Crying in the Classroom: Teaching (through a lack of) Racial Empathy

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Crying in the Classroom: Teaching (through a lack of) Racial Empathy

Today in class, I cried. I cried for Trayvon Martin’s mom and Emmett Till’s mother, the pain they carry for the Black community. I wonder what it means to my students to see me break down in tears in a lesson I planned. Showing this degree of vulnerability as an educator could be viewed as a weakness or unfitness to teach. I apologized to my students. But I think back to how I showed students pictures of my family on the first day of this Sociology of Black Families course. I think I tried to humanize myself to them. I shouldn’t have to, though; they have families too.

- Sociology of Black Families journal entry, 2018

I wonder if showing vulnerability jeopardizes my authority (that I have little investment in enforcing) or if it bridges gaps in relationship-building with students? When making space for emotions in the classroom, it is important to lean into them and allow emotions to shape the analysis and conversation. I shared with students why I cried: naming the similarities and traumatic genealogy between these mothers exemplifies Black folks’ long fight for justice. Students nodded with doe eyes and tight lips. Do they recall the pictures I showed of my mother on the first day? Do they think I am not qualified to teach because my politics are showing? I had to humanize myself to them as a Black woman graduate student instructor in a position of authority to them, though in a relatively disempowered position within the university. Teaching in the absence of racial empathy is disheartening when people do not see your humanity or are not interested in empathizing with Black folks. As a sociologist, empathy is a tool in my classroom. Empathy is important for developing a sociological imagination in that it rejects individualism and equips students to consider other perspectives and structural forces in various social problems (Ghidina, 2019; Rockwell et al., 2019).

Emotions in a classroom are necessary; they reveal another layer of learning and knowing that is intimate and vulnerable. College classrooms are a neoliberal project and a supposed space of objectivity in so far as the mind is foregrounded and the body is forgotten. However, when teaching courses related to the Black experience in the United States, the body becomes an indicator of racial empathy, allows us to unpack students’ and educators’ connection to the material, and is an axis point to prioritize humanization. Emotional distance from the course material is easier when it is not your life (nor your death) reflected at you. In this critical commentary, I try to make sense of various moments from my teaching journal related to emotions in my classroom and what they suppose about teaching, seeing, and the absence of racial empathy.

Relational Tensions Before Racial Empathy

Today, as a TA, we watched the documentary 13th, which included the story of Kalief Browder. It was heavy. I sat in a row with students; we were packed tight in the room. I sobbed as I watched his story of victimization to an unjust system. Hunched shoulders, heaved breathing, blurred vision, and a snotty nose. I looked around the room and saw that many of the Black students had tears streaming down their faces. My white students were dry-faced, though somber.

- Black Lives Matter journal entry, 2017

When teaching about race, I usually prep for a fair amount of tension and high emotions, especially in a course about Black Lives Matter. I was ready for students to argue or disagree
with the material, feel like it was biased, or even express racial guilt. Much of the way students, especially those implicated in whiteness, come to anti-racist pedagogy is through emotions, such as the weaponization of white tears or performative victimization (Zembylas, 2012). What I had not prepared for was how the deep mourning I brought to the classroom was not the reality for many of my white students. While my Black students and I cried, my white students did not. I wondered if they could see Black humanity. Could they accept the emotional weight and see themselves in the story of another child their age? We talked about it. Black students sobbed, walked out of the room, and angrily expressed frustration with the legal system. White students said it was sad but felt like they did not feel the injustice the same way we did. It became apparent that crying was not the only performance of empathy, though the violence of the case was more visceral for some. I empathize with the non-Black students who never learned to see themselves in the Black other. Students who express difficulty relating to the Black experience deserve compassion for how they have not been taught, nor learned, racial empathy. I understand the educators who cannot forgive the emotional invalidation they experience at the hands of their students. I empathize with the person so removed from community that they cannot mourn a stranger, so deluded that they do not know that stranger was a reflection of themselves. Empathy is a relational political orientation (Nelems, 2017) that refuses dehumanization and individualism (Ghidina, 2019). Only through engaging conversations about how we feel about the material, beyond performative emotions, can we begin to unlearn our lack of racial empathy.

**Critical Racial Empathy as Black Feminist Pedagogy**

*Today, I showed a video of Black girls jumping double dutch – I cried happy tears at the uninhibited beauty of Black girl joy. My students laughed. I wonder what they think about my tears. A week ago, I cried at a video of Black teen parents talking about choosing to have children so they could know love infinitely, without conditions. A Black girl student cried with me that day.*

- Sociology of the Black Community journal entry, 2021

Black feminist pedagogy validates a range of emotions and rejects “[t]he restrictive, repressive classroom […] that insists emotional responses have no place” (hooks, 1994, p. 155). My classroom foregrounds the body as a legitimate site of knowing. The body shows what the heart feels and what the brain thinks. Tenderness as praxis can be the mechanism by which we afford our students and ourselves compassion (Thompson, 2017). Given that the personal is political, and both are pedagogical, I situate embodied knowledges in the classroom experience. While we explore social phenomena, we allow ourselves to be part of what we learn. Though this is not the pedagogy I was taught, it is what feels right. Emotions in the classroom as a performance of racial empathy and critical knowing are Black feminist epistemologies that transgresses the stoic classroom to instead center relationality (hooks, 1994).

**Conclusion**

Teaching about Black life and political action as a Black instructor is a vulnerable experience because it draws out tensions. These experiences should touch us all. Immense emotional labor in the classroom pushes us to explore the boundaries of social justice and politics in our classrooms. Teaching in the absence of racial empathy necessitates a pedagogical
shift that foregrounds humanization and emotional validation not usually afforded to Black educators. “If we want to allow possibilities for new affective connections, then teachers must learn to provide space for the emotional remains of troubled knowledge” (Zembylas, 2012, p. 121). Grappling with the aftermath of interrogating racial empathy, or the lack thereof, in your classroom is a critical part of making space for vulnerability, embodied knowledges, and the reality of these difficult topics.
References


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