

## “I See Trayvon Martin”: What Teachers Can Learn from the Tragic Death of a Young Black Male

Bettina L. Love

Published online: 31 August 2013  
© Springer Science+Business Media New York 2013

**Abstract** The goal of this article is to examine the racially hostile environment of U.S. public schooling towards Black males. Drawing on the work of Foucault (Discipline and punish. The birth of the prison, Penguin Books, London, 1977; Michel Foucault: beyond structuralism and hermeneutics, The Harvester Press, Brighton, 1982) regarding the construction of society’s power relations and Bourdieu’s (Power and ideology in education, Oxford University Press, New York, 1977; Handbook of theory and research for the sociology of education. Greenwood Press, New York, 1986; The logic of practice. Polity Press, Cambridge, 1990) work concerning how beliefs are established, this article demonstrates how power operates within schools alongside racism, racial profiling, and gender stereotypes to criminalize Black males. Additionally, the utilization of the theoretical lenses of populational reasoning (Popkewitz in Struggling for the soul: the politics of schooling and the construction of the teacher, Teachers College Press, New York, 1998), conceptual narrative (Somers and Gibson in Social theory and the politics of identity, Blackwell, Cambridge, 1994), and critical race theory (Delgado and Stefancic 2001) links the common narrative and the cultural memory of Black males to the death of Trayvon Martin and the treatment of Black males in schools.

**Keywords** Black males · Racism · Teacher · Education · Hip Hop

---

B. L. Love (✉)  
Department of Educational Theory and Practice, University of Georgia, 604F Aderhold Hall,  
Athens, GA 30602, USA  
e-mail: Blove@uga.edu

## Introduction

The true focus of revolutionary change is never merely the oppressive situations which we seek to escape, but that piece of the oppressor which is planted deep within each of us.

– Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, pg. 123

Lorde's words quoted above serve to ground this work in an examination of the racism and racial profiling that broadly takes place in the United States public school system. Through my critique, I will also address those same issues on a personal level as an educator—starting with the oppressor that is deeply planted within me. Therefore, I do not exclude myself from this analysis because I cannot ignore the role I play as a former elementary school teacher and now a teacher-educator who works with, theorizes about, and researches Black males. That said, the purpose of this work is to unpack the images of Black males in U.S. culture that make it possible for too many teachers to see some of their Black male students as threatening, arrogant, disdainful of authority, and uncontrollable except by force or removal. The backdrop for my analysis is the death of 17-year old Trayvon Martin, who was shot and killed by George Zimmerman, a self-appointed neighborhood watch captain, on February 26, 2012 in Sanford, Florida. Martin was unarmed. He was also Black. Martin was walking home carrying a bag of skittles, a cell phone, an ice tea, and wearing a hoodie. Specifically, the night of the shooting, Zimmerman told a 9-1-1 dispatcher, “[t]his guy looks like he is up to no good or he is on drugs or something.” The dispatcher told Zimmerman not to follow Martin and that police were on their way to investigate his claim. By the time the police arrived, Martin was dead. Zimmerman would later tell police that Martin attacked him and that he shot the teen in self-defense. It took 46 days for Zimmerman to be arrested due to Florida's Stand-Your-Ground law.<sup>1</sup> Martin's death received national and international attention because of public uproar and reached a frenzy through social media. Then on July 13, 2013, a year and a half after the shooting, Zimmerman was found not guilty of all charges against him for the death of Martin based on self-defense. Although the story is seemingly at an end, the turmoil of Martin's murder and Zimmerman's trial have served as a means of publicly reviving the long-standing racial divide in the U.S.

For me, one of the larger questions arising from Martin's death is how educators can explore their own race and gender perceptions to confront the daily classroom injustices toward young Black males. That statement may seem an overreach, but the plight of some Black males who attend U.S. public schools is grim, as the data provided in this article will illustrate. Simply stated, numbers tell a story and the rate at which some Blacks males are being expelled from schools and thrown into juvenile detention centers is horrendous. For example, on October 24, 2012, the

---

<sup>1</sup> “A person who is not engaged in an unlawful activity and who is attacked in any other place where he or she has a right to be has no duty to retreat and has the right to stand his or her ground and meet force with force, including deadly force if he or she reasonably believes it is necessary to do so to prevent death or great bodily harm to himself or herself or another or to prevent the commission of a forcible felony” [Florida Statute 776.013(3)]. Martin was not involved in any criminal activity the night of the shooting.

U.S. Department of Justice sued the state of Mississippi over alleged violations of children's rights, particularly Black children. The lawsuit alleges that police officers routinely arrest students suspended from school without just cause, which puts youth in the criminal justice system for minor infractions or nothing at all.

Therefore, the purpose of this article is not to overgeneralize all teachers and their classroom operations, but to explore the school experiences of some Black males in U.S. public schools and begin to ask serious questions concerning educators' participation in the criminalizing of Black males. Teachers of all backgrounds, in the face of total honesty with one's self, have prejudged Black males. While not all pre-judgments lead to the tragic death of a 17-year-old, negative preconceptions based on the way a student walks, talks, and articulates their culture can be viewed through a deficient lens. Hip Hop swag serves as the perfect example.<sup>2</sup> It is more than just a way of body movement and projections of coolness, it is an epistemological aim to engage others with confidence, likability, charm, cleverness, and resolve. Hip Hop swag is standing one's ground. Someone outside the Hip Hop culture with limited understanding of what swag looks, sounds, and feels like could mistake it for arrogance or a dismissal of authority. In that way, unpacking teachers' perceptions of Black males is critical to reforming education and lifting the dark cloud over Black males in schools.

