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From Looking to Learning: Working with and for Young Black Women in Systems of Whiteness

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, I explore both the need and possibility for liberatory work with and in service of young Black women within two systems of Whiteness. First, I discuss a process of exclusion experienced by a group of young women in their inner-London 6th form college: namely being constructed as hypervisible and hypersexual, and subsequently being erased from sight within spaces connected to the college's public image. I discuss this with reference to a neoliberal framework that insidiously sustains norms of Whiteness in increasingly marketised school settings. I also extend critical analysis to the research process itself, uncovering parallel processes of silencing and stereotyping, with reference to understandings of Whiteness as structurally violent yet invisiblised acts of looking. Crucially, however, I also explore the potential for resistance within these systems. Drawing on Black feminist pedagogical frameworks, I discuss the possibility for co-created spaces in which young Black women's cultural practices and forms of knowledge take centre-stage. I ultimately find how forms of 'dancing with' and 'listening to' can serve as important practices of (un)learning for White teachers and/or researchers, specifically within UK schools and education research.

Introduction

Towards the end of July 2018, a series of heated exchanges took place on Twitter regarding the casting of actress Anna Diop in a televised adaptation of the DC comic, *Teen Titans* (Titans 2018). After it was announced Diop would be portraying the character Starfire, an alien princess, hateful comments appeared – all directed at Diop's physical appearance and all taking issue with a Black woman being cast in the role. The comments were immediately addressed for their misogynoir, a term coined by Moya Bailey and Trudy aka @thetrudz to mean the 'anti-Black racist misogyny that Black women experience' (Bailey and Trudy 2018, 762), with Diop's co-star Minka Kelly posting she could not 'begin to fathom the courage it requires every day to just exist as a Black woman in this country'. However, the supportive words of Kelly, a White North American, arguably went on to receive more media coverage, and more praise, than Diop's own earlier statement in defence of herself.[1]

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In this paper, I also seek to critically address how misogynoir shapes responses to the visibility of Black women's bodies. But this would be for the context of a 21st century inner-London 6th form college,[2] one shaped by market-forces and thus with its own arenas for public visibility, (e)valuation and judgement. I suggest such a system acts upon young Black women in ways less direct than Twitter's outburst at Diop, but still with force, to position Black girls who adopt a particular aesthetic as hypersexual and unfit for sight in the more public and thus marketable arenas of their own college. The discussions of this paper therefore follow legacies of research on the continued and particular pathologisation of Black women's bodies in the Global North (Benard 2016; Magubane 2001) and the enduring educational marginalisation of Black British girls (Archer, Hollingworth, and Mendick 2010; Mirza 1992, 2009; Showunmi 2017; Wright 2005; Wright, Weekes, and McGlaughlin 2000; Youdell 2006), with a particular focus on how these processes play out within increasingly market-driven educational settings.

Crucially however, I also explore forms of resistance and speaking out against such processes: firstly, the critical and self-affirming identity-work of young Black women, but also my own attempts at solidarity as a White and otherwise privileged teacher-researcher. This would be in the context of research/pedagogy that included a co-created dance project and performance event, alongside interviews and group discussions. These were spaces in which young Black women's knowledge, and cultural and aesthetic practices were (re)centred – spaces in which the young women could been seen, heard and learned from, rather than looked upon and judged.

My attempts at solidarity here are not straightforward however – not least because, as the opening anecdote suggests, there is a palpable risk of Black women's work being eclipsed and de-centred further by privileged others' attempts to address intersecting systems of oppression (Jones 2019; Spanierman and Smith 2017). The material for critical analysis in this article is thus twofold: processes of exclusion experienced by young Black women in their marketised education provider, and similar processes that operate through the research process itself. I critically explore both contexts as different systems of Whiteness that should be further acted upon, and ultimately ask the question: how can institutions such as the ones in focus here, and practitioner-researchers such as myself, work with and for Black girls within our own systems of Whiteness?

Introducing the research site: neoliberalism, racism and exclusion

I conducted this research during 2015–18, as part of my doctoral studies, and in my own workplace, a 6th form college located in inner-London. I taught English and dance in this college, which was established to offer a wide range of pre-university and pre-employment courses for young people in the local area. To articulate the values and processes of governance that underpinned this institution however, it is helpful to turn to discussions of a neoliberal schooling system.

