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Article

Unaccounted Foundations: Black Girls, Anti-Black Racism, and Punishment in Schools

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Abstract

For nearly three decades, racial formations theory has influenced ideas, discourses and political projects surrounding race and racism in the United States. The theory holds that although race is a permanent feature in the US, the formation, order, and set of meanings inscribed onto racialized subjects are contingent upon historical and political contexts. This framework conceals anti-black racism as an enduring social order that affects policies, policy outcomes and organizes the relationship between non-black and black bodies. One exemplary social institution through which this can be seen is the public education system and its culture of discipline and punishment in the US. Current interrogations of school disciplinary landscapes have focused in on disparities in discipline policies as they affect working-class/working-poor boys of color. While it is useful to examine the uneven rates of suspensions, expulsions, and arrests, focusing on these disciplinary discrepancies misses everyday occurrences of punishment that young black girls experience. This qualitative paper examines school discipline policies and informal punitive practices including the implications that these mechanisms have on the physical and emotional worlds of black girls. The study finds that black girls are rendered structurally vulnerable to discipline *and* punishment at the hands of adults and peers in ways that exceed or contend with the logics espoused through racial formations theory. Placing black girls at the center of analysis compels us to examine the anti-black logic of discipline *and* punishment in schools and at large.

Keywords

anti-black racism, anti-blackness, black girls, education, girls of color, intersectionality, race and gender in education, racial formation, school discipline and punishment

Introduction

For nearly three decades, *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s* has influenced ideas, discourses and political projects surrounding race and racism in the United States. In this work, Michael Omi and Howard Winant developed racial formation theory, which holds

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that although race is a permanent feature in the US, race and racial subjects are contingent upon historical contexts and political projects. Racial subjects, they theorized, are shaped by contestations over racial meanings that are situated within particular political moments. Omi and Winant distinguished race from racism, arguing that while race is socially (and politically) constructed, not all racializing projects are racist. Although race and racism are different from one another, they share at least one common theme; that is, 'racism, like race, has changed over time' (1994: 71). Omi and Winant highlight examples throughout history where definitions of racial subjects (i.e. Asian Americans, Irish Americans) shifted based upon political projects. While their historical analysis is useful in helping race scholars to understand how racial definitions change, their theory is unable to account for the reasons why ongoing characterizations of blackness as 'criminal' and 'deviant' do not hinge on historical moments or projects but are 'seemingly invariant and limitless' (Sexton, 2010). This paper explores the perpetuity of anti-black racism and argues that anti-black racism is foundational to the US institutional policies and social relations.

One exemplary site through which anti-black racism organizes policies, outcomes and social relationships is the US public education system, including its culture of discipline and punishment. In recent years, education researchers have begun to look closely at the punitive school discipline environment (Advancement Project, 2012; Bear, 1998; Kafka, 2011; Skiba and Peterson, 2000). Often defined by exclusionary practices including suspensions and arrests, school discipline disproportionately affects students of color – particularly black youth. Based upon the US Civil Rights Data Collection (2014), in 2009–10, more than 30,000 California students were referred to law enforcement. According to the report, black students make up 16 percent of the student population, yet the students constitute 32–42 percent of those suspended or expelled. Comparatively, white students make up 51 percent of the student population, but they constitute 31–40 percent of suspensions or expulsions.

Unaccounted Anti-Black Racism

This qualitative study examines the formal and informal school discipline practices. At the formal level, this study examines the relationship between zero tolerance policies and their effects on black girls at a suburban high school located in California called Foundations High School (FHS). During the 2013–14 school year, FHS was 22.1 percent Asian, 19 percent Filipino, 32 percent Latino, 7.8 percent white, 9 percent black, 4 percent Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, and less than 1 percent Native American. Despite the diversity of the campus, black and Latino students are more likely to be disciplined than their counterparts. According to the 2013–14 discipline data for all girls at FHS, Latinas constitute 44 percent of the population of girls who have discipline records (i.e. detention, suspension or expulsion records). Black girls make up 26 percent and Filipino girls constitute 12 percent of all girls who have discipline records. These numbers indicate that black and Latina girls are overrepresented in the data.[1] Departing from the current research on school discipline, the following contribution examines informal practices of school discipline and punishment that take place between black youth, their teachers and peers.

