

# Beautiful Experiments in Teaching Freedom: Collectivist Conceptions of Interdependence in the Discussion of Liberatory Teacher-Student Trust

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**ABSTRACT:** Top researchers in the field of critical pedagogy signify that trust literally liberates the brain from fear. This allows for student creativity and higher-order thinking; without cultural awareness and empathy, researchers claim, educational apartheid in inner-city public schools will persist. American notions of ‘proper’ teacher-student dynamics are contextualized by the political philosopher John Locke who delineated a framework dismissive of relational interdependence. Thus, within domestic pedagogical scholarship, collectivist conceptions of teacher-student relationships, congruent with African American collectivist cultural understandings, remain largely unexplored. At first glance, consideration of political philosophy seems peculiar. This perspective, however, is not only compatible—but critical; interpretations of the intersections between political theory and pedagogical analysis are necessary to move beyond mediating the effects of marginalization towards addressing theories surrounding interrelationship and their exclusion from academia, throughout history and today. The following analysis briefly discusses Afro-Cuban notions of collectivism, particularly relevant because of their ties to socialist ideologies—opposite of John Locke’s economic outlook. It then interprets texts from ancient KMT, “The Satire of the Trades” and “Instruction of Ptahhotep,” in order to articulate the specific definitions of connection that evade modern educational discourse. This research is imperative; effective pedagogy within classrooms will both reduce crime—as is indicated by the realities of the school-to-prison pipeline—and produce adults prepared and willing to eradicate other crises in American society.

**KEYWORDS:** Ptahhotep, Jose Martí, political theory, education, inner-city youth

## Introduction

Socialism augments onto the biggest cultural difference between the United States and Cuba: collectivism, in contrast to the United States’ unbridled individualism. Within an individualistic society, citizens set personal goals and objectives based on distinct notions of self. People are most comfortable operating both solitarily and autonomously. Alternatively, collectivists are propelled by group needs (Reed 1997, 194). Both collectivism and individualism are prevalent within the texts of José Martí and John Locke: political theorists that set foundational substructures for their respective national governments, economies, and lifestyles. Martí was a scholar who is considered a Cuban national hero and revolutionary political theorist, particularly relevant to Latin American literature (Horan 2010, 181). He was divergent, in thought, from John Locke: a philosopher regularly associated with individualistic thought and capitalism because of his *Treatises of Government*; the texts emphasize individual rights and private property. Locke’s ethical and political individualism served as a cornerstone for the US experiment in self-government, individual freedom, and constitutional restraint (Jeffreys 1974, 34).

The understanding of socialism as a cultural opportunity for the pursuit of collective justice and equality was a leitmotiv of Cuban revolutionary conversation. Hence, formal education became relevant to Cuban concepts of both what it is to be fully human and what it means to be a citizen that positively contributes to the nation at large (Martínez, Milagros, and Resende 2006, 32). The Revolution had an extremely successful implementation of mass education, particularly helpful for Afro-Cuban communities (Martínez, Milagros, and Resende 2006, 40). For Afro-Cuban revolutionaries, specifically, education became a way of combating sustained cultural and ideological oppression. In the US, this type of epistemicide—meaning the intentional destruction of knowledge systems—still thrives. According to the Oxford Dictionary, political philosophy, in

general, refers to the study of fundamental questions about government, liberty, justice and the enforcement of code by authority. It is essentially ethics applied to the individual sphere. It discusses both how societies should be constructed and how individuals should operate within societal norms. In academia, however, who is considered a political philosopher is often constricted by political associations. American academia, specifically, has consistently discriminated against Cuban intellectuals, deeming them incapable of creating legitimate interpretations of racism and education (Grosfoguel 2013, 51).

## Results and Discussion

KMT (“the black land”) is Africa’s oldest recorded classic civilization. More commonly known as Egypt, its philosophies, notions of group identity, and theories about politics quite literally set precedent for all other conceptions of civilized life (Hilliard 1992, 17). Still, these three statements--KMT is the oldest recorded classical civilization; KMT had a large impact on world history; KMT was unified with the rest of Africa--explicitly combat narratives within the History and Philosophy disciplines about the impact of Egypt on African diasporic societies and the world (Hilliard 1992, 3). According to what *Intellectual Warfare* calls the ‘ancient tradition,’ many Greek and Roman philosophers and political advisors traveled to Egypt to search for wisdom from African people. At the time, KMT was known as a place of high civilization, cultural understanding, and political intellect. The ‘new orthodoxy,’ however, imposed, and then enforced, the notion that African people were living in an unstructured ‘dark ages,’ until Europeans brought them civilization. This was done to provide moral, intellectual, and civic justifications for the slave trade, colonization, and brutality (Carruthers 1999, 1).

