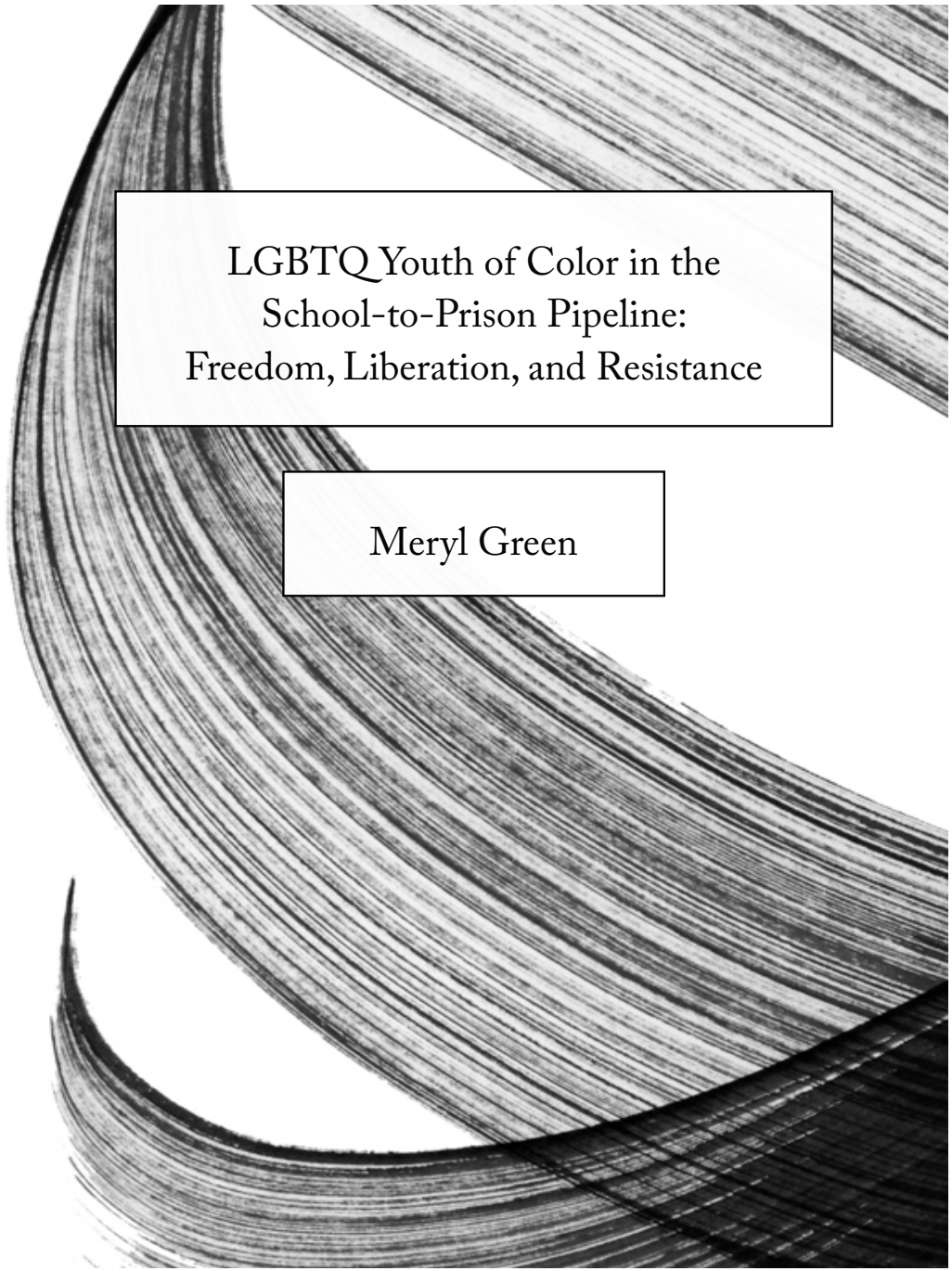

LGBTQ Youth of Color in the School-to-Prison Pipeline: Freedom, Liberation, and Resistance

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Abstract: Emergent research suggests Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer (LGBTQ) youth experience increased discipline in school, as well as increased exposure to the criminal justice system outside of school. Additionally, much has been written in recent years about the school-to-prison pipeline's (StPP) impact upon large numbers of youth of color in the United States. However, a large portion of the existing research regarding the StPP often presumes heterosexuality in dealing with student populations. Further, what research exists on queer and transgender youth in schools often fails to address race in any meaningful way, thus misleading people to assume that the problems facing LGBTQ youth are racially neutral in nature. This paper seeks to synthesize some of the systemic factors that propel school pushout and student criminalization, and impact intersectionally-marginalized student populations like LGBTQ youth of color, as well as pose some possible critical pedagogical interventions in resisting the criminalization of these students under an increased neoliberal governmentality.

