Control, Waste, and Danger
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Abstract

School positions white teachers as precarious contractions, expected to both enforce and submit to colonizing discourses (Grimat, 1988), as part of the larger project of patriarchal, white-supremacist nation-building. **We draw on collective memory work (Davies, 2006; Haug, 1987)** to theorize thecottaging racist and patriarchal discourses penning our embodied memories of classroom teaching. **The memory we analyze illuminates the precarity of a young white teacher’s body as she is about to pass out in her classroom from overwhelming menstrual pain.** We explore her need for, and adamantly refusal of, her brown-bodied male students who wanted to hold her and carry her to safety.

Methodology

Collective memory work (CMW) is a methodological approach first developed by Frigga Haug’s (1987) collective of feminist Marxist women in Germany during the 1980s. Its aim is to capture the “truthness, subjectivity, and complexity” of embodied thinking and being in the world through an analysis of memory and language (Davies & Giannoni, 2006, p. 3). Bronwyn Davies and Susan Gannon (2006) write that memories are always already part of qualitative research (i.e., in the form of interview responses and observational field notes); CMW simply makes those remembered lived experiences the central focus of the method. CMW does not position memory as “the truth,” but rather uses the literacies of writing, telling, listening, and analyzing our own and others’ memories to produce truths in relation to what cannot actually be recovered—the moment as it was lived (p. 3). These particular, local, and situated truths help us understand how we are socially constructed and discursively constituted through the moments we remember and the ways we retell our stories. Through this methodology we bring theory into collision with our everyday lived experience (p. 3).

The memory that starts this chapter was written as data within the process of CMW by Angela, Colleen, and Erin, who for several years have been working together, under Tim’s mentorship, around their shared interest in the constructed and discursively constituted through the moments we remember. “In this moment, the gaze was...”

A Memory

Erin breathes in deeply, sharply. She lashes her body on the edge of the teacher’s desk for a moment, closes her eyes, and sees herself crumbling to the floor, curling up into a ball, letting everything go. Getting to the end of this 90-minute class feels impossible. She opens her eyes wide, looks out to the students sitting in rows in front of her: working on their assignment, playing on their cell phones, doing nothing. She asks them to work quietly today. What a waste. She pushes herself up and off the desk, back on to solid ground. Maybe she needs to walk around, get her blood flowing, breathe and focus on something other than the pain of her cramps. Kind over matter. The doctors always said that her period cramps would get better as she got older. But they never really believed how bad it was. Her pain today is about as intense as it ever gets—and as certainly bad as it has ever been while she has been teaching. It feels like something’s wrong with that fault that it’s still so bad, this invisible pain, that she’s 23-years-old and she doesn’t have control over her own pain and bleeding. She approaches a student sitting in the first row. “How’s your reading going?” she asks. He keeps his gaze down on his book. “It’s good, Miss.” Maybe they don’t notice. She wanders away from the student and across the front of the classroom; another wave of pain hits her. She clutches the waist-high stool in front of the chalkboard. Erin closes her eyes and drops into a drouth, clinging to the stool, then quickly pulls herself back up. When she turns around to sink into the seat, she almost falls backwards. Then she sees them.

The two young men are standing there on either side of her. They are both tall and strong, one in his football jersey, the other in a baggy black t-shirt, hair shaved close to their scalps, smooth brown skin, a few little hairs jutting out from their chins. They are senior boys—full of confidence, with ear-to-ear grins, charming their way into class ten minutes late. Now she notices how their deep brown eyes look at her. They are concerned. And afraid. “Are you okay, Miss?” one of them asks. She focuses on the floor now, breathing in and out, seeing only their tennis shoes, knowing who are they. Her students. Julio and Anthony. “I’m not feeling well. I’ll be okay,” she responds. “I just need a minute.” The boys remain fixed by her side and their bodies block her view of the rest of the class. She closes her eyes again. She hears them. “Should we take her to the nurse?” “We can carry her there.” Julio speaks louder now, “Miss, you don’t look good. We can...”