After decades of U.S. educational reform efforts, Black students still underachieve at a disproportionate rate compared to their White counterparts (National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) 2009, 2010). Howard (2001) argues that one factor contributing to that underachievement is the "cultural incongruence between [Black] students and their teachers" (p. 181). Many Black students enter U.S. classrooms where the cultural mismatch between them and their teacher is so wide that it undermines student learning (Howard 2001). Furthermore, negative social constructs regarding Black males are ubiquitous to American life and, therefore, reach every corner of our schools. Too often, teachers make judgments concerning Black male students having nothing to do with their intellectual ability and everything to do with stereotypes, assumptions, and fear.

Thus, the purpose of this essay is to examine the racially hostile environment of U.S. public schooling towards Black males. Drawing on the work of Foucault (1977, 1982) regarding the construction of society's power relations and Bourdieu's (1977, 1986, 1990) work concerning how beliefs are established and then consciously or unconsciously normalized, this article demonstrates how power operates within schools alongside racism, racial profiling, and gender stereotypes. The theoretical lenses of populational reasoning (Popkewitz 1998), conceptual narrative (Somers and Gibson 1994) and critical race theory (Delgado and Stefancic 2001; Dixson and Rousseau 2006) serve to link the common narrative and cultural memory of Black males to the death of Martin, the treatment of Black males in schools, and the larger issues that underpin injustices tied to one's performance of gender and race. Moreover, research has shown that Black males are statistically more likely to be

---

<sup>2</sup> Hip Hop is the music and culture that reflects the social, political, and economic realities of urban youth expressed through rap, dance, art, deejaying, and the knowledge of knowing one's community (Love 2013a, b).

absent from school, drop out, or have low academic achievement (Eckholm 2006; Garibaldi 1992; Mincy 2006). Also, Black males more than any other group are suspended and expelled from school (Ladson-Billings 2011; Polite and Davis 1999). I therefore use this space to argue that the racial suspicions with which Zimmerman pursued Martin on the night of his death are the same racial suspicions that kill Blacks males' aspirations and spirits because of their skin color, dress, speech, and posturing.

### **“I am Trayvon Martin:” Power and Privilege**

One afternoon, a White female student in my master's level education class observed that she felt uncomfortable chanting, “I am Trayvon Martin” at a local rally in Atlanta, GA, after his death. At the time I did not know how to respond to her statement because she was right. She could not shout, “I am Trayvon Martin” because she had never been the victim of racial profiling, or thought to be intellectually inferior or violent simply because of her skin color and gender. She was a White female who recognized the existence of her privilege and that it created a life narrative that aligned more with Zimmerman than Trayvon. In other words, this particular student was discussing power and how power is exercised, which leads to certain actions and power relations within U.S. society (Foucault 1982). According to Foucault (1982): “Power relations are rooted deep in the social nexus, not reconstituted ‘above’ society as a supplementary structure whose radical effacement one could perhaps dream of. In any case, to live in a society is to live in such a way that action upon other actions is possible—and in fact ongoing. A society without power relations can only be an abstraction” (p. 208).

Drawing on Foucault's words, my student did not create the privileges from which she benefits because of her skin color nor did she construct the racial discourse surrounding Black males. These conditions that are rooted in the fabric of American society, to which we are all exposed, and from which we derive some benefit, can lead to interpretations of domination. Foucault (1982) adds “[e]qually, the relationship between adversaries in society may, at every moment, give place to the putting into operation of mechanisms of power” (208). Applying Foucault's assertion to the very nature of traditional classroom dynamics is important to understanding how teachers comprehend their position of power over students who they may view as adversaries because of race or gender, or both. However, before we explore issues of power, we must call attention to the ways we have been conditioned to see power and privilege. For this analysis, I employ the work of Bourdieu. While I acknowledge that Foucault and Bourdieu have not always occupied the same theoretical landscape, I find both theorists useful in describing how power operates in particular social contexts. Foucault provides an analytic language that helps us to recognize the pervasiveness of power throughout U.S. society, while Bourdieu's work helps to name the ways that power circulates in particular micro-contexts. Thus, drawing on Bourdieu (1977), power is a result of our inscribed dispositions that guide our thinking. Moreover, power and privilege are created culturally, socially, and symbolically (Bourdieu 1977).

That force which I call power, Bourdieu terms “habitus” (1977, 1986, 1990), and describes it as comprised of a complex system:

Systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structured structures, that is, as principles which generate and organize practices and representations that can be objectively adapted to their outcomes without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary in order to attain them. Objectively ‘regulated’ and ‘regular’ without being any way the product of obedience to rules, they can be collectively orchestrated without being the product of the organizing action of a conductor (Bourdieu 1990, p. 53).

Habitus provides a framework for explaining and understanding how beliefs are established and then consciously or unconsciously normalized. However, it is important to note that one’s habitus is not a “conceptual straight-jacket” (Giroux 1992, p. 7) that provides no space for human agency (Harker 1984). In other words, people can change. Harker argues that through innovative, dynamic teaching, and the creation of new knowledge, teachers can engage in social change. Such an assertion is built on the fundamental point that schools are places where transformative teaching can and is taking place. This form of teaching will change students and teachers’ worldviews because education is a “cultural practice” (Harker) and the creation of power and oppression is cultural.

