Difficult Knowledge: When a Black Feminist Educator Was Too Afraid to #SayHerName

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In this Provocateur Piece, the author shares her regrets, mistakes, and fears in hopes that more conversations about how educators, especially Black female educators who are on the front lines of educating students about race-centered violence toward women, have a space to wrestle with the difficult knowledge and task of teaching anti-Black, state-sanctioned violence toward Black women, while dealing with the reality that their lives and spirits are also in danger.

*I write for those women who do not speak, for those who do not have a voice because they were so terrified, because we are taught to respect fear more than ourselves. We’ve been taught that silence would save us, but it won’t.*

—Audre Lorde, 1982/2004, p. 90

In April 2015, Sandra Bland posted a video on Facebook in which she discussed the physical murdering of Black bodies by law enforcement agencies; she stated, looking directly into the camera, “Black lives matter. They matter. . . . In the news that we’ve seen as of late, you could stand there, surrender to the cops, and still be killed.” Eerily and seemingly clairvoyant in her knowledge of Black death, on July 10, 2015, three months after Sandra’s Facebook posting, Texas highway patrol trooper Brian Encinia pulled her over for a minor traffic violation (i.e., failure to signal). The entire incident was videotaped by the officer’s dash camera. “Get out of the car! I will light

*The term provocateur has its origin in then-NCTE President Sandy Hayes’s welcome to the CEE 2013 Summer Conference, during which she shared her wish that she could swap the “troublemaker” label she had been given for her name badge at the International Society for Technology in Education conference the month before with then-NCTE Executive Director Kent Williamson’s, who was fittingly labeled “provocateur.” We can think of no better inspiration than Kent for this section.*
you up! Get out!” he screamed at Sandra. He arrested Sandra on July 10, 2015. On July 13, 2015, she was found dead in her jail cell.

According to the police, Sandra killed herself by hanging, and her death was ruled a suicide by the Harris County, Texas, medical examiner. Subsequently, Sandra’s unjust arrest and suspicious death elicited outrage and, because of the #SayHerName movement, received national media coverage. The county’s district attorney stated that Sandra’s death would be investigated as a possible murder; however, months later, a Texas grand jury ruled not to indict any employee of the Waller County jail, where Sandra was taken after her highly questionable and, I would contend, illegal arrest by Encinia. In March 2016, the Texas Department of Public Safety (DPS) fired Encinia for lying about the circumstances of Sandra’s arrest. Sandra’s family is pursuing a federal wrongful death lawsuit against DPS, Encinia, and Waller County. The trial is scheduled for January 2017. I argue that no matter the final conclusion of the wrongful death lawsuit, Sandra’s spirit was murdered when Encinia’s hateful words vibrated down her spine and when she heard the bars of her jail cell slamming together as if her world had collapsed into four cold, lonely, hate-filled walls. Sandra confronted the reality of systemic, omnipresent, state-sanctioned violence toward Black women and did not live to tell her story. However, she is not the only one.

In the same month as Sandra’s death, five more Black women died in police custody after their arrests: Kindra Chapman (Alabama), Joyce Curnell (South Carolina), Raynetta Turner (New York), Ralkina Jones (Ohio), and Alexis McGovern (Missouri). These deaths went virtually unnoticed, with limited, if any, media coverage, no hashtags, and no public outrage. Further, in August 2014, police officer Daniel Holtzclaw of Oklahoma City was accused and charged with raping and sexually assaulting 13 Black women. Yet, his case attracted limited local coverage and never became a national story. Unfortunately, the denial of a Black woman’s death, trauma, and pain is not a new phenomenon. Treva Lindsey (2015), in her piece “Race in the US: Herstory,” describes how Black women and girls have always been absent from “the national conversation on anti-Black racism and policing.” She writes, “Under chattel slavery enslaved Black women endured forced breeding, rape and brutal assaults.” For an illustration as to how women and girls are left out of the history of anti-Black violence, Lindsey highlights the fact that while Emmitt Till echoes in our collective memory as the 14-year-old Black boy who was kidnapped and murdered for whistling at a White girl in 1955, most folks could not name Addie Mae Collins, Cynthia Wesley, Carole Robertson, and Denise McNair, the four little girls killed in the bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama, in 1963.
Sandra Bland Classroom Edition

