

Essays on Education and Popular Culture

Essays on Education and Popular Culture:

Massliteracy

By

Biko Agozino

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SECTION 1:
SMART STUDY SKILLS

WHEN THE PIRANHA MET THE HONEY BEE

*'I formed habits of work rather different from those of most of the other students. I burned no midnight oil. I did my studying in the daytime and had my day parceled out almost to the minute. I spent a great deal of time in the library and did my assignments with thoroughness...'*¹

A senior university colleague once told new graduate students, during an orientation ceremony, that they should aim to emulate piranhas, in their search for knowledge, by insatiably consuming all available information and stripping the sources down to the barest bones. I thought that the imagery jarred especially when images of wounded books with missing pages in the library or books loaned and never returned came to mind.

The images of escaping enslaved Africans and political prisoners in French Guiana's Devil's Island,² who were probably controlled with tales of escapees who were eaten by piranhas, also flashed past. More recent research suggests that piranhas are rather shy of humans and shoal out of fear of predators and do not have the stomach for a large meal, making do with tiny circular bites. Besides, not a lot of skeletons exist to validate the man-eating bogeyman tale in a James Bond movie. So the piranhas might not be all that bad as an educational model; after all, as fish, they are in school all their lives.

Nevertheless, I decided to challenge the recommendation of my colleague if only to prove to the students that in academia, there are no sacred cows and all ideas are open to challenge on academic grounds. I told the students to emulate instead, the honey bee. Image of the schooling and graduation of bees into work teams in the movie, *Bee*, also flashed. The film shows how the hero bee fell in love with a human, discovered a honey farm, how he fought to end the exploitation of bees in honey farms and saw the consequences of neglecting to collect nectar and thereby failing to pollinate the flowers and keep the cycle of vegetation going, and how the community of bees was reorganized the old-fashioned way to try to save the earth.

I called on the students to emulate instead the busy bees which do not strip flowers down to the barest in order to fetch nectar. Instead, they team up to pollinate them in order to make plants bear fruits that could be eaten by

humans and by others who might also scatter the seeds to bring forth new flowering plants that would ensure endless supply of nectar for the bees to keep producing sweet honey for baby bees and bears and humans to enjoy. That is closer to the reality of graduate education than the imagery of the scary piranhas although the image of the Queenom of the bees jars with democratic ideals too, but academia is deliberately structured as a meritocracy and not as a democracy through democratization and decolonization of the academy as ongoing struggles.

Later, one of the graduate students came to say that she was scared for me because she did not know that it was possible to disagree with the opinion of a senior university official publicly without fear of victimization. So I asked the student if she saw herself as a honey bee or as a piranha? She chose the honey bee but she joked that she would come back later to see if I was wearing a plaster from the punishment that she expected me to get from the critique of the senior official. I reassured her that there is academic freedom and that she should no longer fear critical thinking.

The fear of critical thinking among scholars reminds us of the warning by bell hooks in her book, *Teaching to Transgress*, that critical thinking is a painful process for many students especially when instructors are challenging them to be very critical of taken-for-granted beliefs.³ Students should be encouraged to enjoy their studies instead of being scared with the usual call to work hard as if they do not work hard enough already.

The students are familiar with the gospel of hard work since they had been hearing nothing but that since elementary school and preschool days. Many students still dread exams but leave serious studying to nearer the exam period and then overwork, trying to cram large chunks of information, like a very hungry piranha, perhaps, but with a regular sized fish belly-brains for digesting all that information. Hence many students fall ill psychologically and physically during the examination period. So the students know all about working hard although some still need to be reminded. Once upon a time, working hard was known as working like an African (on the slavery plantation). Hard labor is now what you get for a serious felony in some jurisdictions. So why work hard if you can work smart and get better results?

I bring students the good news that they no longer need to work hard if they know how to work smart and get even better results. I call it the smart study skills. They may not work for everyone but every student that tried them confirmed to me that they are effective. There are ten points in the skills set and all points would have to be observed to maximize results. No need to

add that it is not just a set of study skills but a set of life skills that trains the student to be a relaxed problem-solver with critical thinking. Students, parents, teachers and all those who are interested in learning more about this smart way to study and learn better should write in and tell me how they currently study and their results and in my next chapter, I will reveal the systematic method to all.

Given reports that the West African Examination Council failed more than 80% of the Nigerian candidates in 2008 and given continuing educational achievement gaps affecting especially students of African descent and students from poor backgrounds internationally, it is time for us to address the need for effective study skills.

