I can’t watch without finding tears in my eyes—happy tears, as my girls would say. Sometimes it is the effort of the young runners with their determination to never give up even after falling down. At other times I am moved by the great comeback of an anchor leg. Maybe a few of my tears are in memory of the few races that I ran around that historic track.

I can remember very clearly the first time that I ran at Penn’s Franklin Field during the Penn Relays—the first and oldest track and field relay meet in the country. Teammates Shawn, Alan, Terrance, and I were representing our High School in 4 × 100 meter relay. I ran the third leg. Shawn and Alana were both speedsters, and I can easily admit that I, the third leg, was the slowest on our team. I always knew that I just needed to get the stick around to our anchor leg and fastest runner Terrance as if he was in proximity to the lead, we would likely win the race. I just needed to keep my legs and arms moving, lean into the curve, breathe, and not drop the baton.

The struggle for Black freedom, for peace, for growth and to build the beloved community indeed God’s Kingdom/Kindom is also a kind of relay race, and I am aware that I and many others have taken the baton from those who are no longer with us.
The life of the educator might be characterized as a constant passing of the baton as we pass along education and past efforts for freedom to our students. We try to get the legs of the next generation moving so that our team can come that much closer to the finish line.

We have all received the baton from those who ran before us. Running, I can’t help but look back and see the faces of professors (who are of course still running and handing batons to other students), the faces of authors and leaders who have impacted me via the written and spoken and lived word, as well as the faces of ancestors whose blood flows through my veins. I pray that I haven’t dropped it. I pray that I haven’t let them down.

I pray that I haven’t let you all down.

In 2013, a powerful moment in Hip Hop occurred. The rapper J. Cole—a young brother who was relatively new to national music stage—released a song entitled “Let Nas Down” in which he related the heartbreak he felt at hearing of the famed rapper Nas’ disappointment in Cole’s latest track. The track contains a sample from the song “Gentleman” by Fela Kuti—a powerful and deeply symbolic act in itself. The song tells the story of how growing up, young J. Cole looked up to Nas and how after he himself began to find acclaim as an artist eventually met Nas on tour. During that first meeting the elder rapper let Cole know that he was a fan of his music. Yet, the narrative continues, after J. Cole’s next single was released word got back to him that Nas hated it, thus resulting in the refrain of the song, “I can’t believe I let Nas down.” Nas’ disappointment created a type of existential crisis in the young rapper pushing him to question his decisions in releasing a mainstream radio ready track rather than one more faithful to who he was. Yet J. Cole never saw himself as “selling out” rather he thought by being played on large-scale radio airwaves, he would then