

Writing for Our Lives: (Un)Learning within The American School

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Abstract: This article underscores how writing to activate critical consciousness can function as a lifeline for Students of Color navigating Predominantly White Institutions. More specifically, we contend that nurturing the critical literacies of historically marginalized students within American higher education classroom settings can better equip them to demand and enact change from within and beyond the confines of academe. Thus, as a collective, we employ poetry as a means of coming to voice as well as drawing attention to the larger implications of empowering Students of Color to write for transformation, not just within Education courses, but across the curriculum.

Introduction

When a statement ends with, “for my life,” it often connotes a sense of urgency — immediacy even. One might even begin to question what the conditions may be that elicit such a dire and extreme declaration in the first place. Fighting — *for my life*. Running — *for my life*. Writing — *for my life*? How have we, as People of Color, fought for our lives? How have we, as People of Color, run for our lives? More importantly, how have we, as People of Color, written *for our lives*? (Lorde, 1978) How have we documented how we are experiencing the conditions that compel us to resist? Moreover, how can writing function as a lifeline? How has it served as a vehicle for meaning-making and action for Communities of Color historically? And, why is this medium especially significant given the experiences of Students of Color at historically White institutions?

Audre Lorde, in her acclaimed piece, “Poetry is not a luxury,” (1985, p. 218) aids us in addressing these critical inquiries. Not only does she speak to the centrality of poetry in the lives of women, but she also asserts that “The farthest external horizons of hopes and fears are cobbled by our poems, carved from the rock experiences of our daily lives.” Thus, for women, especially those situated at the margins, the “nam[ing of] the nameless [...] so it can be thought” and translating ideas into action is not only seminal to their survival, but also seminal to their very existence. Using this text to ground our production of meaning, we intentionally tap into this literary genealogy, and come together to unpack our individual and collective experience within EDUC 101: The American School. EDUC 101 is an introductory course within the Department of Educational Studies at Colgate University. For some context, Colgate University is a small, highly selective, residential liberal arts institution located on the unceded land of the Oneida people in rural Central, New York. My classes often reflect the racial makeup of the village the university resides in — mostly White. While a great majority of students are economically privileged, some are only able to attend the university due to Colgate’s commitment to meeting students’ financial needs. That said, even a handful of Students of Color in my courses is always a pleasant surprise.

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Nonetheless, before students are able to take additional courses within our department, it is expected that they take “The American School,” which in many ways functions as a foundational course. Many students come to the classroom clinging desperately to the idea that education is truly the great equalizer, never really having had to think, (or be encouraged to think) about their own academic trajectories, who they interacted with on the journey, and who they never realized was absent the whole time. Needless to say, there is much (un)learning that transpires throughout the course of our time together. In my section of EDUC 101, my students (including my co-authors) and I wrestle with the idea that American schools have been forged and rooted in struggle and that contrary to popular belief, they have *always* been contested spaces. And yet, we are called to “[...] acknowledge that educational institutions operate in contradictory ways, with their potential to oppress and marginalize co-existing with their potential to emancipate and empower” (Solórzano and Yosso, 2001, p. 598).

With poetry as the medium of choice, Dr. Bell, the facilitator of learning and critical thought, Anthony, a sociology major powerfully coming to voice, and Racquel, a creative seeking outlet to produce meaning of her lived experiences within and beyond the classroom setting, collectivize to rethink the possibilities inherent within study and struggle (Patel, 2021). In so doing, all three of us have come to recognize and grapple with writing as a means of empowerment as well as a tool that aids in the building of critical consciousness and personal and intellectual transformation within and beyond the classroom environment.

Conceptual Framework

Critical race theory is a theoretical framework that gives us the tools to better understand as well as contend with issues of race, racism, and power embedded within the very fabric of American society (Delgado and Stefancic, 2023). Through storytelling, the focus and narrative shifts from the deleterious effects of majoritarian stories. This shift makes all the difference. People of Color, their experiential knowledge, and their stories of resistance work together to expose the myriad ways interlocking systems of oppression negatively impact their ability to live, *be*, and thrive. While critical legal theorists initially conceptualized this important paradigm, scholars of education (Tate and Ladson-Billings, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Yosso et. al, 2001, Brayboy, 2005; Covarrubias and Liou; 2014) have since expanded this framework not only to magnify the salience of race, racism, and power within and beyond legal and academic settings, but to also highlight the crucial role storytelling plays in empowering People of Color to “name [their] reality” and disrupt “business as usual.”