While I fully agree with Harker (1984), I am not so confident that transformative public schooling can exist in the current climate of U.S. schools when students are regularly prepared for standardized tests in schools that resemble prisons. The current state of U.S. education—especially urban education—reproduces social inequalities by only recognizing and validating mainstream cultural capital, which perpetuates existing social patterns (Bourdieu 1977). People outside the mainstream or individuals with Hip Hop swag are seen as lower class or lacking cultural capital. Drawing on Foucault’s works when examining U.S. schools, discipline and punishment, especially for Black males, are an inherent component of the structure of schooling created to control Black male bodies. Thereby schools function as controlled and structured spaces where deviant behavior, which is classified subjectively based on one’s positionality, is fundamental to the dynamics of classroom power. In Foucault’s (1977) groundbreaking work, *Discipline and Punishment*, he defines three major tenants of disciplinary power, which can be applied to Martin’s death, as well as the treatment of millions of Black males in schools today: surveillance, normalization of judgments, and examination.

Applying Foucault’s three principles to urban schooling and notions of teachers’ beliefs that rest on biases, it is simple to understand why most urban students attend schools where they are under surveillance every day via metal detectors, police officers, and tracking devices hung around their necks. For example, in October of 2012, *The New York Times* reported that San Antonio’s Northside Independent School District was tracking students’ whereabouts using radio frequency identification name tags because students’ daily enrollment was tied to school finance (Chammah and Swartsell 2012). These students are not seen as human beings, but objects. Moreover, according to that district’s website, there are 99,372 students and

68.5 percent (68.5 %) of the student body are Hispanic. Here, as in many other public schools around the country, Brown bodies are being policed because of normalized judgments surrounding race and ethnicity. Additionally, a large majority of the tragic mass school shootings in the U.S. occur in suburban schools (e.g., 1999, Columbine High, Littleton, CO, USA; 1999, Heritage High, Conyers, GA, USA; 2012, Chardon High School, Chardon, OH), but metal detectors are overwhelmingly placed in urban schools. Thus, the placement of school surveillance equipment is not based on actual facts, but school officials' perceptions of who is and who is not violent, which are ultimately based on racial stereotypes, not criminal justice data. According to Human Rights Watch (2009), people of color in the U.S. are no more likely to sell or use drugs than their White counterparts, but have higher rates of arrest. Blacks make up 14 percent (14 %) of the drug users, but represent 37 percent (37 %) of those arrested for drug offenses.

Finally, examination—the processes of marking an individual as an object—occurs most prevalently when students are taught to the test and filled with information that is “motionless, static, compartmentalized, and predictable” (Freire 1993, p. 28). When students are “filled” with information that is “detached from reality” (Freire 1993, p. 28), they are taught as objects rather than humans with potential for social change. This misguided teaching model that Freire calls the “banking model” also implies that students lack creativity and knowledge beyond the test. More importantly, it implies that students have no prior knowledge, which in turn places the teacher as the authority in the classroom on all things—even the students' culture. Therefore, the dreams, hopes, and futures of Black male students are tied to their teachers' perceptions. Thus, perception is a fundamental aspect of student success, and ultimately stretches beyond the classroom. In that way, perception also played a huge role in Martin's death. Martin represents Black boys throughout U.S. public schooling who are viewed as criminals, put under school surveillance, and denied an education because of America's obsession with disciplinary power over Black male bodies.

The points argued in the latter section of this article detail why the death of Martin is important to education for a number of reasons—though there are far more that would frankly overcrowd the scope of this paper. My goal is to link his death to the larger racial and gender problems within U.S. public schools. For example, in 2012, a teacher in the state of Georgia created a math worksheet that was racially inflammatory—asking students to count how many beatings Fredrick Douglas suffered if he got one beating per day for a week. In 2011, a teacher in the state of Ohio held a slave auction and asked her Black male student to stand on the pretend auction block and open his mouth for students to see if he was healthy enough to buy.<sup>3</sup> As these instances demonstrate, Black males across the country are enduring their teachers' cultural ignorance and insensitivity all too frequently. Furthermore, while national media may cover the most outlandish of these events as episodic cases of racism or cultural insensitivity, they are a daily occurrence that function

<sup>3</sup> For further reading on the Georgia math worksheet, see [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/01/08/examples-of-slavery-in-school-worksheet\\_n\\_1192512.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/01/08/examples-of-slavery-in-school-worksheet_n_1192512.html). For further reading on the Ohio slave auction story, see <http://newsone.com/1071875/niko-burton-mock-slave-auctio/>.

both explicitly and implicitly to culturally exclude, and sometimes physically remove, Black males from education.

## Theoretical Frameworks

Building on the work of Foucault and Bourdieu, this article draws from the theoretical lenses of populational reasoning (Popkewitz 1998), conceptual narrative (Somers and Gibson 1994), and critical race theory (Delgado and Stefancic 2001; Dixson and Rousseau 2006) to explore the issues that underpin the criminalization of Black males within U.S. public schools.

