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LET 'EM TALK: AN EXPLORATION OF AND CHALLENGE TO THE WHITE
SUPREMACY AND COLONIZATION OF BLACK AND BROWN GIRLS IN UNITED
STATES PUBLIC SCHOOLS

By

Keara W. Small

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Women's and Gender Studies in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, The City University of New York

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ABSTRACT

LET 'EM TALK: AN EXPLORATION OF AND CHALLENGE TO THE WHITE SUPREMACY AND COLONIZATION OF BLACK AND BROWN GIRLS IN UNITED STATES PUBLIC SCHOOLS

A Case Study by

Keara W. Small

Advisor: Jean Halley

The United States Department of Education’s mission statement is described as evolving to “Promote student achievement and preparation for global competitiveness by fostering educational excellence and ensuring equal access.”¹ A key piece of this statement is educational excellence and equality. The pathway to educational excellence and preparation is founded on public school students growing aware of their culture, identity, and history. My objective in this research is to discuss educators’ perceptions and misconceptions about Black and Brown children — especially Brown and Black girls—who attend public schools across the United States. Present-day research regarding school discipline policies and the “policing” of children focuses on the school-to-prison pipeline, acknowledges disheartening statistics on suspension and detention rates, and discusses the positive and negative effects of restorative justice. While each of these topics are noteworthy, they fail to consider the root causes of the misbehavior, that are socio-political issues in America.

¹ U.S. Department of Education, “Overview and Mission Statement,” accessed July 20, 2022, <https://www2.ed.gov/about/landing.jhtml>

Early signs of misbehavior are labeled as insubordination and disrespectfulness. However, beyond the surface, misbehavior can also be an early sign of resistance to patriarchy, colonialism, and imperialism. Specifically, in the case of Black and Brown girls, misbehavior is an early sign of feminism present in urban classrooms. I consider the experiences of several young women who attend public schools across the United States and argue that children of color in the classroom are equipped with the tools to challenge these oppressive systems. The combination of quantitative and qualitative data presented in this thesis shows that although children of color are marginalized and oppressed by their racial and gender identity, there is beauty and authenticity if only we unpack the layers of their intersectional identities that are founded on their unique and valuable experiences.

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To,

My ancestors

Mother

Sisters

Brothers

Besties

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Racism has prevailed and sustained its tainted, dark past for many reasons. One of them is the negligence of the public education system. In urban education, we not only have to think about the cultures, struggles, and communities that students come from. We must think deeply about power dynamics and how educators reproduce and sustain Eurocentric ideologies about gender, class, and race. Young women in the public education system are expected to simultaneously create some sort of individuality, meet familial obligations, and excel academically while staying true to self. However, like myself, many young women have a hard time understanding how their language, expression, and power can be their dispositions, because the system labels and categorizes them as aggressive, hostile, or simply “having an attitude” (whatever that means). This subject of young women and how they are penalized may appear as minute to the larger issues we are facing in public education—such as safety in schools, school funding, student mental health, and sporadic attendance rates.²

My argument in this thesis is that we see school zero-tolerance policies targeting girls, boys, and non-binary children of color in the United States. And yet the education system has failed to acknowledge how zero-tolerance policies in public schools are upholding colonial rhetoric about Blackness, more specifically Black womanhood and gendered expectations. I will use my own autoethnographic experiences as a Black public school teacher and former student attending NYC public schools to show that girls of color are in fact resisting white supremacy and patriarchy. Through their resistance, they exhibit the true ideals of feminism. Feminism shines through their reactions which can range from “Talking Back” such as that described by American

² “Education Issues in 2020,” Digital Team, Fingerlakes1, January 19, 2021, <https://fingerlakes1.com/2020/03/30/education-issues-in-2020/>.

scholar and social activist bell hooks in 1989, challenging school dress code policies, and even preserving their inner peace by remaining silent. First, research on zero-tolerance policies and young women focuses solely on distrust of authority and community poverty rates, which demonstrates the lack of scholarship on poor systematic/foundational practices. This thesis contributes to existing educational research by shifting the narrative and focus from students, to acknowledging the indoctrination and complicitness of school staff and faculty who uphold white hegemonic beliefs about behavior and gender in the classroom. This complicitness stems from faculty and staff miseducation and lack of awareness. Second, institutional racism will continue to reproduce itself if disciplinary policies and stigmas around behavior and sex are misunderstood and mismanaged by school personnel. Discipline and consequences for conduct in classrooms have parallels to the penal system in the United States which was founded on the exploitation and abuse against Brown and Black enclaves.

For parents, children, spectators, teachers, and administrators who read this thesis, I challenge you to think about your first encounter with discipline in the public education system. Consider these questions as you explore Black girlhood in education;

1. What behaviors were being corrected and/or fixed?
2. How did this redirection and discipline impact your social-emotional health?
3. Have you ever witnessed a friend or peer being disciplined incorrectly?
4. To what extent have you witnessed changes in a friend or peer who was harshly or disciplined?
5. How might gender, race, and class play a role in who imposes penal measures and who is being corrected?

6. How can noticing the trends and patterns of these accounts create a stronger public school system where students are not being chastised for challenging standards deemed “perfect?”

After reading this thesis, I hope you can rethink the ways in which you understand the concept of discipline and punishment being imposed on children, particularly children of color, across the United States. Discipline can silence students and disengage them from school. In contrast, learning, developing creative capacities, and identity development in school can positively change the scope of someone's life.

Literature Review

This thesis is designed to illustrate the ways in which society has objectified and disregarded Blackness and womanhood. The usage of the word objectification in relation to women of color (WOC) is the action and process of viewing and treating WOC like objects and items. I examine to what extent have public school educators and personnel played a role in the invisibility of Brown and Black girlhood. This thesis draws upon the works of various education, social justice, and grassroots liberation scholars such as Monique Morrison, Connie Wun, and Rebecca Epstein. The primary research method of this thesis will be autoethnography. I will also explore the extensive research available on my topic (using both qualitative and quantitative methods). This will allow me to analyze both my own experience and the research of others.

The research conducted by these scholars have played a crucial role in understanding what exactly is happening in the classroom with Black and Brown children. Despite the limited research pertaining to the effects and experiences of Black and Brown girls in the classroom, *Girlhood Interrupted: The Erasure of Black Girls' Childhood* written by Rebecca Epstein, Jamilia Blake, and Thalia González published in 2017 highlights the racial disparities surrounding and the perceptions of children of color. I plan to use this research to argue that due to bias, prejudice, and

racism, the punitive measures exercised by school administrators and teachers are harmful and counterproductive to the ideals and goals of liberal and progressive schools. These prejudices can transition to the adultification. It seems to assume the connection between punitive measures and adultification. Adultification is ruining the education of girls of color and forcing them to give up freedom, happiness, and self-expression or get in trouble.

Angered: Black and non-Black girls of color at the intersections of violence and school discipline in the United States published by Connie Wun in 2015 examined the relationship between girls of color, violence, and school disciplinary codes. Wun contends that the narrative must be rewritten to include the experiences of Black and non-Black girls and, most importantly, to explore how their ways of dealing with emotions and feelings are signs of agency. I plan to use this research to re-emphasize Wun's arguments which show that Black and Brown girls are disciplined and surveilled more than any other ethnic group or genders in United States classrooms. The infractions that cause Black and Brown girls to be suspended or receive detention are very subjective and these violations are determined by the opinions of staff and faculty who do not necessarily understand the ins and outs of Black girlhood.

Black girlhood is multidimensional and embodies feminist ideals—especially Black feminism. Feminism is an ideology and lifestyle of activism and resistance to fight for equality and the fundamental liberties of for all genders. Black feminism, on other hand centralizes, race, sex, gender, and the struggles and achievements of Black women in America and transnationally. The late bell hooks published a book in 1989, *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black* to explore Black feminist consciousness and the issues of race, class, and politics. Another groundbreaking text written by hooks, *Ain't I A Woman*, published in 1981 examines how racism

and sexism have been damaging to Black women since the 1970s. Black women are omitted from the narrative and are not accurately portrayed and unpacked in film, literature, history. I plan to use her collection of essays and experiences to highlight the resistance shown by Black and Brown girls in classrooms when they make the conscious decision to resist disciplinary policies or challenge the arguments and beliefs expressed by adults. The refusal to accept standards that oppress people, language, identity, and their history are, in fact, the true ideals of feminism and feminism's struggle for the liberation of the body, mind, and soul. Instead of out casting these girls, they should be valued and even studied so as to understand the ways the girls work for freedom, alliance with others, and a just future for all.

