

Holding It Down? The Silencing of Black Female Students in the Educational Discourses of the Greater Toronto Area

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Abstract

This article grapples with the ways in which Black female students tend to be obscured from the discourses around the educational experiences and outcomes of Black students in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA). I employ intersectionality as a theoretical frame, using content analysis and case study approaches to elucidate the mechanics of how these absences and silences persist in the national, provincial, and local contexts in which they occur. Despite the necessity and validity of research on the various educational experiences of Black GTA students, I find that the research tends to focus primarily on Black males, often using their narratives to define the experiences of all Black students in the region. I also find that it is in the very methodological questions and applications of those methodological approaches, that this exclusion of Black female students takes place, creating and maintaining gaps and silences in the scholarship,

resulting in the absence of vital sociological knowledge. The implications and potential negative effects of the normalization and perpetuation of this exclusion on Black female students and their mental and physical well-being is also explored. I conclude by calling for reflexivity and a rethinking of current methodological approaches in this context in order incite more inclusive and fulsome engagement with the educational experiences of Black female students.

Keywords: intersectionality, race, education, Black female students, Greater Toronto Area, sociology of education, research methodology

Résumé

Cet article examine les façons que les étudiantes noires ont tendance à être exclu de les discours en ce qui concerne les expériences éducatives et les résultats des étudiants noirs dans la région du Grand Toronto (GT). J'utilise l'intersectionnalité comme cadre théorique, en utilisant des approches d'analyse de contenu et d'études de pour élucider le mécanisme de la persistance de ces absences et de ces silences dans les contextes nationales, provinciales et locales. Malgré la nécessité et la validité de la recherche sur les diverses expériences éducatives des étudiants noirs de la région du Grand Toronto, je constate que la recherche a tendance à se concentrer principalement sur les hommes noirs, utilisant souvent leurs récits pour définir les expériences de tous les étudiants noirs de la région. Je trouve également que c'est dans les questions méthodologiques et les applications mêmes de ces approches méthodologiques que se produit cette exclusion des étudiantes noires, créant et maintenant des lacunes et des silences dans la recherche scolaire, ce qui entraîne l'absence de connaissances sociologiques essentielles dans ce contexte. Les implications et les effets négatifs potentiels de la normalisation et de la perpétuation de cette exclusion sur les étudiantes noires et sur leur bien-être mental et physique sont également explorés. Je conclus en appelant à la réflexivité et à la révision des approches méthodologiques actuelles dans ce contexte afin d'encourager un engagement plus inclusif et plus complet dans les expériences éducatives des étudiant(e)s noir(e)s.

Mots-clés : intersectionnalité, race, éducation, les étudiantes noires, Grand Toronto, la sociologie de l'éducation, méthodologie de recherche

Introduction

This article was in part provoked by my viewing of broadcaster, writer, and playwright Amanda Parris's 2017 play *The Other Side of the Game*, a brilliant and insightful artistic piece set in contemporary Toronto that explores how the desires and needs of Black men are often prioritized at the expense of Black women's physical, intellectual, emotional, and psychological labour and needs. Parris's multi-generational depictions of Black women facilitating the success of others without support, while being expected to thrive in both public and private spheres, and despite having their personal needs continually and utterly disregarded, made clear how their muling transcends space and time, and perpetuates their silencing. Muling refers to the ways in which Black women are expected to serve the function of a mule through the expectation that they will carry the heavy social, emotional, psychological, and economic loads that others offload onto them without any support or gratitude (Hurston, 1998). Zora Neale Hurston illustrated this experience in her 1937 novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. In this way, Black women are treated as one-dimensional in their function, unworthy of support and consideration. This depiction was simultaneously enlightening, accurate, and exhausting.

The play called for me to locate myself and think through what it means to be both Black and a woman in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA), Canada's most populous region where Black people make up the third largest racialized group (Statistics Canada, 2017b).¹ I wrestled with my positionality as an emerging scholar, primarily concerned with the ways in which Black Caribbean diasporic people experience, navigate, resist, and contribute to their social contexts. In so doing, I couldn't help but reflect on the previous generations of hidden and silenced Black women who also experienced this same marginalization in multiple ways, while their labour was being exploited and undervalued through enslavement (see Cooper, 2000; Elgersman, 2014), post-enslavement domestic work (see Arat-Koc, 1997; Gopaul-McNicol, 1993; Henry, 1968; Johnson, 2012), and as nurses (see Calliste, 1993) and educators (see Aladejebi, 2016) in mid-20th century Canada. While some scholarship explores these histories, the resulting literature is quite

1 According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2010), the GTA is a megalopolis in Ontario, Canada, comprised of the city of Toronto and surrounding regions, including Halton, Peel, York, and Durham, which together create Canada's most populous area. In this region, Black people are the third largest racialized group (Statistics Canada, 2017b).

scanty, leading me to wonder about the ways in which this obscuring of Black women's experiences is a historical pattern.