Based upon in-depth interviews of 15 black girls with discipline records (i.e. suspensions, referrals and arrests) and 12 months of participant observations, findings indicate that at the hands of school staff and their peers – consciously or unconsciously – black girls are rendered vulnerable to racialized and gendered forms of discipline *and* punishment. The girls are more likely to be subject to disciplinary infractions through both formal and informal processes by adults and their non-black peers. These girls' experiences with anti-black racism as it plays out at the state and social levels have not been accounted for in racial formation theory. Hill-Collins (1991: 221) writes, '[P]lacing black women's experiences at the center of analysis offers fresh insights on the prevailing

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concepts, paradigms, and epistemologies of the [Eurocentric masculinist] world view'. Centering the lives of black girls compels us to examine the atemporal and foundational anti-black logic that informs discipline *and* punishment in schools and at large.

Racial Formation Theory

Omi and Winant's canonical book provides a useful framework to understand the relationship of race and racism to the social and political fabric of the United States. One of the most influential ideas is that race is socially constructed through racial categories that are produced, contested and altered within historical contexts and through political projects. Outlining the concept of racial formation, they contend that race and racial meanings are dynamically produced and contested. They write, 'We define *racial formation* as the sociohistorical process by which racial categories are created, inhabited, transformed and destroyed' (1994: 55). Highlighting the temporal contingency of race, they also assert that racism is not fixed, but is instead determined by context. They 'locat[e] racism within a fluid and contested history of racially based social structures and discourses' (p. 71). This important theory has been explored, adopted and expanded across multiple scholarly fields and theories of race and racism in the United States. Despite its usefulness for studying the shifting characteristics of race and racism, racial formation theory narrowly focuses on racial projects at the expense of analyzing racism that extends beyond the logic of time or project.

As exemplified by the collection of essays in *Racial Formation in the Twenty-First Century* (2012), a number of scholars have argued that racial formation theory, including subsequent anti-racist projects, would benefit from more nuanced and expansive analyses of race and racism. Kandaswamy challenges racial formation theory to incorporate an intersectional analysis of the relationship between race, gender and sexuality. She contends that when Omi and Winant analogized race to other indexes of power, namely gender and sexuality, the two scholars obfuscated the complex ways that these categories inform and mutually constitute one another (2012: 26). She explains that race, racial meanings and categories do not operate in isolation from constructions and performances of gender (or sexuality).

In the same anthology, Smith (2012) argues that Omi and Winant's exploration of race missed integral parts of the United States' racial landscape and history. She adds that racial theories must include an intersectional analysis of settler colonialism and the logics of white supremacy if they are to comprehensively outline the nation-state's racial landscape and history, including its discursive machinations and violent implications. Smith contends that racial formation theory misses the centrality of colonial violence to racial formation and racism in the United States. Kandaswamy and Smith are among many scholars who challenge racial formation theory to attend to other vectors of power and domination that shape racial categories, identities, and projects.

Other racial theorists have developed theories of race that attend to enduring processes and effects of anti-black racism. Feagin (2013) argues that racial oppression against blacks is systemic and foundational to the United States. Critiquing racial theorists that deemphasize anti-black racism, he writes:

> [M]issing in both the mainstream race-ethnic relations approach and much of the racial formation approach is a full recognition of the big picture – the reality of this whole society being founded on, and firmly grounded in, oppression targeting African-Americans (and other Americans of color) now *for several centuries*. (2013: 7; emphasis added)

According to Feagin, 'white-on-black' oppression is foundational to the United States, shaping other forms of racial oppression. Contending that anti-black racism is not limited to particular time

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periods or projects, he argues that anti-black racism is systemic, pervasive and productive. 'White-on-black' racism, as exemplified through chattel slavery and cheap labor, enabled the possibility of the United States.

Similarly, Sexton (2010) highlights the centrality of anti-black racism to the United States. He writes, 'Black existence does not represent the total reality of the racial formation – it is not the beginning and end of the story – but it does relate to the totality; it indicates the (repressed) truth of the political and economic system' (p. 48). Sexton's analysis provides a framework to understand that blackness and anti-black racism are integral features of entire systems. Although anti-black racism does not account for all of the systems, studies around the state or racism cannot fully comprehend the depth and entirety of the United States without centering the relevance of anti-black racism to the world and racial formations.

