Tricia Rose, and Joan Morgan as I located Black feminist themes in representations created by Black women rappers in the U.S., and in so doing showed how Black women rappers have much to teach us about the representation of hip hop generation Black women in public discourses. I found an opening within curriculum theory discourses to bring together varied voices in my scholarship because of Pinar's conceptualization (2004) of curriculum theory as a "complicated conversation" (p. 11) and the "interdisciplinary study of educational experience" (p. 2). Curriculum theory provided an intellectual home for my work as well as a lens through which I explored larger questions of self-definition as a Black feminist academic.

When I finished graduate school, I left the world of curriculum theory to take a job in a discipline-specific teacher education program with pre-service teachers more focused on learning best practices than on examining their own privilege or learning how to build relationships with their students. I abandoned writing in which I wrestled with my own positioning as a curriculum theorist, namely a hip hop feminist working in teacher education, as well as writing to understand the overall significance of the curriculum focusing on interdisciplinary themes. I chose instead to write as a teacher educator within the discourses of multicultural teacher preparation, specifically how to prepare pre-service teachers for diverse school environments. Even though defining myself in ways my colleagues and students could understand was not the best fit for me, I felt safer doing so fearing that tenure and promotion reviews would not be favorable towards someone who wrote outside of the boundaries of mainstream teacher preparation.

Though I credit curriculum theory with saving my life in the academy, I have for a long time now wrestled with its viability as an intellectual home within the space of teacher education. This article is about my journey back to curriculum theory in my struggle to define myself as a hip hop feminist working in teacher education. I chronicle that wonderfully dangerous journey through a series of autobiographical narratives, or acts, in which I contextualize as well as theorize my intellectual boundary-crossings.

Act I: The Day I Was Outed as a Black Feminist

When a student followed me back to my office to speak with me about making up an assignment for an absence during the first semester of teaching an introductory educational foundations course, I never anticipated that my bookshelves would become the real topic of discussion. As I explained the guidelines for the assignment, I realized that he was not at all interested in what I was saying when he asked rather abruptly: Why so many books on Black women? I was impressed with his curiosity, so I explained that I had written a dissertation on the public pedagogies of contemporary Black women rappers. He feigned interest, asked a couple of questions, and left my office.

I thought nothing of this exchange until the following day's class. Arriving early and standing just outside of the door thinking that the professor before me in the room was still having a class, I accidentally happened upon a conversation led by the student with the interest in my bookshelves. He told his fellow classmates that he found out why I was so "hard" and "had an attitude" with the class. I still remember his words some four years later: "She's a Black feminist!" Other students asked how he knew that to be true, and he revealed that he had seen the

books on my office shelves. I interrupted their exchange telling the student that if he was going to label me, he needed to use a more accurate term. I told them that I did not identify myself as a “Black feminist,” but that I leaned more toward a “hip hop feminist.” I then announced that I would soon be teaching a course on hip hop feminism if they wanted to learn more. None of them ended up taking that class. In that moment, I did not feel liberated in declaring myself a hip hop feminist because I did not own that label in any substantial way, even though my scholarship was all about locating Black feminist themes in representations created by Black women rappers in the U.S. hip hop context.

I wrote about my ambivalence about the f-word in my dissertation: Even then I did not claim feminist in the string of labels that I used to identify myself. You’d think that I, a girl child taught through example how to be proud, determined, and self-reliant by women who were all of these things, would wear a feminist nametag proudly. But I was reluctant. Most of what I read about mainstream feminist movement did not speak to my Blackness and working class-ness and location in the South, and when I happened upon womanism, it seemed closest to an identity I could step into, but it too was ill-fitting because it fell short of the historically and politically stronger Black feminist movement.