Gordon (1991) defines neoliberalism as a 'style of thinking' specific to capitalist societies of the late twentieth century, one centred around the logic of the 'free' market while masking that it is 'quintessentially concerned with the art of governing' (4). A similar use of the term appears within discussion around the British education system (Archer, Hollingworth, and Mendick 2010; Bhopal and Shain 2014; Mirza 2009). Ringrose (2013) helpfully defines neoliberalism for this context as a framework within which 'subjectivity is

re-constituted in economic terms' (3). Students are thus positioned as 'machines' of productivity whose goal it is to 'self-perfect' (3) for the future within a wider system of competition between schools, regions and nation states. This manifests alongside a drive to sustain the institution that must itself be a marketable success within an increasingly privatised and thus precarious public education system (Ball, Maguire, and Macrae 2000). The purpose of formal education therefore becomes to facilitate, or monitor, individual students' production of themselves into successful and resilient – namely economically viable – subjects.

Researchers have explored how this neoliberal rhetoric of the 'DIY self' (Kelly 2001, 30), one rising to prominence in stressful times of institutional precarity and crisis, not only overlooks the material effects of structural inequality, but also produces an acutely raced, gendered and classed notion of the 'ideal student' (Wright, Weekes, and McGlaughlin 2000). The research suggests this 'ideal' particularly tends to cohere with White middle-class norms of (academic, rational or sporting) masculinity and (demure and quietly high-attaining) femininity, leading to the pathologisation of students who do not embody these norms (Archer, Hollingworth, and Mendick 2010; Youdell 2006).

Such processes were visible within the research site, especially because at the time of research the college was going through financial instability caused by falling enrolment numbers, alongside a series of seemingly unending Ofsted and pre-Ofsted inspections.[3] In this context, accountability and performance mechanisms ruled and arguably 'subjugate [d] more personal aspects, including morals, purpose, emotions and values' (Acton and Glasgow 2015, 108). This all allowed a discourse of the 'ideal/neoliberal student' to operate freely, and in ways that had particular outcomes for the young women with whom I developed this research and its methods.

Methods: researching from yet against a standpoint of Whiteness

Starting points and vantage points

The starting point for this research was my experience of teaching dance and English in the research site. Alongside my own visceral memories of finding these subjects galvanis-ing as a teenage girl, I found myself struck and moved by powerful forms of criticality and creativity mobilised by many young women I taught in the research site. This often seemed to be true for students who studied a particular vocational course in the college, Health and Social Care (hereafter HSC), many of whom I taught GCSE English to and/or attended a dance club I coordinated. However, it was also the case that certain members of this cohort had acquired a particular reputation in the college.

Phrases I had heard staff use to describe the HSC cohort, and had also at times used myself, ranged from 'vulnerable' and 'needy', to 'hard work', 'loud' and 'crazy', with an Assistant Principal sharing in an informal conversation, 'Camilla, I hate to say it, but it's usually the Black girls in the cohort'. This all speaks to research suggesting that young Black women are often positioned as 'problem girls' in UK schools (Wright 2005), with less attention paid to contexts, or to their strengths and successes. I began to wonder if this was something I could work to address, in solidarity with and 'care' (Sharpe 2016) for young women who were facing institutional and societal challenges I never had and never would have.

In important ways, this goal aligns with Heidi Mirza's (2010) definition of Black feminist research as that which aims to 'excavate the silences and pathological appearances of a collectivity of women assigned as "other" [and] quilt a genealogical narrative of other ways of knowing' (2). However, this would nevertheless be from my vantage point as a White woman – a matter that warrants unpicking.

Frankenberg (1993) suggests that 'Whiteness is a location of structural advantage [. . .] a place from which White people look at others, at society [informed by] a set of cultural practices that are usually unmarked and unnamed' (1). Research projects such as this are not exempt from Frankenberg's understanding of Whiteness as a structurally privileged and unnamed vantage point, even when conducted with the best of intentions. Indeed, while Back (2007) suggests qualitative research should ideally be practised as an act of listening, Gunaratnam (2003) suggests that ethnographic research can often come to operate more forcefully as an act of looking.

It is with this in mind, that the initial research design aimed to place the young women's voices and perspectives in the middle, with my role ideally as that of a 'humble learner', a position Allen (2005) advocates for, specifically for the White teacher engaged in 'cross-race dialogue', with an aim of creating 'dissonance in Whiteness' (65). As the research process unfolded however, I discovered new and nuanced ways of achieving this aim.

An evolving group of participants and approach

For the research period, I took up additional work as a classroom assistant in HSC lessons, and after building firmer relationships with the students, presented them with my research questions:

(1) what barriers to educational success do young Black women face in a college and society like this?
(2) can we work together to create a dance and discussion project that might make a difference?