According to Sexton, anti-black racism is not limited to white on black racial oppression, but also includes the relationship that non-black non-whites have to blacks. He critiques studies about non-black non-white existence and argues that, 'What is lost for the study of nonblack nonwhites is a proper analysis of the true scale and nature of its material and symbolic power *relative* to the category of blackness' (p. 48). Sexton's theoretical contributions extend Feagin's analysis of 'white-on-black' racial oppression by implicating all of civil society, including non-black non-whites. Thus, race scholarship particularly about non-black non-whites (or non-black people of color) that takes seriously the project of analyzing the US racial state or system must contend with their constitutive relationship to anti-black racism and black suffering. Sexton argues:

> [E]very attempt to defend the rights and liberties of the latest victims of state repression will fail to make substantial gains insofar as it forfeits or sidelines the fate of blacks, the prototypical targets of the panoply of police practices and the juridical infrastructure built up around them. (2010: 48)

According to Sexton, blacks are the prototypical targets of the state and its foundation. Even if non-black non-whites (and whites) may be subject to state policing practices or racial oppression, blacks are the paradigmatic objects of racialized state repression.

Elsewhere, Sexton elaborates upon the relationship between state repression, discipline, punishment and anti-black racism. He theorizes that within the context of anti-black racism, punishment is primary and foundational to black subjection, with discipline as a 'popular theater of cruelty' (Sexton, 2007: 202). That is, discipline is in excess to a condition of blackness, which is to be structurally positioned *as always* susceptible *to* and *is* a subject of punishment.

James (1996) argues that black bodies are the standard against which normality is measured. Blacks are structurally positioned in opposition to normality and all of its signifiers including demonstrations of civility, respectability, and obedience. According to James, blacks cannot be 'normalized' through state disciplinary processes because blackness is characterized by deviance. She writes:

> In racialized societies such as the United States, the plague of criminality, deviancy, immorality, and corruption is embodied in the black because both sexual and social pathology are branded by skin color (as well as by gender and sexual orientation). Where the plague and the leper are codified in the black, for instance, the dreams and desires of a society and state will be centered on the black body. (1996: 27)

Thus, the punishment of black bodies is not necessarily about discipline for the purposes of normalization. Instead, the spectacle of punishing black bodies is ingrained in the 'dreams and desires' of the US racial society and its citizens. Black bodies are society's quintessential phobogenic objects, embodying that which is feared and loathed.

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Several black feminist scholars (e.g. Crenshaw, 1995; James, 1996) have explored the centrality of violence against black women to the foundation of the United States and its institutions. For example, Roberts (2011) writes specifically about the multiple ways that US state institutions punish black women. Her research examines the relationship between the foster care system and the prison system as they enact violence against black women and black motherhood. Richie (2012) similarly explores the ways that the prison nation produces multiple forms of violence against black women. Her study demonstrates the ways that black women are victimized by the intersecting and layered forms of violence from the state, institutions and the community. Rarely, however, are black women imagined or granted access to 'victimhood'. Similarly, Bierria (2014) writes that black women are more often characterized as violent perpetrators than subjects of violence. Drawing from these studies of anti-black racism and gender, this study explores a school, its punitive mechanisms – which operate at formal and informal levels – and their relationship to black girls.

Formal Anti-Black Discipline

School discipline research indicates that throughout the United States, students of color, particularly black and Latino youths, are more often disciplined in the form of referrals, suspensions, and expulsions, and are more often policed and arrested than their counterparts (Advancement Project, 2011; Casella, 2003; Wald and Losen, 2003; Wallace et al., 2008). Critical examinations of these racial disparities have highlighted racial biases of school faculty and their over-reliance upon harsh discipline policies to manage the behaviors or actions of students of color (Casella, 2003; Fenning and Rose, 2007; Robbins, 2005; Skiba and Noam, 2002). In particular, in the past few years, investigations of school discipline policies and their affects upon working-class and poor students of color have scrutinized the excessive use and overreliance upon 'zero tolerance' policies to manage youth and produce school order (Advancement Project, 2011).

'Zero tolerance' has become the catchall phrase for policies that mandate the immediate suspension and/or expulsion of students for a list of infractions not limited to drug and weapons possession. While many have traced the development of these disciplinary policies and practices to the Guns Free Schools Act of 1994 (which mandated the immediate expulsion of a student found in possession of a gun within 1000 feet from a school campus), the genealogy of zero tolerance policies reaches back to at least the late 1960s as a response to black political protest, purported claims of high rates of crime in schools and school integration at large (Kafka, 2011; Sojoyner, 2013). The creation of these policies has had particularly egregious effects upon black students. According to a report issued by the US Department of Education (2014), black youth make up 18 percent of the student population; they constitute 42 percent of the referrals to law enforcement, 35 percent of school-related arrests, and 39 percent of all students expelled (Losen and Gillespie, 2012).