FOR A CULTURE OF LEARNING

In the previous chapter, I asked parents, students and teachers to send me information on their study methods and the results they get from those methods and I promised to share my preferred methods with all. No one has responded so far but I still keep reading articles about the sorry state of education especially in Africa and among the African Diaspora. So I will go ahead and share the study tips that I share with my students as part of my syllabi. If you try them and they work for you or even if they fail to work, please write to me and comment.

Before I reveal my study methodology, let me reflect on the nature of the problem briefly. It is reported that there is a gap in educational achievement between people of African descent and almost any other group of students around the world. Racist theorists claim that this gap is genetic and conclude that people of African descent are inherently less intelligent. I find this conclusion incredible given that people of African descent are overwhelmingly creative especially in the arts. I am convinced that it takes a lot of intelligence to invent a new style of music and African people have been doing this even without formal education in music. The examples are spirituals, jazz, blues, high life, rock n roll, ska, soul, Afrobeat, funk, reggae, calypso, socca, raga, hip-hop, rapso, rhythm and blues and so on.

If African people have been able to invent new musical styles and patent many inventions in industry even without formal training, then something must be wrong with educational systems that start from the assumption that Africans are less gifted intellectually. Besides, African students who are female are increasingly outperforming their male counterparts in most parts of the world with gender equity in access to education. That is why I came to the conclusion that when a student is struggling with formal education, whatever the racial, class or gender background, the problem is most likely that the student is not equipped with smart study skills.

The emphasis is deliberately on study skills and not teaching skills. No matter how poor a teacher is or how impoverished the educational system, there would always be students who would excel in the examinations because they managed to learn what others failed to learn. Similarly, no matter how effective a teacher is or how nourished the educational

environment, there would always be students who would struggle with the learning materials. Statisticians call these groups of students outliers on a normal curve and expect that the majority of the students would cluster around the average or norm.⁴ I am not a fan of the normal curve because I see no reason why most of the students, if well equipped with study skills, could not all be positive outliers or over-achievers all the time.

However, when it is reported from Nigeria that less than 20% of Senior Secondary School students passed their examinations one year, sliding from the 20% that succeeded the previous year, I am alarmed.⁵ With all due respect to all those who have identified the problem in faulty policies and inadequate funding, the failure rate is just too much and too unprecedented to be explained away simply as a structural problem. I would like to believe that it is also a cultural problem that could be fixed irrespective of the structural constraints. I am encouraged to formulate this hypothesis because the few that succeed in Nigeria or among the African Diaspora also study under the same structural constraints but manage to survive the pressures and thrive academically.

I am not saying that national policies are not necessary nor that funding is not required. I am saying that even with the best policies and best funding for education, we will need a cultural change to turn around our educational failures. The necessary cultural change is in the direction of a culture of learning with less emphasis on the culture of teaching. If all you learned in education was what the teacher taught you, then you must be mediocre indeed. As the example of the musical creativeness and inventiveness of people African descent demonstrates, there are many things that we are capable of learning and mastering even without a teacher. Also, at the university level, there are no teachers but lecturers and the students are expected to take more responsibility for their own learning!

Once upon a time, for centuries, there were laws made to prevent people of African descent from learning to read and write but our ancestors resisted such cruel laws by learning by themselves and often excelling even at the risk of being convicted of the crime of learning. More recently, it has been discovered that people who are successful academically are less likely to take unnecessary risks in life and so, encouraging greater academic success is crucial for the survival of people of African descent in a world where they are increasingly marginalized despite a few more black faces in high places.

So, finally, here are my tips for students and I also call them technologies of the self in my syllabi because they are life skills and not just skills for passing exams:

1) Make sure that you get eight hours of sleep every day. Einstein said that he needed no less than 10 hours sleep daily while some politicians say that they needed less than four hours and some would say, no wonder. Oh yes, the Home Video industry is probably contributing to the failure rate as students may stay up late with parents to watch video after video and thereby fail to get enough sleep. You need enough sleep especially on the night before your examinations but also on every night, including weekends and holidays!

2) Make sure that you always eat a healthy breakfast and do your poo daily. It is also sad to note that many students go to school on empty stomachs either because the family is too poor to afford breakfast or because the kids stayed up late for whatever reason and did not wake up in time for breakfast before going to school. And in many cases, they do not move their bowels and rush to school with all that smelly farts, belly aches and headaches that a proper toilet could have relieved early in the morning before they head to school. If you need to skip a meal due to poverty, consider lunch a better target. It was not for nothing that the Black Panther Party instituted a free breakfast program. Breakfast is the most important meal of the day.

