

# TABOO

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# Taboo: The Journal of Culture and Education

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## Introduction

### The Sovereignty of Black Being: Lineage, Resistance, and the Pedagogies of a Freed Future

Shelton K. Johnson

What happens when Blackness is not moderated, tamed, or chiseled down to fit the structures of civility and legibility imposed by the state, the academy, the curriculum, or the schoolhouse? What futures emerge when Black being is unbothered by the mandate to explain itself? This special issue of *Taboo: The Journal of Culture and Education*, themed *Blackity Black Black Black: Education, Culture, and Reimagined Futures*, moves in the key of radical and unapologetic Black being. It sings, screams, whispers, and wails. It dances barefoot on unswept porches and city blocks, and it breathes new oxygen into the fire Black educators, artists, scholars, parents, and youth have always carried. We do not speak here to persuade or convert. We do not write for whiteness, nor do we labor for permission. Instead, we assemble a body of work that revels in the refusal to be anything but wholly, messily, joyfully, furiously Black. This is an archive of educational insurgency and fugitive thought. Across five sections, *Black Being and Embodied Knowing; Rhythms, Revolt, and Black Cultural Expression; Black*

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*Work, Resistance, and Institutional Reckoning; Legacies, Lineages, and Black Queer Futures; and Revolution, Reconstruction, and Reimagined Futures*, we see a full Black aesthetic and epistemological cosmology in motion.

From the beginning, this issue centers breath, not simply as metaphor, but as praxis, epistemology, and rebellion. Breathing, here, is a methodology. To breathe Blackly is to live despite and beyond the suffocations of institutional violence. The first essays move in this spirit, insisting that Black radical pedagogy must arise not from theoretical abstraction, but from the blood memory of freedom seekers, from ancestral maps buried beneath our tongues, and from the marrow-deep wisdom of Black embodiment. Breathing, in these texts, becomes an act of historical recovery and an insurgent claiming of space in higher education and environmental pedagogy. Against the extractive roots of settler colonial environmental education, Afrofuturist art is deployed not as a tool of restoring and resistance, re-scripting Black placemaking beyond the lies of placelessness. Blackness, always already in relation to land, spirit, temporality, reclaims its right to envision new ecological futures.

From the stillness of breath, we move to rhythm, pulse, and vibration. The second cluster of essays reverberates with sound. These are essays that teach in basslines and liberate through syncopation. What would it mean to center reggae, hip-hop, and urban marching bands as more than curricular add-ons, perhaps as epistemological frameworks in their own right? Here, rhythm is a pedagogy, a cognitive intervention, and a strategy for remembering who we are. The beat is not in the background. It is the curriculum. It is the inheritance. It is the data. We are reminded that neuroplasticity, cultural wealth, and educational brilliance are cultivated not in sterile classrooms, but in cipher circles, at battle of the bands, and through the invisible armor worn by Black male educators who teach in defiance of erasure. These pieces do not ask permission to be recognized as rigorous. They demand new definitions of rigor itself. Rigor as survival. Rigor as memory. Rigor as the daily labor of becoming more fully human in a world that would rather, we disappear.

Subsequently, there is the labor of Black mothering, which arrives in this issue not as the often-sentimental trope but as theory, praxis, and critical race methodology. Black mothering is intellectual labor. It is political labor. It is spiritual labor. It is a lineage of rebellion against the state's surveillance, schooling's policing, and the subtle violences of policy disguised as care. Paired with the critical examination of Black home education and the politics of state power, a clarion call for educational revolution, and a deep dive into legislative transformation in New Mexico, these essays call us to reimagine what it means to be accountable to Black futures. They do not romanticize reform. They demand rupture, inviting us to confront the full weight of institutional harm while daring us to believe that Black communities, in their ingenuity and insistence, can architect structures that honor their children's brilliance and safeguard their boundless possibility.

In another turn, we are offered blueprints and blue notes, the aching chords of

what we have lost and the possibility that even now, amidst so much devastation, something beautiful and free might still be possible. In the fourth section, the issue takes a necessary and brilliant turn toward Black queer lineage. No future is worth imagining without the full embrace of Black queer being and becoming. The essays in this section do not simply gesture to queerness; they ground us in its genealogies, its sacred rituals, its radical joys. They invite us into a world where queerness is not exception but essence, where Black queer historical and cultural figures are reclaimed as pedagogical ancestors, and where the Divine Nine is refracted through the rainbow as it is interrogated for the ways it has both relied on and marginalized queer presence. To talk of the future without speaking of Black queer possibility is to replicate the violence of exclusion dressed in liberation's language. These essays refuse such betrayal. They hold us accountable to a full Black pedagogy, one that does not fragment, or silence, and one that refuses to throw any of us away.

Finally, we arrive at the reimagined futures. But not futures built from fantasy or abstraction. These are futures forged from rural backyards and urban pre-college programs. These are futures imagined on porches, futures where boys are seen as promise and not as threat, where college access is not a pipeline but a liberation pathway, where rural Black resistance is not dismissed as nostalgia but held up as pedagogical vision.

Throughout this issue, we are reminded that education is never neutral. It is always doing something. It is either weapon or balm, cage or key, a site of constraint or a site of becoming. The contributors to this issue choose the key every single time. They choose joy as insurgency. They choose Blackness in its complexity, its contradictions, and its undeniable divinity. They choose to speak in a language that refuses flattening, performance, and the quiet violence of respectability. In assembling this issue, I was moved, challenged, and irrevocably changed as these are not just articles. They are love letters and battle cries, blueprints and conjurings, maps for escape and maps for return. They speak across disciplines, geographies, identities, and temporalities. They do not attempt to homogenize Black experience, but they insist that Black life, in all its vast multiplicity, is worthy of rigorous study, fierce celebration, and uncompromising protection.

Let this issue stand as a record of what becomes possible when Black scholars and practitioners speak from the fullness of themselves without apology or permission. Let it be a signal to the next generation that they never have to shrink, edit, contort, or translate their brilliance to be deemed intelligible. It is my hope that this reminds us that the future we are reaching for is already here. It is quietly and defiantly being built in our classrooms, in our homes, in our art, in our breath, and in our collective refusal to disappear.

Blackity Black Black Black is not excess. It is essence. It is inheritance. It is a blueprint for liberation.

Welcome to the issue.

## ***Black Being and Embodied Knowing***

# **BREATHE: Embracing Radical Epistemological Activist Teaching for Higher Education**

***Frank Tuitt, Saran Stewart, & Kelly Schlabach***

### **Abstract**

This paper explores the global rise of attacks on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) and Critical Race Theory (CRT), which have been fueled by conservative, right-wing groups aimed at dismantling racial equity efforts, particularly in the United States. These attacks have also spread to other countries such as the United Kingdom and Canada, where DEI initiatives are being systematically undermined. The common thread across these global efforts is the persistence of anti-Blackness, which seeks to reinforce white supremacy while hindering racial progress. In response, this paper examines how transnational Black liberation movements can inform the conceptualization of pedagogical practices that support Black Radical Epistemological Activist Teaching for Higher Education (BREATHE). Using Critical Race Theory, BlackCrit, and Plantation Politics frameworks, the paper advances a set of considerations (BREATHE) to guide

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the creation of educational spaces that have the potential to resist anti-Blackness globally. Specifically, we organize our discussion of transformative pedagogical considerations by utilizing a Black liberation framework related to advancing Black epistemology and praxis, emphasizing intersectionality and the multiplicity of Blackness, understanding Black transnationalism, mobilizing Black students' activism, and cultivating Black radical emancipatory imagination. By engaging the global struggle for Black liberation, this paper aims to lift up teaching and learning strategies that challenge anti-Blackness, humanize Black students, and foster antiracist educational environments world-wide where Black people can BREATHE.

*Keywords:* Black Liberation Movements, Anti-Blackness, BlackCrit, Plantation Politics, Higher Education

### Introduction

*We revolt simply because for many reasons, we can no longer breathe.*

—Frantz Fanon (2025)<sup>1</sup>

Recently, higher education has faced unprecedented attacks on diversity, equity, inclusion (DEI) and critical race theory (CRT) (Stewart, et al., 2024). These assaults are the result of systematic, orchestrated attacks that allegedly have been funded by conservative rightwing groups who are committed to undermining many of the efforts to advance racial equity that have occurred throughout the history of the United States of America (Kamola, 2024; Stewart et al., 2024). While coverage of the attacks in the US have increased significantly due to the tracking of legislative assaults by various media outlets (Chronicle Staff, 2025; CRT Forward, 2024), efforts to dismantle DEI and CRT have been occurring in other parts of the world. For example, in the United Kingdom (UK), the growth in DEI initiatives is “attracting so much backlash” (Walk-Morris, 2024, para. 5), including the dismantling of such initiatives amid budget cuts. The UK government has been targeting Critical Race Theory as seen by the Minister for Women and Equalities declaring the teaching of elements of Critical Race Theory as unlawful (Trilling, 2020). In Canada, Sarkonak (2023) claims Canadian Universities are “using DEI statements to force conformity of thought” (para. 1). What all of these global attacks on DEI and CRT share is the pervasive nature of anti-Blackness embedded in the rhetoric of their tactics designed to reinforce the fallacy of white supremacy while halting any further progress made towards equity for Black communities in higher education classrooms across the United States (Wong, 2023) and the world. Thus, the attacks on DEI and CRT internationally are direct assaults on Black people across the diaspora (TheGriot Staff, 2025; Lightfoot, 2025; & Walter-Bey, 2024).

### **Embracing a Global Understanding of Anti-Blackness in Higher Education**

Anti-Blackness is a pervasive global phenomenon embedded in the very structures and policies of traditionally white higher education institutions (TWIs<sup>2</sup>) (Edwards & Shahjahan, 2025; Tuitt, 2021). It systematically devalues and denies the humanity of people of African descent transnationally (Warren & Coles, 2020). This is not merely a matter of individual prejudice but a deeply systemic issue, manifesting through the “beliefs, attitudes, actions, practices, and behaviors” that marginalize Black people and render them ineligible for full citizenship, participation, and recognition within society (Williams-Comrie et al., 2022, p. 74). As Warren and Coles (2020) suggest, this exclusion is woven into the organizational fabric of TWIs, reproducing racial inequities across generations. More than marginalization, anti-Blackness enacts an ontological negation of Black life—targeting the very being and presence of Black people (Williams, 2018). Correspondingly, anti-Blackness functions not only as a social and structural force but also as an epistemic one. It actively erases Black contributions to global knowledge systems, sustaining Eurocentric historical narratives that prioritize colonial worldviews (Rodney, 2001; Clarke, 2022). Scholars (Rodney, 2001; T’Shaka, 1983) have long identified the interconnected nature of anti-Blackness with global systems of capitalism, colonialism, patriarchy, and imperialism asserting that anti-Blackness is not confined to one nation or region but is maintained transnationally and must therefore be confronted through equally expansive, collective resistance.

Adopting a global perspective on anti-Blackness in TWIs is essential for both diagnosis and action. Localized or nation-specific analyses often obscure the broader geopolitical structures that reproduce racial hierarchies and sustain the marginalization of Black communities. A global framing, in contrast, makes visible the shared histories and present-day realities that connect Black struggles across continents, especially in TWIs, creating the conditions for transnational solidarity and collective liberation (Rodney, 2001). Furthermore, as Williams-Comrie et al. (2022) indicate, because racism is endemic to global social systems, Black liberation is always in tension with ongoing trauma, exclusion, and resistance. bell hooks (1994) reminds us that “the classroom remains the most radical space of possibility in the academy” (p. 12), underscoring the transformative potential of education when grounded in justice and liberation. Thus, the resistance we’re seeing across the globe in responses to the current white reclamation efforts to “reinforce systemic inequities, erase racial ideologies, employ revisionist histories, and silence racially marginalized voices” (Stewart et al., 2025, p. 15) reminds us that education is a central battleground in the struggle against anti-Blackness, shaped by colonial legacies that continue to erase or marginalize Black histories, identities, and ways of knowing (Tuitt & Stewart, 2021). However, this potential can only be realized when educators adopt a decolonial,

anti-racist, and Black-centered pedagogy that challenges white supremacy at both the structural and epistemological levels (Tuitt & Stewart, 2021).

In response to the enduring nature of anti-Blackness and the global resistance movements it has inspired, we aim to identify pedagogical considerations that advance a Black Radical Epistemological Activist Teaching for Higher Education (BREATHE). This approach is informed by a review of some of the 20th and 21st century transnational Black liberation movements across the African diaspora and draws on the theoretical traditions of CRT, BlackCrit, and Plantation Politics. It offers a path forward for confronting anti-Blackness in educational spaces and centers pedagogy as a tool for liberation. By learning from global movements—such as Pan-Africanism, the 1960s Black Power movement, and Black Lives Matter—we seek to cultivate liberatory classrooms that challenge structural racism while fostering critical racial consciousness. Specifically, we explore: What considerations can TWIs learn from global movements resisting anti-Blackness that can be translated into liberatory pedagogical practices within the academy? We take up this question with the belief that a global understanding of radical education is essential to dismantling anti-Blackness and affirming the humanity, knowledge, and dignity of Black people everywhere.

### Theoretical Frameworks

According to Tuitt (2020), navigating the pervasive presence of anti-Blackness in higher education is not merely a threat in the air—it is a suffocating condition, a structural force that makes it hard to breathe, stifling Black excellence through its deep-rooted contempt for, and normalization of, violence against Black life. Accordingly, CRT, Plantation Politics, and BlackCrit collectively serve as the anchor point for the theoretical grounding of this paper, guiding the overall epistemology and ontology of how we might engage our emancipatory imagination (Tuitt, 2020) to BREATHE. We focus on the historical vestiges of plantation politics that lead to resistance and center the unique experiences of Black peoples' encounter with and resistance against anti-Blackness to inform our analysis of periods of rebellion and how they may translate to classrooms in TWIs.

### *Critical Race Theory in Higher Education*

Critical Race Theory began as a critical law intervention in civil rights discourse, and a race centric intervention in critical legal discourse (Crenshaw et al., 1995). Critical Race Theory (CRT) is used in higher education as both a framework for scholarly inquiry and a pedagogical tool to interrogate and challenge how race, racism, and power operate in TWIs. Although there are several concepts and frameworks associated with CRT (Crenshaw et al., 1995; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001), we embrace three tenets to frame our understanding of CRT:

1. CRT exposes the structural and ingrained societal features of racism (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995).
2. CRT requires recognition of experiential knowledge of people of color (Dixon & Rousseau, 2005).
3. CRT encourages anti-essentialism and acknowledges the differential histories of racially minoritized groups, while holding in tension their unique positioning to speak explicitly to the experiences of racism (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001).

Though these tenets have traditionally been applied in a US context, we find them helpful to address anti-Blackness across global contexts.

### ***BlackCrit***

According to Dumas and ross (2016), BlackCrit builds on CRT but addresses CRT's inability to fully interrogate anti-Blackness. They contend that while CRT offers a general theory of racism, BlackCrit focuses on the social, cultural, and institutional structures that perpetuate anti-Blackness, which differs from the more general framework of white supremacy. They posit that BlackCrit emphasizes:

1. Anti-Blackness as endemic and central to understanding social, economic, and cultural life globally (Dumas & ross, 2016).
2. Blackness exists in conflict with mainstream, neoliberal multiculturalism, which often marginalizes or silences Black voices (Dumas & ross, 2016).
3. Imagining and creating space for Black liberation beyond the constraints of traditional historical narratives that often erase the role of white dominance (Dumas & ross, 2016).

In this way, BlackCrit takes the broader lens of CRT and narrows it to focus specifically on the lived experiences of Black people under the weight of anti-Blackness. It sharpens our focus on the specific ways that anti-Blackness operates within global systems. Moreover, it challenges contemporary operationalization of DEI in TWIs, which often co-opts Black struggles without addressing the root causes of Black marginalization (Sullivan, 2022).

### ***Plantation Politics in Higher Education***

Building on CRT, Plantation Politics (Williams & Tuitt, 2021; Squire et al., 2018) focuses on the continuation of racial exploitation, dehumanization, and the upholding of white supremacy within contemporary institutions, particularly in higher education. While there are several principles of their conceptualization, for this paper we organize around four themes:

1. TWIs inherit and uphold colonial and imperialist logics that helped establish slavery and continue to sustain racial exploitation in academia today (Squire et al., 2018).

2. Universities perpetuate racial exploitation through labor practices, tuition structures, and performative diversity efforts, dehumanizing students of color and reinforcing racial hierarchies (Squire et al., 2018).
3. Education functions as a tool of social control, where universities oppress Black students and suppress resistance through policies that dismantle organizing and silence dissent (Squire et al., 2018).
4. Universities protect the status quo by commodifying diversity and dismissing Black resistance, thereby upholding white supremacy and racialized power structures in academia (Squire et al., 2018).

These four themes highlight how Plantation Politics in higher education continues to perpetuate racial exploitation and marginalization, building on the historical foundations of slavery and colonialism while reinforcing systems of white supremacy and control. Moreover, Plantation Politics deepens the analysis of CRT by focusing on how contemporary institutions, particularly universities, maintain structures of racial domination that mirror the historical exploitation of Black people during slavery (Williams & Tuitt, 2021).

### ***Integrative Function of the Model***

The integration of Critical Race Theory (CRT), Plantation Politics, and BlackCrit forms a comprehensive, multi-layered framework for analyzing and resisting anti-Blackness in both historical and contemporary higher education contexts (See Appendix A). Each framework contributes a distinct but interconnected lens:

- ◆ CRT exposes the pervasiveness and ordinariness of racism, while avoiding the essentialization of Black people.
- ◆ BlackCrit deepens this analysis by centering anti-Blackness as a unique and enduring force that shapes Black life globally, while insisting on the necessity of radical Black imagination and liberatory possibility.
- ◆ Plantation Politics reveals how contemporary TWIs replicate the logics of slavery through control, exploitation, and the suppression of Black resistance.

Together, these frameworks illuminate how systems of racial domination are historically rooted yet actively reproduced in the present. More importantly, they chart a pathway forward by linking past and present acts of Black rebellion, resistance, and refusal to contemporary educational praxis. This integrative model not only critiques oppressive structures but also provides the theoretical foundation to create liberatory spaces—to BREATHE—where educators and students alike can resist, reimagine, and move toward a future grounded in Black freedom and collective liberation. The authors used the model to inform their search for literature centering Black liberation movements on a global scale. Key search terms included Black liberation movements, Pan-Africanism, the Black Power Movement, the Black Panther Party, the Black Lives Matter (BLM) Movement, and global Black

liberation movements. We use these frameworks and the literature collectively to develop liberatory pedagogical practices within TWIs.

### **Black Liberation Movements**

In the following section, we briefly describe three rebellion periods: Pan-Africanism, the Black power movement of the 1960s and 1970s, and the global Black Lives Matter uprisings of 2020, all of which were multi-sited and connected socially and temporally. Reviewing the literature on these three global Black Liberation Movements provided some guidance as to how to construct learning environments that empower Black faculty and students to BREATHE.

#### ***Pan Africanism***

Pan-Africanism emerged as a response to the colonization and exploitation of Africa by Western nations (Adejumobi, 2008). While the first Pan-African Congress is widely regarded as the formal beginning of the movement, some scholars argue that its ideological roots extend back centuries (Eze, 2013). According to Wynter (2003), the ideological foundations of Pan-Africanism align with the “rise of Europe” and its construction of “world civilization,” which was simultaneously accompanied by African enslavement, Latin American conquest, and Asian subjugation (p. 263). The first Pan-African Congress was convened in 1900 by Henry Sylvester-Williams, gathering 30 delegates, primarily from England and the West Indies, as well as African and Black American representatives (Adejumobi, 2008). However, Eze (2013) notes that this initial meeting was “criticized as an extension of the European colonial mandate” (p. 665). The second Pan-African Congress, held in Paris in 1919 and chaired by W.E.B. Du Bois, was a critical turning point for the movement (Adejumobi, 2008). During this meeting, participants adopted a resolution calling for the drafting of a code of law “for the international protection of the natives of Africa” (Adejumobi, 2008, para. 9). They also demanded the colonial peoples’ right to education, underscoring the global focus on education as a tool for decolonization and Black liberation (Adejumobi, 2008).

The core themes of the Pan-African Congress, and Pan-Africanism more broadly, focused on reclaiming African culture and cultivating a Black identity “not defined in terms of European episteme,” which would serve as a source of pride (Eze, 2013, p. 666). The movement also emphasized the rehumanization of African people and their descendants, both within and outside the African continent. As Eze (2013) explains, Pan-Africanism, through various Black movements, provided a “historical expression of a common consciousness, a shared sense of African/Black identity, and a metaphysical core with which to restore the humanity of Black people all over the world” (p. 670). For example, between the 1920s and the 1960s, Black people from the United States, the Caribbean, Africa, Canada, the Netherlands, and France participated in the Pan-African movement, voic-

ing their demands for Black liberation (Edmundson, 1969). Despite the variations in conditions across these regions, Edmundson (1969) asserts that “an underlying bond of situational unity” existed (p. 705), enabling the coordination of different struggles. This unity was rooted in race and the shared experience of being oppressed within an international system of white power.

Overall, the Pan-African movement sought to reclaim Black liberation and foster a shared Black identity—rooted in common historical, cultural, and lived experiences—in order to restore the humanity of Black people transnationally and build a unifying sense of solidarity against global anti-Blackness. While Pan-Africanism predates the Black Power movement of the 1960s and 1970s, its resurgence during these decades was closely linked to the ideologies of Black Power (Eze, 2013; Kryla, 2024), sharing ideals of unity, resistance, and self-determination.

### ***Black Panther Party & Black Power Movement of the 1960s***

Founded in 1966 by Huey Newton and Bobby Seale in Oakland, California, the Black Panther Party (BPP) emerged as a radical force against anti-Blackness within the broader U.S. Black freedom struggle, advocating for racial justice, community empowerment, and revolutionary socialism (National Archives, 2021; Van den Berk & Visser-Maessen, 2019). Tyner (2006) highlights how the BPP’s activism was deeply spatial and urban in nature—strategically focused on reclaiming and defending the Black ghetto as a site of dignity and resistance through community patrols, free breakfast programs, and health clinics. These programs challenged state neglect and exposed racialized inequalities in public services. Chamedes (2023) further situates the BPP within a broader ideological continuum, showing how their rhetoric and practice drew on antifascist frameworks to mobilize support and contest racial capitalism.

BPP had a significant ideological and political impact beyond their American borders, inspiring anti-racist and anti-imperialist movements across Europe and Canada (Austin, 2006; Nimako & Willemsen, 2011; El-Tayeb, 2011). De Vlugt (2024) highlights how Afro-Surinamese activists in the Netherlands engaged in meaningful solidarity with the BPP during the late 1960s and 1970s, not merely as distant admirers, but as political actors who aligned their own struggles against Dutch colonial legacies with the Panthers’ revolutionary critique of racial capitalism and imperialism. Similarly, in the United Kingdom, the British Black Panthers, established in 1968, modeled themselves after the U.S. BPP, focusing on combating systemic racism, police violence, and educational inequality (Owusu, 2020; Sivanandan, 1974). Likewise, in Canada, particularly in Montreal and Toronto, organizations such as the Black United Front and the Negro Citizenship Association drew inspiration from the BPP’s emphasis on Black autonomy, community programs, and resistance to state violence (Austin, 2006). Collectively, these examples underscore the BPP’s global legacy, as its vision for liberation and

justice found expression in varied local contexts, helping to shape broader transnational movements for Black empowerment. Overall, the BPP's fight against anti-Blackness and for Black liberation was a critical element of the Black Power movement of the 1960s and 1970s. The legacy of its impact would become evident in the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement that would follow a few decades later.

### ***Black Lives Matter Movement***

The Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement emerged in 2013 as a grassroots response to the persistent violence and systemic racism faced by Black communities, particularly in the form of police brutality (Garza et al., 2014). The movement was catalyzed by the acquittal of George Zimmerman in the killing of Trayvon Martin, which prompted Alicia Garza to post the hashtag “#BlackLivesMatter” on Facebook. This simple phrase quickly gained traction, becoming a rallying cry for a broader movement that not only addressed police violence but also aimed to confront the structural inequalities that marginalize Black people (Garza et al., 2014). As BLM gained momentum, pivotal events such as the deaths of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, and Eric Garner in New York ignited nationwide protests. These incidents underscored the role of law enforcement in perpetuating racial injustice and highlighted the urgent need for systemic change. Initially focused on police brutality, the movement expanded its demands to include justice in broader areas such as education, healthcare, and employment (Black Lives Matter Global Network Foundation, 2021). Central to BLM's mission was not only addressing isolated acts of violence but also dismantling the deeply embedded systems of racism and oppression within U.S. society (Garza et al., 2014). BLM's impact report underscores essential needs, including education, food, housing, and healthcare, framing these as foundational to personal and community safety (Black Lives Matter Global Network Foundation, 2021). The BLM Global Impact Report shows the core nature of education and research in combatting anti-Blackness while anchoring that resistance in abolitionist frameworks and curricula centering Black lived experiences (Black Lives Matter Global Network Foundation, 2021).

A hallmark of the Movement for Black Lives was its intersectional approach, which emphasized the experiences of Black queer and trans individuals, women, and those from working-class backgrounds. The movement's founders stressed the importance of recognizing the diverse experiences of Black people across gender, sexuality, and class, seeking to address the interconnected systems of oppression, such as racism, sexism, homophobia, and economic inequality (Clark et al., 2018; Garza, Tometi, & Cullors, 2014). The movement's global impact became especially evident after the murder of George Floyd in 2020, which sparked uprisings worldwide. Protests in countries like France, South Africa, and Kenya invoked local instances of anti-Black violence, demonstrating that the fight for Black liberation is a global struggle. BLM's call for justice resonated across borders, linking

efforts against white supremacy, colonialism, and capitalism globally (Breedon, 2023; D'Agata, 2020; Imray & Odula, 2020; Taddonio, 2021). Thus, the Movement for Black Lives represents a diasporic and transnational struggle for justice. It responds not only to specific instances of anti-Black violence but also challenges the systemic structures of oppression that affect Black people worldwide.

Overall, as we look across the Pan-African movement, the Black Power movement, and the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, a shared global vision of Black liberation emerges—one rooted in collective resistance, cultural reclamation, and educational empowerment. Each movement, though distinct in historical context, responds to the enduring legacies of colonialism, white supremacy, and systemic racism. Pan-Africanism laid the ideological foundation by promoting a unified African identity and calling for decolonization and self-determination across the African diaspora (Adejumobi, 2008; Eze, 2013). The Black Power movement, exemplified by the Black Panther Party, advanced these goals through militant advocacy for civil rights, with a strong emphasis on education as a tool for liberation and community empowerment (Murch, 2007; Newton, 2009). Similarly, BLM extends this global struggle into the present, addressing both police violence and the broader social inequities that impact Black lives, while centering intersectionality and transnational solidarity (Garza, Tometi, & Cullors, 2014; Clark et al., 2018). Each movement situates Black liberation as a global imperative, recognizing that systemic oppression is not confined by national borders but is embedded in international structures of power. In the next section, we tease out the core components of these three Black liberation movements in search of a deeper understanding of how to BREATHE as we combat anti-Blackness in these challenging times.

### **Embracing a Black Radical Epistemological Antiracist Teaching for Higher Education**

Despite being shaped by distinct local and historical conditions, Black liberation movements are united by a shared commitment to dismantling systems of anti-Blackness, colonialism, and imperialism (Cha-Jua & Lang, 1999). Accordingly, our analysis identified a set of pedagogical considerations that persist across time, organized around Stewart et al's., (n.d.) five interrelated pillars:

1. Advancing a critical Black epistemology and praxis.
2. Emphasizing intersectionality and the multiplicity of Blackness.
3. Understanding Black transnationalism and geopolitical contexts.
4. Mobilizing the lived experiences and activism of Black students and children; and
5. Cultivating a Black radical emancipatory imagination.

***Critical Black Epistemology and Praxis***

Across the various waves of the Black liberation movements the affirmation of Black and Afrocentric values has remained central to the global struggle for freedom. Embracing Black cultural traditions and knowledge systems has served not only as a form of resistance to systems of racial domination, but also as a foundation for envisioning and enacting liberatory futures. This cultural grounding affirms Black humanity in the face of systemic dehumanization and offers a critical epistemological consideration rooted in dignity, resilience, and collective care.

Thus confronting anti-Blackness within TWIs necessitates a critical Black epistemology—one that affirms the value of Black centered ways of knowing, cultural practices and lived experiences, resists both individual and structural racism, and fosters critical racial consciousness about the mechanisms through which white supremacy perpetuates anti-Blackness (Langford & Speight, 2015; Castillo-Montoya et al., 2019).

At its core, a critical Black epistemology functions as a form of epistemic resistance—an effort to reclaim the value of Black knowledge systems and disrupt the dominance of Eurocentric educational paradigms. To BREATHE, one must begin with a Black-centered epistemology and praxis that prioritizes the affirmation of Black humanity. Dismantling anti-Blackness in higher education requires more than inclusion—it demands transformation. This approach calls for a radical reorientation toward liberatory teaching practices rooted in cultural affirmation, critical analysis, and radical love. Advancing a critical Black epistemology is thus a political, intellectual, and cultural project of aligning theory and practice in the pursuit of liberation (T’Shaka, 1983; Rodney, 2001). Rather than treating Black knowledge as supplemental, this approach asserts that Black life, thought, and cultural production are foundational to any truly emancipatory educational or political project (Rodney, 2001; Jasar, 2022). Specifically, a Black centered epistemology and praxis must confront the structural violence of white supremacy and dismantle the interlocking systems of colonialism, capitalism, and imperialism that maintain racial inequity (T’Shaka, 1983; Castillo-Montoya et al., 2019; Cha-Jua & Lang, 1999).

Overall, advancing a critical Black epistemology and praxis requires that educators close the artificial divide between theory and action—recognizing that liberation is enacted through daily pedagogical practices of resistance, care, and affirmation. Moreover, to combat anti-Blackness our higher education classrooms must embrace theory-to-practice ethos that construct learning environments as spaces of liberation—where Black students are seen from an intersectional standpoint that captures the multiplicity of their identities and are heard and empowered to resist structural racism as well as cultivate critical racial consciousness (Moore, et al., 2010; Tuitt, 2020).

***Intersectionality and the Multiplicity of Blackness***

The Black Lives Matter movement foregrounded the use of intersectional approaches to combat anti-Blackness. Prior to, Black women and Black feminist movements were undervalued, ignored and largely placed on the periphery of activism even when Black women were the heart and the soul of the 20th Century Black Liberation Movements. In this pillar, we find two significant considerations for creating liberating learning environments where Black people can BREATHE. The first is related to the importance of recognizing the existence of multiple dimensions of Black identities that do not conflate Blackness with African Americanness (Medford, 2019) and the second emphasizes adopting an intersectional approach aimed at challenging anti-Blackness and addressing the harmful effects of overlapping systems of oppression (Crenshaw, 2013).

Across diverse geopolitical and historical contexts, scholars and activists emphasize that Blackness is not a static, homogeneous identity, but a dynamic and evolving construct shaped by the interplay of race, gender, class, sexuality, nationality, and geography (Medford, 2019). This approach demands a departure from essentialist representations and instead centers nuanced, context-specific understandings of Black life and struggle. For example, intersectionality (Crenshaw, 2013) provides a critical lens for understanding how multiple systems of domination—racism, capitalism, patriarchy, colonialism, homophobia—intersect to violently shape the experiences of Black women. Cha-Jua and Lang (1999) and Jasor (2022) argue that historically, radical Black movements have always incorporated intersectional analysis to account for these layered oppressions. Feminist and queer voices within these movements have consistently challenged patriarchal norms, pushing for inclusive liberation frameworks (Van den Berk & Visser-Maessen, 2019; De Jong, 2019; Musgrove, 2019; Stewart et al., 2024). For example, studies of liberation movements from Canada, the UK, the U.S., and the Caribbean affirm this complexity. In Montreal, Austin (2007) and Calliste (1995) demonstrate how Caribbean immigrants navigated intersections of race, migration, and class, forging a unique diasporic identity. In the UK, Black British activists critiqued mainstream anti-racist movements for neglecting how immigration, class, and race coalesce in shaping Black British realities (Sands-O'Connor, 2021; Hancox, 2023). Similar themes appear in Caribbean resistance (Alagraa, 2020) and in Black radical pedagogy movements that center Black women, LGBTQ+ people, and immigrants (Clark et al., 2018).

In addition to integrating a focus on intersectionality, to BREATHE educators need to move beyond a singular identity of Black and embrace the multiplicity of Blackness. Rodney (2001) powerfully disrupted monolithic views of Blackness, emphasizing that Black identity is historically and geographically contingent. Afro-Caribbean feminist thought, for instance, foregrounds the intersections of enslavement, coloniality, and gender to articulate a more situated and plural Black

identity (Stewart, 2019). This multiplicity is reinforced by De Vlugt's (2024) and Balkenhol and Coenders' (2021) work on Black radicalism in the Netherlands, where Blackness emerges through postcolonial experiences in Suriname, Indonesia, and the Caribbean. This plural vision of Black identity also shapes educational and activist practices. Scholars like Moore et al. (2010) argue for pedagogies that are responsive to the distinct realities of African American, Caribbean, African, and European Black communities. Rejecting U.S.-centric frameworks, they advocate for diaspora-aware curricula that reflect the heterogeneous makeup of the global Black experience.

Combined, intersectionality and the multiplicity of Blackness offer more than analytical tools, they are necessary conditions for meaningful liberation. These frameworks resist homogenization, center the most marginalized, and create space for solidarity across differences. Thus, educators seeking to create learning environments that account for the multiplicity of Blackness will want to avoid essentializing Black students' identities and experiences with anti-Blackness in monolithic ways (Tuitt et al., 2018) and account for the ways in which their interactions may vary by nationality, ethnicity, place, and political context (Pabst, 2006). Black Liberation in higher education classrooms, as the literature collectively shows, must be attentive to the specific material, cultural, and historical conditions shaping Black life across the diaspora. Only then can Black faculty and students achieve their full emancipatory potential.

