

Why You Tryna Silence Her Body?

The Role of Education in Shaping the Black Female Body

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ABSTRACT

Artistic expression is a vessel to define, refine, understand and become. Poetry and dance are tongues and instinctive expressions of my thoughts, feelings, and analyses. Thus, my embodiment, challenges and responses to social inequities often merge in these forms. Yet, artistic expression can be seen as trivial when used as method to illustrate social inequities. Drawing on the works of feminists of color, I offer poetry and dance as a queered performance to name and resist my embodiment of racism, sexism, and heteropatriarchy. Using these methods with my body as the site of struggle and potential, this piece talks back to standards of analysis and demands accountability be taken for the marking, sculpting and appraisal of my black female body.

Keywords: Embodied (Re)memory, schooling, healing.

Dances to 'Good Intentions' by Me'Shell N'degeocello for 1:09

Here and Now:

I begin in the here and now.

Dancing somewhere on the highway between Champaign, IL and Buffalo, NY;

between Black and African American;

as a Black woman and Black gurl;¹

between performing for you and being an embodiment of performance;

as angry and excited; restricted, censored, refusing to be boxed in;

controlled by schooling; empowered by education;

nervous to have you hear the sound of my voice;

But even more painfully aware that if I remain silent,

others like me will continue to

suffer, self-silence and remain central proponents of our own subjugation.

I begin,

QUEER—

not quite this or that, dispossessed and possessed,

invisible and (hyper)visible, working from within liminality,

certainty of change, misunderstood, humbled but knowledgeable of my worth, submissive

to the work of identity-love-self expression-and reclamation of the body

And I will NOT apologise

(Re)memory² 1:

It is 2007, I am sitting in a class and the topic was that of race, specifically the desegregation of University of Georgia (UGA). We had just finished watching a documentary of the desegregation of UGA and were expected to engage in a conversation regarding our reactions to the documentary. Silence. There is simply silence. Frustrated and uncertain of the reason for the silence, I decide to open my book and refer to my list of the times, prior to this class,

specifically dedicated to race, that race was raised. I include who raised the issue of race, who responded, and how many times.

After this list, I sit and wait for the conversation to begin. The conversation begins with one white woman insisting that she does not discuss race because I will judge her. One-by-one white women out themselves and assert that I am the reason race is not discussed. For ten minutes the conversation was about ME BEING too strong, too assertive, critical of them and one who makes people uncomfortable. For TEN (emphasis added) minutes two professors, one tenured the other assistant professor, one white female the other black male, sat and watched. They sat and let a conversation, a class conversation theorising about race, turn into a conversation about the 'problem' in the class, me. A conversation about race became a conversation about the 'troublemaker', the one always raising issues of race, me. I was the race problem. I was the class problem. I was simply, A PROBLEM.

'WHEN YOU SEE ME'

Don't sit here!
and look at me
pretending to be in awe of my presence
Confident
in a fighting stance, yet free-flowing
blackfemale
educated
embodying every mark

cut
stab wound
tattooed onto my body and into my body's memory.

Who am I, you ask?
I am your former student.
Who loved education, not your schools
Who sat in your classes and learned about your grandfathers father, grandfather, brothers
and their successes
Who was only seen in class when diversity, race, being poor, and the inner city were topics
of discussion

Don't sit here
and look at my scars
removed, unfamiliar to them
the weapons you used are sitting right
there
on your face
in your briefcase
and the subject of which I am speaking
You told me
you would give me all my heart desire if
I submitted to you
My body

mind
dreams
family
You would give them back, said, you just wanted to fix them up
enhance
globalise
and clean them up

Don't sit here
with your head down
embarrassed at yourself
upset that you failed
LOOK AT ME!
You wanted me to crawl into a corner!?
ball up!
feel afraid!
unsure of myself
black girl chasing an unattainable all American white girl dream!
You expected me to beg
to be part of you and your domination
To accept the place carved out by you for me.
I know your in awe that your heteropatriarchal
white supremacist
hand in everything
including black life wasn't enuf
No need to tell me what you see...
I know
I know from your body
head down
legs bouncing up and down—nervous?

Your red cheeks
Water at the tip of your hairline
running down the side of your face
LOOK AT ME!
Don't worry
I do not wish to come back to your space
Your ex wife is my new teacher
She dared me to love myself
To find her, education, outside of your created structures
Urged me to read about the lies you told my teacher to tell me
You see, I stopped reading your books thinking I'd find myself long ago.
She told me to read about the beauty of being
young gifted and black³
And she knows that being
black—female—queer—working class—dancer—poet—graduate student
and much more
paints an imperfect masterpiece with my body as the canvas

When she looks at me she sees pieces of you
 When I look at me I see possibility
 But when you see me...

