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Further Notes On Teaching In The Time Of #Ferguson

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Call for Conversations Introduction

As the academic year of 2014–2015 began, the killing of Mike Brown, the failure to indict Darren Wilson, and the protests and contentious dialogue surrounding these events again exposed fissures that exist in society as a result of (but not limited to) the dynamics of race, class, and gender.

In response to these events, and in an effort to engage in dialogue with the educators, students, protestors, and academics who were participating in these movements, the Berkeley Review of Education issued its first “Call for Conversations” (CFC). This is an edited selection of the short works first published on our website in January and March of 2014.

As the #blacklivesmatter movement has grown and changed over time and across various forms of media, scholars and activists have weighed in with a variety of political, historical, and sociological perspectives. However, as a scholarly journal centered on issues of education and committed to supporting open dialogue about current and pressing issues in education, the BRE was interested in creating an open intellectual space that—informed by activism, pressing current events, and the mixing of diverse perspectives—would reaffirm our commitment to building community, strengthen our scholarship, and represent a new approach to tackling questions of broad social importance. These non-traditional pieces represent a broadening of the research space, allowing for more voices to engage in a wider array of expression. Thus, the CFC is our attempt to break the traditional epistemology of scholarly journals and democratize both expertise and knowledge about #blacklivesmatter.

In this effort, we began by asking, “How are you centering Ferguson in your work in educational institutions, in community spaces, with young people? How are we—as students, educators, scholars, community workers—teaching and learning around Ferguson?” Six of the pieces that these questions elicited are presented here, in an attempt to capture the range and depth of thought and feeling that this current moment has evoked from scholars, practitioners, and students. These pieces help us consider how schooling is embedded in the social, political, and cultural life of our country by examining how social movements physically and cognitively cross into educational spaces.

Further Notes on Teaching in the Time of #Ferguson is a primer for practitioners on how to frame the work of education—both practically and conceptually—in light of these social justice movements. Edwin Mayorga invokes the perpetual logic of the “*changing same*” and challenges educators to center both their own and their students’ humanity in the face of injustice and the need for collective grief.

In *T train*, the reader feels the poet’s sense of invasion and anger upon being stopped and frisked on the New York subway. Drawing parallels to Orwell’s *1984*, Imrul Mazid uses multiple forms of expression—hip-hop, Bengali, dialogue—to draw attention to conflict between constitutional rights and state surveillance.

In her essay, *Anything but American*, 9th grade student Britany rejects any label that includes the word “American” and instead embraces the identity “Black.” She recounts the events of Ferguson and the growing realization gripping America that police violence against Black bodies is a shockingly common occurrence.

In *Beyond Police Violence*, Connie Wun and Damien Sojoyner push the reader to contemplate a charge of genocide in the intransigent nature of “antiblackness” in U.S. society. Arguing that “*genocide* is not a hyperbolic term,” Wun and Sojoyner assert that the problem is not individual bad actors, but, rather, an entire state apparatus of violence against and suppression of black lives.

Hang, by maisha quint, evokes disturbing imagery of the continuity of injustice to black bodies through its fluid juxtapositioning of historical lynchings and contemporary police shootings. Through a bare handful of chosen words, the reader confronts the terror of the black lynching victim running “mad dog wild,” the cruelty of the crowds “gathered to watch,” and the horror of learning that children “snapped the teeth out of his head to sell as souvenirs.”

In *There are No Toys in Jail*, Jennifer Bradley remembers her first teaching position at a preschool in West Baltimore. She recounts a day when a police officer, invited to her classroom under the banner of “community helpers,” threatened her four-year-olds with the possibility of jail and how this incident helped her begin to see how violence, social conditioning, and power dynamics begin at even the youngest of ages and in the earliest of educational settings.

Further Notes on Teaching in the Time of #Ferguson¹

Edwin Mayorga²

Swarthmore College

Ferguson was where this semester began.

When non-indictment news from Ferguson began streaming in, I found myself searching. Searching for answers, searching for justice. I was inspired by the various collections of resources assembled by educators to support others as we all worked through this tragedy³. But having just moved with my family to Swarthmore College in Pennsylvania, I have thought about what it means to be teaching in the time of Ferguson.