Reflections On The Black Woman's Role In The Community of Slaves by Angela Davis and *ASSATA: An Autobiography* by Assata Shakur are foundational texts for my argument, because of the various themes and experiences of Black femininity that can be elaborated upon concerning Black girlhood. These two texts of this thesis range from publication dates and solely offer quantitative traits. However, through the infusion of qualitative data from government records and public statistics about suspension and expulsion, my audience will have a clear understanding of the racial bias in United States classrooms that targets Brown and Black girls. All of the sources in this research will collectively illustrate a ripple effect of different forms of resistance centered against colonial and imperial beliefs about identity, punishment, and womanhood of both educators and students. I plan to dispel the belief that students of color who receive extreme and outrageous punitive punishments act solely out of their experiences of trauma and poverty. Rather, I argue that Brown and Black girls who are failing victims of the school-to-prison pipeline do so because of the negligence and misuse of authority and power. According to "Orange is the New Black" Comes to New Jersey's Public Schools, Black girls made up 20% of public preschool

enrollment, yet they were approximately 54% of all preschool aged girls (2.5-4 years of age) who received out-of-school suspensions (Morris 2016). Educators and school personnel fail to realize that Eurocentric beliefs about colonialism, sex, and race have a draining effect on children of color in the classroom. This is in part because, through white supremacist education, children of color witness the complicity of educators.

Autoethnography

It's graduation morning, and throughout my house, everyone is scrambling. Even my dog, Bud, seems to know today is a big day. The steamer is puffing out hot steam, and I am twisting my graduation gown, trying to figure out if it's been ironed perfectly. As I twist the gown around, I'm trying to figure out why my gown looks so big. It looks like I'm going to sing in a gospel choir or something, but it'll do. Maybe this is the look of a graduate. I'm excited, nervous, and anxious all at the same time. My mother is all over the place answering calls from family members and asking me which sandals match with her linen pants. As I tell her the green sandals bring some color to the outfit, she reminds me to put on my gold bangles and hoop earrings. My mother is very big on looking "Proper" (whatever that means), but I know she is anxious about attending my ceremony, because I am her first child to graduate. I know she wants to look back at our pictures and not only have a feeling of being proud, but also feel good about how she looked. I walk through the halls of my house leaning in on each door telling everyone to "Hurry up, we gotta go! I can't be late today!" We all know that trope that follows the Black family—lateness. It might be funny at times to those within the Black community but to outsiders, it's embarrassing.

Growing up in a first-generation Afro-Caribbean household, the importance of education and respect are ideals that circulate during family events, parent-teacher conferences, and

whenever a minor infraction is made as a child. My mother always had high expectations and always instilled in me as a child the importance of respect and listening, even if I was uncomfortable or disagreed. Her educational standards were redesigned from the horrors of exploitation, colonialism, and imperialism. There are many individuals and systems who attempt to destroy these roots that ruin the psychological state of a child. Yet the roots still have a chance at sprouting and becoming successful because of the nourishment and minerals from those who are complicit. My mother grew up in a small tight-knit community where elders, educators, peers, and families looked out for one another. The bonds within her community were so strong she remembers my grandparents inviting teachers and church leaders over for Sunday dinner. As I grew into my girlhood, I challenged the expectations and trust my mother had in adults who spent more than seven hours with me. How could she be so sure of their word all the time? What if this person does not have the best intentions for me? How can I be sure that this adult within my community understands me? How can this theory be detrimental to my growth as a young Black woman? I was challenged tremendously during and after the completion of secondary schooling.

All throughout my public schooling experience, I faced many ordeals in which I would wonder whether I should be complicit, interfere, disrupt, or challenge a situation. The working definition I have thus far pertaining to Black Imagination is an escape from the chaos that preys on and oppresses people of color. Imagination is a mental state of beliefs and actions that are not yet reality. Is Black Imagination attainable if it remains merely a mental state and never reality? You can attempt to achieve the goals and messages in your imagination, but it is not guaranteed. Can imagination be simultaneously damaging even when fighting for ideals that are important to Black and Brown communities? Black educational Imagination reminds children and parents that education can lead to the doors of their dreams being opened. Yet, this educational Imagination

does not urge Black and Brown students that all their demands and/ or concerns will be fixed or even understood; the doors that lead to achieving this said Imagination have never been designed intentionally to serve and protect. The doors have been abandoned and barricaded to prevent even a vivid idea of this imagination simply existing.

As we park the car and walk to the annex, where my graduation ceremony is being held, several random New Yorkers tell me congratulations. I proudly and quickly say, “Thank you,” as I anxiously think about life after graduation and how late we are. We are only 20 minutes late, but at the end of the day, late is late. I’m never late so I know everyone will understand my family is the one who held me back on graduation morning. As I try to calm myself down about being late, I get anxious again because I am on the graduation committee, and I am supposed to assist staff and faculty with last-minute hiccups. What if everyone is looking for me and I’m not there? What if we get lost walking to the annex? What if my mom rethinks her shoe choice? What if? Reflecting on these bitter-sweet moments as an adult, I wish that I could embrace these moments as they happened.

A popular aphorism within any Caribbean household is to, “take a child's place.” While this statement has so much value and truth, it serves as a protective layer to shield innocent children away from harsh realities and the difficult conversations. It can be damaging when you struggle to escape the reality of being adultified and on a pillar of high expectations. A “child's place” is apologizing even when you're not wrong and refraining from asking questions to challenge the person in front of you. The expectation is that you listen to the adult commanding you and execute all orders given to you with no hesitation, comment, or excuses. A child is often reminded to take a “child's place” when discussion becomes poetic, relatable, and up for debate. According to this aphorism, children are not viewed as wise or knowledgeable enough to disagree, pose questions,

or truly understand their own voice. Throughout my childhood, adults reminded me to “take a child’s place,” but this figurative motto left me unequipped with tools as a teenager to make the most conscious choice people struggle with—and that is the power to disagree and question.

When we finally reach the annex, my family and I part ways. I could hear Ms. X in her soothing voice instructing families to turn right and enter the auditorium. As I made a left and entered the double doors, I could see all my peers in a single file line. I subconsciously say to myself, “Damn, this is embarrassing. I always tell everyone to be on time, and here I am at graduation, late as ever!” Everyone stops their sidebar conversations and yells out “Key, hurry up! we over here!” Scanning the room, I found a sense of comfort after seeing my peers. The gold jewelry, beautiful hair, heels, and selfie sticks gave me a sense that all of my peers are figuring it out as well on graduation day. I rushed over, jingling like the bells from Santa’s sleigh, but I made it. “Finally!” I exclaim after a strenuous trip to the most important day of my academic career. I was physically present in the room, but my mind was wandering and trying to answer all the questions my brain could not seem to dismiss. My homegirls are trying to start a conversation with me, but I’m thinking about whether or not my family found seats. Is my mother comfortable? Did she see my best friend’s family? Does she have my siblings’ taking pictures of her in front of random art so she can send it to my aunts and talk about her outfit?”

Ms. X walks next to us and does random check-ins with everyone as we get ready to walk into the auditorium. I see her glaring my way and we make eye contact for a second, but I turn away because I know she might address my lateness. As I look down at my phone looking at the time and all my missed calls from my friends, I randomly decide to look up. It was creepy how we locked eyes; it was timed almost. She asked, knowing the answer, “Keara, you were late to your own graduation?” In my head, I ask myself, “How does she expect me to answer this?” Should I

explain myself right away? Should I act like old folks in my family and correct her by saying, “Good morning.” Would she even care to know the GPS horrors on my way here? Would she care to know my mother has a hard time taking instructions from an automated voice that is coming from a smartphone? I decided to say, “I know.” “What's with the attitude, Smalls?”