I extended an open invitation to anyone who wished to join as participants and 'consultants'. Initially four young women offered enthusiastically to take part (Cairo, Winter, Felicia, Kayla) with a further three joining later (Melody, Tinuke, Lara, friends of the original four). All were aged 16–19 at the time of research, identified as Black British, of West African and/or African Caribbean heritage, and might be understood as working class in respect to both economic and culturalist definitions of class (Archer and Francis 2007). Beyond these institutional markers of identity however, the ways the girls spoke about themselves were complex, shifting and worked to resist attempts to pin down what it means to be a 'Black working-class girl', something I learned early-on through this vital opportunity to 'listen' rather than 'look'.

Indeed, a key part of the process was weekly semi-structured interviews, conducted over a period of 5 months, often as 1-1s but also in pairs or small groups, depending on the young women's preferences each time, and always taking place in a small, secluded room next to the college's dance studio. I would record our discussions on my phone, and the girls agreed I could transcribe and analyse our discussions in service of our research.

They all chose pseudonyms for this purpose. After some initial pre-planned questions which aimed to address both research questions directly, these 'interviews' came to be shaped around matters the participants (mainly 'interviewees' but also 'interviewer') felt were pressing and filling our thoughts that day. These sessions therefore soon became more akin to what Ramji (2009) refers to as 'meaning-making conversations' (56), spaces for sharing, exchange and sense-making that responded to the immediate context. In this respect, our 'interviews' often invited me into forms of reflection and realisation, and I increasingly felt I was being 'schooled' by the young women regarding perspectives and methods for investigation I had not previously considered.

This then all helped shed critical light on and give purpose to more formal interviews I went on to conduct with staff members, and to observations (sometimes closer to 'over-hearings') I went on to make of things said and done by staff in the college, from my complicated and shifting perspective as an 'insider-outsider' (Thomas and Gunter 2011). These embodied, invested and never neutral observations (Fitzpatrick 2013) included critical self-reflections on my own actions, words and feelings as a teacher-researcher in this space, ultimately guided by my 'humble learning' (Allen 2005) within both the interviews and dance sessions (which are described later in the article). I took to making daily notes, often focusing on my own feelings, including my own embodied and transformative experiences of being, talking and dancing with others.

The resulting 'data' was coded using a grounded theory approach, as articulated by Charmaz (2006). I first employed open and axial coding processes in which I reviewed and grouped the data to identify patterns and themes. In the 'writing-up' stage, I continued to review and reconceptualise the data and collected more as a result. For example, feeling both galvanised and checked by my experience of listening and learning in the early stages, I sought the insights of four Black British women, professionals within the fields of dance and education with whom I worked and/or share friendships. These women generously offered their thoughts around aspects the research – either through recorded discussions, or through the informal space of text message conversations. Their words provide crucial contexts, conceptualisations and challenges to my own interpretations later in the article.

An intention for this paper

Although the research did involve plenty of listening and doing together (dancing, talking, producing a performance event), and although it operated through close and compassionate relationships, it is undeniable that I am ultimately looking at the experiences of young Black women *as* a White woman – one whose voice is now telling this story, and whose name is attached to it and any credit it receives.

Therefore, rather than a core aim of sharing and interpreting my young research participants' voices and experiences, I ultimately hope to offer something more helpful and appropriate here. This would be to turn a critical lens towards that which I am privy to and part of, namely the systems of Whiteness that underpin the educational institution and the research process itself. This resonates with Spanierman and Smith's, 2017 suggestion that '[White] allies must shift their emphasis from saving people to transforming systems' (609), alongside fellow White researchers' calls for reflexivity to be placed at the heart of the research process (Pearce 2003; Skeggs 2002).

A major task in this paper then will be to name and mark out the norms and practices of Whiteness, its exclusionary effects, and to critically 'excavate' its own violent 'silences' (Mirza 2010, 3): those of the institution and the research(er). Throughout the following discussion of my findings, I therefore endeavour to reflect on how I contributed to the processes of exclusion my students faced, as a teacher and researcher, and invite readers to take time out to reflect for themselves where they feel called to do so.