Popkewitz (1998) stated that, “populational reasoning constructs our understanding of the way children learn, of school achievement, and the social and psychological attributes presumed to cause school failure” (p. 26). Statistical measurements and qualitative indicators that define a particular group of people underprop this method of reasoning. Brown (2011) argues that, “the African American male has become a knowable and fixed entity through social science and educational discourses” (p. 2050). For example, there is a vast body of literature surrounding Black males that highlight their underachievement, drop out, suspension, and expulsion rates (Brown 2011; Garibaldi 1992; Harry and Anderson 1994; Kunjufu 1985; Young 2004). The popular image of Black males is driven by statistical data, which suggests that Black males are not only “in crisis,” but are also America’s problem child. Simply put, populational reasoning through social science research and popular discourses facilitates the normalization of Black males as a physical threat to society’s social order, schooling included (Brown 2011). It would be naïve to think that the mental framing fixed within the American ethos concerning Black males stops at the steps of the schoolhouse.

The theory of conceptual narrative argues that discourse transcends empirical data to shape that cultural memory or common-sense understanding of a phenomenon or group of individuals, the auspices through which much social science research is conducted (Brown 2011). Educational research that does not pathologize Black males is underdeveloped in that much of the educational research surrounding Black males proliferates negative discourses, rather than dispel them. The permanence of racism in American society explains both populational reasoning and conceptual narrative because racial oppression and racism are as American as apple pie.

Lastly, critical race theory (CRT) rests on the fundamental assertion that racism is a “permanent and indestructible” part of society (Bell 1992, p. x). Matsuda (1991) defined CRT as:

...the work of progressive legal scholars of color who are attempting to develop a jurisprudence that accounts for the role of racism in American law and that works toward the elimination of racism as part of a larger goal of eliminating all forms of subordination. (p. 1331)

Although CRT grew from legal scholarship, it has been utilized to critique social science literature (Dixson and Rousseau 2006), the limitations of multicultural

education (Ladson-Billings and Tate 1995), and inequity in schooling practices (Oakes 1985). CRT also provides a lens to examine education's liberal notions of colorblindness and how structural concepts rooted in racism create social outcomes (Delgado and Stefancic 2001). CRT is an important analytic framework for examining racism and education because it offers a critical perspective that illuminates education as a place that is thought of as egalitarian, but rooted in notions of power, privilege, and the racial politics of schooling.

These three frameworks discussed above are important to examining how Black males are viewed, treated, and educated in U.S. public schooling. Each one illuminates how Black males are overwhelmingly viewed as incompatible to schooling. The frameworks of populational reasoning and conceptual narrative illustrate how America's cultural memory of Black males is based on unsupported research rooted in myths regarding the intellectual abilities of Black males. CRT reveals how teachers' color-blind or race-neutral views allow them to insist that racism does not exist and that Black males have an equal chance to succeed as their White male counterparts. When merged, these frameworks highlight how pervasive and complex the day-to-day realities of racism are for Black males in U.S. schools.

### **Li'l Black Boys Become Black Brutes**

While most Americans agree on the basic facts of the tragedy surrounding Martin's death, the nation is racially divided in its interpretation of those facts. According to a Washington Post-ABC News poll (April, 2012) taken a few days following the death of Martin eight (8) of 10 Blacks believed that Martin's killing was unjustified, compared to just 38 % of Whites (Thompson and Cohen 2012). Martin's death has ignited national conversations, some more productive than others, concerning the permanence of racism and racial profiling in America, racial disparities in the criminal justice system, proliferation of guns in U.S. society, and America's persistent and well-organized assault of Black and Brown bodies, especially those that are male.

Teacher educators across the U.S. and abroad, including myself, are utilizing this incident as a powerful teachable moment to engage in conversations with students. Through the theoretical frameworks of critical pedagogy, critical literacy, and CRT, we are opening up discussions about racism, White supremacy, racial inequality, and privilege (Brockenbrough 2012). Most educators that I have encountered are outraged about the killing of Martin and believe Zimmerman's actions were fueled by racism, although most tellingly stop short of examining and linking Zimmerman's perceptions to teachers themselves. Hence, the act of racism solely rests with Zimmerman and his perceptions of Martin that night of the shooting. The ways in which Black males are profiled everyday in schools because of their skin color are never discussed or recognized. In my experience, it is common for educators, regardless of their race, gender, or ethnicity, to critique societal and institutional injustices; however, they engage in this critique independent of their own teaching beliefs, attitudes, or values that are rooted in America's mythmaking machine

concerning race and Black masculinity. Furthermore, teachers' beliefs, conscious or unconscious, inform their pedagogical practices and behavior (King 1991).

Thus, teachers' beliefs function as a set of understood rules, explicit or not, which informs students about their educational, social, and cultural position within schooling and society (Love 2013a, b). A number of studies have concluded that pre-service and in-service teachers hold negative views of students of color (Good and Brophy 1997; Hollins and Torres Guzman 2005; Madon et al. 1997; Rosenthal and Jacobson 1968). The socially constructed racial and gender identity of Black males has permanently cast them as violent criminals, too aggressive to educate. According to Collins (2004), Black masculinity is pitted in narrow terms, in that, "manhood matches up to the White normality/Black deviancy framework that accompanies racism" (p. 187). The commodified and seductive space of Black popular culture is where much of the homogenous and monolithic stereotyping of Black males is created, disseminated, and legitimized (Hall 1983). Currently, Hip Hop music and culture is the primary tool for the distortion of hyper Black masculinity. The commercialization of Hip Hop is one of the primary spaces where Black masculinity is constructed and rooted in the Eurocentric psyche and imagination (Love 2010; West 2001), in that the hegemonic images disseminated by rap music are rooted in centuries of Black males being cast as Black brutes.