In my head, of course, I wonder if she thinks I'm proud that I fit the Black family trope of being late on my big day. What if I was proud and did not let my lateness impact the chains of pain and trauma that was finally being broken on my graduation day? Fifty-nine of the girls who walk in this line beside me are the first as well. I could not help the overwhelming thoughts in my mind: “Did she think I strolled in here acting like time revolves around me? Does she know I had perfect attendance two years in a row? What does she even mean by attitude? I answered her question without elaboration and with confidence, was that attitude?” I stare at her blankly and she walks to the next person and starts conversing, but her voice fades out because I hear my gym teacher telling us it's time to start walking. I think about how my response relates to me having an attitude: “Was it because I responded without giggling or laughing? Was my face too serious? Maybe I should have smiled? Why is Ms. X so pressed about my response? Or is this because she did not like my relaxed emotions and body gestures, so it is labeled as an ‘attitude.’ Who determines what an attitude is? Who has the power and authority to deem your words as an attitude?”

My Black Imagination became distorted because I never had the opportunity to process Black excellence in educational spaces. Trauma and battle wounds are inflicted on Black and Brown children because they are adultified and counseled to be strong and stay focused. From my experience as a young Black woman in public education, sometimes taking the higher road is exhausting, crippling, and unfair. Community members, politicians, educators, and families fought to integrate African American children into educational spaces in hopes of achieving the Black

Imagination. The trauma inflicted onto students like Minnijean Brown-Trickey, a student part of the infamous group Little Rock Nine or those who were students in Candance Reed's math class when she mocked Native Americans while teaching a math formula, shows how children are either forced to internalize oppression or fight against it and be outcasted, especially children of color in educational spaces. Educators, parents, and community members must resist white hegemonic structures that shatter Black identity, expression, and community. How can the Black Imagination come to fruition if schools that serve Black and Brown children model the norms and models of oppressors?

Chapter eight of *Talking Back, Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black: Toward A Revolutionary Feminist Pedagogy* unravels bell hooks' experience as a Black child growing up in the South. She reflects on spaces and individuals that allowed her to use language, emotion, and experience to articulate her opinions and beliefs. Miss Anie Mae Moore was hooks' favorite teacher in high school. According to hooks, "She could catch hold of you and turn you around, set you straight (these were the comments folk made about her teaching)—so that we would know what we were facing when we entered her classroom."³ In making this statement, hooks is implying that after entering this learning space, she was given a space and opportunity to unlearn behaviors and tactics that silenced who she was as a Black girl. In Miss Anie Mae Moore's class, hooks was turned around from the world that she knew where she would take a "child's place," be silent, and let the men and boys in her community and family speak and form opinions. She was introduced to the power of words, pedagogy, and learned to see herself and peers "Strive for wholeness, for unity of heart, mind, body, and spirit."⁴ In a lot of ways, due to the feeling of

³ bell hooks, *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1989), 49.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 49.

belonging, acceptance, and reflection offered in hooks' favorite class during her high school years, she felt neither shunned nor misunderstood— . Maybe the hiccups that happened on graduation morning would not have happened if Ms. Moore was a teacher of my own.

Laying Out The Groundwork

The experience of Black and Brown girls is inextricably linked to historical events and stigmas regarding womanhood and the Black body. In other words, in order to understand the experience, dismissal, and invisibility of Black and Brown girls, we must explore the negative connotations surrounding gender and sexuality in relation to Black and Brown women in the United States. Arguably, one's experience as a child in both their learning and cultural communities creates the foundation from which they can blossom into their adulthood. The negligence of America to understand the intricacies of gender, sexuality, and identity amongst people of color trickles down and affects the socio-emotional development of children of color, specifically, young women and girls in American public-school classrooms. This leads to students misunderstanding themselves, losing their sense of identity, and giving in to a system that refuses to see them for who they are. Young Black and Brown girls lack agency in urban classrooms, and this is part of a systemic problem that we see in other places — like artwork and the ways in which the public responds to the artwork in NYC.

In 2014, Kara Walker, an American contemporary painter and installation artist, curated and designed the infamous sugar sphinx exhibit, which served to explain the complexities of race, gender, and sexuality. *Queering Sugar: Kara Walker's Sugar Sphinx and The Intractability of Black Female Sexuality* by Amber Jamilla formulates dialogue around the controversy and public perception regarding the art installment. Jamilla acknowledges that public criticism from art critics

and the general public shows the ways in which Black female agency is difficult to unpack, understand, and respect. The exhibit was designed to critique the role of capitalism, race, gender, class, and exploitation in the United States. The main sculpture was a Sphinx creature with the head of a mammy figure, and the head of this figure was covered by a kerchief; her breasts and vulva were revealed for spectators to view. The sugar sphinx stood tall with measurements of 35 feet by 75 feet and was cast with white sugar.⁵ Several other art sculptures within this art installation featured tiny “sugar babies,” which depict African American children varying in gender holding Brown weaving baskets that have chunks of broken molasses. The children are wearing clothing bottoms but stand without any clothing on their upper torso. Unlike the giant sugar sphinx, the children are coated in the sticky and Brown sugar molasses; they appear almost stuck in their position and logged into the floor of the Domino Sugar Factory located on the east river in Williamsburg, Brooklyn.

Kara Walker creates contemporary art that analyzes the function and effect of violence, identity, and gender on ethnic communities throughout global history. The imagery and symbolism behind having these sugar babies stand partially naked and stuck in place represent the stagnant and uncomfortable positions children of color are often forced to embrace for various social, political, and/or economic reasons. In this case, the sugar babies stand as tall, proud, and confident as they possibly can despite being used and abused for production profit. The giant sugar sphinx

⁵ DOREEN ST. FÉLIX .“After Her Sugar Sphinx, Kara Walker Is a Whole Different Kind of Public Figure.”

Vulture, April 17, 2017. <https://www.vulture.com/2017/04/kara-walker-after-a-subtlety.html>.

that depicts an African American woman with “mammy”-like features illustrates the trapping cycle of the Black body and lack of agency starting from when they are children.

Kara Walker’s art installation had a meaningful purpose and used sugar to show the historic violence against Black people and the ways in which Black agency is undermined and devalued for the capitalist agenda. However, due to some attendees being unaware or completely ignoring this painful history of Black womanhood, their reactions indicated a lack of respect for Black bodies depicted in this installation. In essence, these attendees reproduced the historical racist violence that Walker exhibits by mocking and belittling the exhibit and the Black life Walker depicts. Cait Munro, a New York City-based writer and editor who wrote for the *Artnet News*, recalls her experience visiting art installations and memorial sites throughout her adulthood. She always experienced respect, love, and understanding being exhibited by attendees. Munro states: “While few appear to have responded to the work with charges of indecency, some visitors have been unable to stop themselves from mocking and sexualizing the work, uploading photos pretending to cup it's breasts or tongue its buttocks.”⁶ In making this statement, Munro is insisting that these inappropriate behaviors exhibited during the view of Walker's art installation illustrate the continued refusal of white bodies to acknowledge the agency, beauty, power and experience of Black women.

Inserting Jamila and Munro’s perspectives on Walker’s sugar exhibit into the larger conversation around gender and sexuality connects to the ways in which we understand the history and experience of Black women in America. During enslavement, reconstruction, and onwards,

⁶ Cait Munro, “Offensive Instagram Pics Plague Walker's Sphinx.” *Artnet News*. March 27, 2015. <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/kara-walkers-sugar-sphinx-spawns-offensive-instagram-photos-29989>.

Black women and girls had no agency in regard to their reproductive rights or bodily autonomy. Rather, they were viewed as property and tolerated only for their ability to procreate. In 2014, an exhibit dedicated to unraveling Black womanhood, purposely placed at an abandoned Domino Sugar Factory, designed by a Black woman unfortunately still cannot be digested, respected, and unpacked. America fails to address the complicated legacy and struggles of the Black woman's sexuality, identity, and contribution to American culture. The acknowledgement of Black womanhood appears to "make an appearance" throughout American history, instead of being celebrated as contributors to this country. If we can't understand the history and experience of Black women, we can't understand them in the classroom or their signs of resistance. Walker's exhibit dedicated to memorialize the horrors of transatlantic slavery and patriarchy against Black womanhood and the experience of Black and Brown girls in classrooms serves to show the continuation of Black women and their invisibility in both educational and capitalist institutions. As I mentioned earlier, Black women and girls are objectified and seen solely as objects and commodities; their layers of richness, and contributions to history and culture are never acknowledged first.