Too much of the Black feminist theory that I read did not complicate conceptual binaries of male vs. female, Black vs. White, poor vs. rich, and straight vs. gay, and most of it did not speak to the real contradictions of my life as a hip hop generation Black woman: A hip hop generation Black woman who calls herself fiercely independent but who also wants a partner who can take care of her, who does not hide her educational achievements but who also worries that they are intimidating to the Black men she dates, who puts Black men in check for their patriarchal attitudes but who also cannot imagine herself growing old without a Black man as her partner, who works many times harder than her White women colleagues but who is also advantaged as a daughter of feminist and Civil Rights Movement privilege, able to make a living in the very spaces earlier generations of Black women academics were denied access, who has more to talk about with the working-class Black secretaries in her building than with her middle-class Black colleagues. I did not locate space in feminist, Black feminist, or womanist theory where these contradictions could reside.

As much as I was willing to accept it, feminism was best represented in the complicated lives of the women in my family who survived sharecropping in the Jim Crow South, who braved single motherhood after the death of their husbands, who valued education enough to work as many jobs as was necessary to pay for their children’s tuition, and who passed on their creative spirit-energy in every meal they prepared for others. These women were fiercely independent, but they also cautioned me against speaking too boldly at my mostly White Catholic schools and insisted that good girls always kept their dresses down and legs closed. I concluded that I could not define a feminism any more real or meaningful than what their lives had shown me about the oppressive forces working against Black women. Feminism was not an academic abstraction; rather it lived and breathed in the contradictory spaces my mother and grandmother occupied as they taught their girl children resilience and independence while also schooling them to know their gendered and raced place in the South.

Not until I found Joan Morgan’s (1999) notion of hip hop feminism was I able to claim the f-word. Her articulation of hip hop feminism, a kind of feminism that is centered in contradiction, a feminism that seeps through the “fissures of patriarchal discourses” (Davis, 1998, p. xi), provided a conceptual space from which to theorize the contradictions of my experiences as a hip hop generation Black woman. According to Sharpley-Whiting (2007), Morgan “embraces the

untidiness” (p. 152) of both feminism and hip hop to bring together two seemingly disparate movements to construct hip hop feminism, a kind of “third space” where feminist/hip hop identities emerge (Bhabha, 1994). Morgan defines hip hop feminism in relation to the complicated context of her (and my) generation, the “post-Civil Rights, post-feminist, post-soul children of hip hop” (p. 61). She maintains that this generation needs a “functional” feminism, one brave enough to “fuck with the grays,” one that attends to the complexities of Black identity because “our existences can’t be defined in the past’s simple terms: house nigga vs. field nigga, ghetto vs. bourgie, BAP vs. boho because our lives are usually some complicated combination of all of the above” (pp. 59, 61–62). Morgan explains further:

More than any other generation before us, we need a feminism committed to “keeping it real.” We need a voice like our music—one that samples and layers many voices, injects its sensibilities into the old and flips it into something new, provocative, and powerful... We need a feminism that possesses the same fundamental understanding held by any true student of hip hop. Truth can’t be found in the voice of any one rapper but in the juxtaposition of many. The keys that unlock the riches of contemporary Black female identity... lie at the magical intersection where contrary voices meet—the juncture where “truth” is no longer Black and White but subtle, intriguing shades of gray. (p. 62)

Because Morgan attends to complicating identity in her articulation of hip hop feminism, rather than reducing it to conceptual binaries, I find it useful as a conceptual framework not only for understanding my own personal identity but also for constructing my professional identity. In my interdisciplinary work in both a gender studies program and a teacher education program—two very different intellectual, political, and educational spaces at my institution—I rely on critical perspectives to transgress disciplinary boundaries in teacher education in particular so as to challenge pre-service teachers to re-think their taken-for-granted assumptions about issues of difference, especially race, gender, class, language, and sexuality. My pedagogy answers Morgan’s call for an articulation of feminism centered in contradiction that resists fixed notions of identity, welcomes multiple voices and ways of being, and complicates how we understand ourselves in relation to others. These are all important as I craft pedagogy for the purpose of helping pre-service teachers to understand the intersectionality of their identities (Crenshaw, 1993), examine how various intersections create varying degrees of privilege, and recognize how this privilege impacts their identities as future teachers.

