Confronting Racial Battle Fatigue and Comforting My Blackness as an Educator

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Black, Female, Educator: Heel toe, clack, tap, tap, heel toe clack, tap, tap, chasse, chasse I go, gliding around the classroom, teaching the day’s lesson. I find myself performing a tap dance, moving to the rhythm of a fast hi-hat. My performance is an entertaining one, it is believable and energetic; however, underneath I am ANGRY, I am cringing and I could scream until my throat BLEEDS. My stomach is in knots and my heart is aching and heavy with the weight of what it means to be BLACK in America today: DEATH. Probable death. Yesterday, I watched video footage of another White police officer murder another Black man … no, a Black child this time—a 12-year-old boy. When I enter the classroom today, I am TIRED … in every way. I am mourning; I am experiencing emotional and psychological trauma and I have had NO time—less than 24 hours—to recover. My homogenous classroom of all White students makes my BLACKNESS even LOUDER. It is an awkward noise that only I can hear. Yet, I smile, and I laugh, and I teach, all while moving through the stages of grief, minutes at a time. I don’t understand what BLACKNESS does to everyone who is not Black—but I am tired of trying to outdance the confrontation it creates with others. This Blackness overwhelms me.

Introduction

Black people accumulate emotional and psychological baggage after being required to perform, function, and thrive in a world that was created with the goal of Black people failing on multiple levels. Dubois’s (1903) distinctively spoke to this “song and dance” when he introduced the world to the concept of double-consciousness, which refers to the way that Black Americans must look at themselves through the eyes of others while simultaneously attempting to self-define. This sense of “twoness” renders it difficult to have one unified identity. Historically, Black people in the United States have been required to live within the constraints of a specific narrative, developed by White European society, that they did not create. Black people have to work within that imposed narrative, or work to the point of exhaustion to counter it. Such continuous negotiation of identity directly influences the development of an affliction called
racial battle fatigue (RBF), defined as exhaustion and “stress associated with racial microaggressions [that cause] African Americans to experience various forms of mental, emotional, and physical strain” (Smith, Yosso, & Solórzano, 2006, p. 300). RBF is the result of the “energy expended on coping with and fighting racism that is exacted on racially marginalized and stigmatized groups” (Martin, 2015, p. xv).

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My above narrative is not unique—Black and Brown professionals working in various fields across the United States share similar stories (i.e., Collins-Sibley, 2015; Martin, 2015; Pain & DeFrancisco, 2015). However, while RBF is indeed pervasive in Black and Brown communities, when RBF impacts educators the stakes are higher than usual. Exhaustion, helplessness, anger, resentment, and anxiety invade classrooms, and thus students’ lives, using the bodies of Black and Brown teachers as vessels. The mind and emotional state of a teacher influences her/his students’ learning. hooks (1994) writes: “[To] teach in a manner that respects and cares for the souls of our students is essential if we are to provide the necessary conditions where learning can most deeply and intimately begin” (p. 13). While I find hooks’s (1994) assertion to be valid, I understand that Black and Brown educators must not only teach in a manner that respects and cares for the souls of their students but also in a manner that respects and cares for their own souls. Without such self-care, our desire to continue critical consciousness but also attend to my need for personal self-care. I have found that my coping strategies do not rid me of RBF; the strategies simply provide me with some comfort and resolution when emotions stirred from racist acts overwhelm my psyche and affect my overall well-being.

Recognizing and Understanding Racial Battle Fatigue

The overwhelmingly high number of deaths of Black men, women, and children are intimately tied to my identity as a Black person. In 2013, soon after the death of Trayvon Martin, I noticed that I was becoming progressively tired, irrationally defensive, and overwhelmingly depressed in general. At one point feelings of helplessness consumed me. I started experiencing weekly migraines, gastrointestinal issues, and unusual anxiety when my family and I stepped out of my house. In addition, I eventually started to dread what I once loved: teaching. Fortunately (or unfortunately), during my initial bouts with fatigue and depression I maintained my ability to effectively teach my eager, seemingly unscathed, and predominately White undergraduate preservice teachers with a smile. However, after some time my symptoms of anxiety became more prominent and debilitating as I, like others around the country, continued to see the unjust violence toward Black men, women, and children in the United States. I canceled my undergraduate classes on at least two occasions because I could not overcome the anger and resentment that I was experiencing after watching a young Black teenager being killed in the street and left to bleed out for hours with no medical attention. This instance of complete withdrawal made me realize that I needed a way to understand and cope with the traumatic stress I was facing.