3) Exercise daily and eat fruits, drink lots of water too, not just juice or soda. Students should learn from the Great Nelson Mandela by reading his autobiography, *A Long Walk to Freedom*. He exercises for 30 minutes every morning before a breakfast of oatmeal porridge and fresh fruits. If we add to that, the need to drink lots of water and avoid sugary drinks, we will have students who are less hyper-active and who could concentrate better to study.

4) Make sure that you have your own study timetable and manage your time well. Almost every school has class time-tables but not every student applies this principle to their own studies. You need to have your own time-table to guide your own private study daily just as your school has its own timetable. This is what the Great

WEB Du Bois was referring to when he said that he did not burn any midnight oil in Harvard University in order to be successful. Rather, he parceled out his day to the minute and spent a lot of time in the library learning.

5) Make sure that you read before and after the class, taking notes, then summarize and integrate all your notes with the lecture notes. This point is important even in mathematics. Make sure that you copy down all the examples in Statistics that the instructor puts on the board. Then go home and practice the examples by changing some of the numbers. The examination questions will be the same examples with a few numbers or letters changed in mathematics. If you practice statistical analysis every day, few texts would be too hard for you in the literature review. On all other subjects, read and read and read beyond the textbooks. Ben Carson, the world renown neurosurgeon used to be called the class dummy until his illiterate single mother resolved that he was allowed only three hours of television a week and that the rest of the time, he and his brother should spend it reading two books a week after which they would write reviews of the book and read out their reviews to her. Barack Obama reveals that his father made a similar point when he visited him at the age of 10 and he was watching endless television programs at the home of his grandparents. His father asked him to stop watching and go and read a book but his grandparents said to leave the boy alone, that he could not show up after ten years and start bossing everyone around in their house. Obama senior insisted and his son sulked off and banged the door of his bedroom but today, that same advice is what he is giving to parents in America: turn off the television and read a book with your children!

6) Use memory aids to help you review for exams and remember that preparations for the exams start from day one. So many students struggle with exams because they wait until the week before the exams to begin revising or reviewing for the exams. That is the hard way and sometimes the hard work pays off but if you want to do it the smart way and still get even better results, here is your tip: You must start preparing for the examinations from day one! Before the class, read something on the topic and take notes. During the class, take detailed notes of what the teacher has to say. Then head to the library or somewhere quiet after the

class and read some more on the topic, filling any gaps that the teacher may have left during the class. If you are without easy access to any books, order inter-library loans or request that the library acquire a copy. Meanwhile, do a Google Book search or a Google Scholar search on your topic and you will find full articles and relevant book pages from which to take notes and credit the authors. Then summarize the main points on the topic with the keywords and finally use the first letter of each keyword to make up a memory aid or mnemonic that would help you to remember all the key points on that topic even in your dream. That is it, you do not need to cram or memorize large chunks of information for the exam. It is not just for exams but for job interviews, business proposal pitches and political campaigns when you could impress your audience by speaking without notes because you could always remember the key points and express them in your own words.

7) Remember that your examination essay is like any scholarly essay and that it will be graded accordingly. So always provide references to scholarly sources in the examination, have introduction, body and conclusions. For university students, I advise that as a rule of thumb, every examination answer should carry at least five scholarly references just like every term-paper. I also advise students to think critically about the sources that they are citing – if you agree, say why and if you disagree, also say why.

8) Rest your back when you are studying or writing to avoid developing back pains. This one is not just for studying but also for the world of work. Many students have formed the poor habit of hunching over their desks while reading or writing. Soon their backs would start to ache and they would lose concentration. If they carry this habit to their offices, soon they would develop chronic back pain and take a lot of ineffective pain-killers or go for unnecessary back surgery. The simple solution is to always rest your back when you are reading, writing, eating, driving or watching television. Rest your back all the time. Also, if you have the habit of shaking your legs constantly or rocking to and fro while reading or listening to lectures, that will distract you from concentrating. You can always tell yourself to cut out the shaking and sit still for better concentration. You can always take breaks after every 75 minutes or so and this will prepare you for the

corporate world where office meetings will be about the length of your class time.

9) In the examination, divide the time available by the number of questions to ensure that you do not spend too much time on one question and not enough on others. This one is self-explanatory but I should add that you should attempt the easier questions first before going to the tougher ones.