In particular, most studies that examine school discipline data and the impact on females have found that girls of color, particularly black girls, are disproportionately disciplined compared to their peers (Mendez and Knopf, 2003; Morris, 2007). Research indicates that young black women are twice as likely as their white female counterparts to be sent to the office and are five times as likely to be suspended or expelled (Wallace et al., 2008). According to the US Department of Education (2014), 12 percent of school-aged black girls across the country have experienced out-of-school suspensions, compared to 4 percent for Latinas, and 2 percent for white girls. Additionally, 19 percent of black girls with disabilities have experiences with out-of-school suspensions. In terms of arrests, 31 percent of black girls have been referred to law enforcement while 43 percent have had experiences with school-related arrests. Mirroring federal data, black girls at FHS were also overrepresented in data on referrals, suspensions and expulsions.

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This study finds that in addition to being disproportionately represented in disciplinary data, black students are also more likely to be disciplined for nonviolent infractions. Findings show that black girls are disciplined for behaviors such as disruption, profanity, defiance and fighting. Many of these infractions are subjective, and violation is determined by the opinions of schoolteachers and administrators. For example, black students are disproportionately disciplined for 'disobedience' and 'defiance'. Black girls are more likely than their counterparts to be disciplined for 'talking back' (Morris, 2007). Although zero tolerance policies were purportedly established to address violence at schools, they are often used to discipline black students for any number of behaviors ranging from fights to 'talking back'.

While studies about youth and criminalization often focus on the harsh experiences that boys of color have with police officers (Ferguson, 2001; Hirschfield, 2008), evidence from this study shows that girls who are depicted as 'criminal' suffer similar forms of criminalization, intimidation, and brutality. Put differently, black girls are also targets of state punishment. Stacy, who is a 15-year-old black girl, details her experience with being punished by a school police officer for 'almost' fighting. When Stacy, another girl, and their friends left school grounds to fight in a neighboring parking lot, they were met there by the police officer. In response to her yelling, he began yelling at her to 'calm down' then pushed her to the ground and handcuffed her in front of all of her peers.

> I was so confused. I couldn't do nothing about it. He was pushing me. I asked why I had handcuffs on me. Friends asked why. He never could say. I asked for his name, but he wouldn't give it to me. He kept saying he would throw my face to the ground.

She explained that in addition to frightening her, his threats – especially in front of her friends – embarrassed her. She recalled asking the police officer, 'Can you take off the handcuffs? You making me look like I'm a criminal.' Her experience reflects some of the literature around the experiences that boys of color have with police officers. Rios (2011) examines the ways that the school and criminal justice system criminalize black and Latino boys. The young men's experiences are often fraught with police harassment and brutality. Stacy's narrative demonstrates that these antagonistic experiences with police are not limited to boys. Black girls are also physically assaulted by police officers. Stacy shared additional details about how her encounter with the school police officer escalated.

> Suddenly there were trucks, ten cop cars, dogs. He threatened to throw her face to the ground. I asked, 'Why do you keep threatening me?' This was because I was yelling at somebody? Ten police cars for one person talking.

The police officer, she explained, was much bigger and taller than her. She recalled feeling helpless and defenseless. The police officer refused to let her call home but did allow her to call one of the assistant principals to pick her up. Throughout the interview she recalled what it felt like to have the police officer threaten her. She repeatedly asked why the police officer needed to have treated her the way that he did, and told him, 'I don't understand'.

Although it can be argued that the police officer's actions were legitimate because they may have helped to stop a fight, according to Stacy, his use of physical force was excessive. Her question and concern has been addressed within black feminist literature. According to James (1996), police in the United States have had a long history of violently disciplining black women's bodies. She writes:

> [M]en are not the only targets of police discipline. Four years before [police brutality against Rodney King in 1992], what became a symbol of police racism and brutality (through channels as diverse as academic

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> texts and urban riots), the Center for Law and Social Justice issued a 1988 report, 'Black women under Siege by New York City Police.' Documenting white, male police violence against black women, the center contended that the police and legal system play an instrumental role in repressive violence and that racism often motivates police assaults. (1996: 30)

As a result of her experiences with the school police officer, Stacy claimed that she attempted to make herself invisible. She tried to avoid trouble by staying quiet and unseen. Stacy claimed that she tried to stay to herself at school and did not communicate much with other peers or her teachers. While these behaviors could be considered an effective outcome, they can also be interpreted as an effect of social control over black girls' bodies and actions.

