



## Article

# “Name Yourself”: Marronage and the Unmaking of Black Educational Futures

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## Abstract

*In this conceptual essay, I trouble the notion of Black educational futures as something that can be constructed in the frameworks of western thought. Instead, the lesson on revolution teaches marronage, which fundamentally changes the question "What are the futures of Black education," to one of praxis that asks, "What is the sound, look, feeling, and doing of Black learning?" Here, I take up marronage, as a speculative method to examine the makings of Black learning.*

## Keywords

Black Learning, Marronage, Education, Haitian Revolution, Lovecraft Country

## Introduction

*"Now that I'm tasting it ... freedom ... I see what I was robbed of back then. I thought I had everything I ever wanted, only to come here and discover that all I ever was, was the exact kind of Negro woman white folks wanted me to be." - Hippolyta*

Months before the insurrection that would become the only successful revolt by enslaved people in western colonial memory, French leadership noted, "there is no movement among our Negroes...They don't even think it. They are very tranquil and obedient. A revolt among them is impossible" (Trouillot, 1995, p. 70). Here, the Haitian Revolution entered history as the essence of that which was unthinkable. That is, there was no conceptual frame by which to affirm the political and ontological nature of Black freedom. In this way, I mean to trouble the notion of Black educational futures as something that can be constructed in the frameworks of western thought (Winchester, 2019). Instead, the lesson on revolution teaches marronage, which fundamentally changes the question "What are the futures of Black education," to one of praxis that asks, "What is the sound, look, feeling, and doing of Black learning?" In this conceptual essay, I take up marronage as a speculative method (Fischer & Mehnert, 2021) to examine the makings and potentialities of Black learning. The production of a radically different subject must begin from elsewhere. Components of what I elucidate as Black learning can be traced to the labor and freedom dreaming of Black people in flight. I lift *Lovecraft Country's* (Green, Abrams, Peele, 2020) Hippolyta and her confrontation with western rationality as the essence of Black future(s) making. I conclude with recommendations for Black futures as political, wayward, and atemporal. To begin, I move back across time and space to the scene of the Haitian revolution as an exemplar of futures making and the praxis of marronage.

## The Haitian Revolution and Marronage

Slavery and freedom are interdependent in that they exist as opposites and, yet, inform each other (see Patterson, 1987). To understand freedom is to grapple with slavery as the origins of its ideals. This intertwined equation breaks the inertia of slavery as a static condition, locked in a state of stillness, and freedom simply as the antithesis of the unfree. Where the two concepts clash, the notion of marronage shoals and orbits as a discursive lens. As more than

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the sovereign teleological narratives that follow some post-independence literacies and histories, the Haitian Revolution underscores the promise of this interstitial, interstellar space because of the ways it illuminated flight as marronage. According to Roberts (2015), marronage is multidimensional and pivots on the idea of flight, the constellation of four pillars: distance, movement, property, and purpose. *Distance* invokes spatiality or the essence of separating a person from their current state to a future state or condition of being. *Movement* is an expression of agency, referencing one's ability to control their motion and direction. Flight, in this way, considers the full body as the capacity to direct one's motion physically, spiritually, cognitively, and emotionally. *Property* concerns that which is possessed or owned by an individual, institution, or state, private or collective, while *purpose* is the articulation or reason for the act(s) of flight. On the premise that there is an agency in and against structures of oppression, in marronage, subjects are engaged socially, emotionally, metaphysically, and psychologically in the process of exiting slavery and maintaining freedom.

Further, marronage is the flight from the realm of subhuman and unfreedom toward the activity of humanity. Moreover, the contours of flight are such that they can be real or imagined, clarifying the expansiveness as a state of being not relegated to a place or destination. Pushing positive and negative theories of freedom that overemphasize stability, marronage does not rest on security against domination (negative theories) nor endorse an arrival defined by self-mastery, participation in the sociopolitical arrangement seemingly earning one's way out of unfreedom. In many ways, the educational curriculum privileges the latter, stressing achievement as the end of, and protection, from social misery, often landing on tropes like *education is the key to freedom and mobility*. In this way, freedom is often regarded as the premier value of western civilization and the expressed aim of western institutions. Alternatively, marronage, or what I explain as Black learning, recognizes that subject formation is made possible in the interstitial stages between liberation and freedom, a space western thought and reason alone do not have the language to explain (Roberts, 2015; Trouliott, 1995).