Findings

'Buff Black girls': locating and disrupting the white gaze

As Ahmed (2002) and Alcoff (2006) discuss, racialised identities are constructed through structurally violent acts of looking but are also *re-created* within the lived experiences of individuals and communities. This would be in deliberating and deeply embodied ways, and always in intersection with gender, sexuality, class, dis/ability and age as their own systems of oppression and liberation (Crenshaw 1995). Such an understanding of identity is apparent in how the young women articulated their social identities, and I had the chance to learn this for myself through the young women's discussions of themselves as 'us brown girls', as Lara put it. It was within these discussions that the girls often mobilised a particular discourse: that of 'buff' Black femininity, an identity that came to intersect with the exclusions the young women encountered, and arguably reveals much about how Whiteness operates.

In interview, Melody explained to me that 'it's *really* important for [Black] girls to be buff[4] in this college'. Subsequent explanations suggested a particularised discourse of beauty and (hetero)sexual attractiveness, manifesting in specific ways of styling one's appearance, including with hairstyling, make-up and clothing. It is not within the remit of this article to detail this further, especially given the existing body of research and journalism by Black women that offers illuminating discussion of Black British girls' relationship with their physical appearance and sexuality – see for example the work of Weekes (1997, 2002), Bernard (2017) and McIntosh and Leonie (2017). However, it is important to note that I initially understood the importance of buffness in a particular way. This would be with reference to research exploring how working-class girls mobilise aspects of their social lives – their friendships, physical appearance and relationships with boys – for status and respect, within a wider societal terrain that undervalues their intellectual, cultural and potential economic contributions (Archer, Hollingworth, and Mendick 2010; Ball, Maguire, and Macrae 2000). I thus adopted a particular type of feminist concern that the beauty norms my students were navigating were (only) a compensatory route to status.

Remaining anchored by the work of Mirza however, I suggest there was a risk in applying this analysis: namely, that of conceiving of young Black womanhood through one-dimensional narratives of oppression and struggle. Indeed, Frantz Fanon's (1967) reference to the tyranny of 'White eyes, the only real eyes' (116) as a lens through which he was continually constructed as 'dangerous' as a Black man living in France, has its own application here. For this context, that of a well-meaning White middle-class feminist woman researching the experiences of Black working-class girls, I suggest the work of these 'eyes' was initially to position the young women as some way

in need of rescuing – in this case from what I had understood as a compensatory set of beauty norms. However, my time on the project helped alert me to a different lens: one that might be articulated with reference to the work of Ruth Nicole Brown (2009), who advocates for a process where adults who work with Black girls learn with and from rather than 'save'.

Indeed, from spending time with the young women, in interview and in the creative and very physical space of the dance studio, I was called to learn that experimenting with buff Black femininity could be a source of great pleasure and artistry, a practice for sisterhood and for the affirmation of identity. There were also ways in which the young women understood their 'buffness' as aligned with their striving on the academic front as empowered Black women, rather than simply as an alternative route to success. As Winter puts it: 'Black girls are into make-up *and* are intelligent at the same time [. . .] education is very important to Black communities – we're *both* at the same time!' For further elucidation of this, I turn to the words of education researcher, teacher and actor-singer-songwriter Dr Vivienne Ekwulugo,[5] whom I consulted on aspects of this research.

As part of a text message conversation around Black girls' styling of their appearance in schools and at work (18 June 2017), Dr Ekwulugo offered me a correction of sorts in suggesting these processes might be understood as 'hustle' rather than struggle: as a route to not only 'surviving' but also 'thriving' in a way that is firmly aligned with and gives personal momentum to educational and career success (Banks 2000; Blackett 2022). Through this lens, the power of the young women's investments in their appearance should not be underestimated by and within academic research or their own institution. In fact, the 'buff Black girl' should rather be understood as strategically and playfully working with what is available: enjoying a process of aesthetically and culturally marking her body (her territory), but also doing so to play the game and win.

However, can the 'buff Black girl' win within the context of her neoliberal institution, one that has its own game to play, with its own set of invisible rules, including the discourse of the 'ideal/neoliberal student' detailed earlier? Indeed, it is in relation to their physical appearance as 'buff Black girls' that my young research participants, clearly dedicated to their own educational success and striving, came to be defined as anything less than 'ideal' - sometimes even as 'abject'.

Arenas for visibility and abjection in the neoliberal college

The term 'abject', as defined by Kristeva (1982), refers to that which 'disturbs system, order' but also 'fascinates desire', inviting a visceral revulsion and consequently, a 'radical exclusion' (1). Hook (2004) suggests this term might helpfully elucidate 'racism's visceral forms, and its [mechanisms] of avoidance and aversion' (672). Following Hook, I employ this term to capture the deeply and covertly emotive ways in which misogynoir operated against young Black women within the college, legitimised and exacerbated via neoliberal discourses of the 'ideal student'. The following examples took place within two public and visible domains of this marketised institution: spaces in which the 'buff' Black girl was rendered hypervisible and subsequently invisibilised, arguably to her educational detriment.