### ***Black Transnationalism and Geopolitical Contexts***

Contemporary scholarship increasingly underscores the importance of theorizing Black liberation beyond national borders. For example, Black transnationalism offers a framework for understanding the interconnected histories and political conditions that shape Black resistance worldwide, situating it within a matrix shaped by slavery, colonialism, imperialism, and global capitalism (Jasor, 2022; De Vlugt, 2024). Through this lens, anti-Blackness is seen as a global system, and liberation as a transnational project. Jasor (2022), for instance, highlights how Caribbean feminist radicalism must be understood in relation to anti-colonial movements throughout the Global South. Thus, a Black transnational perspective challenges nationalist paradigms of resistance by centering global solidarities and historical linkages. Cha-Jua and Lang (1999) argue that radical Black traditions have long operated within internationalist frameworks, offering a broader vision of liberation that connects struggles across borders. Similarly, Balkenhol and Coenders (2021) and De Vlugt (2024) show how Dutch Black activists aligned their organizing with global movements—drawing upon Pan-Africanism, anti-colonialism, and the legacy of the Black Panther Party (BPP) to resist racial capitalism and imperialism. Van den Berk and Visser-Maessen (2019) emphasize that the Black Freedom Struggle of 1968 was directly shaped by global political currents,

from African independence movements to anti-war activism—underscoring that Black resistance has always been deeply embedded in global geopolitics. Transnational geopolitics embedded in capital accumulation has been core to the BPP unifying across contexts. Tyner (2006) demonstrates how the BPP connected U.S. police violence and economic marginalization to global imperialist logics. Their activism, deeply influenced by thinkers like Frantz Fanon and Kwame Nkrumah, exemplified an internationalist revolutionary consciousness.

Transnational Black activism is not only political but deeply embodied and lived, shaped by the historical and geographic movement of Black communities across the globe. T'Shaka (1983) argues that true liberation requires an internationalist approach, drawing from revolutionary movements across the African diaspora, as nationalist strategies alone are insufficient to confront global systems of imperialism and racial capitalism. These transnational struggles are further illuminated by Black geopolitical frameworks, which expose how global power structures sustain anti-Blackness (Tyner, 2006). Austin (2007) illustrates how diasporic Black radicalism in Canada understood its marginalization within a global racial hierarchy.

Today, movements like Black Lives Matter embody a global Black consciousness. These transnational actions challenge the view of racial injustice as a purely domestic issue, linking local histories to global struggles, affirming the global nature of anti-Black violence and situating resistance within a longer history of colonialism and imperial domination (Esajas & de Abreu, 2019). For instance, across the United States, Canada, the Caribbean, the UK, and the Netherlands, Black radical traditions have generated what Esajas and de Abreu (2019) call counter-archives: alternative histories, pedagogies, and cultural practices that contest colonial erasure and affirm Black subjectivity. These transnational networks forged solidarities across geographic, cultural, and linguistic boundaries, demonstrating that Black liberation is not an isolated national pursuit but a global struggle for justice, dignity, and freedom (Calliste, 1995; Hancox, 2023).

Overall, understanding Black liberation through the combined lenses of Black transnationalism and geopolitical contexts illuminates the shared strategies, conditions, and visions that bind global Black resistance. Historically, higher education has functioned as a site of both assimilation and racial stratification. These aforementioned practices were rooted in diasporic and transnational frameworks, linking local educational struggles to broader global Black liberation movements. Anti-Blackness does not stop at national borders—and neither does the resistance to it. This framework honors the long-standing tradition of international Black solidarity and offers a roadmap for future organizing that is historically grounded, globally informed, and strategically expansive. Ultimately, to BREATHE education must reflect the transnational nature of both oppression and resistance. By moving beyond the confines of the nation-state and toward a global vision of justice, we can build more resilient and transformative movements for Black

freedom worldwide. To that end, educators should mobilize the lived experiences of Black students to illuminate the interconnected systems of racial capitalism and imperialism, helping them develop a global political consciousness and the tools for collective liberation (Castillo-Montoya et al., 2021; Moore et al., 2010).

### **Lived Experiences and Activism of Black Students and Children**

Historically, global Black liberation movements have been fueled by Black students and youth activating their lived experiences navigating anti-Blackness into platforms for resistance, radical imagination, and community transformation (Sands-O'Connor, 2021; Moore et al., 2010). Rather than passive recipients of educational injustice, they have redefined higher education as both a tool for liberation and a practice of freedom (hooks, 1994). For example, across global contexts—including the United States, Canada, the Caribbean, Europe, and the UK—Black youth have actively challenged the structural anti-Blackness embedded in educational systems, demanding spaces where their identities, histories, and epistemologies are affirmed (Joseph, 2003; Clark et al., 2018; Rhoads, 2019; Williams & Tuitt, 2021). Their activism, often rooted in direct encounters with racism in schools and communities, underscores education as both a site of struggle and a catalyst for social transformation (Tuitt et al., 2018; Stewart & Haynes, 2016).

In the Caribbean, student resistance to colonization played a pivotal role in dismantling colonial educational structures, paving the way for feminist and Black-centered pedagogies that framed students as both learners and system-changers (Jasor, 2022). In the Netherlands, diasporic Black youth helped shape the Dutch Black radical tradition by drawing on international movements like the Black Panther Party, linking local resistance to global struggles for liberation (De Vlugt, 2024; Balkenhol & Coenders, 2021). For instance, in the U.S., initiatives such as the Black Panther Party's Free Breakfast for Children program served as radical educational interventions—merging political education with material support to foster youth-led transformation (Tyner, 2006). This model of youth-driven resistance extended beyond the U.S., as Caribbean youth in Montreal translated these radical ideologies into the Canadian context, mobilizing their lived experiences with systemic racism to build grassroots movements rooted in cultural pride and self-determination (Austin, 2007; Calliste, 1995). Similarly, Black British students in the UK transformed their daily encounters with racial injustice into acts of radical pedagogy and resistance, highlighting education as both a site of oppression and a space for transformative struggle (Elliott-Cooper, 2015; Sands-O'Connor, 2021). Across different Black liberation movements, Black students' lived experiences functioned as vital intellectual capital—central to the creation of humanizing and justice-oriented learning environments (Tuitt, 2020). Collectively, these examples exemplify a broader political tradition in

which lived experiences and collective learning converge to drive systemic change where in response to colonial education as a mechanism of pacification, Black youth see themselves not just as students, but as historical and political agents of liberation (Rodney, 2001).

Ultimately, as Cha-Jua and Lang (1999) argue, no liberation strategy can succeed without centering the lived experiences of Black students. When we acknowledge Black students as co-creators of knowledge and change, education becomes not only a site of learning—but of liberation itself. Whether protesting police brutality, challenging exclusionary curricula, or reimagining their communities, Black youth have consistently turned personal struggle into collective resistance. As Alagraa (2020) and Musgrove (2019) show, this work is intergenerational, transnational, and rooted in a tradition that values both historical awareness and visionary leadership. Black students' activism is not solely about reaction—it is about imagining new futures. Overall, mobilizing Black students' experiences is not just a corrective to anti-Blackness; it is foundational to education becoming a site of radical imagination and transformation (Williams & Tuitt, 2021; Tuitt et al., 2018).

### ***Black Radical Emancipatory Imagination***

The cultivation of a Black Radical Emancipatory Imagination (BREI) has been a vital and strategic force within Black liberation movements across the diaspora (Dache, 2019; Kelly, 2002). More than an aspirational concept, BREI functions as praxis—a dynamic intersection of historical awareness, political visioning, and collective action. Liberation movements have long used radical imagination not simply to critique oppressive systems, but as a generative force to envision and build worlds beyond anti-Blackness, colonialism, and capitalism (Cha-Jua & Lang, 1999; De Vlucht, 2024). Central to BREI is the political reclamation of Black history and memory—not as a static chronicle of suffering, but as an active resource for resistance and visionary praxis. As Rodney (2001) and T'Shaka (1983) argue, revolutionary movements must draw strength from diasporic traditions of struggle to activate liberation in the present. This historical consciousness is inherently global. Transnational Black communities forge political imaginaries rooted in metahistory and cross-border solidarity, merging anti-colonial, Pan-African, and radical Black ideologies to resist Eurocentric erasure (Austin, 2007; Balkenhol & Coenders, 2021). Correspondingly, BREI embraces the radical project of world-making by framing imagination as both a pedagogical and political act—one that empowers communities to design systems grounded in justice, equity, and Black self-determination (Cha-Jua & Lang, 1999; De Vlucht, 2024). It, like the Black Panther Party Ten-Point Program, provides a blueprint for revolution rather than reform.

Recognizing that the learning environment is a crucial terrain for both struggle and imagination, liberation movements have long recognized schools, liter-

ature, and community pedagogy as essential sites where radical imagination is cultivated and transmitted. Toliver (2021) contends that “all activism is science fiction, for envisioning a world without oppression requires the active creation of socially just societies formed from innovative ideas and visionary possibilities” (p. 85). Accordingly, to BREATHE educators must nurture the critical consciousness of their Black students, empowering them to envision alternatives to racial and systemic violence (Sands-O’Connor, 2021; Tuitt et al., 2018). BREI thus becomes both an intellectual and spiritual reorientation, rooted in love, care, and radical community-building.

Fundamentally, BREI is sustained through a politics of refusal, imagination, and collective courage to reject oppressive systems and envision life beyond them. Central to this is the concept of radical hope — a grounded, collective belief in the possibility of transformation. As Alagraa (2020) and Williams (2018) suggest, hope is not abstract or naïve; it functions as an emotional and organizational force essential to surviving and imagining under conditions of systemic violence. Together, these themes reveal that cultivating a Black Radical Emancipatory Imagination is not a theoretical luxury but a strategic necessity. Within liberation movements, dreaming becomes praxis and imagination becomes strategy—empowering Black communities to reclaim their past, resist their present, and construct their futures on their own terms, in solidarity with others across the globe. In sum, cultivating a Black Radical Emancipatory Imagination (BREI) emerges as both a visionary and grounded praxis—one that binds historical reclamation, political world-making, liberatory education, and collective courage into a dynamic strategy of resistance and transformation. It calls upon Black communities to draw strength from their diasporic pasts (Rodney, 2001; T’Shaka, 1983), to forge transnational solidarities that transcend colonial borders (Austin, 2007; Balkenhol & Coenders, 2021), and to boldly imagine systems rooted in justice and self-determination (Cha-Jua & Lang, 1999; De Vlugt, 2024; Van den Berk & Visser-Maessen, 2019). Ultimately, BREI is not a retreat from reality but a declaration of possibility—affirming that to BREATHE is to imagine, to resist, to dream, to act, and to cultivate Black radical imagination where we commit ourselves to the unfinished project of Black freedom (Tuitt, 2020; Williams, 2018).

### Conclusion and Considerations

Drawing from the legacy of Black liberation movements, TWIs must reconceptualize itself as a space of resistance, care, and emancipatory possibility to meaningfully confront anti-Blackness. Central to this effort is the integration of a critical Black epistemology that challenges Eurocentric knowledge hierarchies and asserts Black cultural, intellectual, and historical contributions as foundational to education (Rodney, 2001; Jasor, 2022). Classrooms must embody a theory-to-practice ethos that affirms the multiplicity of Black identities, centering in-

tersectionality (De Jong, 2019; Stewart et al., 2024) as a liberatory framework and honoring diverse diasporic experiences (Moore et al., 2010; Tuitt, 2020; De Vlugt, 2024). Educators must also recognize the transnational nature of both oppression and resistance, mobilizing global Black histories and solidarities to illuminate the interconnected systems of colonialism, capitalism, and imperialism that sustain racial inequity (Austin, 2007; Castillo-Montoya et al., 2019; Balkenhol & Coenders, 2021). Moreover, centering Black students as agents of transformation—through curricula, activism, and community-based learning—echoes the radical traditions of the Black Panther Party and global freedom movements, where young people’s lived experiences and visionary capacities are treated as political assets (Musgrove, 2019; Alagraa, 2020; Williams & Tuitt, 2021). Ultimately, Black liberation movements teach us that combating anti-Blackness in education requires more than inclusion—it demands the creation of liberatory environments where Black students are empowered to imagine, resist, and remake the world on their own terms (Cha-Jua & Lang, 1999; Tyner, 2006; Tuitt et al., 2018).

In closing, while Black Radical Epistemological Activist Teaching in Higher Education offers a transformative vision for higher education, it is not without significant danger. We do not take lightly the risks associated with educators who dare to BREATHE. Those who choose to meet this moment and take up this work may confront institutional retaliation, often risking professional standing, tenure, or funding for daring to center Black liberation in spaces that remain deeply invested in Eurocentric, colonial, and neoliberal logics (Tuitt et al., 2018). To navigate these risks, coalition-building, policy advocacy, and the strategic use of academic freedom can be essential tools for protection and institutional change. Moreover, the emotional toll of this labor—especially on Black educators, Black Women, and educators of color—cannot be overstated. The psychological burden of constantly resisting anti-Blackness must be met with radical practices of self- and collective care, rooted in joy, spirituality, and community sustenance (hooks, 1994; Alagraa, 2020; Jasor, 2022). Radical care in practice means intentionally creating and sustaining affirming spaces where healing, rest, and collective accountability are prioritized. It calls us to resist isolation by building community, confronting oppressive norms together, and grounding our efforts in love, grace, and the belief that justice work must nourish rather than deplete us. Another pressing danger lies in the co-optation of radical praxis, where institutions reduce liberatory education to sanitized diversity programming. To resist this dilution, educators must remain grounded in historical Black radical traditions and engage in ongoing critical reflexivity to maintain the integrity of their work (Rodney, 2001; Musgrove, 2019).

Educators also face the challenge of student pushback—especially when students are unprepared to engage with the discomfort and complexity of anti-racist, decolonial teaching. In these cases, pedagogies of trust, layered entry points, and vulnerability become crucial strategies for transformative dialogue (Williams &

Tuitt, 2021). Finally, isolation from mainstream academic norms can leave radical educators feeling marginalized. Building alternative scholarly communities, drawing from diasporic counter-archives, and redefining academic success based on liberation rather than neoliberal metrics offer powerful ways forward (Cha-Jua & Lang, 1999; Esajas & de Abreu, 2019). Ultimately, the dangers of this work underscore the very reason it must be done. Liberation movements remind us, to BREATHE is to imagine, to resist, to dream, to act (Tuitt, 2020). Dache (2019) reminds us that Black radical movements occur in both real and imagined spaces, shaped by the tension between domination and liberation. Overcoming these tensions is not only possible—it is a necessary act of collective resistance, powered by radical love, visionary imagination, and a deep commitment to building freer futures. To truly BREATHE, we must embrace two of the most powerful tools in the fight against anti-Blackness: Black love and Black imagination.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> The original quote located in *Black Skin, White Masks* reads “It is not because the Indo-Chinese has discovered a culture of his own that he is in revolt. It is because ‘quite simply’ it was, in more than one way, becoming impossible for him to breathe” (Fanon, 1986, p. 226). The quote from the NMAAHC was utilized for clarity.

<sup>2</sup> We utilize Tuitt’s (2008) conceptualization of Traditionally White Institutions to include higher education institutions “whose campus populations have been predominantly White but now have students of color in the numeric majority. I argue that even though institutions like MIT and Berkeley have more students of color than Whites on campus, the culture, tradition, and values found in those institutions remain traditionally White” (Tuitt, 2008, p. 192-193). Though grounded in a United States Context, we argue the term TWI may apply to higher education institutions worldwide where Whiteness and White Supremacy remain central in their day to day operations.

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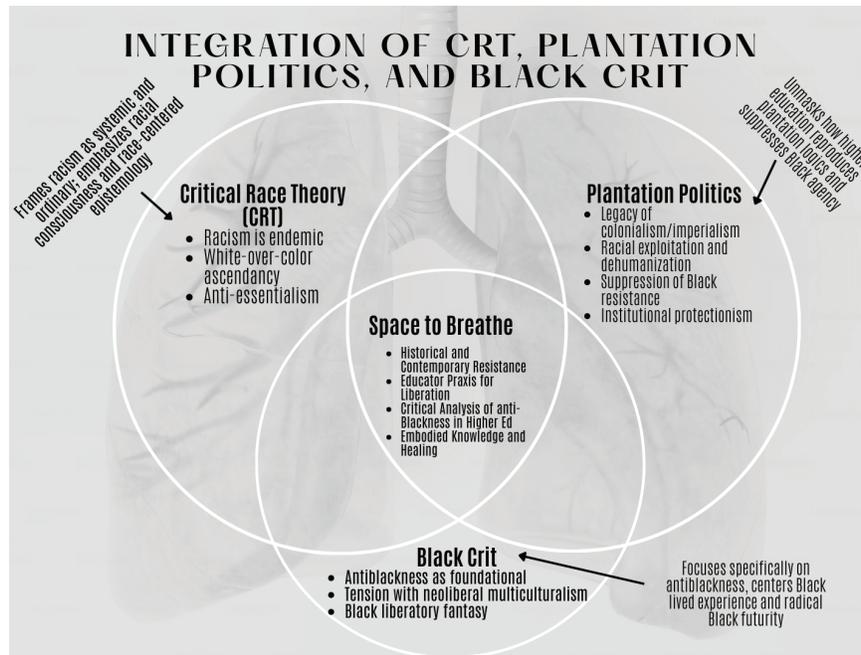
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### Appendix A



***Black Being and Embodied Knowing*****Restoring Black Place Relations  
in Environmental and Place-Based  
Education Through Afrofuturist Art*****Maya Revell*****Abstract**

This article explores Afrofuturist art as a pedagogical tool for restoring Black place relations within environmental and place-based education. While dominant frameworks remain rooted in settler colonial logics that position Blackness as placeless and disconnected from ecological life, this work argues that Black ecological knowledge, temporalities, and world-making practices are essential for just environmental futures. Drawing on Black studies, Afrofuturism, and restoring methodologies, the article analyzes two Afrofuturist art exhibits—kee mabin’s *An Otherworldly Existence* and Antoine Williams’ *Black Fusionist Society*. Mabin’s collages reimagine African and diasporic ecologies through layered histories of extraction, resilience, and speculation. Williams’ transmedia project restores the 1898 Wilmington Coup through digital world-building, community participation, and frameworks such as the Ten Vibes and Mythic Beings, reframing digital non-places as sites of Black ecological storytelling. Together, these exhibits demonstrate how Afrofuturist art disrupts deficit-based narratives and offers speculative, relational, and liberatory pedagogical practices that center Black ecological thought in environmental education.

*Keywords:* Afrofuturism, Restoring, Environmental and Place-based Education, Speculative Pedagogy, Black Time-Space

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### Introduction

Black Studies scholars have long argued that “anti-Blackness functions... by positing Blackness as perpetually ‘out of place,’ ‘placeless,’ and ‘out of time’” (McKittrick, 2011, p. 954; Hawthorne, 2019, p. 5; Phillips, 2025, p.93). These logics are not only foundational to the construction of the United States (U.S.) nation-state but also shape the epistemic roots of environmental and place-based education. Place-based education engages with “experiential, community-based, and contextual/ecological learning” to connect students to “local contexts, cultures, and environments” (Yemini et al., 2023, p.1). Its primary aim is to connect students with their local communities in order to better understand the world around them, to foster critical thinking, and to cultivate a sense of civic engagement and agency (Smith, 2013; Deringer, 2017; Schlemper et al., 2018). Held within the philosophy of environmental education, place-based education relies on pedagogies that are rooted in local stories to cultivate generations of environmental stewards committed to sustainable outcomes that ensure ecologically sound futures. These pedagogies often involve engaging in community spaces and places to facilitate student learning such as museums, historical sites, and outdoor recreation spaces.

In this article, I will provide an overview of how Blackness has been conceptualized and framed in environmental and place-based education research. Specifically, I will discuss the antiblack roots of the environmental and conservation movements, the impacts on environmental and place-based education, and then provide a timeline of educational interventions with an emphasis on the incorporation of multiculturalism, environmental justice, and Black Ecologies frameworks. This article engages with restorying methodologies which are foundational to Indigenous, decolonial, and narrative studies scholarship (Cornassel, 2009; Nxumalo and Villanueva, 2020; Ollerenshaw and Creswell, 2002). In this work, restorying methodologies are put into conversation with Afrofuturism and Black time-space in order to uniquely demonstrate Black livingness and relations to place across temporalities. Two Afrofuturist art exhibits are engaged as case studies in this work—kee mabin’s *An Otherworldly Existence* (2023) and Antoine Williams’ *Black Fusionist Society* (2020). Each exhibit demonstrates an engagement with alternate Black temporalities, make visible Black more-than-human relations and histories, and utilize Black Diasporic art praxis as a mode of creation. Following a visual and spatial analysis of each exhibit through the lens of Afrofuturism, Black time-space, and restorying, this article will offer practical pedagogical implications for educators.

Dominant place-based and environmental education frameworks remain indebted to settler colonial logics where “the remaking of land into property was/is accompanied by the remaking of (African) persons into property, into chattel” (Tuck et al., 2014, p. 47). As Indigenous lands turn into white property, its agentic capacity and relational beingness is sidelined as the notion of property turns land into void space with fixed boundaries for claiming and dominion. This logic

also results in Black people being rendered invisible (McCoy et al., 2016); our relations to place, space, and more-than-human others being erased (Paperson, 2014; Nxumalo et al., 2022; Nxumalo, 2021; Butler, 2022); and, our communities continuing to be dehumanized through deficit-based narratives (Nxumalo et al., 2019; Nxumalo, 2021). Even as Black environmental literature has blossomed in the past decade, these erasures and obscurities persist in education and continue to reproduce narratives of Blackness as dislocated, urban, and nonrelational. This persistent erasure and narrowing of Black life is an educational enactment of the hold where “the hold is a holding of movement (of “nothing yet and already” objects) and the hold of the ship—suspended in dislocation” (Tuck et al., 2014, p. 52; Harney & Moten, 2013, p. 93).

Creating just environmental futures requires educational practices that not only include Blackness, but center it as foundational to environmental thought. This centering directly challenges settler colonial and exclusionary frameworks by rejecting deficit narratives and affirming the richness of Black ecological knowledge, environmental memory, and relationality that have enabled cultural survival throughout legacies of violence and dispossession. It demands pedagogical interventions that reimagine Black relationships to land, time, and space that are dynamic, pluriversal, and vital for imagining liberatory futures. There is a growing community of scholars working at the intersection of Black studies, environmental education, and place-based pedagogy who have made critical interventions in the field to disrupt the antiblackness and highlight the transformative potentials of Black environmental thought (Nxumalo et al., 2024; Scherrer, 2022; Roane et al., 2022). These scholars elevate Black oral histories, storytelling traditions, and creative expressive works as vital forms of ecological knowledge that “tell us something about how we can and do and might live the world differently” (McKittrick, 2021, p. 10). This work foregrounds relational pedagogies that prompt students to grapple with “interdependence, ecological precarity, and ethical engagements” while tracing histories of racial violence, Black survival, and world-building to challenge dominant environmental narratives (Butler, 2022, p. 1; King, 2019; Jones, 2023).

This paper serves as a contribution to this scholarship by proposing Afrofuturist art as a restorying methodology and pedagogical tool that makes Black environmental presence visible across time and space and equips educators to transform place-based learning through speculative pedagogy. Several scholars have explored the role of art as pedagogy for environmental and place-based education (Graham, 2007; Papavasileiou et al., 2021; Ylirisku, 2021). However, visual arts in this research rarely include Afrofuturist or Black artistic depictions. An analysis of recent dissertations and theses reveals that Afrofuturist art is a promising pedagogical tool for the field of environmental and place-based education (Yakovich et al., 2021; Height, 2022). This article builds on the recognition of the potentials of Afrofuturist art pedagogies and the need for tending to affirmative reimaginings of Black environmentalism. In this article, I take up the visual and

digital art exhibits of kee mabin and Antoine Williams as case studies to explore the potential of Afrofuturist art in place-based education. Both multidisciplinary artists create Afrofuturist exhibitions that reimagine time, space, and place in service of Black liberated futures. Hosted in Chicago, Illinois at the Garfield Park Conservatory, mabin's *An Otherworldly Existence* is a physical, collage exhibition that depicts Black people against backdrops of African landscapes and layered histories of colonial extraction. Williams' *Black Fusionist Society* is a transmedia exhibit that reimagines the 1898 Coup in Wilmington, North Carolina through collaboratively imagining alternate futures using a digital interface to connect with global communities. While deploying different mediums and techniques, each exhibit points to the potential of Afrofuturist art as a place-based pedagogy that subverts deficit-based and one-dimensional assumptions of Black subjectivity, presences Black environmental relations, and prompts questions about the relationship between colonialism, ecological demise, and alternate futurities.

### **Blackness in Environmental Education: From Description to Aspiration**

As we strive to create just environmental futures that center Blackness, it is necessary to understand how Blackness has been framed historically in environmental discourse. The theoretical foundations of place-based and environmental education cannot be separated from the historical roots of the early conservation movement which served settler colonial and white supremacist interests. While place-based education promotes community engagement and environmental stewardship, its underlying logic has historically excluded and pathologized Black communities. Early conservationists such as Madison Grant and Theodore Roosevelt were not only architects of U.S. environmental policy but also vocal advocates of eugenics, promoting the idea that protecting the environment was tied to protecting a white racial ideal (Finney, 2014; Sarkar, 2021). These ideologies laid the groundwork for environmental policies that actively harmed Black communities through toxic dumping, zoning regulations, and the creation of protected areas that dispossessed Black people of land and community (Bullard, 1990; Taylor, 2014; Bruno, 2024). This racialized logic exemplifies Du Bois' notion of the Negro problem, a framing where Black people are constructed not only as out of place but as the problem that threatens social and spatial orders (Du Bois, 1903; Hartman, 1997; Sharpe, 2016). In the context of environmental education, this manifests in persistent deficit discourses that characterize Black communities as ecologically negligent or disconnected from nature (Taylor, 1989). These narratives erase long-standing Black environmental traditions and sustain curricular frameworks that fail to recognize Black ecological knowledge, land stewardship, and place-making practices as legitimate. To move toward environmental futures, students and educators must grapple with how these histories of violence continue to shape the field and seek out pedagogical

interventions that center Black life, Black place-relations, and Black futurities as foundational to environmental thought.

### **Multiculturalism and Environmental Justice in Environmental Education**

As environmental racism and the environmental justice movement gained prominence in the United States in the 1980s, the work of Black scholars and activists began to reshape the field of environmental and place-based education through efforts to adopt multiculturalism and environmental justice frameworks (Grass, 1994; Taylor, 1995). Multicultural Environmental Education (MEE)—defined as a “pedagogy that hopes to reignite a relationship between humans and the Earth”—emerged in response to the racial and cultural exclusivity of traditional environmental education through embedding cultural consciousness into environmental learning (Height, 2022, xiii). Early contributors to MEE argued that dominant models of environmental education were rooted in white colonial ideals of romanticism and transcendentalism where environment was synonymous with wilderness (Grass, 1994; Taylor, 1995). They argued that this conception alienated Black, racialized, and working-class communities, whose relationships to land and place may not align with these narratives. However, the multicultural approach in MEE does not sufficiently contend with the permanence and specificity of antiblackness as it often functions as a neoliberal project that embraces inclusion (Coles, 2019; Sexton, 2010; Wilderson, 2010). As Dumas and Ross note, under the neoliberal multicultural imagination, racism is presumed to be no longer a barrier (2016). This assumption obscures the enduring, shapeshifting, and structuring logic of antiblackness. Evidence of this can be seen in multicultural approaches to school gardens that fall short in addressing systemic injustice, failing to incorporate critical pedagogy, or confronting structural racism (Height, 2022; Cutter-McKenzie, 2009).

The incorporation of environmental justice frameworks and tenets have been another method of addressing Black erasure in the field. Most commonly, the uptake of environmental justice has involved the incorporation of case studies into curriculum, the expansion of programming participation and access, and project-based learning. The inclusion of stories—such as the Flint Water Crisis, Louisiana’s Cancer Alley, and Warren County’s hazardous waste—that uncover how white supremacy and oppressive structures have severed and obscured Black life and environmental relations have significantly contributed to disrupting narratives that position Blackness and Black life as a problem. At the same time, the overreliance on environmental justice in environmental and place-based education has flattened understandings of Black environmentalism. Paperson describes this phenomenon of “pain curriculum” where “the disproportionate toxification of air, soil and water in poor, urban, communities of color” is legitimized and necessary to bring attention to while also acknowledging its reductive and damage-centered

quality that “sets the stage for a performance of environmentalist rescue” (Paperson, 2014, p. 120; p. 118). This framing employs a one-dimensional portrayal of Blackness as passive victim while educators and students are encouraged to care about racialized communities without challenging white saviorism and their own complicity in these same oppressive systems. We see this play out through increased efforts to expand programming participation to Black and other racialized communities where predominantly white educators and educational centers invite Black youth out of their communities and into “nature” as a way of “fixing” Black children’s so-called achievement gaps and behavior” while ignoring how antiblackness shows up in pedagogy, institutional norms, and space (Nxumalo, 2021, p. 1195). This finding is also observed in Western higher education where the harms experienced by Black Americans are frequently historicized to the 1980s environmental justice movement, erasing earlier relationships to land, resistance, and care that stretch back and previous to enslavement (Bratman et al., 2022). As these frames sideline Black people as knowledge holders and agents of ecological transformation, the arguments and canonical works of known racists and eugenicists remain centered to further entrench patriarchal and white supremacist narratives.

### **Aspiring for Black Space in Environmental Education**

There is a growing body of scholarship committed to affirming Black onto-epistemologies through the uptake of Black ecologies, Black Feminist Thought, and Black and Indigenous relationality (Nxumalo et al., 2019; Nxumalo et al., 2024; Roane et al., 2021; Butler, 2022; Scherrer, 2022). While we cannot hastily dismiss the tangible improvements and changes that multicultural and environmental justice frameworks have brought to the field, this emerging work is a paradigmatic shift for centering Black life, futures, imagination, and relationality rather than inserting Black communities into existing educational structures and narratives. Black Ecologies foregrounds insurgent ecological knowledge, worldmaking practices, and relations with more-than-human life as vital to ecological thinking (Roane et al., 2019; Hosbey et al., 2021). In educational contexts, Black Ecologies interrupt dominant environmental discourses by affirming that “Black world-making has always involved, acknowledged, and cultivated more-than-human relations” and that these practices also “refuse white supremacy and capitalism by remembering longstanding Black ecological knowledge” (Jones, 2023, p. 214). Rooted in Black liberation politics and freedom movements, Black Ecologies envision just futures and propose alternative ecological models that reclaim erased knowledges and presence “erasures while troubling the ghosts of Black and Indigenous forms of ecological knowledge” (Nxumalo, 2016).

Alongside this uptake of Black Ecologies, Black feminists have already discussed the connections between ecological and social catastrophe although repressed in Anthropocene discourse (Quinn et al., 2021; Moulton and Salo, 2022). Black Feminist traditions provide “critical insights about present conditions and fu-

ture worlds related to the realities of ecological catastrophe and generated through everyday black practices of survival, expressive culture, and explicitly black ecological organizing and intellectual traditions” while creating space for artistic and creative pedagogies such as collaborative Zine production (Quinn et al., 2021, p. 1255). In the classroom, Black Feminist Thought counters Western environmental discourses that depict Black communities as passive victims of harm with an emphasis on death and dying with a focus on Black livingness and vitality.

Lastly, as Indigenous land claims and traditional ecological knowledge are necessarily and ethically at the forefront of recent scholarship, Black and Indigenous scholars have pushed the field to think about the connected legacies of anti-Indigeneity and antiblackness within environmentalism. This research has made significant contributions to disrupting settler colonial land narratives, forming alternate pedagogical orientations, and countering ideals of technoscience, extraction, and neoliberalism with reciprocal and relational ethos (Bang et al., 2014; Bang & Marin et. Al, 2022; Nxumalo, 2022; Roane et. Al, 2022; Butler, 2022).

These interventions engage Black radical imagination and insurgent ecologies that open up pedagogical possibilities for challenging the antiblack foundations of environmental education and imagining liberatory ecological relations. These frameworks point to the need for educational orientations that hold the complexities of Black being, knowledge, and relationality. This paper is an additive contribution to this growing scholarship that engages the conceptual and theoretical frameworks of Afrofuturism and Black time-space.

### **Theoretical Framework: Afrofuturism and Black Time-Space**

Early definitions of Afrofuturism described it as “speculative fiction that treats African-American themes and addresses African-American concerns in the context of twentieth-century technoculture” centering concerns with global modernity, the digital divide, and “placeless, raceless, bodiless” futures (Dery, 1993, p. 180; Nelson, 2002, p. 1). Today, Afrofuturism serves as a creative, artistic, and intellectual mode of cultural production that has diverse and polyvocal strands (Toliver, 2024; Yaszek, 2006; Eshun, 2003; Anderson, 2016). Across Afrofuturism, scholars and cultural producers bring together Black Diasporic culture, history, technology, and science to create visions of the future where Black life thrives. These visions may involve technological advancements, the re-emergence of Diasporic knowledge, traveling across time to rewrite instances of violence on Black communities, and more. Each iteration of Afrofuturism is grounded in a commitment to challenge whitewashed narratives through understanding that Black and African people do exist in the future and that there is a need to think differently about linear temporalities through recognizing past-present-future relations.

Afrofuturism is not only science fiction, but an intellectual movement re-

nowned for showing that Black people are central to ecological survival, technological innovation, and cosmological reorientation. Afrofuturist works foreword Black environmental imaginaries and alternative epistemologies of social and ecological collapse and survival. Black environmental imaginaries refer to the distinct ways that Black communities perceive, understand, relate to, and envision our environments, which are often shaped by historical experiences and ongoing struggles with environmental and racial injustice (Smith, 2007; Ferrari, 2018; Opperman, 2020; Moulton, 2024). These imaginaries challenge the settler and antiblack logics embedded in traditional environmental education and emphasize Black resistance to ecological and political erasure. They are both real and speculative, rooted in memory while being future-oriented, and imagine liberatory worlds where Black communities thrive. We see these worlds produced countless times in the popular works of Octavia Butler, Sun Ra, N.K. Jemisin as well as the everyday practices of Black diasporic peoples.

