



## Black Educology Mixtape “Journal”

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: <https://repository.usfca.edu/be/>

# Dream Out Loud

**Gerald Griffin, Ph.D.**

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The Black Educology Mixtape is an open-access mixtape that moves beyond academic articles to feature various art forms and voices that are typically muted. We feature a collective of Black people working to amplify and empower Black educational voices. Our scope and sequence focus on the past, present, and future of Black education, which has been historically and systemically caught in the underbelly of western education. Our work is grounded in creating mixtapes that are both revolutionary and emancipatory in the name of love, study, struggle, and refusal.

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## Dream Out Loud

Gerald Griffin, Ph.D.

### ABSTRACT

This opinion piece explores priorities and perspectives to help institutions facilitate the actualization of dreams and goals of a diverse faculty body. Moreover, the author relates personal stories and experiences to help transition institutions from surveilling faculty (looking for deficits) to watching faculty with a lens of enhancing professional growth. In all, this piece shares the hope that shifting paradigms at the institutional level will help increase the multitudes of subjects and approaches in the realm of recognized scholarship.

There's a leak in this old building...

-LaShun Pace<sup>1</sup>

### Home

LP Stough Apartments, 98B. That was my grandmother's address in Phenix City, AL. A brick structure that was part of a duplex, a few blocks away from *the* Seale Road. Seale Road was busy, the happening spot in the 60s and 70s (let my older relatives tell it): small disco club on one corner, and diagonal to it was a bar full of those looking for a laugh or a balm to the weight of the week. Just down the road was Fletcher's Grocery Store—small and bricked and full of pickles, pork rinds, fat back, and, as my Uncle Charles called it, souse meat. Oh yeah, and there were collards, chips, and ice cream. Seale Road was FUBU before FUBU. There was no need to explain our stories or existence. On Seale Road, we just got to be.

When I was growing up, the disco club and bar were closed. Only Fletcher's and the convenience store were still open. It'd be the convenience store where I would go to pick up soup—no dents in the can—for my grandmother and pay with the pennies and dimes she'd handed me in a sock. Fun times. Yep, Seale Road was the place where we could be—quirks and all.

There was a large tree in the front yard at 98B. That's where we kids would count when playing hide-and-go-seek. That's where I'd get stung three different times in one summer by the mean yellow jackets, counting for hide-and-go-seek. In the backyard was the clothesline. I'd get nervous every time we had to hang clothes to dry because if you dropped the clothes, well, you had to wash them all over again. And the bed sheets were heavy when wet and sometimes the wind was strong. But I loved taking the dry clothes off the line—nothing like the smell of clothes kissed by the sun and massaged by the fragrance of the blackberries and honeysuckles on the bushes nearby. I loved it so much that I would gather the dry clothes, dump them on my bed, and then just jump on top of them to wrap myself up in that aroma. This felt so good up until the one time my arm landed on the stinger of a dead bumblebee hidden in the mess of clothes.

98B was home: first fight (someone visiting a neighbor), first crush and kiss (neighbor), first celebrations (my grandmother loved when I would win awards for reading books; she didn't care so much about the Tae Kwon Do trophies), and so many talks and heritage-sharing with my grandmother, mom, cousins, play-cousins, and whoever else that would come to visit. We'd read the Bible (note: no other book or item was *ever* to be placed on top of the Bible). I also learned (the hard way) that bibles were not to be used as makeshift snare drums. In 98B, my grandmother would play the guitar (by ear) and sing and would often just hold impromptu services. She'd make up games for us to play; I helped make blackberry wine (grandmother didn't drink it; she just liked making stuff). We made checkerboards, hot cocoa, honey, and peanut butter sandwiches (sometimes you run out of the Bama jelly), and there was always lots of laughter.

We watched the updates from Operation Desert Storm on the small black-and-white TV in the kitchen of 98B. We'd laugh over *Golden Girls*, *Mr. Belvedere*, and see life flow by like sand through an hourglass on *Days of Our Lives*. 98B was Home. I was safe, loved, and there was always a space for me. Space for me to dance, sing

loudly, jump up in the air and try to freeze to imitate the end of the opening credits of the TV show *Fame* (my toe touch became perfected over time—I just hadn't learned about TV editing and freeze-frame).

I could show up as I was. Never hated. Always corrected with love. Often, some family member or other would come over and tell me that my voice was too high and my actions too effeminate. My grandmother would say quickly, "Leave that boy alone." I was free to be me. No judgment either way from her. No further statement needed: I knew someone would fight for my safety. I didn't need everyone, but I did need someone. Someone who would guide me, love me, fight for me, correct me, and show me how to make my own.

In 98B, I was seen, not surveilled. At home, there's no hypervisibility or hyper-surveillance—two experiences all too familiar to those with intersectional, marginalized identities. People who live within these intersections too often must navigate life in a spotlight we did not create, nor can we modify. People who live on the intersections too often have their every move measured and questioned. For those who live within the intersections, mediocrity is not an option. And what makes it worse: There is a tension between being competent without being perceived as competition.