In October 2015, America witnessed a school resource officer in Columbia, South Carolina, body slam a young Black girl sitting in math class for not obeying his orders. When another Black female student spoke out about the beating, she was arrested for “disturbing the school.” Many news organizations reported the physical assault of this young Black girl as an isolated incident and the actions of a rogue officer. However, I argue that not only was this young Black girl physically assaulted by someone hired to protect her, but her spirit was murdered that day as well. Similar to critical race scholar Patricia Williams (1991), I define spirit-murdering as “the personal, psychological, and spiritual injuries to people of color through the fixed, yet fluid and moldable, structures of racism, privilege, and power” (Love, 2013, p. 300). Therefore, just because this student survived race-centered violence does not mean her soul is intact. There are many questions to be asked. For example, how does she learn again in a formal classroom? How does she trust teachers and school officials again? How does she heal from the psychological violence of the incident to reach her full potential as a young Black girl? How did this physical assault injure her spirit? When discussing trauma and memories, Cynthia Dillard (2012) writes, “What is needed are models of injury that truly honor the complexities of memories. Of indigenous and ‘modern’ times, experienced not just in our minds, but in our bodies and spirits as well” (p. 10). Race-centered, gendered violence is not just a physical attack on Black girls’ bodies; it murders the spirits of Black girls and these deaths go unnoticed (Love, 2016). For this reason, more conversations are needed that explicitly identify schools as incubators of gendered, racialized violence, a concept that is somehow incomprehensible to the mainstream when in reality the bigotry, hate, racism, sexism, patriarchy, and violence that are part and parcel to the American ethos are too often entrenched within our schools and in the memories and spirits of Black children.

The United States has always been obsessed with dehumanizing and criminalizing the Black body (Love, 2015). Simply put, Black people, regardless of gender, are being killed in the streets and spirit-murdered in the classroom (Love, 2016). However, for Black girls, there is finally a burgeon-
ing national conversation that documents how schools function as a societal space that slowly and deliberately terrorizes and murders the spirits of Black girls. To illuminate this point, the African American Policy Forum (AAPF; 2014) report *Black Girls Matter: Pushed Out, Overpoliced and Underprotected* found that rates of expulsion were dramatically disproportionate between Black and White students, especially among girls. Findings showed, “In New York, the number of disciplinary cases involving black girls was more than 10 times more than those involving their white counterparts and the number of cases involving black boys was six times the number of those involving white boys.” In Boston, the study found that “disciplinary cases involving black girls was more than 11 times more than those involving their white counterparts while the number of cases involving black boys was approximately eight times those involving white boys.” I cite this report not to pit Black boys and girls against each other in a game of oppression Olympics, but to highlight how Black girls are being removed from the classroom like Sandra Bland was removed from her car for being Black and a woman. Her physical death was the ultimate cost for being Black, female, and living in an anti-Black racially violent country. But physical death is just one form of dying. Spiritual death kills more Black women every year than any bullet. Black feminist scholar Brittney Cooper (2015), who has written prolifically regarding contemporary articulations and moments of Black womanhood and Black girlhood in relationship to state-sanctioned violence, writes,

> A Black girl who moves through space on her own terms is a significant threat to white supremacy and patriarchy. She is someone refusing the state access to her emotions, her dignity, or her fear. Whether loud or quiet, when Black women refuse to grant fear as a concession to power, they get violently beaten into submission. Ask Sandra Bland.

### #SayHerName: An Epiphany

To respond to the historical and blatant refusal by the media and society at large to not only cover but also inform society—regardless of race, gender, ethnicity, or class—of the “history of anti-black racial violence which includes all black people irrespective of gender” (Lindsey, 2015), AAPF, the Center for Intersectionality and Social Policy Studies at Columbia Law School, and Andrea Ritchie issued a report in May of 2015 entitled *Say Her Name: Resisting Police Brutality Against Black Women*. The report documents how Black women are routinely raped, killed, and beaten by police. #SayHerName, which was coined by AAPF, demands that national and grassroots activists fighting against racist policing include gender-conforming and nonconforming Black women (e.g., lesbian, bisexual, transgender) in their overall agen-
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das and engage communities in conversations concerning state-sanctioned violence toward Black women.