Fully engaging with Afrofuturism and Black environmental imaginaries requires engaging with Black time-space—“a theoretical framework that centers Blackness in the production of space in the articulation of time” (King, 2024, p. 40). Western environmental and place-based education frameworks operate through linear, progress-oriented temporalities that render Black communities as lagging and the future as a time yet to come (Nxumalo, 2019; Nxumalo, 2021). Articulations of Black time-space demonstrate how Black temporalities and spatial imaginaries subvert Western temporal and spatial logics (Wright, 2015; Sharpe, 2016; Goffe, 2022). It is “chaotic” as it recognizes that pasts, presents, and futures are simultaneous and in constant conversation which creates cyclical and ongoing periods of stagnance, return, and futurity (Ibrahim et al., 2022, p. 7). Afrofuturism is an enactment and an example of Black time-space where alternate futures are created out of past-present ruptures and timelines are woven together to create new narratives. This orientation is vital to environmental and place-based education as it resists Blackness and Black environmental relations as solely historical and in crisis while affirming Black communities’ future visions that are rooted in ancestral knowledge and also practiced in the present (Campt, 2017).

### Restorying

Many scholars have recognized the important function of stories and lived experience in countering dominant narratives. Restorying is one methodology and pedagogy that functions across disciplines—including Indigenous, Decolonial, Black, and narrative studies—with an overarching aim of retelling stories from alternate perspectives. Indigenous studies scholars have defined and engaged with restorying to challenge the erasures and silences of ongoing colonization. Restorying is an act of resurgence that centers Indigenous strength, resilience, and the lived knowledge of communities whose homelands have been disrupted and de-

stroyed. It pushes back against research frameworks that have historically focused on victimhood and trauma, instead emphasizing the “immediacy” of everyday Indigenous life and the capacity for renewal (Corntassel, 2009). Restorying reconnects researchers and communities to traditional values and cultural knowledge that contain the tensions of pain and desperation with creativity and possibility. It questions the “imposition of colonial histories,” “facilitates truth-telling”, and mobilizes resistance to dominant narratives (Corntassel, 2020, p. 353). In doing so, restorying methodologies helps open up space for Indigenous counternarratives and resurgence movements. It is not only a method of remembering but a restorative process that has the potential to generate individual and collective healing by affirming who Indigenous peoples have always been. Storytelling, in this context, becomes the most vital protection against forgetting and a pathway to reimagining futures grounded in sovereignty, relationality, and strength (Voyageur et al., 2014). Similarly, decolonial studies scholars recognize the role of religion and Christian traditions in promoting and maintaining colonization. In this way, restorying methodologies “interplays concepts of storytelling with restoring and/or re-engaging just relations between peoples” (Morgan, 2024). Decolonial restorying requires intentional reading and listening for “missing or erased Indigenous voices as well as liminal stories” for learning (Morgan, 2024).

Across Black studies, restorying has emerged as a powerful methodological practice that disrupts dominant narratives and reclaims Black subjectivity through the lenses of Black imagination, critical theory, and storytelling traditions. Black scholars have framed restorying as both a critical and speculative method. When centering Black women’s ways of knowing and being, restorying through a womanist storytelling lens allows for the deconstruction of white masculinity and misogynoir (Shaw et al., 2023). This form of narrative resistance enables Black women and girls to transmit their lived experiences, promote social change, and facilitate both self and communal healing (Baker-Bell, 2017; Richardson, 2002). In educational contexts, restorying functions as a speculative design practice that can empower Black youth to use digital tools and creative technologies to reimagine computing futures, challenge curricular violence, and engage in world-building (Toliver, 2021; Jones et al., 2021; Golden, 2024). Restorying has been enacted through *Anasi Tales* guiding Black girl storytelling (Toliver, 2021). It has expanded Black youth engagement with technology to see “computer science [as] a tool in life-affirming, world-building projects” (Jones et al., 2021, p.1). Restorying also resists curricular violence that harms and reproduces deficit-narratives of Black students (Golden, 2024). These practices reflect the wide and varied ways Black girls and youth narrate and recontextualize their experiences, synthesizing multiple stories to generate new, liberatory narratives (Thomas & Stornaiuolo, 2016). Thus, restorying is not simply about correcting misrepresentation. It is a forward-looking, life-affirming method that allows Black youth to see computing and storytelling as tools for reimagining themselves and the world on their own terms.

In the early 2000s, Ollerenshaw and Creswell introduced the concept of restorying to the narrative inquiry field. Building on Clandinin and Connelly's research on lived experience, restorying involves "reading the transcript, analyzing [the] story to understand they lived experiences, and then retelling the story" (2002, p. 330; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Here, restorying is a reflexive process that involves gathering stories, analyzing key elements, and rewriting the story. According to Clandinin and Connelly, restorying is a process of retelling that involves renegotiating information with participants to promote a narrative of participants' lived experiences (2000).

Restorying methodologies in recent environmental and place-based scholarship work highlight Indigenous and Black solidarity and connected legacies, more-than-human relationality and agency, and possible decolonial practices. Grounding pedagogical encounters in Indigenous creation stories, water songs, and storied Black geographies against "the striations of settler colonialism and its anthropocentric assumptions," we see how activating alternate responses can lead to decolonizing orientations (Nxumalo et al., 2019, p. 50). This work also uncovers the ethical, political, and pedagogical implications of the colonial legacies that shape children's multispecies relations (Nxumalo, 2015).

As this article puts Afrofuturism, Black environmental imaginaries, and Black time-space in conversation with restorying methodologies, it builds on Indigenous and Black studies engagements with restorying. While Indigenous restorying is deeply place-based, centers ancestral and traditional knowledge, and emphasizes healing and remembrance, this article engages restorying to expand the notion of place across the Diaspora, centers cultural production in the form of art, and reimagines who we can be. This paper builds on the work of restorying methodologies in Black education and environmental education. Through Afrofuturist art, restorying becomes a reparative and speculative practice that counters both neutral depictions of place and deficit constructions of Blackness to reimage relationships to land, place, and time. By foregrounding Afrofuturist exhibits as sites of Black environmental knowledge and relation, I position these exhibits as theoretical texts and pedagogical orientations in themselves. They alter Western temporal and spatial logic, refuse static and narrow subjectivities of Blackness, and generate speculative worlds where Black life and future-making is affirmed. Here, restorying is situated at the intersection of visual analysis, speculative storytelling, and Black environmental critique.

### **Analytic Method**

This paper uses visual and digital analysis grounded in Black studies, Afrofuturism, and environmental education to examine two Afrofuturist art installations as case studies. Each exhibit is treated as both a theoretical text and pedagogical site. I analyze the aesthetic form, material practice, and site-specific or digital

context of each work to understand how they enact Black time-space, restory environmental relations, and model speculative pedagogies. I attend to how the visual elements, narrative structures, and spatial configurations operate to challenge dominant environmental and place-based education paradigms. Restorying serves as both an analytic and pedagogical lens through which I read these exhibits as interventions into environmental and place-based education.

**Case Study I:  
kee mabin's *An Otherworldly Existence:  
Afrofuturism and the Environment***

*An Otherworldly Existence: Afrofuturism and the Environment* was produced by kee mabin and hosted by the Garfield Park Conservatory in Chicago in 2023. The exhibit presents twelve unnamed collage works, each representing a different region of the African continent. As a multidisciplinary artist rooted in West African traditions, matriarchal systems, and archival practices, mabin engages Afrofuturism not simply as a visual aesthetic, but as a methodology of environmental storytelling. Their approach layers imagery, materials, and meaning to enact a speculative restorying of African and diasporic ecologies.

Utilizing a collage technique that repurposes accumulated and reclaimed materials, mabin constructs a “fluid but cohesive vision” of Afrofuturist environmentalisms (personal communication, April 5, 2025). Their material practice aligns with African traditions of reuse and circularity, which rejects colonial notions of waste and emphasizes the longevity of materials. As Kalina et al. (2021) note, items in such traditions often “live multiple lives before being ultimately discarded,” (p.1) suggesting a cyclical rather than linear relationship to environmental consumption. Mabin’s ecological method—both in content and form—foregrounds a Black environmental ethic rooted in resourcefulness, reciprocity, and survival.

Each collage is anchored by a portrait or bodily image of African or African-descended people. These figures—sometimes singular, sometimes collective—are surrounded by rich layers that combine archival photographs, maps, and topographies of African landscapes with cosmic imagery, natural resources, and colonial-era artifacts. Gold, cobalt, and diamond imagery reference the extractive economies that have historically shaped Africa’s place in the global environmental order, while constellations and galactic motifs open speculative futures that transcend that positioning. The layering technique generates what could be described as a Black temporal collage: an overlapping of ecological pasts, political presents, and potential futures that resist fixed or linear temporalities. Joy, rage, curiosity, and refusal are all felt emotions and affective states that interrupt the trope of the passive or suffering Black environmental subject. In this way, mabin’s work destabilizes the viewer’s temporal orientation. The collages resist any singular historical reference, instead inviting interpretation through past-present-future

simultaneity. Rather than locating Blackness in a singular time or place, mabin's exhibit invites us to see how Black ecologies persist, mutate, and refuse erasure.

The placement of *An Otherworldly Existence* within the Garfield Park Conservatory further extends these themes into physical space. The Conservatory, a lush site of botanical life, occupies land with a deep history of racialized spatial politics. Chicago, shaped by the Great Migration, redlining, and environmental racism, is a layered geography of Black ecological and place struggle. From the 1995 heat wave to ongoing displacement caused by green gentrification, Black Chicagoans have long been subject to environmental injustice and racism. Mabin's exhibit both acknowledges and reimagines the present conditions of Chicago. By situating African diasporic bodies and landscapes within the plant-filled spaces of the Conservatory, *An Otherworldly Existence* stages a counter-narrative to Black placelessness. It affirms that Black ecological presence is global, imaginative, embodied, and unfolding. The placement of the collages throughout the Conservatory prompts viewers to move through a re-mapped geography where Africa is not a distant elsewhere, but a present and speculative now-here.

One collage in *An Otherworldly Existence* centers a young Black woman who turns her head to look backward, her gaze intersecting two contrasting yet entangled visual fields (mabin, 2023) (See Figure 1).

**Figure 1**  
*Untitled*



In order to preserve a cohesive vision with this exhibit, mabin chooses not to title the collages that were produced individually. Rather, they prefer the exhibit to be seen as a wholistic depiction of an Afrofuturist environment.

On one side of her line of sight, a group of figures stands reverently in white garments, while others nearby are working the soil. This image evokes memories of ancestral agricultural practices and ritual engagements with the land. On the other side, a glimmering galactic expanse blooms. As it expands, it collapses the boundaries between sacred land-based traditions and speculative futures. The scene has a deeply reverent aesthetic that suggests that Black ecological relations are not only material but spiritual and cosmological. The background reveals rich layers of symbolism: soil, trees, and lush landscapes referencing precolonial West and Sub-Saharan Africa, juxtaposed against an image of gold extraction. A pair of Black hands open toward the viewer with a blue sweatshirt that transitions into a galactic aesthetic. This continuity in the image directly highlights the connected legacies of colonial mining economies and labor practices that shape landscape transformation and future possibilities. In this collage, Black temporality is expressed as a looped and layered entanglement: the young woman's backward glance becomes a speculative gesture toward futures seeded in ancestral land, resilience throughout colonial violence, and Black vitality. Collectively, these visuals create an exhibit that counter dominant environmental and ecological narratives that obscure Africa's centrality to wealth accumulation in the West. Ultimately, mabin's exhibit activates a pedagogical space in which Blackness is no longer out of time or out of place but situated within complex and resurgent time-space logics.

### Educational Implications

Mabin's *An Otherworldly Existence* invites students and educators to critically rethink place beyond Western and colonial notions of borders and fixity. As a physically constructed exhibit of collage visuals, viewers enter into an alternate time and space where the landscapes and layered histories of Chicago and Africa merge. This reorientation of place challenges Western environmental narratives that position Africa as a singular and far away place that is either ecologically pristine, catastrophically degraded, or completely disregarded. Grounded in Black temporality, the exhibit destabilizes viewers as they simultaneously encounter Black pasts, presents, and futures. As a primary text, this exhibit acknowledges how Western nations have historically extracted wealth through exploitation and extractive practices in African countries. These narratives are omitted in dominant Western environmental and place-based education that center local and current environmental issues rather than critically questioning how local issues and experiences are shaped by global legacies of colonialism, racial capitalism, and resource imperialism.

This exhibit brings attention to how the extraction of gold, cobalt, and other minerals has shaped environmental degradation and sociopolitical instability across the African continent. At the same time, it connects this instability to Western colonialism and imperialism. It implicates Chicago specifically as the Chicago Mercantile Exchange and the introduction of gold futures contracts intensified extraction and commodity control in ways that built Western profit while shaping African and Black ecological realities. By situating this exhibit within the Garfield Park Conservatory, the work makes this entanglement spatially and pedagogically visible. This exhibit demands that students interrogate environmental histories through global Black geographies and across multiple temporalities. By doing so, it challenges the field of environmental education to account for the historical and ongoing violence experienced by African and African-descended communities. Centering the African Diaspora in environmental education enables a more accurate, ethical, and justice-oriented understanding of how environmental harm is distributed, narrated, and resisted.

### Restorying Place through Black Time-Space

Mabin's work reimagines place and identity through a distinct Black time-space. In a field where place is often assumed to be local, neutral, or fixed, *An Otherworldly Existence* shows that place is also imagined, historical, diasporic, and relational. The exhibit invites students to engage with Black environmental histories that are often rendered invisible in U.S.-based place-based education, despite their local implications. Through its layered visuals, the exhibit affirms that Black people have always had complex, ancestral, and evolving relationships to land and nature that are not reducible to narratives of displacement or victimization. As a pedagogical tool, the exhibit contains multiple real and imagined stories of Black environmental stewardship. By restorying place through Black place relations, this exhibit demonstrates how environmental learning can be rooted in Black pasts and Black futures without requiring Blackness to assimilate into dominant environmental narratives.

As a physical installation, *An Otherworldly Existence* implicates the viewer. The collages transform the conservatory into a portal where views can move through time and space to confront the layered images of ecological pasts and speculative futures. At the same time, viewers are also moving through their own environmental assumptions and temporal orientations. In this way, they become part of the exhibit's restorying process. They are called not only to witness but to reckon with histories of extraction, with their own positionality and complicity, and with the possibilities of reimagining relationships to place.

Ultimately, *An Otherworldly Existence* suggests that place-based education must go beyond its goal of cultivating environmental stewards through pedagogies grounded in discrete and confined local experiences. It must be committed

to Black futurity, prompt reflexivity, and ethically blur the spatial boundaries of place. As a primary text, the exhibit prompts students and educators to consider:

- ◆ How are West African landscapes and Chicago's landscapes, geography, and history entangled? How does this disrupt narratives of Africa as elsewhere and more broadly implicate Western imperialism?
- ◆ How does Black time-space impact environmental history? Why does this matter?
- ◆ How can students and educators engage in collaging as a way to assemble fragmented histories and futures? How can Afrofuturist art function not just as content, but as a methodology in the classroom?

For educators who want to center Black visionary ideas and strive toward epistemic pluralism, creating speculative collages or timelines that connect ancestral and Diasporic histories to the lands students live on now can help to uncover their ecological knowledge outside of data and nature-as-object. This collage creation can be paired with audio storytelling and guided meditations that invoke ancestral and sensory memory. These can prompt students to reflect on how their maps and ecological knowledge can resist extractive, linear narratives of place and offer a form of land relations. For younger learners, it is necessary to remove some of the theoretical abstraction and emphasize place attachment through imagination. Examples of this can look like imagining worlds where people and nature live in harmony and then building it with students. Students can be prompted to consider what kind of world they are creating, the kinds of things that grow in their world, and how people care for one another in their world. Using art materials, students can creatively build their alternate worlds and tell short stories.

### **Case Study 2: Antoine Williams Black Fusionist Society**

Antoine Williams' *Black Fusionist Society* is a transmedia Afrofuturist exhibit that challenges dominant narratives of Black history, subjectivity, and place through a speculative and collaborative restorying of the 1898 Wilmington Coup. The exhibit is grounded in a "histofuturist" approach coined by Octavia Butler that enacts Black time-space by "merging of the work of historians and Futurists" (Streeby, 2018, p.3). As an Afrofuturist and digital interface-based exhibit, Black Fusionist Society brings attention to how environmental and place-based learning can be reimagined through a Black Diasporic environmental ethos and speculative pedagogies.

At the center of this exhibit is the 1898 Wilmington Coup, where a white supremacist mob violently overthrew the multiracial, democratically elected local government in Wilmington, North Carolina. This white supremacist riot aimed to eliminate Black life which led to conservative political transformation, the erasure of Black social life and knowledge, and displacement as Black communities

were murdered and forced to flee the city and disperse into nearby swamplands. This moment in U.S. history represents a brutal rupture to Black life, presence, and power in Wilmington and the South broadly. Prior to this coup, Wilmington was a thriving predominantly Black community where Black urban and coastal life flourished. While slave labor was integral to Wilmington's economic development, Black communities remained heavily represented in maritime, agricultural, and environmental industries post-emancipation resulting in unique southern and coastal Black ecologies. If we situate the 1898 coup within the broader environmental and ecological landscape of Wilmington, this exhibit becomes an act of spatial and political reclamation. Thus, the coup is deemed not only an act of political and racial violence, but as an act of environmental violence as well. As Black communities fled from the city to low-lying swamplands, the exhibit is in conversation with Black geographies and Maroon Ecologies that speculate on "what anticolonial practices and epistemologies might have been developed in the maroon communities that inhabited these ecologies? Moreover, what happens when we place the maroon and her strategies in the 'foreground' of thought about geography and ecology" (Hosbey & Roane, 2021, p.71).

Through speculative digital media, *Black Fusionist Society* builds an alternate world where the descendants of the Wilmington Coup survive, adapt, and create thriving futures through community, technology, and folklore. The exhibit is accessed through an interactive digital platform where visitors explore a richly constructed speculative universe filled with archival-style documents, illustrations, maps, animated visuals, and user-submitted content. Rather than passively consuming historical trauma, viewers are invited to co-author the future through contributing stories and artifacts that expand the universe of the Black Fusionist Society. This collaborative design speaks to the pedagogical commitment of the exhibit: it's not merely a retelling of history, but an invitation to remake it.

Central to the *Black Fusionist Society* are The Ten Vibes of the Founding Mothers and the Mythic Beings which frame the exhibits onto-epistemological, ethical, and pedagogical commitments (Williams, 2020). These components structure the belief system of the speculative society that Williams creates, offering both ethical orientation and a mode of environmental relation rooted in Black Diasporic worldviews. The Ten Vibes—equity; self-reflection; critique and doubt; knowledge; intersectionality; self-care; culture; history and progression; failure; scientific method; and empathy—function as core values passed down by the society's matriarchal founders. These principles are not just abstract ideals but are encoded into the daily practices and epistemologies of the *Black Fusionist Society*. They reflect a holistic and relational understanding of environmentalism that counters Western logics of individualism, extraction, and neoliberalism. In an educational context, these Vibes offer a critical framework for students and educators alike to engage in ethical ecological and place inquiry and to imagine how practicing Black environmental ethos can alter collective future climate trajectories.

Williams describes the Mythic Beings as a set of demigod creature that complement and deepen the Ten Vibes and have pedagogical potential. These beings are hybrid figures that fuse Black diasporic subjects and more-than-human others. Some are benevolent, while others are characterized as malevolent or indifferent. Each Mythic Being is aligned with a specific Vibe and functions as both a guide and an ecosystem disruptor that challenges simplistic moral binaries and emphasizes the need for ongoing relationality and negotiation in environmental and social life. For example, Nomalonga is the indifferent Mythic Being of Knowledge that is represented as a fusion between a Black femme and ravens. In the Black Fusionist Society, Nomalonga functions to guide the community in the realm of advice and questioning. However, “like knowledge, [Nomalonga] extremely powerful but amoral and have the potential to do both good and harm. Without the other benevolent Mythic Beings, information from Nomalanga has the potential to be very dangerous” (Williams, 2020). In the classroom, the Nomalanga—and other Mythic Beings—can serve as a critical tool for deconstructing notions of objective knowledge and fostering critical, care-filled, and ethical thinking and problem-solving.

By constructing the *Black Fusionist Society* as a digital interface, Williams’ work engages with recent conceptions with recent conceptions related to non-place and placelessness in place-based education. Non-place acknowledges spaces that are transient, anonymous, and often stripped of cultural and historical context (Augé, 1995; Bertling, 2019). If we consider the internet and digital space as a non-place, Black digital space is important to consider and (re)story. Black studies scholars have argued that antiblackness is prevalent in the digital space as Black users navigate surveillance, silencing, and misrepresentation and as representations of Black violence are increasingly taken up and reproduced in digital coding (Browne, 2015; Johnson, 2018). In this way, the internet is storied as a terrain of violence for Black users. The *Black Fusionist Society* intervenes in this digital landscape, not by rejecting it, but by restorying it through a collaborative, speculative storytelling practice of Black Diasporic knowledge-making.

Through speculative design, *Black Fusionist Society* resists the flattening of Black experiences and the reproduction of pain curriculum (Paperson, 2014). Its interactive format invites viewers not simply to observe but to participate through reading, listening, and submitting stories of Black resilience and futurity tied to Wilmington and its place-based history. We see imagined and real interactions that refuse to render Black life as one-dimensional and narrow. Instead, the exhibit cultivates a fugitive space where Black presence is generative, unbound, and expansive. This practice enacts Black time-space as Williams and co-authors create new narratives through merging and weaving futurist aesthetics and speculative stories within the ruptures of a historical moment. The interface itself becomes a site of Black place-making where memory and possibility coexist in ways that allow Black people and imagination to thrive. By transforming a digital non-place

into a storied, relational space, Williams reframes environmental education to include virtual terrains as significant sites of place-making. In doing so, *Black Fusionist Society* challenges dominant place-based education paradigms that rely on geographic fixity and settler mapping.

### Educational Implications

*Black Fusionist Society* intervenes on environmental and place-based education by restoring place through Black time-space, engaging in digital non-place reclamation, and enacting collaborative speculation. This work presents possibilities for educators and researchers to attend to entangled and racialized place relations and to explore the affective potentials of Black speculation, futurity, and joy (Nxumalo, 2021). Black Fusionist Society is an example of how Afrofuturist art can bring multidimensional and layered narratives into the classroom that bridge “longstanding inequalities, violence, and harm while at the same time, talking about spaceships... and becoming a different sort of person time-travelling” (Facer et al., 2022).

*Black Fusionist Society* prompts students and educators to explore how Black environmental and place relations, memory, and speculative storytelling can be leveraged to imagine otherwise possibilities (Crawley, 2022; King et al., 2020). As a pedagogical tool, *Black Fusionist Society* engages the imagination as a critical site of learning. The integration of The Ten Vibes and Mythic Beings offers a Black ecological ethos and worldview through which students can imagine alternate futures free from ecological and climate degradation. This worldview offers new curricular and pedagogical directions that recognize “Black world-making has always involved, acknowledged, and cultivated more-than-human relations” in a similar vein as Black Ecologies scholarship (Jones, 2023, p. 208). Students encountering these frameworks can begin to see environmental education not simply as scientific analysis or conservationist practice, but as a deep cultural, ethical, and creative endeavor.

Ultimately, *Black Fusionist Society* is an Afrofuturist freedom technology (Toliver, 2021) where we see Black people creatively address historical violence, evade oppressive logics and techniques, and reclaim control. It unmakes and challenges white geographies that privilege the past and linear temporalities as “the exclusive time-space” through which the future is envisioned and produced (Baldwin, 2012, p. 172). The exhibit also asks pedagogically generative questions such as:

- ◆ How can storytelling act as a method of ecological and historical reclamation for Black communities? In what ways does reclamation disrupt the logic of settler time and colonial geographies?
- ◆ What environmental knowledge emerges when we trace Black communities’ relationships to land and water pre-emancipation and in the afterlife of slavery?
- ◆ How does fleeing into the swamplands and creating a space of fugitivity and refuge enact a Maroon ecology? What pedagogical possibilities does this open up?

- ◆ How can educators critically engage non-place as sites for Black ecological storytelling and speculation?

It is also generative for environmental and place-based researchers as it considers how Black Diasporic ecological worldviews can guide us toward more anticolonial environmental inquiry, and how co-creation can be a value orientation in liberatory and decolonial research and knowledge-production (Nxumalo & Tuck, 2022). For educators interested in interacting with the digital interface in their classroom, students can select a mythic being or digital micro-site to enter. In small groups, they create a speculative story, video, or comic set in a future Wilmington where that Mythic being reshapes environmental and social conditions. Through this activity, students can map timelines of what came before, what caused ruptures, and what futures emerged. It invites students into wake work while engaging in collaborative future-oriented restorying (Sharpe, 2016). For younger learners, movement can serve as a tool for temporal resistance and cultivating imagination. Using chalk on a concrete surface or butcher paper, educators can sketch out past, present, and future spaces. Allowing students to draw in each section to represent their depictions and visions will later allow them to create a collective story. From this, students gain a sense that time is layered and changeable through a collaborative mode of storytelling. It can also work to foster ecological hope and agency.

### **Afrofuturist Art as an Enactment of Restorying**

Taken together, kee mabin's *An Otherworldly Existence* and Antoine Williams' *Black Fusionist Society* demonstrate the potential of Afrofuturist art as a pedagogical tool that restories Black place relations. By engaging Black time-space, speculative traditions, and visual art praxis, these installations disrupt dominant narratives within environmental and place-based education that render Black communities disconnected from land, absent from ecologically sound futures, or as perpetual victims of environmental harm.

Through collage and site-specific installation, mabin physically transforms the Chicago Conservatory space. Their artistic practice foregrounds the Black body as relationally entangled with flora, fauna, ancestors, and imagined futures. The use of repurposed materials and layering techniques create not only a visual aesthetic but function pedagogically by inviting viewers to imagine and engage with expansive relations to place and layered environmentalisms. Viewers of *An Otherworldly Existence* must reckon with the presence of Blackness amidst ongoing environmental policies and practices that harm Black communities in the same space. In this way, the work becomes a counter-geography that maps alternate time-place relations.

Likewise, Williams' *Black Fusionist Society* utilizes digital media and historio-futurist revisioning to model a speculative place-based education rooted in Black

survival, imagination, and memory. By blending archival material, fiction, and user contributions, Williams demonstrates how speculation and critical fabulation are foundational knowledge-making practices for Black environmental futurity (Hartman, 2008). The inclusion of the Ten Vibes and Mythic Beings not only expands the scope of what counts as environmental knowledge but also introduces students and educators to an ethical framework grounded in equity, interconnection, self-reflection, and care. Through participatory design and collaborative storytelling, the exhibit refuses the consumption of Black trauma and instead centers Black futurity and world-building as an ongoing, collective project.

Both exhibits teach that Black environmental knowledge is not simply about documenting harm, it is about imagining and building new ways of relating to land, history, and one another. These works model “restorying” as both an artistic and educational methodology: a practice of intervening in colonial narratives and remaking the world through Black speculative worldviews. They challenge educators to consider how place-based learning can move beyond fixed geographies and linear histories to embrace multiplicity, fluidity, and ancestral presence. In doing so, mabin and Williams offer powerful blueprints for teaching environmental justice in ways that affirm Black life, land, and imagination. Collectively, *An Otherworldly Existence* and *Black Fusionist Society* demonstrate that Afrofuturist art holds transformative potential for environmental and place-based education by foregrounding Black ecological thought, speculative practice, and memory. Through restorying, both exhibits challenge dominant educational paradigms rooted in settler time, Black dislocation, and geographic fixity, offering instead a Black time-space where history, imagination, and environmental relation converge. They model how environmental learning can be participatory, affective, and liberatory, while redefining what counts as environmental and place knowledge. These works create space for students and educators to engage in creative, relational, and imaginative inquiry that is grounded in Black worldviews. In this way, Afrofuturist art is not just a creative medium but a pedagogical orientation for situating environmental education as a site of repair, co-creation, and environmentally just world-building.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper explores how Afrofuturist art serves as a pedagogical tool that restories Black place relations by challenging the temporal and spatial dislocations historically imposed on Black communities. The Afrofuturist installations of kee mabin and Antoine Williams radically refuse these spatial and temporal dislocations. Instead, they assert a Black Diasporic environmental ethos that reclaims time, space, and place through speculative world-building, future memory work, and arts-based storytelling.

Grounding environmental education in Black onto-epistemologies is neces-

sary for imagining and creating futures where Black life is abundant and refuses settler colonialism and the resurgence of far-right ideologies. Engaging Afrofuturist art is not only an aesthetic choice but a methodological and pedagogical imperative that allows for Black ecological imagination to flourish. Ultimately, centering Afrofuturism in environmental and place-based education makes space for Black life as an organizing principle. It invites us to reconsider what counts as knowledge; whose stories and temporalities constitute place; and how futures can be imagined and practiced in the present.

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**Rhythms, Revolt, and Black Cultural Expression****Roots, Rock, Reggae, and Hip-Hop:  
Rhythms and Reasonings  
of BlackCrit Cultural Wealth****Shawn S. Savage****Abstract**

This article introduces *BlackCrit Cultural Wealth* (BCW) as a theoretical framework that combines core Black theoretical traditions with diasporic musical genres to shed light on Black life, culture, and education. Drawing on decades of Black theoretical work and the liberatory substance and aesthetics of genres such as reggae and hip-hop, BCW examines how these intellectual and musical traditions have contributed to the flourishing of Black life. By engaging their historical connections and contemporary significance, this framework illuminates the role of scholarship and music in cultivating and securing culturally grounded Black pasts, presents, and (reimagined) futures.

*Keywords:* BlackCrit, Black diaspora, community cultural wealth, Black music, Black theory

**Introduction**

In this article, *BlackCrit Cultural Wealth* (BCW) is presented as a theoretical framework that enhances studies focused on Black education and culture. BCW is a combined framework that merges different relevant theoretical approaches to form a unified foundation for research and analysis. The framework is organized into three key sections: roots, rock, reggae, and hip-hop. The aim of this exploration is not to offer a thorough account of music history in the Americas, specifi-

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cally in Jamaica and the United States. Instead, it aims to clarify and explain the theoretical framework through a complex scholarly heritage.

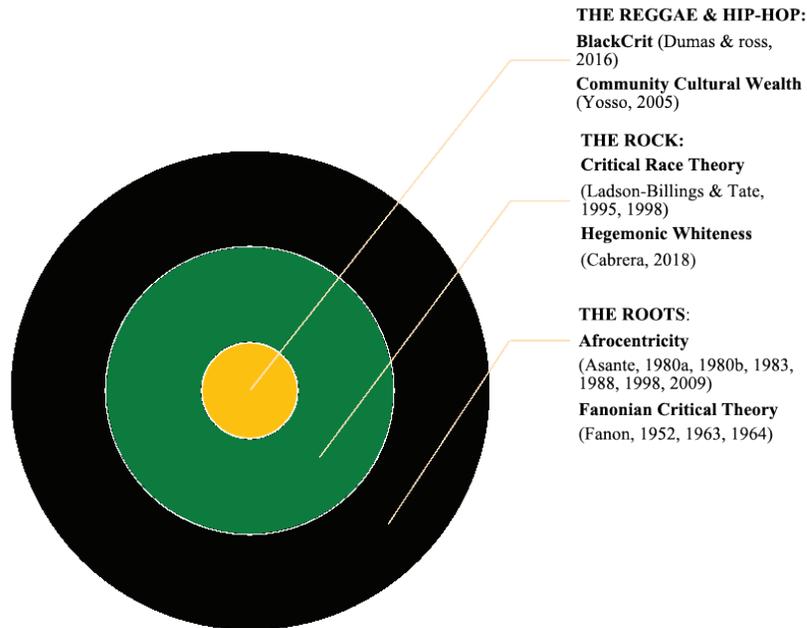
By conceptualizing this framework with the term “roots, rock, reggae, and hip-hop,” I use the headings of the BCW framework in this article to reflect significant musical traditions of the Americas while simultaneously underscoring the distinctions and interconnections among diverse theories and analytical perspectives. Specifically, this theoretical framework synthesizes critical race theory (CRT), hegemonic whiteness as a racial theory, and Black critical theory (BlackCrit) as a lens specifically attuned to Black experiences, in conversation with community cultural wealth (CCW) (Cabrera, 2018; Dumas & ross, 2016; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Yosso, 2005). Moreover, this framework honors Leonardo’s (2013) robust multidimensional theory of race and racism, which remains pertinent to educational discourse within the tradition of critical race scholarship.

The unique focus of BlackCrit offers a concentrated perspective for examining Black existence, viewpoints, and encounters. It is crucial to note, as highlighted by Coles (2018), that both CRT and BlackCrit are essential for comprehending Black experiences in America comprehensively, with CRT alone being insufficient. This approach is linked to critical theory, particularly influenced by the writings of Fanon (1952/2008, 1963/2004, 1967), and is firmly rooted in the Afrocentric metaparadigm (Asante, 1983, 1988, 1990, 1991, 1980a/1998, 1980b/2003), incorporating Afro-Caribbean and African-American epistemological viewpoints. This convergence is well-suited for exploring Black experiences situated within macro-social structures, mediated by cultural practices in educational and other societal contexts, and articulated through liberatory imaginaries.