The play also caused me to reflect on my doctoral research work, which explored the social, athletic, and educational experiences of Black Canadian female student-athletes from the GTA, and the sheer difficulty I experienced in finding contemporary examples that meaningfully engaged with the diverse experiences of Black Canadian women of all ages in a more broad sense and, more specifically, their educational experiences. How much do we know about Black women's experiences and in what ways are their marginalization and silencing still prevalent? How much do we actually know about their specific educational experiences in the GTA? And how do we use that information, or lack thereof, to shape educational policy and interventions?

In its haunting brilliance, *The Other Side of the Game* had tapped into a perpetual ambivalence towards Black women that was hard to ignore. It captured the tendency to not *check for* Black women, and when I say *check for*, I am invoking a colloquialism that refers to the act of looking into, being concerned with, or caring about someone or something. In practice, not checking for Black women, refers to how we—that is, all those invested in, affected by, or engaging with the educational experiences of Black students—have a tendency to not ask, look into, show concern for, or care about Black women, their experiences, or needs. Therefore, in this article, I explore this tendency by examining research where their specific experiences could have been engaged. How have we not been checking for Black female students in the GTA?

Theoretical and Methodological Approaches

As a conceptual frame, I invoke intersectionality to grapple with how the experiences of Black female students are obscured within the educational discourses of the GTA. The scholarly literature insists that this habitual practice of forgetting Black women and how their gender and race intersect to create specific experiences, oppressions, and therefore, outcomes, is customary and normalized. Crenshaw (1989) put forward intersectionality as a way to address the “problematic consequence[s] of the tendency to treat race and gender as mutually exclusive categories of experience and analysis” (p. 139). She argues that both anti-racist and feminist frameworks “theoretically erase” Black women by focusing

on the most privileged group members (pp. 139–140). Crenshaw indicates that there is a “unique compoundedness” in the marginalization of Black women that is perpetuated by our “uncritical and disturbing acceptance of the dominant ways of thinking about discrimination” (p. 150). Therefore, it is the very ways that we conceptualize and define what counts as oppression, and for whom, that perpetuates the disregarding and silencing of Black women. I use this framework to unpack the mechanics of how Black female students are often “theoretically erased” in their GTA educational contexts to focus on the most privileged group members, which in this case are usually Black male students.

My sources of data included scholarly research and various reports commissioned by academic, educational, governmental, and international institutions. This is in part because, at the time of writing, much of the empirical work focused on Black GTA student experiences that garnered much media attention tended to be in the form of reports rather than academic studies. As such, this article uses a content analysis approach to provide social context and to review how race and racism intersecting with gender are taken up more broadly in the Canadian context at the national and provincial levels. I then focus on the GTA specifically, using two contemporary case studies, which explore the educational experiences of Black youth to examine how Black female students tend to be ignored in this kind of research. I argue that this ignoring is part of a larger historical trend that disregards the specific needs of Black women and that can have negative consequences.

Broader Patterns

Grappling with Race and Gender Nationally and Provincially

My reflections provoked an examination of how contemporary initiatives aimed at combatting anti-Black racism were grappling with race and gender at the national, provincial, and local (GTA) levels. For example, at the national level, the United Nations (UN) reviewed Canada in 2010. The review found that despite being the third largest racialized group in the GTA, Black Canadians experienced a lack of collective socio-economic and political inclusion and power due to the increased likelihood of being impoverished, poorly educated, working in precarious labour, and underrepresented in most

professional, leadership, and political positions (MacDougall, 2010). In 2017, the UN again scolded Canada for not addressing its systemic racism, citing educational marginalization as a key area of persistent inequality (Paradkar, 2017; United Nations [UN], 2017a, 2017b). While these analyses were very insightful and rigorous, especially considering the lack of quantitative data regarding Black Canadians to date, much of the analysis did not include the specific experiences and outcomes for Black Canadian women.