As most academics do, I turned to literature in hopes of finding support through narratives of other Black faculty experiencing similar race-based emotional and psychological trauma. I soon found Stanley’s (2006) edited volume Faculty of Color: Teaching in Predominately White Colleges and Universities. Chapter authors Smith, Yosso, and Solórzano introduced me to the concept of racial battle fatigue. They write:

The stress ensuing from racism and racial microaggressions leads people of color to exhibit various psychophysiological symptoms, including suppressed immunity and increased sickness, tension headaches, trembling and jumpiness, chronic pain in healed injuries, elevated blood
pressure, and a pounding heartbeat. Likewise, in anticipation of a racial conflict, people of color may experience rapid breathing, an upset stomach, or frequent diarrhea or urination. Other symptoms of racial battle fatigue include constant anxiety, ulcer, increased sweating or complaining, insomnia or sleep broken by haunting conflict-specific dreams, rapid mood swings, difficulty thinking or speaking coherently, and emotional and social withdrawal in response to racial microaggressions or while in environments of mundane racial stressors. Ultimately, these symptoms may lead to people of color losing confidence in themselves, questioning their life’s work or even their life’s worth. (pp. 300–301)

Smith et al.’s (2006) chapter helped me identify the relationship between my anger and grief and the physical and psychological symptoms that started to affect my desire to continue my life’s goal of teaching. This newfound knowledge about RBF initiated reflective considerations about the locations where RBF was exacerbated for me. In many ways it was the classroom because of the required repression of aspects of my identity and emotions as a Black woman experiencing psychological violence associated with racism. Therefore, I began to consider ways that my classroom and teaching pedagogy could be transformed in an effort to better support my self-care. My research yielded varying diverse pedagogies that guided reciprocal humanizing practices in the classroom, benefiting both student and teacher. Through reflective pedagogical experiments I identified my classroom as a fertile space to work through my struggles with RBF.

Coping via Critical Pedagogies: Racial Battle Fatigue as a Site of Departure

Martin (2015) shared excerpts from an interview with Sonia Nieto, diversity and equity educator and scholar, in which Nieto asserted that there is a psychic cost to doing antioppression work with resistant students. Nieto’s assertion made me wonder how might educators of color work to maintain healthy psyches via their pedagogical choices? Which pedagogies lend themselves to teachers’ of color self-care? For decades women of color have sought and written about strategies for mentally surviving in a predominately White academic space, specifically working against the White patriarchal structures that essentially ignore the multiplicity of identity (see Evans & Grant, 2008; Gutiérrez y Muhs, Neumann, González, & Harris, 2012; Moreno, Smith, Clayton-Pedersen, Parker, & Teraguchi, 2006). Regarding racial battle fatigue in academia, educators of color have used counter-storytelling (Smith et al., 2006), cultural pride reinforcement (Smith, 2004), and spiritual and religious retreat (Smith, 2004) as means to work through the debilitating racial exhaustion. In this paper I hope to add to this set of literature by explaining the ways racial battle fatigue has moved me to explore varying and diverse critical pedagogical frameworks.

Reality Pedagogy

Reality pedagogy, coined by Chris Emdin (2016), refers to “an approach to teaching and learning that has a primary goal of meeting each student on his or her own cultural and emotional turf” (p. 27). Furthermore, “instead of seeing the students as equal to their cultural identity, a reality pedagogue sees students as individuals who are influenced by their cultural identity” (pp. 27–28). Reality pedagogy has theoretical grounding in culturally relevant pedagogy (Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995) and critical pedagogy (Apple & Carlson, 1998; Freire, 1998); however, Emdin (2011) critiqued both frameworks as being unable to offer teachers “tangible tools that support them in becoming transformative pedagogues” (p. 286). Emdin (2011) asserted that teachers’ “considering” of the cultural background of students does not necessarily translate into them delivering content in a way that resonates with students and encourages them to independently engage with content more deeply. Emdin (2011) suggested that reality pedagogy moves culturally relevant and critical pedagogy to action by offering five tangible tools that “consider” the cultural backgrounds of students and other explicit tools and strategies that direct teachers and students in relationship building, which inevitably results in transformative learning experiences. While reality pedagogy can be read as essentially student centered and primarily interested in destabilizing a hegemonic, deficit-oriented understanding of students of color that has been created by predominately White educators, I have identified how some of reality pedagogy’s components offer support for teachers of color who deal with racial battle fatigue. There are suggestions of teacher self-work embedded in reality pedagogy that can address microaggressions and racial stressors that cause racial battle fatigue.