10) Use office hours or make appointments with your teachers for academic advising and if any topic remains unclear, do not be afraid to raise a question in class next time.

5 COMMENTS:

A reader said...

I have something to add to this list. Learn the logical fallacies and avoid them in all arguments.

Another reader said...

I did a few courses with the author of this article and I must admit when I first read the study habits in the course outline I laughed because I did not see the link between going to the toilet daily and success in my studies. However after reading the tips listed I realized that they made sense but strangely enough it was not part of my habits. Therefore I took up the challenge and integrated a few of them into my daily routine and it worked quite well. Needless to say I got an A in the course. Nevertheless I realized that working them into my lifestyle was much more difficult than I thought and sometimes I simply reverted to the old way of studying. Hence I agree with Prof. Biko that the cultural trappings of students in the African Diaspora inhibit our potential academically. However I would suggest to him that he place the study habits to the front of the course outline and not to the back as some students only saw the habits after about 6-8 weeks in the semester. Additionally a note on "how to take notes" would assist a lot of students. Teachers usually encourage their students to take notes but fail to tell them how to do so and in the end only students who learn the art of taking notes emerge as good note-takers.

Nevertheless I continue to integrate his advice to my academic life...

A different reader said...

Prof. Agozino, believe I understand the foundation of your premise(s), and I would essentially agree that a 'system of order' inculcated at a deep personal level can significantly offset surrounding upheaval. However, if one examines the great cultures & civilizations in the history of this planet (of which the west is not one), imho, one of the key commonalities one finds is a structure & stability -- in premise & practice -- which filters down to the individual. I also agree that issues of policy will have little effect until this foundational stability & structure is achieved on a social level.

I would add that, based upon my research, there are some intrinsic aspects within the methodology of teaching here in the west which individually & collectively militate against the inherent cognitive processes of Tropical people. Note that I am not limiting this to the African Diaspora. One of the ways this can be observed is thru an examination of the teaching methodologies in China & Japan, and to a certain extent, in India. There are cultural precepts which inhere within their educational premise which we do not see here. Perhaps the most critical are the premises of rigor & synthesis -- the connectivity of all things -- cognitively & functionally.

Another key area of this can be seen in children's games. Prior to the 60's, & earlier -- before manufactured toys took over children's play time -- here in the USA, like other places, many children's games were thinly veiled mechanisms for developing things like rhythm & hand-eye coordination (jacks, jump rope, etc.), the premise of accretion (building blocks, etc.), and others. These established a foundation of learning based in physical entrainment which in many cases is no longer present. Perhaps we should continue this in direct discourse....

Author said...

Please keep the suggestions coming. Dr Burst's advice to avoid fallacies is part of the critical thinking that I suggested. Keron's suggestion to bring the tips for self-management up front in my syllabi is already being done. And Jamal's suggestion that we study

teaching cultures of the East is important but because we are addressing African students who come from a culture that values fractals more than lineal geometry, we need to recognise that it is important to emphasize the self-efficacy of our students and thereby empower them to succeed even against the odds as many of our people have done.

Another reader said...

Allow me to clarify some important points...

Firstly, my suggestion of querying the educational methodologies of China, Japan & India was based upon the truth of the tropical origins of their cultures, rather than their *Eastern* aspects. I said India less so because even before the British invasion, the invasion from the north by the Aryans radically altered the cultural foundation of the land & people. Few outside of India have any depth of understanding of the civilization which existed prior to the Aryan invasion (Harappa, Mohendjo-Daro, etc.)

This is important on a variety of levels. As an example, I would reference a post on my blog Electronic Drum on "[Puranic Time](#)".

Secondly, it is most unfortunate that African fractals have been misrepresented so broadly (not unlike Black English research being reduced to Ebonics). I happen to have a mentor, Robert Powell, who is one of those on the forefronts of fractal research. It is a reflection of this misrepresentation that one would even speak of fractals in the context of *being African.* We don't speak of *African Geometry* even though all available evidence points to a Khemetic/Egyptian origin of geometry.

If one really listens to the video by *Ron Eglash*, you will recognize that he is speaking to deeply embedded socio-philosophical patterns reflective of cognitive immersion in geometric/mathematical understanding.

When I speak of examining the precepts/principles of western educative modalities, & how they militate against non-nordic thinkers, this is part of what I am speaking of.