Discipline for Self-Defense and Agency

Although popular culture imagines that students are typically disciplined for violent infractions, most disciplinary actions are for nonviolent behaviors. According to the study, black girls are formally disciplined for 'talking back', 'getting up to throw away trash', and 'not listening to the teacher'. All of these offenses were considered 'obstruct[ions] [to] the learning environment'. For example, Michaela, a black girl in the 12th grade, shared that she had received up to seven referrals during her time. Like many of the girls in the study, her referrals were for defiance. Michaela defined the infractions as 'smart comments' or for 'talking back'.

C: How many referrals have you gotten since you've been here?
Michaela: (pause) Maybe seven.
C: What are your referrals for?
Michaela: Being disrespectful maybe. Making smart comments.
C: What are smart comments?
Michaela: It's making smart comments, like responding in a way that you know is kinda rude (sigh), I can't explain it.
C: You get in trouble for making smart comments?
Michaela: Well, I don't think I should have. I just thought the comment was intelligent to say (chuckles).

Making smart comments included questioning authority figures and their instructions. When she failed to automatically obey authority, faculty often responded by giving her a referral. Her refusal to follow every adult's instruction was also an attempt to assert agency within an environment that typically over-policed its black students. According to school policies and the authority figures that implemented them, Michaela's assertions were characterized as disciplinary problems.

Students from the study maintained that black girls, especially when they articulated their objections to unfair instructions, were disciplined. Victoria, a Puerto Rican and black girl in the 9th grade, explained that her disciplinary experiences were multilayered. In addition to being disciplined for behaviors that would otherwise be considered normal outside of classrooms, such as drinking Gatorade, she was also disciplined for challenging teachers and their excessive discretions over her movements. For instance, Victoria often got in trouble in Mr Waters' class for disobeying rules. She contended that Mr Waters, a white male teacher, incessantly policed her actions. In his class, seemingly benign behaviors such as using ChapStick were rendered punishable offenses.

Victoria: He gets mad for everything like if you're drinking Gatorade he yells, 'Put that away!' [I say,] 'What do you mean?' 'I'm thirsty.' You have out ChapStick, he yells, 'Put

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that away!' [I think], 'Whatchu mean? You want my lips to be chapped? I'm not gonna be crusty like yours [sic].'

C: What happens when he tells you to put things away?

Victoria: I wait til I'm done using it (chuckles) then I put it away.

C: What happens after that?

Victoria: I get a referral.

She describes a layered disciplinary condition, one that is characterized by excessive policing and punishment for resistance. Mr Waters, she explained, incessantly policed her. While Victoria admits that she has a problem with people 'telling [her] what to do', she also explains that authority figures, particularly white teachers, rarely treat her with 'respect'. Instead, they are more likely to incessantly police and punish her.

According to Bernstein (2011), throughout US history, black children have been depicted as devoid of 'innocence', a characteristic that has not only been reserved for white children but is emblematic of whiteness. Without the protection of innocence, black children are structurally positioned as guilty subjects who warrant punishment. Fashioning blacks as 'structurally guilty' subjects has material effects. In Ferguson's (2001) canonical study of elementary school aged black boys and school discipline, she finds that the boys are held to adult standards of behavior. When black boys 'misbehave' according to school rules, they are immediately punished and removed from the classroom. On the contrary, their white peers who commit similar infractions are excused for being young and acting like children. More pointedly, black children are not only incessantly judged as adults, but blacks (of all ages) are depicted as incapable of reform. Fantasized as perpetually guilty, black innocence is a structural impossibility. This does not mean that the juridical system renders every black person guilty. Instead, blacks represent criminality (James, 1996) and are the prototypical targets for punishment.