Act II: Plantation Politics and My Work in Teacher Education

A bit of geographical context about the predominantly White institution in which I work: My office in the teacher education building sits in the shadow of an historic mountain in the antebellum South, a looming physical reminder of one of the few victories for Confederates during the Atlanta Campaign of the Civil War. As such, I am positioned at the intersections of geography, history, and the academy to serve a wealthy, owning class who lets me know every day that I am allowed in the Big House on the plantation to serve and not lead, be seen and not heard, acquiesce and not resist, practice not theorize. The institution values what I have to offer only to the extent that it does not trouble existing teacher education epistemological frameworks and departmental hierarchies, and any contribution I make that propels me beyond the boundaries of

my designated position is routinely resisted and dismissed. Like Williams (1991), I feel that “no matter what degree of professional I am, people will greet and dismiss my Black femaleness as unreliable, untrustworthy, hostile, angry, powerless, irrational, and probably destitute” (p. 95). The plantation politics of the academy clearly define my worth in teacher education: The price paid to/for me annually continues as long as my teaching, research, and service maintains/advances the conceptual framework of the unit.¹ John (1997) compares Black women’s positioning in the academy to their positioning in the antebellum South:

The analogy of academe and the plantation is not lost. Both structures reify, in content and form, the ideology of the power elite; both stand as seemingly self-sufficient entities, yet are, in fact, totally dependent on the labor each exploits. So, as the Black woman in the antebellum context facilitated the existence of the planter’s family and the survival of her own, so the contemporary Black female academic and activist poised between the ideal culture of America’s rhetoric and the real culture of her double jeopardy has a pivotal role. Who has an angle of vision that can view social reality from high and low places in the configuration? (p. 59)

To complicate my positioning even more, my teacher education students expect me—as their fantastical mammy—to provide them with the “best (practice) recipes” for teaching. Forget theory and thinking and rigor; they want to be spoon-fed—as only a good mammy could—quick and easy strategies for teaching math, science, English, and social studies to what they expect will be their problem students: those lazy Black kids, illiterate Latino kids, and neglected poor kids, who have taken over good—read White, middle-class—neighborhood schools. They do not want to be questioned or challenged beyond their comfort zone. A colleague once told me, after observing my teaching, that I would never have favorable student evaluations if I did not smile more in class; she told me that my facial expressions did not communicate affirmation and approval. Because of her advice, I concluded that what my Scarlets needed the most was their mammy, and I decided right then that a kerchief was not a good look for me.

I did not begin to theorize my work in the context of the plantation of teacher education until fall 2008, ironically the same semester during which some of us elected President Barack Obama. That semester I taught a social foundations course in the teacher education program and a hip hop feminism course, which I created, for the Gender and Women’s Studies program. I taught these courses on the same days at back-to-back times, and I often joked with colleagues that every Tuesday and Thursday, as I walked across the university campus green to get from my hip hop feminism course with humanities students to my social foundations course with teacher education students, I also traveled back in time about 100 years.

I underestimated the impact of the U.S. Presidential election on studying issues of privilege and power with my conservative teacher education students. Fearing the possibility of a Black man in the White House, they became the real-life embodiment of political cartoon caricatures of angry, White, working-class, FOX News-watching, Southern Christian fundamentalists as they called Barack Obama a Muslim; White, anti-racist essayist, author, and educator Tim Wise, a self-loathing race traitor; and any educational policy aimed at equitable access for non-Whites “reverse racism.” Their end-of-course evaluations, much more so than in previous semesters, were rife with personal condemnations of me: “she’s racist, rude, disrespectful, mean, and condescending”; “[she has] a chip on her shoulder”; “she makes people feel uneducated”; and about the required text *Affirming Diversity*: “it was a left wing liberal crazy communist book.”