Subsequently, when paired with the work of Dolores Delgado Bernal, (2002) *Students of Color*, in particular, are positioned as holders and creators of knowledge who are actively struggling toward liberation and working through the complexities of their lived experiences and material realities. We draw upon this standpoint as a means of rejecting deficit-oriented pedagogies and classroom environments predicated upon the banking method of teaching and learning as explained by Paulo Freire (2021) and bell hooks (1994). Connecting critical race theory with the idea that *Students of Color* are holders and creators of knowledge creates room for larger discussions on *how* we can tap into the untapped potential of said students, especially those navigating Predominantly White Institutions (Yosso, 2005; Gonzalez et al., 2006) Furthermore, when we consider the works of radical Feminists of Color (Guy-Sheftall, 1995; Moraga and Anzaldúa, 2003; 2022), who were also writers — activists deeply connected to community, educators, staunch advocates for intersectional justice, among many other things —

we observe the ways in which literacy, learning, and liberation have *always* been inextricably linked. Thus, we draw upon the principles of critical race theory, critical pedagogy, and Women of Color feminisms to foreground the power of building critical consciousness, and fostering critical literacies among Students of Color hungry for critical engagement within Predominantly White Institutions of higher education.

Poets' Statement

To exist within academia as a Person of Color means disregarding your experiences as knowledge and succumbing to the publicized narrative. Throughout history, the words and works of the majority have erased and buried the community of People of Color. The narrative that survives is the one maintained by society and society tells us to understand these narratives as facts with historical significance. Doing so has inculcated a sense of inadequacy into our sense of being; it is as though our thoughts, experiences, and truth(s) hold no weight on their own.

The introductory education course “EDUC 101: The American School” at Colgate University with Professor Bell was different. The class aimed to highlight our experiences — the experiences of those marginalized — within the school system and delineate the discrepancies the system was built on. For once, there was a teacher who understood us as knowledge producers rather than just students. Professor Bell fostered our curiosity and provoked the passions we were prone to suppressing. We remained equally impassioned to speak our truth to power. In one of the assignments, we were moved to disregard the word count limit for fear of risking our messages.

Although we were apologetic in response, Professor Bell urged us not to be apologetic but to wonder why we felt inclined to silence ourselves. As intimidating as it felt to go against the professor’s standards and rubric, a sense of urgency overcame us to finally finish our thought. What we realized was that we didn’t believe in our truth any less or think that what we knew was invaluable; we were simply adapting to survive. We were surviving by being passive participants, following rubrics, and citing authors, but Professor Bell taught us that was not surviving, but rather permitting our erasure. We will be consistently silenced, cut off, and “invisibilized” until we start writing ourselves back into existence.

When navigating spaces that never allowed residency by people like us, the work necessary is urgent. We occupy an intellectual space, one rooted in whiteness, rooted in homogeneity, but we come from places where whiteness and academia are foreign. We depended on our community to pass on life’s most valuable lessons through stories, poems, and history; this is the knowledge that raised us. We have experienced the spectrum of the American School and only through this course, EDUC 101, did we find the strength to demand our space rather than just occupy it. We remain conscious of the stark difference between this privileged world and the reality for most People of Color in this system. We share a sense of responsibility to bring our communities into every space we enter. We share our communities and our *knowing* with the world through our writing. We share everything we have by writing.

Racquel’s poem

The body is a creature of habit

So maybe it makes sense that I learned to silence myself

Maybe, my body became so comfortable in that silence that I thought that's where I needed to be

My senior year,

I was awarded a prize,

My headmaster addressing the school said

“She is an incredible friend and community member, pushing her school to be true to its ideals”

I was awarded a prize

I was awarded my shame gilded in pride

I learned how funny language is

If you compliment me on the outcome of my suffering,

Then I must thank you for it

If you praise the person I become because of your pain

Then I must be proud of it

If you force me to call you headmaster,

I must respect it

I was being a friend

Praising unity in the land of opportunity

I was naive to believe them when they looked like listeners

I felt sorry when they responded like prisoners

Stuck,

In a system that set them up for failure

Can't you see that it is not their fault that they live this way?

That they can only see the lack of privilege as peculiar?

The George B. Blake prize is awarded in recognition of extended voluntary and generous service to others.

It seems now, entirely agonizing,

To be recognized for my service to others

Service solely responsible for my survival

Perhaps I was only seen as a friend because I allowed them to believe my work was for them,

Perhaps I believed once that it was actually for them

“We seek to provide the most meaningful educational experience our students will ever have in their lives,”

So why did I have to fight?