The 1915 film *The Birth of a Nation* is the quintessential example of the historical mythmaking of popular culture. In that film, the character of the Black brute was subhuman, barbaric, and full of Black rage (Bogle 2001). The movie glorified the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) by distorting events after the Civil War. By portraying Blacks as attempting to dominate Southern Whites during the Reconstruction, the KKK became the White man's only savior from Black domination and protection from the raping of White women by Black males. The film was the first motion picture to be shown at the White House (Stokes 2007). Thomas Dixon, who wrote the novel *The Clansmen*, which is the basis for *The Birth of a Nation*, stated that the purpose of the film "was to revolutionize Northern audiences that would transform every man into a Southern partisan for life" (quoted in Wormser 2004, p. 121). Dixon's comments came after a White man killed a Black teenager after viewing the movie (Wormser). According to Wallace (2003), *The Birth of a Nation* inscribed, endorsed, and provided the discourse and aesthetics for Jim Crow laws and dominant racial ideologies. Jim Crow laws furthered the myth that Black males were violent rapists and thieves. Furthermore, Jim Crow laws restricted the physical movement of Black people, ensuring that Blacks could not enter particular public spaces, schools, universities, and neighborhoods. Jim Crow maintained whiteness as the standard for citizenship (Alexander 2012).

Although the White supremacy images and discourse constructed by *The Birth of a Nation* are almost 100 years old, these racial constructions are still prevalent today and are fundamental to America's conceptual narrative concerning Black males as criminals inside and outside of school walls. For example, fast-forward to 2013, where "[t]oday's pimped out street-wise urbanly clad gangsta brotha is linked historically to the brute black buck of slave economy" (Richardson 2007, p. 770). This narrative surrounding Black males is at the crux of Zimmerman's racial profiling that led to Martin's death. This same narrative also creates the suspicions

that cause many educators to refer their male Black students to special education, suspension, and expulsion.

Ladson-Billings (2011) suggests that the symbolic message attached to young Black males in popular culture puts society in a love–hate relationship with African American males. Black males are marketed as seductive (e.g., Denzel Washington and P. Diddy) and intriguing (e.g., Jay-Z and LeBron James), but are also feared (Ladson-Billings). As Black boys reach school age, they are no longer seen as “cute,” but are viewed as “men” with criminal capabilities (Ladson-Billings). Schools respond to this fear by attempting to increase their control over Black males bodies. In this way, schools begin to mimic prison with dress codes (e.g., no hoodies allowed), limiting or prohibiting social interaction between students in hallways and cafeterias, removing “disruptive” students from classrooms in handcuffs, using Tasers on elementary school students, and regulating students’ recess or free time in a manner reminiscent of a prison yard. These tactics are illustrated by news stories, such as the reporting in Milledgeville, Georgia of a six-year-old elementary school student who was handcuffed and arrested after she allegedly threw a tantrum (Clausing 2012). By way of further example, in San Diego, California, a police officer used a Taser on a 6-year-old boy who allegedly resisted arrest after allegedly stealing school-owned iPods (Mencken 2012). By considering teacher beliefs, the out-of-school suspension rates of Black males, “zero tolerance” school discipline policies, the overrepresentation of Black males in special education, and the school-to-prison pipeline, my intent is to link the everyday assault on Black males in public schools to Martin’s death—a young man who embodied the swag of Hip Hop, wore the Hip Hop uniform (i.e., hoodie), and was targeted because of how he expressed his culture. The suspicions that led to the killing of Martin, rooted in provocative stereotypes about Black males, are the same as those that criminalize Black male students. Black male students enter school every day wearing, articulating, and celebrating their Hip Hop cultural belonging, and for that they are labeled as unteachable, threatening, and criminal.

### **Teacher Beliefs’, Objects, and Spirit Murdering**

An examination of research concerning teacher beliefs’ is disheartening. Research clearly illustrates that Black males’ performance of masculinity is misunderstood by teachers, and therefore targeted as oppositional. Black boys are seen as defiant and intimidating by White middle-class teachers (Majors et al. 1994; Majors and Mancini Billson 1992). Irvine’s (1990) findings show that teachers largely believe that Black students have less academic potential than White students. When researchers interviewed pre-service teachers regarding their perceptions of students’ grade point averages in terms of race, they found that most teachers assumed that Black students had lower GPAs than their White counterparts (Richman et al. 1997). Villegas (2007) contends, “Black students tend to receive less attention, less encouragement, less praise, less time to respond, less eye-contact, and more verbal and nonverbal criticism (especially Black boys)” (p. 375). The popular and debasing narrative of Black males as brutes incites fear in teachers. Teachers’

racism extends to the racial profiling of Black males placed in special education. Teachers make their special education referrals based on subjective and unreliable measures, such as whether they believe a student is “teachable” or non-threatening (Harry and Anderson 1994; Hale 1982; Hilliard 1990; Kunjufu 1985). Given teachers’ perceptions of them as threatening, inevitably Black boys represent a large number of those referred for removal from the general education environment and funneled instead into labels such as “mentally challenged,” “emotionally disturbed,” and “learning disabled.”

Another routine used to eject Black boys from public schooling is the zero-tolerance policy. Such policies place police officers and metal detectors in schools, which increase the “likelihood of adolescent arrest, loss of school time from schooling, and involvement with the criminal justice system” (Fine and Ruglis 2009, p. 20). In short, this Draconian practice expedites the removal of Black bodies from classrooms. Black males make up 8.6 % of the public school enrollment, yet represent 22 % of expulsions and 23 % of suspensions (Ladson-Billings 2011). However, these numbers do not correlate to statistically greater levels of violence. Black students are three-and-a-half times more likely to be expelled than their White peers for the same or lesser offensive infractions (Adams et al. 2012). Thus, Black males experience prison-like conditions at school and are subsequently steered into detention centers, jails, and prisons from the hallways of school buildings (Noguera 2003; Nolan 2011).