Because evaluations of teaching are of primary importance in my institution's annual reviews of faculty members, my students' voices are always given credence; in effect, they have the power to put me in my place on the plantation, making me vulnerable in the hierarchy of the institution, for without positive student evaluations, I will not move up in faculty ranking.

Ill-prepared pedagogically for the vitriolic response this class had to my usual discussions of race, privilege, and social justice, I surrendered the pedagogical Big House to them and retreated to the field, in this case to my hip hop class, to restore my own sense of scholarly, pedagogical, and racial well-being. Perhaps the interdisciplinary nature of the Gender and Women's Studies program, the institutional context for this course, allowed greater freedom for the kind of teacher and scholar I am. It was in this space that I never had to soften my challenges to students' thinking, pay careful attention to the tone of my voice, or prove that systemic racism, sexism, and homophobia still existed. It was in this space that students and I wrestled with the complexities of the hip hop context, questioned whether or not we labeled ourselves feminists of any kind, and marked an ever-increasing invisibility of Black women rappers in the rap industry, which has since been the subject of the recent documentary *My Mic Sounds Nice: A Truth about Women and Hip Hop* (2010).

In this documentary, Black male record executives explain why they believe Black women are now mostly invisible in the mainstream rap market. Kevin Liles, Chuck D, and Russell Simmons attribute Black women's invisibility to a cooptation of the rap industry by major corporations that dictate what music can stay in the market based solely on the number of units sold, and they point out that units sold by women rappers have historically been much lower in comparison to their male counterparts. Ice Cube says the problem of invisibility stems from a focus by women rappers on their "image" rather than on "rappin," a focus on representation rather than skills, and Nile Ivey, a hip hop blogger on BETOnline, says female hip hop is "obsolete," virtually non-existent. He joins other rappers and cultural critics in questioning whether Nikki Minaj, the only mainstream Black woman rapper with consistent video and radio play in today's market, is authentic enough to have any longevity in hip hop.

In the documentary, the aforementioned Black male rappers, cultural critics, and record company executives offer their reasons—sexist as they are—for an ever-increasing invisibility of women in mainstream rap, never connecting the problem with larger social forces. Women rappers in the documentary best capture the complexity of the invisibility issue. Resisting simplistic answers and situating the problem within the larger context of patriarchy, MC Lyte, a Black woman rapper most popular in the late 1980s and early 1990s, says:

There are many reasons why women are not as prominent in the hip hop world as they should be, but when it comes down to it, the bottom line is that rap is a boys' game and it's a man's world. Male rappers have an amazing amount of influence and power, and if they are spending a majority of time dissing African American women, then what is expected of the people for whom they are performing? Why would their audience spend money on records to hear an African American woman speak her mind? (*My Mic Sounds Nice: A Truth about Women and Hip Hop*)

Medusa, a Black female rapper from Los Angeles whom Mitchell (2007) labels "the Angela Davis and high priestess of underground hip hop" (para. 3), constructs the future for Black women rappers outside of mainstream markets. She says:

The old-boy network is hard to crack. Many feel if it's not broke, don't fix it. But the industry needs to be broken down at least and rebuilt. Threatened by the indie world of the Internet, everyone is being forced to look at things in a different light. Underground is the future. Female emcees are here. They haven't gone anywhere. Just because they're not on the commercial radio doesn't mean they're not still doing it and loving it in the same way. (*My Mic Sounds Nice: A Truth about Women and Hip Hop*)

Medusa points to the underground, the space in the music world where artists perform in small, local venues and distribute their music through channels independent of record company influence and cooptation, as the location from which Black women rappers continue to be successful. It is in the underground, a space on the margins that is still visible/audible to the mainstream/center but not easily taken over by it, that Medusa says Black women rappers have the best chance of “rebuilding” the discourse of rap and reclaiming their rightful position within it (Mitchell, 2007, para.3).