### **Western Thought and Reason**

I understand Black learning as marronage, a liminal and interstitial materialization that gives way to process with no achieving end; it is predicated on acts of flight, and as such, perpetual and unfinished. Black learning as marronage builds on theorizations of fugitivity and literary societies that point to the pursuit of education as a transcendent proposition (Muhammad, 2020) for Black people. To be sure, Black learning is a contested idea in the United States. For Spillers (1987), the writing is on the wall. To reckon with this contested terrain is to pass back through American grammar (school), the lessons instantiated by trans-Atlantic slavery that treat and teach that the Black body/flesh is a fundamental transfer point on, and in, the making of Black dispossession, and, for the purpose of this analysis, the idea of Black learning. Enslavement defined the parameters of personhood, writing out with stoic accuracy the genre of the human (Wynter, 2003), expelling Black people from normative categories of personhood and sociality. When and where the notion that Black people were worthy of education exists/ed, the experience constructs them to be participants of a specific kind, yet never total beneficiaries of learning. Upfront, I delineate education, or schooling, with the potentialities of learning.

Schooling should be regarded as a process, formalized through socializing institutions, that functions as a site of sociocultural reproduction. Through a set of automatic practices and expectations, pedagogies of respectability, and neoliberal progressivism, schooling, for Black people, is often tied up in reform discourse, not transformation. Legislatively speaking, and following a pattern of sociopolitical decisions intended to quell and undermine Black communities' mobilization efforts and calls for equity throughout the 20th century, educational policy has wedded itself to the anti-Black policies and logics that normalized Black subjugation (Sojoyner, 2013). That is, schooling sites act out racialized and gendered disciplining technologies that reflect investments in theories of Black pathology, and by extension, the notion that Black people should not have the right to self-definition.

Evidence of these scenes can be seen at the advent of public education, during Reconstruction, when Black people in the United States organized the redistribution of their collective resources to work out of the shadows of plantation economies, to take control of their freedom (Sojoyner, 2013), and, thereby, to transform themselves into something other than enslaved. Their efforts, however, were disputed and, ultimately, disrupted, such that Black education, "from curriculum development to pedagogical philosophy to discipline policy, is connected to the struggle between a Black radical democratic, social vision of the educative process and an education model that

reproduces the gross consumptive and oppressive desires" (Sojoyner, 2013, p. 246). Importantly, oppressive desires are not only those that bend to the status quo; instead, Black people engaged in self-disciplining and policing, which is to say, in the absence of material enclosure, a self-fashioning mimetic of the moral, rational subject took its place to structure the relationship between Black being and the state.

### **Hippolyta's education**

Contextually, these grounds of unfreedom might help to explain who Hippolyta Freeman was in the social imaginary. Hippolyta was trained in these grammar schools. Viewers of *Lovecraft* are introduced to Hippolyta as a Black woman who charts the stars and is full of brilliant ideas. However, it would seem that her aspirations are tapered by the racialized and gendered expectations that befall Black people, and more specifically, Black women in the United States. This conditioning is on full display when her husband, George, effectively dissuades her ambition and genius by telling her about the danger of the road. Amplifying the contested nature of Black (women's) knowledge production, the threat and temerity of Black people as knowers and doers, Hippolyta explains that as a child in the astronomical society, she named a comet (Hera's Chariot), only to have the credit go to a White Swedish family. Of note, in the current order of knowledge (Wynter, 2003), Black is narratively constructed and logically conceived as less than human. In this way, Black people's ideas must pass through white processes and evaluations for the chance to be recognized as a contribution to the official curriculum. Hence, Hippolyta as a speaking agent capable of putting ideas into the world challenges the current order of knowledge and the notion of Black being. To account for this violation, the astronomical society, rigorously invested in protecting who can be a complex, legitimate knower, reinscribed the exploitative colonial apparatus to the refusal and disappearance of Black onto-epistemologies, or Hippolyta's ability to name. These early lessons might explain some of the decisions that have directed Hippolyta up and to our point of encounter.

As a disciplining apparatus, schooling would have it that Hippolyta found pleasure in the space carved out for her as wife, mother, dreamer. Following Cox (2015), "our failures to articulate and witness Black life—and, in particular, Black girlhood—as a dynamic, creative space continually being remade in the future tense have grave consequences" (p. 233), consequences that re-present themselves in policies and practices bent on enclosure. In doing so, she would fall in line with Negro family and Black maternal politics of the day. Generally, Hippolyta's social world could not fathom/imagine a future beyond those ascribed to her, thereby spatializing her existence as a site of social death where Hippolyta becomes a non-knower and cartographic impossibility. This impossibility is not new, and yet, Black folks persist into the future. Thus, the otherworldliness of Blackness (McKittrick, 2017) allows for a different orientation to Black flesh, one that recovers it as the portal for Black freedom making. In the space of nowhere, of Black impossibility, the flesh can point to radical geographic work, puzzling out new "possibilities and coordinates, modes of responding to, challenging, and confronting" (Browne, 2015, p. 21) surveillance, which can be all-encompassing, in pursuit of being human.