Open evening

During a college open evening for prospective students and their families, I was stopped on the stairs by a senior staff member, a White British man in his 50s. He motioned towards the college dance studio that had been opened so visitors could see students rehearsing. The dancers, mainly young Black women, had stayed late that day to rehearse for an upcoming performance. This senior staff member then asked me, with what I encountered as hesitation and discomfort, if I would ask the students to 'cover up a bit'. I remember feeling that there was a barely implicit sexualisation of their bodies in his question – one in which the young Black woman's body is not something she utilises and enjoys in producing an art form or an aesthetic ideal, nor something she puts to work and shares in support of her college. Instead, her body, practising dance in stylised and stylish dance rehearsal clothes, became a sexualised item of public property whose meaning existed only in its capacity to either promote or harm the reputation of the institution.

Research suggests that young Black women's bodies are sexualised, and, more specifically, are 'consumed and punished' (Brown 2009, 93) through a White patriarchal gaze within schools (Youdell 2006), and in ways that cohere with Kristevan discussions of the deeply emotive desires and fears that underpin racism. Here however, the sexualisation and attempted erasure of these young dancers' bodies was compounded and legitimised by a marketised education system. Within such a system, an event like Open Evening sees educational spaces transformed into arenas for 'generating the right kinds of appearance' (Ahmed 2012, 85), largely because 'the question of education is no longer 'Is it true?' but 'What use is it?' (Ahmed 2012, 84, citing; Lyotard 1984). In this context students become valuable, and fit for sight, only in their potential to attract future 'ideal students', either in the results they achieve or in the image they present: one that should cohere with 'the rules of the game' (Kristeva 1982, 2). This neoliberal (e)valuation of young people was brought into relief by the college Principal's reported pronouncement in a team meeting that 'marketing is [now] more important than teaching and learning' as a college development priority.

I suggest this is a particular problem for Black girls because it allows a 'consuming and punishing' White patriarchal gaze to operate legitimately, and ultimately to go unchallenged. Indeed, although I declined to ask the young women to 'cover up', I remember feeling somewhat anxious during this opening evening: specifically, because our usually enclosed dance studio space was being opened-up to the neoliberal gaze, one I instantly found myself adopting. I suggest this reveals the more insidious and emotive ways in which Whiteness operates in a neoliberal system. This would be through triggering my own racist and sexist ideals of what makes a marketable 'ideal student' and doing so by calling my professionalism into question – by pulling at my feelings of needing to do the right/White thing in a performance-oriented education system, complete with marketing-related performance targets teachers at this college were now expected to meet.

Ultimately this positioning of the Black girl's body as too-sexy-for-school (or for school as marketable *image* of school), and the deployment of 'well-meaning' and under-pressure staff members to this end, came to have tangible outcomes for young women's education. The next example illustrates this further, alongside the impact of Whiteness upon the research process itself.

Work experience

During the research period, a colleague shared a particular account with me, concerning a young Black woman who had been sent home from her work experience placement at a care home for wearing an outfit that was judged 'inappropriate'.

According to this teacher's account, she had been asked to bring the student to a senior staff member's office. This senior staff member, a Black British woman in her 50s, reportedly asked the student to 'cover yourself up' upon her entering the room, in a tone that the teacher described as 'disgust'. The teacher reported an ensuing 'lecture' from the senior staff member, conveying how the young woman was putting her very future at risk through her outfit choice, in addition to a poor attendance and work submission record at college. The student was then put on report directly to the senior staff member, who promised to support her, apparently telling her at the end of the meeting 'I know you're a good girl really'.

In the disciplinary space of this office, it seemed to me at the time that this young woman was addressed through a distinctly neoliberal discourse of risk and responsibilisation (Kelly 2001), in which the 'risk' was situated not only in the extent of her educational efforts, but also in her body. Hers seemed to have been positioned as a threatening body that needed to be covered, managed or erased – even within the enclosed space of the staff office, let alone in the public domain of the work experience placement where the institution's reputation was also at stake. A related pathologising label is also reported to have operated here, that of the 'good girl underneath' which Archer, Hansall and Hollingworth (2007) explore in relation to how Black girls are positioned in UK schools as 'bad' in their behaviour, and are then nurtured, or disciplined, towards their potential 'goodness' through norms of an appropriately demure, White middle-class femininity. In this context, processes towards managing young Black women were again ones in which acutely neoliberal discourses are invoked: this time of futures and career success, discourses ironically mobilised to *remove* the young woman from a work opportunity.