Though I do not work in the rap industry, I am familiar with the kind of patriarchal “old boy network” Medusa describes (Mitchell, 2007, para. 4). The academic establishment, which defines whose knowledge matters most, makes survival for Black women scholars hard and success even harder. Building on what hooks (1992) calls the “commodification of Otherness” (p. 21) duCille (1994) writes about the exploitation of Black women academics:

Mass culture, as hooks argues, produces, promotes, and perpetuates the commodification of Otherness through the exploitation of the Black female body. In the 1990s, however, the principal sites of exploitation are not simply the cabaret, the speakeasy, the music video, the glamour magazine; they are also the academy, the publishing industry, the intellectual community. (p. 592)

As a Black woman scholar writing within intellectual traditions defined from White male Western perspectives, I am quite familiar with the codes of power and gate keeping practices that have historically marginalized Black women's voices. Feeling a constant need to assert myself as a producer of knowledge and a speaking subject, I write not only to earn tenure and promotion but to challenge the larger issue of how and where Black women's theorizing is presented. To work inside the academy in teacher education but write outside its knowledge/epistemological boundaries is to step out of my place, but the plantation politics of the academy discourages such uprisings. Rebellions of any kind are forbidden, for they threaten to undermine the very structures that keep me in my place and the plantation productive—and hence—profitable. So when Medusa says the future of women's rap can be found in the underground, I too recognize that in order to survive the plantation politics of the academy, I must construct an alternative intellectual space away from the center of mainstream teacher education.

Act III: You Can Find Me in the Underground

In this final Act, I situate my complicated, contradictory academic identity as the agreeable-Aunt Jemima/bitch-with-an-attitude professor within the space of the underground, a fitting location from which to negotiate the plantation politics of the academy and theorize what it means to be a hip hop feminist working in teacher education. The network of stations and depots

through which hundreds of enslaved Africans traveled to freedom as well as the space for hip hop music outside of the commercial, corporatized canon, the underground is an out-of-place space that allows for escape of institutional and intellectual boundaries, from what Pinar (2004) calls the “nightmare that is the present,” where schools have become “skill-and-knowledge factories (or corporations)” and where the education professoriate has been reduced to the “status of supervisory personnel” (p. 3). The space where Black women rappers can still claim a voice in hip hop as well as the space where I dare to reclaim my academic—intellectual—freedom, the underground is fertile ground for resisting the status quo and for fashioning an academic identity around interdisciplinary intellectuality.

Moving beyond hooks’ notion of the margins (1990) where academics can always be seen and thus potentially be vulnerable to the gaze, the underground is not easily accessible to White supremacist, capitalistic, patriarchal, heterosexist exploitation (hooks, 1994). From the underground, I can choose to remain out-of-sight—that is, outside of the discourse of teacher education and NCATE’s “corporatization” of it (Pinar, 2004, p. 214)—and in so doing, still be ever-present as a subject who crafts pedagogy and produces scholarship using frameworks not germane to teacher preparation and that cross many intellectual boundaries, including Black feminism, hip hop feminism, critical race feminism, social justice education, and cultural studies. It is from the underground that I can journey back to curriculum theory in search of what it means to be a hip hop feminist working in teacher education.

Hip hop feminism has helped me to clearly define my purpose for teaching and writing. Morgan’s call (1999) for a “functional” feminism, one brave enough to “fuck with the grays,” (p. 59), opens up possibilities for attending to the complexities of identity, especially important in teaching pre-service teachers. Working the grays—or calling into question fixed notions of who I am and helping students to do the same—has meant that I take some risks. In my writing, as evident here, I expose some hard truths about my experiences as a Black woman working as a teacher educator in a predominantly White institution in the South that may potentially have negative repercussions for my tenure and promotion. In my teaching, I expose my students to theory that challenges much of what they take for granted as “normal” about education. Together we examine the effects of privilege and power on schools and on our identities as teachers.