Based upon my research in the sacred architecture of Nile Valley civilizations, & elsewhere, Nature (Ntcheru) is the First Book. In

terms of empowering students, if we emphasize this fact, along with the premise that everything written by humans is, at best, a rough approximation of the body of knowledge embodied/expressed in nature, then the essential humility of no human being -- or cultural group -- possessing ALL knowledge/understanding/etc. will set the stage for a much more balanced engagement.

MIRACLE OF HARLEM?

'The Harlem Miracle' as reported by *The New York Times* in an opinion article by David Brooks on May 7, 2009 is noteworthy if only because a Harvard University Economist, Roland Fryer, claimed that the Harlem Children's Zone study changed his life by making him hope for more than marginal gains in closing the academic achievement gaps between white and black students.⁶ I wonder why the focus is on the gaps between white and black when Asians appear to be the ones setting the achievement standards at the moment. Perhaps it is too much to expect that black students could rival Asian ones.

Education reform programs, according to Brooks, tend to produce small 0.1 to 0.3 standard deviations gains whereas the Harlem Children's Zone experiment produced 1.3 and 1.4 standard deviations. The trouble is that standard deviations are double-edged swords; the bigger the standard deviation, the wider the spread or distribution of the population from the mean, positively and also negatively. In other words, standard deviations of 1.3 and 1.4 might also mean that the outliers below the mean are farther away from the mean than standard deviations of 0.1 or 0.3. Before we start celebrating standard deviations, we should also know what are the minimum and maximum scores and what is the measure of central tendency or the mean, without which standard deviations are meaningless by themselves.

Dr Fryer is quoted in the article as using the analogy of curing cancer to celebrate the report that Promise Academy 'eliminated the achievement gap between its black students and the city average for white students'. This might not be the appropriate metaphor to use because it assumes that there is something wrong with the black students or that they were suffering from an illness that the school cured. The problem might lie in the teaching methods or learning methods rather than some disease within the students themselves. Before we try to replicate the 'cure' as he urged, we must be careful not to produce iatrogenic repercussions or the creation of a disease in an otherwise healthy student as a side-effect of trying to heal 'literally and figuratively'.

In the opinion of Mr. Brooks, the disease of Harlem students is that they lack middle class values such as being goal-oriented, exercising self-control

and knowing how to work hard. He added that the experiment inculcated these values in the students by teaching them how to shake hands, how to look people in the eye when talking with them and not to accept excuses. He recommends New York Times articles like 'Whatever It Takes' (whatever?) and 'Sweating the Small Stuff' (no air-conditioners in the classroom?) to support this opinion. But that begs the question whether goal-orientation, self-control and hard work are essentially middle-class values? Some of the hardest working people in the world are not middle class at all and just because poor people do not have the means to live all their dreams is not to say that they have no goal-orientation. Is there any evidence that poor students lack self-control?

Believing that this is the case, the Miracle of Harlem proceeded to detain black students in school, double the time that white students spend in school if they are below their grade; and one and half the time that their white peers spend at school, if they are performing at their grade level! That is no miracle, it seems punitive and prejudiced. It has always been assumed by black parents that their children would work twice as hard as white children in order to get a fair shake in societies structured in dominance but for the educational system to accept this handicap as the 'cure' for the supposed 'cancer' afflicting black students is to institutionalize discrimination.

What if there is a different method of learning that would produce even better results without having to detain black children in school for up to twice the time it takes white students to learn their Mathematics and English? What if school work is not really hard work but smart work which students could master effectively if only they knew how to study smart rather than hard? That method is described in two chapters earlier: 'For a Culture of Learning' and 'When the Piranha met the Honey Bee at school' and I would be happy to know if Dr. Fryer and his team would also study this method that produces better results for students who work smart and not necessarily hard.

EVERY MONTH IS BLACK HISTORY MONTH

Remember contributions every month, not just one

Black History Month is every month because there is no month without a significant black history event.

The question of whether one month is enough to celebrate black history is possible today because of the success of activist scholars such as Carter G. Woodson, who started it as the Negro History Week in 1926.⁷ He chose the week in February, that marks both the birthdays of Frederick Douglas and Abraham Lincoln, to honor their contributions to the abolition of slavery. From one week to one month is a leap that some may not have imagined possible when Woodson was starting the series because back then, otherwise learned scholars still believed the misinformation from philosophers such as Hegel that African people made no significant contribution to history. Azikiwe wrote that he faced opposition when he introduced the first African History course at Lincoln University of Pennsylvania in the 1930s.⁸

It is good to know that a student newspaper is asking the rhetorical question whether one month is enough to celebrate the immense contributions of Africans to history. Such a question suggests that there is a genuine desire on the part of students to learn more about Africana people and so they wonder whether one month would be adequate to learn all that they need to know. In a sense, the question suggests that the students already hypothesize that every month is Black History Month.