One significant tenet of reality pedagogy is “courage.” Emdin’s (2016) “courage” tenet challenges educators to “teach without fear” (p. 31). Emdin (2016) wrote, “To be an effective black male
educator for youth of color, I was being advised to erase pieces of myself and render significant pieces of who I was invisible” (p. 35). In this chapter Emdin wrote about having to assume the role of the “ideal” Black person instead of being his “unabashed urban” Black self. I can identify with Emdin’s experience of having to perform within a specific Black teacher narrative, especially teaching at a predominantly White institution (PWI).

Specifically, there are implicit requests often made by White students, colleagues, and department heads for educators of color to suppress their racial identities, their interests in racial equity, and, ultimately, their voices. For example, White students often believe that educators of color who teach with critical education frameworks situated within race and equity have an “agenda,” a personal vendetta against White people, and are emotional, which affects their ability to grade objectively (Bryant et al., 2005). Interestingly, White educators who teach similar topics are not characterized similarly. Educators of color are asked to be completely void of racial and/or cultural identity and are not allowed to address White privilege or critique racialized oppression because White students often read such critiques as personal attacks (Patton & Catching, 2009; Ross & Edwards, 2016).

Emdin (2016) suggested that “the process of personal repression is in itself traumatic and directly impacts what happens in the classroom” (p. 23). For me, removing my authentic racialized self from the classroom meant that I could not, without professional repercussions, address the grief and psychological trauma I experienced after seeing a Black child murdered in the street. For a long time I consistently worked to do everything in my power to not be seen as the “angry Black woman,” falling victim to negative stereotype threat (Carter-Black, 2008; Collins, 1986). However, in reality I was angry. “ Courage,” in the term of Emdin’s reality pedagogy, forced me to consider how I would gain the nerve to be more self-centered in my teaching instead of only student centered.

**Pedagogy of Vulnerability**

**Pedagogy of vulnerability**, which has tangential parallels with reality pedagogy, is heavily theorized and expounded upon by Edward Brantmeier (2013). Pedagogy of vulnerability refers to the decision to open yourself, contextualize that self in societal constructs and systems, co-learn, admit you do not know, and be human. ... Simply understood, a pedagogy of vulnerability is about taking risks—risks of self-disclosure, risks of change, risks of not knowing, risks of failing—to deepen learning. (p. 96)

Brantmeier’s pedagogy of vulnerability is situated in broader critical theoretical positions; he developed and framed the pedagogy’s tenets around literature from scholars such as Bernal Delgado (2002), Peggy McIntosh (1989), and Allan Johnson (2006). Using these scholars suggests that educational frameworks such as critical multicultural education, antiracist education, and social justice education undergird the pedagogy of vulnerability. Brantmeier (2013) explained that additional foundational frameworks include humanizing pedagogy and mutual vulnerability. The goals of pedagogy of vulnerability require educators to open their social identities and experiences for critical reflection and scrutiny in an effort to engage a community of learners in “critical thinking and reflection on diversity, including the topics of power, oppression, privilege, and social justice” (Brantmeier, 2013, p. 98). Furthermore, openly discussing issues of oppression, power, and privilege allows me to place my bias, resentment, and frustration on the table for my students to see.

Vulnerability in the classroom can “heal the effects of traumatic events that produce guilt, anxiety, resentment and injustice that persist and distort individual and national well-being” (Hattam, 2004, as cited in Keet, Zinn, & Porteus, 2009, p. 109).

**Performing Courage and Vulnerability: What Do These Pedagogical Tools Look Like?**

Courage and vulnerability primarily encourage me to destabilize hegemonic understandings of teacher identity that require teachers of color to be disconnected from their authentic selves and perform in deracialized ways. Teachers of color,
specifically women, are encouraged to keep our stories to ourselves, follow the rules, and make no waves (Gutiérrez y Muhs et al., 2012; Motha & Varghese, 2018). Such silencing of voices exacerbates RBF. So, in my classroom I began to teach with and through my personal stories, giving face to theory. For example, I shared the painful story of how I had to explain to my six-year-old Black son that Tamir Rice, a 12-year-old Black child, was unjustly murdered by a White police officer while playing with a toy gun at a playground. This personal story was the introduction to a unit about antiracist pedagogy. Courage and vulnerability guided me to renegotiate my teacher identity, which initially followed popular cultural myths that teachers must be completely separated from their emotional and moral self. Contrary to the normative narrative about who teachers are and what they should be in the United States, hooks (1994) asserted that “teachers must be actively committed to a process of self-actualization that promotes their own well-being if they are to teach in a manner that empowers students” (p. 15). Self-actualization, for me, means walking my Black experience through the door with my Black body.