### **Portals to Nowhere: A Theoretical Framework**

Impossibility, as the ongoing labor and invention toward Black non-personhood, is inextricably coupled with projects of Black mattering, as Black people assert their humanity. According to McKittrick, this calculus equates to refusals of both Black humanness and the praxis of being human. This corporeal predicament for Black people that unfolds into prisons, north stars, *separate but equals*, and premature death denotes the nowhere of Black life (McKittrick, 2017) that opens marronage as a speculative method for Black learning. The portal into nowhere "provides a template to imagine the production of space not through patriarchal and colonial project trappings (e.g., we want our own space, to own space, give us a place) but instead as a project that engenders relations of uncertainty" (p. 99). Delineating space and place, I read space as relational to the self-defining praxis of Black life (Okello, 2018), whereas defining is a dynamic verb, revising itself in perpetuity, non-static.

In this crossing-over space, though the body bears the historical markings of torture and terror, it should not be read as a suffering object, as the nowhere of Blackness choreographs a way of being structured by but not beholden to its rational comportments. Nowhere, in its essence, traffics in the speculative, wherein, imaginative maroon experiments about otherwise worlds exist. Within those worlds, exploration about what could or should become in the actual world takes precedence. Furthermore, speculation is not divorced from the assumptions and current

discourses that outline orders of knowledge, and therefore, is not the creation of new knowledge so much as it is an unearthing of social imaginaries of the present. To speculate about possible worlds is to reflect on and evaluate how current worlds are imagined and constructed. Attention to the latter and its relation to Black learning requires dreamers of emancipatory learning to liberate "the Dark Others" (Thomas, 2018) from their imprisonment, which is a call to reflect on how Black educative worlds are presently devised.

*"When I was a kid, I thought I was big enough to have every right to name something out of this world, and then I just started shrinking myself." - Hippolyta*

Within the speculative, the Dark Other is unsettling, persisting as that which haunts a text and must be destroyed. Thomas (2018) noted how darkness is the site of disturbance, the cause of unrest. The inherent and primal fear attached to darkness is rooted in western mythology (Thomas, 2018). From there, darkness would, thus, transfer to Black things, as enslaved Black people would become the site of anti-Black imaginings. Artists, according to Morrison (1992), routinely transfer their internal conflicts "onto 'blank darkness' consisting of conveniently bound and violently silenced black bodies" (p. 38). The presence of the Dark Other in speculative imaginings, thus, creates an ontological dilemma as that which is already rendered abject and socially dead. Said differently, in a United States context structured by Black inferiority, the Dark Other survives as the embodiment of accumulation and fungibility. Engaging the speculative, *Lovecraft* (Green, Abrams, Peele, 2020) confronts this ontological dilemma by transporting Hippolyta into and beyond her world to another planet. On that planet, she encounters a curriculum for emancipating the Dark Other, internalized or otherwise, as "I Am" nudges her childlike sensibilities to name.

### **Exposing the Discourses of Black Education**

*"You are not in a prison ...Where do you want to be?... Name yourself." -Seraphina*

Hippolyta is greeted in this dimension by a towering Black woman with a blossoming afro and incandescent presence. The tension she feels is immediate, as she grapples with the impossible notion that she is "not in prison." Her confusion, hesitation, and perhaps, fear are unsurprising. Black learners as astronomers, discoverers, as those who can choose where and whom they want to be, how they want to show up, are incommensurable ideas in the western sociopolitical imaginary. Black learners are taught to forget (Dillard, 2012) their core self as a rite of passage through K-16 schooling structures, and so, it makes sense that the invitations to imagine otherwise would seem dangerous and out of reach. Notably, in these moments of fear, though she dreams about charting new territories for herself, the impulse to return to normalcy is instinctive as she attempts to get back to a familiar place through an entrance that appears to be wide open. In other words, the gate to her probable freedom does not have any visible bars on it, and yet, when Hippolyta attempts to pass through them, she is repeatedly met with resistance.

In these freedom-like attempts, I read multiple trappings in the advancement of Black education. The first suggests that normative orders of knowledge that enclose Black being and knowledge are effective, in part, because they work beneath the surface. This is to say, Black people, can be relegated to psychological prisons they have come to internalize. Different names constitute internalized bondage – imposter syndrome, miseducation, self-hatred, psychological colonization – but the patterns of impact are consistent in how these states erode a Black sense of self-definition (Okello, 2020). Hence, if the condition of naming oneself anew (*Movement*) does not reckon with, or give language to, the unseen specters (*Property*) that require Black youth to fold themselves into acceptable versions of normative western assumptions for citizenship, then educators and practitioners, through curriculum, ignore anti-Black foundations of social mobility and etiquette.