The mission statement that I was fed

Eventually felt like mockery

They believed it to be true,

So much so,

that I thought it applied to me too

I was ordered to learn neutrally

To accept their teachings openly
that my meaningful educational experience must be deserved
A daily reminder that my spot is not assured

My mind soon began to degrade,
Considering the places that I belong,
What was given this authority?
To convince me,
That my bane existence is wrong

I was used to being blatantly ignored,
To be made invisible,
To be swallowed in noise
I was so used to my tongue burning in poise

My worst fear as a girl of color,
Was to get lost in this system of power
It's realizing that I could not be more than what they thought me to be
Because their desires disapproved of me

I was told to shut up by a white boy in 10th grade English
Defending Kaepernick as a liberator of our mental stuck in this perpetual state
Prideful,
In explaining his role as educator and sufferer
Seeing everything I know and feel through his kneel

I was told to shut up by a white boy in 10th grade English
And I recognized
my place in the classroom
It had already been designed
And my worst fear played out,
They saw me as everything I had previously assumed
I was stripped to my misunderstanding that I could exist neutral in this space,
Down to the darkened wronged impression that I could escape this foolish fate

I was told to shut up by a white boy in 10th grade English and I had to apologize
I'm Sorry.
I'm Sorry?
My own voice suffocated my thoughts,
Each syllable sour with shame
When I thought I may have been finally seen, their true intentions began to unfold
It was an empty commitment,
A weightless word

For the first time
A "sorry" didn't sound right It felt like the S

It was too sssshhhh shaken with disbelief
Or the R
The R was too
Rrrrr ready to sacrifice it
I was used to apologizing,
For taking up space
For existing within their place
A place that permits his rage with my presence
That likens his and my experience
They tried to justify his inability to be uncomfortable with the depth of my trouble

I was apologizing for sharing my knowledge
And for my experience being seen as so outrageous,
So impossible,
That it was a lie by nature
That I had to be silenced.
Is it my fault that you cannot see a life other than your own?

I began to know this as truth
That my knowledge was unproved

In that silence,
I began to listen
I heard Audre Lorde as she escaped the silence and spoke through the paper
As I listened, I knew there was no one to interrupt

I heard Tupac as he grew from concrete.
There was no bound or defeat
I saw their ideas morph through generations and their thoughts be preserved through time
I exist amongst my peers
Freely and unapologetically on paper.
There is no need to apologize on paper
To be quiet on paper
I was free to experience the world
To be my ancestors' dreams unfold

There was no one pretending to listen or to make me feel small
A paper must intuitively trust the writer
It trusted me.
It will always trust me.

I was told to shut up by a white-boy in 10th grade English
And my ambitions were killed
My perceptions and fears fulfilled
My identity became distinctive as my will diminished
I had no interest in respecting

a system only expecting
I was cursed to a cycle of double consciousness
I know because of the blood running through the pens of my people
I AM because of the pen I use to write my future
Are you here with us now?

Anthony's poem

Here, on the intersection of Whittier Boulevard and Maple Avenue
From the high-top *Converses posted on telewire
The ones tied together with colored laces
To that little sidewalk behind the corner store alley
Cracked, tagged, and in need of repair,
Behind the security bars of my window,
A home inside a prison
Even up above where the ghetto bird roams
Preying on melanated souls

It clearly doesn't require half a million dollars for a sociology degree
To recognize that the world is off balance
The academy brags of its commitment to Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion
A desire to solve the world's most pressing issues
What a paradox then,
That the problem seeks to be the solution

Structures of power created in such a way
That these same people we study in Sociology
The working class, the immigrants, the unhoused, and other displaced peoples
Only exist in the abstract; in textbooks, lectures, and imagination
But not tangibly, not breathing here within these same four walls

Am I a ghost?
Have I not been breathing here within this institution?
Have I not been raising my hand for an eternity?
Pleading for the chance to speak
To share a truth that risks my livelihood as much as it does yours

It's almost as if my taking up of space
Taking up that little chair with that built in desk
One less seat for the elite
As if someone mistook a pinto bean for a grain of white rice
Is a glitch in the system

"No pertenezco"; I don't belong here

My people aren't worthy of a space here
Yet somehow, narratives of us are formed here
Often told inaccurately
Of how we are low-class
Of a people that threaten modernity and development
Of a people that simply don't wish to better themselves

Social deviants are what they call us
Sick people in need of a cure

I'm sorry *ama*,
All those times
Never forgetting those goodnight kisses
Those little potions, the *remedios* you would craft
The tubs of VapoRub, pots of lemon tea
Chili cheese fries and Fanta Strawberry at Arry's
Carrying me tight across your arms
Running to drop me off with Mrs. Gonzalez
The melodies your heart sang
When I'd rest against your chest
The constant reminders *que "si se puede"*
I could be a doctor, a firefighter, perhaps an artist
All those dreams we crafted together
All of that
Somehow not enough to save me from this disease

Apparently, I didn't cite enough readings
Enough research findings
Enough quotes from the 1800s

To understand my lived experiences
The many "*mijo echale ganas*" "EBT or WIC?"
"I'll bring the bus fare next time"

To realize that lived, legacies of resilience to cycles of oppression
To relate a type of knowledge gained

Gained far removed from literary text
Or from the tongue of a PhD graduate

To recognize that layer of perspective
Silenced by the dominant powers that be
Are linked to histories of who belongs and who doesn't
Is quite a dangerous thing

What am I to do now?