The UN also declared 2015–2024 as the International Decade for People of African Descent, recognizing that the descendants of the victims of the transatlantic slave trade still face invisible systemic barriers and discrimination (UN, 2001). Justin Trudeau, Canada’s prime minister, first acknowledged the Decade on the national stage in January 2018, three years after its inception (Government of Canada, 2018; Mochama, 2018). However, his acknowledgement lacked depth and complexity, as it failed to discuss how anti-Black racism would be addressed nationally through policies, legislation, and funding. No specific issues were identified, nor were any plans revealed or substantive discussions about racial inequity in Canada had, and again, the role of gender in shaping systemic racism was not discussed. In fact, all follow-up questions by the media focused on a different subject matter entirely (Omar, 2018), reflecting a general political ambivalence about the decade and anti-Black racism, and broader articulations of a Canadian-style “symbolic antiracism.”²

In 2016, the Province of Ontario (under Premier Kathleen Wynne’s Liberal government) developed an Anti-Racism Directorate for the second time since the New Democratic Party government under Bob Rae of the late 1980s and early 1990s. The aim of the Directorate was to “eliminate systemic racism in institutions in Ontario” by increasing awareness and understanding, and collaborating with social and institutional entities to promote equity through fair practices and policies (Government of Ontario, 2016). The Directorate also aimed to research and evaluate government policies, programs, and services (like educational institutions) from an anti-racist perspective in order to “identify, monitor and prevent systemic racism in Ontario” (Government of Ontario, 2016) and identified education as a key area of focus. Another key initiative was a move

2 Symbolic anti-racism is “policy language that gestures toward a commitment to racial equity in line with the doctrine of Canadian multiculturalism and the imperatives outlined in various legal acts, but does not enact any targeted, substantive programming to identify, rectify, or prevent structural racism” (George et al., 2020).

towards the collection of disaggregated race data in the province. Of particular interest was that the Directorate's publication *Ontario's 3-Year Anti-Racism Strategic Plan* (Government of Ontario, 2017) and the *Black Youth Action Plan*³ published by the Ministry of Children and Youth Services (2017) included some intersectional verbiage, which defined and aspired towards intersectional practices. However, once again there was little, if any, substantive engagement with data about Black women's experiences and how this data would inform policy directives. Instead, the literature emptily gestured toward intersectionality.

Provincially, Ontario's Anti-Racism Directorate aspired to address anti-Black racism, but did not make a distinction between the needs of Black men and women, and thus, conflated their experiences. This is underpinned by a general national indifference toward anti-Black racism in Canada, evidenced by Prime Minister Trudeau's politically ambivalent response to the announcement of the UN's Decade, despite the UN's scathing analyses of Canada in 2010 and 2017. Further, after less than two years, Ontario's Anti-Racism Directorate is all but defunct, as June 2018 saw a Progressive Conservative government, under Premier Doug Ford, elected in Ontario. By August 2018, some of the Directorate's subcommittee members had already been dismissed, and the provincial government's moving of the Directorate from the Cabinet Office to the Ministry of Community Safety and Correctional Services had diminished the Directorate's influence through a loss of "cross-departmental knowledge-sharing and accountability measures" (Yang, 2018).

The president of the Urban Alliance on Race Relations, a Toronto-based non-profit organization, theorized that the Directorate "will die from a thousand cuts—neglected and 'defanged from its original purpose and intent'" (Yang, 2018, para. 16). These changes to the Directorate are also a repeat of the events of 1995, when Rae's NDP provincial government was succeeded by the Progressive Conservatives under the leadership of Mike Harris, who swiftly dismantled the long-advocated-for Anti-Racism Secretariat after only four years of work (Morgan, 2018; Yang, 2018). This type of handling of racial matters is an example of the ambivalent ways that race is often handled in the Canadian context, habitually resulting in policy directives that do not reflect or respond to the

3 This initiative aims to invest \$47 million in parental and mentorship programs, skills development, collective community building, and anti-violence initiatives.

specific and gendered challenges and experiences of Black Canadians. This is in part because the structural and institutional initiatives vigorously advocated for by various stakeholders in the Black community are often eradicated before they can truly begin or make a difference. What does that mean for Black Canadians as a whole and, more specifically, Black Canadian women, whose needs are clearly not on the national or provincial agendas in any substantive way?

Grappling with Race and Gender in the GTA

At the time of writing, the GTA was also engaged in debate about the educational experiences of Black students through a blitz of media coverage, reports, and scholarly work. Historically, Black students in the GTA face persistent and significant systemic barriers to university (see Brathwaite & James, 1996; Cheng, 1996; Cheng, et al. 1993; James & Brathwaite, 1996; Lewis, 1992; Toronto Board of Education, 1976, 1988; Wright, 1971; Wright & Tsuji, 1983). These barriers are often informed by systemic racism and Eurocentricity, a culture of low expectations, an absence of culturally relevant representation, stereotyping, stigmatization, streaming, disparities in school discipline, more athletic support than academic support, and high drop-out and push-out rates, all resulting in a lower likelihood of attending university (see Bailey et al., 2016; Dei, 2008; Dei et al., 1997; F.A.C.E.S. of Peel Collaborative, 2015; James, 2012; James, Turner et al., 2017; Lund & Carr, 2015; Ontario Alliance of Black School Educators, 2015; Robson et al., 2018). These barriers also persist in academic enrichment spaces such as Regional Arts Programs through the exclusion and marginalization of racialized and/or working-class students by catering to wealthier White students (Gaztambide-Fernández & Parekh, 2017). In addition, there is little information regarding the experiences of Black students in post-secondary education, making it difficult to capture the complex and long-term educational implications and outcomes for this group. Further exacerbating the problem is a lack of disaggregated data collected by Ontario school boards and post-secondary institutions, with the exception of the Toronto District School Board (TDSB), making intersectional analysis of student trajectories and outcomes from elementary school through to university unachievable and extrapolative at best (James, Robson et al. 2017; James, Turner et al., 2017).