It is important to acknowledge, however, that I did not interview or seek out the views of the senior staff member and therefore cannot claim to accurately represent her intentions. In this respect, I would like to re-visit my initial discussion of her 'disgust' at the young woman's clothing choices.

My drive to revisit my analysis here emerged later in the research process, after consulting a HSC teacher, a Black British woman, for her thoughts on the dance project. While supportive of the project, she also shared her fears around her students dancing in the college: 'when I see them twerking in the corridor, we *know* what people will think'. This discussion alerted me to an alternative lens through which to understand this work experience encounter: one that acknowledges the complicated work that adult Black women do within institutions to *protect* young Black women from racist, sexist labelling (Brown 2009; Richardson 2013). In this respect my initial interpretation of the senior staff member's response – one in which I potentially missed the nuance of a Black woman's protective work – could be understood as another act of 'looking at' rather than 'listening to' within the research process itself.

Taken together, these examples illustrate how Whiteness operates to erase and silence, through invoking neoliberal language of success and risk, alongside 'well-meaning' White-feminist intentions to name and to save, even if through our own attempts at critical work.

Spaces for resistance: the dance project and Black girls 'in the middle'

To conceptualise spaces for resistance in all this, I turn to Ahmed's (2004) suggestion that someone 'would be an agent insofar as that which affects [them] leaves room for creative action' (190). Powerful forms of creative action took place within our dance project, alongside the rich spaces for (un)learning that the interviews were already providing, primarily through placing young Black women's embodied forms of knowing and knowledge at the centre.

This collectively designed dance project consisted of weekly group dance sessions, culminating in a performance for International Women's Day in which the students took leading roles as organisers, choreographers and performers. I share two practices from within this project. The first is the dance cipher or freestyle circle; the second is the young women's particular approaches to occupying stage space during their performance. I theorise these practices with reference to African American scholars' work on critical dance pedagogies, the insights of professional dancers with whom I have worked in more recent versions of the project, alongside my own reflections on the visceral unlearning that took place for staff members, myself included.

'One Black Girl in he Middle': the dance cipher

The first practice for resistance was introduced to our studio practice by Winter, on a day a small group of students had arrived early for class: Winter, three of her friends and four young Turkish women. I was present, as was the girls' form tutor, a British Indian woman who was a staunch supporter of her students both in and out of the classroom. After we gathered in a circle to play some warm-up games, Winter suggested we play what she called 'One Black Girl in the Middle'.

Winter, a young woman of Jamaican heritage, explained the rules of this game which were aligned with the Jamaican children's ring game, 'Brown Girl in the Ring' (Cameron, Conolly, and Signham 1981): an energised communal dance space that emerges through participants forming a close-knit yet dynamic circle and taking it in spontaneous turns to enter the middle and 'show me your motion'.[6] Brown (2009) explores this for a contemporary US context in relation to the 'Black girl dance cipher'. She conceives of this cultural event as nothing less than 'serious education' (100), in that 'the knower chooses to be at the centre and make who she is known by deciding how her body moves' (100). She goes on to argue that the Black girl/woman dance cipher 'provides the possibility of creating a narrative of the self in communal company that insists on complex identities . . . [regarding] who we are and what we want to be' (101).

In our version, we formed a small circle and took it in turns to dance for each other to the Afrobeats and Bashment music playing on the stereo, as a diverse group of women in respect to ethnicity, age, class and place within the institution. Winter held back from entering the circle until everyone had taken a turn, and then at last walked into the centre, waited a moment for the beat to drop, and then proceeded to dance to cries of a particular term from her friends: 'brukkout!'

Two professional dancers with whom I have worked on this project in its more recent versions, explained this term to me thus:

Chanelle Hall[7]: brukkout means freedom of expression: letting loose, being free and truthful and fluid with the music [...] for women of our [African Caribbean] culture it is about embracing womanhood. Stepping into womanhood.

Kloe Dean[8]: brukkout is going all out, letting go, not having any inhibitions [...] to say it in front of a teacher like that – it's kind of like a little secret, like their own language, their own space.