The Changing Same

Before teaching, we must make sense of situations for ourselves. The failure to indict Darren Wilson was sadly not surprising. Instead it is a *changing same*. It speaks to the way oppressions, and racism specifically, are sown into the fabric of our society. As Ruthie Gilmore notes, "[R]acism, specifically, is the sanctioned or extralegal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death."⁴ What happened in Ferguson was a sanctioning of the legal system as a group-differentiated, death-dealing machine. What happened in Ferguson is injustice by design within the racial capitalist, carceral state in which we live. The maintenance of racial and economic conditions in Ferguson, nationally, and globally become the legitimized motivation for state, and state-sanctioned, violence. In short, Black lives matter, but only inasmuch as they are of value in advancing what Robinson (1983) describes as racial capitalism. Once decoupled from that value, our bodies become disposable.

This is the changing same that we must recognize, and continue to document and analyze, if we seek to abolish it.

Centering our Humanity

There is much to analyze about Ferguson and the killing of Michael Brown and the numerous other Black people and people of Color who have died premature deaths at the hands of the state. But for now, I turn to the undergraduate classroom.

In my haste to respond to injustice by sharing information and resources, I lost sight of the broader challenge to humanity that moments like these pose. I needed to give my

¹ This essay is based on a previous post written by the author, Teaching in the Time of Ferguson (<http://edwinmayorga.net/?p=515>). Thanks to the various folks who have been putting these resources together since August. Specific thanks to Dr. Lee Smithey (@peacesociology) and the New York Collective of Radical Educators (@nycore3000).

² Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to: Edwin Mayorga, Swarthmore College, Department of Educational Studies, 500 College Avenue, Swarthmore, PA 19081. Email: emayorg1@swarthmore.edu.

³ Some of those resources are listed below.

⁴ Gilmore, R. W. (2007). *Golden gulag: Prisons, surplus, crisis, and opposition in globalizing California*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

students *and* myself time and space to grieve over the negation of human life, and Black lives in particular. Engaging our grief, letting it circulate through us, is a part of moving forward. With that in mind, I sent out an email to all of my students. I shared information from the night before, encouraged them to continue following social media, and let them know that the college was organizing transportation to Philadelphia to participate in a march. I also offered up my office as a space for students to meet. Not many students stopped by, but a few did, and several others thanked me via email for sharing information and making the office available.

After attending the march in Philadelphia, Joelle Bueno, a student in my Introduction to Educational Studies course, noted in an email,

Thank you so much for sharing about the protests in Philly. I really appreciate your dedication to us as students and as people, it really means a lot to me especially as a freshman.

Joelle's words demonstrate the impact of centering people in the classroom. When we show our students that they matter to us, and that the injustices happening in the world must matter to all of us, we are having an impact.

To me, teaching in the time of Ferguson requires us to teach with our humanity at the center. In carving out spaces to come together, we can begin to see each other and connect ourselves to stories of human struggle that are often, intentionally, blurred from sight.

Groundwork

Centering people in the classroom is an ongoing process rather than a single event. The groundwork begins in the planning of the curriculum and is as every bit as essential as is the content we teach. This semester began with Ferguson, and I had to immediately modify our early sessions to make certain that what was happening in the world was a part of our discussions on education. It became evident that in addition to space for discussion, students wanted more language and historical context for talking about racism and education. As part of a changing same, Ferguson and the protests that have ensued are markers of the long history of structural racism and abolition work in the U.S. These narratives are not often part of curriculum, but I contend that these stories are essential.

Ferguson is also a mirror. Students are well-intentioned folks who recognize the complexities of privilege and see broader injustices. Still, social forces like structural racism are thought to happen somewhere else. Through our discussion, we came to recognize how we are all situated within structural oppression. We recognized that just as much work needed to be done within the college as was required beyond the college.

Hope and Radical Possibilities

Ferguson was where the semester ended, and justice work was re/ignited.