As both writer and teacher, I have learned that denials, disagreements, and dissonance are sometimes necessary to get to what hooks (1989) terms “true speaking,” which she defines as “an act of resistance, a political gesture that challenges the politics of domination that would render us nameless and voiceless” (p. 8). The work most meaningful in my life as an academic, though sometimes not formally recognized as significant by the institution, is theorizing and teaching that moves me toward true speaking with myself, with my colleagues, and with my students. While at the university, moments of true speaking have come most often and most easily in classes that I teach outside of teacher education—e.g., hip hop feminism—and in writing that crosses intellectual boundaries. Most recently, however, I have been able to assume an underground hip hop feminist identity within the space of teacher education.

In fall 2009, I was asked to serve as the university liaison in one of the College of Education’s new public school partners. The high school is located on the geographic margins—literally speaking—of the larger suburban school district in an unincorporated area of the county. In a district that includes some of the highest performing high schools in the state of Georgia, this school, in contrast, is labeled “NI6,” NCLB language for “Needs Improvement” or not meeting “Adequate Yearly Progress” (AYP) goals for six consecutive years. As such, it is a state-directed school, which means that it was forced to enter into an annual improvement

contract with terms and conditions dictated by the Georgia Department of Education (GaDOE). With a GaDOE representative on its campus to oversee(r) the implementation of the terms of the improvement plan, the school is housed in the oldest buildings in the district, serves a student body that is 90% Black, Latino, and poor, almost twice the percentage of Black, Latino, and poor students in the district, and is located in a community with very few middle-class job opportunities. The school stands in stark contrast to most other high schools in the district. Many parents who live within this school's zoned boundaries take advantage of the district's choice option that allows them to send their children elsewhere. While the school is a place many try to avoid for various complicated reasons, I agreed to work there on a two-year assignment as university liaison.

Sent out of the Big House—the university—to work in the field, I am in this school every week—teaching my classes, coordinating field experiences for interns, and working with high school faculty as well as arts and sciences university faculty to develop curriculum for a new urban education concentration in existing teacher education programs in the instructional areas (e.g., math, science, social studies, English). While the administration's decision to (dis)place me into the field in a school that matches my race, but not the racial culture of the university, is suggestive of the historical allocation of enslaved Africans by the plantation master, working in the field has positively impacted my work. Though the time commitment has been exhausting, I have experienced the field—in the school on the margins—as a mostly liberatory space, one in which high school teacher colleagues urge me to “push the envelope”² towards education for social justice when developing course syllabi, a call I have never heard working in teacher education within the boundaries of the institution.

Ironically, in the site where curriculum theorists rarely situate their work—in schools—I have created an intellectual and pedagogical space outside of the boundaries of the institution's traditional teacher education program—in the underground—where I do not have to force my teaching into a lockstep curriculum with the same textbook that other instructors use for different sections of the same course, where I am not forced to collect evidence and artifacts from students only for the purpose of NCATE accreditation, where I am not forced to focus on best practice teaching strategies in the instructional fields to improve P–12 achievement. I have created a space where my students and I wrestle with questions related to privilege and its potential impact on our identities as teachers—playing in the “subtle, intriguing shades of gray” that Morgan (1999) says hip hop feminism is brave enough to tackle. In this space, we are able to understand through careful study that there are no quick fixes—or best practice recipes—to solve everything that is purportedly wrong about (urban) education, the focus of our course together. This place—outside the close scrutiny of the master—allows us to examine systemic inequity first-hand alongside the courageous resistance of teachers who do what is in the best interests of their students even if their efforts are not measurable in the bottom line of the school's performance data.