As sociologist Ramón Grosfoguel signifies, these inaccuracies are especially relevant to disciplines of human sciences--including the social sciences and humanities. Slavery meant that African individuals were subjected to a “regime of epistemic racism that outlawed their autonomous knowledge.” Further, the racist idea at the end of the 16th century, that “blacks lacked intelligence,” has turned into a new 20th-century proclamation: “blacks have low levels of IQ” (Grosfoguel 2013, 59). And, make no mistake, he comments, this notion of black intellect still “calls into question black humanity” (Grosfoguel 2013, 49). This reality is expressed by the Afro-Ecuadorian intellectual-activist Juan García when he says: “I have always been told that my knowledge is not knowledge, that my land belongs to no one, which makes me think that I am not a person” (Walsh 2007, 200). African diasporic individuals today, like in the case of García, struggle to combat internalized notions of inferiority first imposed by the devaluation of their ancestors’ philosophical musings. Thus, the modern marginalization of Cuban academics within American spaces and the historical exclusion of KMT from scholarly literature signifies notions of who has ‘legitimate’ political thoughts, is often generated by political commitments to the imposition of particular ideologies.

Amongst the Afro Cuban demographic Jose Martí’s interpretations of intimacy and societal engagement—representative of mainstream Cuban national dogmas—is nuanced by the cultural relevance of maxims embedded within afro diasporic ancestral norms. Similarly, the African American community aligns with ancient KMT but, unlike Afro Cubans, this notion is directly perpendicular to individualistic conceptions of intimate connection and political obligation, integrated into mainstream domestic American life. The most prominent and earliest philosophy in black scholarship is found in ancient Egypt: “The Satire of the Trades” by a scholar named Dua-Khety and “Instruction of Ptahhotep” by Ptahhotep, a political advisor of the time. Known as ‘sebayet,’ which means “wisdom literature” in ancient Egyptian, these compositions expose the theoretical underpinnings of ancient Egyptian societal engagement, especially about intimate connections (Rollston 2001, 135).

The “Instructions of Ptahhotep,” centers around Ptahhotep’s recommendations for an unspecified subordinate—perhaps, his son, successor, or student. Phtahhotep’s maxims present views on communication and ethics, specifically regarding interpersonal relationships, through a

discussion reminiscent of dynamics esteemed within modern collectivist cultures. Ptahhotep would have been generally considered an important citizen at the time due to his civic and scholarly involvement but the unidentified dependent is also recognized, at least by Ptahhotep, as necessary; without investment in children, there could be no longevity of cultural or political reign. As such, these textual formats demonstrate the prevalence of intergenerational interdependence in Egyptian life. Further, Walsh (2007, 206) in “Afro in Andean America: reflections around current struggles of (in)visibility, (re)existence and thought,” indicates that the role of elders as holders of knowledge is one that connects Afro Cuban, African American, and ancient Egyptian ideas about education. In “Do we still adhere to the norms of ancient Egypt? A comparison of Ptahhotep's communication ethics with current regulatory principles,” Löwstedt (2006, 494-5) expands on the close parallels between the norms asserted in the text and present-day conceptions amongst black activists in Cuba and North America. More specifically, Löwstedt references Ptahhotep's economic perspective; “the lack of market economy rationale” and a “widely perceived need to limit commercialism,” he considers, in fact, “reminiscent of revolutionary Marxism and reformist socialism” represented by the domestic left and many Afro Cuban individuals.