Coming to grips with complicity can often have a paralyzing effect on those who wish to act. The long march to freedom can sometimes seem too big, too impossible. I invited students to read Crawley's stunning piece, *Otherwise, Ferguson* (2014), Duncan-Andrade's *Note to Educators: Hope Required when Growing Roses in Concrete* (2009),

and Chapter 10 of Jean Anyon's book, *Radical Possibilities* (2005). In each of these pieces, the call to fight injustice is clear, and the sustainability of the work is made possible when we are animated by the radical possibilities of an otherwise.

Hope, I have come to think, is something crafted through human relationships. We remain hopeful because the ideas and action we share with the people around us nourish a feeling that change is possible. In the days since our last class meeting, students have expressed a desire to continue having these conversations and continue taking action next semester. The march is a long one, but our commitment to justice keeps me hopeful and thinking about #FergusonNext.

Author Biography

Edwin Mayorga is an Assistant Professor of Educational Studies and Latin American and Latino Studies at Swarthmore College (PA). He directs both the Education in our Barrios project (#BarrioEdProj), a youth participatory action research project that examines educational policy and urban politics in Latino core communities in Philadelphia and New York City, and the Critical Education Policy Studies group (#CritEdPol). He is co-editor of *What's Race Got to Do with It? How Current School Reform Maintains Racial and Economic Inequality* (Peter Lang; 2015; co-edited with B. Picower), and is a member of the New York Collective of Radical Educators (NYCoRE).

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Additional resources may be found on the online version of this essay, available at http://www.berkeleyreviewofeducation.com/fergusonblacklivesmatter_blog/further-notes-on-teaching-in-the-time-of-ferguson

T train

Imrul Mazid¹

Impact Academy of Arts & Technology, Hayward, California

The impetus for this piece derives from a stop-and-frisk experience on the New York City subway. Drawing from the rich aural tradition of hip-hop, the poem addresses issues of a surveillance state, the policing of Black and Brown bodies, and the criminalization of knowledge. I sample re-interpretations of poetic luminaries, Sugarhill Gang and Black Sheep, which establish a meter overlaid by Orwellian themes. The juxtaposition of English and Bengali linguistic forms reflects the native's double-consciousness and the effects of state violence in the psychic realm.

Bengali Excerpt

*Ami nishash falithe parthesi na
pigair gondher jonne
Amar tupir modhe lakha "Ali."
Amar chambrar modhe kali.
Amar monair modhe judho,
onek mara-mari.
Amar jonmo hoylo bideshi,
ayta amar bari.
Ayta amar train,
ayta amar gari!*

Rough Translation

I can't breathe
because of the smell of the pig.
"Ali" written on my hat.
Melanin in my skin.
War in my soul,
lots of fighting.
I'm born outside the motherland,
this is my home.
So, this is my train,
this is my car!

Engine, engine, letter T,
on the New York transit
"free,"
if these pigs go off the track,
stick em up,
stick em up,
stick em up!

Back on the scene,
shells on the T,
forward
to 1984.

¹ Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to: Imrul Mazid. Email: imazid@gmail.com.

Ammunition
strapped to my back,
writing thoughtcrimes
with a sword.
Rounds of artillery
and magazines,
munitions,
clips galore.
Best-selling heaters
in section nine,
self-determination,
aisle four.

A bang-bang,
a baby bubba,
a bang-bang
to the boogidy-beat.

(Bacon).

The boar beared down
and up-jumped my boogie,
broke my rhythm of the boogie,
the beat.

(I'm bakin).

*Ami nishash falithe parthesi na
pigair gondher jonne
Amar tupir modhe lakha "Ali."
Amar chambrar modhe kali.
Amar monair modhe judho,
onek mara-mari.
Amar jonmo hoylo bideshi,
ayta amar bari.
Ayta amar train,
ayta amar gari!*

Engine, engine, letter T,
on the New York transit
"free,"
if these pigs go off the track,
stick em up,
stick em up,
stick em up!

Pigs rifled through my bag,
found my black and steely revolver,
my .44 Mag

"Where you going, boy,
and what's this here book?"

"I'm going to the library,
Oinker,
and a crook
is a crook
is a crook."

"Look,
war is peace,
you're a terrorisk,
and I just put you on my hit list.
It's a free market,
and I'll stop and frisk
with a star-spangled
iron
fist."