Relatedly, if, as noted above, Black education is fashioned after the western conception of Man-ideals of autonomy, freedom, and power, – naming oneself must conceptualize the act of juxtaposing Black youth's standing in society against those who are non-Black (*Distance*). Imitations of social life and significance cannot produce fully livable Black futures that re-present non-Black realities, which is to say, those structurally condemned to social death, are not, within the realm of western thought and reason, able to resurrect themselves from social death. For Hippolyta, this imitation is the pursuit of freedom as a derivative of western discourse – a release from imprisonment, exemption from control, liberation from autocratic control, or the state of acting without hindrance. Where Black youth and schooling are concerned, it is the pursuit of education, and for this inquiry, educational

futures, as the opposite of educational failure and misery. To ask then, what are the futures of Black education, is to employ logic grounded in western framings of freedom without a sufficient grounding in what happens "during the act of flight itself" (Roberts, 2015, p. 9).

Building on Fanon's (1967) zone of non-being, the cartographic space of physical and psychological terror, act(s) of flight exists in the potentiality of enclosure. Proposing a sociogenic turn in an "extraordinarily sterile and arid region" (p. xx) that permits individuals to fashion their social worlds, civil, and political orders (*Purpose*), a sociogenic marronage emerges that includes imagined blueprints of freedom, constitutionalism, and the importance of naming. I begin with the latter as an entry point into revolutionary flight for Hippolyta and Black learners.

## Unmapping Black Freedom Dreams

*"How could I fit in everything that I am now, into that place?" - Hippolyta*

On the principle of sociogenic marronage, as the nudge to reconsider one's imprisonment, and through the speculative portal of the nowhere Black flesh, if multiple worlds exist in orbit, then all possible realities are realized somewhere, or as Hippolyta concludes, there exists "a world where I can name myself anything." Learning for Black youth can be what living has become for Hippolyta, activities of flight, where learners can participate in becoming free by exiting conditions of schooling as the perpetual act of attainment (Patel, 2016; Roberts, 2015). Imaginaries of freedom, in part, do work for the self and the masses. As the appellation of Black futures, naming is political, holding power to shape and transform meanings. If one of the key aspects of education is sorting society and enforcing a hierarchical order of owners, laborers, and managers (Patel, 2015), naming as central to Black learning performs a fundamental injunction of those normative systems of knowledge.

Drawing on Haiti's independence narrative, the official naming of Haiti occurred with the reading of its Declaration of Independence, carrying the spirit of Black enslaved people during the revolution. Of note, reading was personalized and deliberate, as the writers chose words like citizen over terms like 'ex-slaves,' in effect, proclaiming a new order of society and laying claim to the indigenous lands that were colonized beneath them. Where it relates to Black education, Black learners need opportunities to rename themselves, but not as a directive to prescribed freedom. Instead, naming locates freedom on the imperative of interiority. Attention to the Black interior invites institutions and educators surrounding Black youth to prime learners' minds, bodies, and spirits to respond indefinitely to the question, *What is the feeling of freedom?* This question moves freedom from an idea cognitively conceptualized onto somatic registers that ought to be affirmed as valuable sites of knowledge.

Giving language to one's longings, an imperative to interiority understands that the construction of another world for Black learners begins as utterances of the possible. As part of the matrix of sociogenic marronage, blueprints to freedom are symbolic architectures that individuals or collectives imagine in new worlds. These blueprints provide the image of mass flight that resists normative logic and institutional designs outlined by the state. On this principle, Black learning responds to the question, *How does the future (your learning) sound and look?* by rewriting and rerouting organizational pathways and systems designed to train Black youth. By attending to this remapping, wayward sensibilities illuminate the errantry of western epistemology and position Black youth as radical thinkers who have ideas about their own learning. Releasing the notion of a blueprint from ideals of organization and procedure, maps are the "directionless search for a free territory; it is a practice of making and relation" (Hartman, 2019, p. 228) within policed boundaries.

The third factor in sociogenic marronage lifts the notion of constitutionalism and, as such, is atemporal. Constitutionalism describes the forming of principles and articles for governance yet, despite innovations, should be grounded in philosophies of flight and read as a temporal text. Thus, Black futures would be arranged according to past lessons, present needs and contexts, and liberatory outcomes. Where certain types of Black futures have been tolerable within a western episteme, constitutionalism asks what materials are necessary for perpetual flight and arms the polity with pronouncement, denunciation, and revisioning provisions.

## We Are Here

*"We are here because we did not believe them ... That is our freedom." - Hippolyta*

Hippolyta Freeman is not an aberration. Her story tracks through Black educational contexts across space and time. She is a product of Black educational futures rooted in rationality and reason. We shrink her and the imaginative capacities of all Black children like her when we lock their futures into western epistemic framings. Returning to McKittrick (2017), Black is "in every dark corner; black is social death, afro-pessimist, afro-optimist, afrocentric, afropunk, afrofuturist, soulful, neosoul, blues; it is negritude, postslave, always enslaved; black is like who/black is like me" (p. 98). Thus, portals through the nowhere of Blackness may be the maroon undoing that facilitates flight toward the names and titles Black youth desire to give themselves.

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