The section of “Instructions of Ptahhotep” called ‘Follow your Heart,’ discusses the balance between this sort of communal connection and independence, in relation to success. One should “[follow] [their] heart as long as [they] live,” but only once they properly “[provide] for [their] household,” it reads. This allows for true joy because Ptahhotep suggests, no individual can be happy pursuing individual success—especially based merely on monetary acquisition—while their family remains “glum.” Though this was written centuries before Martí, this approach incorporates elements of his interpretation of proper societal order. Like Martí, the communal gain is highlighted by Ptahhotep and considered critical, along with introspection. However, this appraisal is nuanced by specific attention to fiscal interrelationship and passion as a prerequisite for happiness and peace. The next portion, entitled ‘Conduct,’ adds to this definition by assigning importance to equality within close-knit intimate relationships. This is distinct from the attachments of equality to the notion of a vague ‘humankind, which Martí offers. Ptahhotep encourages repulsion of the “vice of greed; a grievous sickness without a cure.” He expands saying that greed is particularly significant because it, more so than other “evils,” “embroils fathers, mothers, and the brothers of mothers.” The fact that it disrupts intimate connections makes it worth this descriptor: “compound of all evils, a bundle of all hateful things.” His obvious contempt for greed impacts his notion of felicity. The joy articulated in ‘Follow Your Heart,’ is not tied directly to property accumulation nor total self-abnegation; it requires the pursuit of individual goals. The objective of intimate connection, then, incorporates the actualization of communal stability and personal focus in the direction of achieving one's purpose. ‘In Public,’ later mentions the need to reserve the expression of negative personal opinions for the sake of common good, even if the particular appraisal is accurate. There are many more examples, but with each subtopic, there is an affirmation of political and cultural norms; both inner virtues and collective aptitudes, this insinuates, are critical to stability within political management and the maintenance of cultural tradition (Löwstedt 2006, 1).

The conceptual perspective of virtue in the “Instruction of Ptahhotep” can be described through MA'AT: a name attributed to ancient KMT. It represents truth, justice, righteousness, harmony, order, balance, and reciprocity. “Keep to the truth,” Ptahhotep's Treatise starts. Truth is essential to wisdom; one should personally seek truth to gain knowledge; and knowledge, as well as good communication, is important for societal harmony, dignity, and respect. Inauthenticity is immoral and individual self-awareness is one's duty, he also indicates. With introspective attention, individuals are more capable of distinguishing between reality and falsehood. He specifically condemns artificiality, like greed, because it can lead to “[harmful] [intentions].” In agreement with his notions of intimacy, MA'AT forces one to understand themselves to increase love and respect within the community at large (Löwstedt 2006, 497). Furthermore, he equates liberation with the elimination of power hierarchies. Freedom of expression is thus intrinsically

about the possibility to not only speak the truth but also to “[speak] truth to [people] [in] power.” With this comprehension, freedom of expression and—in tandem—liberation is always transitive in KMT society. The term ‘freedom of expression’ is often used today, in contrast, intransitively—as something attributive or predicative rather than relational and interactive, as something that one possesses not something that is developed through healthy relationships between individuals or with oneself (Löwstedt 2006, 498). In “Instructions of Ptahhotep,” three different sections start with the same line: “If you meet a disputant in action.” Then come three different scenarios: “A powerful man, superior to you,” “your equal,” and “a poor man, not your equal.” In each scenario, he recommends the same traits: patience and self-control (Löwstedt 2006, 1). Equality, thus, is important for a connective sort of justice where spiritual and societal peace abides through intentional equality of treatment. As such, the notion of justice is correlated with a meaningful construction of the moral universe, in which all voluntary acts are viewed collectively. This may also be a form of constructing causality as a scientific principle: that there is no event without cause or consequence. Justice, then, will prevail through reciprocal logic—especially with attention to horizontal solidarity. The social memory necessary for connective justice is related to the idea that every action is communicative, either an answer or a question (Löwstedt 2006, 503).

In “To be an African Teacher,” Dr. Asa Hilliard (2009) recognizes the pedagogical elements of ancient Egyptian education which are encapsulated through three important features: respect for ancestors/community tradition, the notion of children as divine gifts from the creator, and the elevation of spirituality/building for eternity. Egyptian scholars, he articulates, were less concerned with formal educational processes. They had more interest in conceptual mastery which they believed would lead to cultural preservation. They encouraged their students to attain excellence—in, for example, capacities to interpret the natural and connect it to human sanctity—through a particular approach which included apprenticeship and holistic nurturing. Through hands-on-interaction, thus, children were able to learn from ‘true masters’: individuals who were considered steeped in the thoughts and behaviors of their communities. For teachers, the propensity for excellence was assessed by one’s likelihood to seek intergenerational wisdom. Those that communicated regularly with local elders and demonstrated loyalty to societal obligations were praised. This incorporates the previously mentioned notion of respect for ancestors as well as the importance of maintaining community norms. African teachers, additionally, believed in an innate genius of children, rooted in their divinity. Because they considered children divine gifts, educators automatically held high expectations for their students and they cared about nurturing quality teacher-student relationships, peer-peer interactions, and fostering genuine connections between home and school life.

