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Walking the Tightrope of Visibility

Leigh Patel

It is often said, posted, and quipped that “we do not live single-issue lives.” Sometimes this quotation is rightly attributed to Audre Lorde (2012 p. 138); often it is not. This lack of attribution is more than ironic, considering Lorde, her work, and her life. Lorde was a poet and future-dreaming analyst whose words incisively named the white, heteropatriarchal nationalist violence visited upon Black peoples, and saw the possibilities beyond these realities. She named oppressions and also wrote of strength, life, and love. At the core of Lorde’s poetry and her life was the idea that being an outsider meant multiple realities. She wrote about herself as “the outsider, both strength and weakness” (Lorde, 2004, p. 120).

When Lorde’s words are used and she is not cited, a theft of her ideas occurs—a theft that is as regular as rain in a nation built by stolen labor on stolen land. When Lorde is not acknowledged, we also suffer the loss of learning from her work, which saw beyond the categories of Black, woman, queer. What, then, does it mean to pay attention in a rightful way? How can we name not just as a way of interrupting the ongoing erasure of Black, brown, and Indigenous women, but as a way of altering how we are in relation to what we’ve named?

The United States has long relied on erasing Indigenous populations and Black peoples’ labor, particularly the labor of Black women. Because the nation was built upon the economic system of slavery, Black women were pivotal to the founding fathers’ projects and success. They could bear children, which meant more property for slave-owning office holders, university presidents, farmers, and school headmasters.

When Janie, the protagonist in Zora Neale Hurston’s 1937 novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, is told by her grandmother, “De nigger woman is de mule uh de world so fur as Ah can see” (p. 29), it cues the reader to witness and take note of the ways that Janie lived entangled with these burdens and how she lived beyond them. Hurston encourages us to read Janie’s story as a way of changing not only how we deal with burdens, but how those burdens are assigned. In a culture that has historically been tethered to individualistic ideas of identity, #SayHerName (<http://www.aapf.org/sayhername/>) calls us to speak out loud the intersecting vectors of racism, heteropatriarchy, ableism, and capitalism as they impact Black and brown women and girls.

Naming also urges us to speak to the life and learning that has taken place in defiance of these oppressions. Naming as a way of being in right relation obligates us to make visible the lives of Black and brown girls, and to do so with a sober understanding of this society's tendencies toward spectacle. Visibility has both potential and peril, particularly for education.

Categorized as Victim or Overachiever in Schools

In November 2015, the nation collectively gasped when a cellphone video of a young Black high school student being tossed across a classroom by a white male school safety officer went viral. In mere seconds of grainy footage, millions of people saw the seeds of violence that had been planted by intersecting categories of young, Black, and girl in a white male nationalist setting. Yet when people deliberated what this young girl might have done to precipitate this heinous action, they engaged in a narrative that associates Blackness with criminal or deviant. Asking what she may have done erases longstanding population-level vulnerabilities and replaces it with justified white male violence. Neither the spectacle of this egregious violence nor how it was then justified is unusual. Schools are regular sites for the conjoined categorical locations of savage and savior.

Schooling is animated by categorical logics because it sits within and feeds into a larger society that segments and stratifies. More and less intelligent, beautiful, and worthy is the drumbeat of colonial ranking of human to less than human (Wynter, 2003). Reading groups, math course tracks, the first to be called for physical education teams, the roster of detention, and the list to be expelled—these are the sounds of categorical distinction. The machinery of schooling ranks and sorts people into categories.

Categorical distinction is never just about the single categories; the impact is in how the categories function together. Black suffering is created for white profit. Narratives of manifest destiny are required to justify the theft of Indigenous land. Categorical projects seek to position people towards poles: one is discardable because another needs to be essential. If visibility means playing into facile tropes of victim or superachiever, saying her name hasn't served her well at all.

The song, "Tightrope" (Lightning, Wonder & Big Boi, 2010), as performed by Janelle Monae, reminds Black and brown girls that high and low are both still places on the tightrope:

While they jumpin' round ya
They trying to take all of your dreams
But you can't allow it
Cause baby whether you're high or low
Whether you're high or low
You gotta tip on the tightrope.

Uprising the Tightrope

There is no doubt that we must say her name. We must say her name to interrupt the erasure that whiteness, heteropatriarchy, and ableism rely on. We must say her name to starve racist capitalism of its projects that confuse, blur, and conflate whiteness with human. The challenge is in saying her name with a vivid understanding that visibility is not in and of itself a means to an end; it is the way to upend categories of distinct and destitute.

Although easily and constantly glossed over, the experiences of Black and brown girls can serve to upend the tightrope instead of just our place on it. Saying her name invites and obligates us to articulate the connected yet distinct ways that Black suffering is spectacularized (Dumas & Nelson, 2016; Wun, 2014), while erasure of Indigeneity relies on silence (Dhillon, 2015). Saying her name offers an opportunity to interrupt these twinned and contradictory impulses of hypervisibility and erasure. But it will not succeed without vigilance to the structure of settler colonialism that not only allows for these intersecting oppressions (Crenshaw, 1991), but relies on them.

This is a big ask for education and its categorical logics. The seduction of justice through representation is palpable. The term *underrepresented* speaks of the material impact of privileging certain populations as smart, talented, and beautiful: they become overrepresented in positions of power and safety. But the term also belies a cul-de-sac finish line that is easily satisfied by numbers but doesn't necessarily change how we are with each other.

Leanne Betasamohe Simpson writes, "Change achieved through struggle, organizing, and creating the alternatives produces profoundly different outcomes than change achieved through recognition-focused protest, and pressuring the state to make the changes for us. That is a recipe for co-option" (2016, p. 24). Recognition and optics are beguiling but also potentially politically distracting. Saying her name holds great power and potential to shatter single-node approaches to just racism, or just

patriarchy, or just capitalism. It also demands that we shed individualistic ideas of heroines and victims. It calls on us to eschew the high or low place in the interest of finding new ways of being with each other and for each other.

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