Foreword[1]

William F. Pinar

Critical Black pedagogy – a crucial concept Abul Pitre formulated while studying the teachings of Elijah Muhammad – is engaged in an "examination of Black leaders, scholars, students, activists, their exegesis, and the challenge of power relations in Black education."[2] Such examination is in the service of a "liberating Black education." Professor Pitre draws on the life and teachings of Elijah Muhammad to provide such a "counter-curriculum," knowledge that provides a "key to freedom." Why Elijah Muhammad?

The "entire mission" of Elijah Muhammad was "educational," Pitre explains, and the core of Elijah Muhammad's that mission was teaching, a prolonged act of "love" for his students, so they might "know themselves and the divine essence that permeates their beings." Muhammad argued, Pitre continues, that the "knowledge of self was the most important of all knowledge," knowledge enabling "students to know themselves and the divine essence that permeates their beings." This was no "other-worldly pursuit," Pitre emphasizes. Black poverty would end, Elijah Muhammad was certain, "when Blacks were enabled 'to use their creative minds'." That enabling requires education usually reserved for the elite.

Self-knowledge is informed by culture and history. From his teacher - Wallace D. Fard - Elijah Muhammad learned of the significance of "naming" in Black culture and history. What Fard termed "slave names" were "detrimental to the development of the

self," and he encouraged "Elijah Poole" to change his. "This examination of the mechanism of naming," Pitre points out, "required one to examine the self as a historical being who has been shaped by historical forces." Understanding the self, then, requires understanding history, including one's location in it, a life-long project of "becoming historical" that those of European descent are also obligated to undertake.[3] "[W]e study history," Pitre explains, "to become actors on the world in which we live." Muhammad's "message to the downtrodden Blacks of America was to pursue the knowledge of self," Pitre emphasizes, noting that "knowledge of self is the foundation of elite education." There are critiques of elite education[4] but, as Pitre implies, the point is not only to critique but extend to everyone what the elite enjoy.

For Elijah Muhammad, Pitre points out, education was "more than preparation for job; it was a moral and ethical endeavor that would ultimately lead to awakening a new consciousness in human beings." Consciousness comes from understanding, and understanding occurs through study. Study is not cramming for exams but, as Dwayne E. Huebner (1999, 411) knew, a "way of 'working' on [students'] journey, or their struggle with spirit, the otherness beyond them." Elijah Muhammad knew that " a deeper and more profound knowledge was needed to resurrect and free Blacks." As Pitre emphasizes, "this freedom could be attained through the knowledge of self." As the Du Bois – Washington controversy testifies, vocational-technical training is important but it must not function to reproduce racial inequality. To understand racial inequality requires sustained study of history and culture, including one's own.

"The best educators," Pitre appreciates, work with the "thoughts that students have already developed," asking about "the origin of these thoughts." The question of

identity - "Who Am I?" – invokes a second one: "Whose Am I?" Whose thoughts are now "mine," and how do they function in my life? "What is the role of society," Pitre asks pointedly, "in shaping thoughts that might arrest one's potential for greatness?" Self-knowledge is, then, also social knowledge, and it encourages us to be self-critical, assessing the origin and consequence of what we have learned from experience. "And if our thoughts are shaped by experiences," Pitre asks, "how do we go about deconstructing those thoughts that might become destructive to self and others? Thus, understanding thought will be the basis for beginning education in the new world." This is a powerful insight, one that the great revolutionary Frantz Fanon would appreciate and endorse.[5]

"Schools today have strayed away from the teaching of character," Pitre reminds, "and the result has been the deterioration of the society." He cites Elijah Muhammad's *The Fall of America*: "The American people no longer want their education and they are destroying the very houses that house their text books of education…. [T]hey are destroying their own civilization." While the reference here was the student protests in the 1960s and early 1970s, given the school shootings and the assault on education that *Race to the Top*[6] represents, Elijah Muhammad's assessment seems prescient. Like Muhammad, Pitre knows that "the keys to breaking the psychological chains of white supremacy lie in gaining knowledge." But U.S. school reform emphasizes not knowledge – not knowledge of the history of racial politics[7] – but so-called skills and the employability their acquisition presumably guarantees, made chilling clear in Williamson's (2013) *The Future of Curriculum*. The information technologies offer us, he tells us,

> an emerging decentered vision where learning is continually dispersed an cybernetically distributed into society through new technologies, communications networks, the informal pedagogies of media, and emerging social practices of interest-based, peer-to-peer, just-in-time participatory learning. (2013, p. 7)

Where are teachers in this vision? What if white (or Black) students have no "interest" in learning about slavery? Pitre is not intoxicated by the hype; he understands that what the digital era means – most of all - is that "Black children are bombarded with media images that suggest power lies in entertainment and the simple acquisition of wealth. The result is the production of a culture that removes the quest for more knowledge."

That knowledge – self-knowledge derived from the study of history and culture, as the naming project makes explicit – becomes "the force or power to change one's reality." Rather than fantasies of fun and high-paying employment with (say) Facebook, Pitre is focused on working from within. "Education," he tells us, "then becomes synonymous with a body of knowledge that stimulates the God force within. In the truest sense, knowledge as power will give one the ability to develop thoughts and images." He understands such knowledge does not exclude a job at Facebook, but Elijah Muhammad's advice seems as timely than ever: "Get an education, but not an education which leaves us in an inferior position and without a future. Get an education, but not an education that leaves us looking to the slave master for a job."

For Elijah Muhammad, "teaching is indeed an act of love." Abul Pitre reminds that on Friday nights at many mosques in the United States, students meet in circles to engage each other dialogue that derive from the teachings of Elijah Muhammad. These discussions, Pitre judges, constitute "free education" – one might say freeing education –

"because it provides the basis for all further learning: It awakens them to the inner voice."

It was Elijah Muhammad's "personal approach to teaching" that lives on today, not only in mosques but in classrooms where students study this book, an enactment of critical Black pedagogy inviting us work from within.

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Endnotes

[1] Pinar 2015.

[2] Unless otherwise indicated, all quoted passages come from this book.

[3] It is a project to which I have labored to contribute, resulting in three volumes dedicated to the study of racial politics and violence, emphasizing first the role of place, identity

and politics, then the role of gender, in the formation of "whiteness" (Castenell and Pinar 1993; Pinar 2001, 2006). In the 2001 volume – which Professor Pitre kindly acknowledges - I reference the role of Black Muslims in mobilizing black prisoners to fight for their human rights: Pinar 2001, p. 986.

[4] See Howard 2008; Gaztambide-Fernández 2009.

[5] For one summary of Fanon's significance for education, see Pinar 2011, p. xxxx.

[6] Pitre appreciates that *No Child Left Behind* and *Race to the Top* policies – "under the guise of making sure that all children receive proper education"' – in fact creat[e] more disparities." I call school reform "school deform" (2012) precisely because it economizes education, appropriating social justice rhetoric – at least in the Bush policy title – to efface black history and cultures presumably for the sake of employability in the global marketplace. The jobs have been slow in presenting themselves but history fades in the obsessions with skills, as Pitre appreciates.

[7] Not only structuring much of the resistance to President Obama, but evident in the recent police killings of Black men and children in Ferguson, Missouri, Cleveland, Ohio, and Staten Island, New York.