The #SayHerName movement should be at the center of my pedagogy as a Black feminist queer educator. Black feminism is fundamentally concerned with creating communities of accountability that are deeply invested in the lives of all children and reflect their lived experiences with the complex intersections of race, racism, sexual orientation, gender, and other oppressive factors (Brown & Kwakye, 2012). Moreover, Black feminist educators know that the lives of young Black girls have historically been and continue to be marginalized or ignored inside and outside of the classroom; therefore, the dismissal by mainstream media of Black women killed through state-sanctioned violence is, unfortunately, not surprising. However, my reaction to teaching in a world where Black girls and women are habitually killed, raped, and beaten by police was unexpected.

As a Black feminist, the study reports mentioned above did not shock or provide information that I did not already know, but they suddenly made the physical and spirit-murdering of Black women, including myself, real and in my face. In short, these reports and the #SayHerName movement brought to light matters that I had intentionally left in my subconscious. Since 2012, I have taught a class called Real Talk: Hip Hop Education for Social Justice to elementary and middle grade students at a public charter school in Atlanta, Georgia. The class exposes students to the history and elements of hip-hop culture and music, current issues affecting students’ communities, and how hip-hop is a tool for social justice to educate community members and challenge injustice.

As a class, my students and I were comfortable discussing, critiquing, and thinking about creative ways to speak back to anti-Black racism and policing of Black men. We had the language for Black death when focused on Black men but were tongue-tied and silent for Black women. One major reason I was reluctant to engage my students, especially my young girls, in critical, in-depth conversations about the police killings of Black women was the already present and overwhelming fear for the lives of their brothers. My female students expressed worry and anxiety about how their brothers or male cousins would be racially profiled by law enforcement and, ultimately, killed for being Black and male. Because they were living with this fear and trauma, their lack of knowledge that their own lives were at risk provided a space of pedagogical comfort for me. It never crossed the minds of my young girls that their lives were in danger, too, and I did not have the courage to tell them.
Teaching with the Ghosts of Black Men

The project-based class focuses on teaching students the elements, traditions, and customs of hip-hop music and culture to create multiliteracy artifacts that address injustices within students’ communities and society at large. At some point in the course, without fail, the class is interrupted by, paralyzed with, and curious about the constancy and endlessness of Black death. Questions start flying at me as students try to make sense of race-centered violence: “Dr. Love, you hear about what happened to Trayvon Martin?” “Dr. Love, what happened in Ferguson?” “Did Mike Brown steal something?” Noticeably, I have yet to hear a question about the death of a Black woman from my students.

As I reflect on my teaching career, I realize that Black death and the language to articulate it is reserved for Black men. It is almost as if the commentary and rage that follow the killing of a Black man are organic and rehearsed at the same time, because Black men dying at the hands of racism is familiar. In school, students learn from an early age about how racism and White supremacy killed Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. In their homes, many students learn about the killings of Medgar Evers, Malcolm X, Fred Hampton, or attempts by White supremacists in South Africa to kill Nelson Mandela. However, in school or at home, conversations about the physical or spirit-murdering of Black women are uncommon. For example, at least 200 Black women and girls were lynched in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, which is mostly unknown and certainly not discussed in schools or in society (Lindsey, 2015).