Fundamentally, Black theorization is grounded in African epistemology, emphasizing community, interconnectedness, circularity, diversity, and coherence. This epistemological standpoint contrasts with Euro-American intellectual customs that prioritize individualism, linearity, singularity, and competition (Asante, 1980a/1998; Shockley, 2007). This conceptualization respects African customs, focusing on Blackness and diasporic contemporary, historical, and future encounters.

BCW values diversity, enabling studies utilizing this framework to draw on multiple interconnected yet distinct sources, amalgamating various Black influences. Ultimately, this amalgamated theoretical framework, embedded within the Afrocentric metaparadigm, provides insightful perspectives for understanding, evaluating, and reimagining how Black individuals navigate temporal and spatial dimensions, particularly within and despite historically white environments. A visual representation in Figure 1.1 outlines the specifics of this framework, highlighting the musical and theoretical heritages, associated scholars, and the interrelations within the theoretical construct.

The figure illustrates that the framework comprises three interlinked circles, each representing two theoretical traditions. The first circle, denoted as “the roots,” encompasses Afrocentricity and Fanonian critical theory. The second cir-

**Figure 1.1***A Fused Theoretical Framework: BlackCrit Cultural Wealth*

cle, labeled “the rock,” includes critical race theory and hegemonic whiteness. The third circle, the analytical core, features BlackCrit and community cultural wealth. Notably, the third circle is nested within the second circle, which is encompassed within the first, effectively interconnecting all facets of Black identity and experiences.

### **The Roots: Afrocentricity & Fanonian Critical Theory**

This section delves into the Jamaican roots music genre and its intersections with Afrocentricity and Fanonian critical theory. The inception of Jamaican music traces back to the era of enslavement, when enslaved Africans in Jamaica engaged in call-and-response vocalizations, accompanied by various instruments to create rhythmic sequences. A study from 1924 highlighted the preservation of African work and grave songs, notably in the region of the island identified as Cockpit Country, showcasing elements such as “singing, call-and-response, chanting, and the repetition of brief musical phrases—all foundational to reggae” (Davis & Simon, 1977, p. 9). These components often intertwined with European influences, incorporating the melodies and lyrics of English sea shanties (Heider, 2000).

Over time, these amalgamations evolved into local genres like Kumina, mento, and ska, from the late 1800s through the 1960s (Cooper, 2020; Heider, 2000).

These genres epitomize the “roots” of Jamaican music and subsequently diversified into styles characterized by societal commentary and critique. This fusion of African and European musical customs parallels the fusion of Afrocentricity and critical theory, notably influenced by Fanonian viewpoints.

Afrocentricity provides a framework that challenges the invisibility of Black scholars and history, essential for Black researchers to integrate Black contributions into academic discourse deliberately. This metaparadigm centers Africa as a vision and ideal, demanding a holistic understanding of research that acknowledges the connectedness of African-descended peoples historically and culturally. African epistemology rejects the separation of knowledge and emotions, fostering creativity absent in Eurocentric research traditions and positioning Black individuals as active participants rather than passive subjects.

Fanon’s critical theory aligns seamlessly with Afrocentricity, emphasizing the impacts of colonization on identity and the perpetuation of negative imagery about Black individuals. The concept of fabrication in Fanon’s work underscores how colonizers construct dehumanizing narratives about the colonized, perpetuating a cycle of violence and oppression. This process is entwined with systemic historical narratives that shape the identity and representation of colonized Black individuals.

### **Afrocentricity**

Asante (1983, 1980a/1998, 1980b/2003) theorized Afrocentricity as a significant philosophical concept, initially rooted in communication studies but applicable across disciplines (Asante, 1988; Mazama, 2003). Asante (1980a/1998) asserts that “the African finds coexistence with nature and a harmonious relationship with all elements of the universe” (p. 4), contrasting sharply with the Eurocentric perspective that seeks to dominate nature (Asante, 1983). These lenses are critical to inquiries with and about Black peoples and have been evidenced across the work of African scholars and freedom fighters.

While foundational African scholars, such as Diop (1978), Du Bois (1965), and Fanon (1967), emphasize different aspects in their work, they collectively acknowledge “the need for a people to define their own power vis-à-vis another” (Asante, 1983, p. 5). Consequently, Asante posits that “Afrocentricity is the ideological centerpiece of human regeneration, systematizing our history and experience with our own culture at the core of existence” (p. 7). By centering Blackness within this theoretical framework, Afrocentricity serves as the metaparadigm for the theories, methodologies, analyses, and representations illuminating Black life and scholarship, as detailed in this article.

Afrocentricity provides a framework for selecting literature and theories that combat the invisibility of Black scholars and history (Asante, 1983). This metaparadigm is essential for Black researchers, enabling them to deliberately cite Black thinkers and integrate their contributions into academic discourse. In

light of the prevailing access to and dominance of European and Euro-American theories, Afrocentricity fosters a distinctly Black research orientation that situates Africa—not merely in geographic terms but as a vision and ideal—at the center of inquiry (Asante, 1983). This perspective demands a holistic understanding of research, recognizing African-descended peoples’ historical and cultural connectedness. Asante emphasizes the significance of *ancestralism*, *extended kinship*, *rhythmic ritualism*, and *belief in a Supreme Deity*, which forge unity among Black individuals regardless of their geographic origins or localities.

Additionally, African epistemology rejects the dichotomy between knowledge and emotions, allowing for a level of creativity often absent in Eurocentric research traditions. Afrocentricity acknowledges the agency of Black individuals, positioning them as active participants and researchers rather than passive subjects of a white gaze (Morrison, 1998; Yancy, 2008/2017). This relational focus is especially crucial in qualitative research involving Black participants, as it centers their experiences and recognizes the intertwined nature of knowledge and emotions. Engaging participants in discussions about their experiences will elicit responses that reflect emotional depth and contribute valuable knowledge to the research discourse.

Thus, any research that seeks to apply BCW will creatively integrate knowledge and emotions, because Afrocentricity demands it. As Asante (2009) asserts, any textual analysis must consider the concrete realities of lived experiences, making this perspective particularly relevant for studies involving (racialized) Black individuals. At its core, Afrocentricity opposes racism, sexism, and classism (Asante, 1988). Importantly, Asante (1980a/1998) critiques modernism for its “use of Africans” rather than recognizing their agency (p. 10). Therefore, our inquiries and expressions—characterized as “Blackity Black Black Black”—must foreground agency as a vital element of liberatory freedom. The meta-paradigm of Afrocentricity elevates Black scholars and perspectives rooted in this agentic tradition.

### ***Fanonian Critical Theory***

Relatedly, Frantz Fanon’s critical theory (1952/2008, 1963/2004, 1967) aligns seamlessly with Afrocentricity, as part of the roots domain of BCW as a trans-disciplinary and interdisciplinary framework. Specifically, Fanon’s concepts of fabrication and symbolic violence are instrumental to the theoretical foundations presented here. Fanon’s (1963/2004) idea of fabrication is particularly salient in acknowledging colonization’s historical and ongoing impacts. The concept of fabrication involves the creation of a distorted image of the colonized people by the colonizers, alongside the promotion of an idealized image of whiteness. This process results in a narrow and negative portrayal of the colonized individuals, depicting them as morally inferior and contrasting them with what is considered virtuous. By dehumanizing the colonized, this fabrication perpetuates the idea

of Black inferiority, especially when Black individuals challenge the status quo. Such negative depictions contribute to the degrading perception of Black individuals as inherently flawed, leading (some of) them to rely on the colonizers for defining what is deemed acceptable and civilized (Fanon, 1952/2008, 1963/2004).

According to Fanon (1952/2008), this fabricated portrayal continuously labels the colonized as inherently pathological. This cycle of fabrication is deeply ingrained in a violent and oppressive historical narrative that shapes the identity and representation of colonized Black individuals. This narrative aims to control how the colonized are viewed and portrayed, emphasizing the antagonistic relationship between the colonizer and the colonized, with the former seen as the solution to the latter's perceived problems.

Imperial and colonial discourses have historically influenced ideas about humanity and who has the power to define it, as noted by L. T. Smith (2012), echoing similar sentiments expressed by Wynter (1989, 2006). This authority to delineate humanity has played a crucial role during periods of imperialism and colonialism and continues to impact contemporary society. The ongoing process of fabrication and symbolic violence is central to understanding the treatment of Black individuals today.

Violence is deeply entrenched in every aspect of a settler colony's institutions and systems, underscoring the importance of Afrocentricity and Fanonian critical theory perspectives in frameworks like the BCW model, particularly in research involving Black populations. By incorporating Fanonian critical theory and Afrocentricity, the BCW framework prioritizes Black identities and allows Black individuals to define themselves independently of the colonizers' ongoing fabrications and violence, whether symbolic or tangible. This approach draws on diverse historical and spatial perspectives within Black communities. In the following section, I will explore the musical genre of rock as part of the Jamaican musical lineage, examining its relationship with critical race theory and hegemonic whiteness as essential components of this theoretical framework.

### **The Rock: Critical Race Theory (CRT) & Hegemonic Whiteness**

By 1966, the Jamaican musical sub-genre known as 'rock' emerged as musicians began to slow the tempo of their compositions. This transition was both striking and significant. Often referred to as rock steady or lovers' rock, this style facilitated smooth, contemplative movements for dancers. Jamaican artists drew inspiration from North American rhythm and blues while simultaneously refining and cultivating a distinctly Jamaican sound. As Heider (2000) notes,

pervasive trombones, trumpets, and tenor saxophones blended into the background; the electric bass took on a down-stroking prominence; the guitar asserted itself to punctuate the hiccupping cadence, and solo vocals were used to produce the rock steady sound. Rhythm and bass guitars, drums and organs were the most common configuration, with horns added to the occasional record (pp. 53-54).

Similarly, critical race theory (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995) and hegemonic whiteness (Cabrera, 2018) represent a profound shift in the historical landscape of educational research. The parallels between these musical and academic transformations are noteworthy. Critical race theory, in conjunction with the theory of hegemonic whiteness, elevates the perspectives and experiences of minoritized communities, thereby granting them a “prominence” within research, previously absent or deficitized. As a result, critical race-informed research studies have been increasingly “asserted” and now “punctuate” the educational field through methodologies such as counter-storytelling, teatro, and other innovative approaches designed to produce strengths-oriented scholarship.

### ***Critical Race Theory: Origins and Principles***

Critical race theory (CRT) originated in the legal field during the 1970s, addressing the complexities of race and racism as the legal community engaged with race-related jurisprudence following the civil rights movement. Initially introduced in K-12 educational research by Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) and later expanded by Solórzano (1997) for higher education, particularly in teacher education, CRT has become a vital framework for both scholars and activists. The framework is built upon five guiding principles (initially termed tenets), crucial for developing an inquiry stance toward systemic oppression.

These principles include: (1) the centrality and endemicity of race and racism and their intersectionality with other forms of subordination in US society; (2) the challenge to dominant perspectives, such as objectivity, race neutrality, meritocracy, equal opportunity, and color-evasiveness; (3) a commitment to social justice and activism, providing liberatory solutions to oppression in education; (4) the valuing and centering of experiential knowledge derived from minoritized and oppressed communities, particularly people of Color; and (5) interdisciplinary analyses of race, racism, and other vectors of oppression, viewed through both historical and contemporary lenses across various disciplines (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Dixson & Anderson, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Lynn & Dixson, 2013). These principles serve as essential guideposts in research.

### ***The Complementation of Hegemonic Whiteness***

Although CRT has been critiqued for its lack of a comprehensive theory of race and racism, it is significantly enhanced by the theory of hegemonic whiteness. As Cabrera (2018) describes, hegemonic whiteness sheds light on how “whiteness is attributed value as a privileged, dominant, and frequently invisible social identity,” which serves to illuminate the contemporary reproduction of historical white supremacy through systemic and cultural avenues (p. 223). This understanding ultimately leads to clarity about how white privilege, racial inequality, and anti-minority sentiments get normalized through various policies and practices (Cabrera, 2018).

### ***Evolution and Variants of CRT and Cultural Parallels with Rock***

The principles of CRT are embedded within critical race methodology, which is frequently employed in research about minoritized peoples' experiences. Consequently, since its inception, CRT has evolved into distinct theoretical branches that address the multifaceted nature of oppression experienced by various marginalized groups. Notable variants include Critical Race Feminism (Crenshaw, 1991), AsianCrit (Wing, 1999), QueerCrit (Johnson, 2001), LatCrit (Solórzano & Bernal, 2001), TribalCrit (Brayboy, 2005), and Disability Critical Race Theory (Annamma et al., 2013).

The slow tempo of rock steady music, often linked to themes of love and lived experiences, mirrors CRT's affirmation of the importance of minoritized communities' lived experiences as sources of knowledge and their counterstories as valid data. The genre of rock steady was influenced by the musical traditions of Black people in the US, reflecting the broader influences of race and the interconnection of Black people throughout the Americas. Importantly, it signals the centrality of Black experiences in the development of CRT and the salience of hegemonic whiteness.

Additionally, just as rock steady emerged in Jamaica as a transitional genre after independence from Britain, hegemonic whiteness has emerged as a transitional theory by complementing CRT and helping us recognize the evolving significance of race and racism. It invites a careful critique of the literature on racial theories, including CRT, while delineating the specific features of race and racism through white hegemony in modern contexts. Finally, rock's distinctiveness from its predecessor parallels the independence of critical race theory and hegemonic whiteness from the preceding conventional research paradigms and their majoritarian, color-evasive, and wider oppression-evasive lenses.

### ***Current Continued Relevance of CRT and Hegemonic Whiteness***

In today's society, racism reincarnates and reifies through various mechanisms—such as anti-immigrant political rhetoric, anti-DEI policies, legislative machinations, and state-sanctioned anti-Blackness. Therefore, CRT and hegemonic whiteness remain particularly pertinent as they provide essential frameworks for understanding the iterative nature of oppressive dynamics. The contemporary landscape reveals continued evidence of the significance of CRT in helping marginalized communities strategize and navigate systemic oppression. Like the slow-paced movements encouraged by rock steady music, these theories help Black individuals celebrate their identities and foster resilience, enabling them to live authentically despite pervasive challenges. Whether it is through our inventive music, dance, and other ways of being, Black folx get to critically deconstruct the current societal systems and structures and recreate their own with the acute precision afforded by CRT and hegemonic whiteness.

### **The Reggae & Hip-Hop: BlackCrit & Community Cultural Wealth**

The third component of the BCW theoretical framework establishes a connection between reggae, hip-hop, and the critical analytic lenses of BlackCrit and Community Cultural Wealth (CCW). This section briefly explores the significance of these musical genres and their similarities to BlackCrit and CCW as counter-hegemonic frameworks in life and research design and practice.

#### ***Evolution and Impact of Reggae and Hip-Hop***

Reggae music, which gained global prominence in the 1970s, is characterized by faster bass-driven rhythms than the roots and rock steady genres. According to Cooper (2020), these characteristics “bore the weight of increasingly politicized lyrics that addressed social and economic injustice” (Cooper, 2020, para. 4). It gained the reputation of being conscious music because it provided social commentary and honored Africa/ns and Blackness through soothing reggae rhythms. The genre has evolved significantly, influencing modern dub, dancehall, and hip-hop iterations.

Each of these genres embodies a rich cultural heritage and reflects the socio-cultural imperatives of Black experiences and culture over time. From the 1980s to the present, their evolution has resulted in diverse varieties—some harmonious, others cacophonous—each immersing itself in the critique of the hegemonic norms of Babylon. This term loosely refers to the oppressive global system that is entrenched in whiteness, capitalism, materialism, and the carceral state that perpetuates systemic violence. Regardless of their new iterations, reggae and hip-hop remain illuminations of Black waymaking replete with analytic precision and culture-shaping gravitas.

#### ***Musical and Theoretical Parallels: Distinctive Yet Complementary Lenses***

In parallel with reggae and hip-hop, BlackCrit (Dumas & ross, 2016) and CCW (Yosso, 2005) are essential for analyzing the oppressive contexts of, and the possibilities afforded by, Black life. They illuminate both the counter-hegemonic strategies and the subversive ways of being arising from these contexts. Most importantly, these lenses enable reflexivity, allowing individuals and communities to be and to articulate their experiences, while engineering liberatory presents and futures.

Both BlackCrit and CCW can be likened to reggae and hip-hop as musical and lifestyle genres that draw from diverse traditions to create a new form of analysis. They are distinctive in their approaches yet complementary in their goals, enabling a richer understanding of Black lived experiences. In the upcoming discussion, I will elaborate on the key foundational works underpinning these theories, specifically highlighting Dumas and ross (2016) for BlackCrit and Yosso

(2005) for CCW. For now, however, it is essential to emphasize that the connections drawn between reggae, hip-hop, BlackCrit, and CCW underscore the collective significance of these elements in the pursuit of liberation. By framing these components together, we deepen our understanding of their powerful insights in addressing the complexities of Black identity and resistance—in all our Blackity Black Black ways of being.

### ***BlackCritical Theory (BlackCrit) and The Need for Inclusivity in Human Rights Discourse***

Over two decades ago, Lewis (2000) posited BlackCrit as a specific segment of Critical Race scholarship to address the significance of “racial attitudes toward Africans and peoples of African descent” within the framework of the international human rights system (p. 1076). The hope was for this theoretical lens to center the Black experience, particularly concerning human rights issues and legal frameworks, which often excluded Black individuals from Africa and the Caribbean in legal discourse. Lewis emphasized the urgent need for a more inclusive understanding of human rights and the law—one that recognizes the global realities of Black suffering and advocates for a comprehensive view that does not prioritize the struggles of Black Americans while ignoring the plight of Black communities in other regions.

Various scholars wrestled with the formalization of BlackCrit theory, engaging in debates about its implications. Critics raised concerns that BlackCrit might inadvertently suggest a form of Black essentialism (Roberts, 1998) or overlook pivotal intersections that are crucial for individuals racialized as Black (Phillips, 1998). Conversely, proponents acknowledged both the necessity of understanding “the specificity of the Black” (Wynter, 1989) and the importance of resisting anti-essentialist narratives that could hinder meaningful theorization and research through this lens (Roberts, 1998). Despite these discussions, BlackCrit remained largely undertheorized until Dumas and ross (2016) articulated a relevant framework within the context of education.

### ***Foundational Principle of BlackCrit: The Endemicity of Anti-Blackness***

The first foundational principle of BlackCrit is the recognition that anti-Blackness is not merely a byproduct of racism; rather, it is integral to how society perceives Blackness and Black individuals across various dimensions of life. Dumas and ross (2016) describe anti-Blackness as embodying a “broader antagonistic relationship between blackness and the (possibility of) humanity” (p. 429). This perspective positions BlackCrit as apt to explore the myriad ways in which both formal structures, such as policies, and quotidian practices contribute to and perpetuate Black suffering. Importantly, BlackCrit also fosters the ability to imagine

a future for Black people that transcends the pervasive devaluation of Black life and the challenging narratives surrounding their worth in various spheres.

### ***Neoliberal Multiculturalism: Tensions and Critiques***

Another critical framing idea of BlackCrit is the tension between Blackness and the neoliberal multicultural imagination (Dumas & ross, 2016). They argue that the narrative surrounding anti-discrimination and antiracist efforts in the US evolved significantly post-World War II to the 1960s, moving towards a more laissez-faire approach that positioned the market as the primary agent for fostering diversity and opportunity from the 1980s onward. In this neoliberal context, multiculturalism has often been celebrated superficially, creating a veneer of equality with notions of equal opportunity and meritocracy that wrongfully attribute the challenges faced by Black individuals to personal failure rather than systemic barriers.

In doing so, neoliberal multiculturalism seems to absolve governments and institutions from active roles in addressing anti-Blackness as well as the broader frameworks of systemic and institutional racism. This neoliberal multicultural logic poses significant challenges. BlackCrit is particularly critical of how neoliberal multiculturalism tends to explain the material conditions faced by Black people as self-created problems, framing them as individuals who are unwilling or unable to engage with an ostensibly “officially antiracist” multicultural future (p. 430). Thus, neoliberal multiculturalism is seen as existing in opposition to the lived realities of Black lives (Sexton, 2008).

### ***The Role of Liberatory Fantasy: Resistance and Resilience***

The third essential framing concept within BlackCrit is the significance of liberatory fantasy (Dumas & ross, 2016). This fantasy represents a pathway to liberate Blackness from the constraints of societal oppression, serving as “the beginning of a necessary chaos [as] the first taste of freedom” (Dumas & ross, 2016, p. 431). Given the historically oppressive nature of formal schooling for Black individuals, there is an urgent need for both a liberatory fantasy and the realization of authentic liberation. As Sojoyner (2016) reminds us, “the formal education of Black people as articulated by the U.S. nation-state has been about the suppression of Black freedom” (p. xi). Consequently, research about and reimaginings for education would be well-aligned with the liberatory fantasy framing idea of BlackCrit as we create the chaos necessary to reconstruct the kinds of educational contexts Black people deserve.

Ultimately, BlackCrit enables resistance to anti-Blackness and fosters actionable steps toward improving the quality of life for those racialized as Black. Recent scholarship suggests that a growing number of scholars are embracing the lenses afforded by BlackCrit, marking a significant shift in understanding and addressing the complexities of anti-Blackness in schooling across K-12 and post-

secondary contexts (example, Coles, 2018; Coles & Powell, 2019; Dumas, 2018; Powell & Coles, 2020; Savage, 2021). Furthermore, community cultural wealth effectively complements the analysis BlackCrit affords. Thus, next, I explain community cultural wealth as the final central analytic component of the BCW theoretical framework.

### ***Community Cultural Wealth: Reframing Cultural Capital in Education***

Yosso (2005) offers a critical perspective that challenges conventional interpretations of Bourdieuan cultural capital theory (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). Rather than focusing solely on “upper and middle class values” as indicators of capital, which often leads to viewing minoritized students and communities through a deficit lens, Yosso (2005) introduces six distinct forms of capital prevalent in marginalized populations’ experiences. These forms of capital encompass a rich array of “knowledge, skills, abilities, and contacts” utilized by Communities of Color to resist and navigate multi-layered forms of oppression (p. 77).

Yosso expands upon the concept of capital, framing these six forms collectively as community cultural wealth. This characterization challenges the notion of wealth in a settler colonial context, where wealth is typically linked to the commodification and exploitation of people and resources. Through this lens, community cultural wealth highlights an understanding more aligned with African and Indigenous epistemologies, valuing community, ecology, and the sanctity of life, land, and people. It celebrates our collective efforts and resilience in the face of systemic challenges.

### ***Connecting Scholarship, Practice, and the Forms of Community Cultural Wealth***

There is significant antecedent scholarship and practice within which Yosso’s (2005) work is anchored. For instance, Irvine’s (1990) concept of “cultural synchronization” argues that educators must understand their students’ lives, cultures, and the contextual factors impacting schooling. Yosso’s framing aligns with Moll’s (1992) idea of “funds of knowledge,” which reframes students’ cultures as valuable assets for learning, rather than viewing them as deficits.

Yosso (2005) identifies six components of community cultural wealth: aspirational, linguistic, familial, social, navigational, and resistant capital. These forms are deeply represented in Black experiences and highlight the nuanced ways in which Black communities navigate educational environments. While Yosso speaks broadly about communities of Color, the focus in BCW specifically centers on Black perspectives and beingness, extending and enriching the community cultural wealth framework Yosso (2005) established.

***Theory into Practice:  
Leveraging BlackCrit Cultural Wealth in Research***

In previous research, I framed and explored the transformative potential of BlackCrit Cultural Wealth (BCW) through an inquiry into the experiences of Black male doctoral student-instructors within education (Savage, 2021). Grounded in the metaparadigm of Afrocentricity with Fanonian critical theory, this study examined literature by Black scholars primarily. It centered the experiences of Black male student-instructors in historically and predominantly white institutions (HPWIs). By employing these lenses (the roots genre), I effectively highlighted the significance of the Black experience. CRT and hegemonic whiteness (the rock genre) complemented the inquiry and enabled the counterstorytelling of Black males, offering a deeper understanding of their lived realities.

***Methodology and Data Collection***

The fusion of rhythms and reasonings within the study aptly illustrated the effectiveness of BCW. Data were collected through focus groups, where Black male co-researchers collaboratively discussed their experiences. This dialogue facilitated collective sensemaking and individual expression, as participants shared music, poetry, spoken word, and African dance and drumming—artistic forms that encapsulated their cultural wealth and resilience. These rhythmic expressions reflected personal joy and served as mechanisms for persistence in the face of adversity encountered in their respective HPWI contexts.

***Engaging in Liberatory Practices***

Using the analytic precision of BlackCrit and community cultural wealth (the reggae and hip-hop genres), the study revealed that co-researchers were actively engaged in liberatory fantasy—actions promoting their own survivance and the survivance of Black students for generations. The data showcased how their pedagogical approaches and practices were committed to dismantling educational barriers, thereby creating high-quality learning experiences for Black students in K-12 settings. This affordance would also benefit other K-12 students. These students would eventually be taught by predominantly white educators who were trained by the Black male doctoral student-instructors, highlighting a ripple effect that extends beyond individual experiences.

***Insights and Implications for Future Research and Practice***

Each dimension of BCW proved essential throughout the research process, informing the study's framing, data collection, and analytic insights. This operationalization of BCW provides actionable strategies for researchers aiming to

integrate these principles into their work. It also offers pertinent scholarship to substantiate and defend those moves.

As you consider the applicability of BCW in your own contexts, studies, and life, reflect on the interplay of roots (Afrocentricity and Fanonian critical theory), rock (critical race theory and hegemonic whiteness), as well as reggae and hip-hop (BlackCrit and community cultural wealth). This holistic approach fosters a profound, life-sustaining resonance within the broader Black experience and scholarship.

Engaging with BCW not only enriches the research discourse but also amplifies the voices of Black scholars and practitioners. I invite you to explore how this composite framework, in all its Blackity Black Black dimensions, may resonate within your work and contribute to a richer understanding of the complexities surrounding Black identities and experiences in education, culture, and the wider society.

### **Conclusion:**

#### **Continuously Connecting the Rhythms and Reasonings**

Many have taken up, explored, critiqued, theorized, and advanced a scholarly lineage of Black specificity. Cue Black feminisms' contributions (rhythms and reasonings), including Hartman (2007), McKittrick (2011), Sharpe (2016), and Wynter (2006). Contemporary thinkers have continued this lineage of Blackity Black beingness and living. These rhythms and reasonings have been represented in hip-hop and academic theorizing. For example, more recently, Lamar's (2024) "Not Like Us" and the related Super Bowl performance through unapologetically Black specificity in his lyrics, performance, semiotics, and cinematography aptly and effectively demonstrated the Black specificity (Lamar, 2025). It offered social commentary and critique on one of the most televised US and global entertainment platforms as part of the half-time show. Relatedly, Okello (2024) curated and engaged robust, specific Black lenses using visual art, letter writing, and substantial theorizing about Black being and liveliness. Both Lamar and Okello reflect the rhythms and reasonings of our people—at once reflexive, historically-situated, purposefully salient in the (fully) present, and speculatively necessary for Black futures, but always, always, Blackity Black Black Black.

Regardless of genre and lifestyle, however, or their rhythm, tone, texture, or topic, music has been central to how Black people reflect on and navigate life before, within, and without capitalist settler colonies. For instance, music was a crucial part of that Afrocentric lineage and coping mechanisms—on the colonial plantations, during sharecropping, in the fight for abolition and emancipation, civil rights, and even as we continue to contend with police brutality, the militarized carceral state, and permeative state-sanctioned anti-Blackness across time and space. Similarly, many aspects of scenography and fashion, as seen in music videos, theatre and film semiotics, and even everyday dress, are evident in our ways of being in an anti-Black world.

All of these help to illustrate our history of survival and strategizing for freedom. They demonstrate our counter-hegemonic orientations and wealth of talents, knowledge, and skills. Whether it was the Haitian Revolution in Haiti, the Morant Bay Rebellion in Jamaica, or the Underground Railroad from the South to the North in the US, Black life is characterized by subversive and abolitionist acts, as well as acts of life-making and Black image-making, including in higher education (Mustaffa, 2017; Okello, 2024). What is clear is that both BlackCrit and community cultural wealth (like reggae and hip-hop) are critically apt and practical tools for representing, investigating, and analyzing the beingness and experiences of Black people.

Taken altogether, then, this fused theoretical framework may be referred to as a BlackCrit cultural wealth framework (see Figure 1.1). It is centered in the metaparadigm of Afrocentricity, informed by Fanonian critical theory, guided theoretically by CRT and hegemonic whiteness, and strengthened analytically by the specificity of BlackCrit and community cultural wealth, as illustrated in Figure 1.1. Moreover, like the roots, rock, reggae, and hip-hop musical genres, they connect and are emblematic of the onto-epistemic ways many Black people live, view the world, critique it, and seek to change it for true liberation. In these ways, BlackCrit Cultural Wealth underscores a generationality of rhythms and reasonings that have animated Black continental and diasporic life, and that might be used, built upon, and expanded to enable Black futures. In these and other ways, BlackCrit Cultural Wealth emblemizes Black survivance. It fuels all the Black-ity, Black, Black, Black ways we make music, moves, and memories in theories and practices in education, the wider society, and (perhaps) within and across the cosmos.

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***Rhythms, Revolt, and Black Cultural Expression*****Bands Can Make Them Dance:  
A Neurological Lens on the Impact of Urban  
High School Band Programs on Black Students*****Kevin L. Jones*****Abstract**

This conceptual literature review examines how participation in urban high school band programs influences the cognitive development of Black students, emphasizing the neurological mechanisms activated through musical training. Drawing on interdisciplinary research from neuroscience, music education, and culturally responsive pedagogy, the paper develops a conceptual argument that band programs function as cognitively enriching, culturally sustaining, and equity-oriented educational spaces. Grounded in Critical Race Theory, the review situates the decline of arts programs in urban schools within broader patterns of structural inequity that disproportionately limit Black students' access to culturally meaningful and neurologically beneficial learning opportunities. Findings highlight that when band programs employ culturally relevant and sustaining pedagogies, they enhance neuroplasticity, executive function, identity development, and academic resilience. This conceptual paper underscores the need for policy and practice to recognize urban band programs as essential contributors to holistic development and educational equity for Black students.

**Introduction**

Urban high school band programs serve as an influential factor in the success of Black students, offering cognitive and cultural benefits that promote resilience,

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belonging, and academic achievement (Doyle, 2014; Fiese & DeCarbo, 1995; Fitzpatrick, 2011; Fitzpatrick-Harnish, 2015). These band programs play a significant role in advancing the success of Black students by stimulating brain development and supporting academic growth (Doyle, 2014). Participation in band also enhances multitasking and coordination, as students must simultaneously process visual cues, auditory information, and motor movements (Frierson-Campbell 2006). This multisensory integration helps refine both fine motor skills and cognitive flexibility. Additionally, the structured environment of band fosters discipline and sustained mental focus, which are essential for academic success. In this way, urban high school band programs provide more than artistic enrichment, they act as powerful tools for boosting brain development and academic achievement among Black students.

Engaging in music education activates multiple areas of the brain, enhancing cognitive functions such as memory, attention, auditory processing, and executive functioning (Bidelman, & Alain, 2015; Olszewska et al., 2021; Zaatar et al., 2023). Regular practice and performance strengthen neural connections, supporting both functional and structural neuroplasticity that can lead to improved problem-solving, critical thinking, and language skills (Chobert et al., 2014). For Black students, these neurological benefits contribute to academic resilience and increased capacity for learning in other subjects. To fully grasp how music education enhances cognitive development, it is essential to understand neuroplasticity. Shaffer (2024) states that neuroplasticity refers to the brain's remarkable capacity to adapt by forming new neural connections and reorganizing existing ones. This process enables the brain to modify its structure and function in response to learning, experience, or injury, effectively rewiring itself to operate differently than it did before. Neuroplasticity is the brain's ability to adapt and reorganize itself by forming new neural pathways or modifying existing ones in response to experience, learning, or injury (Rozo et al., 2024).

This adaptability can be categorized into functional neuroplasticity, which involves changes in how brain regions operate, and structural neuroplasticity, which refers to physical changes in the brain's architecture, such as the growth of new neurons or synapses (Diamond, 2001). These changes may start at the cellular level and expand to broader transformations across different brain areas. Examples include alterations in neuron shape, synaptic strength, synaptic pruning, and cortical remapping. A compelling example of neuroplasticity is seen in the brain's response to music. Music, as a complex multisensory activity, stimulates various regions involved in emotion, movement, memory, and auditory processing. Repeated engagement with music, whether through listening or performing, can drive both functional and structural brain adaptations (Rozo et al., 2024). While the study of neurological disorders has been extensive, the use of music as a cognitive tool brings added value to urban music programs by promoting brain development and enhancing students' academic potential.

The reduction or elimination of music programs in schools often limits students' access to culturally meaningful experiences and opportunities for neurological development, both of which can play a significant role in supporting overall academic achievement. This literature review is significant for several key reasons: conceptually, pedagogically, and socially. At its core, the literature challenges narrow, Eurocentric understandings of music education by elevating urban high school band programs as critical sites for cognitive development, cultural affirmation, and academic persistence among Black students. Through an interdisciplinary synthesis of neuroscience, urban music education, and culturally sustaining pedagogies, this review of literature repositions band programs from extracurricular enrichment to vital co-curricular interventions that foster both neurological growth and identity development.

The cognitive demands of music-making, particularly in ensemble settings, engage auditory, motor, memory, and executive function networks in the brain, promoting neuroplasticity and long-term cognitive benefits. However, the extent of these neurological gains is not universal; they are deeply influenced by students' cultural contexts, sense of belonging, and motivation to engage. By examining band programs through the lens of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995), Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy (Good-Perkins, 2023), and Flow Theory (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990), this review emphasizes that the effectiveness of music education is enhanced when it is culturally grounded, emotionally resonant, and socially inclusive. It holds particular significance in light of the historical underrepresentation and marginalization of Black students in advanced academic tracks and gifted programs. Urban band programs, when guided by inclusive and culturally sustaining teaching practices, can serve as counterspaces that challenge educational inequities and affirm the rich musical and cultural identities of Black youth. As Lind and McKoy (2016) argue, music educators must move beyond technical instruction to foster authentic, inclusive environments that sustain students' lived experiences and ways of knowing.