(Re)memory 2:

I love English. I mean, I' going to school to be a high school English teacher. All this time I have gotten by taking fun but hard courses. Feminist courses, Black Lit courses and the like. Now I'm stuck in this core course on an 'important' white man—Chaucer. Professor says, we must read and understand Middle English. We don't use it anymore. I don't know anyone who does, cept up in this class. I don't get it. I'm having trouble and decide to be proactive in my approach to education. At the end of class, I go to the professor and express my desire to come to office hours to get more assistance with reading and understanding Middle English. Her reply, 'someone like you would be having trouble'.

(Re)memory 3:

At the same time, I was taking a Native American Literature course—a class that had my attention and a professor who was invested in knowing what we felt and knew about the world. For our final exam she declared that we must write about something pressing to us. Something imposing on our lives, pressing on us. Something that keeps us up at night. So I started to write.

FEAR NO LONGER LIVES INSIDE ME

I opened my eyes to a world that adopted me
 As a child is adopted and brought into a home that
 did not welcome her but instead welcomed the extra
 money.

I opened my mind to new ideas and an ideology that degraded the one
 I believe in, laughed out our traditions, destroyed our bodies, and still
 called us BARBARIC!

I opened my heart to men and woman whose only interest in me pertained to labor or sex

I did as you told

I washed myself to get rid of my skin, which you called dirt. I blow dried
 and permed my hair to get rid of its natural beauty, which you called naps. I
 shaved the hair all over my body to rid myself of warmth, which you called savage like and
 manly.

I did all these things and in return I was given a bundle of fear

You are no longer my master

I opened up my legs...NO...they were thrust open by your demanding
 needs and raging ego. While I lay in pain and embarrassment because I was
 robbed of something I cherished.

I opened my mouth to let the blood ooze out after being beat over the head with a stick because I was not pretty enuf in your eyes.

I opened my books to the history of all people...No...to the history of your people. I accepted your history as golden and true; yet none of my ancestors were included, none besides the slaves and uncle toms.

I did as you pleased and learned all I could

Is this education? I have learned nothing more about my people, nothing other than what I learned growing up and therefore neither have you. But,

I still read and 'learn' in silence so that fear may not look my way.

You are no longer my teacher

I opened everything I had to understand you and where you were coming from, but you LAUGHED at me

MOCKED me

RAPED me

DEGRADED me

and DEFACED me

I no longer respect you

(Re)memory 4:

It's freshman year of high school. I enter class and realise I have been placed in Spanish 1. At the end of class, I stay after and tell to Ms Moirera that there has been a mistake and I am supposed to be in Spanish 2. She assures me that I am where I am supposed to be. I beg her to go check my records and she will see that I scored a 100 on the Spanish Proficiency test, which determined high school placement. Ms Moirera agrees to check the records.

At the end of our next Spanish class, I ask Ms Moirera if she looked at my records. She expresses that she had and I exclaim, 'I told you I got a 100 on the test'. I assumingly ask when I will be moved. Instead, she suggests that I stay in the course I was placed and take Spanish 2, during my lunch, until the first test. She asserts, 'just want to be sure you can handle the material'.

Dances to 'House of cards' by Foreign Exchange for 1:30

'KNOW YOUR PLACE!'

ALL MY LIFE I have heard, sensed, and smelled
still hear, sense and smell the sentiment that

I should know my place

[Know your PLACE]

Sit down! Be quiet! Calm down!
 You are too sensitive,
 too black, too smart...for your own good
 too feminine
 [Know your PLACE]

Quiet down, be still, work hard, submit, obey me
 You are too angry, too sexual
 too emotional, too fearless
 too mannish
 [Know your PLACE]

Shut up! Don't move! Smile. Dance for me!
 You are too lazy, too seductive, too much this and
 NOT enough that!
 Sit, quiet, stay, work, obey. Believe you are an animal and think not, because if you think...
 you will know your true place and
 NOT the place I carved out for you
 Because in reality, you are too much for me to handle
(February 2007)