She frees. She hears her heart beating in her ears: No. No. No. She sees herself in these young men’s arms: through the hall, a down flight of stairs, past the front office, and through the commons to the nurse’s office. She wonders, “What have I done?” That journey is too far away, too dangerous, too public. Already a class of students has seen her, is too ill to teach them. But she cannot let these boys pick her up and hold her in their arms. When she goes to the nurse—if she goes, she’ll get there on her own. She opens her eyes and looks up. They would do this for her. “No....” she says loudly. “No one is carrying me anywhere. It’s okay.”

Control

Methodology

Control Surveillance

In addition to the hierarchical structuring of women within schools, women also served as crucial tools within a structure of surveillance, maintaining adherence to the status quo. Situated as the eyes of the state, women’s bodies were harnessed to meet its controlling and capitalist needs. While they clearly exerted power over their students and represented the power of the state, they did not play a significant role in the development or administration of that power.

The White Gaze

The white gaze, according to Ruth Frankenberg (1993), acts as a social construction “in the examining and contestation of women’s race consciousness” (p.18), and is akin to Foucault’s understanding of the assumed authority that lies in the self-disciplining power of the imagined panopticon. As such, the normalizing and controlling authority of white, patriarchal, heteronormative and capitalist structures constitute the white gaze. In reading Erin’s story, we considered the ways in which the white gaze operated both through and on Erin, as a white female teacher, and in the ways it is functioned to enforce the separation of white, female bodies and brown, male bodies.

Waste

“Waste a what.”...waste is a subject position constructed in opposition to what is good, desired, whole, and usable. It is unwanted excess. It is mistakes and missed opportunities. It needs to be managed and dealt with.

Reading Waste

When reading waste within the narrow view of knowledge and learning constructed by the efficiency narrative, the day was essentially wasted for Erin and her students. This waste existed as a direct result of her inability to maintain the authority of the teacher; the pain of her menstrual cramps became a waste of her labor in the classroom. Erin needed to avoid intimacy, vulnerability, or an expression of her needs around her monthly bleeding in order to control and reduce waste.

Re-Reading Waste

A re-reading of Erin’s declaration “What a waste.” allows us to see Erin’s classroom as a product of systemic racism and oppression. Erin’s black and brown-bodied students were constructed as human waste when confronted with the “common curriculum” that feigned neutrality while advancing white, middle-class, and hetero-patriarchal values. Ultimately, her students’ lives, cultures, and communities were disconnected from school, not accidentally but purposefully as the public school system served to reinforce white supremacy. As a white woman teacher, Erin was charged with the reproduction of that system, that in producing this waste, was doing exactly what it was designed to do.

It is in Erin’s state of corporeal vulnerability that she is able to see and expose the waste of human lives sitting before her in neat rows.

Conclusion

These moments in Erin’s memory—of seeing her students more clearly for a split second, of internally acknowledging the waste, and of understanding that “they would do this for her”--these cracks and fissures are glimpses of possibility for what could be in a system deeply entrenched in what is. After this moment of disillusionment, vulnerability, and precarity in her classroom, things shifted for Erin in her role as a teacher. Through our analysis, we aim, as much as possible, to lend to Erin’s students who, through their attempts to take action with their bodies, opened up the possibility for an alternative story to be told. Because of Julio and Anthony, Erin began to cultivate more radical and loving relationships with her students. This possibility felt dangerous because she still feared, for herself and her students, the ways that closeness between her white female body and the brown and black bodies of her students would be punished. But for a moment she saw the care those bodies could have for her and to give to one another and how that radical care might begin to peel away at the layers of authority, surveillance, hierarchy, and control embedded in our classroom. In this moment, the gaze was softened, waste was vibrant and alive, and Erin’s body and thought and feeling became less constrained.

Selected Bibliography