Keywords: LGBTQ youth of color, school-to-prison pipeline, neoliberalism, critical pedagogy, intersectionality

Introduction

"We know that we, the blacks, and not only we, the blacks, have been, and are, the victims of a system whose only fuel is greed, whose only god is profit. We know that the fruits of this system have been ignorance, despair, and death, and we know that the system is doomed because the world can no longer afford it – if, indeed, it ever could have. And we know that, for the perpetuation of this system, we have all been mercilessly brutalized, and have been told nothing but lies, lies about ourselves and our kinsmen and our past, and about love, life, and death, so that both soul and body have been bound in hell." (Baldwin, 2010, p. 260)

While much has been written recently about the school-to-prison pipeline (StPP) and its impacts on students of color, most of the extant research regarding incarcerated youth often presumes heterosexuality. Conversely, a large portion of the research around the bullying and harassment of LGBTQ students in schools often either presumes whiteness, or at the very least, fails to address race and ethnicity in any meaningful way. Racial neutrality in LGBTQ research perpetuates the misconception that violence against LGBTQ youth occurs independently of factors relating to their race, ethnicity, indigeneity, or class. Additionally, the disparities present in research regarding the StPP give the impression that marginalized youth populations exist separately from one another rather than interact in meaningful ways.

This paper seeks to interrogate some of the ways homophobia in schools intersects with racial and ethnic disparities in school discipline, and contributes to the StPP and school pushout. First, I will examine some of the disciplinary changes taking place in the American school system under a neoliberal governmentality. I will then introduce important terminology and outline some of the ways in which LGBTQ youth of color are uniquely impacted by punitive disciplinary measures in schools. Finally, I will address the potential for liberatory pedagogical responses to issues facing LGBTQ youth of color in American schools, as well as address areas where resistance and transformation are possible within our education system. I will use the term "queer and trans" interchangeably with "LGBTQ youth" throughout this paper and it should be noted that this terminology is meant to operate as an umbrella term for LGBTQ people, rather than to single out individual facets of the LGBTQ population. Moreover, the term "youth of color" likewise serves as an umbrella term to delineate American subjects who are not white and who share common experiences of systemic racism. Instances in which specific racial and ethnic groups are singled out over the course of this paper are utilized only in cases where existing research suggests significant differences in group-differentiated vulnerability to criminalization.

Neoliberalism and its Implications in American Schools

Anyon (2014) defines neoliberalism as a collection of free-market economic policies that are characterized by deregulation, privatization, and the elimination of social welfare. In addition to neoliberalism's fiscal implications, its emphasis on social management and ideological hegemony are sustained and reified through the stratification of racialized, gendered, sexualized, and classed populations. These divisions are subsequently maintained through increased militarization, policing, and a reliance upon carceral logics in order to manage populations that have been rendered disposable under a neoliberal governmentality (Giroux, 2012). For youth of color, these shifts in policy often mean increased criminalization in schools. Giroux (2012) explains, "many youth now have to endure drug tests, surveil-

lance cameras, invasive monitoring, random searches, security forces in schools, and a host of other militarizing and monitoring practices typically used against suspected criminals, terrorists, and other groups represented as a threat to the state" (p. 98). In other words, as neoliberal market logics (and their subsequent counterparts in the logics of carcerality) are infused into the American school system, both structural and interpersonal violence against youth of color have increased.

One of the terrifying consequences of a school system imbued with a neoliberal profit mentality is that of the StPP. Snapp, Hoenig, Fields, and Russell (2014) define the school-to-prison pipeline as the "automatic and punitive discipline policies and practices [that] often result in student entrance into the juvenile justice system" (p. 58). These processes overwhelmingly and disproportionately affect youth of color, and as we will see, LGBTQ youth as well. As Grady, Marquez, and McLaren (2012) explain, the continued development of youth incarceration is largely a product of neoliberalism's ideological hegemony, which attempts to redefine education in relation to its contributions to the economy rather than as a space where children can learn and grow. Where students of color are increasingly viewed as disposable (or more valuable to the U.S. economy as incarcerated bodies), they continue to be subjected to severe disciplinary measures and heightened criminalization (Giroux, 2012).