Courage and vulnerability also give me the audacity to use explicit, pointed language in the classroom. It has become imperative for me to “call a thing a thing.” Specifically, conversations about race and racism are sometimes couched in non-threatening discourses. I am guilty of using this practice in my classroom. For example, I would position race within conversations around diversity, inclusion, and multiculturalism, which often left racism in the periphery because these terms have been expanded to include so many contexts of difference that the individual concepts are often hard to define. Therefore, I have identified the use of specific language as critical in calling out actors of racialized oppression. For example, while once apprehensive to say “White supremacy” in the classroom, I now introduce it as a primary term to emphasize the systemic macrolevel organization of racism. I also introduce concepts like “hegemony” and “homogenization” to undergraduates, even though I used to claim that these concepts were too sophisticated for them to explore. Reality pedagogy and pedagogy of vulnerability have helped me understand that my “claim” about student ability was driven by my own fear, which consequently affected the expectations I had for my students. For example, I initially feared that assigning my students the task of completing Harvard’s Project Implicit Association Tests (IATs) online would create an accusatory tone for the follow-up class discussion, as most people have some kind of bias. The IATs are a blatant and raw reminder of this; thus I feared potential backlash in the classroom. Now, even before the first class of the semester, my students are required to complete the race IAT and two additional IATs. I have found the tests to be dynamic catalysts for class discussion and for students’ personal reflections on their positionality, beliefs and practices in general. Consistently tip-toeing around issues of race and racism was emotionally exhausting for me, and it only stagnated learning opportunities that could have helped my students develop critical consciousness.

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Finally, Emdin’s (2016) and Brantmeier’s (2013) pedagogical tools give me permission to destabilize the “business as usual” mentality that guides classroom practices. While wars, mass shootings, daily police brutality, divisive political practices, environmental disasters, and more happen outside of the school, teachers tend to casually move on with their daily agenda. For the sake of possible conflict, I often closed the door to outside goings-on as well. However, I have learned that these world events do not remain outside the classroom doors, even after the doors are closed and locked. The implications of these events and the emotions that they evoke are embedded in the psyches of students as well as teachers—and thus is the perpetual lens through which learning and teaching occurs. Therefore, instigating conflict or not, my practice now places these events at the forefront of class, literally. At the beginning of some classes, I ask the students to form a circle with their chairs, and I then open the

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4There are 14 different IATs, including those related to religion, weight, gender, sexual orientation, and ability. I do not present these tests as undisputable truths about self; I instead use these tests to begin class dialogue, which includes critiquing the tests in addition to reflecting on the results.
floor to brave discussions. This practice actually evolved my students’ perceptions of my classroom. Students no longer see my classroom as an incubator for content knowledge acquisition but instead both as a site for vulnerability and comfort and as an open forum for sociopolitical critique and resistance. Instead of moving forward with syllabus items and “business as usual,” my students began to request that I address world events, tragic or otherwise, that affected our lives as humans. For example, when a White police officer in our very own city, Columbus, Ohio, murdered a 13-year-old Black boy, Tyre King, a White female student enrolled in one of my undergraduate courses sent me the following email:

Dr. Acuff:

I am so angry, and so sad right now. The news about Tyre King shocks my system on multiple levels. Even as enlightening as this class has been so far, I was under some vague and foolish assumption that Columbus was immune to the very deadly and violent parts of the conversation. Even as much speaking about systemic discrimination and inequity as we have done, the reality of this event makes me sure we must discuss it in class. Are there any particular readings regarding how communities of Police murdered children deal with this kind of trauma that you can direct me to? Thanks.

For me, this student’s email confirmed Brantmeier’s (2013) claim that vulnerability invites vulnerability as well as Emdin’s (2016) assertion that we should teach without fear and from the lived realities of the students. Without first establishing a classroom of courage and vulnerability, I am not confident that I would have received such an emotionally bold email in which a student actually requested to have a possibly contentious discussion with such a political undercurrent. It was validating to see that my student was an active initiator of vulnerability and courage. Our class discussion about King’s untimely death evolved into a conversation about race and racism in America. The conversation moved on to the topic of police brutality, and then to the relevance and critique of the Black Lives Matter movement. As a mother of three Black children, having a frank conversation about the unjust death of King, a mere teenager, was a self-care experience for me. However, it was simultaneously educationally beneficial for my students because they were able to work through issues of racism and power. This dynamic classroom experience was supported by the pedagogies that I have embraced, which communicate that modeling courage and vulnerability in the classroom works and works well.