The linkage of transatlantic slavery and the dismissal of Black women and their "sugar babies" in Kara Walker's exhibit translates to the issues we are seeing in the classroom pertaining to Black and Brown children in the 21st century. Capitalism and patriarchy are linked and must remain connected when trying to unpack liberatory feminism and Black feminism. The late Gloria Jean Watkins, known to the world as bell hooks, is a world-renowned author and contributor to feminist theory. Her theory insists that social classifications are linked and shape a woman's experience. hooks states in *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black*,

Without diminishing in any way our struggle as academics striving to succeed in institutions, such effort is fully compatible with liberatory feminist struggle only when we consciously, **carefully, and strategically link the two**. When this connection is made initially but not sustained, or when it is never evident, Women's Studies becomes either an exotic terrain for those politically chic few seeking affirmation or a small settlement within the larger institutional structure where women (and primarily white women) have a power base... which mirror the status quo.⁷

hooks is implying that white supremacy and capitalist patriarchy are challenging and dominating pedagogies that weaken "active resistance and rebellion against sexism and racism."⁸

Feminism is a western theory that advocates for the social, political, and economic equality of the sexes. Throughout history, many groups have been excluded from this theoretical framework and movement, because of a lack of inclusivity for all women regardless of their race, gender, sexuality, and class. *Ain't I A Woman* is named after Sojourner Truth's "Ain't I A Woman" speech published in 1863. bell hooks analyzes the effects of racism and sexism on Black women from both the Black community and white America. She demonstrates the theme in the following quote:

Although the women's movement motivated hundreds of women to write on the woman question, it failed to generate in depth critical analysis of the Black female experience. Most feminists assumed that problems Black women faced were caused by racism - not sexism. The assumption that we can divorce the issue of race from sex, or sex from race, has so clouded the vision of American thinker and writer on the "woman" question...I was disturbed by the white women's liberationist movement that race and sex were two separate issues. My life experience has shown me that the two issues were inseparable.⁹

hooks proposes that white feminists failed to ignite meaningful discussions about the Black female experience and their connection to the larger movement. In order for the experience of Black women to be understood, the aggressors are not solely white hegemonic-patriarchal hierarchies, nor is it solely based on racial hierarchies. Rather, in order to understand the Black female

⁷ hooks, 51.

⁸ hooks, 50.

⁹ bell hooks, "Ain't I A Woman: Black Women and Feminism." (London: Routledge, 2015), 12.

experience successfully, both racism and sexism are “intertwined...to make them separate was to deny a basic truth of our existence.”¹⁰

The feminist ideals and traits exhibited by girls of color in public schools across the United States are similar to the sculptures depicted at Kara Walker's sugar exhibit, *Subtlety*. Feminist values exhibited by girls of color can easily be sugar coated and recognized in a complicated manner. Brown and Black girls in the classroom use their silence, experiences, and identity to verbalize their concerns or resist situations revealed at hand. The sugar sculptures that depict Black women and children at Walker's exhibit did not orally verbalize their history, struggles, or experiences. In fact, many of Walker's art sculptures and exhibits are analytical and allow viewers to open a world of imagination and interpretation.

Both the classroom and the *Subtlety* exhibit reminded its audience about the troubled, yet astonishing history of blackness, gender, and sexuality in the United States. It is worth mentioning that while many Black and Brown girls use their language to resist situations and systems that are deeply rooted in capitalism, power, and patriarchal agendas. Many of these girls in the classroom and sculptures featured in the exhibit reveal commonalities worth noting. Stakeholders in the classroom varying from positions (teachers, administration, and school safety personnel) can assert their feelings, embarrassment, and feelings of being “violated” publicly to further fuel an imagination that Black women agency and identity is non-existent.

Black and Brown girls “talking back” remind stakeholders that this form of resistance does not back down from discomfort and consequences.

When patrons feel violated, racial difference is solidified, thereby encouraging the continued imagination of black female sexuality as nonagential and discouraging white

¹⁰ Ibid.,13.

bodies from placing themselves in the scene of critique or harm. It raises the question of how to imagine responses to the piece (and immersion in it) that do not contribute to an abusive epistemology of white ignorance, in which white discomfort registers as abuse because it seems to encroach on black historical realities and feelings.¹¹

In making this statement Musser is implying that white ignorance and discomfort intrudes on the feelings and sentiments of Black and Brown people. Moreover, the *Subtlety* exhibit shows that agency exhibited by Black and Brown girls and women are open for criticism and sometimes spectacle from outsiders. Feminism exhibited by girls of color in school and the racism at Kara Walkers exhibit both show how Black and Brown agency and feminism is up for debate based on the spectators positionality and comfortability with addressing the colonialism, race, gender, and sex in the United States.

As the arguments and insights of this thesis unravel the mentioning of terms like girl, young women, Black, and/or Brown; in essence represents any and every person who identifies as such regardless of their assigned sex at birth. The mentioning of Black and Brown throughout this research symbolizes any person on planet earth who identifies as such. However, the term is primarily used to address any person who does not present as “White” or who has been a victim of being marginalized by white supremacy socially, politically, and/or economically. The decision is left up to you as a reader to make the conscious choice to make sure your chosen identity aligns with the daily and historical struggles of being Black and Brown in America. It is very personal to me that I share the experiences, knowledge, and questions with whoever analyzes this research.

Black and Brown girls who attend public schools across the United States are armored with unique and subtle experiences. Classroom and school disciplinary policies have to be rethought and designed to represent the student voice. Policies in the learning environment should neither

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target nor further stigmatize students' culture, comfort, and/or history. The resistance exhibited in classrooms against these guidelines exemplifies basic feminist ideals in communal spaces. The forms of resistance vary from writing, verbalizing your thoughts aloud, dance, music, and by no surprise-choosing to use silence as a position. The power of language is the foundation to any social or political movement and is crucial to ways in which resistance is promoted and encouraged. Hooks states in *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black*, "Whether writing in diaries (my older sister always read my thoughts and reported to our mother my secrets) or speaking out, clearly I understood early that talking back was a form of conscious rebellion against dominating authority."¹²The refusal to accept orders, demands or pleads from authoritative figures who do not understand intersectionality or the importance of speaking out and against something is feminism. Instead of these Black and Brown girls being scolded and receiving harsh punishments for their resistance to white supremacist and patriarchal power in their schools, they should be acknowledged for the ways in which they challenge and oppose assimilation to sexist and racist operations.

Black Womanhood During Slavery

The exclusion of Black and Brown women and children originates from the displacement and evils of transatlantic slavery in the United States and Caribbean. To illustrate how enslaved women fought to preserve some sense of femininity and identity, I have chosen to explore *Reflections On The Black Woman's Role In The Community of Slaves* by Angela Davis. Davis investigates the Black woman and her role in preserving her community within the institution of slavery. Showing how regardless of the perimeters placed upon the enslaved Black woman. She

¹² bell hooks, *"Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black"* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1989), xi

managed to serve as the matriarch that protected, served, and guided her immediate family and community:

As a matter of necessity, the women of those communities were compelled to define themselves no less than the men- throughout their many acts of resistance. As it will be seen, black women often poisoned the food and set fire to the house of their masters. For those who were also employed as domestics, these particular overt forms of resistance were especially available.¹³

The basis of Davis's argument is that enslaved women resisted and fought boldly alongside men to dismantle a vicious system that preyed upon the Black woman, man, and child. However, Davis contends that despite her active resistance the Black woman's femininity and opposition to colonialism have left her in an eerie position. The layers and versatile roles of the Black woman, in her community and America has left her difficult to unpack and appreciate. Davis has allowed me to consider how resistance exhibited by Black women in the discourse of American history has been neglected.

