

## Discipline and Knowledge: Teaching at a Maximum-Security Prison

*“Disciplinary control does not consist simply in teaching or imposing a series of particular gestures; it imposes the best relation between a gesture and the overall position of the body.”*

—MICHEL FOUCAULT, *Discipline and Punish*

I do not wear lipstick.  
I do not wear anything short or tight, or even well-fitting.  
I do not show my arms or my legs. I wear white cotton over-blouses.  
I wear dark stockings although it is 80 degrees outside.  
Although it is completely dismantling my personality and killing my soul,  
I even wear gym shoes into the classroom.  
(No high heels. Open-toed shoes may lead to inappropriate thoughts.)  
I need to be absolutely drab, absolutely diminished.  
I cannot give the officer at the front desk any reason not to let me in.

To understand my experience teaching this past August for two intensive weeks at a maximum security male prison in NY state, you have to know the rules.  
Each morning before leaving the house for different facilities, my fellow teacher and I would inspect each other closely.  
There were restricted objects to avoid, but appearance was equally important. Volunteer Services told us:  
“If you think you look good, you might want to change.”

But how can we change?  
I am black and she is Indian.  
We are both young, female, attractive, women of color.  
We are both highly educated and believe deeply in the power of education.  
We have come to teach Aristotle, Kafka, Judith Butler, Edward Said and other intellectual heavyweights to convicted murderers, rapists, robbers and drug dealers.

No matter what we wear, we will always look wrong.  
We know we will always be suspects.

*“But the guilty person is only one of the targets  
of punishment. For punishment is directed above all  
at others, at all the potentially guilty.”*

—MICHEL FOUCAULT, *Discipline and Punish*

My 16 students were mostly Latinos and blacks but also included a native Chinese, an Albanian and the son of a Swedish immigrant. Together, they were some of the best students I have ever had the pleasure of teaching. They carried around dictionaries and discussed etymology; they compared the footnote on page 36 to the one on page 12. They were disciplined in every sense of the word. The coercive nature of the prison system had created this byproduct, diligence and hunger for knowledge.

I loved these students.

And they loved me, so many of them proud that someone like me could be their Professor, could have a Ph.D., could shake their hands and push their minds, could take them seriously as scholars and give them hours of homework which they stayed up all night completing.

Some of them loved me more because I was a young black woman; and, some of the staff distrusted me more for the same reason. What was I really doing there? Teaching liberal arts to inmates? I must be gullible, untrustworthy. I could be manipulated into breaking rules, or, as one staff member warned me, end up pregnant on the other side of the glass. (This was not a concern expressed to my white male colleagues.) In order to even get to my students, I had to bend over backwards to prove that I was not a threat. I had to shut up and follow.

I hated the walk.

After the metal detectors, the initial pat down, the investigation of my person and belongings, the wait for an escort (who was often slow), I had to walk through the bowels of the prison to and from the classroom. Officers either talked to me about how terrible the prisoners were or talked over me to each other (about home improvement projects, future overtime, and possible inmate weapons). Because no one could find a way for me to eat lunch inside between classes for an hour (instead of outside at a picnic table next to the parking lot), I did this walk four times a day. Twice in the morning, twice in the afternoon, navigating multiple physical controls (gates, locks, logs, stamps), staying quiet and demure. I never complained to the staff or my students. I did my best to smile.

*“Knowledge is not for knowing: knowledge is for cutting.”*

—MICHEL FOUCAULT, *Discipline and Punish*

In truth, I was a threat.

Outside my classroom, the prison environment was toxic, racist, sexist, smug, and dehumanizing. Once I arrived, everything we did in the classroom was working against the system. To me, this is the power of the liberal arts: its potential link to liberation.

Although I had to submit myself to power in often uncomfortable, gendered and racialized ways, I do believe my prison teaching was empowering. Moreover, my challenges were only a fraction of what my students have to deal with every day. Teaching in the prison forced me to reckon with power and knowledge, academic and state discipline. It helped me think about the complexities of advocacy and pushed me to put my money where my mouth is. I believe in the power of knowledge. But prison teaching forces me to remember that we must maneuver knowledge—and power—in and against its own conditions.

## ~~BLACK OUT~~ ~~WHITE WASH~~ fall out

### WHITE WASH

A black woman walks into a room  
and regards a wall of whiteness,  
from floor to ceiling, rows and rows of books.  
The spines are white. The pages are white.  
The words are white. How can she read  
such blinding whiteness? The black light of her body  
illuminates the words. Reverses impressions.  
She feels it as a violence in her body.  
A throwing up. Of words, of bile.  
She would throw up her hands if she had them.  
She no longer has hands. She is no longer a body.  
She swallows. Disembodied poetics.

