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“Who You Callin’ Smartmouth?” Misunderstood Traumatization of Black and Brown Girls

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Cover Page Footnote

1) We will continue to follow the precedent of Critical Race Scholars by intentionally combating white supremacist language practices. Therefore, white, which is the racially dominant group, will appear as lower case and all references to People of Color will be capitalized. Special Acknowledgement For Black and Brown girls may you see past the whiteness that dulls the beauty of your Color.

“Who You Callin’ Smartmouth?”

Misunderstood Traumatization of Black and Brown Girls

Danielle Walker, Cheryl E. Matias, and Robin Brandehoff

Denying Human Dignity with White Emotions

Sigh. I overslept again. Last night was another long evening of balancing homework, putting my siblings to sleep, and tuning out my parents’ fighting. I rush to get ready. Mom has already left for her 12-hour shift at the hospital and dad is asleep, preparing to work another 15-hour double shift at the factory. I try not to complain about having to get my siblings ready because I know it helps the family. The only things I dread are Ms. Becky and having to explain why I am late yet again. I wish I had someone at school to talk to about how overwhelmed I feel, but these white teachers don’t care about me or any Black kids.

Before leaving, I’m cognizant that my clothing complies to the unjust dress code policy even though I’m only ten years old. Ms. Becky has told me my clothes are too tight, although I see white girls in school wearing tight clothing but never getting reprimanded. As if I don’t have enough to worry about at home, I also must prepare for battles at school over how my clothes look, how threatening my kinky hair is, and, most of all, Ms. Becky’s emotions: Will she be happy with my Blackness today or will she vilify me? I don’t want to end up like those Black girls in the Carolinas.¹ I shouldn’t dread school. Truth is, I love school. I love learning and my grades are always high, but Ms. Becky kills my spirit. It’s like she gets sadistic pleasure from seeing me irate; like it confirms her stereotype of me.

Collecting my tardy slip, I head to class. As I expected, Ms. Becky waits, wearing a predatory smirk. Her crossed arms and unwelcoming frown show she is ready to interrogate me. I hand her my slip, and she says, “So, what’s the excuse this time?” Tired of dealing with her emotions, I say, “I’m just late.” Shaking her head in disbelief, she says, “You’ll never be successful if you’re always late.”

1 <https://blackamericaweb.com/2015/10/26/south-carolina-teen-slammed-to-ground-by-school-security-officer-in-classroom-video/>

<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/jan/04/high-school-girl-body-slammed-police-officer-north-carolina>

“Ms. Becky, I have the highest grades in class!” I reply. Ms. Becky stops, astounded that I had the audacity to speak up for myself. She flails her arms, screaming, “Look, smartmouth, grades will only get you so far. I’m sick of your attitude. You’ll spend the day at the principal’s office!” I didn’t even make it through the door today. I’m tired of tiptoeing around her emotions. What about me?! Ms. Becky showboats how much she “loves” and “cares” about her Black students, but how could she? With everything I go through, is it too much to ask for a simple, “What’s going on, Brittany? Why are you late?”

Although the above counterstory draws from one of the author’s experiences as a Black woman, there are similar stories of countless Black women everywhere. Before delving into the trauma evident in the counterstory above, we first define the very concept of trauma. Trauma, per Herman (1992), is “an affliction of the powerless.... At the moment of trauma, the victim is rendered helpless by overwhelming force...” (p. 33). For Black and Brown girls, trauma that makes them feel helpless comes in many forms, produced through whiteness that targets girls of Color.² For example, punitive disciplinary policies constructed through whiteness punish Black and Brown girls’ bodies, speech, behavior, and dress.

Sadly, even Black hair is seen as a threat and in its mere expression, whiteness finds ways to exert itself so that it continues to traumatize Black girls. These are seen in those punitive measures. These punitive measures are traumatic because as Matias (2016a) argues, trauma “relentlessly terrorizes my heart, soul, and psyche on a daily basis” (p. 10). Black girls are made to feel ashamed of their own hair. Although Matias referred to the trauma she faces as a Brown professor of white teacher candidates, these are also the very teacher candidates who will become K–12 teachers like Ms. Becky who inflict trauma on girls of Color. To stop this trauma, more analyses of how the emotionality of whiteness traumatizes Black and Brown girls must occur.