This is a healthy thirst for knowledge that a program such as the Africana Studies Program in the Department of Sociology is here to satisfy with courses on subjects such as Introduction to African American Studies, Introduction to African Studies, African American History, The Black Woman in America, African and Caribbean Literature, The Black Church in America, Race and Social Policy, Special Topics, Africana Contributions to Science and Technology, Africana Research Methods, etc.

Students who take five such courses would qualify for a Minor in Africana studies. Such students could demonstrate diversity contents in the education received at the university, making employers look more favorably at them

and equipping them with the diversity imagination that they would need to go into business for themselves if they choose.

In other words, people should not treat Black History Month events as rituals to be engaged in once a year but as a reminder of the immense contributions that people of African descent have made and continue to make to world history. A skeptic might wonder why we still need to celebrate a Black History Month if every month is indeed Black History Month. Such skepticism can be answered in two ways.

First, Black History Month is an African-American gift to the world that has since been internationalized following its adoption by Canada and the U.K. This is something for all Americans to be proud of – an innovation of theirs is becoming a truly international phenomenon. Someday, it may become a global event across the entire world.

Secondly, following the success of Black History Month, other groups have also innovated their specialized history months as opportunities to teach the immense contributions of other racial, gender, and ethnic groups to civilization and the enduring problems that others still face in an unequal world.

Such spin-offs serve to reassure people of African descent that the commemoration of history by people who were marginalized for a long time – and whose contributions were denied or denigrated – remains a worthwhile endeavor especially given that racial and gender inequalities still persist in addition to problems of poverty that tend to conceal the huge sacrifices and struggles that the marginalized have gone, and are still going, through.

The cost that the world paid for the ignorant propaganda that black men and black women made no significant contributions to civilization was that such false notions were used to support systems of racial, gender and class exclusion, oppression and exploitation that caused the world so much grief and also denied the world the greater contributions that many gifted people from the Africana community could have made for the betterment of all.

For instance, so many American students today are getting the opportunity to go to universities and better themselves; such opportunities were reserved for the rich until former enslaved Africans started demanding public funds to be spent on public higher education for the benefit of all Americans.

According to W.E.B. Du Bois, this demand for land and learning by the Freedmen's Bureau resulted in the public universities that are responsible for the education of a lot of American college students today who could not have afforded the exorbitant costs of private colleges.⁹ Although there was a lot of opposition to this demand for publicly funded institutions of higher learning during the era of Black Reconstruction post-Civil War, it is now obvious that public higher education does not benefit only black students.

Finally, all human beings descended from Africa and so the celebration of Black History Month should be supported by all as an opportunity to learn more about our common heritage. We all should resolve to adhere to the principles of community by avoiding hateful and harmful conducts that are the result of prejudice and ignorance. We should resolve that we will strive to study Black history as part of world history instead of clinging to the false notion that some people have not made significant contributions to civilization. Black History Month is not just for black people, it is for everyone and it is not just a single month, it is every month.

WE WERE NEVER THEIR SLAVES

A respected colleague in Africa recently sent me the urban legend piece that has been making the rounds on the internet with the title, 'They are still our slaves'. A search on the internet reveals that there are more than one million sites that published the article with varied discussions. I am sure that many of you have seen it and maybe believed it to be true or ignored it or got annoyed about it and wished that our people would heed the lamentations of Bob Marley – 'Emancipate yourself from mental slavery'! However, the colleague who forwarded it to me is a full professor in the natural sciences and she also copied a full professor in the arts at an Ivy League university and two top journalists in the African country. I knew that I was being invited to respond to it and I just want to share with you my brief response which my colleague described as 'thought-provoking'. Thanks for this opportunity to share.

Urban legends are rumors that are repeated so often that they acquire the status of gospel truths but as legends, no one is certain about how they originated. True or false, they have the ability to influence the lives of real people for better or for worse. This particular urban legend makes the claim that people of African descent are still 'our' slaves, suggesting that the author is a person of European descent who shares a history of having enslaved Africans. Dee Lee, the journalist who allegedly read it on a New York radio station attributed it to a Caucasian author. However, such a legend could also be authored by a person of African descent as a propaganda hoax to shock Africans into changing their lifestyles in a direction desired by the author or authors. Whoever the authors may be, let us take a critical look at it as you commence your careers following college graduation. Do you think that we are still their slaves?