Sexism and racism plays a role in the way we understand gendered expectations and colonial legacies. The 21st-century classroom has designed itself to uphold colonial beliefs that are extreme and excessive against students of color. Enslaved Black women during the institution of slavery in the United States were not regarded as feminine beings in comparison to their white counterparts. Despite possessing distinct empirical and bodily knowledge in comparison to white women, enslaved Black women were defeminized, dehumanized, and invisible to both patriarchal and white hegemonic structures. Davis' argument about womanhood helps to extrapolate beliefs about Black girlhood in urban education. For the reason being that, almost 400 years post-slavery, the public education system has managed to perpetuate a vicious cycle that surveils and targets

¹³Angela Davis, "Reflections on the Black Woman's Role in the Community of Slaves." *The Massachusetts Review* 13, no. 1/2 (1972): 2–15. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00064246.1971.11431201>.

women of color who are untraditional and “unladylike.” Furthermore, the social construction of this inescapable web about womanhood and femininity which commenced during slavery forces Black girls to straddle the fence between them and the world when, in reality, they will never be accepted.

Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl is an autobiography written by Harriet Jacobs that documents her experience being exploited and haunted by the daily cynical and sinister horrors of slavery in the United States. Jacobs' autobiography is a powerful testimonial about the experience of an enslaved Black woman fighting for the freedom of her children while being a fugitive slave. Jacobs agrees with Davis's central argument about Black femininity being nonexistent during slavery. Jacobs alludes to Black invisibility starting from the Black childhood experience on the plantation. In Jacobs view,

I once saw two beautiful children playing together. One was a fair white child; the other was her slave, and also her sister. When I saw them embracing each other and heard their joyous laughter, I turned away from the lovely sight. She was also very beautiful; but the flowers and sunshine of love were not for her. She drank the cup of sin, and shame, and misery, whereof her persecuted race are compelled to drink.¹⁴

This supports the argument that Black girlhood in the United States and expectations for children of color stem from the racist ideologies of children during slavery. Moreover, this excerpt demonstrates that the innocence and protection of Black girls dim overtime in comparison to white children. The figurative speech of comparing the cup that Black girls are obligated to drink from has a deeper meaning and exchange. The cup has the words and themes of shame, sin, and persecution plastered around it and is forcibly given to Black and Brown girls by white men and

¹⁴ Harriet A. Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (Boston: Thayer & Eldridge, 1861), 29-30.

women. The cup exchange represents the mission of white men and women to enable whiteness and privilege in exchange for capitalist gains and power.

Gatekeepers

Black and Brown girls in learning spaces are surveilled and scrutinized at higher rates than their white peers.¹⁵ In classrooms, girls of all races are pressured to be ladylike, presentable, and docile. However, Black and Brown girls in classrooms is misunderstood and quickly labeled as “talkative, disruptive, or having attitudes.” In April, 2007, a 13 year-old girl in New York City was removed from her school in handcuffs because she wrote the word “Okay” on her desk¹⁶. The public education system and educators fail to realize how negative language used to describe common and typical behaviors of youth is placing women of color at a disadvantage. Nonetheless, this structural barrier in the public education system has led to inequality amongst students and has continued to fuel tensions with students of color and authority in schools. Educators and school personnel fail to realize that the ideologies about the performance of Black girlhood are still exhibited in our classrooms. It exposes the failure of deeply rooted issues of the public education system to understand and include women of color in the definition and framework of femininity, childhood, and behavior.

¹⁵ *Test, Punish and Push out: ‘How ‘Zero Tolerance’ and High-Stakes Testing Funnel Youth into the School-to-Prison Pipeline.’* Justice4all, *Advancement Project*, 2010, 14. <https://www.justice4all.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Test-Punish-Push-Out.pdf>

¹⁶ “Arrest of 13-Year-Old for Writing on Desk Should Be Wake-up Call for City, Nyclu Says.” American Civil Liberties Union, 2007, <https://www.aclu.org/press-releases/arrest-13-year-old-writing-desk-should-be-wake-call-city-nyclu-says>.

The presence of law enforcement and the relationship that many students of color have with the agency revolves around the misuse of authority. Many students in urban cities like New York City have been introduced to policing, surveillance, and prison-like safety protocols since kindergarten. According to the Advancement Project, “In New York City, on any given day, over 93,000 children predominant students of color-have to pass through security stations with metal detectors, bag searches, and pat-downs administered by police personnel before getting to class.”¹⁷ It's important to consider that before entering the classroom and embarking on the journey of learning. Schools with a higher population of students of color are more likely to fall victim to body searches and policing. How are students supposed to be excited about learning when they have rushed to school to make the line for searching and scanning? How are students supposed to be excited about learning when they miss half of the first period because the scanning lines were backed up?

The arguments being made are not designed to depict educators, like myself, or school safety agents who are hired to keep school grounds safe in a negative light. Rather, the call to action is reminding school personnel to acknowledge how students, but more especially students of color, are fighting to co-exist and be respected. How are students of color interpreting your tone and language? What connections do students make while having these encounters? How are these experiences resurfacing trauma? Once students enter the classroom, they are expected to hit a switch and become robotic almost. They are expected to sit up, make eye-contact, be quiet, and obey orders. The frustration of Black girls in classrooms can derive from many things such a sexual

¹⁷ *Test, Punish and Push out: “How 'Zero Tolerance' and High-Stakes Testing Funnel Youth into the School-to-Prison Pipeline.”* Justice4all, *Advancement Project, 2010*, 16. <https://www.justice4all.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Test-Punish-Push-Out.pdf>

abuse, trauma, poverty, and frustration having to co-exist in two identities, both of which they do not understand. What makes the disciplining children of color in the classroom alarming and oppressive is correlated with the hierarchies and systems that pertain to wealth, income, and status. In her book, *Bad Boys: Public Schools in the Making of Black Masculinity*, Ann Arnett Ferguson states, “One of the systemic pressures making for more oppressive, punitive relations for African American children is the fear that white middle-class families will increasingly pull their children out of the public school and send them to private schools.”¹⁸

Students who attend public schools across the United States of America can attest to their relationships with authority and discipline in their school community and neighborhoods. *Problematizing Exclusionary Discipline: Multi-Generational Perspectives of Black Women School Administrators on Suspensions* by Robin Renay Hatchett explores the experiences of Black women from various generations in order to understand student relationships with authority and suspension. One of the interviewees, Mrs. Sky, sheds light on her experience being a Black young woman attending public schools in the deep south. She also elaborates on the experiences of her peers being severely punished for minor infractions. Mrs. Sky stated, “They still didn't think Blacks deserved to be there. So, it was like where do they belong? What can we do? What can they learn?”¹⁹ This statement allows us to understand how residential segregation, racism, and constantly redesigning school models/systems leave children of color at a disadvantage; this happens because of anxiety and fears of white families removing and sending their children to private or less racially diverse public schools.

¹⁸Ann Arnett Ferguson, “Bad Boys: Public Schools in the Making of Black Masculinity.” (The University of Michigan Press, 2000), 43.

¹⁹ Hatchett Robin Renay, "Problematizing Exclusionary Discipline: Multi-Generational Perspectives of Black Women School Administrators on Suspensions.", PhD diss., (Concordia University Chicago, 2019).

During my experience as a student teacher in New York City, I taught at an educational complex that served four high schools. To be very clear, all students, regardless of race, were scanned and expected to go through metal detectors daily. At times I would arrive to work early and walk around the school complex; I am always curious about what my students see or experience around the school zone. I walk around the community and school zones I serve because it allows me to understand the context behind the emotions I see before opening the doors of my classroom. I recollect the looks of defeat and frustration from my students when teaching first period. After watching morning scanning procedures, it all made sense to me now. In the fall right before the pandemic, I was yelled at for walking by the scanning detectors after a fire drill instead of joining the line with students from the grade I taught. The loudness and hostile tone from one school safety agent offended me, but I knew my students were watching. Remaining calm and making it very clear that I was a teacher, the tone and loudness faded. From the awkwardness of this encounter, several of the agents attempted to smile and laugh it off. “OMG you blend right in with the kids!” “Sorry about that—I thought you were one of ‘them.’”