We live and teach proudly with the ghosts of King, Mandela, and X, but the lives and killings of Black women are at most whispers. Moreover, students, male or female, rarely hear about the contributions of Black women, much less the violence toward them. For example, students learn about Rosa Parks but never learn about her life’s work combating sexual violence against Black women (Theoharis, 2015). The work of Anna J. Cooper, Ida B. Wells, Ella Baker, Angela Davis, Shirley Chisholm, Pauli Murray, Lorraine Hansberry, Elaine Brown, and more contemporary Black women activists, such as the three Black queer women (Alicia Garza, Opal Tometi, and Patrisse Cullors) who created the hashtag and now movement for social change, #BlackLivesMatter, are routinely and intentionally marginalized or disregarded from school curriculums. To exclude these women is offensive because, as Sherell McArthur (2016) reminds us, there is a “rich lineage of Black women activists who used their voices and literacy practices for social change” (p. 564). She adds that, historically, Black women’s “traditions of activism and social change were grounded in critical literacy practices” (p. 564).
The reasons for students’ lack of knowledge of the race-centered violence toward Black women are vast, but the responsibility ultimately comes down to limited media coverage and mainstream dialogue about violence toward Black women, watered down curriculum that centers and privileges Whiteness, patriarchy, colonialism, and romanticized notions of violence, and lastly, *me*.

By way of further investigation, I share below the words of my seventh-grade female students concerning how much they feared for the lives of Black boys. These vignettes were captured after my students individually and collectively researched systematic oppression in the United States using as text the speech “Two Minutes” (2013) by activist and cofounder of the Dream Defenders Umi Selah (formerly known as Philip Agnew). In conjunction with Selah’s widely encompassing speech that addresses the issues of school closings to build prisons, voter suppression, inner-city crime, transphobia and homophobia, and undocumented immigrants’ detainment in detention camps, the class also investigated the killing of Mike Brown. His singular death ultimately took center stage because it harkens to the overarching issue of the killing of Black males, which was and is sensationalized by the media and reinforced by teachers like me because of my fear to look Black girls in the eye and explain to them that they—we—are in constant danger, regardless of the context.

**Who’s Gonna Tell ’Em?**

For their final projects, students had to create a speech that modeled that of Selah and addressed at least one of the issues raised in his speech, along with Brown’s death. After they completed their projects, I interviewed the students to understand how they processed the assignment. In addition, I conducted videotaped end-of-year formal interviews with each student to evaluate the course and gather data to understand how students engaged with the course material. After data collection, interviews were transcribed and coded. The data clearly showed that, when asked about Brown, my female students went instantly to their fears for their brother(s) or male family members.¹

*Michelle:* I have to live, I have to feel, I have to fear for him when he goes out and walks the street because he is a Black male. He probably won’t be doing anything foolish but he’ll just be judged . . . really sad that people can’t just walk down the street and mind their own business, without getting profiled.

*Robin:* By saying it’s right to shoot a Black male just because of their skin color, the way that their appearance, that’s the number
one thing, their appearance, that’s the way they walk, the way they talk, all that stuff and have the right, and they think they have the right to assault them, harass them, shoot at them. It makes me feel like Black people, it makes me feel like the same history that’s been in the past is going on and on and again.

Monica: I do have a brother, my little brother Robert . . . because he’s only 11 and if he ever did have an interaction, that kind of interaction with the outside world and the real world, it . . . it makes me think about how he would survive in the real world because the kind of world that we have today, I don’t think he would.

Bree: I’m fearful for my cousin’s safety because I feel that when he grows up that he won’t be treated fairly by police officers or anybody else.

While I was interviewing the girls in the class, it hit me hard and fast in the gut that my female students had no understanding of the possible terror of race-centered violence toward women. As I stood behind the camera conducting interviews, I was simultaneously in awe of their deeply keen understanding of racism and racial profiling toward Black men and struck by their naivety of the thousands of Black girls who are raped, beaten, killed, or declared missing every year. My first reaction was to blame the girls for not knowing, and the media for not telling. Then I asked myself about the class assignments, the structure of the class, the guest speakers, and how at each turn in the class I intentionally pushed the lives of Black girls to the periphery. After I came to this crushing realization, I decided to investigate the possible reasons for my deliberate omission. As a Black feminist, devoted to the lives of Black girls, much of my life’s work is spent understanding the plight of young Black girls. I realized that the root of my neglect was fear, or what psychoanalytic theory scholar Deborah Britzman (2013) calls “difficult knowledge.”