The legend alleges that 'they are still our slaves' because black people, according to the authors, remain ignorant, greedy and selfish. The legend suggests that our people are ignorant because we do not read and so the saying that the best place to hide something from black people is to put it into a book is still true. Let me ask the graduates today if you agree that black people are still their slaves, whoever 'they' may be? Do you agree that black people do not read or that black people are ignorant, greedy and selfish? You are proof, if ever proof was needed, that our people do read

and that our people are knowledgeable as much as any other people with suitable opportunities. It is true that young people no longer value reading as much as the older generations did but this applies to white youth as well as black youth, especially the poor male youth. This does not mean that the youth are ignorant nor even that they do not read; it only means that they prefer to read multimedia kinds of material whereas we still privilege the written text as our major medium of communication.

My response to this urban legend is that we were never their slaves to begin with. Slaves are the property of other human beings and since we resisted attempts to reduce us to the level of property, we were never anybody's slaves. Yes, our people were enslaved for hundreds of years but they were never slaves, they remained human beings who struggled for their freedom as best they could and won with the support of their allies. A piece of property lacks such human agency born of consciousness to struggle for rights and social justice. That is why I say to the authors of the urban legend that the argument was based on a flawed thesis: since we were never their slaves, it is certainly true that we are not still their slaves. We are free at last, free at last, thank God almighty, free at last, as brother Martin Luther King Jr. stated at a time that we were still struggling to push back the boundaries of social equity.¹⁰

The mother of a famous St. Lucian used to tell him that whatever Europeans could do, Africans could do too. He took that wisdom to heart and became a Nobel Prize winner in Economics, a distinguished professor and a university administrator.¹¹ If Sir Arthur Lewis was still with us, I would have asked him if he believed everything his mother told him or if, at least in this one case, he had doubts about some aspects of his mother's advice? Just because we could do anything that they could do does not mean that we would want to do everything that they did. For instance, they enslaved us for 400 years but I am yet to meet an African with the desire to enslave Europeans even for a day.

Now that you have your degrees, you may feel like belonging to the talented tenth that W.E.B. Du Bois called out for higher education in America.¹² The urban legend under discussion also makes reference to Du Bois and tried to say that educated black people see this prescription as encouraging elitism whereas Du Bois saw the talented tenth as the leadership that would work to uplift the rest of black folk. The legend claims that due to selfishness, black people would only use their higher education for personal gains rather than use it to serve their community better. This is certainly true of some people, whatever their color or race, but I am convinced that many educated

black people have risked their own comfortable potential incomes to campaign for social equity and social justice at great personal costs. In other words, black leaders are not more selfish than white leaders, many have rendered selfless services for the benefit of humanity and I hope that you will follow in their footsteps.

It is false to accuse Du Bois of being elitist when he called for the higher education of the talented tenth. What he was arguing against was the situation in which institutions believed that the descendants of enslaved Africans were not fit for higher education and that they should only be trained in crafts and job skills. Du Bois argued convincingly that if no black people went to university to study the liberal arts and sciences, then our people would remain the hewers of wood and the drawers of water. Interestingly, about 100 years after Du Bois called for the doors of higher education to be opened to at least the talented 10% of Africans, the percentage of African Americans with college education is still approximately seven per cent and therefore still below the target demanded by Du Bois.

The US Census Bureau would put this percentage at 15% because they use the population that is 15 years and above as the denominator but if you use the entire population of African Americans to divide the number with college degrees and multiply by 100, you will get less than seven per cent. Moreover, Du Bois later revised this formula and talked about the talented 100% by which he suggested that all our people have talents and so we should aim at bringing out the best in the talents of all our people. I hope that with your new degrees, you will not start thinking that you are better than your brothers and sisters or colleagues and friends who have not had the privilege to access higher education the way you did. I hope that you will use your new knowledge and critical thinking skills to encourage them to come forward and better themselves the way you did.

During your awards gala, I was impressed to see that the winners of the top awards for perfect GPAs of 4.0 were three men and three women. This is proof that what is setting our young men back is not lack of intelligence but lack of participation as Barry Chevannes argues.¹³ When young men participate in equal numbers with young women, they tend to distinguish themselves equally. So talk to your brothers and nephews, your husbands, boyfriends, sons and sons-in-law, encourage them to come forward and benefit from this rare opportunity that Monroe College is helping to extend to the less-served populations of small island states. I commend the ladies for coming in droves to quench the thirst for knowledge but we need the

young men to take their places beside the women and try to be the best that they can be.