"Seize the Fourth Amendment,
trample human rights,
oh, but I forgot,
in *1984*,
the daytime is the night!
Banish books
like the Truthspeak Crew,
but I'll muzzle your snout,
stick you in the zoo!
Pigs play in State Pens,
and I'll brandish my pen,
I'm a snipewriter
through and through."

A bang-bang,
a baby bubba,
a bang-bang
to the boogidy-beat.

When these pigs go off the track,
stick 'em up,
stick 'em up,
stick 'em up!

Author Biography

Imrul Mazid is a Math teacher at Impact Academy of Arts & Technology in Hayward, California. Before working at Impact, Imrul taught in Danville, Richmond, and East Oakland, California. Imrul has also worked in youth development in New York City, where he earned his M.A. from Teachers College, Columbia University. His interests are broadly in sociology and education, economic sociology, and urban education. Imrul wrote his Master's thesis on Muslim youth identity in a Queens, New York, high school.

Anything But American

Britany

Oakland High School, 9th grade

Please don't call me African American. Call me Black. I am proud to be Black, but I'm not proud to belong to a nation that won't give me the same rights as others. I'm no longer proud to be American. I mean, how could I be proud of a nation that takes enjoyment in the slaughtering of colored people, most often Black people?

Don't get me wrong—being American is great: freedom of speech, a better-than-most education system, and the power to become whatever you like. These things and so much more are things that are great about America. However, we also have many disadvantages, the most unacceptable being that White lives matter more than colored lives. There are examples of that all the time, you just have to really look. Society says we as Americans are all equal. We are all equal until a teen is shot down. Even when we have clear evidence against the murderer, because he is White he's given a slap on the wrist. Because a murderer is White we are try to justify the murder and give a reason as to why his Black victim deserved the die. We talk about how, because the victim smokes weed, he deserved to die; this happens all the time.

To the people that think that Mike Brown is the first case of police brutality, allow me to introduce you to just a few victims:

John Crawford: John Crawford, 22, was murdered in a Walmart in Beavercreek, Ohio, by a police officer who said Crawford wouldn't drop his weapon. However, new surveillance footage shows officers did not give Crawford time to drop what ended up being a fake gun from the toy section. Police there were cleared of any wrongdoing.

Please don't call me African American. Call me Black.

Charles Smith: 29 years old, Smith was executed by police in Savannah, Georgia. He was shot in the back of his head while his hands were cuffed behind his back. His body was left on display for three hours. His murderer, Officer David Jannot, is on paid leave.

Please don't call me African American. Call me Black.

And of course there's Mike Brown.

Mike Brown: An 18-year-old in Ferguson, Missouri, was shot 6 times by Darren Wilson, then left on the ground for four and a half hours. Wilson says that Mike punched him in the face and had a lethal weapon. But a video of the fatal shooting (a video you can watch online) shows Brown saying he was unarmed and a picture of Wilson after the shooting shows no bruises. According to online sources, a woman named Piaget Crenshaw, who lives in an apartment overlooking the street where Brown was killed, also videotaped the incident because from the beginning something felt off about the incident. She told CNN,

From it all initially happening, I knew this was not right. I knew the police shouldn't have been chasing this boy and firing at the same time. And the fact he got shot in his face, something clicked in me and I thought someone else should see this so I recorded.

According to Crenshaw, it appeared that the officer was trying to pull the teen into his car when Brown got away. The officer then fired his weapon multiple times.

Not only did Crenshaw videotape the scene, but someone on Twitter (whose username is the @TheePharoah) also live-tweeted as it was happening. He wrote:

10:03 am: I JUST SAW SOMEONE DIE OMFG

10:03 am: Im about to hyperventilate

10:04 am: The police just shot someone dead in front of my crib yo

10:05 am: Fuckfuck fuck [with an image of Brown's body lying in the street.]

10:06 am: Its blood all over the street, niggas protesting nshit. There is police tape all over my building. I am stuck in here omg

10:13 am: Bruh. Im so upset

10:13 am: (@_amourlace): @TheePharoah why did they shoot him?