Unless structures and mindsets change in higher education, this tension between showing oneself as an expert but not a threat to other's humanity will continue to tear at the souls of Black people in academia. Black excellence will continue to be the result of achievement despite the systems that work to constrain people and their works. For instance, scholarship and research that highlights issues of the African diaspora are often labeled as secondary. In fact, the jump for many scholars is that anything outside of the classical canon would require a "lowering of the bar." Thus, it is time for academic administrators to think about how we can celebrate the many different types of scholarship and research venues that can augment the thinking of all. Moreover, Black excellence has long required an inhumane spotless character. Far too often, institutions (and the people that comprise them), expect perfection in all regards from Black thought leaders. And yet, this perfectionism is not required of our White counterparts. Imagine what dreams could occur—imagine what dreams could be realized if we can all be free to submit, edit, revise, and re-submit.

As I survey the aspirations of academia, numerous institutions of higher learning have written scripts asserting their commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion. These places aim to have spaces for the dreams, ideas, and hopes of their faculty, staff, and students. These hallowed halls desire to showcase the God-given gifts, talents, and skills of their constituents. Space to exchange ideas, critique, reflect, revise, create, disseminate, ponder, and questions. Space for first grants, books, displayed art, awards. Space for "no and not now," space for "let's try this again a different way," space for repeating experiments to gather more data. Space for healing and reconciliation. Space that does not require those most recently joining them to find a way to "fit." Space for us all to learn ever-evolving methods of engagement.

It's been many years since I've been to 98B. I long for the warmth that was created in that space. Moreover, I hope to work to create that warmth for every student, faculty, and staff member I encounter. I challenge myself and my colleagues to work in such a way that every person we serve feels our love and desire to learn from them.

It is my hope that evaluations and assessments are used and viewed through lenses of continual growth—not animosity-filled correction. Senior administrators should create space to listen to the ideas of those that have been missing for far too long from academia. While we may never be able to "make up for lost time," we can deliberately act to re-center the experiences, research topics, and perspectives that have been deliberately ignored and removed from the canons of our disciplines.

These reflections have led me to two main questions:

How do we watch and not surveil?

How do we promote experimentation at the departmental and institutional levels?

### Watching, not surveilling

My grandmother watched me at 98B. She watched me grow, stumble, succeed, and fail. She was ready to intervene when it looked like I was going to hurt myself or someone else; she was ready to correct me after I had mis-stepped. She'd give me advice, as she had wisdom to share from her experience. She saw me in 3D, taking time to breathe and reflect with me. My grandmother took notice of how I changed throughout the years. She asked me what I was curious about. She noticed I would perk up when she sang, so she sang and played the guitar—working with me to learn rhythms and notes. She invited me to participate in her ventures.

When she made blackberry wine, I helped pick the berries and filtered the liquid through makeshift cheesecloth. She showed me how to hang the clothes up and take them down in record time. She paid attention to learn how to best invite me into her world as an active participant, which helped her build the best bridge to learning for me.

At the other end of the spectrum from that loving attention is surveilling—observing with the expectation that someone will do something wrong. Too often I hear stories of leaders and teachers saying something to the tune (played in a minor chord of course) of "aha! I knew they couldn't do it!" Essentially, what I am speaking of is the active watching and waiting for and wanting someone to fail. Moreover, the underlying motivation that is often

present waiting for such failure is just to point it out or write it up. More simply, the observation is not about growth. And more somberly, it is often a conscious action that reflects an unconscious confirmation bias.

I implore educational leaders to watch with a curious spirit: What can I learn about this person (or persons) to build a bridge? Let us apply our gifts of keen discernment and observation to build effective development plans and create opportunities for academic/career promotion.

### Cultures for Dreaming

Unfortunately, my grandmother died before I finished middle school. She didn't see me graduate from high school, undergrad, or grad school. Her foundational, spiritual work shaped my zeal for learning, and yet she didn't get to see me start my first class as a professor or give my first Pre-College Conference speech as a provost. This grieves and motivates me. I desire to lead, learn, and serve in a manner that modeled her unconditional love for me: pouring out a loving acceptance of people in their best God-given light.

This posture is essential for experimentation and learning from novel ideas, particularly those ideas that have been discounted and ignored in academia. Too often it is stated that we must protect those who have most recently joined our institutions. What if we shifted our framing from protection to promotion? Let's shine light on the new ideas and approaches. I find it imperative to highlight the questions and innovations from our newest community members, as this is essential to rejecting a culture of assimilation. A requirement to "fit" and tacitly conform implies that there is something wrong with those newly joining us. What if we shifted the framing to interrogating how we as institutions can restructure ourselves to more readily respond to new ideas, including those that challenge the power, privilege, and comfort of the majority?

Let us create institutions where employees and students not only work and learn, but also dream. Institutions full of dreams can constantly innovate and introduce new sets of priorities that empower those that have been silenced and stifled. Institutions that represent collages of dreams watch to help the development of their people; institutions that promote dreaming spur experimentation and learning for all.

I dream of academic institutions being more like 98B—full of love and learning; full of growth and development at all levels; full of innovation, both technical and conceptual; full of people who long to share the love that was given to them.

### Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

### Notes on Contributor

*Gerald Griffin, Ph.D., is Provost of Hope College. Griffin is an accomplished scholar whose research interests primarily focus on the interactions between viruses and the nervous system. In 2019, he was named an Emerging Scholar by Diverse: Issues in Higher Education and also was the recipient of Hope's Janet L. Anderson Excellence in Teaching Award. During his time as a faculty member at Tuskegee University and Hope College, Gerald has procured numerous grant funds to support collaborative research with students.*