Although there were promises of data collection in the near future through the Anti-Racism Directorate, given its eradication, little is known about the future of data collection, including its approaches or permanence, raising questions about the utility, validity, and comprehensiveness of the (potentially) forthcoming data. Therefore, while most of the GTA research has understandably been qualitative in nature, it tends to speak about Black students in generalities, or when it does explore gender, focuses primarily on the experiences of Black males, obscuring the specific needs of Black female students. I will now move on to specific examples in the GTA that highlight how the gendered experiences of Black Canadian students in formal education systems have been obscured.

Example #1: Are Black girls allowed to rise? In 2016, the Peel District School Board (PDSB) commissioned a ground-breaking report specific to the Peel Region⁴ of the GTA entitled *We Rise Together: Perspectives of Black Male Students in Secondary Schools*. Due to the lack of collection and access to quantitative data by almost all Ontario school boards, the report captured the experiences of 87 Black male students using focus groups. The findings, which garnered much media attention, asserted that streaming, low expectations, racial microaggressions, lack of curricular inclusion, differential treatment, and over-surveillance were key educational barriers (Bailey et al., 2016). The report also proposed meaningful and appropriate interventions, and reinforced quantitative data findings from the TDSB.

The PDSB responded to the report's findings by committing to anti-racism and bias training, student mentorship, community engagement, race-based data collection, and some curricular changes (CBC News, 2017; Gordon, 2016; Linton & Rieti, 2016; Spencer, 2017). The board also released a report entitled *We Rise Together: The Peel District School Board Action Plan to Support Black Male Students*, stating "that report, *Perspectives of Black Male Students in Secondary Schools*, clearly identifies key areas where the board needs to act. Certainly, the results demonstrate that there is significant room for

4 Peel is a regional municipality and a western/northwestern suburban part of the GTA. It is comprised of the cities and towns of Brampton, Mississauga, Malton, Caledon, and Bolton and has a population of almost 1.4 million, with Black citizens as the second largest racialized group (Statistics Canada, 2017a) Public education is funded through taxpayers and administered by four school boards: Peel District School Board (English and public), Dufferin-Peel Catholic District School Board (English and Roman Catholic), le Conseil scolaire Viamonde (French and Public), and the Conseil scolaire de district Catholique Centre-Sud (French and Roman Catholic). The above studies did not garner data from Black students in the Dufferin-Peel, French public, or French Catholic school boards.

improvement” (PDSB, 2016, p. 1). The report then cites the director of PDSB as saying, “We will do what needs to be done, because that is the work of inclusion—that is how we make sure our students—all students—can truly *rise*” (p. 1). Does this inclusion and doing what needs to be done for *all* students include Black female students? Do Black female students also get access to the resources and support needed for them to *rise*?

Apparently not, because the data from the referenced report was only gathered from Black male students, meaning that the recommendations only reflect and respond to the needs and experiences of those Black males. Furthermore, a quick search of both the Action Plan (2016) and the subsequent *We Rise Together: Accountability Report* (2017) do not mention any of the following keywords: female, woman, women, or girl(s). Therefore, by not engaging Black female students in the data collection process, the experiences of their Black male peers come to define the experiences of Black students in general in the region, obscuring the fundamental role that race intersecting with gender has in shaping schooling experiences and outcomes. This approach also prioritizes Black male students without justification because, as discussed earlier, the GTA context lacks substantive quantitative race-based data at all educational levels. So, what is being assumed about Black female students here? Are they not in need of educational supports and resources? How are Black female students faring in the Peel District School Board? Do we know? Do we care to know?

Example #2: Discourses of criminalization and disproportionate discipline.

There has also been much discussion in the GTA regarding the criminalization and disproportionate discipline of Black students, but much of the scholarship does not account for the intersection of race and gender. For example, a report from the PDSB used primary data from 20 key informants, online surveys from 23 Black youth, interviews with 30 service providers, and focus groups and interviews with youth. This report shared findings similar to the existing scholarship, including differential discipline practices that criminalize Black youth, fear-inducing police presence, and a suggestion by participants that Black males are criminalized to a higher extent than Black females (F.A.C.E.S. of Peel Collaborative, 2015). While this report found gendered differences around access to enrichment and stereotyping, the gender breakdown of the participants and informants was unclear, making the role that gender plays in shaping the experiences of Black youth regarding differential discipline practices and criminalization indefinable.