Informal Anti-Black Punishment

Exclusionary discipline practices are used to punish black students for nonviolent infractions, and often times regardless of whether or not infractions have taken place. In addition to the formal types of punishment that constituted the girls' experiences with school discipline, girls from this study contend that there are other unaccounted forms of policing and surveillance that did not register under the current conceptualizations of 'zero tolerance', nor were they considered institutionalized forms of discipline. These actions are not considered egregious forms of suspension, expulsion or arrest. Yet, according to these girls' stories, they are still punitive encounters that shape their experiences at school.

During an observation of a 9th-grade all-black girls' course that was created and taught by a black female teacher, students were being asked to assess their experience with the class. This class, which started two years ago, was developed to support black girls at the school. Based upon teacher and administrator observations and school discipline data, black girls were becoming increasingly disciplined. In response, the school created a class for black girls to learn about black history, contemporary black issues, black feminism and issues of self-esteem. When the teacher asked why the students liked the class, they clamored to answer: 'Because this class if fun' and 'I can be with my friends'. One student expressed that 'in this class, I don't get in trouble for *everything*'. Ms Jones asked her to elaborate. The young woman explained that in all of her other classes it seemed as though any time she did anything, she would get into trouble. She claimed that her Spanish teacher would get mad at her for 'chewing gum', 'laughing', and 'talking', or for acting as if she was talking. Although she did not get a referral for these infractions, she was sent out of class.

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A number of other students echoed her experience. They shared stories about getting sent out of the classroom for chewing gum or for getting up out of their seat to go to the trash. Students claimed that they were sometimes excluded from the class for entire periods. These frequent experiences with punishment were not archived in school data despite the fact that they constituted another level of punishment. These practices are not generally traced within school discipline research in large part because they are not exceptional forms of discipline. Instead they are commonplace and embedded within the fabric of the girls' everyday lives, a condition of schooling.

At the end of the class, Simone, a black girl in the 11th grade, stayed to discuss her experiences with school discipline. Simone explained that while her school was characterized as 'diverse', black students were often subject to hypersurveillance and punishment. Simone explained that sometimes her experiences with school discipline were not recorded. As an example, she recalled that her advanced placement (AP) chemistry teacher once accused her plagiarizing her assignment. As the only black person in the honors class, Simone contended that her teacher's accusation carried racial undertones.

> [She thought] I had someone else do it. [She said] I wrote you a referral. She thought I got it off an Asian girl. I said, 'This is my handwriting.' She said, 'I thought it wasn't yours.' She could have at least asked. Did she ask every student about their handwriting?

Her teacher's assumption was that Simone had someone else do her homework. The teacher's purported evidence was that her writing looked 'Asian'. Not only did the teacher accuse Simone of plagiarism, but she also brought her to the principal to test her handwriting in front of another adult. Simone was asked to write sentences and compare her writing to the assignment under investigation. Although this encounter was not archived as a referral, suspension or arrest, it was a form of policing and punishment that negatively affected her. Simone's experience with her teacher's accusation provides an example of the racialized suspicion that she felt her teachers had of her and other black youth about their academic abilities and veracity as students. In response to this encounter, Simone explained that she became withdrawn in class. She did not ask for assistance when she needed it and attempted to render herself invisible to her teacher. The underlying logic behind her response was that she wanted to finish the class with minimal encounters with her teacher.

Despite completing her work and excelling as an honor roll student, Simone was still policed by her teacher. Her experience was not archived in school discipline data, particularly because it did not count as any formal type of punishment or disciplinary action. Getting sent to the office to demonstrate the authenticity of one's work is not a formal consequence that is listed in the school handbook. However, it was a part of Simone's experience with punishment at school. Subsequently, Simone tried to distance herself from the teacher and classroom. Her objective was to get through school without having to engage with her teacher. When asked what she thought about her experience at the school, Simone expressed that she 'hated' her 'diverse' high school. She disliked the school despite the fact that she was an honor roll student who was recently accepted to several universities. In other words, while Simone was going to be graduating with honors, her experience with school discipline, particularly racialized school discipline, affected her perspective about the school and her entire high school career. Therefore, despite her academic achievements, Simone's narrative demonstrated that a black female student who succeeds in school can also be subject to gratuitous punishment.

While it is useful to examine the uneven rates of suspension, expulsion and arrest, only examining formal discipline policies as the locus for disciplinary discrepancies misses other everyday occurrences of punishment to which black students, particularly young black women, are subject. Hartman writes about the need to chronicle the 'mundane and quotidian' that exists beyond the

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'shocking spectacle' of violence (1997: 4) in order to understand the 'diffusion of [anti-black] terror' that characterizes civil society. Focusing only on racial disparities in suspensions, expulsions, referrals and arrests steers observations away from even more common forms of discipline and punishment that are enacted upon black youth, particularly on young black school-aged girls, in school settings – and those that are executed by peers as well.