Hilliard claims the worldview of teachers in ancient KMT should be widespread knowledge—at least amongst black communities. Egyptian pedagogy aimed to teach how to cultivate good character and create social bonds. “For the African teacher,” Hilliard states, “teaching [was] far more than a job...[Their] students and parents [were] [their] family.” The self-sacrifice that was sometimes needed to obtain and uphold the virtues of MA’AT was bolstered by a culturally-enforced pedagogical commitment to spirituality and eternity. The general subscription to a higher power, human connectedness, and generational sustainability prompted an education system that viewed education as not only a cultural necessity, but an extension of divine ordinance. There was virtually no separation between one’s spiritual and intellectual self (Hilliard 2009, 1). In fact, many educational processes were passed on orally as part of religious processes (Löwstedt 2006, 1). The scholar Elsa S. Guevara Ruiseñor connects Latin America to ancient Egyptian ideologies when the author says that they, also, “[deplore] the flourishing of individualism and the lack of commitment sustained by a culture of consumerism that promotes an obsessive complacency and makes it very difficult to sustain” intergenerational, interdependent, sacrificial, and spiritual teaching (Ruiseñor 2005, 859).

The significance of KMT is reaffirmed through its historical utility in grassroots struggles for African American liberation--most recently, the pushback against prejudiced federal standards

in the 90s; Asa Hilliard participated in this movement. The very existence of the “Instruction of Ptahhotep” and the ‘Satire of Trades’ are epistemological combatants against black dehumanization. Their conceptual value for intergenerational knowledge preservation, too, still supports worldwide black intellectual emancipation. Wade Nobles in “Per Âa Asa Hilliard: The Great House of Black Light for Educational Excellence” states, “conquerors are fully aware of the power of history and culture,” as a basis for independence. Once freedom is won it must be sustained; a free person or group must have an independent conception of identity, purpose, and direction. The history and culture of KMT provide the foundation for these independent visions. Like dominant Cuban culture, Westernized distance allowed for the preservation of collectivist interpretation within societal scrolls. While many African Americans, specifically, but Afro Cubans as well, feel deeply disconnected from the KMT, the past--according to numerous black scholars--truly “contains the seeds for the future,” in terms of presenting viable educational and liberatory measures (Nobles 2008, 730). And as Walsh expresses, the inclusion of social justice in educational theories, to Afro-diasporic communities, is almost a given. More specifically, Afro-diasporic demographic notions of education often encourage “development...towards the agency of critical, active and collective subjects that could act [in] their lives and those of their communities; subjects capable of seeking knowledge not only in written texts but also in collective memory” (Walsh 2007, 205). Whereas many historians have been astonished by the unparalleled building of great tombs and temples within KMT civilization, Dr. Asa Hilliard raises an, arguably, more significant question: “What kind of educational system...allowed for the attainment not so much the level of technical development as the philosophical orientation [and]...uses of the technology?” Consequently, one must parenthetically ask, how did the education of black students move from becoming one with MA’AT to being, at least domestically, academically inferior (Nobles 2008, 731)?

The Afro-descendant people in the Andean region of Latin America, have constantly resisted and challenged order, finding ways to feel national integration and social interdependence despite exclusion from societal institutions. In contrast to indigenous grassroots organizations that mainly aim to transform their relationship with the state, Afro-Latinx struggles tend to center issues rooted in the intimate sphere. Within education, for example, they specifically focus on self-esteem, described as an intimate process of “affirmation, strengthening and re-existence” by the scholar, Catherine Walsh. The main site for this work is in the communal efforts for the development of African education, also known as ‘ethno-education’ (Walsh 2007, 201). In this sense, it is worth remembering and giving agency to the words of two black intellectual activists whose lives exemplified these struggles. One is the Afro-Colombian and Ekobio mayor Manuel Zapata Olivella who argued some years ago that, “the chains are no longer in the feet but in the minds.” The other is W.E.B. Du Bois who said, in his ruminations about black consciousness, “ignorance is not only of letters but of life itself.” It is these individual chains and this ignorance, decimated by empathetic internal intimacy and accurate historical education, that persist amongst Afro Cubans and African American folk, especially in activist spaces (Walsh 2007, 206).