Other recent reports share similar findings (James, Turner et al., 2017; Toronto District School Board, 2017a), with the TDSB (2017a) finding that Black students made up almost half of school expulsions board-wide (48%) between 2011 and 2016, which is approximately triple their representation in Toronto schools. This finding is of particular interest not only because of the disproportionality, but also because of its consequences—among the students expelled, “more than half (58%) dropped out of school or did not have a known destination” (TDSB, 2017a, p. 31). Yet again, although it was noted that males were generally suspended and expelled much more frequently, the rate at which Black female students specifically, were expelled or suspended was unclear.

These findings also garnered much media attention, sparking ongoing region-wide debate and scrutiny, especially from Black Lives Matter Toronto. In response and to address the criticism regarding the criminalization of Black youth, the TDSB removed police presence from its schools (Boisvert, 2018; DiManno, 2018; Duxbury & Bennell, 2018; Gordon, 2017; TDSB, 2017b). Provincially, under the previous Liberal government, Ontario’s Anti-Racism Directorate had also earmarked funds to support anti-violence initiatives and education for Black youth (Government of Ontario, 2017; Ministry of Children and Youth Services, 2017). However, throughout this media blitz the criminalization and disproportionate discipline practices experienced by Black youth were constructed as a predominantly Black male problem.

While the responses to the scholarship by both the TDSB and the Anti-Racism Directorate were commendable, they did not sufficiently explore the gendered experiences of Black female students regarding criminalization and disproportionate discipline practices in schools. I again ask: How do these research methodologies, discussions, and proposed interventions target the specific ways that Black female students experience their schooling? For example, that same TDSB report (2017a) also explored the relationships between factors like special education status and credit accumulation with expulsion; how do the interactions of these additional variables shape expulsions for Black female students? Are Black male students being suspended or expelled in different grades, and therefore, at different stages of development in comparison to their female counterparts? How do the behaviours that incite expulsions differ across gender lines? Why are we not *checking for* Black female students?

What the Current Approaches Miss

In not checking for Black female students in our educational discourses, we inevitably miss critical information. For example, American research—which I draw on only due to a lack of this type of comprehensive data in the Canadian context—suggests that the adultification of Black boys also happens to Black girls (Morris, 2007; Muhammad & Dixson, 2008). These findings were fortified by a study from the Georgetown Law Center on Poverty and Inequality by Epstein et al. (2017) that explored how Black female students are constructed in marginalizing ways and disproportionately disciplined in their schooling through adultification, which is being “viewed as more adult [or biologically older] than their white peers at almost all stages of childhood, beginning most significantly at the age of five, peaking during the ages of 10 to 14, and continuing during the ages of 15 to 19” (p. 8).

The process of adultification is problematic because it promotes the idea that Black girls are more independent, knowledgeable about adult topics, and more equipped to take on adult roles and responsibilities and *therefore, less in need of protection, support, and nurturing* (Epstein et al., 2017). Further, Epstein et al. (2017) suggest that this adultification of Black girls may explain differential discipline practices in school. For example, in examining data from a school in the state of Kentucky, the authors found that Black girls were two to three times more likely to be disciplined for subjective infractions⁵ than their White female peers. This disparity was actually larger than that between Black and White boys for the same subjective infractions in the same school district, which they cite increases the likelihood of Black female students dropping out, being suspended, getting arrested, and having brushes with the juvenile justice system (Epstein et al., 2017). This finding disrupts the maleness of the school-to-prison pipeline, demonstrating that Black girls are also very much at risk. Further, this finding uncovers how our methodological approaches can either *obscure or illuminate* very pertinent information, because it is through the comparison of Black girls to White girls that the larger disparity in discipline practices becomes clear.

5 Subjective infractions were defined as disobedience, disruptive behaviour, fighting, bullying/harassment, and minor violations (dress code violations, inappropriate cell phone use, and loitering).

Epstein et al. (2017) conclude that while the process of adultification is currently poorly understood and requires further research, it is a form of bias that is also applicable and happens *differently* to Black girls because of race intersecting with gender, and it shapes how these students are perceived, constructed, and treated in their schooling. If we were to explore adultification in the GTA context, what would we find? Are Black girls in the GTA being adultified? If so, how does that then shape our approaches to educational inequity? These are pertinent questions that require further exploration in our context, but we cannot even begin to adequately explore these issues because, simply put, you cannot find what you are not looking for.

Why Are We Discussing Educational Anti-Black Racism Like This?