Moreover, this review contributes to broader discussions around educational equity by drawing attention to the neuroeducational and socio-emotional potential of arts-based learning. It advocates for policy shifts that recognize the transformative power of arts education, particularly music, as central to academic and developmental outcomes for marginalized students. By situating urban band programs at the intersection of race, educational access, and neuroscience, this review offers a compelling argument for reimagining the role of music education in the academic lives of Black students.

### **Statement of Problem**

Urban schools are increasingly removing band programs from the curriculum, often due to budget constraints, standardized testing pressures, and shifting

educational priorities (Doyle, 2014; Goldberg, 2006). The reduction or elimination of music programs in schools often limits students' access to culturally meaningful opportunities and neurological development, both of which can play a significant role in supporting overall academic achievement (Ellis et al., 2021; Norgaard et al., 2019). This trend disproportionately affects Black students in under-resourced communities, where access to arts education is already limited. Despite a growing body of research suggesting that musical training activates key neurological mechanisms linked to cognitive development, particularly in areas such as executive function, memory, and attention, the educational value of band programs remains underrecognized in policy decisions. As a result, opportunities for Black students to engage in cognitively enriching, culturally affirming, and socially transformative musical experiences are being systematically reduced. This is particularly troubling given the potential of urban high school band programs to serve as critical spaces for academic growth and identity formation (Baker & Green, 2022; Kraus et al., 2019; Southgate & Roscigno, 2009).

Recent studies have demonstrated that participation in music education can foster neuroplasticity and support academic achievement, especially for students from underserved backgrounds (Kraus et al., 2019). However, the disconnect between what research reveals about the neurological and cognitive benefits of music education and the diminishing presence of such programs in urban schools highlights the urgent need for evidenced-based advocacy and policy reform. This review seeks to address this gap by exploring the research wonder: How does participation in urban high school band programs influence the cognitive development of Black students, particularly through neurological mechanisms activated by musical training? This review bridges a critical gap in the literature by centering the experiences of Black students in urban schools within discussions about the cognitive and educational benefits of music programs. By highlighting the transformative potential of arts education, it underscores the importance of leveraging band programs as tools for equity, offering practical insights for educators, policymakers, and researchers committed to advancing inclusive and effective educational practices.

### Positionality

As a Black male professor in an educator preparation program whose research centers on urban education, my lived experiences profoundly influence my perspective and approach to studying urban high school band programs and their impact on Black students. My engagement with music education ranges from high school and college band participation to serving as a high school and university director of bands. These diverse experiences afford me a unique vantage point on the academic, cognitive, and social-emotional benefits that music education, particularly in the form of band programs, especially for Black students who, like me, often confront systemic barriers within educational spaces.

Navigating predominantly White institutions throughout my academic and professional journey has shaped my understanding of the role music plays in fostering resilience, identity development, and a sense of belonging. I have experienced firsthand how participation in music programs can not only serve as a tool for cognitive enhancement but also as a vital support system for Black students who may be marginalized or underserved by traditional academic structures. These programs offer not only an outlet for creative expression but also a space that helps students build community, confidence, and self-worth, qualities essential for overcoming the challenges they face.

However, I also recognize that my positionality, shaped by my experiences as both a Black male, music educator, and professor; brings inherent biases to this research. My strong connection to music education may predispose me to overemphasize the positive effects of such programs, particularly as they relate to cognitive and social-emotional outcomes. To mitigate this bias, I am committed to engaging in critical reflection throughout my research, ensuring that I remain open to diverse perspectives and experiences, particularly those of Black students whose interactions with music programs may differ from my own.

Ultimately, my goal is to provide an informed, nuanced perspective on the potential of urban high school band programs as both academic and social-emotional interventions for Black students. While I recognize the transformative power of music, I aim to address the broader systemic challenges these students face, offering a balanced examination that highlights both the strengths and limitations of such programs in supporting their growth and achievement.

### **Methodology**

This literature review addresses the central research question: How does participation in urban high school band programs influence the cognitive development of Black students, particularly through neurological mechanisms activated by musical training? The purpose of this review is to synthesize interdisciplinary scholarship to explore how music education, specifically band programs in urban high schools can serve as a catalyst for cognitive, academic, and social transformation among Black students. This paper aims to bridge gaps in the literature by integrating insights from neuroscience, music education, and culturally sustaining pedagogy, with a focus on equity-centered approaches to arts education.

A comprehensive search was conducted using academic databases including ERIC, JSTOR, PsycINFO, ProQuest, and Google Scholar. Key search terms included: urban education, urban music education, band programs, Black students and music, cognitive development and music, neuroplasticity and music training, and culturally responsive music education. Studies were included if they were published between 2003 and 2023, peer-reviewed, and addressed topics related to k-12 music education in urban settings, cognitive or neurological outcomes of

music training, or the cultural and educational significance of band programs for Black youth. Exclusion criteria included studies focused solely on clinical populations or non-urban contexts.

From each study, key information was extracted, including: author(s), year, study purpose, research methodology, sample characteristics, theoretical frameworks, major findings, and relevance to cognitive development and urban music education. A spreadsheet was used to organize and code the studies according to themes, theoretical grounding, and methodological rigor. A narrative synthesis approach was used to analyze and interpret the findings across studies. Themes were identified through an iterative coding process that included: (1) cognitive and neurological impacts of music training, (2) sociocultural and identity-related outcomes for Black students, and (3) structural and policy-related challenges in sustaining urban band programs. Studies were compared and contrasted to highlight common findings, divergent findings, and emergent insights relevant to the research question. Theoretical frameworks from critical race theory and cognitive neuroscience were used to guide the interpretation of findings.

The quality of included studies was assessed using adapted criteria from the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) (2025) for qualitative research and the Joanna Briggs Institute (JBI) checklist for quantitative studies (Mathioudakis et al., 2019). Criteria included clarity of research aims, appropriateness of methodology, data validity, and relevance to the research question. Studies of higher methodological quality were weighted more heavily in the synthesis, though lower-quality studies that contributed valuable conceptual insights were also included and contextualized accordingly. Findings are presented primarily in narrative text, structured thematically to reflect key areas of inquiry. The findings focus on rich, interpretive narrative grounded in the literature.

## Review of Related Literature

### *Theoretical Framework*

This review examines the impact of urban high school band programs on the cognitive development of Black students through an integrated theoretical framework that combines neurological, educational, and sociocultural perspectives. Grounded in research on music cognition, brain development, and culturally responsive pedagogy, this framework provides a lens for understanding how structured musical engagement influences cognitive functions such as memory and critical thinking. Additionally, it considers the role of music education as a culturally sustaining practice that fosters academic resilience and personal identity formation among Black students.

By incorporating Critical Race Theory (CRT), this review foregrounds the ways in which systemic racism and educational inequities shape the experiences of Black students in urban schools. CRT draws attention to how race and power

intersect in educational contexts, allowing for a more nuanced understanding of the significance of band programs as counterspaces, sites that affirm cultural identity, resist deficit narratives, and promote social-emotional growth. In synthesizing CRT with culturally responsive pedagogy, culturally sustaining practices, and neuroeducational research, this framework underscores the transformative potential of urban band programs not only as sites of artistic and cognitive development, but also as spaces of resistance, empowerment, and liberation within historically marginalized communities.

### ***Critical Race Theory and the Marginalization of Arts Education in Urban Schools***

Critical Race Theory (CRT), as established by Derrick Bell (1992), provides a necessary framework for understanding the structural inequalities that underpin the removal of arts education, particularly band programs from urban schools. Bell argued that racism is a permanent and pervasive feature of American society, embedded within laws, policies, and institutional practices. This permanence is evident in education systems where curricular decisions, such as defunding or eliminating music programs, disproportionately affect Black students in under-resourced urban schools. These decisions are not race-neutral but reflect what Bell termed “interest convergence” policies that appear to serve broader educational goals (e.g., improving test scores or managing budgets) but ultimately sustain racial hierarchies by deprioritizing programs that serve marginalized populations (Bell, 1992).

Building on Bell’s foundational work, Gloria Ladson-Billings (1998) extended CRT into the field of education, emphasizing that educational inequity must be analyzed through a racial lens. She contended that systemic disparities in curriculum access, funding, and educational opportunity are not accidental, but rather reflect historical and ongoing patterns of racial exclusion. Ladson-Billings introduced the concept of “education debt,” which reframes the so-called “achievement gap” as a consequence of accumulated social, economic, and political neglect of Black students. The erasure of band programs in urban schools can thus be seen as a form of curricular racism, where culturally affirming and cognitively enriching opportunities are denied to students under the guise of fiscal responsibility or accountability measures.

By applying CRT, this review positions the decline of urban band programs as part of a broader pattern of structural disinvestment in Black student potential. It challenges the notion that such decisions are benign or purely economic, arguing instead that they perpetuate racial inequities by stripping away access to arts-based educational interventions with proven cognitive and academic benefits. This theoretical lens compels researchers, educators, and policymakers to consider not only what is being removed from urban classrooms, but also whose opportunities are being erased in the process.

### ***Neuroplasticity and Cognitive Development***

The neurological framework explores the effects of musical training on brain development, particularly in the areas of memory and attention. Neuroplasticity highlights the brain's ability to reorganize neural pathways in response to learning experiences (Kraus et al., 2014). Musical engagement strengthens auditory processing and fine motor coordination, all of which are critical for learning and cognitive development.

Cognitive Load Theory further supports this perspective, suggesting that musical training enhances working memory and attention control, both of which are essential for academic success (Sweller, 2011). The structured and repetitive nature of musical practice fosters cognitive efficiency, enabling students to process and integrate complex information more effectively.

Applying this framework, this review explores how participation in high school band programs fosters cognitive skills that contribute to improved academic performance among Black students. Specifically, the review examines how musical engagement refines auditory discrimination, enhances memory retention, and strengthens problem-solving abilities.

### ***Urban Band Programs***

Urban band programs have the potential to support the cognitive and social development of Black students by offering culturally relevant, interest-driven learning experiences that stimulate both neurological and academic engagement (Fiese & DeCarbo, 1995). Drawing on the Connected Learning framework, Evans (2021) explored how Hip-Hop Music Education in two predominantly African American elementary schools fostered critical thinking, personal empowerment, and a sense of community among students. Although the context differs from traditional band programs, the study's emphasis on identity formation and media literacy through culturally situated music-making has direct implications for understanding how structured musical engagement in urban schools can serve as a cognitive and academic catalyst. In particular, Evans noted that students developed deeper civic awareness and academic curiosity through their participation in music education, suggesting that similar outcomes may be possible in urban high school band programs that meaningfully connect students' cultural backgrounds to their educational experiences.

Moreover, the neurological impact of music education, particularly when students are emotionally and culturally invested, cannot be overstated. Musical activities, including performance, composition, and ensemble collaboration, activate brain regions associated with executive function, memory, and language development. Evans' (2021) findings support the view that when students are encouraged to explore music tied to their cultural identities, such as Hip-Hop, they are more likely to experience transformative educational outcomes, both cognitively and

socially. Thus, urban band programs that engage Black students through relevant, student-centered content not only affirm identity but also support the development of critical cognitive processes (Fitzpatrick, 2011). These programs, therefore, should be viewed not merely as extracurricular luxuries, but as essential, neurologically and culturally enriching spaces capable of narrowing educational inequities.

### ***Culturally Relevant Pedagogy and Engagement***

Participation in urban high school band programs can significantly influence the cognitive development of Black students, particularly when these programs are grounded in culturally sustaining pedagogies (Good-Perkins, 2023). Good-Perkins (2023) critiques the historical dominance of Western classical traditions and argues for music curricula that honor and sustain the diverse musical cultures and identities of students, especially those from minoritized backgrounds. By centering students' cultural experiences and musical epistemologies, such pedagogies foster greater engagement, authenticity, and relevance in music education. Research shows that these conditions are crucial for maximizing the cognitive and neurological benefits of musical training (Good-Perkins, 2023).

From a neurological perspective, musical training activates a wide array of brain regions, supporting plastic changes in auditory, motor, and executive function networks (Zaatar et al., 2023). The social context and motivational climate, which are elements central to culturally responsive and sustaining teaching, modulate the extent of these cognitive benefits. Students are more likely to experience positive developmental outcomes when their identities and musical backgrounds are valued in the classroom (Doyle, 2014). Lind and McKoy (2016) further emphasize that effective music educators must develop competencies that allow them to make informed, authentic, and holistic pedagogical choices, thereby creating inclusive learning environments where diverse musical traditions are not only represented but actively sustained.

For Black students in urban band programs, this approach does more than enhance musical skills; it leverages the neurological mechanisms of learning and motivation, supporting both cognitive growth and the affirmation of cultural identity (Lind & McKoy, 2016). Urban high school band programs serve as culturally rich environments that facilitate student learning and engagement. Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (CRP), as introduced by Ladson-Billings (1995), emphasizes that effective teaching should be academically rigorous while affirming students' cultural identities. Band programs frequently incorporate musical traditions that resonate with Black students, fostering deeper engagement and intrinsic motivation (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

In addition, Flow Theory, as proposed by Csikszentmihalyi (1990), describes the psychological state of deep engagement and optimal learning. Participation in band requires a high level of concentration and skill mastery, creating immersive

learning experiences that enhance motivation and academic persistence (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Through these perspectives, urban band programs can be seen as essential educational spaces where Black students experience culturally relevant instruction, intrinsic motivation, and opportunities to develop academic discipline and perseverance.

This exploration situates urban band programs as essential educational spaces where Black students experience culturally relevant instruction, intrinsic motivation, and opportunities to develop academic discipline and perseverance. The integration of neurological and educational frameworks provides a multidimensional perspective on the impact of urban high school band programs on Black students. By linking neuroplasticity and cognitive development with culturally relevant pedagogy, this review of literature underscores the significance of music education in shaping both academic and personal growth.

### ***Neurological Benefits of Music Education in K-12***

Music education has long been recognized for its ability to enrich students' learning experiences beyond musical proficiency. For Black students, who often contend with systemic barriers in education, including underfunded schools and limited access to specialized programs, music education offers a valuable opportunity for cognitive and academic development. Research highlights the ways in which structured musical training supports auditory processing and overall academic achievement (Chobert et al., 2014; François et al., 2015; Zaatari et al., 2023). This synthesis explores the neurological benefits of music education in K-12 settings, with a particular emphasis on its impact on Black students' cognitive development.

### ***Cognitive Skills and Academic Achievement***

Music training plays a critical role in enhancing cognitive functions that are essential for academic success. One such function is inhibition control, which allows students to regulate their responses and maintain focus in learning environments. Foster, Hyde, and Bella (2023) conducted a meta-analysis of 22 longitudinal studies, including randomized controlled trials, which demonstrated that music training significantly improved inhibition control in children. These findings suggest that engaging in music education can support Black students in developing the self-regulation skills necessary for navigating challenging educational spaces.

Additionally, rhythm and movement programs have shown promising results in enhancing school readiness, particularly for students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds (Bentley et al., 2022). Their study found that children who participated in structured rhythm-based interventions exhibited sustained improvements in self-regulation and cognitive flexibility as they transitioned into formal schooling. These results suggest that integrating music-based learning

strategies in schools with high Black student populations could mitigate some of the disparities in early childhood education outcomes.

Schellenberg and Weiss (2005) further examined the cognitive impact of music education, noting that while music listening can provide short-term enhancements in cognitive performance, structured music lessons in childhood yield long-term intellectual benefits. Given that Black students often face educational environments where sustained academic growth is challenged by systemic inequities, incorporating music education as a consistent element of curricula could contribute to their academic success over time.

### *Neural Processing and Auditory Skills*

Music education has been linked to improved auditory processing, which in turn enhances language development and reading skills which are critical areas of academic achievement for Black students. Long-term music training has been found to strengthen neural pathways associated with speech processing, particularly for students at risk of language-based learning difficulties (Zuk et al., 2014). Zuk and colleagues found that that music education can serve as an intervention to support literacy development in Black students, who are often disproportionately affected by reading achievement gaps. Research has demonstrated that musical training induces structural and functional changes in the brain, particularly in regions associated with motor control and auditory processing (Olszewska et al., 2021; Chober, 2014; François, 2015). These changes include increased brain activation in the auditory and motor systems, as well as enhanced connectivity between these regions. Longitudinal studies have shown that these neuroplastic changes are not solely due to innate predispositions but are significantly influenced by active musical training (Chober, 2014).

Furthermore, research has demonstrated that music training enhances neurophysiological functions within the auditory system, leading to improved phonological awareness and working memory (Orchard et al., 2023). For Black students in under-resourced schools, where access to high-quality literacy instruction may be limited, music education could provide an alternative means of strengthening foundational reading and comprehension skills.

### *General Cognitive Benefits*

Beyond specific academic subjects, music education contributes to broader cognitive and emotional development. Wilson and Prior (2006) suggest that background music can enhance focus and self-regulation in students with special education needs, a finding that may have implications for supporting Black students with learning differences. Additionally, individualized education programs that incorporate musical activities have been shown to improve mental processing skills in students struggling with mathematics (Korkmaz & Temur, 2022). Giv-

en that Black students often face disparities in math achievement, integrating music-based strategies into math instruction may help bridge performance gaps.

Perry (2022) examined the impact of ‘music sharing turns,’ a weekly music engagement activity, on students with sensory processing challenges. The study found that incorporating personal music experiences into the classroom enhanced students’ self-awareness and social interactions. This insight suggests that similar strategies could foster a more inclusive and engaging learning environment for Black students, particularly in classrooms where cultural responsiveness is prioritized. The body of research on music education underscores its substantial benefits for cognitive and linguistic development. For Black students, these advantages are particularly significant, as music education provides opportunities to strengthen essential academic skills while also fostering self-regulation and engagement. Given the persistent educational inequities that Black students face, integrating music education into K-12 curricula is a meaningful step toward closing achievement gaps and supporting their holistic development. Schools and policymakers should consider expanding access to music programs as an evidence-based approach to promoting educational equity and student success.

Musical training has been widely associated with enhanced cognitive functions. Research suggests that engaging in musical practice can serve as a protective factor against age-related cognitive decline by promoting neuroplasticity (James et al., 2020; Bidelman & Alain, 2015; Siponkoski et al., 2020). This neuroplastic adaptation is crucial for maintaining cognitive health in aging populations, as it supports the retention and enhancement of various cognitive abilities. Musical training has been linked to enhanced working memory. The ability to temporarily store and manipulate information is critical for everyday functioning, and studies have shown that musicians tend to have superior working memory compared to non-musicians (Bidelman & Alain, 2015). This advantage may stem from the need to memorize musical pieces, anticipate changes in rhythm and melody, and integrate auditory and motor information in real-time.

### *Processing Speed*

Processing speed, another essential cognitive function, also appears to benefit from musical engagement. Older adults who actively participate in musical training exhibit faster reaction times and improved neural efficiency, which contribute to overall cognitive resilience (James et al., 2020). The ability to quickly interpret and respond to stimuli is particularly valuable in aging individuals, as it can aid in maintaining independence and reducing the risk of cognitive impairment (Siponkoski et al., 2020). Beyond cognitive functions, musical training supports improvements in fine motor skills (Bidelman & Alain, 2015). Playing an instrument requires precise hand-eye coordination, finger dexterity, and rhythmic timing, all of which contribute to sustained motor function in older adults. These benefits

are particularly relevant for individuals at risk of age-related motor decline, as musical activities can help preserve motor control and coordination (Siponkoski et al., 2020). Overall, the evidence suggests that musical training offers significant cognitive and motor benefits for aging adults.

By fostering neuroplasticity and enhancing key cognitive domains, musical engagement serves as a promising intervention for maintaining cognitive health and mitigating the effects of aging on the brain. The transformative power of music education extends beyond cognitive enhancement to include emotional and social benefits. Music training can improve language processing, social bonding, and emotional regulation, making it a valuable tool in educational settings (François, 2015; Zaatar, 2023). The structural and functional brain changes induced by music education suggest that it can be an effective, low-cost method for neuro-education and neuro-rehabilitation, offering new strategies to support the cognitive development and academic success of Black students, particularly in addressing learning disparities and neurological challenges.

### ***Gaps in Literature/Findings***

Despite a robust body of research underscoring the cognitive, neurological, and socio-emotional benefits of music education (Bidelman, & Alain, 2015; Olszewska et al., 2021; Zaatar et al., 2023), there remains a critical gap in how these findings are translated into policy and practice within urban school settings. Urban high school band programs, particularly those serving Black students in under-resourced communities, are being systematically eliminated due to shifting educational priorities, budgetary limitations, and increased emphasis on standardized testing. This is occurring in spite of compelling evidence that music training activates neurological mechanisms associated with executive functioning, memory, language development, and emotional regulation. Moreover, when students are emotionally and culturally invested in musical experiences, such as those offered through culturally affirming band programs, the potential cognitive gains are even more pronounced. However, the existing literature often fails to center the specific experiences of Black students in these contexts, overlooking how music education can serve as both an academic intervention and a culturally sustaining practice.

This review of literature addresses the disconnect between the well-documented neurological and cognitive benefits of music training and the declining availability of band programs in urban schools. Through the theoretical lenses of Critical Race Theory, Neuroplasticity, and Cognitive Development, it explores how participation in urban high school band programs can function as a site for both cognitive enrichment and identity affirmation for Black students. While prior research has acknowledged the general benefits of music education, few studies have explicitly examined how these programs support Black students' cognitive growth within structurally inequitable educational systems. By focusing on the

intersection of race, educational access, and neuroscience, this study offers a much-needed contribution to the literature and provides actionable insights for policymakers, educators, and researchers committed to fostering equity through arts education.

### Conclusion

In light of growing inequities in educational access and the persistent marginalization of arts programming in urban schools, this review emphasizes the urgent need to reframe music education, particularly band programs, not as expendable extracurriculars, but as essential components of holistic and equitable learning environments. The removal of band programs disproportionately affects Black students in underserved communities, stripping away opportunities for culturally affirming engagement and neurological development that could significantly bolster academic success. This research underscores the transformative potential of music training as a cognitive intervention that fosters executive function, language processing, and emotional regulation.

This review is not merely about music education. It is about re-envisioning how public schools in urban contexts can support Black students' full humanity through academic rigor, cultural responsiveness, and neurological insight. It offers a multidimensional framework for future research, program development, and teacher preparation aimed at fostering excellence, equity, and empowerment. Ultimately, this review contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how educational policy decisions intersect with race, culture, and cognition. It calls for a deliberate reinvestment in urban high school band programs as vital spaces for academic, cultural, and personal growth. Centering the experiences of Black students within this discourse not only advances educational equity but also reaffirms the role of the arts as powerful vehicles for learning and liberation. Future research, policy, and practice must align to protect and expand access to music education in urban contexts, ensuring that its cognitive and cultural benefits are no longer overlooked but embraced as fundamental to student success.

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***Rhythms, Revolt, and Black Cultural Expression*****Invisible Armor:  
Black Male Educators, Fugitive Pedagogy,  
and the Politics of Presence*****Michael J. Seaberry*****Abstract**

This study examines how Black male educators navigate and resist the racialized politics of presence within educational institutions that often prioritize our physicality over our intellect (Ferguson, 2020; Dumas & Ross, 2016). Drawing from critical qualitative inquiry and anchored in BlackCrit, the hidden curriculum, and fugitive pedagogy (Givens, 2021; Kärner & Schneider, 2024), the study centers the voices and experiences of 23 Black male educators across the U.S. who participated in a survey and culturally responsive professional development workshop. Findings reveal recurring patterns of hypervisibility, labor exploitation, and reductive role assignments that cast Black men as disciplinarians or father figures rather than as pedagogical leaders (Brockenbrough, 2015; Brown, 2012). Despite these constraints, participating educators described strategies of resistance, including intellectual assertion, pedagogical refusal, and spiritual subversion, that align with a long-standing legacy of Black educational resilience (hooks, 1994; Lynn, 2006). These acts reflect what Givens (2021) terms fugitive pedagogy: subversive teaching rooted in Black cultural knowledge and survival. Ultimately, the study offers practical and policy recommendations that move beyond surface-level diversity efforts and toward structural transformation. Rather than asking to be managed or saved, we, as Black male educators in this study, call for recognition, respect, and restoration of our rightful place as leaders of just, humane, and liberatory classrooms.

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### Introduction

At my lowest, I write. Writing has always been my refuge, a way to navigate the deep and often uncharted territories of my thoughts. Through reflective writing and critical dialogue, I have come to understand that, for the past ten years of my career, my professional and intellectual work has been rooted in a singular, persistent concern: navigating and challenging the racialized conditions that shape my identity and labor as a Black male educator. These conversations surfaced because I was trying to pinpoint why I was growing tired and becoming much more weary about my future in education. I began these reflections as a means to find some solace, some peace to withstand the attacks on Black bodies that have been occurring for centuries, and more recently, since the shift from covert to overt racism in the threads of our nation.

We have been on the front lines of war. Not a war fought with guns and missiles, but a war waged on Black male bodies in education. As my upbringing in a Southern, Christian home has taught me—“For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places (King James Version, 1769/2017, Ephesians 6:12).” This proverbial war has turned classrooms and educational spaces into a battlefield where discipline is weaponized, intellect is diminished, and presence itself is politicized, all in the name of wanting Black bodies to police other Black bodies.

This war was never of our choosing. We are often enlisted into a battle we never signed up for, then positioned as enforcers of discipline rather than as architects of knowledge. We are often celebrated for patience and perseverance, showing ‘grit’ in hard times, but rarely for intellect or creativity. This is reminiscent of the fortitude Black folks had to have to survive slavery, Jim Crow era, and now. Our presence in classrooms is policed, shaped by expectations rooted in a long history of surveillance and control. This has now become a war where Black bodies are sites of power struggles and political meaning.

bell hooks reminds us that education operates within an imperialist, white supremacist, capitalist, patriarchal framework (hooks, 2004). This same framework consistently and strategically sets the rules of discipline and enforces them disproportionately on Black bodies. These regulations, masked as neutral policies and hidden curriculum, are often executed through faces that look like the very children they target (Seaberry, 2024b). We are placed at the center of this contradiction and are expected to embody both the system’s order and its reform, to serve as father figures, disciplinarians, and cultural translators, all while being denied full recognition of our intellectual contributions.

This paper unmask these hidden structures and explores the subversive strate-

gies Black male educators employ to defy the politics of presence. How do we navigate spaces that simultaneously demand our authority but restrict our autonomy? How do we reclaim our intellectual identities in institutions that often reduce us to symbols of control? Through an examination of BlackCrit, Black educational criticism, and fugitive pedagogy, this paper analyzes how Black male educators resist reductive roles imposed by the politics of presence and reclaim our intellectual and pedagogical agency. By centering the voices and experiences of Black male teachers, the study offers both theoretical grounding and practical strategies for challenging institutional misrecognition and affirming our full humanity in educational spaces.

We were drafted into this war, but we do not have to accept its terms. This is a call to reimagine, resist, and reclaim.

### Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored in three interwoven frameworks that together illuminate the racialized expectations, silences, and resistances surrounding Black male educators: BlackCrit, the hidden curriculum, and fugitive pedagogy. Together, they offer an analytic lens for understanding how we, as Black men in schools, are both surveilled and subversive, visible and yet still unseen. As a Black male educator writing from within the experiences I analyze, I adopt a first-person plural voice (we, our) to more honestly reflect the shared realities these frameworks illuminate.

#### ***BlackCrit***

In response to Critical Race Theory, BlackCrit intentionally chooses to center anti-Blackness as a foundational tool that undergirds many, if not all, U.S. institutions, especially education (Dumas & Ross, 2016). BlackCrit acknowledges that schools are not neutral spaces. Instead, they are a historically anti-Black space that reads Black male bodies through the lens of control, toughness, and physical labor. Hence, the socially constructed image of the Black male teacher as a disciplinarian is not a coincidence. This harmful image was particularly constructed through centuries of scripting that proliferated the work of surveillance (Foucault, 2012) and containment (Ferguson, 2020).

The conceptual roots of BlackCrit can be traced back to legal scholar Dorothy Roberts (1997), whose foundational work challenged the race-neutral paradigms in law by highlighting how systemic control over Black bodies, particularly through reproductive policy, healthcare, and surveillance, reveals the persistent and structural nature of anti-Blackness. Roberts' call to center Black experiences and challenge colorblind legal frameworks helped lay the groundwork for BlackCrit as an analytic stance, not only in law but in education as well. Her framing of how institutions discipline and devalue Black lives aligns closely with the mechanisms schools use to contain and marginalize Black educators.

This framework was chosen because of its critical analysis of school systems,

leading to a greater understanding of exactly how Black male educators are treated and imagined within the institutional DNA of schooling. For those of us who teach while Black and male, this framework allows us to name the models that render our intellect expendable, while holding our bodies and physical labor as close as possible.

### ***Hidden Curriculum***

Complementing BlackCrit, the concept of the hidden curriculum speaks to the unspoken norms, values, and role assignments that circulate within schools and shape teacher and student identities (Anyon, 2013; Giroux & Penna, 1979). In a systematic overview, Kärner & Schneider (2024) described

...the hidden curriculum in schools refers to both ordinary and extraordinary aspects of education, which in certain cases maintain a certain hegemony for certain students. It plays a crucial role in maintaining unequal distributions of power through explicit and implicit means in areas such as social, economic, political, and cultural reproduction...This involves both social functionality, which is concealed in many forms in the structures, processes, organizational forms of schools, and a certain autonomy and momentum of the institution itself. Important dimensions of such schooling and socialization effects are, for example, the internalization of the hierarchy of the school organization, the object status of learners, the orientation of learning toward evaluation on the basis of formal performance criteria, the adaptation to external expectations, and the internalization of bureaucratized procedures. (p. 2)

While school's policy documents and mission statements may espouse equity and inclusion, the hidden curriculum could tell another story—a story in which we are relied upon for discipline, emotional regulation, and the containment of Black youth, especially boys. As stated earlier, these expectations are not random. They are embedded in staffroom conversations, hallway assignments, and leadership decisions that actively place Black men as disciplinarians and behavioral mitigators. The hidden curriculum ensures that certain bodies are asked to perform certain roles, regardless of training, aspiration, or expertise. It is the unspoken message that we are best suited to maintain order, not design curriculum. It also frames how students and colleagues relate to them, often limiting our capacity to fully realize our intellectual or creative potential within the school.

Yet even as Black male educators are confined by these unspoken expectations, many resist them daily, actively engaging in pedagogical practices that are not only subversive but deeply rooted in a historical legacy of survival and liberation.

### ***Fugitive Pedagogy***

Against the forces outlined by BlackCrit and the hidden curriculum, Black male educators engage in what Givens (2021a) conceptualizes as fugitive pedagogy. Rooted in the life and legacy of Carter G. Woodson, Givens frames fugitive

pedagogy as a tradition of subversive educational practices that challenge dominant narratives and affirm Black intellectual life, often carried out in spaces of constraint and surveillance. This concept has since been extended by scholars who examine how such pedagogies continue to unfold in contemporary educational contexts. Brown and Brown (2010), for instance, illuminate how Black educators in K–12 schools deploy curricular counter-storytelling and culturally sustaining practices to disrupt deficit-based teaching and uphold Black student agency. Their work situates fugitive pedagogy as both a response to, and refusal of, the institutional norms that marginalize Black learners and educators alike.

This legacy of resistance continues in the work of Black and Brown educators who engage in what Zaino (2021) calls fugitive literacies, a pedagogical refusal that defies carceral schooling logics while reclaiming space for joy, culture, and liberation. Stovall (2023) furthers this discourse through her ethnographically-informed study of the Black Teacher Project, identifying Black teacher fugitive spaces as collective, professional learning environments where educators refine and sustain Black-affirming classroom practices amid curricular and administrative surveillance. Similarly, Adams (2023) explores how Black women teachers in alternative schools enact spiritually grounded, relational pedagogies through what she frames through endarkened and indigenous storywork. Storywork transformative acts resist punishment-based models and center care, community, and liberation. Even historical retrospectives such as those found in the *LA Review of Books* remind us that this pedagogical tradition is not new: Black educators during slavery and Jim Crow advanced literacy and antiracist thinking in secret (Givens, 2021b).

Taken together, these extensions of Givens's work position fugitive pedagogy as both a historical inheritance and a living, breathing framework for educational resistance. This theoretical lens allows us to understand ourselves not simply as victims of systemic constraint, but as cultural workers who engage discretion, memory, and strategic silence as tools of survival and subversion. For many, teaching is more than a profession. It is sacred, spiritual labor tethered to the ancestors who once taught in hush harbors, freedom schools, and barbershops.

By placing these three frameworks (BlackCrit, the Hidden Curriculum, and Fugitive Pedagogy) in conversation with each other, I position this study to examine how Black male educators navigate, negotiate, and sometimes reject the roles assigned to them. These theoretical tools not only guide the analysis of surveys, interviews, and workshop conversations, but also affirm the lived brilliance and quiet resistance that have long characterized Black educational labor.

## Literature Review

### *The Double Burden*

We, as Black male educators, have historically occupied a fraught and hyper-visible position within schools, where societal projections and institutional

expectations converge. While many enter the profession with a deep sense of purpose and commitment to transformative teaching, they are often subsumed into roles framed by deficit-laden narratives. Frequently cast as disciplinarians or saviors, Black male teachers are recruited not simply to educate, but to ‘fix’ Black boys or restore perceived order. We are often put into positions that reflect more about institutional anxieties than pedagogical intent (Brockenbrough, 2015; Brown, 2012). These are not neutral assignments but racialized enactments bound to the enduring afterlife of slavery and the carceral logics that shape school discipline and surveillance (Dumas & Nelson, 2016; Foucault, 2012).