Schools have become a veritable pipeline to prison (Tuzzolo and Hewitt 2006; Meiners 2007; Noguera 2003; Nolan 2011). One in nine Black males aged 20–34 are in prison (Pew Center 2008). The plight of Black males in U.S. schools is grim and frightening, but ultimately predictable due to Americans’ obsession with dehumanizing Black males and criminalizing their every move. Even the way in which Black males walk is under surveillance and suspicion (Brunson and Miller 2006). Edelman (2012) calls this phenomenon “Walking While Black.” Black males are under attack, whether they are walking home or walking into schools, because of America’s pervasive mythmaking and seductive media entrenched in the most debasing stereotypes. Thus, Black boys are not safe in public schools or on urban streets.

Williams (1991), a legal scholar, created a term for what she would suggest is the existential condition happening to young Black men attending U.S. public schools: “spirit-murdering.” Williams defines 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. Spirit-murdering denies inclusion, protection, safety, nurturance, and acceptance—all things a person needs to be human and to be educated. According to Williams, spirit-murdering occurs in the victims’ experience, when a person is injured as the result of being viewed as an “object.” On the night of Martin’s death he was a Black brute, not a young man with dreams, hopes, and fears. When someone is viewed as an object, human emotions and aspirations do not exist. In that same way, Black boys enter classrooms as objects. I argue that an alarming amount of spirit-murdering takes place through the individual racism of educators of every race, class, or other social and cultural identity markers. Pervasive tropes of hyper Black masculinity, coupled

with the diluted meaning of social justice, make many educators, myself included, at times unaware of how their day-to-day interactions with Black boys are an act of spirit-murdering. Therefore, as a teacher-educator, I am constantly trying to undo my own mistakes as a novice elementary school teacher through properly educating my students about the complexities of race, power, privilege, and perceptions in their classrooms.

### **“I See Trayvon Martin”: Recognizing the Oppressor Within**

Before I ever read the work of Williams (1991), who gave me words to explain what I personally experienced during my teaching years, I knew that some of my actions were limiting or stifling to my students. I remember teaching at a school in Florida deemed an “F” school, a failing school, and asking myself everyday if I could make a difference teaching to the test. Moreover, I asked myself why I was afraid to use pedagogical frameworks that I knew would empower students beyond test scores. I was not afraid of my Black male students, but sometimes I could not resist scapegoating my failures as a first-year teacher onto my students. It was easy to blame parents for every disadvantage my students carried into my classroom, instead of working to eliminate educational barriers. As a first-year teacher slowly transitioning into middle class status, I forgot the plight of the working poor and the institutional barriers that make schools difficult to navigate. I knew all the negative stereotypes regarding Black males, so when they did not achieve I already had the rhetoric in place to explain their failures, but not my own.

There are numerous recommendations and educational policies that could possibly alter the experiences of Black males in and outside public schools. A discussion on multicultural and social justice education can be a starting place to create a classroom and a world more socially just. Additionally, a conversation concerning anti-oppression education or culturally relevant pedagogy could also gain some momentum in how we should educate all students differently as we recognize and celebrate their cultural, social, sexual, religious and class identities—or just simply their otherness.

All of these frameworks and pedagogical lenses have the ability to be transformative. However, each time I begin to explore those frameworks, I am drawn to Lorde’s (2007) words that revolutionary change cannot be reached without examining the many pieces of the oppressor that is planted deep within me. I have come to understand that many of my teacher education students will never be able to say, “I am Trayvon Martin,” but they can begin to utter, “I See Trayvon Martin.” To say these words is to understand that race and racism are fixed structures within U.S. public schools that provide the ideological framework to create conceptual narratives and cultural memory that in turn pathologize Black males as criminals and unteachable students. This pathology must be recognized because most urban classrooms are filled with kids just like Martin. Little Black boys who through no fault of their own sit in classrooms everyday where teachers are unaware as to how narratives, popular or dated because they are all built on the same tropes, circulate to disrupt learning and spirit-murder children. To “See Trayvon Martin” is to

acknowledge one's power and privilege, and reconcile these social constructions to the plight of one's students of color. If educators do not take action to problematize, examine, confront, and challenge their own inscribed dispositions to create social change, they determine that their role in schools is to criminalize Black bodies. So long as educators continue to enforce policies that demonize innocent children, they thus allow for the murder of thousands of Trayvon Martins in classrooms every day.