**Difficult Knowledge**

Jim Garrett and Avner Segall (2015) argue through the lens of psychoanalytic theory that we all “defend ourselves from anxiety or emotional danger in ways that we often cannot immediately recognize, and the distinctions between our interior, emotional life and the broader social and political world are messier and more blurry than we might hope” (p. 280). For me, my anxiety stemmed from the emotional and physical danger threatening all Black girls and women. To communicate those concerns to my students
through critical inquiry was a fear and place of emotional trauma for me. Britzman (2013) writes that the difficult knowledge “issue is not that knowledge must be called off to help others with their feelings. Rather, we all have feelings about knowledge and knowledge carries these affects” (p. 114). Alice Pitt and Britzman (2003) extend the definition of difficult knowledge to embrace the potential of loss of self and others that can result from encounters with meaning.

My encounter with meaning was realizing my “displacement of an unconscious world” (Shim, 2014, p. 5) filled with Black girl trauma. I was afraid to bring my emotional world into the classroom out of worry that my female students would in turn become fearful, and I would be left with the hopeless responsibility of protecting them. No one expected me to protect the boys. We all agreed, spoken or unspoken, that no one could save them. Thus, another hard truth for me was realizing that I viewed the girls through a lens of female fragility, believing that my Black female students would be easily broken. I also did not want to inform the young boys in my class that their mothers, aunts, and sisters were in danger. Thus, reproducing the dominant narrative was a pedagogical space of comfort while, ironically, I simultaneously challenged that same narrative through Critical Hip Hop Pedagogy (see Love, 2014).

This difficult knowledge, even in my unconscious world, contributed to the long history of violence toward Black women and girls being pushed to the margins of disclosure. My fear denied my students, both girls and boys, the opportunity to engage in critical dialogues about the threat against Black females—to #SayHerName.

Working Through

Peter Taubman (2012) suggests that teachers need to investigate “their own feelings and ideation aroused by their students” (p. 56). In my case, I needed to examine my feelings aroused by society before I engaged with my students. I am now working through what I have learned to resist. From a psychoanalytic pedagogical standpoint, working through means resisting the idea that I need to “teach a lesson” to my students about race-centered violence toward women, and embracing the idea of creating a classroom environment where we all can work through our traumas with a “proliferation of questions rather than answers” (Garrett & Segall, 2015, p. 292). The process of working through my pain and anxiety with my students does not
place my burden of difficult knowledge on their shoulders, but allows me the space to examine my unconscious emotional world. It gives me the courage to #SayHerName aloud while looking in the eyes of all my students facing the burden of anti-Black, state-sanctioned violence toward Black women, and know that we are doing it together, unafraid to be afraid because, as Audre Lorde admonishes us, silence will not save us.

I share my regrets, mistakes, and fears in hopes that more educators, especially Black female educators who are on the front lines of educating students about race-centered violence toward women, have a space to wrestle with the reality of teaching about violence toward Black women. As an educator and a writer, I know writing saves lives. It saved mine. I know when Black girls are given the space to write their truths we, collectivity, #SayHerName. Grounded in Black feminist/womanist epistemologies, the act of empowering Black girls to write autobiographies, memoirs, and fiction, as well as engage in the power of social media to create digital tools to “self-define and reclaim their identities” (Sealey-Ruiz, 2016, p. 295), models the type of humanizing, critical, and creative curricular and pedagogical activities needed to heal. These teaching strategies also provide Black girls the opportunity to speak back, up, and out about what it means to live in a world with, and face the burden of, race-centered violence at the intersections of multiple vulnerable identities (Haddix, McArthur, Muhammad, Price-Dennis & Sealey-Ruiz, 2016; Price-Dennis, 2016). The authors of the July 2016 issue of English Education powerfully honor, affirm, reclaim, and redefine Black girls’ literacies. The issue makes it clear that Black girls’ literacies matter and that English educators “need to understand a more complete vision of the identities girls create for themselves, and the literacies and practices needed to best teach them” (Muhammad & Haddix, 2016, p. 299). The Black women authors of the special issue understand, as I have argued throughout this Provocateur Piece, that without critical conversations concerning the responsibility of educators in the wake of racial violence and how they grapple with their own difficult knowledge, Black girls and Black educators are left on their own to tackle the threat of violence in their lives and the knowledge that one day they could be the next Sandra Bland.

Note
1. Student names are pseudonyms to protect their identity.

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