Only Three-Fifths of White Emotions

The counterstory above draws from the common trope that white teachers in urban schools are sympathetic (Matias, 2013) and righteous in their proclamation of love and care for their students of Color. Whether portrayed in film (Vera & Gordon, 2003) or described in teacher education settings (Matias, 2016b), white female teachers are shown espousing white saviority, altruism, and benevolence.

² We follow the precedent of critical race scholars by intentionally combating white supremacist language practices. Therefore, white, which is the racially dominant group, appears in lowercase, and all references to People of Color are capitalized.

Brittany's teacher, Ms. Becky, is no different. In her self-promoting role as a hero to Brittany's life, she reprimands Brittany's tardiness and "advises" her that she will not become successful because of it. Though Ms. Becky does not embody all white female teachers, she is the embodiment of the statistical majority of white teachers. By stating this, we acknowledge, it placates white emotionality; for whiteness always works in ways to deny one's own complicity just to make one feel morally intact (i.e., "I didn't vote for Trump," "I'm not like those white folks," "I never own slaves.")

Couched in false empathy (see Matias & Zembylas, 2014), Ms. Becky's feelings toward Brittany are so obvious that Brittany tiptoes around them, hoping never to unleash them. Often, students like Brittany are sent to principals, who often refuse to listen to the voices of Black girls. Simply put, when the white emotions of white teachers are considered more important than those of their students, the pain of Black and Brown girls becomes only three-fifths of their white teachers' pain.

Speaking Truth to Black Female Students

There is a great deal of research profiling the injustices Black and Brown boys face (Archer, 2003; Ferguson, 2001; Noguera, 2009). Though important, it masks how intersectionalities of racism and sexism impact Black and Brown girls. Black girls are suspended six times more often than white girls, whereas Black boys are suspended three times more than white boys (Morris, 2016).

In the counterstory, Ms. Becky's patronizing remark about Brittany's excuse "this time" places Brittany in a subjected position—one that is immediately vilified. The saddest part is that Brittany is aware of this. She expects Ms. Becky's vitriolic behaviors, which make Brittany feel as though her thoughts, feelings, and presence do not matter—essentially as though her humanity does not matter.

When Brittany asserts her humanity by mentioning her high grades, Ms. Becky shoots her down as a "smartmouth." This is no different than labeling Black and Brown girls as sassy, feisty, or angry. These labels, the denial of the essential humanity of girls of Color, and the teacher's immediate need to vilify are traumatizing. Plainly, because Black and Brown girls are dismissed as defiant when expressing discontent, white teachers like Ms. Becky concoct versions of Black and Brown intentions to justify maltreating girls of Color. They view "smartmouth" Black and Brown girls as misbehaving and in need of control and order, instead of acknowledging that being a "smartmouth" is expressing an objection to dehumanizing schooling practices.

So What Is Traumatizing Black and Brown Girls? What Traumatizes Us?

Whiteness traumatizes Black and Brown girls because racially inept educators reading Brittany’s story will question why she did not tell the teacher instead of questioning Ms. Becky’s reaction. Brittany’s scenario is traumatic because teachers are always given the benefit of the doubt and girls of Color are socialized to put their thoughts and feelings to the side to accommodate the fragility of their teachers. We, the authors, are all women of Color. As such, we too are subjected to racialized trauma. We are angry at how such traumas persist, especially now that we have our own daughters to protect.

So what is it that traumatizes us? We know systemic white supremacy produces a society where whites are given privilege, but that alone is not enough to traumatize us on the level of our soul. Instead, the emotionalities of whiteness upholding institutional white supremacy dehumanize us. We witness this when girls of Color are denied their humanity by their white teachers, many of whom render them as “smartmouths” with attitudes. Suffocated by these atrocities, we are traumatized because we know that when we assert our humanity, the emotionality of whiteness becomes unfettered and will do anything to put us back in our place. If Ms. Beckys want to support students, they must drop their “smartthought” about Black and Brown girls, and develop a “smartear” to listen to them.

Special Acknowledgement

For Black and Brown girls—may you see past the whiteness that dulls the beauty of your Color.

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