The legacy of scholarship cited here by numerous scholars, consultants, community organizations, and so on has been rich, diverse, and meaningful. In many ways, this advocacy and research has built the foundation for discourse, debate, and educational milestones, including the opening of the Africentric Alternative School (elementary) and secondary school streams within the TDSB (see CBC News, 2009), as well as a commitment from the previous Wynne Liberal government to finally collect disaggregated race data (see Bascaramurty, 2017; Crawley, 2017; Rushowy, 2017). This seminal and significant work is not to be discredited. However, I would like to underscore how we are still left with many questions regarding the specific educational experiences of Black female students of all ages in the GTA. In many ways, the questions I've posed throughout this section could be applied to any other area of educational marginalization outlined in the scholarship, such as streaming, access to enrichment, low expectations from teachers, and more athletic support in comparison to academic support. The erasure of the racial and gendered experiences of Black Canadian students ignores the possibilities of where school boards can respond to the specificities of Black female students' experiences. In so doing, we become ill-equipped to intervene in ways that are targeted, efficacious, and comprehensive.

In examining the aforementioned examples, it became clear that the existing discourses around Black student's educational experiences ignore Black female students, leading to an absence of essential data. This erasure from the very discourses that are supposed to engage and intervene to ameliorate their lives "conflate or ignore intragroup

differences” (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1242), silencing and rendering Black female students invisible, normalizing their erasure, and assuming that interventions for Black boys are also suitable for Black girls, which Epstein et al.’s (2017) findings demonstrate is a gross oversight.

Further, in our collective failure to include Black female students’ narratives, we employ approaches that centre on the oppressions of Black males, missing the implicit ways that systemic policies, practices, or interventions neglect to address the barriers faced by Black female students that are distinct from their non-Black female and Black male counterparts. This silencing results in their experiences not even having the space to count, unless they can be made valid by being attached to the oppressions of White (or other non-Black) women or Black men, resulting in an additional burden being placed on an already multi-marginalized group: creating space to be counted and heard.

I sincerely question whether we are currently even equipped with enough information to sketch a comprehensive picture of what anti-Black racism in schooling looks like for Black female students in the GTA. While the scholarship indicates an urgency for educational interventions for Black students, this focus on boys assumes that what will work for Black boys will also work for Black girls, or that their problems and experiences are the same, or that Black girls can be dealt with later on. When is later and what happens to them in meantime?

The Normalization of Silencing Black Women

It is in how we define categories and types of oppression, in the questions we ask and don’t ask in our research methodologies, and in the parameters of those questions that we normalize the silencing of Black women. By not asking questions about Black women and by framing the discourse in ways that exclude their experiences, it is assumed that discrimination against all people within a group happens in the same ways (Crenshaw, 1989)—that is, that all women are oppressed similarly and all Black people are oppressed similarly. However, Collins (1986) argues that Black women’s oppression is distinct from that of Black men and other women because of its interlocking nature and, as a result, requires space for self-definition and self-valuation. Therefore, true intersectional analysis requires the decentring of not only Whiteness, but also maleness, and this is where we

are failing, because in our current discourses that centre on Black GTA students, in our attempts to decentre Whiteness, we often fail to also decentre maleness.

In other words, it is the *modus operandi* to ignore, sideline, and forget Black women, and this practice shows up in the current educational discourses about Black students in the GTA. We forget about Black women by conceptualizing anti-Black racism in ways that privilege the experiences of Black male students. While in some cases we may even use intersectional language (like in Ontario's Anti-Racism Directorate literature), we do not apply the lens in the way that it was intended, which is to make evident the ways in which social structures specifically marginalize those whose Blackness intersects with their gender. Therefore, our current approaches universalize Blackness or are inherently male-focused, which is underpinned by the assumption that Black women's needs are not as urgent as those of Black males, and that Black women can wait.

In so doing, we engage in what Crenshaw (2017) calls trickle-down equality, where the level of attention and resources put into Black female students is far less than what is put into their male counterparts. In her words, Black women's challenges are last to be addressed, which leads to the false assumption "that they must be doing well" (para. 5). However, Crenshaw refutes this assumption, asserting that "silence is not a measure of well-being" (para. 5). Just like the earlier example with PDSB's *We Rise* initiative, by not even speaking to Black female students in the initial data collection process, the assumption is that they are doing well, or that their issues are not as pressing and therefore, the resultant interventions end up being completely and fundamentally rooted in Black male experiences. A true intersectional approach would have made clear the specificities of Black female students' experiences, uncovering that their specific and perhaps, different schooling experiences with systemic anti-Black racism, are not a measure of well-being or indicative of a lack of challenges and needs. What could we be missing by not doing this?