## References

- Adams, C. J., Robelen, E. W., & Shah, N. (2012). Civil rights data show retention disparities. *Education Week*. Retrieved October 21, 2012 from [http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2012/03/07/23data\\_ep\\_h31.html?tkn=SQWFeLaaeLcVAUrVpZ0FL5z9vQS336Ru%2Fve&cmp=clp-edweek](http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2012/03/07/23data_ep_h31.html?tkn=SQWFeLaaeLcVAUrVpZ0FL5z9vQS336Ru%2Fve&cmp=clp-edweek).
- Alexander, M. (2012). *The new Jim Crow: Mass incarceration in the age of colorblindness*. New York, NY: The New Press.
- Bell, D. (1992). *Faces at the bottom of the well: The permanence of racism*. New York: Perseus Books.
- Bogle, D. (2001). *Toms, coons, mulattoes, mummies and bucks: An interpretive history of Blacks in American films*. New York, NY: Continuum.
- Bourdieu, P. (1977). Cultural reproduction and social reproduction. In J. Karabel & A. H. Halsey (Eds.), *Power and ideology in education* (pp. 487–511). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Bourdieu, P. (1986). The forms of capital. In J. G. Richardson (Ed.), *Handbook of theory and research for the sociology of education* (pp. 241–258). New York: Greenwood Press.
- Bourdieu, P. (1990). *The logic of practice*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Brockenbrough, E. (2012). Teaching Trayvon Martin: Three strategies for teacher educators. *Warner Perspectives*. Retrieved Oct 21, 2012 from <http://www.warner.rochester.edu/blog/warnerperspectives/?p=1220>.
- Brown, A. L. (2011). "Same old stories:" The Black male in social science and educational literature, 1930s to the present. *Teachers College Record*, 113(9), 2047–2079.
- Brunson, R. K., & Miller, J. (2006). Young Black men and urban policing in the United States. *British Journal of Criminology*, 46(4), 613–640.
- Chammah, M., & Swartwell, N. (2012, October 6). Students' ids that track the students. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from [http://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/07/us/in-texas-schools-use-ids-to-track-students.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/07/us/in-texas-schools-use-ids-to-track-students.html?_r=0).
- Clausing, J. (2012). Georgia handcuffing of kindergartner for tantrum renews school policing debate. Retrieved October 22, 2012 from [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/04/18/ga-handcuff-case-renews-s\\_0\\_n\\_1434245.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/04/18/ga-handcuff-case-renews-s_0_n_1434245.html).
- Collins, P. H. (2004). *Black sexual politics: African Americans, gender, and the new racism*. New York: Routledge.
- Delgado, R., & Stefancic, J. (2001). *Critical race theory: An introduction*. New York: New York University Press.
- Dixson, A. D., & Rousseau, C. K. (2006). *Critical race theory: All God's children got a song*. New York: Routledge.
- Eckholm, E. (2006, March). Plight deepens for Black men, studies warn. *New York Times*. Retrieved August 21, 2013 from [http://www.nytimes.com/2006/03/20/national/20blackmen.html?pagewanted=all&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2006/03/20/national/20blackmen.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0).
- Edelman, M. W. (2012, March 21). Walking while Black. Retrieved October 21, 2012 from [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/marian-wright-edelman/walking-while-black\\_b\\_1371428.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/marian-wright-edelman/walking-while-black_b_1371428.html).
- Fine, M., & Ruglis, J. (2009). Circuits of dispossession: The racialized and classed realignment of the public sphere for youth in the U.S. *Transforming Anthropology*, 17(1), 20–33.
- Foucault, M. (1977). *Discipline and punish. The birth of the prison*. London: Penguin Books.
- Foucault, M. (1982). The subject and power. In Hubert L. Dreyfus & Paul Rabinow (Eds.), *Michel Foucault: Beyond structuralism and Hermeneutics* (pp. 208–226). Brighton: The Harvester Press.
- Freire, P. (1993). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York: Continuum.
- Garibaldi, A. M. (1992). Educating and motivating African American males to succeed. *Journal of Negro Education*, 61, 4–11.