Proponents of neoliberal governance and mass incarceration often simply assert that increased criminalization is the natural byproduct of increased criminality. They emphasize personal responsibility in discussing both incarceration and education, and argue that those who fail in the school system as well as those who are put in jails and prisons are merely pathologically unable to abide by the rules of civil society. These discourses circulate on notions that social problems like poverty are the result of individual failings, laziness, complacency, dependency

on social services, and immorality. Where neoliberal free market capitalism has become analogous with freedom and democracy, we see the rearticulation of individualizing narratives which supplant notions of the greater good with sentiments that mark economic subjecthood as the ultimate expression of nationalism.

Here, it is important to underscore some of the ways in which neoliberal ideology is sustained and reified through projects that uphold both white supremacy and heteropatriarchy. Neoliberalism's centralization of the individual as the primary actor, economic subject, and the essential site of responsibility ultimately works to obscure the systemic roots of oppression and inequality (Grady et al., 2012). Angela Davis (2012) encapsulates this phenomenon, writing, "when obvious examples of racism appear to the public, they are considered to be isolated aberrations, to be addressed as anachronistic attributes of individual behavior" (p. 169). That is to say, racism, and homophobia for that matter, is rhetorically situated as a problem having to do with individual behavior and violence, rather than as a systemically supported outgrowth of oppression and marginalization. When connecting these processes to carcerality, Davis (2012) continues, "by failing to recognize the material forces of racism that are responsible for offering up such large numbers of black and latino youth to the carceral state, the process of criminalization imputes responsibility to the individuals who are its casualties, thus reproducing the very conditions that produce racist patterns in incarceration and its seemingly infinite capacity to expand" (p. 171). In other words, neoliberalism's insistence upon personal responsibility, effectively does the ideological work of eliminating homophobia and racism as systemic problems, and instead entrenches them within a network of individual suffering whose cause has no structural origin.

The Criminalization of LGBTQ Youth of Color

According to a 2016 study by the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), on any given day in the United States, almost 60,000 children under the age of 18 are incarcerated in prisons and jails. More alarmingly, according to The Sentencing Project (2014), youth of color constitute approximately 67% of incarcerated populations in American juvenile detention facilities. The ACLU (2016) also asserts that black students are suspended and expelled at a rate three times higher than their white classmates, and that students who are suspended or expelled are nearly three times more likely to come into contact with the juvenile justice system within the following year. Moreover, more than 90% of LGBTQ students report that they have heard homophobic remarks made in their schools (MacGilivray, 2000), and almost half (44.7%) of LGBTQ students report having been physically harassed at school (GLSEN, 2011).

While these statistics are staggering, you may find yourself asking: What does homophobia in schools have to do with youth of color in the StPP? Though very little research has been carried out regarding LGBTQ youth of color and school punishment, it does appear that they constitute a "pipeline population" because LGBTQ youth of color are significantly overrepresented in juvenile detention facilities (Snapp et al., 2015; Ware, 2015). Moreover, LGBTQ youth of color are overrepresented in nearly every prominent pathway into the juvenile justice system – poverty, homelessness, substance abuse, delinquent behavior, gang membership, bullying victimization, and struggles with mental health (Ware, 2015; Panfil, 2013). While we know that youth of color are significantly more likely to experience punitive disciplinary measures in school, the same appears to be true of LGBTQ students who are bullied on the basis of perceived or actual sexual orientation, or gender identity. Snapp et al. (2015) explain, "experiences of discriminatory harassment make LGBTQ youth more susceptible to truancy, assault, and disorderly conduct charges" (p. 59). If we synthesize the risk factors associated with StPP populations and the intersecting identities of LGBTQ youth of color, it stands to reason that students with multiple marginalized identities may be exposed to increased disciplinary disparities in schools (Snapp et al., 2015).

What little data we do have about LGBTQ youth of color in schools seems to support the assumption that intersecting marginalized identities increase the potential for violence and victimization at the hands of the criminal justice system. For example, according to the Center for American Progress (2015), Black and Latino LGBTQ youth were substantially more likely to report being disciplined in school than their white or Asian and Pacific Islander counterparts. Additionally, perhaps the most significant determinant in the criminalization of LGBTQ youth of color is that of their proximity to poverty. According to the Williams Institute (2012), up to 40% of homeless youth seeking services through agencies identify as LGBTQ. Moreover, LGBTQ youth of color are disproportionately exposed to incarceration as they are often more likely to engage in survival crimes like prostitution and the selling and consumption of illegal drugs (Arkles, 2009). As Snapp et al. (2015) illustrate, "LGBTQ youth are twice as likely as their heterosexual peers to be detained for non-violent offenses such as running away, prostitution, and truancy" (p. 58). Furthermore, while LGBTQ youth of color remain understudied in criminological research, the systemic barriers in place that are designed to funnel this particular student population into the StPP are visible in statistics. For example, LGBTQ people of color are significantly less likely to have a college degree than their non-LGBTQ counterparts (Center for American Progress, 2015).