In citing Crenshaw, Ocen, and Nanda (2015), Crenshaw (2017) posits that nationally (in the US), in comparison to their White female counterparts in public school, Black girls are six times as likely to be suspended, and more than one in three fail to graduate from high school on time. Crenshaw (2017) further argues that Black female students face additional gender-specific barriers such as teen pregnancy, sexual assault, harassment, and care-taking responsibilities, which can push them onto the school-to-prison pipeline. These gender-specific challenges can also lead to interaction with the criminal

justice system, as a study from the Department of Education in Ohio also uncovers that Black female students “are the fastest growing population in the juvenile injustice system and are four times as likely to be arrested in school as white girls” (para. 5). These findings are not unique and echo the aforementioned Epstein et al. (2017).

It is also important to again underscore that these studies (Crenshaw et al., 2015; Epstein et al., 2017) compared Black girls to White girls rather than to Black boys, which uncovered that, comparatively speaking, the rate of marginalization for Black girls (six times) was actually more severe, as Black boys were found to be three times more likely to be suspended in comparison to White boys. This illuminates the ways in which a male-focused data analysis of racial discrimination in schooling can often miss the specific and sometimes more severe ways that Black female students are being marginalized. Purposeful intersectional examination of data has made evident in these studies, how gender and race intersect to create unique barriers and outcomes for Black female students, and similar methodological approaches in Canadian research could uncover similar patterns. What are the gender-specific barriers for Black girls in the GTA? Do we know? Who are we comparing them to, if at all?

A Measure of Well-Being or Muling?

If our inability to check for Black female students is rooted in the assumption that they “must be doing well” or at least better than their male counterparts, we are assuming that Black women can wait for support and that everything will be okay while waiting. As mentioned earlier, muling refers to the ways in which Black women are expected to carry heavy social, emotional, psychological, economic—and in this case, educational⁶—loads that others offload onto them without any support or gratitude (Hurstun, 1998). In this way, Black women are treated as one-dimensional worker bees in their function, unworthy of support and consideration. In our myopia, are we muling Black female students in the GTA?

This excluding, forgetting, ignoring, and therefore, silencing of the specific experiences of Black women and girls through our trickle-down equality approaches is not

6 Here, educational load refers to the ways in which the educational needs and supports for Black female students are the last to be considered, if at all, and because of this failure to explore their educational experiences, the effects of this neglect in the GTA are not known.

without consequences. I once again turn to an American study—due to a lack of comparable data in the Canadian context—by Jones and Shorter-Gooden (2003). This study, which is based on surveys and in-depth interviews with 333 Black women between the ages of 18 and 88, in 24 US states, points to a psychological cost. First, Jones and Shorter-Gooden argue that Black women are often constructed as the controlling image⁷ of the “Sapphire,” which is a construction of Black womanhood that defines Black women as “invulnerable, indefatigable, [and] always preserver[ing] and endur[ing] despite great odds without being negatively affected” (p. 3). Second, the authors argue that many Black women then take on and, inadvertently, fulfill this stereotype by taking on multiple roles and tasks, ignoring their physical and emotional strain, while combatting “race and gender-based myths” (pp. 4–6). Third, in order to handle the load, as an invisible form of survival, Black women have had to develop the ability to “shift,” which is the constant hiding of one’s true self in order to placate and accommodate the barrage of demands from their communities, colleagues, and Black men (p. 7). Jones and Shorter-Gooden define “shifting” as follows:

[Shifting is] to work overtime when you are exhausted to prove you are not lazy. It is the art of learning to ignore a comment you believe is racist, or to address it in such a way that the person who said it, doesn’t label you as threatening or aggressive. It is over-preparing for an honours class to prove that you are capable, intelligent, and hard-working, or that you are really okay no matter what society says about you. It is feeling embarrassed by another African-American who seems to lend a stereotype truth, and then feeling ashamed that you are ashamed. And sometimes, shifting is fighting back. (pp. 7–8)

Therefore, shifting is an essential form of survival and psychological warfare that Black women employ as a way to navigate both race and gender oppression in order to survive and thrive.

Shifting requires a constant negotiation of self and many women “break down emotionally and physically under the pressure, their lives stripped of joy” (Jones &

7 Controlling images are stereotypical images of Black women that are designed to “make racism, sexism, poverty, and other forms of social injustice appear to be natural, normal, and inevitable parts of everyday life” (Collins, 2000, p. 69). In so doing, these controlling images serve to maintain social order and boundaries by defining Black women as “others” that are outside of traditional White womanhood and at the margins of society (p. 70).