The historical presence of Black men in educational spaces has long signified a radical act of resistance and communal investment. During Reconstruction, Black male educators served as architects of literacy and liberation, laying the foundations for collective advancement. In the era of segregated schooling, they functioned as both intellectual leaders and cultural custodians within their communities. Yet in contemporary educational contexts, we are too often positioned not as scholars, but as enforcers (Givens, 2021; Lynn, 2006). Our intellectual contributions are frequently eclipsed by institutional demands for our physical presence, where the boundaries of our labor extend beyond the classroom to spaces like hallways, cafeterias, and entryways and where our bodies become sites of surveillance rather than instruction.

This conflation of discipline and salvation not only distorts the roles assigned to Black male educators but also erases the depth of our pedagogical contributions. What emerges is a structural overreliance on our embodiment rather than our expertise, effectively flattening our humanity and narrowing our impact. My analysis of survey data and workshop reflections is situated within this historical and contemporary tension. This writing exemplifies an enduring paradox in which Black male educators are rendered indispensable and hypervisible yet pedagogically underutilized.

### ***The Hidden Curriculum***

In a previously published work, I discuss the importance of addressing how institutional traditions as small as the morning announcements should be analyzed for bias, language that creates othering of students, and simple harmful rhetoric (Seaberry, 2024b). In this work, I describe the permanence of curriculum in our everyday lives.

I find it my duty to make people aware that curriculum is in everything. The curriculum is not just the year-at-a-glance document and the pacing guide. It is also the school dress code, the student handbook, the policies and procedures, the photos of other people’s children hanging in the hallway, the football team being highlighted in the announcements instead of the Math Bowl winners. Every aspect of the school building and its happenings within and around are indicators of curriculum, both formal and hidden (Seaberry, 2024b, p.60)

The hidden curriculum, unspoken rules, rituals, and racial codes embedded in school structures, do not explicitly appear in syllabi, but they shape every inter-

action (Anyon, 2013; Love, 2019). For Black male educators, this curriculum assigns us roles as enforcers or mentors, rarely as intellectuals. The expectations are whispered, written between the lines of school handbooks and hallway glances: “be strong,” “keep order,” and “handle the boys.” These expectations are particularly dangerous because they go unchecked. They are rehearsed in staff meetings, echoed in teacher lounges, and reinforced by administrative silence. The result is a narrowing of possibility, a tightening of metaphorical ropes, creating a condition where Black men are judged not by what we teach, but by how we ‘control the room.’

Survey completers and workshop attendees describe being called on when students “act up” or when a Black boy “needs a man to talk to.” Yet, they are rarely asked to lead curriculum discussions, to mentor new (non-Black and male) teachers, or to shape school culture beyond discipline. In short, our bodies are welcome; our minds are not.

### ***Subversion, Resistance, and Intellectual Refusal***

And yet, we resist. Not always loudly, but with intention. In the spirit of fugitive pedagogy (Givens, 2021), many Black men in education build classrooms that center joy, culture, and radical care. We teach curriculum standards, yes, but we also teach self-worth, Black history, and collective healing. We resist our assigned scripts by refusing to discipline without inquiry, refusing to pathologize Black children, and refusing to conform to whitewashed notions of professionalism. Lynn (2006) and hooks (2004) remind us that teaching can be a liberatory act, and we have long understood this truth. Whether in hallway check-ins or book discussions that affirm Black identity, they transform classrooms into sites of possibility.

The Profound Gentlemen (PG) Community Impact Assembly (CIA) workshop created space for this subversion to be named aloud. Educators discussed how they push back against the myth of the Black male disciplinarian and choose instead to mentor with compassion, teach through culture, and challenge the very systems that hired them to uphold the status quo. Our strategies are not only pedagogical; they are spiritual and political acts of survival.

### **Methodology**

I began this conversation at Spelman College’s Annual Diversity Summit in fall 2024. I was honored to invite a diverse group of Black male colleagues to speak on a panel titled N95: Unmasking the Hidden Curriculum and Black Male Teachers’ Fight for Liberation (Seaberry, 2024a). This study also emerges from the intersection of my lived experience and my scholarly commitment to understanding how we, as Black male educators, navigate spaces that both need and negate us. It is a study born in barbershops and classrooms, in whispered frustrations and public declarations, in the sacred space between resistance and resignation. Methodologically, this project is shaped by critical qualitative inquiry, with

an emphasis on Black epistemologies, counter-narratives, and liberation-centered research traditions.

### **Research Design**

This pilot study utilizes a two-pronged qualitative approach: a geographically-varied survey of Black male educators and a culturally responsive professional development workshop. These methods work in tandem to surface our voices, strategies, and emotional labor as we navigate the politics of presence in schools. The study is guided by the following research questions: (1) How do Black male educators experience and respond to institutional expectations in educational spaces? (2) What subversive or liberatory practices do we employ in our professional roles? and (3) In what ways do our identities inform our resistance to or refusal of traditional schooling roles? While the findings offer valuable insights, this study is exploratory in nature and would benefit from expansion into a broader national project that includes additional qualitative methods such as in-depth interviews and longitudinal analysis.

This study draws from a design rooted in critical qualitative inquiry, with an emphasis on understanding how Black male educators navigate and resist racialized role expectations in schools. Data was collected through a survey that included both multiple-choice and open-ended responses. This structure allowed for a broad assessment of common patterns while also providing space for educators to articulate our lived experiences in our own words. Rather than positioning educators as passive informants, this study views them as co-constructors of knowledge. The methods used were intentionally designed to honor the complexity and emotional depth of our experiences.

### **Participants**

The study engaged 23 Black male educators, recruited through snowball sampling and a professional network affiliated with *Profound Gentlemen*, an organization dedicated to supporting male educators of color. While modest in size, this sample reflects a range of educational contexts and geographic regions across the United States. Educators represented over 14 states, including Texas, Connecticut, Ohio, Georgia, New York, and Maryland, reflecting a wide geographic distribution across urban, suburban, and rural contexts. Professionally, the cohort includes K–12 classroom teachers (n=5), school administrators (n=5), higher education faculty (n=2), deans, instructional coaches, and nonprofit education leaders. Most educators worked in public school systems (n=16), and 57% (n=13) held a master's degree or higher. Years of experience ranged from early-career educators in their 20s to veteran professionals in their 60s, with a median teaching experience of 8–13+ years. This range reflects a seasoned and deeply invested group of us as Black male educators,

whose positionalities offer valuable insight into institutional dynamics across diverse educational spaces.

### **Data Collection**

#### ***Survey***

To gather broader insights and ensure this study exemplified the diversity of Black male teachers, I distributed a survey through Profound Gentlemen, my professional networks, and various social media sites. The survey included both Likert-scale items and open-ended questions designed to surface our beliefs about our professional positioning, visibility, and resistance strategies.

#### ***Workshop Reflections***

After receiving 23 responses to the survey, I opened the discussion to a broader national space to anchor my findings. During the workshop at the Profound Gentlemen Community Impact Assembly, educators engaged in critical dialogue, journaling exercises, and group reflection. They were asked to respond to prompts such as, “When have you had to mask your intellectual labor?” and “How do you disrupt the hidden curriculum at your school?” Written and verbal reflections were collected with our consent, always with care and transparency.

#### ***Positionality***

As a Black male educator and researcher, my body is not separate from this study. In fact, it is central to it. My own experiences navigating schools, holding space for Black children, and resisting deficit framings inform every aspect of this work. I write not as an observer, but as an insider. I am in conversation with educators in this study, not merely extracting from them. My identity shapes not only what I ask but how I interpret, feel, and understand what is shared. I do not consider this a limitation; it is the methodology.

### **Data Analysis**

#### ***Quantitative Analysis***

Educators’ responses to fixed-choice questions concerning our professional roles, school responsibilities, and perceptions of institutional treatment were examined and analyzed using frequency distribution. Frequencies and percentages were calculated to identify how often we are perceived as disciplinarians or being expected to serve as father figures. These quantitative patterns offered a foundational snapshot of the institutional dynamics shaping the presence of Black men in educational settings and helped guide the thematic framing of the qualitative responses

### *Qualitative Analysis*

Open-ended responses were analyzed using a thematic approach grounded in BlackCrit. Initial coding was conducted inductively, allowing our language, insights, and positionalities to guide the formation of codes. These codes were then grouped into broader thematic categories related to politicization, resistance, pedagogy, institutional disruption, and cultural labor. The analytical process followed several phases: (1) All responses were read multiple times to allow for a deep understanding of tone, context, and meaning; (2) Key phrases, and concepts were highlighted and coded line-by-line, with attention paid to patterns related to race, gender, and power in educational spaces; (3) Codes were collapsed into core themes such as politics of presence, pedagogical refusal, fugitive strategies, and calls for institutional transformation; and (4) Each theme was analyzed through a critical interpretive lens to situate our strategies and reflections within larger histories of Black educational resistance and institutional constraint.

To ensure analytical depth and coherence, qualitative findings were triangulated with the descriptive statistical data as well as personal reflections. This iterative process allowed the emergent themes to remain grounded in the raw experiences of educators while also contributing to a broader theoretical conversation about race, masculinity, and power in education.

### **Findings and Discussion**

In this study, I explore how we, as Black male educators, navigate and resist the racialized expectations that often position us as disciplinarians, father figures, or symbolic role models rather than as intellectual leaders and pedagogical architects. Through data collected from an exploratory survey (n=23), including open-ended responses, the findings reveal enduring patterns of hypervisibility, labor exploitation, and institutional misuse of Black bodies. At the same time, we articulate and enact a range of subversive strategies designed to reclaim our full humanity and reassert our intellectual presence in school spaces.

We represented a wide and diverse cross-section of educational professionals. The majority worked in public school settings (n = 16), with participant ages spanning from early 20s to late 60s. Finally, educators in this study are based in over 14 different states across the United States, including Texas, Connecticut, Ohio, Georgia, New York, Maryland, and more. This demographic snapshot reflects a seasoned cohort of Black male educators whose longevity in the field speaks not only to our expertise, but to our endurance within systems that continue to misread and misuse our professional identities. While limited in scope and not generalizable, the survey results offer meaningful insight into recurring themes in Black male educators' experiences.

### ***Politics of Presence***

Our survey responses revealed a consistent pattern: we are too often positioned in reductive, racialized roles within our schools. A significant proportion of responses (78.3%) reported being assumed to be disciplinarians, particularly for Black male students. Similarly, 69.6% were expected to serve as mentors or father figures, fulfilling a caretaking function not equally demanded of our peers. Additionally, 65.2% indicated they were assigned behavior management tasks without formal recognition, reinforcing a structural reliance on our labor outside the bounds of instruction. Nearly half (47.8%) felt that our intellectual contributions were undervalued, pointing to the persistence of anti-intellectual stereotypes that frame Black male educators as enforcers rather than scholars.

These findings align with Ferguson's (2020) theory of the hypervisibility/invisibility paradox, where we are constantly seen, yet rarely seen fully or accurately. Our bodies are recognized and relied upon, but our minds and pedagogical visions are often ignored or dismissed. This phenomenon is further supported by BlackCrit (Dumas & Ross, 2016), which asserts that anti-Black institutions frequently interpret Black bodies, especially those who identify as male, as instruments of control rather than vehicles of thought, creativity, or leadership.

### ***Strategies of Resistance: Reclaiming Pedagogical Space***

Despite the weight of institutional expectations, we are not passive recipients of stereotypes. Instead, we engage in a range of intentional strategies, both overt and subtle, to resist being weaponized and to reclaim our roles as intellectuals and pedagogues.

When asked how we navigate these imposed roles, we highlighted several key strategies: (1) 43.5% reported using humor or indirect forms of resistance to challenge and destabilize the stereotypes projected onto us; (2) 34.8% described building strategic alliances with administrators and colleagues to advocate for more equitable role definitions and institutional support; (3) 30.4% noted a deliberate emphasis on their individual intellectual identity as a means to shift attention from their physical presence to their pedagogical leadership; and (4) 13.0% intentionally avoided hypervisibility in discipline-related matters, choosing instead to focus their energies on teaching and mentorship.

These strategies illustrate what Givens (2021) defines as fugitive pedagogy, which correlates to the everyday acts of resistance, survival, and subversion that Black educators have historically practiced within systems not designed for our flourishing. One of us said,

[I] vocalize that I'm not there for discipline. I am not there for punishment. I am there to help them learn. My role is to provide ways for them to be accountable for what happens at school, and with other individuals. Discipline is always the last resort.

Another educator shared, “I teach about white supremacy and patriarchy in my class because I know the role people expect me to play, and I choose not to perform it.”

These reflections are not just anecdotal. They are pedagogical refusals. One participant spoke to the power of reframing visibility, saying, “I intentionally dress more casually so I’m not read as ‘intimidating’ or ‘stuffy.’ I do this so I can disarm people and get to the work I came to do.” Another described redirecting institutional assumptions, explaining that he declined to participate in disciplinary conversations, instead focusing on mentoring students and leading instructional initiatives.

Together, these responses demonstrate that Black male educators are not merely surviving within hostile or misaligned environments, but they are actively reimagining what it means to teach, lead, and show up whole. Our strategies do not seek to dismantle the system all at once, but instead carve out space for freedom and brilliance within it.

### ***Disruptive Moments and Defining Pedagogy***

We offered rich, grounded examples of intentional disruption. These particular moments actively challenged and redefined the institutional narratives that seek to frame Black male educators through the narrow lenses of control, discipline, or symbolic presence. Our disruptions were not abstract; they were tactical, embodied, and deeply pedagogical.

Educators described actions such as modeling relational rather than punitive authority, publishing scholarship to assert intellectual legitimacy, publicly naming misaligned expectations, and reclaiming curriculum as a space for Black voices and Black joy. These moments reflect a commitment to teaching not just within systems, but often against them. As Givens (2021a) explains through the lens of fugitive pedagogy, Black educators have long taught in ways that defy institutional scripting. Black educators have been crafting freedom in the very spaces meant to constrain them. Another of us reflected on a moment during summer camp when he was called in to “handle” a group of students. He recalled,

When I walked in, the kids sat down expecting me to yell. I stood on the table instead and yelled, ‘WELCOME TO CAMP ARROWHEAD!’ That moment changed how the students and staff saw me, not as a warden, but as a guide.

Another educator recounted, “when I published about this very topic,” while some mentioned other subversive strategies such as ‘coming out’ as same-gender loving, obtaining advanced degrees, and even remaining in the classroom instead of pursuing administrative roles when encouraged.

Such moments echo hooks’ (1994) assertion that teaching is a site of liberation when it is rooted in truth-telling, boundary-setting, and the reclamation of one’s voice. By reorienting authority around care, creativity, and critical con-

sciousness, we disrupt not only the expectations placed on us, but we also interrupt the very structure of schooling that makes such expectations seem natural.

### ***Policy and Institutional Recommendations***

When asked what policies or institutional changes would best support our work, we identified a range of interventions designed to affirm, not manage, our presence in school systems. The recommendations offered were not requests for symbolic inclusion, but calls for reparative policy that acknowledges the historic marginalization of Black male educators and creates conditions for our professional and intellectual flourishing (See Table 1).

We strongly advocated for the development of mentorship pipelines and affinity spaces, where Black male educators could receive support, mentorship, and community, free from racial isolation. We emphasized the need for curriculum autonomy and culturally sustaining professional development, enabling us to teach in ways that reflect the cultural and intellectual traditions of Black communities, rather than being tethered to Eurocentric standards. Several educators called for equitable placement in core academic roles such as English, Humanities, and STEM, all fields where we are often underrepresented due to assumptions about our capacity or interests. Others highlighted the importance of clear job descriptions, higher compensation, intentional rubrics for culturally relevant teacher evaluations, and expanded leadership opportunities that go beyond roles tied to discipline or student control. Finally, educators also called for autonomy in

**Table 1**  
***Highlighted Findings and Corresponding Policy Recommendations***

<i>Finding</i>	<i>Policy Implication</i>
Black male educators are disproportionately assigned disciplinary roles.	Revise staff role expectations to include shared behavioral responsibilities across all faculty members.
Their intellectual labor is undervalued compared to physical/emotional labor.	Create equitable curriculum development teams and leadership pipelines inclusive of Black male educators.
Participants feel their full identities are unseen within school culture.	Require school leaders to implement identity-affirming, equity-focused professional learning.
Subversive practices are essential but often unrecognized.	Protect time and space for culturally responsive, restorative, and non-traditional pedagogical approaches.
Hidden curricula reinforce race/gender role expectations.	Conduct school culture audits and include equity metrics in staff evaluations.

leading parent-teacher conferences so that we are not solely responsible for talks surrounding discipline, but can also provide perspective on the student's intellectual capacity in the classroom. According to educators in this study, this creates a "line of communication and representation" and also "shows academic credibility and [administrators'] ability to build teacher-leaders."

Notably, some educators pointed out that policy shifts are not enough without accompanying cultural transformation, particularly at the level of school leadership. Institutional leaders must be trained to recognize the full pedagogical range of Black male educators, not only what we represent, but what we know and how we teach.

Taken together, these responses affirm that supporting Black male educators requires more than surface-level diversity efforts. It requires intentional, systemic reconfiguration of how Black men are hired, retained, supported, and promoted in education spaces. We are not asking to be saved; we are demanding to be respected, resourced, and restored in our rightful place. We are thinkers, teachers, leaders, and builders of just and humane schools.

### Limitations

As a pilot study, this project is limited by its small, self-selected sample of 23 participants and its reliance on short-term engagement through a single workshop and survey. While rich in insight, the data cannot be generalized to all Black male educators across contexts. Additionally, the absence of longitudinal observation or interviews limits our ability to assess long-term outcomes or shifts over time.

### Future Research

Building on the findings of this pilot study, future research should include a larger, nationally representative sample of Black male educators to strengthen generalizability. Longitudinal studies that follow educators over time could provide deeper insights into how our strategies of resistance and resilience evolve. There is also a need to examine institutional responses to policy changes informed by such studies and to include other intersectional identities (e.g., Black queer male educators) in future explorations.

### Conclusion

Here's what I learned: we, as Black male educators, show up to work every day wearing invisible armor. It's not stitched from fabric or shaped in a welding shop, but forged from history, expectation, and survival. That armor is heavy. It protects, but it also conceals. It lets us stand tall in spaces not built for us. This study reveals that we are expected to be the security, the role model, the motivator, the father, the buffer, the coach, the mentor, the enforcer, the belt, the paddle, and more. We are used but not always heard. Needed but not fully respected.

The numbers make it plain. Take a look at the data again and you will see

that nearly 8 out of 10 Black male educators in this study said they were seen as disciplinarians. Almost 70% were expected to be father figures or moral anchors. Over half said they were tasked with managing behavior without being asked or acknowledged. And nearly half said their intellectual contributions were overlooked. None of them asked for these roles.

But we are not sitting still. In fact, I would argue that we cannot afford to sit still for too long in fear that we may be used as a prop or a stepping stone. We are not waiting for validation. We are resisting every day, in ways big and small. Some use humor. Others build coalitions. Many double down on their academic identity. Some simply say, “That’s not my job,” and mean it.

The stories we shared show that disruption doesn’t always come with shouting. Sometimes it’s a quiet “no.” Sometimes it’s a lesson plan filled with Black writers and thinkers. Sometimes it’s a moment of joy. Sometimes it’s choosing to stay in the classroom when everyone says you should be a Dean. Sometimes it’s being a same-gender-loving Black man in a school system that never planned for your presence. These are acts of pedagogical refusal, but also spiritual resistance. We are teachers who are building something more liberated than what we inherited. We also ask for more than applause. We want a policy that repairs, not just includes. We want leadership development, affinity spaces, curriculum autonomy, and fair pay. We want to be placed in subjects where we can teach minds, not just manage bodies. And we want our voices heard at the table, not just our bodies used to hold the table up.

But here’s another truth: none of these changes will matter if the culture doesn’t shift. You can raise the pay and still miss the point. You can hire more Black men and still misuse them. Until schools stop reading us as threats or saviors and start seeing us as scholars and builders, we will keep wearing the armor. And the armor will keep doing its job, but at a cost. It holds us up, but it hides the depth. It protects us, but it muffles our brilliance. We want to release these feelings and we need—no, demand—that everyone does their part to help.

This work is not about saving Black male educators. It’s about listening to us, learning from us, and finally getting harm out of the way so we can do what we came to do: teach, lead, love, and liberate.

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**Black Work, Resistance, and Institutional Reckoning****Black Mothering as Warning:  
Lamentations for Living  
in the Afterlife of Slavery****Martez Files****Abstract**

This article theorizes Black mothering (BM) as an analytic that sharpens Critical Race Parenting (CRP), positioning it as a framework for apprehending how Black mothers think, act, and survive within the enduring structures of antiblackness. While CRP offers a vocabulary for understanding racialized parenting, Black mothering exposes its limits by insisting on the singularity of Black existence as the site of domination, negation, and hyper-surveillance. Through Black feminist narrative inquiry (BFNI), this work engages the narratives of five Black mothers drawn from a larger collection of fifteen Black activist mothers, reading their strategies, warnings, and lamentations as disciplined acts of clarity rather than mere gestures of care or hope. The thematic acts, *Stop Being Delusional, I'll Prepare a Place for Us*, and *Throw Everything You Got*, illuminate BM as praxis that refuses sentimentality and the moral demand for redemptive meaning. BM as CRP does not seek to repair systems that depend on Black suffering. BM emerges here as a practice of vigilance, clarity, and maneuvering under siege. This article emphasizes the expansion of CRP without overstating its capabilities. It does not promise escape. It names the impossibility of parenting in the afterlife of slavery and still marks where and how Black mothers try.

*Keywords:* Black Mothering, Critical Race Parenting, Antiblackness, Black Feminist Narrative Inquiry, Storytelling

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### My Grandmother's Warnings

My grandmother often warned me about the despicable and violent conditions of this world, particularly for poor Black people. She recounted stories of Black labor, resilience, ingenuity, and how Black people fought against insurmountable odds to create space for themselves and their families. Her admonishments were precise and unrelenting: avoid staying out late, monitor your behavior, and tailor your speech to shield yourself from the predatory structures of racism. Her home was a sanctuary of Black cultural affirmation: shelves lined with *Ebony* pictorial encyclopedias, volumes chronicling Black histories, and photos of radiant Black figures. These objects bore witness to her effort to cultivate a love for Blackness in me. Her teachings instilled a profound sense of pride but equally reflected a counterinsurgent logic that shaped my understanding of survival. I believed that careful self-presentation, how I spoke, dressed, and achieved, could protect me from the unrelenting violence of white supremacy. This belief eroded as I grew older. My life became increasingly precarious as I encountered systemic violence, harassment by police, and surveillance by security guards, teachers, principals, and other state agents tasked with disciplining Black bodies.

Despite my early beliefs in the salvific potential of Black excellence, the persistence of white supremacy rendered these efforts futile. White supremacy, though pervasive in its reach, operates as a structural framework that organizes domination broadly. However, it is antiblackness that sustains the social order through the specific and gratuitous targeting of Black people in life and death (Sharpe, 2016). Antiblackness is not simply a subset of white supremacy but an ontological framework that positions Black suffering as indispensable to the coherence of the world (Douglass, 2018). It is this specificity, Black life as precarious, Black death looming, that distinguishes antiblackness from other forms of domination (Douglass, 2018; Sharpe, 2016).

My Black feminist mentors illuminated this distinction, teaching me to identify the counterinsurgent aims embedded in the promises of assimilation. These mentors revealed how my adherence to capitalist ideals, nationalist propaganda, and heterosexist desires was never intended to safeguard me but to perpetuate the mechanisms that obliterate Black people (Hill Collins, 2000; Lorde, 1984). Antiblackness operates not only through overt violence but through a sadistic consumption of Black suffering or what some might call an antiblack enjoyment, which underpins societal pleasures and aspirations. My mentors provided me with the tools to name these dynamics and strategies for navigating a world that relies on Black exploitation, suffering, and death to stabilize itself, exposing the impossibility of escape within systems designed to make and unmake Black people. This guidance demonstrates how Black mothering is a form of Critical Race Parenting.

### **A Question to Clarify the Stakes and Structure the Analysis**

How do acts of warning and lamentation within Black mothering (BM) praxis sharpen the contours and critical stakes of Critical Race Parenting (CRP)?

#### **Theoretical Frameworks**

This paper employs Black mothering and Critical Race Parenting as interwoven theoretical frameworks that clarify the pedagogical, political, and affective labor Black mothers undertake. These frameworks guide my reading of how the mothers in this work navigate a world structured by antiblack violence, not only as caregivers but as educators, organizers, and protectors. Their practices exceed conventional definitions of parenting, functioning instead as responses to a social order that positions Black life as disposable. As Esposito and Evans-Winters (2021) explain, a theoretical framework “typically provides some indication of how the researcher views knowledge and the research issues” (p. 170). Here, Black mothering operates as a site of theorization and praxis, marking the strategies and the psychic weight borne from raising Black children within a hostile world.

DePouw and Matias (2016) define CRP as a praxis that occurs “amidst contemporary societal contexts rife with unpunished police violence against Black and Brown youth, all occurring amidst contentions that we now live in a postracial U.S. society” (p. 237). This framework emphasizes the necessity of preparing children of color to navigate a racist world while recognizing that the protections parents can offer are often “uncertain and illusory,” even as their support remains unwavering (p. 238). The dual imperatives of CRP, equipping children for survival while maintaining a critical stance toward systems of subjugation, situate Black mothers’ parenting as a form of resistance. Racial realism, a theory developed by Derrick Bell, critically informs the broader framework of Critical Race Parenting by offering a lens to understand the permanence of racism within U.S. society. Bell critiques idealism, particularly the reliance on incremental legal change as a strategy for dismantling systemic racism, arguing that this approach often fails to produce substantive transformation. As DePouw and Matias (2016) note, Bell’s theory “calls for a broader sense of idealism that would dream of different possibilities than currently exist” (p. 239). Critical Race Parenting (CRP) is situated within this aspirational posture. It offers a responsive approach to teaching and learning that prepares children of color to navigate the material and symbolic terrains of subordination, grounded in “cultural traditions, epistemologies, ways of being, values, and relationships” (p. 241). As a praxis, CRP foregrounds intergenerational survival strategies, situates children within their social, historical, and political contexts, and cultivates a political imagination rooted in resistance to white supremacy. It is a pedagogical framework and a communal ethic attuned to how family, education, and culture can function to resist domination.

Black mothering, while resonant with CRP, extends its analytic frame by in-

sisting on the specificity of antiblackness. Unlike white supremacy, which organizes racial hierarchies broadly, antiblackness positions Blackness as the negation of the human, rendering Black life fungible and disposable (Hartman, 1997). The work of Black mothering, then, is not just to navigate or prepare for domination, but to contend with an ontological order that necessitates Black suffering as its condition of coherence (Sexton, 2012). While CRP can address multiple forms of subordination, Black mothering as CRP sharpens the lens. It exposes the impossible conditions Black mothers are made to endure, frames lamentation and warning as vital acts of care, and refuses the flattening logics that conflate Black life with other minoritized experiences. Black mothering prepares for siege. And it does so with clarity about the structural conditions that produce vulnerability as a mode of living. This distinction highlights how Black mothers confront a world that systemically necessitates their suffering and the obliteration of their children.

Together, Black mothering and Critical Race Parenting contribute to an ideational framework that is attentive to intergenerational strategies of survival. While CRP offers a framework for racial literacy and social consciousness within communities of color, Black mothering attends to the specific ontological and structural precarity that shapes Black life. Black mothers are not merely preparing children to navigate racial injustice but are also crafting practices in proximity to grief, disappearance, and social death. When situated within, and at times expanding beyond, the contours of CRP, Black mothering refuses pedagogical romanticism. It reveals the labor of care as a practice forged under enduring threat and responds to its brutal constancy. Black mothering, required by the material and psychic conditions that produce Black children as always-already imperiled, clarifies the stakes of care where no structural relief is ever promised.

### ***Black Mothering in Research***

The strained relationships that Black mothers often experience with schools, along with the presumption that their presence causes harm rather than support, have been documented in research (Hill Collins, 2000). Still, their acts of care, advocacy, and organizing remain largely unrecognized by schools and administrators. Hill Collins argues that white feminists often viewed maternal politics as a less developed form of activism. In contrast, Black mothers have historically drawn on the maternal as a locus of clarity, power, and confrontation. She writes that Black mothering, grounded in communal responsibility, can move mothers to “take actions that they otherwise might not have considered” (p. 194). Her analysis focuses on the resistance efforts of low-income and urban Black mothers, including writing, attending church, protesting, petitioning, and public shaming. This paper builds on that foundation to examine how maternal strategies operate as deliberate responses to the conditions of antiblack violence. By engaging directly with the narratives of Black mothers, this work reveals the situated and often improvisational forms of maternal action that confront a world whose coherence depends on their dispossession.

Not all Black mothering is uniform, particularly across socioeconomic classes. Low-income Black mothers face barriers and exclusions that are distinct from those encountered by middle- and high-income Black mothers. This complexity highlights how low-income Black mothers deviate not only from white normative parenting structures but also from other Black mothers within their communities. Kakli (2011) examined the experiences of parent activists for education, employing a case study approach to explore the life of a Black educator and activist working to dismantle inequitable practices inside and outside the classroom. By centering the specificity of a single Black mother's experience, Kakli disrupts the emphasis on generalizability in educational research and instead insists upon the analytic value of particularity. This work builds on that orientation by foregrounding the irreducible context and nuance within Black mothering. Rather than flattening BM insights into universal claims, it takes seriously the situated knowledges produced by Black mothers as they navigate antiblack structures. In doing so, this paper affirms specificity as theory, strategy, and refusal.

Allen and White-Smith (2017) illuminate how Black mothers and their sons are routinely disciplined within white educational institutions, where white cultural values masquerade as neutral norms. Within this racialized schema, anything deviating from this standard is disorderly or threatening. Black mothering, often operating in tension with these imposed norms, is cast as volatile or uninformed. This work builds upon Allen and White-Smith's intervention by situating Black mothers' cautions and requiems as central to refining Critical Race Parenting. The narratives engaged here reveal how Black mothers disrupt white institutional orders while forging modes of protection and communal endurance.

Fuentes (2013) introduces the term "mother-participants" to signal a shift away from extractive research "on" mothers of color toward more collaborative modes of inquiry "with" them (p. 304). She also expands "political mothering" to include "fathers, aunts, grandparents, and concerned community members," all of whom act toward "creating better worlds for our youth" (p. 304). While this expansive framing challenges fixed gender roles, it risks dissolving the specific racial-sexual logics that structure Black maternal labor. Rather than idealizing the maternal or abstracting it into a shared ethic of care, this work insists on analytic precision. Black mothers in this analysis are not celebrated as moral beacons but engaged as co-theorists whose insights emerge through imposed conditions of surveillance, extraction, and disregard. Their practices do not signal transcendence or virtue but index a positionality that is imposed on them as they navigate a world that relies on their exhaustion to function.

Beauboeuf-Lafontant (2008) foregrounds the cultural and political specificity of Black mothering in classrooms, rejecting the notion that care can exist apart from power. She writes, "Protecting children from adversity is not the same as preparing them to effectively deal with such circumstances" (p. 261), pointing to a form of mothering that neither shields nor sentimentalizes. Politicized mothering

in this context does not rehabilitate schooling but clarifies its violence. “Authentic care,” is not depoliticized for Beauboeuf-Lafontant, nor is it benevolence. It is strategic endurance, forged in proximity to children already marked for jails and death. Extending Beauboeuf-Lafontant’s work, this paper situates Black mothering as a methodology of interruption, one that builds political clarity in themselves and their children despite the terrain.

Elliott, Powell, and Brenton (2015) examine the ideology of “intensive mothering” and how it presumes limitless time, financial resources, and emotional bandwidth as prerequisites for “good” mothering. This framework, constructed through white, middle-class norms, pathologizes those who do not or cannot conform. Black low-income mothers are held accountable to this model despite being structurally denied access to its sustaining conditions. These scholars argue that their work provides “an in-depth portrait of the lives of low-income, Black single mothers to give voice to their parenting beliefs, experiences, and practices, but also to theorize the tensions and contradictions surrounding the ideology of intensive mothering” (p. 255). They rightly treat these mothers as theorists. This analysis aligns with their commitment and contends that the adoption of intensive mothering by Black mothers should not be misread as consent. It signals the coercive force of normative parenting logics that conscript them into performances of legitimacy while concealing the political clarity already at work in their daily practices. My engagement with their work is a deliberate effort to trace how Black mothers move under duress, enact critique through practice, and trouble dominant notions of care that demand performance without structural redress.

Thomas and Blackmon (2015) examine how the murder of Trayvon Martin intensified Black parents’ racial socialization strategies, identifying three dominant concerns: the persistence of racial profiling, the vulnerability of Black boys and men, and the need to shield Black children from harm. These concerns are not new but reflect a persistent structure of antiblack violence that structures Black parenting into political labor. Their study, based on a survey of 104 Black parents, reveals how everyday parenting practices function as mechanisms of survival in a world that renders Black life disposable. This paper engages Thomas and Blackmon to foreground how Black parents (mothers in my work) craft strategies that exceed reaction and operate as deliberate confrontations with the world’s violence against Black people. The mothers in this work do not simply respond to episodic violence; they navigate an antiblack terrain that demands they organize life around the anticipation of premature death. Even still, I take care not to reduce their praxis to liberal ideas of grit and resilience. Instead, they offer a repertoire of practices that expose the saturation of Black suffering and reveal Black maternal labor as an epistemological intervention into the grammar of violence itself.

**Black Mothering Praxis (BMP)**

Black Mothering Praxis (BMP) is a conceptual lens that clarifies how Black mothers maneuver through the enduring architecture of antiblack violence. It is not a sentimental turn toward care or repair but a disciplined practice of vigilance, anticipation, and shielding within conditions of permanent exposure. BMP rejects the liberal notion that so-called resilience and love are redemptive. It is a tactical orientation, not merely therapeutic. The mothers in this study are not preoccupied with restoring order to a world that depends on their undoing. They move with precision through a landscape that requires constant calibration to danger, crafting protective rituals and strategies of clarity in the face of social, psychic, and material threat. BMP names this labor as analytic. It reveals how Black mothers develop forms of knowing forged in proximity to harm, where survival becomes method and theory. These practices do not seek recognition from institutions invested in their erasure. Instead, they enact refusal, reading the world as hostile terrain that must be navigated, not reformed. BMP insists that protection is not an act of faith in humanity but a continual preparation for catastrophe, a way of making life possible inside the ongoing event of antiblackness.