Though I have experienced this school as a mostly liberating space, where teacher colleagues support theorizing and praxis that challenges how teacher education programs, which blindly follow NCATE's accreditation mandates, typically prepare teacher candidates, I do not conceptualize the underground—and my writing and teaching within it—in direct opposition to mainstream teacher education. Rather, I theorize the underground as an intellectual site in “complicated conversation” (Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery, & Taubman, 1995; Pinar, 2004) with mainstream teacher education. That is, the underground has not been a completely liberatory space for me within the academy just as mainstream teacher education has not been exclusively

oppressive. Rather, both spaces within the institution serve as contradictory, yet complementary intellectual and pedagogical locations from which I navigate the plantation politics of the academy. While the historical underground provided pathways to freedom for enslaved Africans, it also cost some their lives and while the rap industry's underground provides a platform for many female emcees to rap, it often does not provide them with a lucrative income. A site with this kind of contradictory complementarity is how I imagine the underground to function. While it has worked to free my writing and teaching from strict disciplinary boundaries, assuming an underground hip hop feminist identity within the space of mainstream teacher education has also cost me significant professional capital.

I do not “deliver” an NCATE brand of teacher education, and my style of teaching and assessment has always tended toward that which is not measurable using rubrics, diversity surveys, and candidate evaluations. In addition, I do not seek to find a measurable link between what I do as a teacher educator and the academic achievement of P–12 students, the trend now in NCATE-driven teacher education programs, so I do not write for the purpose of providing best practice strategies for other teacher educators in the service of NCATE's mandate to produce “scholarly work driven by the mission of [my] unit and institution.”³ Yet I still must answer to my institution and document how my work advances its mission. Even though utilizing pedagogical and theoretical frameworks outside of the mainstream of teacher education has been empowering in many ways, the dangers of assuming an underground hip hop feminist academic identity within mainstream teacher education have also been ever-present: personal attacks by students in course evaluations, unfavorable tenure and promotion reviews by colleagues and administrators, and difficulty publishing in top tier teacher education journals. Even with these risks, I have learned that curriculum theory must remain my intellectual home if I am to grow intellectually and pedagogically as a hip hop feminist working in the underground of teacher education. The underground, as I conceptualize it, is a generative space, not an isolating one, that enables Black women to more easily practice what Taliaferro Baszile (2006) calls the “praxis of radical Black female intersubjectivity,” which she defines in this way:

I have learned to seek out and develop mutually empowering relationships with other Black female colleagues, who have helped me unload, not feel alone, see from another perspective, and continue to challenge myself in significant ways. Consciously and critically cultivating my wild in the company of comfort of other wild women in academia has been absolutely vital to my ability to sustain spiritually and grow infinitely. I call this the praxis of radical Black female intersubjectivity, and I see it not only as crucial for my well-being, but as nurturing the pedagogical promise of Black women (p. 206)

Like other Black women curriculum theorists working in teacher education in the academy, I have spent a lot of time searching for an intellectual identity that is a right fit for the kind of interdisciplinary boundary-crossing work I do. For now, I have settled on a hip hop feminist teacher educator, complementary and contradictory identities that allow me to challenge NCATE's version of teacher education, to reclaim my academic freedom, to prioritize Black women's ways of knowing, and to empower myself to survive another day on the plantation of the academy.

Outro: An Uncertain Future

Yes, curriculum theory and I have a complicated past and present, and we will probably have a complicated future. Finishing my fifth year in the academy, I will be preparing my portfolios for tenure and promotion as this paper goes to press. In anticipation of an NCATE site visit on the near horizon, teacher educators at my institution are convening in committees, one for each of NCATE's six standards, to craft narratives—with accompanying evidence, of course—that show how we measure up to our unit's shared vision and goals for teacher education. Faculty are busying themselves with creating surveys to determine how well we model best practices in teaching, scholarship, and service; searching through web-based assessment databases to find all the right candidate evidence; and writing "Specialized Professional Association" (SPA) reports that show how we meet the particular standards of various professional associations. A lot of valuable time is being spent to paint a picture of success in fulfilling our unit's conceptual framework.