Shorter-Gooden, 2003, p. 7). Black women often suffer due to their having to combat the constant onslaught of negative messages, which results in an erosion of their sense of self as they question the truth of the projected falsehoods and begin to doubt their own self-worth and competence (Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003). Many become susceptible to an array of “psychological problems including anxiety, low self-esteem, disordered eating, depression, and even outright self-hatred” (p. 7). Other key findings suggest that Black women are at a higher risk for depression and that they feel that specific race and gender-based discrimination against them is pervasive, that their suffering from rampant sexual abuse and harassment is often silent, that they must downplay their strengths and abilities with Black men, and that there is increasing pressure to meet conventional beauty standards (Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003).

Throughout Jones and Shorter-Gooden’s (2003) research, it became quite clear that while Black women felt compelled to accommodate everyone but themselves, they also felt a great sense of being overwhelmed and alienated, particularly because there were limited opportunities and spaces for them to seek and receive support and develop healthy coping mechanisms (self-care). Because controlling images like Sapphire devalue Black women by constructing them as strong enough to withstand suffering without negative effects, it becomes unnecessary to *check for* Black women because it is believed that they can persevere regardless of the challenges or barriers they face. They’ll figure it out. *Handle it*. As Jones and Shorter-Gooden illuminate, this myth has grave psychological, social, emotional, and physical consequences for Black women.

Therefore, I question if, through our trickle-down equality approaches to educational marginalization in the GTA, we are creating, reproducing, and perpetuating social, educational, and psychologically taxing environments that summon Black female students to *shift* by assuming that their perceived silence through a lack of data, or a lack of asking, is a measure of well-being that suggests their needs can wait. How are we missing the specific ways that they are experiencing and coping with anti-Black racism in their schooling?

Conclusion

The ambivalence of others in the lives of the Black women in Amanda Parris's play *The Other Side of the Game*, left them physically and psychologically exhausted. These often-silenced women were always expected and assumed to be *holding it down*,⁸ ignoring the long-term social, psychological, material, and physical consequences of their silencing. In many ways, by not checking for Black female students in the GTA's educational discourses, we also become complicit in assuming that they too, are *holding it down*. We assume they are *holding it down* by not even looking into their experiences, normalizing their juggling, and inadvertently deciding that their educational needs are not as pressing as those of Black boys. We also assume that they are *holding it down* by not recognizing that perhaps their responses to and experiences with systemic racism, especially in schooling, might just look different from that of Black boys, and if we continue to not ask or check for them, we will never come to know or understand those differences.

By not asking, we waste time and resources on educational interventions that do not capture the full scope of the problems and fail to address the needs of approximately half of Black students. We also miss out on the richness of the nuances of the specific ways that Black students are experiencing their schooling, when socially positioned in different ways (race intersecting with gender, class, etc.). An inclusion of this information can only serve to enrich the conversation and a comprehensive approach may prove to be more efficacious because interventions can then be more informed, intersectional, corrective, and targeted.

Therefore, genuine reflexivity is required. Why have we been neglectful of Black female students in educational spaces, and what assumptions are we making in our neglect? How do our educational discourses and methodologies silence and exclude the perspectives of Black women and girls? How do we engage in what Crenshaw (2017) terms "trickle-down equality"? What are the physical, social, emotional, and psychological costs for Black female students, when our ambivalence and forgetting reproduces marginalizing social and educational environments? Which forms of capital (social, economic, cultural, navigational) do Black women and girls bring to the table that is currently being

8 A colloquial term that means that something is being adequately taken care of or handled.

undervalued? How can we be more inclusive of Black women and girls and their specific needs and experiences within our current educational discourses?

The purpose of this piece is not to disparage the meaningful scholarship by generations of Canadian scholars in this area of education, but rather to bring attention to our collective neglect of Black female students of all ages in our current educational discourses. My aim is to provoke thinking about the ways that we continue a tradition of not knowing or caring enough to seek out their experiences, and how that unawareness, and the interventions that are birthed from it, may have a negative or nullifying impact. There is simply far too much that we still don't know about the educational experiences and outcomes of Black students, and the little we do know is often male-centred or problematically uses the experiences of Black male students to define and construct all Black students' experiences.

For those of us invested in, affected by, or engaging with the educational experiences of Black students, we need to grapple with how to be more nuanced in our thinking and methodologies, being more mindful of the assumptions that allow for the ignoring of half of Black students. We must reflect on how and why this continues to happen, and with race-based data collection potentially on the horizon, we should be engaging in rigorous discussions about not only how the data will be used and analyzed but also which research questions will inform the data gathering process. I contend that it is in the very questions that we ask and don't ask in our data gathering and analysis that will decide what counts, will set the parameters of the richness and usefulness of the data that is collected, and will ultimately determine the educational interventions (and funding) that will follow. Collecting data is not and will not be a cure-all, but my hope is that our approaches to the potentially forthcoming data collection will resist convention and interact more frequently, rigorously, and intimately with Black women's experiences.

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