In conclusion, let me repeat that we were never their slaves; we are not more greedy than people who enslaved their fellow human beings for hundreds of years; we are not more ignorant than a people who lack any knowledge of how our people managed to survive four hundred years of holocaust while serving their oppressors' every need and knowing them intimately; and we are certainly not more selfish than those one percent of the world population that insist on cornering 90% of the world's wealth. There are selfish, greedy and ignorant people in any race but to dismiss all people of African descent with their legendary culture of hospitality as remaining slaves that we never were is the height of ignorance, greed and selfishness on the part of the writers of that urban legend fantasizing about remaining slave masters when Dr Eric Williams told us long ago that *Massa Day Done*.¹⁴

With the learning and character that you developed here in Monroe College, I am certain that no one will dare call you a slave but I hope that you will use your improved skills to speak for the whole world and for our people in particular in denunciation of slavery and any attempts to re-enslave our people again. Never again! But to make sure that others will benefit from the great opportunities you have enjoyed here, I will give you some tips:

1) Continue your search for knowledge by reading at least one new book every month. If you read for only 30 minutes per day, you will complete not less than 12 books per year. When the father of Barak Obama visited him at the age of 10, he sat in his grand-parents apartment watching cartoons endlessly until the father intervened and said that he had watched enough, he should turn it off and go and do his homework! The grand-parents tried to defend the child by saying that it was a holiday and there was no homework but the father insisted and they told him that he could not show up after ten years and start bossing everyone about in their own home, who did he think he was? He insisted that as the father of the boy, he was saying that hours of watching television was enough time and that he should go and read a book. Obama sulked off and banged his bedroom door but the same advice is what he is giving to American families today – turn off the television and read a book with your family! Further your education too.

2) Continue writing your own works too. If you write a page a day, you will complete a big book of 360 pages every year. The more you write the better you get at it. All those ancestors who wrote freedom narratives that

were misnamed slave narratives lacked your high level of education and yet they wrote and published to pass down knowledge to future generations. You are living proof that it is no longer against the law for black people to read and write as it was under slavery.

3) Serve your community in any way that you can by ensuring that you are volunteering and helping to organize your community to achieve collective goals. That is the best way for you to sharpen the leadership skills that I am sure you were equipped with here at Monroe College.

4) Start your own enterprises and do not simply go about looking for a job. You can keep your job but also think about the things that you feel passionate about and see if you could turn your passion into an enterprise that would help to create wealth and jobs for your community.

5) Finally, invest in your future by setting aside 10% of your monthly income for your retirement investment. Many of you pay tithes to your churches but some forget to pay something for the financial security of their family. Remember that your family goes beyond your bloodlines to include Monroe College which has become a kind of mother to all of you as your Alma Mater. Whatever you do, remember to send a check every now and then or include a legacy in your wills to the college to show your gratitude for the opportunities extended to you here.

I wish to emphasize in closing that all these things that I am asking you to do for your community are guaranteed to make your lives more satisfying than the lives of selfish, ignorant and greedy people who are wishing for people to enslave again. Although I disagree with the legend that ‘They are still our slaves’, we must remain vigilant to make sure that never again will our people be enslaved. With your college education, you have been armed with more than just a meal ticket or the means with which to buy the biggest house, drive the most flashy car, attract the most beautiful lovers and enjoy your celebrity status; you have been called to leadership and although many will fail in that task, I am confident to say that some of you will succeed in helping to make the world a lot better for you and for me and for the entire human race as brother Michael Jackson pleaded with us - heal the world!

This is the commencement of your careers as graduates and the commencement of my career as a commencement speaker. So, I must end by thanking you for giving me this immense honor. This is not the end of your association with your college but the beginning of your lives as college graduates and alumni, the start of a new adventure of new challenges to

thrill, honor and reward you with new laurels. Congratulations to all of you for your steadfast faith, sacrifice and glorious achievements, to your families and friends for their support and to Monroe College for extending this wonderful opportunity to you; well done to your lecturers for the successful mentorship and guidance, and above all, well done to the beautiful island of St. Lucia, home of multiple Nobel Laureates, for providing the incentives and infrastructures for this fountain to satiate the endless thirst for learning and character development.

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