There is no turning back
No second chances
No undoing
Of the mountains crossed
Oceans swam
Families lost
For a dream which I'll never get the sleep for

The unspoken "do's and don'ts" to the formal education setting:

Among others,

Do listen to the professor
Do raise your hand before speaking
Do submit your work before 11:59 PM

But,

Please don't challenge this "education" you are receiving
Don't question why we experience space and place differently
And for People Of Color, just don't be

Quite frankly, our livelihoods are being erased
Who knew these fine lines of black ink
sprawled across this 8.5 by 11-inch sheet
could open up another dimension
A portal into a safe haven
Where what I know to be true,
That inner voice and memory
Is not silenced by the pressures to present knowledge a certain way
Is not lost to the convenience of accepting inequality as natural
Is not bound by rubrics and grading scales

And instead,

Opens up a place where our dreams could be made possible
Where all those structures that lead to -isms and -phobias cease to exist

This is what writing for liberation looks like.

Can you hear us now?

Discussion

At a time where complete histories are being erased, whitewashed, and sanitized, (Hartocollis and Fawcett, 2023) Students of Color are rewriting themselves back into existence.

Creating mirrors they can look into to see themselves and those they love reflected back to them as they navigate hostile living and learning environments (Gonzalez, (2022). Racquel and Anthony came to EDUC 101C: The American School. Slightly lifeless. Apologetic, but unsure of why they had to be. Both resuscitated themselves in my course. This revival was necessary. This revival was urgent. This revival is still now.

Dr. Micere Githae Mugo, a poet, playwright, essayist, novelist, orator, educator, and scholar once said, “Writing can be a lifeline, especially when your existence has been denied, especially when you have been left on the margins, especially when your life and process of growth have been subjected to attempts at strangulation.” Like Racquel, in this moment, Dr. Mugo’s words bring me back to Audre Lorde’s “Litany for Survival.” Still so resonant — transcendent:

and when we speak we are afraid
our words will not be heard
nor welcomed
but when we are silent
we are still afraid

So it is better to speak
remembering
we were never meant to survive.

Anthony and Racquel have spoken. Are you listening? Many Students of Color are dying slow and painful deaths within many halls, corners, and crevices of academe (Love, 2019). But, in the words of the Aboriginal Rights group in Queensland, “If you have come here to help me you are wasting your time, but if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together.” As a first-generation Black woman educator of Caribbean ancestry, my liberation is bound up with that of Racquel and Anthony. Their truths freed me/free me over and over and over again. Their truths beckon me to reconsider always my pedagogy and my praxis. How will we engage in above/underground operations within and across institutions not designed for nor desiring to nurture the brilliance of Students of Color, their histories, and their truths? How will we work together to facilitate education as a practice of freedom and as a lifeline for students languishing, perishing, and in need of life support across American school contexts?

How can our pedagogies restore? Are we intentional about drawing upon theoretical frameworks (the very ones that are crucified, vilified, set aside might I add) that inform our pedagogy and praxis in ways that acknowledge, center, and affirm students who have been overlooked, marginalized, and devalued historically and currently? Have we considered the ways in which James Baldwin and Robin D.G. Kelley are speaking to one another across time and space? “The paradox of education is precisely this,” says Baldwin, “that as one begins to become conscious one begins to examine the society in which he is being educated.” Kelley responds with, “Love and study cannot exist without struggle, and struggle cannot occur solely inside the refuge we call the university. Being grounded in the world we wish to make is fundamental.”

Anthony and Racquel are literal and symbolic beings. For them, poetry is not a luxury, but a sheer necessity. How many other Anthonys and Racquels are out there in search of a classroom

space where they do not have to feel obligated to apologize to appease the status quo, or feel like they must remain silent *because* they are not members of the status quo? The exploration of study and struggle should not be confined to introductory courses within departments dedicated to educational study. Rather, it should be taken up in critical ways in courses students least expect (Burgess and Williams; 2022; Kokka, 2019).

Anthony and Racquel came to my class already brilliant, already critical, already enough. As educators, it is *our* responsibility to see them, engage critically with them, and push them to harness “the strength to demand [their] space [within academia] rather than just occupy it.” And if you listen closely, you will hear the pounding of hearts as they are being resuscitated in classroom spaces where *everyone* present, *including* White students, is urged to take ownership of their learning and encouraged to think deeply about how their liberation is bound up with that of the person seated next to them. Writing is a lifeline. Poetry is a pathway. For many People of Color, writing for our lives is not a new practice (<https://www.aiisf.org/poems-and-inscriptions>). However, empowering Students of Color to tap into these legacies of resistance both intellectually and rhetorically can very well be the difference between life and death within institutions never architected for their survival.

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