### BLACKOUT

What to name this thing that has happened to me?  
That has happened to my people?

### FALL OUT

A wraith arrives.  
A black woman professor stands before the class.  
She is a guerilla. Not a monkey, although some might think so.  
A warrior. A black savage intellectual with a flat cut diamond  
on her finger spread as large as her palm.  
It is like a slice of mining on her outstretched hand.  
Her reminder of the wrongness of everything, catching the light.  
She is jumping, screaming: "YOU HAVE TO BE READY!!!  
This Is Intellectual Warfare. What They Are Saying Is We Don't Exist."

### BLACKWASH: SPILLERS

Spill her here.  
The first paragraph of "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American  
Grammar Book" first published in *Diacritics*/ summer 1987. "Let's  
face it. I am a marked woman, but not everyone knows my name.  
"Peaches" and "Brown Sugar," "Sapphire and Earth Mother,"  
"Aunty," "Granny," "God's Holy Fool," a "Miss Ebony First," or

Black Woman at the Podium.” I describe a locus of confounded identities, a meeting ground of investments and privations in the national treasure of rhetorical wealth. My country needs me, and if I were not here, I would have to be invented.”

Yes, this would be our first text.

## ~~BLACKOUT~~ [S C R E A M]

### BLACKWASH: KENNEDY

The spooks in Adrienne Kennedy’s 1964 play “Funnyhouse of a Negro,” Queen Victoria, the Duchess of Hapsburg, Jesus described as a hunchback albino, Patrice Lumumba wandering the jungles of Africa, they all screamed in the visions of the hero of the play: a quiet, modest black college student named Negro-Sarah. Negro-Sarah “spend[s] her days preoccupied with the placement and geometric position of words on paper. [She] writes[s] poetry filling white page after white page with imitations of Edith Sitwell.” Her hair falls out incessantly throughout the play.

### FALL OUT

What to do with these visions of history?  
the problem of these bodies? the grappling of power and violence?

### BLACKWASH: KENNEDY

In the plays of Adrienne Kennedy, the world of history and knowledge reckons and constitutes a world of violence, the world we live in. Negro Sarah tells us her mother was “raped by a wild black beast.” This beast is her father. Or in the Suzanne Alexander plays, “the ones I always return to, a black woman professor named Suzanne Alexander witnesses terrible murders. In her college years, she loved 19th century English verse and wrote long encomiums about the wind on the moors, so good that her white professor was sure they were plagiarized. In the plays, he seduces her, wide-eyed and innocent, and leaves her in the lurch with a baby to raise. The mingling of violent urges, the body and the mind. And what to do with the fall out?

## WHITE OUT

I am trying to explain to you something that you already know.  
That insidious twirl of brown ivy feeding green on white ivory towers,  
the way a certain kind of violence enters the body, is intersected,  
intercepted by ideas.

## BLACKOUT

A few months ago, I was grabbed on the street.  
It was a dark street. He was a stranger.  
Although the idea of him was familiar.  
The intimacy of touch. Grabbed from behind,  
Swiped. Snatched. It is so easy to snatch a body.  
I told my lover—a man grabbed me in the street  
He said why didn't you hit him.  
I did, I told you that I hit him.  
That's right baby, you hit him. I forgot.  
False memory.

## IN BLACK & WHITE

Vi•o•lence          noun

1. swift and intense force: the violence of a storm.
2. rough or injurious physical force, action, or treatment:
3. an unjust or unwarranted exertion of force or power, as against rights or laws
4. a violent act or proceeding.
5. rough or immoderate vehemence, as of feeling or language

## FALLOUT

The violence of feeling or language.

## BACKWASH

The backwash of what you have to swallow.  
It gets thrown up. Hands thrown up in the air.  
But you have no hands.  
I told him that I hit him.  
I hit him and kicked him in the stomach.  
I ran after him and my shoe fell off in the street.  
A violence was done to me but it gets blacked out.

I can't remember the moment precisely.  
An unwanted—turn, shove, push, kick.  
The idea of such a thing. The idea.  
The thing is happening. Me, the thing

### WHITE WASH

Go back to school.  
Forget it happened.

### FLASHBACK

In *Poetic Justice*, the second feature length film by director John Singleton released in 1993, Janet Jackson plays a young hairdresser named Justice who falls in love with a postal worker played by Tupac Shakur on a road trip in a mail truck. In many fanciful dream sequence-like scenes, she incants poems actually written by Maya Angelou. These poems exist only inside her head. She never says them aloud. The actual dialogue of the movie goes something like this. Fuck you. No, FUCK YOU. FUCK YOU FUCK YOU FUCK YOU MOTHER FUCKER FUCK YOU.