Moving Forward

Experiencing RBF forced me to question my overall approach to teaching. I knew I had to figure out how my teaching could become an act of healing for me in this Black female body while steadily honoring my students’ learning process. These two goals of self-care and student learning have come to work together brilliantly, affecting not only my ability to cope with RBF but also my ability to more effectively engage my students in critical conversations about issues like race, equity, hegemony, and power. More recently, during my continued search for supportive frameworks I found a home in Black feminist thought (BFT; Collins, 1991; hooks, 2015) and womanist discourse (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002; Walker, 1983; Maparayan, 2012). In addition to their focus on standpoint epistemology, BFT and womanist literature discuss the tradition of caring that extends throughout the history of Black women teachers as well as the level of risk they are willing to take in the classroom (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002; Collins, 1991). Speaking even more explicitly to self-care and survival, Scott (2016) addresses the ideologically imposed, controlling image of the “strong Black woman” (see also Collins, 1991), which can imprison Black women by denying them opportunities to acknowledge and attend to their physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual health. The “strong Black woman” trope—while it counters the

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5In my classes I opt to create “brave spaces” as opposed to “safe spaces.” Dr. Melissa Crum and Keonna Hendrick’s multicultural critical reflective practice framework argues that a brave space, which is not always necessarily safe, is where critical learning happens. Dr. Crum explains: “The concept of ‘safe’ implies that no one’s feelings will get hurt. That sense of protection doesn’t allow for certain questions (possibly offensive questions) to be asked. Brave spaces allow people to unearth personal hidden stories that may be problematic, that may be racist, that may be sexist, that may be elitist, but brave spaces also offer opportunities for peers to push back on those stories. In a brave space, people who share their stories and ask questions must come from a genuine, productive place, and those who may become offended by the nature of the stories and questions must keep this sincerity into consideration. Brave spaces require a sense of forgiveness—the people in the group need to be able to forgive one another as they walk through their learning, as each person will be at a different stage of criticality” (M. Crum, personal communication, November 14, 2017). During the first class of the semester students collaboratively write a community agreement that supports the development of the classroom as a brave space where brave discussions happen.
tropes of the “mammy,” “jezebel,” and “sapphire”—still dehumanizes Black women because it portrays them as unbreakable and having super strength. Scott (2016) wrote, “Black women can be black feminist activists and take the time we need and deserve to heal, replenish, and rejuvenate. We can be simultaneously strong and fragile” (p. 130). BFT has helped me closely consider how the simultaneous interaction between race and gender further limits the socially acceptable behaviors of Black female educators in the classroom.

Hadnot (2002) so sincerely wrote, “I am tired of race. Bone-weary of thoughts about race. Fatigued by our society’s silence about race. Too broken down in spirit to shoulder the mantle of race” (p. 207). Hadnot (2002) continued, describing her racial battle fatigue:

After a while, these little daily indignities take their toll. And now I am simply tired of comporting myself to the expectations of white people. I am not going to be superwoman and I am not going to be mammy. Mine is the generation of integration and assimilation. Yet I do not want to be a social experiment any more. Mine is the generation of opportunity. Yet I have never felt so oppressed. … Corporate America has made many of us sick enough to seek psychological treatment; others have simply disappeared inside themselves, coming to work as holograms. (p. 209)

I have disappeared inside myself at times. I have gone to work as a hologram on more than one occasion. And honestly I cannot say that I will never return to a hologram again. The fatigue that accompanies the Black experience is a perpetual exhaustion that will never be alleviated as long as we continue to be “in denial about what race means to America and who we are in reference to it” (Singley, 2002, p. xi). For me, finding coping mechanisms that do not involve wearing a “mask that grins and lies” (Lawrence Dunbar as cited in Hadnot, 2002, p. 207) is imperative, as this mask causes RBF. Therefore, I cope with RBF through my life’s work as an educator who is simultaneously courageous and vulnerable. So far, Emdin’s (2016) and Brantmeier’s (2013) pedagogical tools help me leave the proverbial mask on the kitchen table, at least on most days.

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