



Bank Street

Occasional Paper Series

Occasional
Paper
Series

Volume 2017

Number 38 *#SayHerName: Making Visible the
t/Terrors Experienced by Black and Brown Girls
and Women in Schools*

Article 11

October 2017

Untying The Knot

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Recommended Citation

Jones, C. (2017). Untying The Knot. *Occasional Paper Series, 2017* (38). Retrieved from <https://educate.bankstreet.edu/occasional-paper-series/vol2017/iss38/11>

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Untying the Knot

Charisse Jones

Consider the case of Shaquanda Cotton.

A 14-year-old African American girl growing up in Paris, Texas, Cotton pushed a hall monitor one school day morning when the employee would not let her into the building to pick up her prescribed medication (Witt, 2007). As reported by Howard Witt in the *Chicago Tribune*, Cotton had never been in legal trouble before, though she had been given written warnings at school for such wayward behavior as wearing a skirt that administrators said should have been one inch longer.

For that shoving incident, Cotton was found guilty of assaulting a public servant and given a sentence of up to seven years in jail. But the judge who meted out Cotton's punishment was considerably more lenient with another 14-year-old girl who happened to be White. That teenager received probation after being found guilty of intentionally setting her family's home on fire (Witt, 2007).

The shockingly unequal treatment that Cotton suffered in school, and then in the legal system, begs many questions. Among them: What happens to your psyche when you are maligned before you have time to define yourself? What does it do to your spirit to see your image projected back to you, distorted and fractured, like the reflection in a fun house mirror?

The emotional trauma experienced by Black girls is worthy of deep exploration, but for now, let us examine the roots of that stress. Black girls stand at the juncture of race and gender. The biases that they face are at times sharp and distinct, targeted with clarity at one innate part of their selves. At other times, the biases blur, tangled together like a knot. Black girls live in double jeopardy, misunderstood or minimized because of the most salient parts of their identity. (Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003). And yet there is little acknowledgment, in their communities or the broader culture, of their unique experiences and struggles.

To ensure that Black girls become fully realized, confident contributors to a society that can ill afford to discard any of its members, we need to take the time to look at the world through their eyes and then do whatever we can to remedy the inequities that we see.

When it comes to matters of gender and race, two images loom in the national imagination. White women are the standard bearers of womanhood, the center of discussions around pay parity, reproductive rights, and sexual harassment. Black men are top of mind when talk turns to the ramifications of racial bigotry, whether that bias plays out during a traffic stop, in a corporate office, or inside a courtroom.

And yet, not only do Black women suffer sexual harassment, but it is often of a more violent nature than that endured by their White peers (Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003). Black women have also historically been paid less than both White women and Black men (Swartz & Jones, 2017). And while it may be true that Black men often bear the most visible and violent expressions of racial bigotry, Black women also experience the paper cuts and deep wounds inflicted by subtle and overt acts of racial prejudice.

The stereotypes that envelop Black women—painting them as unnaturally strong, lacking in intelligence, sexually promiscuous, and criminally inclined—do not just take hold on the threshold of adulthood. They latch on tight while Black women are still children. That is how an act of arson can result in a slap on a White wrist, and a shoving incident that leaves the victim physically unharmed leads to a Black girl being sent to prison (Witt, 2007).

There are so many ugly stereotypes to unpack, but let us think for a moment about just one—the myth of criminality. As the nation begins to grapple with the inequities of the legal system, from the stark racial profiling used in stop-and-frisk tactics to the hyperincarceration of Black men, a lens is also being turned on the school-to-prison pipeline. Suspensions, or even expulsions, for the smallest of infractions fall hardest on Black boys. But Black girls are also on the receiving end of harsh and unequal treatment. In the 2011–2012 school year, 12% of African American girls were suspended from school, versus 4% of Latinas and 2% of young White women. For Black girls with a disability, the number soared to 19% (Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, n.d.).

Missing days of learning because of a suspension or having to find a new school after being expelled is disruptive and can undermine a student's chances at academic success when her educational journey is just beginning (Morris & Perry, 2016). It can also create a paper trail used to justify unduly harsh punishment for childish transgressions.

In 2013 young Black women were roughly three times more likely than young White women to be referred to juvenile court for an allegation of delinquent behavior (Office of Juvenile Justice and

Delinquency Prevention, n.d.). And in 2014 the incarceration rate for Black women was 109 per 100,000, compared to 53 per 100,000 for White women (Sentencing Project, 2015).

In addition to the visible abuses Black girls and women may suffer while detained, there is also more subtle emotional damage that can occur when they are struck with the realization that they are being judged more harshly simply because they live inside brown female bodies. Shaquanda Cotton, desperate and afraid as she languished for months in jail, reportedly tried to hurt herself (Witt, 2007). She was finally released in March 2007, roughly a year after her sentencing, and two weeks after the newspaper reported her story.

What of the other girls like Shaquanda, who may not wind up in jail for a childish physical outburst, yet who have to fight every day to maintain their dignity as they are followed around a department store, parodied on television, or underestimated in the classroom? We should pay attention to the emotional terrain traveled by African American girls, and consider how to make their lives less arduous.

The narrative of the American melting pot is largely a myth. It implies a mutual appreciation for how each culture, gender, faith, and hue enhances the other, culminating in a society worthy of celebration. We are far from such unity, but it is a worthy goal. And if there is a possibility of ever reaching it, we as a society must try harder to acknowledge the humanity of each of our citizens.

For Black girls to grow into their most assured selves, the institutionalized barriers that crush their confidence, stifle their expression, and cut off their opportunities have to be addressed. We can call for dialogues with educators about implicit bias. We can follow the lead of entities like the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, which recommends, as an alternative to detention facilities, the creation of community-centered programs to work with girls who are unlikely to cause harm to others. And, as a last resort, we can file complaints to legally challenge overly punitive actions. Whatever the strategy, we must be proactive in bringing both the struggles and gifts of Black girls out of the shadows. We haven't a moment to waste.

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