In two groundbreaking studies, Vanessa R. Panfil (2013;

2014) found that extant research suggests that many LGBTQ youth of color are harassed in schools on the basis of their sexual orientation or gender expression/identity, and their race or ethnicity. This is significant because Panfil (2013) also found that in-school victimization was strongly correlated with delinquent behavior, gang membership, and engagement in violence, and that LGBTQ youth were decidedly more likely to have been in a gang at some point in their academic career. Both studies found that LGBTQ youth of color often turned to gang membership in order to protect themselves from violent victimization in school, and sought out a support system of peers in lieu of institutional support from school administrators. Moreover, Panfil (2014) discusses the phenomenon of the "gang double bind" wherein LGBTQ youth of color engage in violence in order to prevent their own victimization in the future, and in doing so, their involvement in such violence only increases their vulnerability to additional violence both through gang activity and at the hands of the juvenile justice system. In this context, LGBTQ students of color are placed at a significant disadvantage in schools, as they are often victimized and then subsequently punitively disciplined for fighting back against their abusers when school administrators and teachers fail to intervene on their behalf (MacGilivray, 2000; Panfil, 2013; Snapp et al., 2015).

Pedagogical Responses, Liberation, and Resistance

In understanding that the primary force driving the increased criminalization of LGBTQ youth of color is neoliberalism, the initial steps that are needed to combat these issues lie in challenging neoliberal capitalism and governmentality. Firstly, the removal of the police and their modes of surveillance from schools is imperative. As Davis (2012) writes, "when the message [children] receive in school is that they live in the world as

objects of surveillance and discipline, and that security guards are more important and powerful than teachers, they are clearly learning how to be prisoners" (p. 69). This will be no small feat, as the discursive reconstruction of schools as spaces for liberation and resistance is anathema to the ultimate goals of neoliberalism. Giroux (2012) stresses that teachers and other cultural workers carry an immense responsibility in the task of opposing neoliberal hegemony, and that they will be responsible for the reinvigoration of democratic political culture. In so doing, teachers and independent intellectuals alike will need to adapt various pedagogies that are attendant to the dehumanization of LGBTQ youth of color in order to effectively challenge neoliberalism and its carceral outgrowths.

I stress the use of pedagogies, or more simply, different methods and strategies of teaching, because to educationally address the factors driving the criminalization of LGBTQ youth of color is to change the cultural dialogue around the ways in which we construct "the criminal" in our heads. Moreover, given that neoliberalism sustains itself upon the ideals of white supremacy and heteropatriarchy, a counter movement in education that is critically analytical of race, class, gender, and sexuality is long overdue. In this context, Giroux (2012) writes, "one of the most serious challenges faced by cultural studies is the need to develop a new language and theoretical tools for contesting a variety of forms of domination associated with neoliberalism in the new millennium" (p. 148). Giroux (2012) additionally advocates for a form of utopian thinking which may provide the space needed to theorize a radically different future. He writes, "educated hope poses the important challenge of how to reclaim social agency within a broader discourse of ethical advocacy while addressing those essential pedagogical and political elements necessary for envisioning alternatives to global neoliberalism and its attendant assault on public time and space" (p. 122). In other words, a

view of hope that recognizes that through education people can learn the conditions necessary for a different future, may offer a transformative pedagogical tool in liberating those who are oppressed.

In addition to pedagogies that critically examine race, ethnicity, class, culture, gender, and sexuality, McLaren (1993) also advocates for a pedagogical response that specifically attends to whiteness. He argues that the explicit interrogation of whiteness is paramount because, "unless we give white students a sense of their own identity as an emergent ethnicity – we naturalize whiteness as a cultural marker against which Otherness is defined," (p. 139). In other words, white students need to critically examine their own ethnic histories so they are less likely to view their experiences as racially neutral and universal. Additionally, McLaren (1993) promotes a pedagogy of solidarity that moves beyond the condescension and white savior complexes that work to keep institutionalized forms of racism intact. He argues that this pedagogy is one which must be struggled for, and which, "develops out of the imperatives of freedom, liberation, democracy and critical citizenship," (p. 138). These exercises in solidarity could have direct and tangible impacts within the lives of intersectionally-marginalized youth like LGBTQ students of color.