10:14 am: no reason! He was running!

Wilson most likely shot out of malice rather than self defense, as Brown was running when Wilson fired. Despite the towering evidence against Wilson, because of the secrecy of the trial process and allies who played key roles in the judicial process, Wilson is still a free man who has gotten thousands of dollars and a vacation for murdering a young teen. The whole Mike Brown situation really shows that the White man's words are worth more than cold, hard facts and this must stop. We must change our justice system if we expect our nation to thrive on for another two thousand years or so. Because if we can't trust our government, then the people will take justice into their own hands; they will want to get revenge on people who took a loved one. A government without a justice system won't last.

These deaths—of John Crawford, Charles Smith, Mike Brown, and many more—are connected. That's the reason the hashtag #blacklivesmatter has become a movement. It reminds people who have forgotten that Black people deserve human rights. A lot of people think that as African Americans, we're a total different species of animal or something. But we are not that different from Whites, or any other race for that matter. Sure, we have differences, but at the end of the day were still human and deserve the same justice as White people.

So in my opinion, the first step to changing our system is taking guns away from police officers. People make mistakes and if you accidentally kill someone, there is no way to make it right—a life will be gone forever. Tasers, bats, and mace are enough to defend oneself without taking a life. If there is ever a situation where guns are needed (which there will be) a SWAT team can handle it.

Secondly, the people of the U.S. should become more educated about their rights. Knowing your rights—such as knowing whether police officers have the right to search your bag with or without your permission—could help you out of a sticky situation.

These are just a couple of my ideas to reduce and stop police brutality and racism in our justice system. I hope my essay has inspired and opened the eyes of others to see that this is a serious problem and that this should be taken as seriously as issues like global warming if the US is going to survive another couple of thousand years.

Until we fix police brutality: I'm Brittany, and I'm Black.

Beyond Police Violence: A Conversation on Antiblackness, #BlackLivesMatter, #WeChargeGenocide, and the Challenge to Educators

Connie Wun^{a1} and Damien Sojoyner^b

^aDataCenter, Oakland, California

^bUniversity of California, Irvine

The following is an excerpt of an ongoing dialogue between two scholars, Damien Sojoyner and Connie Wun, whose work closely examines the interlock of antiblackness, “violence,” schools, and prisons. The dialogue is situated within the current period—one that has focused on the police violence that has occurred across the nation, particularly in Ferguson, Cleveland, New York, Sanford, Chicago, Oakland, Detroit, and Los Angeles. At the same time, this conversation situates the deaths of Mike Brown, Tamir Rice, Eric Garner, Trayvon Martin, Dominique Franklin, Jr., Rekia Boyd, Oscar Grant, Aiyana Stanley-Jones, and Ezell Ford as part of a civil society that is foundationally antiblack. We also understand that these are only a few of the names of people who have been murdered by police and with impunity. Police murders of Black people, we contend, are characteristic of a structure that also includes “slow and gradual state violence” against Blacks. The latter takes the form of school closures in predominantly Black neighborhoods, gentrification and displacement of Black communities, mass incarceration and their effects, poor health care, hypersurveillance of Black bodies at large, and racial *microaggressions* across multiple social spaces. We understand that the important political actions concerning “Black Lives Matter”² exists alongside “We Charge Genocide”³ and “Black Power Matters”⁴ campaigns. We recognize that police violence against Black people is part of a society that is organized around antiblackness, and we call for educators, researchers, and scholars to respond accordingly.

Connie: There has been much said about Ferguson in both the popular media and across academic forums; is there anything that stands out for you?

¹ Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to: Connie Wun. Email: wunconnie@gmail.com.