**Black Feminist Narrative Inquiry**

This research draws on Black Feminist Narrative Inquiry (BFNI) to examine how Black women theorize through mothering wisdom and mother wit, particularly as they navigate a world organized through antiblack violence. Evans-Winters (2018) reminds us that “critical qualitative inquiry and/or leanings (e.g., personal reflection, auto/ethnography, narrative inquiry, storytelling, poetics, etc.) [allow us] to engage in meaningful and unapologetic conversations on race, class, gender, sexuality, privilege, and power” (p. 7). This framing does not rely on sentiment or empathy but on the political necessity of study that thinks with the epistemic contributions of Black women. As a scholar, activist, and organizer committed to the liberation of Black and other oppressed people, I understand these approaches as methodologically and ethically precise for this work. Deploying BFNI enables narrative inquiry to transcend representation and move toward analysis that reveals how Black mothers theorize in conditions designed to obscure their knowledge. It ensures that research neither extracts from nor romanticizes Black women’s experiences, but instead attends to the clarity, rigor, and survival logics embedded in their narratives.

Looking at narrative research from a Black feminist and intersectional perspective was critical in making decisions about editing and restorying the mothers’ narratives. DeCuir-Gunby, Chapman, and Schutz (2019, p. 93) emphasize that narrative research for intersectionality:

1. focuses on multiple inequalities embedded in identities and intersecting forms of oppression

2. avoids hierarchies of oppression
3. centers the voice(s) of the multiply burdened
4. uses counter-storytelling to provide alternative realities to debunk the master narrative(s)

As DeCuir-Gunby et al. (2019) explain, “authenticity of the participants’ voice must be present in the work,” and researchers must reposition themselves from talking to listening, valuing the multidimensionality of participants’ voices (p. 93). In this narrative, I serve as story editor and co-theorist, working alongside the mother narrators to clarify how they move, interpret, and survive within antiblack conditions. This approach requires reflexivity as a practice of rigor that accounts for the layered positions of both narrator and listener. Centering intersectionality is not a call for inclusion but an analytic recognition of how domination arranges itself across difference. The mother narrators offer precise readings of their communities and the systems that endanger them, insisting that safety cannot be outsourced to the state. Their emphasis on community protection over police protection highlights the ongoing negotiations needed to preserve life in hostile conditions. Their stories align with the family and community-centered analyses of Critical Race Parenting. Black mothering extends this framework by engaging the ordinary and spectacular violences that shape their lives, revealing a praxis of vigilance, preparation, and unrelenting opposition.

Bhattacharya (2017) situates qualitative inquiry as an engagement with the multiplicity of truths, arguing that “qualitative researchers are in the business of understanding, interrogating, or deconstructing multiple truths” that emerge within “contextual details, social structures, [and] discourses” (p. 36). Rather than pursuing “comprehension” as an end, this project rejects post-positivist assumptions of impartiality and objectivity that render the researcher an observer rather than a participant in power. Esposito and Evans-Winters (2021) remind us that “we must accept our own lived experience and how it shapes our critical consciousness and approach to the research process” (p. 13). To do otherwise is to reproduce the epistemic order that sustain racial hierarchy. Researchers are never detached witnesses but are situated within the very structures they seek to name. Ignoring the differentiations across race, gender, and class, as Esposito and Evans-Winters (2021) note, “inadvertently maintains the status quo” (p. 14). For scholars writing in the afterlife of slavery, which Hartman (2007) defines as “skewed life chances, limited access to health and education, premature death, incarceration, and impoverishment” (p. 6), the demand is to think from within the condition of subjection itself, to theorize without illusion, and to write from the ruins that structure Black existence in an antiblack world. Critical inquiry must therefore proceed with a refusal to rehearse the “same old theories, [same] old methodologies, [and] same old buffet of protocols set before us by the beneficiaries of academic apartheid” (Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2021, p. 14).

In this work, Black mothering narratives function as analytic texts that expose how these Black mothers think, move, and strategize within structures of domination. As Esposito and Evans-Winters (2021) note, “narrative inquirers recognize that both research participants and researchers lead storied lives,” and “our stories as researchers cannot be separated from the meaning we make of participant stories” (pp. 67–68). These mother narrators theorize through story, transmitting collective memory and political clarity. Their storytelling is not ornamental. They are modes of critique. Through narrative, they chart how domination is endured and named, how harm is anticipated and countered. Too often, Black mothers are denied complexity, positioned instead as archetypes through which others stage their moral performances. The elevation of the “good Black mother” becomes a disciplinary tool, weaponized against non-compliant Black women to affirm antiblack and patriarchal logics. These stories work against such fictions. They refuse redemption and insist on truth-telling to mark the everyday practices through which Black mothers confront violence. Narratives that embrace complexity challenge reductive tropes and sharpen our understanding of Black mothering. When read through critical theoretical frameworks, Black mothers’ stories unsettle dominant interpretations and expose the strategies, insights, and contradictions that structure their lives. Esposito and Evans-Winters (2021) remind us that when storytelling is used critically, it strengthens communal knowledge and deepens analytic inquiry. The narratives shared by the mother narrators in this work illuminate practices of refusal, clarity, and protection as forms of theory-making.

### ***The Work of Gathering***

I received Institutional Review Board (IRB) exemption because this work draws from public and community-based narratives. The IRB concerns itself with “research” and “subjects,” but neither term holds here. What I am doing is not research in the institutional sense. It is an engagement with the living record of Black women’s fight to exist within the totalizing violence of this world. The IRB’s protocols measure exposure and liability, not truth or consequence. They cannot account for the antiblack surveillance that defines what it means to “study” those whose bodies were used to perfect the violence of so-called research, from J. Marion Sims’ experiments on enslaved women to the Tuskegee syphilis study, nor can they apprehend the ethical demand that emerges when the so-called “participant” is a theorist of her own condition. My work refuses this language because these mothers are not data to be collected, but narrators who have already named the conditions of Black life with more precision than any institutional apparatus could sanction.

This work centers on the discernment of five Black mother narrators drawn from a larger collective of fifteen activist mothers representing various educational, geographic, and sociopolitical contexts. While only two explicitly identify as Black feminists, each articulates incisive critiques of white supremacy, carceral power, and the structural conditions that endanger Black people. Their stories

elaborate Black mothering as Critical Race Parenting, exposing how race, gender, and survival intersect as modes of endurance, study, and praxis. I developed a narrative outline and restored their accounts in ways that locate Black mothering within the epistemologies of Black study and praxis. Through thematic organization and critical analysis, this work foregrounds how Black mothers theorize from within conditions of unrelenting exposure. Their stories are oriented toward precision in seeing, anticipating, and naming what is required to keep Black people alive while under siege. This is what I call Black Mothering Praxis (BMP), which is a disciplined study of survival, forged in vigilance and enacted against the structural and psychic forces that seek Black annihilation.

The Black mothers in this work were identified through community nomination and direct engagement with activists who were aware of the project's aims and wanted to help me do this work. Some would call this purposive or convenience sampling, but those terms miss what this process actually is. I refuse to treat these mothers as "samples" or "subjects." Following Evans-Winters (2018), I name them as narrators whose stories and practices reveal the workings of Black mothering in a world that depends on their suffering. These narrators are educators, organizers, and advocates who move between community, family, and political struggle. Working with them required flexibility that reflected their realities, not institutional convenience. One mother spoke with me at 2:00 a.m. after a full day of movement work. Another joined me after leading a protest against violence targeting Black women. They made time not because it was easy, but because they believed in the work and in me. Working with Black activist mothers means abandoning the idea of a predictable research timeline. It demands an ethic of engagement that treats them as collaborators and co-theorists, not data. This kind of work requires listening across exhaustion, studying their pace, and understanding that the story itself is the method.

### ***Gathering Narratives***

Each mother selected pseudonyms for herself, her children, and others appearing in her account, extending her control over how she and her kin are described. My proximity to several narrators through community and political work shaped our exchanges but never collapsed difference. As a Black man who practices mothering but does not occupy it, I approached these conversations with carefulness, restraint, and an awareness of the distance between us. The stories were often heavy and clear in their depiction of violence. They refused consolation or reconciliation. When I paused, it was to sustain the space for their telling, not to temper its force. I told each narrator that she could end the session at any point, recognizing refusal as part of the method. Their accounts reveal how Black women bear the psychic and structural weight of a society that depends on their exhaustion.

Zoom, a videoconferencing platform used for online meetings and interviews, served as the necessary medium for these conversations. Yet its design

flattens vernacular, obscures the texture of Black Southern dialects, and renders intimacy nearly impossible. These distortions required deliberate revision on my part to preserve the narrators' tone, rhythm, and intention. After each interview, I met again with the narrators to confirm that their words aligned with their intent. This process was not an exercise in mutual storytelling but an act of precision, ensuring that their language remained intact and unsoftened within the constraints of academic form.

### ***Black Mothering Narratives as Theory***

This work reads Black mothering narratives as theoretical texts that expose how they think, plan, and act under conditions of unrelenting violence. Thematic analysis here is a process of critical reading and discernment, used to trace how meaning is organized through structure, rhythm, and silence. It is not a search for universality. Following Dillard (2000), the narratives are treated as epistemological accounts, texts that theorize the conditions of Black life. Each narrative was engaged frequently and contextually. I read for what emerged, what recurred, and what refused to resolve. This iterative process allowed for the identification of patterns of vigilance, preparation, and anticipation, forms of knowing that gesture toward a disciplined way of living with danger. *Black Mothering and Critical Race Parenting* ground this analysis as explanatory frames and orientations that insist on the necessity of speaking plainly about violence. As a story editor and co-theorist, I understood my task as one of listening with discipline. These mothers are thinkers whose accounts illuminate the world's dependence on their suffering and their continued refusal to surrender to it, attuned to how they name the unendable and act anyway.

### **Editor's Note**

I write this as a Black man, a father who mothers, a Black feminist scholar, a professor who trains teachers, a poet, and a motherless child who became mother-full through the othermothers who loved, warned, and protected me. These are not disclosures of transparency or claims to intimacy but to clarify that who I am shapes what I can hear, what I can hold, and what I can write. I am inside the stories I edited, accountable to them, and altered by them. My presence is an extension of their labor, a continuation of the analytic work they began. Their warnings are mine, too, demanding that I carry forward what they have made thinkable. To edit, in this context, is to render visible that which exceeds formalism while remaining bound to the discipline of clear expression. I re-story what they have already made clear, presenting in creative form what cannot be contained by the conventions of scholarship yet must be delivered through them to be legible to specific audiences. However, this is not about translation because it is a practice of reading beside rather than above the wound. My task is to hold the precision of their knowing and the wreckage through which that knowing speaks.

### **Turning Themes into Narratives**

The themes structuring this work—*Stop Being Delusional*, *I Will Prepare a Place for Us*, and *Throw Everything You Got*—come to me through the theoretical frameworks of Critical Race Parenting and Black mothering. They allowed me to see, name, edit, and creatively re-story the mothers' narratives in ways that expose the depth of their analysis and the conditions that shape their knowing. In this writing, Black mothering sharpens Critical Race Parenting by grounding it in vigilance, preparation, and confrontation with the permanence of antiblackness. These stories generate these themes as the living grammar of how these Black mothers theorize through practice, caution, and refusal. *Stop Being Delusional* calls for an end to the fantasy of progress, of safety, of belonging in a structure that requires Black disposability. Through the words of Mother Janet, Mother Joyce, and Mother Suler, it exposes the disciplinary apparatuses that make Black endurance seem like willful consent. *I Will Prepare a Place for Us* extends this clarity toward the labor of building and sustaining Black life in the ruins, asserting that the conditions of survival must be constructed within the upheaval, not beyond it. Mother Tiana and Mother Suler remind us that preparation is precision, foresight, and a Black collective strategy. *Throw Everything You Got* completes this by engaging with exhaustion and expenditure, revealing the total demands that antiblackness places upon those who refuse to collapse. The stories of Mother Cindy, Mother Janet, and Mother Joyce make legible how this struggle unfolds as necessity, not choice.

Composed as a three-act narrative, this framework is analytic and performative. It exposes the texture of Black mothering praxis as that which exceeds conventional methods while refusing to dissolve into sentimentality. The narrative's dramaturgical form stages the collisions between knowing and impossibility. In doing so, it refuses to abstract the mothers' insights into mere "data," allowing their voices to chart the coordinates through which Black mothering continues to think and move under permanent duress.

### **Act I: Stop Being Delusional**

#### **Setting:**

A modest community center with worn wooden floors and faded posters about local programs. The women gather in a circle of folding chairs, the light filtering through dusty windows. This is their space for dialogue and truth-telling.

#### **Characters:**

**Mother Joyce:** Raised in New York City by a strong-willed Black mother, she grew up in the projects, protected by her community despite the challenges of addiction and violence surrounding her.

**Mother Janet:** Adopted out of foster care, she now leads a mutual aid organization and advocates fiercely for systemic change while navigating the challenges of raising her own children.

**Mother Suler:** Rooted in the rural South, she was raised on a plantation as a sharecropper's child and now battles against environmental racism and systemic neglect in her community.

**Scene: Confronting Reality**

(Mother Joyce shifts in her chair, her hands resting in her lap as she begins.)

**Mother Joyce:** “You know, I used to think education was the way out. My mother drilled that into me, said it was the only way we'd escape the projects. And I believed her. But now, as an educator myself, I see it differently. It's not just about education; it's about dismantling the structures that make escaping necessary in the first place. And yet, we're told over and over to pull ourselves up, as if that's enough.”

**Mother Janet:** (Nods, her voice steady.) “The system doesn't want us to have agency over our lives. They'll give you just enough to say they're helping, but it comes with strings. Like, if you're poor, they think you don't know how to live. They send people into your house to ‘show you how to function,’ as if we haven't been navigating this shit for centuries. It's condescending, but it's intentionally like that. They don't want us to feel like we can control anything.”

**Mother Suler:** (Leans forward, her tone firm.) “They want to keep us down. Where I live, it's all corruption. The land we're on, the air we breathe, even the water we drink—it's all poisoned. They put this on us, and then they judge us for how we respond. If we fight back, we are criminals. If we don't, we suffer. Worst part..they make us feel like it's our fault. Like we just didn't try hard enough.”

**Mother Janet:** (Shaking her head.) “Poverty is violence. It's not just about not having money—it's the way it's used to keep us in place. They design these programs to oppress us, and then they act like we're the problem for needing them in the first place.”

**Mother Joyce:** “They'll judge you for not fitting into their mold. But let me tell you, the same people who want to talk about our struggles are the ones playing the loudest hypocrisy. Like all these white people bumping Black music in their cars but can't see the humanity in us when we walk into a room.”

**Mother Suler:** (Laughs bitterly.) “They'll say they're with us, but they're the same ones letting corporations come into our communities and destroy everything. They'd rather see us suffer than stand with us.”

**Mother Janet:** (Looking at both women.) “We can't sugarcoat it. We've got to tell it like it is. No more pretending things are better than they are. No more holding on to illusions about systems that were never meant for us.”

**Mother Joyce:** (Her voice rising.) “We’ve got to stop being delusional about what this world is and what it does to us. We have to name it for what it is—racism, exploitation, oppression. That’s the only way we’ll ever see it clearly enough to fight it.”

**Mother Suler:** (Nods, her voice quiet but resolute.) “We have to keep working and fighting.”

The curtain falls as the women sit in reflective silence, their words echoing in the still room.

### Act 2: I Will Prepare a Place for Us

#### Setting:

A modest community center kitchen with mismatched chairs and a rickety table. This is a space of planning and resolve, where words turn into action.

#### Characters:

**Mother Tiana:** A Black trans woman who grew up in poverty and now leads an organization providing holistic and inclusive care for Black trans communities.

**Mother Suler:** Rooted in the rural South, she was raised on a plantation as a sharecropper’s child and now battles against environmental racism and systemic neglect in her community.

#### Scene: Building What We Need

(Mother Tiana sits at the table, flipping through her notebook. Her voice carries weariness and determination as she speaks.)

**Mother Tiana:** “I don’t have the luxury to wait. My people don’t have the luxury to wait. Every day I see it—Black trans women not making it past their thirties, families left without homes, people being turned away because their lives don’t fit into neat little categories. And I’m tired. Tired of seeing resources go to white-led organizations that barely even acknowledge we exist.”

(Mother Suler leans back in her chair, her hands resting on her lap. Her voice is steady, grounded in decades of experience.)

**Mother Suler:** “When I was young, my granddaddy taught me that no one was coming to save us. They’ve never cared. When I was growing up, we didn’t have nothing handed to us. My granddaddy taught us to share what little we had—okra, hogs, chickens—with the elderly and folks who couldn’t work the fields. We weren’t rich, but we were together. That’s what kept us alive. Not them. Not the system.”

**Mother Tiana:** “That’s why I built my organization. No one gets turned away—

whether you're HIV-positive or not, whether you have housing or not, whether you've been rejected by your family or not. Because I know what it feels like to be unseen, unheard. To be told that your life does not matter."

(Mother Suler leans forward, her voice resolute, her eyes glinting with determination.)

**Mother Suler:** "We have to keep building. We see what happens when we don't. They poison our water, pollute our air, leave us to die in these rural areas, and then blame us. It's not enough to talk about what's wrong—we've got to make what's right. And we've got to do it ourselves."

(Mother Tiana sets her notebook aside and meets Mother Suler's gaze, her voice gaining strength.)

**Mother Tiana:** "We have to be ready for what's coming. I don't want the next generation to fight the same battles I'm fighting now. I want them to get something better—where they can live, not just survive."

(Mother Suler nods, her face softening as she remembers her roots.)

**Mother Suler:** "I want for us to breathe clean air, drink clean water, and have a place to call our own. We got to build it ourselves. No one is coming to save us. We always been the ones saving each other."

**Mother Tiana:** (Smiling faintly.) "Every time we take care of each other, every time we create something out of nothing, that's a win."

(Mother Suler lifts her cup in a quiet toast, her voice firm with resolve.)

**Mother Suler:** "When you plant something, you might not be the one to see it grow, but you plant it anyway. Preparing a place, not just for us, but for the ones who'll come next."

(Mother Tiana raises her own cup in solidarity, their determination filling the room.)

Curtain falls.

### Act 3: Throw Everything You Got

#### Setting:

A modest living room, well-worn but vibrant with energy and resolve. A bookshelf stuffed with community books and a map of the city marked with pins and notes hang on the wall. The women sit in a circle, some sipping tea, others with notebooks in hand, ready for action.

#### Characters:

**Mother Joyce:** Raised in New York City by a strong-willed Black mother, she grew up in the projects, protected by her community despite the challenges of addiction and violence surrounding her.

**Mother Cindy:** The Chairman of a Black Gun Club, a strong advocate for Black self-defense.

**Mother Janet:** Adopted out of foster care, she now leads a mutual aid organization and advocates fiercely for systemic change while navigating the challenges of raising her own children.

**Scene: Fighting on All Fronts**

(Mother Janet adjusts her chair, her voice measured and steady as she speaks.)

**Mother Janet:** “I’ve seen what their systems do—how they tear people apart while pretending it’s for their own good. They act like they’re saving you, but they’re just taking pieces of you, replacing them with their rules. That’s why I started my mutual aid group. It’s not charity—it’s about trusting people to know what they need and giving them the resources to get there.”

(Mother Cindy leans forward, her voice rising with passion.)

**Mother Cindy:** “That’s why we’ve got to throw everything we’ve got at this fight. Whether it’s mutual aid, advocacy, education, or self-defense—whatever it takes.”

(Mother Joyce nods, her voice deliberate and tinged with frustration.)

**Mother Joyce:** “It’s the same story in the schools. When my son was younger, people saw him as approachable because of his autism. But now that he’s growing into a young Black man, that’s changing fast. They don’t see him as innocent anymore—they see him as a threat. And my daughter? She came home one day saying her lips were ‘too big.’ I had to sit her down and tell her, ‘Big compared to who? The people in your class are a minority in the world. Their lips are small.’ We’re constantly undoing the harm they inflict, but we shouldn’t have to.”

(Mother Cindy, her voice steady but resolute.)

**Mother Cindy:** “That’s why I make sure my people know how to protect themselves. The Black Gun Club isn’t just weapons; it’s the right to defend what’s ours—our lives, our homes, our communities. They take and take, and when we fight back, we’re the problem. But you know what’s really dangerous? Leaving us defenseless.”

(Mother Janet nods in agreement, her tone firm.)

**Mother Janet:** “And their systems are designed to fail us. That’s why direct giving works. I’ve had people ask me, ‘Aren’t you worried they’ll misuse the money?’ And I tell them, ‘That’s not my concern. My concern is making sure people have what they need to live today.’ When you’ve been navigating this system for 400 years, you don’t need someone telling you how to live. You need resources!”

(Mother Joyce’s voice grows sharper, frustration palpable as she recounts her daily battles.)

**Mother Joyce:** “I see it every day in my son’s school. They think they can decide what’s best for him because he’s autistic and Black, like that makes him less de-

serving. But I won't let them. They don't get to dictate our worth—not to me, not to my children, not to any of us.”

(Mother Cindy's voice, filled with determination, meets her gaze.)

**Mother Cindy:** “That's why we stand our ground. Teach self-defense. Arm ourselves if we have to. They call it dangerous, but we know the truth. The danger is in letting them strip us of everything and standing by.”

(Mother Janet interjects, her voice firm and unwavering.)

**Mother Janet:** “My organization is proof of that. It's not perfect, but it's ours. It's a place where people can come and know they'll be seen, heard, and respected. No one has to beg here.”

(The room grows quiet for a moment, the weight of their shared fight hanging in the air. Then, Mother Cindy speaks, her voice quieter but no less firm.)

*Mother Cindy:* “We've spent long enough waiting for them to do right by us. Centuries. And every time, it's the same—over-policing, underfunding, and a system that works exactly the way it's designed.”

(Mother Joyce leans back, a faint smile breaking through her seriousness.)

**Mother Joyce:** “They've tried to undo us at every turn. Yet, here we are. Still fighting in our own ways.”

(The women exchange looks, their solidarity unspoken but deeply felt. The conversation quiets, but the resolve in the room remains palpable. They are fighting a fight that has lasted generations, but together, they refuse to let it be in vain.)

#### **Closing Narration:**

“This is what it means to throw everything you have into the fight using the tools at your disposal: mutual aid, self and community defense, and surgical truth-telling. These Black mothers remind us to fight even as the violence remains relentless and unending.”

#### **A Final Note on Black Mothering as Critical Race Parenting**

By positioning Black mothering as Critical Race Parenting, this work articulates various ways Black mothers navigate, protect, and strategize within a world organized against them and their children. Black mothering as CRP clarifies the operations of power that structure Black suffering and makes visible the tactical and intellectual labor demanded of those tasked with living through antiblack conditions. Grounded in Black Feminist Narrative Inquiry (BFNI), this analysis reads these mothers' stories as theories that diagnose the social order and craft practices of endurance, not repair. Black mothering, in this context, is not sentimental or redemptive. It is a disciplined praxis that moves with clarity through violence, discerning its logics and refusing its demands for surrender.

Mother Joyce exposes the everyday assaults of antiblackness in education. Her son, a Black autistic boy, becomes visible only as a threat, a position produced through the convergence of ableism and antiblackness. Her refusal to accept his devaluation as inevitable reveals the psychic warfare waged against Black children through institutions that disguise harm as care. Similarly, her interventions with her daughter expose how beauty and worth are conscripted into racial hierarchies. Her vigilance and defiance situate Black mothering as CRP's most exacting expression, a praxis that names violence as constant and surviving it as work.

Mother Tiana's vision extends CRP as a rebellious method of organizing. Her work with Black trans communities exposes the failures of white-led institutions that commodify suffering while erasing Black lives. Her refusal of dependence, her commitment to direct material support, and her rejection of respectability destabilize the liberal fantasy that inclusion equals liberation. In her hands, CRP becomes a rejection of assimilation and a blueprint for collective struggle.

Mother Janet exposes the state's predatory benevolence. Her critique of foster care and welfare interventions reveals how "help" becomes a mechanism of surveillance and control. Her mutual aid work models a counter-structure, one grounded in trust, direct giving, and community autonomy. Through her praxis, CRP functions as an instrument of exposure, revealing the continuity between state care and state violence.

Mother Cindy redefines care through self-defense. As a leader within a Black Gun Club, she insists that the protection of Black life requires preparation and mastery of tools that the state would deny them. Her pedagogy of defense rejects the moral fictions of white liberalism that equate susceptibility with virtue. Through her, CRP expands to include the strategic and collective labor of keeping one another alive.

Mother Suler grounds CRP in ancestral practice. Raised on a plantation, she recalls survival as a collective act, where the sharing of land, food, and knowledge was a necessity and refusal of the social order. Her environmental advocacy demonstrates how antiblack violence extends beyond the social into the ecological. Her reminder that "no one is coming to save us" should not be understood as despair but pedagogy. Her praxis binds land, memory, and care to a Black maternal epistemology of self-determination.

This work does not seek to recover or fix broken systems. It aims to understand the clarity these mothers provide. Their narratives show that Black mothering as CRP does not aspire toward reform but to expose, reveal, name, and confront the structures that depend on Black suffering. For scholars and practitioners, it demands a confrontation with the limits of reformist ethics and liberal care. Black mothering as CRP grapples with the state's failures and centers the analytic forged in their aftermath. It is a practice of vigilance, preparation, and protection that renders visible the conditions of our captivity and the strategies that refuse to let captivity be the final word.

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***Black Work, Resistance, and Institutional Reckoning*****Black Home Education  
and the Politics of State Power:  
Navigating Policy Enforcement  
and Racialized Regulation*****Cee Carter & Erin Milne*****Abstract**

This inquiry examines Black home education amidst the racialized educational terrain, educational policy and regulation, and state-sanctioned violence. The central question for this conceptual and analytical article is: What are the productive effects of current New York home education policies and associated state laws as Black educators seek, begin, and maintain home study for their children? In response, this inquiry focuses on three home educators in New York State and engages black feminist critique with critical policy analysis to draw out the sociopolitical complexities of reimagining futures for black education. Overall, the article emphasizes the political significance and tensions of Black mothers educating in the home as a challenge to racialized educational subjugation.

*Key words:* Black Feminist Critique; Black Home Education; Critical Policy Analysis; Educational Regulation; Raciality

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### Introduction

Public education in the United States (U.S.) faces significant challenges from increased curriculum censorship and the lingering effects of school shutdowns during the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, the current administration is taking action to dismantle the federal department of education, which flies in the face of educational advocates and critics of educational neoliberalism. Educational advocates have long fought for federal protections, oversight, and accountability in the pursuit of educational equity and quality for students with disabilities as well as racially, linguistically, and economically subjugated students (Coady et al., 2022; Givens & Ison, 2022; Rothstein, 2023). Critics of neoliberalism have rung the alarm about the risks of using corporate-like policies for improving academic achievement. These policies have resulted in deficit-oriented curricula, student and teacher pushout, school closures, and other devastating impacts to local school systems (Hursh, 2007; Picower & Mayorga, 2015). The current educational moment is marked by continued political shift toward neoliberal reform, conservative ideologies, as well as the funding, regulation, and person-making schemes (Popkewitz, 2018) that accompany such shifts.

Homeschooling is a dramatically growing option for Black families amidst the shifting public-school landscape. Researchers estimate that Black families have been steadily turning to homeschool since 1999, with sharp increases since the COVID-19 pandemic (Ali-Coleman & Fields-Smith, 2022; Ray, 2015). The U.S. Census Bureau's Household Pulse survey reports that the proportion of Black homeschoolers "increased by five times, from 3.3% (April 23 – May 5) to 16.1% in the fall (Sept. 30 – Oct. 12)" (Eggleston & Fields, 2021, para. 13) from school years 2019-2020 to 2020-2021 in the aftermath of government-imposed school shutdowns. Further, Baker (2024) reports that most states in the Black belt of the American South saw an increase in Black homeschoolers from 2023 to 2024. The literature aptly frames Black homeschooling as *political protest* (Puga, 2019) in response to discriminatory pedagogical practices and the *racialized educational terrain* (M. Johnson, 2024). So, this article turns to three New York home educators as an occasion for reimagining the future of black education through black feminist critique and critical policy analysis (Apple, 2024).

Homeschool policy and regulations differ from state to state with no federal oversight from the U.S. Department of Education. Thus, homeschoolers comply with vastly different requirements and reporting mechanisms depending on their state of residency, and in some cases, their local school districts. Some argue that different requirements and reporting mechanisms make homeschool children more vulnerable to safety issues, neglect, and abuse. For example, the Coalition for Responsible Home Education (CRHE) is a nonprofit organization that advocates for homeschool child safety, wellbeing, and educational quality. Their website color codes each state green, yellow, red, or deep red in terms of homeschool enrollment

procedures, assessment guidance, and intervention provisions. New York is rated green for their assessment-with-intervention regulations, which require parents to assess their children and report those results to the state. These regulations trigger probationary terms if students are not making adequate academic progress, i.e., falling below the 33<sup>rd</sup> percentile on a standardized assessment. Yet, Texas is rated deep red because there are limited requirements for demonstrating the intent to educate. For example, parents are neither required to notify the state of their homeschool intentions, instruct for a specified number of hours, nor assess and report their children's academic results.

CRHE's work is undoubtedly important in its mission to combat "parental-rights extremism" and empower "homeschooled children by educating the public and advocating for child-centered ... policy and practices for families and professionals" (CRHE, n.d., para 1). Yet their emphasis on assessment-with-intervention as strong evidence-based policy and practice carries similar racialized and neoliberal policy tensions as public school equity efforts (Carter, 2024). These tensions have the potential to create harm, examine children's learning from a deficit perspective, and punish families through problematic enforcement procedures. So, this inquiry troubles CRHE's green rating of New York's homeschool policy regulatory scene through the stories of three Black home educators. Together, the stories underline the limits of current homeschool policies—inspiring a radical call to end racialized educational subjugation and state violence against Black children and families.

Therefore, the purpose of this inquiry is to understand the political significance and tensions of home education amidst the current policy enforcement context by "stretching the legacy of frameworks" (Andreotti, 2012, p. 25) for pursuing educational equity, quality, and regulation via standardization and accountability measures. This paper views current educational challenges, and the analytical practices for examining them, through an ontoepistemological critique. We question the philosophical assumptions of taken-for-granted home education policies by examining their "modes of thought" and the "practices enabled by modes of thought" (St. Pierre, 2014, p. 4). We also draw on anticolonial (Andreotti et al., 2018) and black feminist critique (Ferreira da Silva, 2022) to examine the racialized assumptions that structure homeschool policy's productive effects and "foreground ... the *unnatural* nature of what exists" (St. Pierre, 2014, p. 5). These critiques defamiliarize western humanist ontoepistemology, which is complicit in "the violence of constructing *racial others* (symbolic violence) and the violence made possible by this categorization (total violence)" (Carter, 2024, p. 6; Ferreira da Silva, 2007). Put another way, we apply critique and expand the ethical-political demand to eliminate racialized educational subjugation by jointly analyzing home educator stories, policies, and enforcement procedures.

When writing this article, we intentionally discussed multiple scholars' strategic (and varied) uses of lower- and upper- case letters when referring to race,

ethnicity, and the modes of existing these words describe. For example, across many works, scholars have explicitly written with “Black” and/or “black.” The various decisions to use capitalized “B” and/or lowercase “b” in B/black studies are moments that show respect, honor specific histories and cultural processes, and complicate racial category making. For example, when Ferreira da Silva (2022) writes with lower case “b” she does so as a “defying gesture” that contemplates “how blackness ... unleashed from within its categorical confines” reveals “the perversity of modern thinking” (p. 61). Furthermore, in critical W/whiteness studies scholars discuss their choice to use “w” “as a symbolic representation of the desire to challenge white dominance and white supremacy” (Corces-Zimmerman et al., 2017, p. 1) and “reverse the normalisation of whiteness” (Matias & Boucher, 2021, p. 77). Murray (2021) uses “W” to focus “attention on Whiteness as a significant social construct deserving of critique, rather than a default position that today maintains its power through invisibility” (p. 334). Across this article we strategically write with lower case “b” and/or “w” to intervene on categorical thinking, disrupt the dominant gaze, and foreground how the modern construct of race has (re)produced social, political, and economic (among other) consequences. In all, we respect the shifting uses across scholarly discussions and cite in accordance with published works by following their usage. Thus, we also follow the American Psychological Association’s (APA) (2019) style guidance, which instructs authors to capitalize proper nouns—and we also challenge the concept of proper throughout this article (Bruce, 2021).

The central question is: What are the productive effects of current New York home education policies and associated state laws as Black educators seek, begin, and maintain home study for their children? This inquiry contributes to Taboo’s special issue focus on advocacy for breaking “down systemic barriers” and advancing “justice in education” (S. K. Johnson, 2024, para. 2) by demonstrating how the political dimensions of raciality, in the form of educational regulation, linger in home education policy and enforcement procedures. The article also makes clearer how these policies have the potential to put families in harm’s way, which informs home educators’ critiques and their navigation of regulations. Further, this inquiry attends to black education futures through a black feminist reading practice that provides an “imaging of what happens and has happened as well as what has existed, exists, and will exist otherwise—all and at once” (Ferreira da Silva, 2020, p. 43). That is, the article highlights the political significance and tensions of Black educators’ choice to homeschool while also considering Black people’s ongoing political struggle for education. We avoid reducing parents’ educational decisions to a choice between public schooling or private alternatives to traditional education. Instead, this analytical engagement reads the political implications of their accounts by erasing “the line that separates the colonial present from the colonial past” as a means of “seize[ing] the colonial future” of education and the regulative policies that facilitate it (Ferreira da Silva, 2020, p. 47).