Against this backdrop, I am reviewing the trajectory of my work and wondering if the risks I have taken to carve out an academic identity within mainstream teacher education that challenges its norms will indeed pay off in the master's house. Institutional powers will have to make a decision to grant me tenure—and set me (almost) free—knowing full well that I am committed to my own intellectual and pedagogical agenda that runs counter to the kind of teacher education "delivered" at my institution, that is, teacher education driven by NCATE directives requiring us to show how our teacher candidates perform effectively in P–12 schools to the extent that their students score well on standardized tests. I am not sure what the reactions—maybe repercussions—will be for a runaway academic in search of freedom from intellectual homogeneity and pedagogical lockstep.

Though I expect that our teacher education programs will fare well in our accreditation review, it will not be because of any systemic effort to reconceptualize teacher education from "a skills-identified induction into the school bureaucracy to an interdisciplinary, theoretical, and autobiographical study of educational experience in which curriculum and teaching are understood as complicated conversations toward the construction of a democratic public sphere" (Pinar, 2004, p. 229). A successful NCATE accreditation review will occur precisely because we do not engage in the latter form of teacher education nearly enough. It is too difficult to measure, control, and replicate, and more significantly, it challenges the firmly entrenched plantation politics of the academy. I will continue to have to take risks and make hard decisions as I navigate the complex, contradictory locations from which I construct my professional identity. I do so not in hopes of dismantling the politics of the Big House—after all I am complicit in maintaining such structures every time I remain silent about policies and practices that limit faculty's academic freedom, craft an assignment for the purpose of gathering NCATE evidence, or writing within discourses that are safer for tenure and promotion reviews rather than those better suited to the disciplinary boundary-crossing work I do—but in hopes of demonstrating for my students what it means to teach and write toward deeper understanding of the self.

If curriculum theory has taught me anything, it has shown me how to create and stand in my own space as a brave Black woman in the academy alongside others before me who did the same. They are my academic sisters, aunts, cousins, and friends who have carved out cultural spaces from which to construct their complex identities and offer their multiple perspectives as Black women. Their theorizing challenges my own and others' taken-for-granted assumptions about Black women and helps me to name who I am in the academy and the tensions I experi-

ence as a result of the contradictory lenses through which I theorize: complicated blends of gender and race, working-class and middle-class, old school Civil Rights and new school hip hop generations, theory and practice, White feminism and Black feminism, teacher education and curriculum theory. While I cannot know for certain what new directions my work in the academy will take, I do know that curriculum theory will continue to be the intellectual tradition that sustains me.

About the Author

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Notes

1. NCATE defines a unit's conceptual framework as follows:
A conceptual framework establishes the shared vision for a unit's efforts in preparing educators to work in P-12 schools. It provides direction for programs, courses, teaching, candidate performance, scholarship, service, and unit accountability. The conceptual framework is knowledge-based, articulated, shared, coherent, consistent with the unit and/or institutional mission, and continuously evaluated. The conceptual framework provides the bases that describe the unit's intellectual philosophy and institutional standards, which distinguish graduates of one institution from those of another. (See <http://ncate.org/>)
2. In a meeting to revise curriculum to include a new urban education emphasis, a high school teacher colleague reviewed the list of possible revisions and additions we were proposing and asked if we were "pushing the envelope" in our courses toward the development of a social justice strand in the new curriculum. With my colleagues at the university, I am usually the one making such calls. At this meeting, however, I was the one who was urged to think outside of the institution's curriculum boundaries.
3. NCATE defines modeling best practices in scholarship as follows:
All professional education faculty demonstrate scholarly work related to teaching, learning, and their fields of specialization. Their scholarly work is driven by the missions of their units and institutions. They are actively engaged in inquiry that ranges from knowledge generation to exploration and questioning of the field to evaluating the effectiveness of a teaching approach. (See <http://ncate.org/>)

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