² Black Lives Matter, Freedom & Justice for all Black Lives. (n.d.) Retrieved from <http://blacklivesmatter.com/>

³ We Charge Genocide. (n.d.) Retrieved from <http://wechargegenocide.org/>; Red plot or indictment? UN asked to act against genocide in United States. (29 December, 1951). *The Afro-American*. Retrieved from <http://news.google.com/newspapers?id=mdQmAAAAIIBAJ&sjid=kgIGAAAAIIBAJ&dq=we-charge-genocide&pg=2113%2C3191483>

⁴ Eastside Arts Alliance. (13 December, 2014). Black power matters at Eastside Arts Alliance [Blog post]. Retrieved from <http://blackbirdpressnews.blogspot.com/2014/12/black-power-matters-at-eastside-arts.html?m=1>

Damien: One of the things that I take note of is the framing of what constitutes the “problem”—The popular depiction of Ferguson and the tragedy that befell Mike Brown and his family identifies police in general, and more specifically, a particular police officer, as “the problem.” Historically, I think back upon the many Black rebellions that have been touched off in the United States dating back to the Houston Mutiny of 1917 to Watts in 1965 to LA in 1992. In all of these, while policing was a huge issue, it was part of a much more multifaceted set of issues.

For example, even though 1992 is best remembered for the savage beating of Rodney King and the acquittal of police officers, the demands by one of the major organizing forces, a coalition of Crips and Bloods, was not for better policing. They put forth an analysis that centered on the fact that Black lives are vulnerable to the terror of policing when Black people are forced to live and exist in conditions that render them vulnerable. Thus, the Crips and Bloods’ solutions to the condition of structured vulnerability were multifaceted. These solutions demanded a complete power shift in which control over resources such as health care, employment, education, and housing would be placed in the hands of Black communities.

I look at Ferguson, and I see a city where Black people are devoid of “political representation.” The schools are on the verge of state receivership. There has been a history of police abuse in the city and surrounding areas. Many Black people do not have jobs and when they do find work, they are not paid a living wage. Better policing would not be able to address these concerns.

Connie: What would you say is a better approach to take?

Damien: I think the approach taken by the youth in Chicago who are framing the issue around genocide is much more effective. While there is very limited action that can be achieved at the level of the United Nations given the unilateral power that the United States holds over the body and the watered down version of genocide that was developed in the 1990’s, the historic framework of genocide provides a multifaceted approach to understanding the extent of antiblack racism in the US.

Connie: I agree. Your invocation of genocide reminds me of questions that I have been wrestling with for some time. What does it mean to say *genocide*? If we can understand and agree that a genocidal project is beyond immediate deaths caused by police violence, then we have to contend with a civil society that enables and is predicated upon multiple forms of antiblack violence.

Damien: Pushing you on the link between civil society and genocide, how do we as educators answer this call, especially within the context of our understanding that schools have long played a critical role in genocidal projects?

Connie: We should understand that *genocide* is not a hyperbolic term to describe the condition that Black people are living under. When we understand *genocide*, we understand that Blacks are the “prototypical targets” of police violence and other forms of state violence.⁵ We must also understand that Black people are subject to forms of violence that are not archived and are even more mundane than police violence. There is violence that is woven into the fabric of other state institutions and everyday social

⁵ Sexton, J. (2010, Summer). People-of-color-blindness notes on the afterlife of slavery. *Social Text* 103, 28(2), 31–56. doi:10.1215/01642472-2009-066

relations. In combatting an antiblack genocidal project, we must understand that police violence is part of the U.S. As educators, we have to identify the relationship between police violence with other institutionalized forms of violence against Black people.

For instance, we have to look at how school closures are generally accompanied by privatized charter schools and intensified punitive mechanisms, which also include soft policing strategies (i.e., restorative justice that problematizes student behaviors instead of the conditions that shape student lives).

We have to understand that as educators we are implicated within the civil society project. We too are licensed to police and punish our students. However, we can authorize ourselves to organize against the genocidal project of antiblackness by revealing the connections between state institutions and the ways that they *all* enable the possibility of Black deaths.