Two 17-year-old black girls, who were teaching assistants for the Lifeskills class, explained that faculty were not the only ones who punished black girls and that punishment extended beyond handcuffs or exclusion from school. Punishment also included perpetual neglect and humiliation. The girls detailed the different layers of emotional and physical challenges that afflicted them, including the ways in which they were policed and rendered structurally vulnerable to authorities and their peers. They shared a story about an anonymously created faux Instagram account that was being circulated around campus.

According to these students, there were at least 30 young women featured in this online montage of photos, most of which were of black female students. Although it is already a major concern that pictures of these adolescent girls were circulated online without their consent, each picture was accompanied by a caption that detailed personal details of the student's life. In one case, one of the pictures included a caption that detailed intimate stories about her family and experience with sexual violence. The girls explained that many black female students were extremely upset by this social media account, especially because they were unable to hold anyone directly responsible. Meanwhile, images of their bodies circulated throughout the internet for their peers to see and scrutinize.

The online exhibition of the girls' images became the impetus for searing tensions among many of the girls they knew on campus. The young women featured in the account tried to find the owner, sometimes wrestling with each other and becoming suspicious of one another. There were at least three fights that ensued because of this account. Girls with pictures posted online began confronting other girls they suspected of unscrupulously 'posting photos' of them. According to the girls, friends who were involved in these fights were suspended, and those who actively confronted other students in search of the Instagram account holder found themselves threatened with suspension (and arrest) by administrators. Granted these threats were to deter students from fighting or threatening one another, the impending fear that students would be reprimanded for purportedly asserting their agency disempowered the girls.

In addition, although the administrators and teachers purportedly did their best to identify which students might have created the account, the anonymity provided by social media made it difficult to hold anyone responsible. After a few weeks, a principal was able to contact the social media company to ask that the page be removed. While the immediate removal of the page did help alleviate tensions between students, the fact that youth were able to exploit one another through social media left these young girls feeling helpless. There were few options, if any, for how they could defend themselves and assert their agency. Thus, at the same time that the girls were being exposed on social media, sometimes confronted by peers searching for the Instagram account holder while they confronted others, they were also confronted with the constant threat of school discipline policies.

One week later, as a former high-school teacher, I was asked to guest-lecture in an 11th-grade history class on gender, discipline and violence. There were 33 students in this diverse classroom. Most were Latino, Filipino/Filipino-American, and Asian-American. In this classroom, white and black students were the minority. I asked the students to tell me why girls got in trouble on campus. They believed that girls were generally disciplined for fighting.

A young male explained: 'Girls fight on campus the most. Boys fight off campus.' According to the young men, who initially dominated the classroom discussion, girls fought because they were

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'dramatic' and 'thirsty' for attention. One male student brought up the Instagram conflict. When asked what the students thought about the Instagram issue, a few male students said that it was not a big deal. Most of the young women in the group agreed. In fact, many non-black students nodded in affirmation.

Suddenly, one black female student, who was the teacher's assistant, retorted quietly and defensively: 'It's not a big deal to you because you're not involved.' Her assertion seemed to indicate that she and the women from previous interviews existed in a separate sphere from those of their peers. Her proclamation was left unaddressed by the other students. Instead, her peers ignored her and continued to say that the Instagram issue was over 'drama' – 'Girls like drama.'

The wave of accusations about girls and their need for attention circulated until a young South Asian man casually yelled out, 'They get into fights to pull out each other's weaves.' His neighboring classmates burst into laughter. It was the first and only racial signifier that was used in class to describe the generalized girls who liked drama. That is, they wanted excessive attention. According to this racial signifier, the girl who liked drama and was often in trouble for fighting was imagined as a black girl, 'thirsty for attention'. Instead of considering fights as a means of self-defense, especially in light of the recent Instagram upheaval, the students insisted on characterizing their peers as being engaged in dramatics. The rest of the class appeared to share the perception, which was that the girls who got in trouble the most on campus were black girls who sought drama.