According to “Epistemologies, oligarchies, and scriptures in crisis: from racialism to culturalism in the Latin American essay of the 1930s,” there is no doubt that long historical processes have resulted in strong cultural parallels between the paradigms of black communities throughout the “black Americas,” including--the author implicates--amongst Afro Cubans and African Americans (Mailhe 2005, 30). There are obvious differences; individualistic American culture deviates strongly from general Cuban collectivism, represented both in the Afro Cuban demographic and in dominant Cuban cultural beliefs. There are also, however, the obvious bonds of brutal conquest, human exploitation, and cultural extermination in the pursuit of plantation-based economies. Simply put, this means that in modern societies throughout the Americas “the decoupling of traditional social forms by industrial social forms,” have replaced traditional black “social structures such as the Church, the village community and the extended family.” Instead, they are “replaced” with other fascinations “such as science, the national state, and the nuclear

family.” This has direct implications for spheres of intimacy because, presently, another article argues, African diaspora erasure forces the devaluation of African American notions of solidarity, value for self-awareness, and acknowledgment of the need for interpersonal relationships (Ruisseñor 2005, 863).

## Conclusion

Within America, teachers would not be expected—for example—to even meet a student’s family, let alone consider themselves a part of a student’s intimate circle. This is particularly difficult for African American students as, KMT signifies, intergenerational interdependence is commonplace within their early educational frameworks. In the United States, formal education is generally regarded as a primary vehicle for reducing poverty and closing the wealth gap between African Americans and dominant cultures. Still, African American students are often located in schools with less qualified teachers, teachers with lower salaries and novice teachers (U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, Data Snapshot Report 2014, 1) Research from Upjohn Institute demonstrates evidence of systematic bias in teacher expectations for African American students and non-black teachers were found to have lower expectations of black students than black teachers (Gershenson et al. 2015, 15).

While somewhat outdated, these insights possess legitimacy. Contemporary researchers have found that ‘high achievement teachers’ communicate higher performance expectations for students and demand more work in comparison to other teachers within their respective schools. Teacher efficacy—defined as taking both the credit and the criticism related to students (Ronald and Solórzano 1999, 67). The text “Unlocking the Potential of African American Students: Keys to Reversing Underachievement,” by Yvette Jackson, begins with explanations of African American cultural values: resilience, spirituality, humanism, communalism, orality, realness, and personal style. Resilience is defined as the conscious need to bounce back from disappointment and disaster; African American culture considers humor and joy tools to the renewal of life’s energy in response to societal oppression. For African American populations this renewal is often associated with spirituality which is based on a belief, derived from many African nations, that all elements in the universe are of one spirit and that all forms of matter are different manifestations of divinity. Communalism denotes awareness of the interdependence of people and is connected to the elevation of orality and verbal expressiveness, which refers to the special importance attached to the knowledge that is passed through word of mouth, as well as realness—which refers to the ability to face life as it is, with authenticity and uniqueness (Jackson 2005, 207). The blunt refusal to mimic the exact technique of a particular classical author in an assignment, for example, might be a demonstration of African American ‘culturally affirmed’ creativity through an appeal to personal style, verbal communication and realness. However, this may be perceived as defiance from an authority figure who does not understand the cultural values of an African American student.

Notions of what constitutes ‘legitimate’ political theory—often rooted in prejudicial political agendas—have, so far, obstructed academic research regarding the relationships between Afro Cuban, African American, and ancient Egyptian conceptions of intimacy. Teacher-student love in Cuba, impacted literacy rates, especially within the Afro Cuban demographic. Today, these historical notions of love remain amongst Afro Cubans activists. African American activists, too, recognize the necessity of intimate teacher-student bonds to mitigate African American educational underachievement. However, they do not explicitly delineate the type of intimacy that must be fostered, nor do they suggest how a public school teacher in the domestic inner-city could actualize these ideologies; it seems, the teacher would have to create and sustain their own mini cultural revolution within a classroom setting—a difficult feat. Consequently, future research must be conducted on how divergent notions of blackness and individualistic dogmas regarding interdependence would impact the reality of cultural transference. Still, the potential positives of the incorporation of afro descendent interpretations of intimate connection within inner-city classrooms are clear. The ideological applicability of afro diasporic intimacy definitions—rooted in

collectivism—to conceptions of teacher-student relationships, thus, must be pursued within political theory scholarship related to the educational sector or liberatory social justice work.

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