Author Biographies

Connie Wun, Ph.D., *received her doctorate from the Graduate School of Education at UC Berkeley. Her research projects are closely informed by her experiences as a woman of color, sexual assault counselor, and anti-prison activist. Her work focuses on anti-Blackness, carcerality, and racial and gender violence, specifically as they relate to school discipline and punishment. Her projects have been funded by the National Science Foundation, the UC Berkeley Chancellor's Office, and the UC Berkeley Center for Race and Gender. She has published in Critical Sociology, Educational Philosophy and Theory, Journal for Curriculum and Teaching, and Journal of Educational Policy. Her publications can also be found on truth-out.org and The Feminist Wire. Connie completed a postdoctoral research fellowship at the University of Illinois, Chicago. She recently joined the DataCenter in Oakland, California as their Director of Community-Driven Research.*

Damien Sojoyner *is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Anthropology at the University of California, Irvine. He researches the relationship among the public education system, prisons, and the construction of Black masculinity in Southern California. In addition to his work appearing in many popular media forms, he has written articles in scholarly journals. His book, entitled First Strike: Prison and Educational Enclosures in Black Los Angeles, will be published by the University of Minnesota Press.*

hang

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The underlying notion for this particular piece is to show how Black death is still sanctioned in much of the same ways that it was sanctioned post-reconstruction—to show that the ways in which we allow, treat, and participate in Black death is eerily unchanged. My “hang” poems are influenced by Kara Walker’s work in the way her work interrogates the supposed antiquity of the antebellum South and slavery. The myth that the beliefs, representations, and sentiments of that era are over and in the past are blown open in her work. Like Walker’s work, my poetry aims to articulate the understanding that these ideas are very much alive and foundational to our culture. And also, as in Walker’s work, the visual quality of the poems is very important to their meaning. As silhouettes are used in Walker’s work to punctuate, the sparse clusters of text against so much white space are similarly crafted to create an unrelenting gaze on the violence continuously enacted upon Black bodies.

hang

as in opposite of crawl:
hands dragging knees
that bleed but instead
legs dangle
after head.
as in limp
from a rope
that swings
back and forth.
as in strung up
like lights
blaze brilliant
in the night.
as in opposite of crawl:
hands dragging knees
that bleed
but alive.

¹ Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to: Maisha Quint. Email: maisha.quint@gmail.com.

to get the hang
of something
to become
capable

first find the tree
preferably one
sturdy enough
for two
maybe three
bark able to burn
if need be
trunk wide
but branches
high enough
for two
maybe three
preferably one
on open field
large enough
for thousands to see
the two
maybe three
sway free

as in proud display
like trophies
or plaques
like the flag
billowing
from courthouse steps
now watch
as they drag
bleeding
black boy's neck

and if he
breaks free
watch him
run

mad dog wild
he may scream
or pray

smash both legs

*a group of children
snapped the teeth
out of his head
to sell
as souvenirs*

as in pin up
on the wall
writing scrawled
along postcard edges:

Bill, this was some raw bunch

to learn the method
or
arrangement of
to become accustomed to

*over 10,000 spectators
including city officials and police
gathered to watch*

hang

on the corner
in twos
maybe threes
shrugged backs in dark sweatshirts
hands stuffed in jeans
black boys watch
cops circle
two
maybe three

as in

helicopter in sky

waiting

see black boys
fly
from street corner
run
mad dog wild

police kill
a black man
woman
or
child
every 28 hours

as in

smoke
that lingers

from a gun
just fired

as in

(black boy)

limp

like

slack rope

tape off
the perimeter

isolate
the body

calm the officer
offer coffee
or water

crowds will gather

hang

as in opposite of crawl:
hands dragging knees
that bleed
but instead

crowds will gather.

Author Biography

maisha quint was born and raised in the San Francisco Bay Area. A staunch anti-prison organizer since high school, she worked for 6 years at Legal Services For Prisoners With Children and taught poetry for 4 years at UC Berkeley with June Jordan's Poetry for the People program. She joined the EastSide Arts Alliance as a collective member 7 years ago, and is currently Program Coordinator there. She has organized with the Committee to Free the San Francisco 8, Friends of Marilyn Buck, Stop the Gang Injunctions Coalition, and several other grassroots organizations and campaigns. She recently completed her MFA in poetry at Mills College.

There are No Toys in Jail

Jennifer Bradley¹

Swarthmore College

When I taught preschool in West Baltimore in the 1990s, the oft-quoted crime statistics of the city predicted that seven out of every ten black males would end up in the criminal justice system by the time they were adults. I have no idea if this was an accurate statistic, but it's one I heard all the time. All of the children I taught were African-American.