Silenced

In this section, I discuss the roots of Black girlhood adultification. Adultification is a multi-layered concept and framework in relation to the argument of this thesis, it is a form of prejudice and/or racism exhibited by adults onto children of color. *Where and when does this process begin to happen? What are the effects? Who are enablers of adultification? Most importantly, when do we begin to see resistance against these standards of acceptance, gender, and colonialism? A few examples of adultification that happen commonly amongst children of color is telling them not to cry when they are upset or emotionally disturbed. Adult caregivers expect them not to show*

emotion nor voice their feelings, instead they are channeled to take the higher road and move on. The pain, confusion, and construction of Black girlhood in the classroom is evident through the experience of Assata Shakur.

ASSATA: An Autobiography was published in 1987 and written by Shakur to expose the experience of Black women in America. *ASSATA* begins with Shakur's experience with the construction of Black girlhood in the classroom. She shares many significant and gratifying moments as a child, but as she matures, she witnesses and **experiences** the vicious cycle of systemic racism in the United States. Shakur transforms from JoAnne Deborah Byron to Assata Olugbala Shakur. Despite Shakur's complicated legacy in the United States, her autobiography offers a unique insight that illustrates the construction of Black girlhood. The seeds of racism, sexism, classism were all on fertile soil as Assata grew into her understanding of self. And as she stepped in intimate settings such as the classroom, these seeds grew strong and tall and blocked her view of self. Instead, in the North, Shakur was forced to abandon her Black girlhood in order to survive racial and gender expectations of her white, middle-class teacher, to live in a double-conscious state of mind, which molded her into two different about when and where she can demonstrate blackness. Shakur's empirical and bodily knowledge from being a student at P.S. 154 in Queens, New York reveal how school personnel held the double-edged sword that prey on women of color in the classroom.

Shakur was constantly reminded by her family that education is the root to all success and happiness. Shakur, like many children of color, was constantly reminded by family, friends, school staff, and faculty to listen to the teacher and never question or challenge authority—especially at school. In third grade, Shakur noticed that the experience of Northern public schools and administration alluded to progression, modernity, and inclusivity, but her teachers were

disingenuous: Shakur's confidence and hunger for knowledge placed her at a disadvantage amongst her peers and teachers. Shakur stated, "It seemed that every time I mentioned something I learned down South she got mad. She never saw my raised hand. When she couldn't ignore it, like when no one else raised theirs, she would say something like "Oh, do you know they answer, JoAnne?"²⁰

In Shakur's autobiography, she accuses the public schools system in the "progressive north" of silencing her because she was a Black student. Silencing children overall has a very detrimental effect on the acquisition of learning and knowledge.: "Studies have shown that the academic self-esteem of Black girls declines during their adolescence (AAUW, 1992; Smith, E. J., 1982; Basow & Rubin, 1999), and that Black girls who speak out in classrooms receive negative feedback from their teachers, particularly if the teacher is White (Fordham, 1991)."²¹ Shakur's middle-class third grade teacher cultivated a classroom culture that overlooked the presence of Blackness and, evidently, was one of the reasons for her dropping out of school at thirteen years old. Her teacher's racial bias expressed through hidden techniques and strategies and the silencing of Black voices in the classroom were misuses of power and authority. This quote, and the passage that follows it, captures the essence of how young women of color in the classroom are punished for being nonconforming because of their skin color. Furthermore, these experiences are just as detrimental to non-students of color who become spectators to implicit bias about students of color in academic spaces.

²⁰Ibid.,32

²¹ Monique Morris, "Race, Gender, and the School-to-Prison Pipeline: Expanding Our Discussion to Include Black Girls." (New York: African American Policy Forum, 2012), 4.

Assata was obedient and quiet in elementary school, but in the years to come, her patience and tolerance ran low. In the fifth grade, Shakur described her teacher, Mrs. Hoffler, as, “One of those military types...we were told where to sit, how to sit. Whenever somebody got caught talking or doing something she disapproved of, she gave extra homework. David and I were the only ones she saw with our mouths open. The more she rode our backs, the more rebellious I became.”²² The essence of Shakur’s argument is that she clearly understood what was happening to her identity in class. She realized that her presence as a Black student was a problem for Mrs. Hoffler. Moreover, Shakur supports her conclusions by observing the treatment of her classroom peer, David, who was the only Black boy in the class. Mrs. Hoffler's expectations for behavior in her classroom was punitive for all students both Black and White. However, Shakur and David were punished quicker and watched more closely because children of color were adultified and punished quicker than white peers.²³

Historians and educators who examine the learning experiences and culture of Black and Brown children find early origins and correlations to the institution of slavery. According to Professors Michael J. Dumas and Joseph Derrick Nelson, beginning in slavery, “Black boys and girls were imagined as chattel and were often put to work as young as two and three years old. Subjected to much of the same dehumanization suffered by Black adults, Black children were rarely perceived as being worthy of playtime and were severely punished for exhibiting normal child-like behaviors.”²⁴ Towards the end of her autobiography, Shakur reflects on several

²² Ibid.,34

²³ A. Rochaun Meadows-Fernandez, “Why Won't Society Let Black Girls Be Children?” The New York Times, April 17, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/17/parenting/adultification-black-girls.html>.

²⁴ Rebecca Epstein, Jamilia J Blake, Thalia González, “Girlhood Interrupted: The Erasure of Black Girls Childhood.”, (Washington, D.C: Georgetown Law, Center on Poverty and Inequality, 2017), 3.

experiences in the urban classroom. Shakur pointed out that, “Eurocentric our so-called education in amerika is, it staggers my mind. And when I think back to some of those kids who were labeled ‘troublemakers’ and ‘problem students,’ I realize that many of them were unsung heroes who fought to maintain some sense of dignity and self-worth.”²⁵ This emphasizes how "misbehavior" is used as the term to identify behaviors that truly stem from prejudice and racist ideals, but instead, Black and Brown students have been fighting for basic respect and their dignity."

These two excerpts from Shakur's autobiography allude to three important interpretations that we must consider if we are attempting to decolonize institutions that prey on the existence, mannerism, and behavior of children of color. Mrs. Hoffler shows how middle-class teachers who teach in urban communities misunderstand and/or choose to be oblivious to their implicit bias against children of color. According to the US Department of Education Office for Civil Rights (2013), from 2011 to 2012, Black girls in public elementary and secondary schools across the nation were suspended at a rate of 12%, compared to the rate of 2% for white girls. Black girls were suspended more than girls of any other race or ethnicity and more than white and Asian boys.²⁶ Secondly, before we assume that children of color are faulty and possess undesirable traits, we must consider how school policies and standards reject Blackness. Ultimately, I agree with Shakur; before we associate students with the negative labels, we must stop being oblivious to students' performance and “bad” behaviors of attempting to dismantle Eurocentric beliefs about childhood.

²⁵ Ibid., 136.

²⁶ Connie Wun, "Angered: Black and Non-Black Girls of Color at the Intersections of Violence and School Discipline in the United States.", *Race Ethnicity and Education* 21, no. 4 (2016): 423-37, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13613324.2016.1248829>

The qualitative methods discussed in this thesis presented by Davis, Jacobs, and Shakur illustrate the various layers that must be peeled back when trying to make sense of the low graduation rates, high rates of arrest and encounters with law enforcement, and rising suspension and expulsion rates with Brown and Black girls. The beliefs and ideologies regarding behavior, mannerism, and school disciplinary protocols were designed in a way that intentionally places children of color—especially in urban cities—at a disadvantage. Furthermore, educators, school personnel, and restorative justice agencies/ organizations must acknowledge the effects of this system and how it excluded Brown and Black girls.

Davis' text, *Reflections On The Black Woman's Role In The Community Of Slaves*, epitomizes Black femininity and the fight from enslaved women to remain true to self while fighting for family, children, and community. Nonetheless, Davis' central argument embodies how women of color since the plantation era have failed to gain the respect and protection from both white women and patriarchal hierarchies, including but not limited to white and Black men. Harriet Jacobs' experience as a slave exemplifies the argument presented by Davis; Jacobs emphasized that although slavery was brutal to the Black man, it was far more detrimental and punishing to the Black woman.²⁷ Her daughter, Ellen, was promised a life of a child in the North from a white family and close friend of Jacobs. Instead, Ellen was domesticated and adultified, barely knowing how to read and write in comparison to her brother, Benjamin who attended school and learned vocational trades. Lastly, Davis' experience connects with Shakur's autobiography and illustrates

²⁷ Harriet A. Jacobs, "Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl" (Boston: Thayer & Eldridge, 1861), 56.

how the invisibility of Black girls in the classroom led to her growing urge to become a revolutionary who liberated her people from systemic racism.