A young black woman who had been quiet up until the last 10 minutes of class intervened: 'Maybe the girls fight because they're vulnerable.' I asked her to expound on her comment. 'Maybe something is happening at home, somewhere, and they're angry.' She explained that the girls were vulnerable to judgment and violence at home and in society. Her response was an attempt to explain this imagined 'thirst for attention'. Recognizing her efforts to explain desire for attention, I turned to the rest of the class to ask, 'What do you think makes a girl vulnerable?' The once clamorous classroom stayed silent. It was as if imagining, engaging, or even empathizing with the vulnerability of their young black female peers had been an unfathomable option to this predominantly non-black student population. These girls existed in another part of the world, a sphere of vulnerability that was peripheral to their classmates' but could operate as a premise for joint, social laughter. This desire to characterize their black female peers as 'dramatic' without analyzing the causes behind their actions extended beyond any logic of empathy or understanding. The fantasy that girls who get into trouble do so for fighting and for being dramatic misrepresents the reality, which is that most girls are disciplined for subjective reasons and nonviolent infractions. On the one hand, they not only implicated the girls instead of their teachers or administrators, but they also failed to see their black female peers as victims or peers who were trying to defend themselves and their dishonor.

Conclusion

Returning to Omi and Winant, these conditions and forms of social relations are unaccounted for in racial formation theory and their theory of racism. In *Racial Formation*, the authors attempt to provide evidence that racism shifts: 'It is obvious that the attitudes, practices and institutions of the epochs of slavery, say, or of Jim Crow, no longer exist today' (1994: 71). Missing an opportunity to clarify how they conceptualize slavery (and its afterlife) and its end, Omi and Winant's theory overlooks the longstanding, foundational persistence of anti-black racism and its effects. Since the attitudes and practices of the Jim Crow era are still in existence, anti-black racism demonstrates that it is not temporal or contingent upon shifting racial projects.

Most research on racial disparities in school discipline data has narrowed in on institutional policies and their effects. While this research is extremely necessary, there is limited research on

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social forms of punishment. The focus on discipline policies, while important, eludes a critical analysis, one that centers the social order that positions black girls as receptacles for racist and misogynistic projections. Put differently, the dominant discourses on school discipline disparities obscure a structural condition that characteristically positions black girls within a social order where their lives are illegible and inconsequential, rendering them perpetually susceptible to discipline and punishment. While discipline policies are imagined to punish students for violent behaviors or for the purposes of normalization (Foucault, 1977), narratives from this study indicate that discipline is a 'popular theater of cruelty' (Sexton, 2010) for black girls. Criminalized for seemingly 'normal' behaviors (i.e. drinking Gatorade, chewing gum, or asserting their agency) and above average behaviors (i.e. honors student), black girls are incessantly subject to punishment. The cruelty is in the fantasy that punishment against blacks is contingent upon particular behaviors when it is a structural condition.

Instead of implicating the different contexts that may propel a young woman to act out, we should examine the racial/gendered phobic impulse to characterize her as a problem and overly dramatic. Instead of receiving support for her acts of agency, she is punished and disciplined. In fact, in lieu of examining social forms of punishment and state sanctioned discipline policies as impetuses for student misconduct, students are constantly considered the problem. Put differently, her vulnerability and desire for attention – real or imagined – are premises for criminalization and grounds for punishment.

In the efforts to address school discipline policies and their effects, perhaps we should start reconceptualizing how we understand and critique discipline in schools by focusing on the dominant social order that authorizes and executes everyday forms of discipline *and* punishment that are institutionalized into policy and are ingrained in daily encounters of anti-black racism. It is within the seemingly mundane, in affect, in jokes, in the hypersurveillance of the black girl's body. Sexton poignantly summarizes scholars Hortense Spillers and Saidiya Hartman to understand anti-black racism as a condition that positions young black girls as 'structurally vulnerable' to layers of violence, including 'appropriation, perpetual and involuntary openness, including all the wanton uses of her body' (Sexton, 2007: 202). Discipline policies – that is, suspensions and expulsions, referrals and arrests – are both a part of and excess to a type of anti-black punishment that is much more ordinary. Recognizing these conditions will enable a politics of liberation that rightfully supports young black women in resisting the multiple forms and layers of anti-black racism – including when it is performed by their peers and society at large.

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Note

1. Although this study centers on girls of color in general, most of the girls who met the criteria for the study were black girls. As a result, this study focuses primarily on the experiences that black girls have with discipline at FHS.

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