The neighborhood struggled with poverty, crime, under-resourced schools and health care systems, and limited opportunities. But it was also brimming with promise.

The families were vibrant. They loved their little boys with a passion. They watched over their play, the friends that they made, and their early education. They showed up for parent conferences, read the books I sent home for their children, and worked hard to give them a head start.

The boys themselves—three, four, five years old—were so bright, so inquisitive, so engaging, and so very, very funny. They kept me on my toes and made my job as rewarding as it was exhausting. I didn't have children of my own back then, so I loved those kids with my whole heart.

Those preschoolers are now in their early twenties. Little Jay Jay, Delonte', Jared, Chelin, Bruce, and friends are now grown black men. Every time I hear about the shooting of an unarmed black man, their faces are the ones I see layered on top of Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, Tamir Rice, Oscar Grant, and Eric Garner.

I wonder how the system could fail them, and fail us all, so miserably.

I think back to the police officer who came in to speak to my class one day. *Community Helpers* is a big preschool theme, and I wanted to show the kids that people just like them kept their community going. I was so excited when I learned the officer coming in to speak was African-American. So excited, that is, until she started to speak.

"How many of you know someone in jail?" Almost every tiny brown hand flew into the air. "Well, those grownups are breaking the law, and that's why they went to jail. Drugs are against the law. If your mommy breaks the law, she will go to jail. If your daddy breaks the law, he'll go to jail. If you break the law, you will go to jail too. There are no toys in jail."

No toys in jail. She pointed to them as she threatened my wide-eyed four year olds with prison. Twenty years later, it still remains one of the lowest points in my teaching career, allowing that woman to come in to our safe space and talk to my preschoolers like criminals. I realized that life training for them started right then and there, if not before, and I had invited it in.

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I think back to that incident because Michael Brown, Trayvon Martin, Tamir Rice, Oscar Grant, and Eric Garner all went to school, too. They all sat in classrooms for years, learning who they are in our system, who is in power, and what society thinks they are worth. The lessons might not have been as explicit as the one my preschoolers received, but the lessons were there just the same.

And, thinking back, I also realize something else.

Darren Wilson, George Zimmerman, Timothy Loehmann, Johannes Mehserle, and Daniel Pantaleo all went to school, too. In different classrooms, in different schools. Did a police officer come in to talk to them as preschoolers, too? If so, what did she say to them?

Because we teachers have both the shooters and the victims right in front of us, hour after hour, year after year after year.

We teach them math, reading, and science, but we also create histories as we teach them the unspoken lessons about what their role is and how the system works. About who's in power and who isn't. Who matters and who doesn't.

As educators, we have children right in the palms of our hands, in the years when it matters most. This is both a gift and a deafening call to action.

We teachers didn't build the system, but even with the best intentions, we've had a hand in reproducing it.

We will continue to see these children, right in front of our eyes, year after year, both the shooters and the victims. So what do we do to upend the unjust system and harness the promise and responsibility we've been given?

What I did, the day after the officer left my class, was simply to apologize. I tearfully told my young students that I had no idea that the officer would speak that way to them, and that if I had known she would never have been allowed to speak.

I told them they mattered. That they were smart and curious and creative and funny. That they were good friends. And that they deserved respect.

Do they remember the incident twenty years later? I'm sure they remember the officer's words more than mine, because they were shocked. And because at their request, she also showed them her gun.

This makes me realize that as educators, the lessons we pen and the words we speak have to be mightier than the swords, guns, or badges the system wields over our students. We must speak louder, name the injustices our students face, and construct a better history for us all.

Because it all starts when they're very, very young.

Author Biography

Jennifer Bradley is a Visiting Professor in Educational Studies at Swarthmore College. She continues her work with both urban students and their teachers in Philadelphia and in Camden. Jennifer co-founded the Philly Children's March as a family-friendly space within the Black Lives Matter movement. The group celebrates its one year anniversary of rising up for racial justice in January. One of the Children's March actions was a solidarity march with Baltimore last spring after Jennifer realized that Freddie Gray was the same age, lived, and died just six blocks away from the students she writes about in this article.