The sources in this literature review along with my autoethnography show how Brown and Black girls are adultified and misunderstood in academic spaces. Moreover, the sources illustrate a common trend that many of our young people experience before their journey into adulthood. In the classroom, school staff and faculty play a role in the overall success or destruction of students. Brown and Black girls' distrust and lack of faith in authoritative figures begins with their interactions with school personnel as children in the public education system. Although this research area is still evolving and becoming more complex, researchers must continue to conduct interviews and provide some sort of quantitative data that shows the damaging effects of adultification bias against children of color in the classroom. Moreover, the sources in this review along with my personal experiences have pushed me to think about other groups in the public education system that fall prey to harsh retribution. A study conducted from the *Office of Civil Rights of the U.S. The Department of Education* concluded that African American children, students with disabilities, and boys were more likely to be corporally punished in the public schools across the United States.²⁸ School communities replicate the realities of the world. School staff, personnel, and administration must decolonize academic spaces that marginalizes students of color and many other groups. We must be purposeful about redesigning schools and embed love, anti-racist, and relational teaching pedagogy into learning spaces.

²⁸ University of Texas At Austin. "Schools use corporal punishment more on children who are black or have disabilities." *Phys.org*, 2016, <https://phys.org/news/2016-10-schools-corporal-children-black-disabilities.html>

Positive Learning Environments

Within a school community, even the most aware of teachers and administrators are pulled into this funnel to uphold policies that deny Black and Brown girls from exercising their femininity. During my advisory period, I was instructed by my school's administration that every teacher must review the student conduct handbook for important reminders and expectations regarding the school year. As I skimmed the handbook, I discovered several issues including (but not limited to) the following: the array of list, tone, and lack of accessibility for students to process and engage with the handbook in a meaningful way. During my presentation of the handbook, I spoke briefly about the dress code policy. I vividly remember saying no hoods, hats, hooded sweatshirts, tank tops, or scarfs.

Every school year when I review the student conduct handbook, the students' facial expressions always reveal how they are struggling to make sense of policies that target their existence. Many schools have involuntary and voluntary dress code policies and insist these protocols are preparing students for success in the future. With any information that I pass down onto my students, I would urge them to challenge and question everything they hear. Questioning is not disrespectful; it is the conscious choice to resist and critique. It was very silent in the room after I stated the policy regarding dress code. A few of my students expressed valid questions that I or any of my colleagues could not answer. "How are hoods distracting to learning? I wear my hood because that's when I'm most comfortable."

My experience as a public-school student in New York City and Black educator has urged me to think of realistic solutions from educators who work in urban communities. Moreover, this thesis has challenged me to think of present-day issues that exist in public education throughout

the United States. Attempting to discuss one issue that exists that affects children of color is very difficult, because every issue simultaneously marginalizes Black and Brown children. Based on my experiences both as a Black girl attending public schools throughout New York City and now as a public-school teacher, dress code policies that are imposed on children of color limit their expression including of their identity, and ingrain in their mind that their style and comfortability threaten their learning.

Public school conduct codes for clothing are important to me as an educator, particularly when considering the high rates of suspension and detentions in New York City public schools. According to *Chalkbeat New York*, “One report, studying data from 2011-2012, found that Black girls made up more than half of all girls who were disciplined in New York City, even though they made up one-third of all girls. Just 5% of the disciplined girls were white. In a 2017 study, Black girls were found to be more than twice as likely to be suspended in every state—and researchers blamed a bulk of that on racist or sexist ideas educators have about Black girls.”²⁹ Although the issue I presented does not solely pertain to Black and Brown girls in public school, this excerpt referenced from *Chalkbeat New York* shows the ways in which Black and Brown children struggle with positive and successful school experiences because of harsh discipline. When children do not comply with dress code policies, they are often asked to change, receive detention, or can be suspended if there have been multiple infractions. Currently, there is no public data that shows

²⁹ Amin, Reema. “NYC Schools Can't Ban Mini Skirts or 'Distracting' Clothing, but Some Dress Codes Do It Anyway: Study.” *Chalkbeat New York*, Chalkbeat, 23 Jan. 2020, <https://ny.chalkbeat.org/2020/1/22/21121822/nyc-schools-can-t-ban-mini-skirts-or-distracting-clothing-but-some-dress-codes-do-it-anyway-study>.

how different genders and races are being disciplined for violating school dress code policies throughout New York. However, from the data currently available, it is evident that generally, Black and Brown students “in and beyond New York City are more likely to receive harsher punishments for committing the same infractions as students of other races.”³⁰

A study conducted by the National Women’s Law Center in 2017 found that Black girls are five times as likely as white girls to get suspended in schools across the country. Many of these infractions are due to uniform or dress code violations. A school official from Virginia shared with Petula Dvorak that in his school “three girls—all good friends and all different shapes, sizes and colors—wore the same banned outfit to school one day to make their point. And sure enough, the curvier and darker-skinned girls were singled out for a violation; the thin, white girl was not.”³¹ In 2019, Oumou Kaba walked into her Bronx high school and was immediately stopped by school administrators because she was wearing ripped jeans, which violated the school dress code policies. “The school administrator went into the storage room, and she found a piece of cardboard,” Oumou stated that this school administrator cut up pieces of cardboard and covered every piece of her body that they deemed a distraction to the learning environment.” Cardboard is

³⁰Amin, Reema. “NYC Schools Can't Ban Mini Skirts or 'Distracting' Clothing, but Some Dress Codes Do It Anyway: Study.” *Chalkbeat New York*, Chalkbeat, 23 Jan. 2020, <https://ny.chalkbeat.org/2020/1/22/21121822/nyc-schools-can-t-ban-mini-skirts-or-distracting-clothing-but-some-dress-codes-do-it-anyway-study>.

³¹ Petula Dvorak, “Are black girls unfairly targeted for dress-code violations at school? You bet they are.”, *The Washington Post*, 26 April. 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/are-black-girls-unfairly-targeted-for-dress-code-violations-at-school-you-bet-they-are/2018/04/26/623a91dc-4958-11e8-9072-f6d4bc32f223_story.html.

used to transport goods, create cereal boxes, tissues and paper. The material is **not** designed to cover the human body.

Joseph Nelson, a sociology professor at CUNY, Hunter College, offers a solution to this problem through relational teaching pedagogy. Relational pedagogy is theory that places students at the top of the ladder. Social-emotional learning is placed on a pedestal that is used to gear students towards all the ins and outs of the classroom. He conducted a recent study about the significance of forming connections with students and asking them to reflect on their upbringing, values, and struggles. Nelson argues that positive mentor relationships, intellectualism, and dialogue between students and teachers fosters a positive construction of identity. Using this pedagogy can reshape the ways in which we understand how school dress code policies are designed and who they may target along the way.

One of the vital pillars of Nelson's arguments urges educators and stakeholders to allow students to engage in a dialogue. The dialogue between administrators, teachers, and students regarding dress code policies or other concerning issues on any school campus to prioritize the negative experiences, history, and call to action created by the individuals who have to abide by these policies and experiences, which is the student body! Another concept that is crucial to relational pedagogy is pushing for Black and Brown children to engage and channel their intellectualism. In relation to using this pedagogy to rethink school dress codes that target children of color, school staff and facilities should allow students to present academic research along with using their lived experience to provide written and oral testimonies that bring attention to systemic problems in public education.

