

“Performative Witnessing as an Act of Agency: What we can learn from Black Gen Z Disruptors”

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Growing up in my household, as a Black girl, Sundays were always designated for church. The dressing up in my Sunday's best, the usher directing us to our seats, and the greeting of familiar faces was like a family reunion every Sunday. I have many memories of my Black church experience, particularly, when the preacher gave space for testimony during service. This was the part where the mothers of the church community testified about encounters within their everyday experiences that seemed (im)possible to solve. They would pause and ask, “Can I get a witness?” and the congregation would respond in unison with “Amen and Hallelujah!” I was too young to understand that collective act of listening and spectating as part of a larger conversation on the performance of witnessing and the affirming of identities, voices, agencies, belonging and mattering, to those often erased. However, George Floyd's public execution and the variety of responses that resounded from watching 8 minutes and 46 seconds of Black death would push me to return to this memory as a guidepost for how I conceptualize the act of witnessing, and what possibilities emerge within the ruptures of collective witnessing? I center the Black Gen Z witnesses in this essay.

I have been thinking critically about such witnessing, especially in reflection of my own work which is grounded in the experiences of Black girls attending elite private, independent schools. Elite schools are particular places that, if we trace back, can historically unveil stories about privilege. Questions such as *Who can belong? Who has access? and Who matters?* arise when reflecting on the foundations of these institutions. More specifically, I ask, how did Black alumni/x use their collective agency in and through digital space to address anti-racism and anti-Blackness in elite private schools? And, what are we called to do as scholars when we witness?

The Project of Witnessing

Amidst the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic a globally issued “stay at home” order would be the ongoing rupture that Christina Sharpe (2016) theorizes when she writes “the past that is not past, it always reappears to rupture the present.” It is these ongoing rupturing’s within our everyday practices and our own passivity at times that witnessing interrupts. To perform witness is to be unsettled with what we think we know as truth and recognize the spatial colonial histories that exist between the Black body, the church, the sidewalk, the hallways of schools, and the knee on the neck, while we wrestle with questions of what it means to be human in a world that is anti-Black. To be a modest witness evokes a refiguring of our own literacies and our collective response-ability as we observe in-relation- to others and “see the narratives as clear mirrors” within everyday experiences (Haraway, 1997). The project of witnessing is about acknowledging the ethical dilemmas that surround the discourse on Black suffering and woundedness and the ways to perform/practice witness through a lens to imagine otherwise (Musser, 2018; Nxumalo, 2016; Sharpe, 2016).

As we witness George Floyd’s body pinned down on the sidewalk, we mark the concentration of power and the structural systems that uphold the pervasive culture of Whiteness in this country. The construct of Whiteness as an ongoing and unfinished history, which orients bodies in specific directions, affecting how they “take up” space, and what they “can do” (Ahmed, 2007). We witness him call for his mother. We witness his, “*I can’t breathe.*” And, for *8 long minutes*, and *46 seconds*, we witness the perpetuation of colonial histories and violence that have long plagued this nation. As a mother, my immediate response was rage. I had a pit in my throat, my jaws clenched, and I struggled for days about what to say and write. Furthermore, as a scholar-activist, pushing the discourse on race, gender and geography within historically White, secondary private independent schools, my witnessing was unsettling my own research questions about Black girls navigating racialization in these spaces. I was compelled to reach out to the girls in my study to offer support and a collective space to process this violent act. In doing so, I learned how their act of performing witness of George Floyd’s murder would generate the thinking, care, and space necessary to address the rupturing of constructs

of Whiteness in private elite independent schools, and further push theorization of space and place-making, as radical possibilities for knowledge production and liberation.

Black Lives Mattering: We Need You to Walk That Talk

James Anderson (1988) in his seminal work, *The Education of Blacks in the South 1860-1935*, asserts that “both schooling for democratic citizenship and schooling for second-class citizenship have been basic traditions in American education” (p. 1). He argues that American public education was not designed with Black people in mind, and most definitely, elite private schools weren’t designed with Black people in mind, many of which served as havens for white families during desegregation (Purdy, 2018). For the past four decades, the National Association of Independent Schools (NAIS) has diligently worked to support the growing demographic of students of color, particularly Black families attending Independent schools, while attempting to address ruptures within the systems as they arise. In a pursuit of ensuring that member schools shifted from using ‘diversity’ only as a checkbox to more nuanced forms of representation, the NAIS devised a vision statement that emphasized “creating a more equitable world” for schools to adopt as a way forward (2019). The focus on equity is pivotal within the association’s move, especially with the increase of Black families who select these schools as a transformative opportunity for their children. Even with the NAIS new vision and values announcement, the systems and structures embedded within elite independent schools are still fashioned in ways that can perpetuate social isolation, racialized socialization, and classism for Black students.

