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Anti-Black state violence, classroom edition: The spirit murdering of Black children

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In October of 2015, a Black girl at Spring Valley High School in Columbia, South Carolina was thrown out of her desk and across the floor by the school's resource officer, Ben Fields, for refusing to obey instructions. Two students in the room videotaped the incident as the entire class watched their classmate be physically assaulted by a school official. When another Black female student spoke out about the incident, she was arrested for "disturbing the school." Because the young girl that was assaulted is underage, limited information about her has been released to the public, for privacy reasons. However, authorities investigating the case did report that the young girl had recently transferred to Spring Valley after being left to foster care following her mother's death. In the aftermath of the assault, it was revealed that the students of Spring Valley referred to Officer Ben Fields as "The Incredible Hulk" because of his aggressive behavior with students at the school.

Less than six months before this incident in South Carolina, a Georgia principal verbally assaulted the students and families of an alternative high school by making a racist remark at the school's graduation ceremony. Nancy Gordeuk mistakenly dismissed the crowd after forgetting to let the school's valedictorian give his speech, then asked them to return to hear his remarks. When it seemed that attendees did not adhere to Gordeuk's commands, she declared to a predominately Black audience, "Look who's leaving—all the Black people." Not unexpectedly, the crowd erupted as attendees were taken aback by her racist statement.

The media would like to portray these incidents as isolated, the work of a few racist, overzealous, culturally insensitive school officials. Instead, I want to draw attention to how school officials like Gordeuk and Fields—regardless of their race, gender, or ethnicity—"spirit murder" (Love, 2013) the souls of Black children every day through systemic, institutionalized, anti-Black, state-sanctioned violence. That intangible violence toward Black children is less visceral and seemingly less tragic than the physical acts of murder at the hands of White mobs, kidnapping and killing by White self-appointed vigilantes, or shootings by police officers in their homes and streets. But a slow death, a death of the spirit, is a death that is built on

racism and intended to “humiliate, reduce, and destroy” (Coates, 2015, p. 7). Racism is indelible to the Black body and the spirit, and the physical and spirit murdering of Black bodies is unfortunately part-and-parcel of America’s history. It is, in many ways, what makes America, America.

Spirit murdering

Race-centered violence kills Black children on a daily basis by either murdering them in the streets—taking their bodies, or murdering their spirits—taking their souls. Spirit murdering within a school context is the denial of inclusion, protection, safety, nurturance, and acceptance because of fixed, yet fluid and moldable, structures of racism (Love, 2013). Black children in schools are humiliated, reduced, and destroyed by visceral and explicit attacks like those by Gordeuk and Fields, or are systemically and institutionally ejected from schools for being Black. For example, Black boys and girls are expelled and suspended at much higher rates than their White counterparts for the same or lesser offensive infractions. As a result, Black children are “steered into detention centers, jails, and prisons from the hallways of school buildings” (Love, 2013, p. 12). Black children are dehumanized and criminalized from the moment they enter those school doors. To emphasize this point, I would be remiss not to mention that in 2012, a six-year-old little Black girl in Georgia was handcuffed and taken to a police station for throwing a temper tantrum at school. This incident and those detailed above leave a trail of unanswered questions: How does a child learn after being handcuffed, or thrown around the room, by a person who is supposed to protect them, or racially insulted at their high school graduation for being Black? How does a Black child live, learn, and grow when her spirit is under attack at school, and her body is in danger outside the classroom? How does a parent grapple with this reality? How are a child’s imagination and humanity stunted by the notion that they are never safe? Where does the Black soul go?

Black souls

Dillard (2012) argued that the souls of Black people are a space of reconciliation, spiritual centering, transformative possibilities, and, most importantly, survival. In order for folks of color to survive in America their souls must strive for wholeness, therefore necessitating a nurturing educational space. However, systemic, race-centered violence on Black children in our schools (*i.e.*, school-to-prison pipeline, zone tolerance policy, overrepresentation of Black and Brown students in special education, and uniform policy that criminalizes youth of color) fractures that wholeness. School practices and officials are slowly killing Black children by murdering their spirits through intentional actions, physical assaults, and verbal stabblings. Although Fields and Gordeuk did not actually pull the trigger of a gun—unlike those who killed Tamir Rice, Jordan Davis, Tanisha Anderson, Aiyana Stanley-Jones, Trayvon Martin, and Mike Brown—they are murderers nonetheless.

Yet the spiritual deaths of Black children continue to go unnoticed, even in a time when folks are screaming in the streets that Black Lives Matter, calling to end police brutality, and demanding racial justice. It is thus fundamental to call attention to the fact that our education system, built on White supremacy and enforced by physical violence, is invested in murdering the souls of Black children, even if they are not physically taken.

Contributor

Dr. Bettina L. Love is an award-winning author and Associate Professor of Educational Theory & Practice at the University of Georgia. Her research focuses on the ways in which urban youth negotiate hip hop music and culture to form social, cultural, and political identities to create new and sustaining ways of thinking about urban education and social justice. She also concentrates on transforming urban classrooms through the use of non-traditional educational curricula and classroom structures.

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