Aside from following your pacing chart and statewide curriculum and/or standards, a teacher must be transparent and exchange dialogue with their students. It is important to think about how we can make our students excited about the process of learning, we must also reflect on our students' interpretations of their classroom teachers. Teachers must ask themselves reflective questions like: “In what ways are your students connected or relate to your experiences, struggles, and identity? What impact can relational teaching and embedding love into your craft have on students in urban classrooms? And why might students need to sense their teacher's vulnerability about relevant matters?” The role of a classroom is not limited to the scope of academic instruction. Rather, it is a loaded role with many duties that not only fosters intellectual growth but also heals and restores pain and trauma amongst our students. A teacher cannot teach anyone if they fail to establish or foster a bond without force or pressure. Nelson states:

Establishing common ground acknowledges similar interests and talents among boys and their schoolteachers. Boys’ learning relationships with teachers evolved at school through shared participation in activities of common interest; appreciation of identical traits, as well as social and academic experiences (e.g., race and ethnicity, academic struggles, socio-economic background); and here too, when professionally appropriate, the relationship was enhanced when teachers exhibited a willingness to be vulnerable (e.g., express sadness), and disclose relevant matters in their personal lives to engage boys relationally toward a learning goal.³²

I chose to use this excerpt from Nelson’s study, *Relational Teaching With Black Boys: Strategies for Learning at a Single-Sex Middle School for Boys of Color*, because Nelson emphasizes not only the importance of establishing rapport and dialogue with students of color, but he explores the

³² Nelson Joseph Derrick. “Relational Teaching with Black Boys: Strategies for Learning at a Single-Sex Middle School for Boys of Color.” *Teachers College Record: The Voice of Scholarship in Education* 118, no. 6 (2016):19. <https://doi.org/10.1177/016146811611800608>.

importance of two concepts: willingness and vulnerability. Educators must use the strategies and theories from educational preparation programs, but they must also remember transparency, dialogue, and vulnerability. In simpler terms, in order to accommodate for our students and revivify Black imagination amongst Black and Brown children, educators must build a culture of transparency and dialogue around schooling, policies, and feelings of discomfort. Secondly, students are reminded that learning spaces embody multiculturalism, equity, and respect. However, their cultural attire and fashion are associated with disturbance and are misunderstood to be unsuitable for learning. The illusion that educational institutions are progressive and are grounded on student voices is flawed.

What messages are school administrators sending to school communities when they decide to cover a Black child's body? How does this embarrassment and damage affect a young woman growing into her identity and self-expression? By no surprise Oumou was later suspended for refusing to walk around her school campus and attend classes wearing taped cardboard pieces to her body. Removing children from learning, literature, and collaborating with their peers because of a dress code violation is excessive and embodies Eurocentric views on what and who is proper, suitable, and who does not belong.

The broad implication and underlying influences of these disparities measures negatively shape the identity and experience of Black and Brown girls who attend public schools across the United States. The practice of taking children out of the classroom due to suspension or detention, specifically Brown and Black children, reveals the implicit bias against communities of color and the dismissal of Black learning. The message of removing a child from a learning community

unveils the message that this student does not belong simply because of their looks. White supremacy will continue in America because forthcoming generations have been exposed to the same detrimental behaviors that are ingrained in the dark history—of how African American and Indigenous people have been outcasted and treated like second-class citizens because of their appearance.

Secondly, conduct policies regarding dress code violations that result in suspension and detention are assembling children of color for the American carceral system. The issue of dress code violation throughout educational institutions reveals the complicity of the middle-class who exercise privilege, autonomy, and preserve hegemonic structures. Children across the United States should not be reprimanded for self-expression especially when it does not embody hate or avenge on anyone's culture and history. Dress code policies should not be designed to prey on students who do not follow mainstream beliefs of perception and acceptance. Black and Brown girls should not be castigated and made examples out of because of their expression, skin color, body, shape, or culture.

Final Remarks

The 1969 Supreme Court Ruling, *Tinker v. Des Moines* relates to the overarching issue of dress code policies in educational institutions. The ruling of this case claims that students have the right to expression and free speech, yet the Supreme Court insists that school districts have the right to design policies based on the communities they serve. The Supreme Court needs to revisit the case and provide more guidance about the constitutionality of schools creating dress code policies that evidently prevent the expression of students. Nonetheless, truly examine the ways in

which dress codes policies by design target the customs and identity of children, specifically children of color.

Public school institutions across the United States should strive to design a more inclusive dress code policy that is fair for students' cultural identity. Inspired by Nelson, perhaps schools should ask students to create a dress code policy and argue as to why these dress codes are going to support their learning, success, and identity formation. Instead of prohibiting students from wearing headscarf or ripped jeans, school staff and administrators should truly dig deep to find out the deeper meaning and the importance of these cultural markers to the communities they serve. Dress code policies should be designed to not only accommodate cisgender students but non-conforming student as well who are present in these educational spaces. For example, no data and/or research concretely proves that banning hoodies in classrooms creates a more productive learning environment. Hoodies do not stop or prohibit a student from learning. In fact, I would argue that hoodies serve as a community staple and attestation of individuality, resistance, and comfort.

A possible pitfall that educators and parents can anticipate is school deputies and administrators believing that social, political, and economic mobility can only be attained if the institution models the core values of white college preparatory schools. In simpler terms, schools that have a student composition that primarily serves Black and Brown children must redesign their educational, behavior, and dress code policies to not model white educational institutions. Children who refuse to be complicit suffer from the labels of being deemed as problematic and filled with "bad" attitudes. The educational philosophies that are carried by teachers,

administrators, and even parents solely associate whiteness and Eurocentric models of cleanliness and knowledge as progress. Educators, parents, and community members must resist white hegemonic structures that shatter Black identity, expression, and community. How can the Black imagination come to fruition if schools that serve Black and Brown children model the norms and models of oppressors?

bell hooks thanks Miss Annie Mae Moore for turning her around and getting her straight in the avenues that she addressed throughout her collection of essays, books, and text. hooks was introduced to a learning community that valued the experience of Black and Brown girls growing up in the rural South. She argues that in order to create revolutionary feminists who resist the status quo, patriarchy, and oppression educators must do **three** important things. In order to have a revolutionary feminist pedagogy, educators must:

1. Focus on the teacher-student relationship and identify both students and teachers as power holders regardless of the subject matter or situation.
2. Work to allow students to “exercise and assert power in the feminist classroom.”³³
3. Transform the classroom environment to diminish absolute power and domination.

Secondly, educators should work to “Dispel the notion that our experience is not a “real world” experience.”³⁴ Lastly, the classroom should transform into a space that molds students into critical thinkers and have them believe and practice that! “For students who are afraid to speak (especially students from oppressed and exploited groups). The revolutionary hope that I bring to the classroom is that it will become a space where they can come to voice.”³⁵

³³ hooks, 51.

³⁴ Ibid., 51.

³⁵ hooks, 53.

Healing, unlearning, and the application of theories and buzzwords that are plastered throughout school mission statements, murals, and school websites must be put into effect. As a Black educator teaching in New York City, I too had to go through these three phases. I am on a journey to relearn and remove the chains of misconceptions that I held about the teaching profession. Both of my lived experiences from the perspective behind the teacher's desk and once as a student, have constantly reminded me to stop thinking in a complicit and deficit mindstate. Educators must remove this savior complex and listen to testimonies of the permanence of racism, sexism, and classism in America; and its effects on students, their families, and communities.

Teachers are not necessarily exposing students to skills that they do not already possess. Instead, it is our duty as educators to inspire and highlight the unique abilities and experiences of our students and the communities we serve. Even if that entails students speaking out against policies that crush and diminish their clothing expression, customs, or values. The classroom should be a space where we bring in “real world” issues—debate and problem solve. We will continue to fail students if we further fuel this culture of the “real world” that begins when you graduate or leave class. The “real world” is happening all throughout the school building and, most importantly, when students leave their school community and travel back to their neighborhoods. Classrooms should be places where students can heal, unlearn biased behaviors or outdated norms that promote conformity instead of inclusivity, and exchange knowledge.

School communities replicate the realities of the world. School staff and faculty must decolonize academic spaces that marginalize students of color and many other groups. We must be purposeful about redesigning schools and embed love, allowing resistance, the emergence of

feminism, and relational teaching pedagogy into learning spaces. The language, style, tone, voice, expression, and customs of Black and Brown girls has yet to be unpacked and addressed in the public-school education system. Research, interviews, and social media platforms are resurfacing the need and importance to understand our young girls in educational spaces, but a lot still has to be done. As Nelson, hooks, and Shakur suggested, in order for liberatory feminism to flourish and remain a momentous force, school staff and faculty should strive to create learning environments that are reflective, non-impressionistic, and **hold adults and students to the same expectations and standards.**

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