George Floyd’s death led to educational institutions furiously issuing statements that denounced anti-Blackness; a flurry of renewed commitments to becoming anti-racist institutions; claiming to be in solidarity with the Black lives within their institutions and the Black Lives Matter movement. With the surge of statements from some institutions, as well as non-responses from others, the elitism, classism, and racial hierarchy deeply embedded in these particular educational spaces became evident. However, as Black alumni waited for their former schools’ statements and responses to George Floyd’s murder (institutions that too often represented Black bodies through numbers of diversity, marketing pictures, and communications), the overwhelming silence and surface

statements within these predominately white spaces would strike a once familiar feeling of frustration. So, how did Black alumni/x use their collective agency in and through digital space to address anti-racism and anti-Blackness in elite private schools?

Witnessing in and through Digital Spaces Using Black Feminist Lens

Digital spaces are a cultural phenomenon, even more during the COVID-19 pandemic. Price-Dennis et al. (2017) state, “In our society, Black girl spaces are not strongly advocated for by those who intentionally or unintentionally promote anti-Blackness, but Black girls themselves deeply desire such collectivism” (p. 4). Black alumni/x used digital literacies and led a surge of Instagram hashtags ‘#BlackAT’ insert [private school name] that would circulate widely across social platforms. The posts signified within this movement were filled with narratives of racial violence, and other forms of anti-Blackness that students experienced. For elite private schools that seek to be insulated from the power of public media, this was a PR nightmare; a reckoning of colonial histories not fully addressed that endowments alone could not erase. As I spent time reading through well over 5,000 posts, I was struck by many but particularly this one on IG, “Welcome to Black AT the Big B. This is a platform for the Black girls who feel silenced. We want to share the stories of Black life at Brearley. In hopes that these stories lead to Institutional changes” (@BlackatBrearley, 2020). Black alumni/x’s collective response to the public execution of George Floyd illustrates that the spirit of witnessing has jumped from the church pews to online platforms. The performing witness, both the present and future, was a nod to Black Feminists (Hill-Collins, hooks, Lorde), social movements (#BlackLivesMatter), and the notion that radically collective spaces are integral to shift the dialogue from Black lives as powerless to agentic knowledgeable producers.

Black alumni/x used the digital platform as a way of restorying perspectives and holding institutions accountable, this new mobilizing is a response to the intergenerational legacies passed down from Black Feminists during the 70s, who heavily relied on mobilizing on the ground. bell hooks (1989) and Patricia Hill-Collins (2000), theorized spaces as “sites of resistance”. hooks (1989) writes, “Spaces can be real and imagined.

Spaces can tell stories and unfold stories. Spaces can be interrupted, appropriated, and transformed through artistic and literary practice” (p. 23) and these radical interruptions of the *everyday experiences*, call forth witnesses to move with agency beyond our existing frameworks and draw attention to new aesthetics and technologies. The Black Gen Z movement are working in and through the triggering of racial brutality, memories of injustices experienced in these elite spaces and asking, “Can I get a Witness?”

Can I Get A Witness, Too?

One might argue that the non-issue of an immediate statement to George Floyd’s death was the pulling of the trigger for these Black alumni/x, although I disagree. The concept of witnessing and a collective return to humanity and promotion of ethics of responsibility that witnessing calls forth, opens possibilities for new ways of collective doing and knowing. It is through this lens that I examine my own project of witnessing, theoretically and methodologically. As a scholar speaking out, my work has shifted after seeing Black Gen Z collectively witness a painful moment, and yet generate future possibilities for collective voice across intersections of race, gender, class, sexual orientation, (dis)ability and age. As scholars and educators, we have a response-ability to collectively hold ourselves accountable and move in the direction of increased humanity. We have a response-ability to challenge traditions of racialized research and methods of data collection that reproduce inequalities/injustice. We are called to find new ways to illuminate and amplify collective voice and agency amongst our youth. George Floyd, in those painful last 8 minutes and 46 seconds, used agency as he called for his mother and as we collectively witnessed, we responded. Our collective response was and continues to be a move towards humanity. Can I get a witness, too?



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