Hall's and Dean's explanations are reminiscent of Hobson's discussion of African American girls' ring games: 'the game of sashaying and hip shaking transforms into a sacred space [...] this added spiritual component elevates Black women's dance to a higher plane of aesthetic appreciation' (Hobson cited in Brown 2009, 99). Within the conceptual framework of this research, a 'sacred space' can be understood as a sanctuary of sorts and an arena for cultural visibility, celebration and self-love (Sears 2010). This would be one that resists a White patriarchal/White feminist and neoliberal gaze through which Black girls' bodies are rendered either abject, or vulnerable and in-need of saving.

However, the dance cipher is not only a site of learning for young women, but also for the adults who dance with them. As Brown (2009) puts it, 'the adult-girl dance cipher transforms typical binary power relationships' (89), in no small part because 'to understand what dance does, you have to dance' (102). Indeed, I did experience a powerful (un) learning process here. I remember having brought a distinctly White feminist orientation of concern into our dance sessions regarding the meaning of the young women's dancing, in a way that echoed my concerns around their stylings of their appearance. However, the visceral experience of the dance cipher was a space of political learning for me, located within the very sensation of my dancing, accompanied by the lively feeling of celebration and community in the room: the cheering, the clapping, the laughing, the bodies moving in close proximity to each other.

This was an embodied, lived experience of transformed consciousness (hooks 1994) in which I developed a deeper understanding of my students' cultural practices, and the forms of pleasure-power and sisterhood they can create. The girls' form tutor articulated something similar during the dance sessions: 'I'm beginning to see these girls differently, you know'. I suggest therefore that these dance ciphers were a powerful space for unlearning institutional racism and sexism in material form, for the teacher and for the researcher. This was not the only practice through which the White neoliberal gaze was challenged, however.

'Turn up the music Miss!': the dance performance

Researchers have explored how the public dance performance can serve as a (complicated) space for young Black women to project their own identities and teach audiences who they are, and who they might become (Hickey-Moody 2013; Stanger 2016). In a similar way, our dance performance event, performed to an audience of women-only staff and students, became a space where the young women's self-directed identities became legitimately visible rather than erased/abject within the institution.

Two HSC students hosted the show and introduced each performance with reference to the national culture being represented. This elicited playful and not un-competitive cheering from the audience that highlighted the different national and cultural allegiances within the auditorium! The cheering and clapping always seemed to go up a

notch as soon as the performers entered the stage, wearing costumes carefully designed to evoke particular national identities, for example an Afrobeats performance with music, steps and costumes evoking Igbo, Yoruba, Congolese and Ghanaian cultures. The performers had successfully negotiated the music be turned up to the maximum, and the sound of the music and the students' cheering consequently filled the auditorium from every angle during the show. For me as an audience member, this all worked to create a celebratory experience of the literally spot-lighted – or 'lit'[9] – Black femininities being performed onstage. In this space, the girls' cultural identities could now legitimately, quite expansively and viscerally claim centre-stage, again, right 'in the middle'. This was in resistance to the erasing, containing, micro-managing and attempted Whitewashing of their bodies in the public spaces discussed earlier.

Throughout the performance I sat next to two senior staff members. I noted the pleasure these women seemed to take in the show, with smiles, applause and spontaneous laughter. After the event had finished, both turned to me with what I remember as wide smiles, congratulations, requests for it to happen again next year, and the following statements: 'we have some *really* good dancers, don't we?'; 'it was a breath of fresh air – one that we really need at the moment'; 'it's great to see these girls presenting a different side to themselves'. It seems the young women's 'creative action' (Ahmed 2004, 190) not only destabilised a discourse in which they are not and cannot be 'good', but also provided an important antidote to the pressures of the neoliberal, Ofsted-ready institution, a 'breath of fresh air that we really need'. In referring to the young women presenting a 'different side to themselves', there is also a complicated sense that the way this staff member saw these students had, in that moment at least, shifted. Arguably young women were not presenting a different side to themselves: this senior staff member was *seeing* them differently. I read any (partial) processes of learning and transformation here in relation to my own learning within the dance cipher: namely of the visceral, emotive kind (hooks 1994). The kind that meets the deeply embodied triggers for abjection head-on, and all facilitated by being in the midst of a charged, Black-girl centred, and utterly 'lit' dance space (Brown 2009).

The young women also had much to say about how the dance project – the performance event especially – made them feel, with the words 'proud' and 'pride' recurring across every research participant's 1–1 interview-conversation that took place immediately after the event. This was in stark contrast to the feelings of 'being judged by teachers' and 'blamed over the White and Turkish girls in the class' that Felicia, Winter and Tinuke discussed in a revealing group interview mid-way into the process. The young women also spoke about feeling that the project and event 'brought us all together', something I felt I had witnessed clearly as the girls had taken their bows at the end of the performance: stood together, front and centre stage, smiling with their arms around each other, claiming the limelight as a collective of 'Black girl[s] in the middle'.