When I am invited to participate in a symposium on violence and community, I think of this.

### BLACKOUT

[A *Lite Brite* offers this bright, colorful message: *FUCK YOU*]

### BLACKWASH: ELLISON

from *Invisible Man*, 1952

“Meanwhile I enjoy my life with the compliments of Monopolated Light & Power. Since you never recognize me even when in closest contact with me, and since, no doubt, you’ll hardly believe that I exist, it won’t matter if you know that I tapped a power line leading into the building and ran it into my hole in the ground. Before that I lived in the darkness into which I was chased, but now I see. I’ve illuminated the blackness of my invisibility—and vice versa.” This from the black man who strings up 1,369 light bulbs.

## FALL OUT

\*\*MONOPOLATED LIGHT AND POWER\*\*

### **BLACKOUT:**

A woman is writing in Haiti.

It is 1966. She is a schoolteacher. There is a dictator.

She teaches the children to sing hymns to him.

She teaches them to pray to him "Our Father."

In the darkness, she writes of the darkness.

The dictator tries to whitewash their language  
in blackness. In the **BLACKOUT**,

she writes in a different way.

Transforms whitewashed blackness to shadow.

She aims to move from the shadow to flight.

\*\*FALL OUT\*\*

I am running up stairs.

I want to throw my hands in the air

with glee. I have no body. Fingers. Only rustling

through my pocketbook for change for the copy machine.

I have found the school teacher's book in this place.

It is the black library. The Schomburg.

I will copy the pages to enter her shadow.

### **BLACKWASH: JACQUELINE BEAUGÉ-ROSIER**

She writes:

Toute la nuit la persistance des marches

Toute la nuit le feu le verre

L'heure anonyme des lunes interdites

A longueur de jour la ronde chronique

De ta frayeur renversée contre mon mutisme

Les discours du temps des statuts du temps

De la stature du temps qui s'oublie

Dans l'espace

N'ont pas synchronisé la musique

Antérieure à mon appel à la vie

Je suis au seuil de l'histoire

qui passé le dépit le vertige

L'abîme d'ombre où je te retrouve  
Vie de névrosée  
En éclats brisées de verre  
Dans l'ivrognerie de la douleur

I translate:

All night long the persistence of walking  
All night long the fire the glass  
The anonymous hour of forbidden moons  
All day long the chronic round  
Of your fright turned against my muteness  
The discourse of time of statutes of time  
Of the stature of time forgotten  
In space  
Have not synchronized the music  
From before my call to life  
I am at the threshold of history  
Passing the vexation the vertigo  
The abyss of shadow where I find you again  
Life of a neurotic woman  
In broken shards of glass  
In the drunkenness of pain

FALL OUT

What are disembodied poetics?  
What does it mean to be a black woman poet?  
How to chronicle and embody a certain kind of violence?

FLASHBACK

In college, I took a poetry class which I hated.  
We learned about sonnets which I loved.  
I was at the start of trying to reconcile content and form,  
ideas and body. And so I did a project on racially righteous sonnets.

BLACKWASH: MCKAY

“Tiger [a sonnet]  
The white man is a tiger at my throat,  
Drinking my blood as my life ebbs away...”

## FALLOUT

My professor hated this poem.  
He told me that there were no good African-American poets  
(except for a few lines of Countee Cullen  
which displayed promising prosody.)  
He told me he disagreed with my analysis  
of transforming poetic form through poetic content.  
My professor hated my paper and was I wrong  
in believing that he hated me too?

## BLACKWASH : BARAKA

A paraphrase from the first lines of *Wise Ys Wise*,  
*When you find yourself in a strange place*  
*With strange people speaking a strange language*  
*You know you're in trouble*

## WHITEWASH

My professor gave me an A for the paper and an A in the class.  
This is how I knew he really hated me.

## BLACKWASH: DOUGLASS

Give a nigger an inch, and he'll take an ell.  
Mr. Auld said this about teaching  
Frederick Douglass his A B Cs.  
Something about epistemology.  
I was born.  
I was born.  
I was born.

## STEP BLACK

There is a dance called the Electric Slide.  
You ivory tower vine to the left and snap.  
You ivory tower vine to the right and snap.  
You shimmy your hips back and snap.  
You sashay forward, bend and twist.

## FALL OUT

What happens when you turn a person into a thing?

What happens when you think this?

What happens when a person is told she is a thing?

What happens when a person is taught she is a thing?

What happens when a person is taught disembody?

[Words no longer decipherable]

## LIGHTS OUT / LIGHTERS UP

I am writing this in the dark.

Not just a room but a body.

Not just a body but a mind.

Illuminated by violent light.