- Giroux, H. A. (1992). *Border crossings: Cultural workers and the politics of education*. New York: Routledge.
- Good, T., & Brophy, J. E. (1997). *Looking in classrooms* (7th ed.). New York: Addison-Wesley.
- Hale, J. (1982). *Black children: Their roots culture and learning styles*. Provo Utah: Brigham Young University Press.
- Hall, S. (1983). What is this Black in Black popular culture. In M. Wallace (Ed.), *Black popular culture*. Boston, MA: Beacon.
- Harker, R. K. (1984). On reproduction, habitus and education. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 5(2), 117–127.
- Harry, B., & Anderson, M. G. (1994). The disproportionate placement of African American males in special education programs. A critique of the process. *Journal of Negro Education*, 63(4), 602–620.
- Hilliard, A. G. I. I. (1990). Misunderstanding and testing intelligence. In J. I. Goodlad & P. Keating (Eds.), *Access to knowledge: An agenda for our nation's schools* (pp. 145–157). New York: College Board.
- Hollins, E. R., & Torres Guzman, M. (2005). Research on preparing teachers for diverse populations. In M. Cochran-Smith & K. Zeichner (Eds.), *Studying teacher education: The report of the AERA panel on research and teacher education* (pp. 477–544). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Howard, T. C. (2001). Powerful pedagogy for African American students: A case of four teachers. *Urban Education*, 36, 179–202.
- Human Rights Watch. (2009). Decades of disparity. Retrieved October 21, 2012 from <http://www.hrw.org/reports/2009/03/02/decades-disparity-0>.
- Irvine, J. J. (1990). *Black students and school failure*. New York: Greenwood Press.
- King, J. E. (1991). Dysconscious racism: Ideology, identity, and the miseducation of teachers. *Journal of Negro Education*, 60(2), 133–146.
- Kunjuju, J. (1985). *Countering the conspiracy to destroy Black boys*. Chicago: African American Images.
- Ladson-Billings, G. (2011). Boyz to men? Teaching to restore Black boys' childhood. *Race, Ethnicity and Education*, 14(1), 7–15.
- Ladson-Billings, G., & Tate, W. F. (1995). Toward a critical race theory of education. *Teachers College Record*, 97, 47–68.
- Lorde, A. (2007). *Sister outsider*. Berkeley, CA: Crossing Press.
- Love, B. L. (2010). Commercial hip hop: The sounds and images of a racial project. In D. P. Alridge, J. B. Stewart, & V. P. Franklin (Eds.), *Message in the music: Hip hop, history, and pedagogy* (pp. 55–67). Association for the Study of African American Life and History.
- Love, B. L. (2013a). 'Oh, they're sending a bad message to kids and about blacks': Black males resisting & challenging eurocentric notions of blackness within Hip Hop through critical pedagogy. *International Journal of Critical Pedagogy* (forthcoming).
- Love, B. L. (2013b). Urban storytelling: How storyboarding, moviemaking & hip hop-based education can promote students' critical voice. *English Journal* (forthcoming).
- Madon, S., Jussim, L., & Eccles, J. (1997). In search of the powerful self-fulfilling prophecy. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 72(4), 791–809.
- Majors, R. G., & Mancini Billson, J. (1992). *Cool pose: The dilemmas of Black manhood in America*. New York: Lexington.
- Majors, R. G., Tyler, R., Peden, B., & Hall, R. E. (1994). Cool pose: A symbolic mechanism for masculine role enactment and copying by Black males. In R. G. Majors & J. U. Gordan (Eds.), *The American Black male: His present status and his future* (pp. 245–259). Chicago: Nelson-Hall.
- Matsuda, M. (1991). Voices of America: Accent, antidiscrimination law, and a jurisprudence for the last reconstruction. *Yale Law Journal*, 100, 1329–1407.
- Meiners, E. R. (2007). *Right to be hostile: Schools, prisons, and the making of public enemies*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Mencken, W. (2012). Reactions mixed over school taser incident. *San Diego Reader*. Retrieved Oct 22, 2012 from <http://www.sandiegoreader.com/weblogs/almost-factual-news/2012/feb/17/reactions-mixed-over-school-taser-incident/>.
- Mincy, R. (2006). *Black males left behind*. Washington, DC: The Urban Institute.
- National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). (2009). *Reading report card for the nation and states*. Office of educational research and improvement. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education.
- National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). (2010). *Reading report card for the nation and states*. Office of educational research and improvement. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education.

- Noguera, P. (2003). Schools, prisons, and social implications of punishment: Rethinking disciplinary practices. *Motion Magazine*. Retrieved October 22, 2012 from [www.inmotionmagazine.com/er/pn\\_rethink.html](http://www.inmotionmagazine.com/er/pn_rethink.html).
- Nolan, K. (2011). *Police in the hallways: Discipline in an urban high school*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Oakes, J. (1985). *Keeping track: How schools structure inequality*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Pew Center on the States. (2008). *One in 100: Behind Bars in America*. Washington, DC: The Pew Charitable Trusts. [http://www.pewcenteronthestates.org/report\\_detail.aspx?id=35904](http://www.pewcenteronthestates.org/report_detail.aspx?id=35904).
- Polite, V. C., & Davis, J. E. (1999). *African American males in school and society: Practices and policies for effective education*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Popkewitz, T. (1998). *Struggling for the soul: The politics of schooling and the construction of the teacher*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Richardson, E. (2007). 'She was workin like forreal': Critical literacy and discourse and practices of African American females in the age of hip hop. *Discourse & Society*, 18, 789–809.
- Richman, C. L., Bovelsky, S., Kroovand, N., Vacca, J., & West, T. (1997). Racism 102: The classroom. *Journal of Black Psychology*, 23(4), 378–387.
- Rosenthal, R., & Jacobson, L. (1968). *Pygmalion in the classroom: Teacher expectation and pupils' intellectual development*. New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston.
- Somers, M., & Gibson, G. (1994). Reclaiming the epistemological "other": Narrative and the social constitution of identity. In C. Calhoun (Ed.), *Social theory and the politics of identity* (pp. 37–99). Cambridge, MA: Blackwell.
- Stokes, J. A. (2007). *Students on strike: Jim Crow, civil rights, Brown, and me*. National Geographic Books.
- Thompson, K., & Cohen, J. (2012). Trayvon Martin case: Poll finds stark racial divide. *The Washington Post*. Retrieved October 22, 2012, [http://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/trayvon-martin-case-poll-finds-stark-racial-divide/2012/04/10/gIQAEEtX8S\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/trayvon-martin-case-poll-finds-stark-racial-divide/2012/04/10/gIQAEEtX8S_story.html).
- Tuzzolo, E., & Hewitt, D. T. (2006). Rebuilding inequity: The re-emergence of the school-to-prison pipeline in New Orleans. *The High School Journal*, 90(2), 59–68.
- Villegas, A. M. (2007). Dispositions in teacher education: A look at social justice. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 58(5), 370–380.
- Wallace, M. (2003). The good lynching and The Birth of a Nation: Discourses and aesthetics of Jim Crow. *Cinema Journal*, 43(1), 85–104.
- West, C. (2001). *Race matters*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.
- Williams, P. J. (1991). *The alchemy of race and rights*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Wormser, R. (2004). *The rise and fall of Jim Crow*. New York: Macmillan.
- Young, A. A. (2004). *The minds of marginalized black men: Making sense of mobility, opportunity, and future life chances*. Princeton, NJ : Princeton University Press.