(Re)memory 5:
 Soo, it's junior year of high school. I am sittin' in Honors English—the only one. The only
 black, non-white female in this all-girls predominantly white Catholic School. We are
 reading Huckleberry Finn and the white blonde female teacher wants someone to volunteer
 to read aloud. Kelly Bobak raises her hand, the teacher nods as clearance, and Kelly begins
 to read. I am taking notes, doodling, and reviewing the notes I wrote from earlier that week.
 I don't like to read line-for-line with the person reading aloud. Behind I hear snickering.
 She continues to read. The snickering increases. I wonder what it's about and decide to open
 the book to find the page where she is reading. Kelly continues to read. I identify the passage
 she is reading, and read toward the end of it. My heart pumps. My chest tightens. I sit frozen
 wondering if she will dare complete this passage. The teacher continues to follow along.
 Kelly's reading slows. Her voice resounds, the snickering stops, and with all the confidence,
 reassurance, conviction and sincerity she could, Kelly finishes the end of the sentence...NIG-
 GERRRR.

'REPORT CARD COMMENTS'

She says I'm outspoken, too vocal, but smart
 Says I have too much to say
 Too controversial
 Too
 Too
 Too Much
 Says if only I could be a little quieter
 Like, Like
 Like who Kelly, Sarah, Kelly K?
 What if I have something to say?

What if they don't?
She says I'd excel, if only I
If only I
Be a little more
More what? Girly?
Says I'm overly aggressive
Overly
Overly
Over the top
I suppose it's why I choose here
To be able to be too, too, much
To have my voice heard over others
Like Phil, Thomas, and others
She says I should listen more
Smile more
Be normal
What if I don't like to smile?
What if my normal is not her normal?
What if I'm just being me?
She says
She says
Says I have potential...if only...
Like she says

(Re)memory 6:

It's almost my birthday—I am turning five years old and gonna have the biggest party ever. I want all my friends to be there. I'm gonna have Big Bird, a clown, family, friends, games, prizes, Lots of prizes. It's gonna be hugeeeee. I go to school excited, telling everyone about my party. I want all of my friends from school to come. I pass out invitations and await the responses. One classmate, Sarah, comes back asking where the YMCA is. I say on William. You know downtown Buffalo. I always go swimming and summer camp there. You know where Jefferson is? She does not seem familiar when she comes back. Sarah returns to school and expresses she can't attend my party, her family has another gathering that same day.

I am devastated. Just the other day, she was able to come but needed to know what side of town I lived. Sarah my friend could not come, I say to my mother. Mama claims, Sarah can't come to my party because I'm black and that this will not be the last time this will happen to me. Ma goes on to state she is sorry but that I need tough skin if I am going to get through this world. Being black will never be easy and the faster I learn this, the better prepared I will be.

I pause here
overwhelmed, overjoyed, committed, humble;
somewhere between curious of your thoughts and okay with it;
excited about what's next and living in the moment.
QUEER
not quite this or that, dispossessed and possessed;
invisible and (hyper)visible, accepting liminality, certainty of change;

misunderstood,
 ALWAYS Misundastood;
 submissive to the work of identity-love-self expression-
 and using my body to disrupt,
 interrupt.
 I am unapologetically here.

NOTES

- 1 As articulated in Hill (accepted), I offer the spelling 'gurl' in place of girl to refer to black gurls to delineate the unique experience of being black and female. Given the complex material realities which manifest from the embodiment of these two identities, I offer 'gurls' to name that betwixt and between, not feminine enough, not black enough, too much of this and not enough that, space black females occupy. Rather than deeming this place minimal, like hooks (1984), I purport this position as powerful, truth telling, transformative, and communal.
- 2 Traversing through space and time attempting to capture the making of my present black female performativity, these (re)memories are accounts of the past that have shaped school experiences and informed the poems and movements captured in this piece. I situate these (re)memories as living history—not in the past, of the past, or simply past. They are living, breathing, moments in life that shape my everyday movements.
- 3 Refers to Lorraine Hansberry's book *To be young, gifted, and Black*.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dominique C. Hill—poet, scholar, dancer, embodies a passion to dismantle binaries and create more fluid spaces for, and understandings of, females of color. She utilises dance and poetry specifically to challenge identity norms, historical tropes, and narrow conceptions of black femininity, education, and the body—a signification of, and resistance to, ongoing tensions experienced as a black female. Dominique is invested in interjecting the body into education policy and classroom pedagogy to engender healing and self-awareness in education in particular. Her work offers artistic expression as an educational intervention in and outside classrooms.

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