These practices, however, did little to permanently rearrange wider relations of power in the college, and in some ways even served to reproduce some pathologising discourses. This was pointed out to me by a teacher I consulted towards the end of the process, the same who had shared her concerns around the increasing visibility of Black girls dancing at college events. A final interview with this teacher Rita (a pseudonym), proved illuminating in forming some critical yet still hopeful conclusions, in respect to the pedagogy and the research process itself.

Conclusions: moving forward within systems of Whiteness

Rita: Yes and I agree with that – but then it always seems to focus on the Black person [pause] having to lead it, and usually without any credit.

CS: Yes but I think this is what I'm struggling with [pause] if we want change to happen, if we want those eyes and that looking to change, then keeping everything behind closed doors might just keep the status quo?

Rita: [. . .] it's about expansion isn't it? Expansion of knowledge. When I see the girls twerking in the corridor – it's about context sometimes because we know what people will think.

CS: I feel [the project] didn't quite succeed in doing the opening-up I had hoped. So going forward, I'd value your thoughts?

This research sought to engage in theoretical and pedagogical work that, as Rita advocates, 'expands' institutional 'knowledge', in alignment with Mirza's 2010 avocation that Black feminist research serve to 'quilt a genealogical narrative of other ways of knowing' (2). The key aim was to disrupt a particular process of Whiteness: namely, the seeing, reading and rendering of young Black women's bodies, their selves, as hypersexual, 'inappropriate' and ultimately abject within their marketised college. First, I have argued and sought to expose that processes of misogynoir in schools are exacerbated and invisibilised by neoliberal discourses of success and crisis within the UK education system. The young women and I also worked together to create spaces that platform and (re) centre young Black women's voices and aesthetic practices of sisterhood and identity-making, in service of 'quilting [. . .] other ways of knowing' (Mirza 2010, 2).

Within any hopeful work achieved here however, a risk remains – the same that opened this article: namely, the enduring centring and 'crediting' of Whiteness, even in attempts to un-do it, as demonstrated in how some processes of 'looking at' eclipsed 'listening to' within the research process itself. In this context, it is important to ask again, how might White teachers and researchers best work with and for young Black women? It is in this respect that I return to the opportunities for and importance of 'humble learning' (Allen 2005) in, through and about the research process.

This would firstly emerge through compassionate and boldly self-reflective forms of listening, rather than through forms of looking, or looking to name, claim and to save. This 'humble learning' can, and should, also take place through giving oneself over to the visceral and deeply emotive forms of realisation that come from sharing embodied cultural practices in communal space, whether it be in a dance studio, an auditorium or the enclosed, private space of an interview room. The resulting work would turn a critical lens to institutions and systems, rather than offering a paternalistic hand to those already working to 'thrive and survive' within and against them. It would also avoid eclipsing or taking up room from young Black women's 'creative action', nor would it neglect or fail to learn from the protective work and knowledge of Black women professionals who support Black girls. And crucially, this work would continue to be predicated on the White professional seeking out spaces in which to critically self-reflect, to viscerally feel

something new, and to (un)learn. I hope the reflections of this article can play a part in at least myself, if not other White teacher-researchers, moving towards such a place.

Notes

1. See Agbeni (2018) and Martin (2018) for full reporting on the response to Diop's casting, including all matters referred to here.
2. 6th form colleges in the UK offer full-time courses and qualifications for students aged 16–19 years old, as a route into either further study at High Education/university level, or employment.
3. Ofsted is the UK Government's school inspection body.
4. For international audiences, it is important to note that this term operates differently in the UK to how it does in the US.
5. See the following for more about Vivienne Ekwulugo's work: https://www.londontheatredir ect.com/actor/vivienne-ekwulugo; https://bura.brunel.ac.uk/handle/2438/12752. Both last accessed 28th April 2023.
6. Lyric from the song that accompanies this game. See Cameron et al. (1981), a compilation of children's songs from the Caribbean, as part of Gloria Cameron's (MBE) broader work to promote West Indian culture in the UK.
7. See the following for more about Chanelle Hall's work: https://bloggeronpole.com/2018/02/ twerkology-nation/ Last accessed 28th April 2023.
8. See the following for more about Kloe Dean's work: https://www.myselfdance.com. Last accessed 28th April 2023.
9. A slang term the young women used to denote something exciting and lively. See Webb (2018) for further discussion and context.

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