As James Baldwin (1985) reminds us in A Talk to Teachers, the process of education takes place within our social frameworks, and is arranged in order to achieve the goals of our society. While this currently means that academic institutions have essentially become laboratories for the expansion of neoliberal miseducation, it does not mean that they are inevitably resigned to remain that way. Grady et al. (2012) have attempted to develop a critical pedagogy specifically for working-class LGBTQ youth of color. Echoing Paulo Freire (2000), they insist that we must struggle against the "objectification of the person" that has

become central to neoliberal social relations, in service of realizing our full humanity through education. They highlight that in a performative pedagogy designed to create cracks in neoliberal objectification, students and teachers alike must seek out, "spaces of horizontality and love" (p. 990) and work to create spaces that are actively anti-racist, anti-sexist, and anti-homophobic. Further, Grady et al. (2012) argue that dance and performance contain radical possibilities for providing LGBTQ youth of color with, "voice, exposure, safe spaces, freedom to think critically, and greater support" (p. 995). In other words, creative spaces that do not stifle student voices have the potential to create an environment in which critically reflective social justice (or what Freire refers to as "praxis") can begin to flourish.

Smith (2013) adds a caveat to the notion of queer and trans liberation. She does not argue that this liberation is illegitimate or that it should not be struggled for. Instead, she argues that pedagogies that aim to liberate LGBTQ people must also interrogate the ways in which queer subjects (including those who are racialized) are complicit in nation-building projects that are colonial in nature and that recentralize whiteness as the norm. She asserts that pedagogical affirmations of social justice should aim to decolonize their theoretical backgrounds, and in doing so, they should attempt to interrupt settler colonial institutions. This is important because in understanding American carcerality, and youth incarceration in particular, we must acknowledge the incarceration rates of Indigenous peoples across the United States. For example, according to the office of juvenile justice (2013), American Indian and Alaskan Native girls are nearly five times more likely than white girls to be placed in a juvenile detention facility. That is to say, neoliberalism and neocolonialism do not simply operate within a black/white binary and any pedagogical approach to social justice must include solidarity with all manner of racialized populations in the American school system.

Lorde (2007) and hooks (1994) both discuss the erotic in relation to liberatory growth and education. For hooks (1994), traditional Western methods of teaching have often accepted the Cartesian ideal of a mind/body dualism. She argues that we must move beyond our understanding of the erotic purely as it relates to the sexual, and instead conceive of the eros as a force rooted in embodiment, and embedded with ways of knowing that transcend our traditional epistemologies. Similarly, Lorde (2007) conceives of a formation of the erotic which eclipses its traditional interpretation in the sexual. She demands that we use this internal consciousness to subvert the miseducational forces of traditional Western thought that have been imbued with racism, sexism, and homophobia, and that students empower themselves to, "examine the ways in which our world can be truly different" (p. 55). We are to use the affective dimensions of our being in order to foster a pedagogy of resistance through both feeling and acknowledging the feelings of others. For LGBTQ students of color reckoning with the precarity of their existence within the American school system, an avowal of their humanness through feeling could be a truly revolutionary act.

Conclusion

So, why is all of this important? Why must we address inequality in schools? Why does the StPP matter? In the simplest terms, these things matter because neoliberal governance has ensured the most terrifyingly rapid expansion of widespread suffering of any event in modern history (Giroux, 2012). More plainly still, it is simply a moral imperative that we begin to address these problems and examine why it is that we incarcerate children in this country in the first place. Moreover, the disruption of neoliberal oppression and domination can only begin to take place through education. As Paulo Freire (2000) writes, "it is only when the oppressed find the oppressor out and become involved in the organized struggle for their liberation that they begin to believe in themselves" (p. 65). This is done through education that inspires critical reflection upon ourselves and the world around us, in order to promote sustainable and meaningful social change.

For those who find themselves sitting on the margins of the margins, like LGBTQ youth of color, solidarity and resistance are the primary modes through which we may liberate ourselves and each other. Duncan-Andrade's (2009) conception of "audacious hope", which insists that we reconnect with the collective in order to struggle alongside each other, implores us to share both in one another's victories, as well as in our pain. Moreover, it is through solidarity and struggle that we may begin to address the material conditions of social inequality. In a poignant and profound reflection, Lorde (2009) writes, "to survive in the mouth of this dragon we call America, we have to learn this first and most vital lesson – that we were never meant to survive" (p. 41). Indeed, for those who were never meant to survive, education may be able to finally bring us to life.

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