The next section discusses the Black home education scholarly literature related to growth, motivations, and political contentions. We also examine the broader literature and current regulation demands related to homeschool child welfare. The discussion continues with an ontoepistemological critique that frames this paper's inquiry into educational regulation in New York State.

### **Black Homeschoolers' Motivations, Curricular Censorship, and Child Welfare**

Homeschooling or home education (which we use interchangeably in this article) refers to parents and children actively teaching and learning in the home during early education or at any point during the compulsory schooling ages. Scholars cite several motivations for Black parents who home educate, including the narrowness of public school curricula, discriminatory pedagogies, and violent disciplinary practices (Fields-Smith & Williams, 2009; Lundy & Mazama, 2014; Mazama & Lundy, 2012; Peters, 2019), a desire to provide their children with expansive opportunities for the study of Black experiences (Penn-Nabrit, 2003; Ali-Coleman & Fields-Smith, 2022), and a desire to challenge deficit ideologies about Blackness through their curricula (Puga, 2019; Williams-Johnson & Fields-Smith, 2022). M. Johnson (2024) also argues that Black mothers homeschool as resistance to conventional schooling's racialized and "structural inequalities that limit their school choices between highly-resourced majority white schools or low-resourced majority Black schools" (p. 575).

In addition to structural inequalities, there has been an increase in state-level curricular censorship measures led by coalitions of parental-rights advocates, or conservatives who argue that public education's curriculum should be limited to skills-based instruction. They argue for skills-based instruction opposed to curricula that teaches about the nuanced lives and experiences of subjugated peoples' as well as their struggles for recognition, equality, and decolonization. Contentious school board meetings have been battleground sites for promoting conservative public education ideologies, resulting in book bans, teacher dismissals, and other state-directed curricular gag orders (Burmester & Howard, 2022). While we witness the narrowing of public-school curricula, home education and out-of-system educational options have also (and always) allowed Black families and community organizers the opportunity to be expansive in their curricular curation (Daramola, 2024; Fields-Smith & Kisura, 2013; Givens, 2021; Siddle-Walker, 1996).

### **State Regulation and Homeschool Child Welfare**

Yet the aftermath of state-imposed school shutdowns has brought more attention to homeschooling. There are intensified demands for greater regulation in response to prominent, yet rare, cases of homeschooling child neglect and abuse (Homeschool Legal Defense Association, 2024; CRHE, 2024). There is much that

remains unknown about the relationship between homeschooling and child abuse, as attempts to quantify this relationship have yielded inconclusive results. After surveying 1,253 previously homeschooled and conventionally schooled adults, Ray and Shakeel (2022) found a weak positive correlation between homeschooling and child abuse and neglect, though this correlation disappeared when controlling for several demographic variables, including race and disability. As such, Ray and Shakeel (2022) assert that the relationship between homeschooling and abuse is not strong enough to warrant increased regulation of homeschooling. In a qualitative review of research on abuse and neglect in homeschooling as well as state policies on homeschooling and child abuse, Luck et al. (2025) found a lack of empirical evidence linking homeschooling to abuse. Similarly, while investigating child death rates by state in the years after homeschooling legalization, Dills (2022) found mostly no statistically significant increases, though some states had statistically significant increases in child homicides following homeschool legalization. Still, Dills (2022) argues that her results are largely inconclusive, and that further research is needed to determine if government oversight of homeschooling actually improves child safety.

Despite the lack of conclusive evidence, some remain concerned around homeschooling's possible contribution to child abuse. CRHE has identified 500 cases of child abuse linked to homeschooling since 2000 and argues that the withdrawal of a student from a conventional school to homeschool can be a red flag for abuse (Stewart et al., 2024). CRHE further argues that these findings highlight a need for increased regulation of homeschooling, including stricter laws around notification of intent to homeschool, stronger qualifications for homeschooling parents, and increased assessment and intervention for homeschooled students, all of which they outline in their proposed *Make Homeschool Safe Act* (CRHE, 2024). Yet given the lack of research on the effectiveness of government regulation in preventing child abuse within homeschooling, it is impossible to know if such proposed legislation will indeed have its intended effect of protecting children. It is also fair to question such regulatory efforts when data analyses have failed to establish that homeschooled children are more likely to experience abuse. Further, given the systemic racism and settler colonialism that undergirds and facilitates the U.S.'s education system, it is reasonable to raise concerns about how increased regulation may unjustly target homeschooling families of color.

### ***Black Children's Wellbeing and State Homeschooling Regulations***

Educational scholars and historians have long demonstrated that public education systems produce harm and suffering for Black children (Anderson, 1983; Dumas, 2016; Givens, 2021; Siddle-Walker, 1996). However, Black educators have often countered harm by developing “strategies to contest this reality” ranging from “broad institutional realms down to the interpersonal and psychic levels” (Givens, 2021, pp. 7-8). For example, Baker (2024) complicates the narrative of

homeschool child safety when considering Black children's experiences in public schools compared to homeschool. She argues that "the flexibility of homeschooling allows parents to tailor educational experiences to their children's needs, ensuring their safety and emotional well-being" (p. 568). Thus, policies that regulate homeschooling in the image of public education's quality and evidence-based practices are "tricky ground" (Smith, 2005, p. 85) for addressing Black homeschool children's wellbeing.

M. Johnson (2024) encourages scholars to further examine the regulative apparatuses and logics that facilitate both public and home education. Moreover, homeschoolers' experiences with seeking and beginning home education in the regulative accountability policy context are less widely represented in the scholarly literature. So, this article's focus on the productive effects of homeschool policies for Black home educators is especially important in an education reform context marked by active enforcement of accountability apparatuses. This study inquired into state home education policies and enforcement procedures as Black families continue to navigate discriminatory instructional practices and structural inequalities that restrict their school options. Families are also navigating an educational terrain contoured by larger configurations, which authorize harm and violence through the expropriation of labor and extraction of land essential for the accumulation of global capital (Ferreira da Silva, 2022). Crucially, this critical policy analysis sharpens the political aims of promoting a safe and quality education. This analysis also advocates for Black families as they pursue a liberatory praxis that demands the end of educational subjugation, or as Peters (2019) argues, Black children's "right to be and become in childhood" (p. 30).

### **The Political Dimensions of Raciality**

Previous research on the productive effects of federal education law and state-wide accountability regulation highlights neoliberalism's co-opting of educational equity pursuits (Carter, 2024). Thus, M. Johnson's (2024) appeal to understand how Black homeschool mothers are transforming the racialized educational terrain is inspiration in the present inquiry. Instructively, the interdisciplinary inquiry practice of black study is instrumental to exposing the persistence of anti-blackness and colonialism—as well as the tensions that continuously percolate—when seeking flight (Judy, 2020) from discriminatory, conventional schooling spaces to home education. This paper turns to black study for refusing "the blessings of liberal humanism and its variants," or "the philosophy of life and living that is really only about the political same, a violent reanimation of the status quo" (Myers, 2023, p. 8) in making its ontoepistemological critique of educational policy enforcement procedures.

Black study and anticolonial critique support this inquiry to examine how the violence of "exploitation, ecocide, and genocide" (Andreotti et al., 2018, p. 28)

underwrites the pursuit of educational quality in the context of accountability and regulation. That is, this article takes Ferreira da Silva's (2022) cue by moving from "explaining" toward "eliminating racial subjugation" (pp. 50-51) in the matter of racialized educational subjugation. In contemplating Black mothers' resistance to the burdensome racialized educational terrain, it becomes important to stay wary of how even a more equitable education system, as is presently conceived and pursued, is facilitated by the "post-Enlightenment political...moment" (p. 48) and its regulative tools. That is, it continues to be subsidized by colonial and racial violence (Andreotti et al., 2018), which need to be interrupted.

For example, Ferreira da Silva (2022) argues that we can expose subtle yet larger configurations and rationalities that authorize harm and material violence by tracing the political dimensions of raciality in the global present. The dimensions refer to the "political work that necessity has done in the post-Enlightenment period—which gives the force of the symbolic as a political moment" and operates through "raciality both as common ground of and basis for deciding among what is ethically, juridically, and economically proper" (p. 51). Ferreira da Silva's critique of necessity's logic supports this inquiry to closely examine educational regulative efforts and enforcement procedures that justify harm and discrimination in education. She goes on to explain that tracking necessity's logics includes reviewing how:

various meanings of proper operate in these political moments—that is, how necessity is what establishes a statement as accurate, resolved, or true (scientific), what makes an action worthy or good or not (ethical), the undesirable that drives production/ accumulation (economic), and what makes something right or legal (at the juridical level). (p. 51)

Tracing these political dimensions confronts widely accepted home education policies and regulations, exposing their productive effects for the New York home educator stories discussed in this study. The forthcoming sections defamiliarize regulative logics and make them indefensible by discussing home educators' encounters with state apparatuses such child protective services (CPS).

Additionally, tracing as a methodological strategy, rehearses a transformative theory of justice in education with an ontoepistemological critique that demands "for nothing less than the return of the total value expropriated from and yielded by the productive capacity of Native lands and slave bodies" (Ferreira da Silva, 2020, pp. 40-41). Further, Ferreira da Silva's (2022) insistence to turn our analytical gaze toward eliminating racial subjugation has implications for delivering on child safety and wellbeing, disrupting neoliberal educational regulation, affirming resistance to pedagogical and systemic discrimination, framing homeschooling as political protest, and witnessing Black mothers as politically engaged community members in opposition to the colonial-racial status quo. In the sections below, we share more about ourselves in relation to this study's focus. We also discuss the

modes of inquiry employed in this study and the emergences from our methodological and analytical engagements.

### **About the Co-Authors**

We are writing this paper together as an outgrowth of our collaborative scholarly inquiry into home education. I (Cee) am a Black education scholar and black feminist methodologist, whose educator experiences span public K-12 and higher education institutions. I enter the scholarly conversation on home education through multiple stories, including that of my sister, who attended virtual homeschool out of medical necessity, and a former 6<sup>th</sup> grade gifted and talented student whose parents elected homeschooling to further accelerate his learning. Most recently, the story of Kiarre Harris shifted my focus on homeschooling from a purely idealized vision of black educational freedom toward the fraught terrain of limited educational choice for Black families. Despite state-imposed tensions, the home educator stories shared with me inspire possibility models for Black families seeking educational options beyond traditional public education.

I (Erin) am a fourth-year doctoral student in the Educational Leadership and Policy Studies program at the University of Vermont, where I study access and equity in higher education for first-generation students. I worked on this paper as part of my research assistantship, and my interest in homeschooling stems from my own background as a formerly homeschooled student, a situation that arose due to childhood medical issues. I am White and new to the study of Black homeschooling; however, my personal experiences as a formerly homeschooled student who faced inequities in a public school have fed my interest in considering how homeschooling can challenge systemic barriers within traditional schooling.

### **Modes of Inquiry**

Narrating Black peoples' political struggle for education requires complexity, possibility, criticality, and a willingness to challenge oppressive realities. This narration also requires writers to nuance stories by complicating the white, western, and colonial gaze. Thus, this article contributes to black educational advocacy and inquiry in the home education space by engaging ideas from the field of education as well as ontoepistemological contributions from black studies, black feminist critique, and anticolonial critique. We reject traditional analytical practices that depend on constructing Blackness as "always already a referent of commodity, an object, and the other, as fact beyond evidence" (Ferreira da Silva, 2014, p. 81).

More specifically, this article intervenes on categorical thinking in its conceptual-analytical approach. Categorical thinking describes a mode of meaning making that confines the imagination and forecloses possibility to a colonial gaze using separations that "occur through the creation of racial and gender categories and the institution of hierarchical relations premised on white and male supremacy, and other

forms of normativity” (Andreotti et al., 2018, p. 21). The “Category of Blackness” (Ferreira da Silva, 2014, p. 81), which is constructed by separations such as human-nonhuman, tends to flatten narratives about Black people by doubling down on violence and despair. This is not to say that enacted violences are irrelevant. Rather, telling Black peoples’ stories requires the care, complexity, and depth that critical educational advocates and scholars consistently frontload in their work. By applying the political dimensions of raciality as a conceptual-analytical device, this article challenges the philosophical assumptions that undergird policies and enforcement procedures and traces their productive effects for home educators.

### Study Phases

This inquiry reports on two phases of a larger study that I (Cee) began in Fall 2023. I conducted a conceptual inquiry for phase one, followed by phase two, which was an Institutional Review Board-approved inquiry conducted with 12 Black home educators and one microschool educator across the U.S.

### Phase One: Policy Review and Content Analyses

Before commencing the study with educators, I (Cee) conducted a comparative content analysis of Northeast state policies and associated laws for home education (see Tables 1-3). The comparative content analysis revealed that New

**Table 1**  
**New York State Statutes, Regulations, and Enforcement Procedures**

<i>Key Statutes that Authorize Home Instruction</i>	<i>Initiation Procedures</i>	<i>Home Education Record Keeping</i>	<i>Enforcement/ Intervention</i>
Education Law §3204, §3205, §3210.2, §3211, §3212.1, §3212.2(d) and Regulations of the Commissioner of Education §100.10.	Parents provide annual notice of intent to homeschool by July 1st of each school year. Notice of intent can be submitted during school year or if family moves school districts during school year.	Maintain attendance records and submit to school district upon request. Maintain Individualized Home Instruction Plan (IHIP).	Compulsory school attendance penalties include a fine not exceeding ten dollars or ten days’ imprisonment; for each subsequent offense penalties include a fine not exceeding fifty dollars, or by imprisonment not exceeding thirty days, or by both such fine and imprisonment.

Note. Compulsory school attendance ages are 6-16 or (6-17 in New York City).

York and Rhode Island carry the harshest chronic absenteeism and truancy penalties, which have the potential to result in fines or imprisonment for parents. These policy enforcement procedures are significant for home educators, who may be subject to punitive action if their child is labeled as chronically absent in the process of commencing home education. I further explored these enforcements through the story of Kiarre Harris, who received considerable local news coverage in 2017. Specifically, I conducted a news coverage content analysis after encountering Ms. Harris’s story of forced family separation, which was initiated by the home education accountability apparatus in Buffalo, New York. News coverage of Harris’s interrupted homeschool journey confronts the violent enforcement of compulsory school attendance, which led me to critique the productive effects of home education policies without reducing the complexities of this story to just another instance of racist structural inequality.

**Phase One Diffractive Analysis.** After conducting the content analyses, I diffractively analyzed (Barad, 2007) the punitive measures for enforcing compulsory school attendance laws with the political dimensions of raciality. A diffractive reading practice blurs “the boundaries between different disciplines and theories to provoke new thoughts and theories” and examines “how and why boundaries between disciplines and strands of thought have been made and how they can be (re)made to matter more toward inclusion than apartheid” (Geerts & van der Tuin, 2016, para. 5). It is reading practice that examines how boundaries blur without intentional separation through practices like coding. Illustratively, I employed

**Table 2**  
**New York Reporting Requirements**

<i>Grades</i>	<i>Individualized Home Instruction Plan (IHIP) Submission Required</i>	<i>Quarterly Report Submission Required</i>	<i>Annual Assessment Type</i>
1-3	Yes	Yes	Written Narrative of Academic Progress required.
4-8	Yes	Yes	Commercially published norm-referenced achievement test required every other year. Written Narrative of Academic Progress allowable in non-test years.
9-12	Yes	Yes	Commercially published norm-referenced achievement test required.

Note. Annual Assessment serves as fourth quarter report for each grade level. Quarter Four Annual Assessment report should certify that child has either made adequate academic progress or failed to do so (which triggers probation). Probationary decisions can be appealed to Commissioner. Probation can last up to two years and can be removed if academic progress is made. Home visits are possible.

Jackson and Mazzei's (2013) diffractive approach of plugging in theory, which "positions both data and theory as machines" and demonstrates "their potential to interrupt and transform" other data, and other knowledge projects (p. 261).

This analytical engagement involved tracing how necessity's logic operates through the states' home instruction policies and reveal themselves in regulative efforts under the guise of educational quality and safety. For example, Reyes (2020) problematizes how criminalizing chronic absenteeism and truancy "has not increased attendance rates or decreased long-term crime" (p. 21). Furthermore, Reyes finds that "simple law and order school attendance policies have not met the complex needs of large, diverse student populations" and have led to "disproportionate exclusion of children of color and low-income families" (p. 24). This argument problematized state officials' intervention in Harris's case. I also asked the policy and regulation text: how does necessity operate to resolve a statement? What is deemed worthy or good in this moment? What is the undesirable and how does it drive production/accumulation? How is legality established in this scenario?

**Table 3**  
**New York Instructional Requirements**

<i>Grades</i>	<i>Required Instructional Days (per year)</i>	<i>Required Instructional Hours (per year)</i>	<i>Required Subjects</i>
1-6	180	900	Arithmetic; Reading; Spelling; Writing; the English Language; Geography; United States History; Science; Health Education; Music; Visual Arts; Physical Education; Bilingual Education and/or English as a Second Language where the need is indicated.
7-8	180	990	English*; History and Geography*; Science*; Mathematics*; Physical Education; Health Education; Art*; Music*; Practical Arts; and Library skills.
9-12	180	990	English*; Social Studies (which includes American History*, Participation in Government*, and Economics*); Mathematics*; Science*; Art and/or Music*; Health Education*; Physical Education*; and Electives*.

Note. Asterisk denotes that specified unit(s) are required. One unit equals 6,480 minutes of instruction per school year.

Parents are also required to teach additional subjects such as state history, citizenship, and health education at least once during K-12.

**Phase Two Interview-Based Inquiry**

After phase one, I (Erin) supported participant recruitment by compiling a list of key contact persons for Black homeschooling groups across the U.S. via social media sites such as Instagram, Linked-In, and Facebook as well as state departments of education. Interested participants completed an online form and were invited to 30-minute interest meetings with Cee to learn more about the study before participating.

**Interviews.** I (Cee) engaged with educators via two interviews, and each participant was compensated two hundred dollars for their participation, time, and expertise. During the first interview, I asked participants to share about their decision to homeschool, their visions for home education, and how they deliver on that vision through their teaching and learning activities. Participants also completed a mapping exercise, demonstrating how they navigate home education regulations in their state. During the second interview, I asked educators to share documents and photos about their curricular focus, learning environment, and vision for homeschooling. Participants sent documents that illustrate their home education practice e.g., schedules, curricula samples, and state filing forms. They also shared photos in response to several prompts about their homeschooling practice such as “A typical day of home education;” “Learning activities outside of the home;” and “This is why I homeschool.”

**Phase Two Diffractive Analysis.** Furthermore, the emergences from phase one’s diffractive engagement supported me (Cee) to trace how the political dimensions of educational regulation showed up for two New York City educators as they navigated home education requirements. I also engaged in the practice of “seeing voice” (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012a, p. 747) through “through contextualizing participant voice in multiple spaces beyond the site of the research” (Carter, 2024, p. 8). For example, I analytically read participants’ stories to uncover how New York’s homeschool policies and associated laws produce barriers, possibilities, and more for families. This approach differs from more traditional approaches to qualitative analysis, which primarily generate findings by analyzing participants’ interview text via coding, whose “focus on the macro produced by the codes might cause us to miss the texture, the contradictions, the tensions” (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012b, p. 12). Additionally, the analytical engagement with participants’ stories highlighted their critical-creative approaches to curricula and pedagogy in the interstices, or “the gaps and the spaces created without perfect enforcement of law and policy” (Peters, 2019, p. 50), of New York State homeschool policy.

**Emergences:****The Confrontational, Critical, Poethical, and Radical**

The following analysis details the conceptual-analytical collision between Ferreira da Silva’s (2022) theory, content analyses of home education policies, associated state

laws, and three home educators' stories. Toward conceiving of a transformative theory of justice for reimagined present-futures in black education, the sections are organized into confrontational, critical, poethical, and radical moments that exercise criticality, complexity, and possibility (Ferreira da Silva, 2017). The reader will encounter modes of thought and moments that intervene on anti-blackness and contribute to emergent possibilities in black education. The confrontational moments examine two mothers' encounters with law enforcement and CPS, illuminating how "all that happens and exists is deeply implicated" in colonial-racial violence (Ferreira da Silva, 2020, p. 48). The critical moments levy "anticolonial and racial critiques of global state-capital" (p. 40). The poethical moments examine critical-creative learning in the home, which subvert dominant curricular imaginaries. Then we turn to a radical moment, which contributes to the ongoing demand to end racialized educational subjugation and state violence as a task at the nexus of critical policy analysis, black feminist critique, and "freedom dreaming" (Kelley, 2002).

***Confrontational Moments:  
Homeschool Mothers' Experiences with State Intervention***

In this section, each story challenges the philosophical assumptions that are foregrounded in current educational policies. They also reveal assemblages of racialized logic that are implicated in widely-accepted educational terms like chronic absenteeism, equity, and disadvantage.

***Alleged Educational Neglect***

In December 2016, Ms. Kiarre Harris submitted a letter of intent to homeschool her children (see Table 1). In her words, "I felt that the district was failing my children and that's when I made the decision to homeschool" (WKBW Staff, 2017, para. 2). Days later, she was notified that her paperwork had been received by the school district and that her children were officially enrolled in homeschool. Yet, in subsequent weeks, Ms. Harris received an inquiry into her children's school absences, learned that the district's homeschool coordinator did not notify the schools about the enrollment change, and was contacted by CPS for a home visit. After refusing the home visit, Ms. Harris was charged with educational neglect and served a child removal order. She refused to surrender her children to the state and was additionally charged with obstructing an officer's process of child removal. Days later, her children were forcibly removed from her care, placed into foster care, and eventually relocated to stay with family in a different school district. In February 2017, Harris filed civil rights complaints with the U.S. Departments of Justice and Education, accusing Buffalo Public Schools and CPS of racial discrimination and improper procedure (Vaughters, 2017). By April 2017, a judge dropped the criminal and obstruction of justice charges against Ms. Harris, and she was reunited with her children (WGRZ Staff, 2017).

Harris's story of forced family separation confronts the ghosts of founding colonial-racial violence that linger in the present (Sharpe, 2016). It also exposes how the political dimensions, facilitated by raciality, are deeply fortified and implicated in (and by) compulsory education laws that shape home education regulations. In this case, Buffalo Public Schools' neglected action sets the stage for the state to violently intervene, immediately marking Ms. Harris as neglectful and noncompliant. Reyes (2020) helps to unpack this situation further in her discussion of how compulsory school attendance laws especially target "minority, low-income and culturally different children" (p. 22). She also reminds that chronic absenteeism, or missing 10 percent of school days, is linked with "low achievement, dropping out of school, and criminal behavior" (Reyes, 2020, p. 16). However, chronic absenteeism becomes a racialized assemblage—not simply a phenomenon or designation—when challenging its philosophical assumptions and targeting practices.

That is, chronic absenteeism reveals how the various meanings of proper operate in the scientific, ethical, juridical, and economic dimensions to exacerbate the district's clerical error. In the scientific dimension, chronic absenteeism establishes predictions about a child's school attendance and their educational and societal outcomes. Alleged chronic absenteeism also prompts the state to resolve students' attendance data into categorical evidence of parents' educational presence or neglect. The process of establishing Harris's actions as "worthy or good or not" (Ferreira da Silva, 2022, p. 51) productively translated her children's absences and her refusal to surrender them into markers of cultural deviance. These acts of translation transform "human bodily and social configurations into signifiers of the mind" (Ferreira da Silva, 2007, p. 166), providing justification for corrective intervention into the lives of those deemed culturally different and deviant from categorical whiteness, which imposes itself as racially and morally superior. Chronic absenteeism's assemblage of racial logic establishes *educational facts* about morality, achievement, and predictive life outcomes. These *facts* justified the juridical grounds on which the state enforced compulsory education in Ms. Harris's case. For example, New York State's penalties for violating compulsory education regulations stand out (see Table 1). Punitive measures for enforcing compulsory school attendance laws—such as fining and/or imprisonment—also reflect the economic (production/accumulation) dimension, where the state has legal authority to expropriate a person's labor. The Harris case exposes chronic absenteeism as a racialized assemblage that produces a necessary connection between alleged neglect, criminality, and legalized state intervention. Within these logics parents are placed onto a moral binary as they are labeled educationally present or educationally neglectful.

### *Weaponized Child Services*

Harris's experience of forced family separation was not shared by Rashida

(pseudonym). However, her children's former public school weaponized New York City's Administration for Children's Services (ACS) against her as someone who rocked "the boat and went against status quo." Expanding more, Rashida shared that she had been opting out of standardized testing and required weekend school days:

I was making the decisions around them not taking standardized testing and my son being enrolled in a school that required Saturday school. ... So, I was already rebelling from the system.

To reveal the racialized assemblages of educational disadvantage and equity, it's helpful to expand the frame of this story by drawing on a previous analysis that leverages the political dimensions. I (Cee) argued that the federal and state department's juridical imperative to pursue educational equity depends on creating the scientific category of educational disadvantage. This label is often applied to racially, economically, and linguistically subjugated children who are positioned as necessary objects-of-study-and-intervention for greater equity. Their academic achievement is closely monitored through standardized assessments, extended learning time, and other interventions designed to obliterate disadvantage (Carter, 2024). The school translated Rashida's decisions to opt out of standardized testing and extended learning time into a marker of cultural deviance that prompted school intervention. Again, we witness how school officials are deputized as state officers who have the potential to thwart a mothers' active participation in her children's education. State officials do so with legalized punitive action in the name of pursuing educational equity and justice. This incident propelled Rashida to begin home education—a move she had been researching and considering years prior to the incident.

By foregrounding the political dimensions of raciality, both stories illustrate the productive effects of New York State's educational regulations and specific home education policies as mothers seek out and begin home instruction. Harris's story illustrates the liminal space that home educators navigate as they leave public education and begin their homeschool journeys. Rashida's story illustrates one of many factors that push Black families to seek out home education, facilitating their liberatory educational visions (Fields-Smith & Kisura, 2013). Both stories make clear how evidence-based policies and practices, as designed by the political dimensions of raciality, have the potential to create harm, examine children's learning from a deficit perspective, and punish families through problematic enforcement procedures. Each mother's enactment of family educational agency radically demands the end to state-sanctioned violence and racialized educational subjugation. Their refusals open questions such as, what would it look like to redefine educational policy and practice? What practices could help maintain the absence of violent policing, problematic regulation, and punitive enforcement? Responding to these questions are a task at the nexus of conducting critical policy

analysis, ending state-sanctioned violence, abandoning allegiance to global capital, and reimagining education.

***Critical and Poethical Moments:  
Navigating Policies and Pedagogies***

This section further introduces the two New York participants, Rashida and Sarah (pseudonyms). The analytical engagement expands the frame of each participant's story to consider how raciality limits educational justice (Ferreira da Silva, 2016) for homeschoolers. The resulting analyses defamiliarize New York State's standardization and accountability policy and regulations for homeschooling by critiquing how the state prioritizes its own interests and its participation in global capital. This section also explores how home educators envision and practice education from a critical perspective. In doing so, they reimagine black education's present-futures by announcing "a whole range of possibilities for knowing, doing, and existing" (Ferreira da Silva, 2014, p. 81).

***Question Everything***

Rashida is an artist, organizer, wife, and mother of three. She elaborated on her and her husband's unschooling approach to home education:

where our kids had the autonomy and agency to decide what ... they wanted to learn. And we would take their lead and ... be their guides. I would hope that they would say that their parents ... laid the foundation for them to be explorers and to question everything. Question us, question authority ...

Rashida's vision of questioning everything from the state to parental authority offers an insightful moment for witnessing the political significance of her choice to home educate in the image of Black educators who taught students "to be aware and critical of their oppression, while gaining an expanded inventory of knowledge about black history and culture" (Givens, 2021, p. 188). Her educational stance challenges racialized educational subjugation by subverting dominant pedagogical imaginaries that prioritize ahistoricism and rote compliance. She also challenges the logics of the parental rights movement, which has been a ubiquitous phrase for hierarchizing parental entitlements over children's agency in conservative educational organizing.

During the first interview, I (Cee) prompted Rashida with "describe the moment that you decided to homeschool and what led to that." She shared more about how she had been considering home education prior to the pandemic and had engaged with local organizations:

I attended a homeschooling ... roundtable orientation ... with a local organization ... So I learned more about how Black folks did home schooling versus, ... the ways in which we see homeschooling as like a white thing.

Rashida's exploration of home education in a local organization illustrates how Black parents with critical curricula priorities are also simultaneously navigating a compliance-oriented regulative scene. It is incumbent upon parents to stay well versed in the policies and laws both at the state level and in their local education agencies as they seek out and begin home education. On one hand, learning home education policies and associated state laws was a facilitator for Rashida's liberatory unschooling vision. On the other hand, state policies and laws that facilitate home education are primarily designed to secure state interests and serve the elusive goal of providing a rigorous education for future participation in an increasingly complex global economy (Hursh, 2007). For example, Rashida curates her curriculum although she cannot opt out of New York State's biannual state-approved standardized testing requirements for grades 4-8—which are administered annually in grades 9-12 (see Table 2).

Furthermore, New York intervenes on home education programs if children's scores fall below the 33<sup>rd</sup> percentile on state-approved standardized assessments. Parents are instructed to remediate their children's learning without tax dollars provisioned for additional learning support. Probation is temporary if children's assessment scores improve. However, without improvement, this process can escalate to home visits or state-required public-school attendance. Despite parents' visions for home education, the state regularly reasserts itself, displaying how it is "always prone to abuse its legal authority, that is, to intervene in order to limit its citizens equal liberty" (Ferreira da Silva, 2016, p. 193). The point is that state policies are a facilitator up to a point. While homeschooling is one way for Black families to redress racialized discrimination, the state is always positioned to undermine this work. However, on the frontlines of this reality, Black home educators contribute to the black radical tradition of navigating and contesting state power on a global stage.

### *Worldbuilding Pedagogy*

Parents have the flexibility to create learning activities that animate their visions for home education within the bounds of New York State's policy guidance—which requires children to learn specified subjects by grade level (see Table 3). Rashida tailors learning experiences with her children's art and gaming interests as well as their focus on agency, autonomy, and criticality. During our second interview, she shared about enrolling her daughter in an online Afrofuturism Worldbuilding class:

**Rashida:** So, this is actually my daughter's artwork from the Afrofuturism ... World Building Series ... So, I would say my curricular curation process looks like including folks who are passionate about subjects and not thinking that I have to be the sole provider and sole support system for homeschooling. ... I'm able to connect them with people in different parts of the country, different parts of the world, and so my curriculum design ... is creating curricular community.

Cee: What's happening that we cannot see in this photo? (See Figure 1)

Rashida: While everyone else had AI and computerized presentations ... she had something that's ... more tactile. And it was okay ... Because in school she could have gotten deductions because she didn't follow the instructions to the tee and had AI and tech. ...that never even came up in this space.

In this exchange, Rashida demonstrates the possibilities for addressing the required subjects, like the visual arts, by seeking out local and digital education communities to nurture her daughter's creativity and imagination. In approaching curriculum this way, she challenges the notion that she, or the primarily skills-based state curriculum, must be the sole provider of her children's learning. She also highlights the Afrofuturism educator's feedback approach, which generatively responded to her daughter's creative work rather than assessing it for deficits. In her comments, Rashida recalls Ferreira da Silva's (2016) assertion that "any global ethical program designed to dissolve the effects of the power of raciality must target the governing

**Figure 1**  
*A Futuristic World Illustration*



logic of obliteration” (p. 203). Put differently, Black home education troubles the process of examining children’s learning from a deficit perspective and confronts the state’s self-interest in obliterating disadvantage with reform practices that disregard learners’ creative and intellectual expressiveness. Black home educators who critique power also reject commonplace neoliberal reform practices by disrupting deficit thought and refusing public education’s allegiance to the “workings of capitalism” (p. 203). Rashida surfaces tensions that underline the longstanding and fraught context that Black families face in the struggle for a dignified education. Yet, the tensions also highlight opportunities for educators and critical policy analysts to examine and innovatively disrupt policy logics that reproduce global state capital power and the problematic educational practices that feed it.

### *Confidence and Critical Thinking*

Sarah is a gifted and talented educator, artist, child of an agronomist, wife, and mother of two. When I (Cee) asked “what would you want your children to say about their education when they look back as adults?” Sarah shared about her and her husband’s collective vision for home education, which is rooted in confidence and critical thinking:

The majority of our lessons are discussion based. Really asking questions, making connections with other texts, other experiences, other stories. . . . I just wanted them to be able to process information and know that once you understand the method of processing information, there is nothing that you can’t understand.

Further, when I asked about her curricular philosophy, Sarah was clear about how raising “young Black men in America” is an inspiration for her critical curricular focus:

I prioritize Black American history and African history and African literature and Black American writers. I also prioritized world history and world literature for them so they could get a more global perspective and understanding. . . . And I try to . . . ensure that they have the foundations and fundamental understanding of all the . . . sciences and core curriculum so that they can compete . . . in [institutional] spaces.

Sarah prioritizes curricular themes that accentuate Black history, literature, and writing in the wake of navigating the racialized educational terrain during her children’s preschool years and during her own teaching experiences. Their family homeschooled for early childhood education given their previous experience living in South Carolina, where they witnessed Black children being discriminated against in traditional and gifted and talented classrooms. When her family moved to New York City, her oldest son qualified for gifted and talented elementary programs. However, given the distance from their home she worked with local administrators to creatively navigate public magnet schools given her knowledge of policies and associated state laws:

... understanding the bylaws of the Department of Ed in New York State, I realized that I could send him to school in the beginning of the year ... And then after the Christmas holidays, I pulled them out during the period that focused ... on testing ... and then I would send them back in April ... when I knew testing was done and the school had reverted back to project-based learning and focusing on the magnet part of the curriculum, which was ... cultural and ethical studies.

Yet she made the decision to permanently homeschool after encountering the racialized educational terrain again as her first son was preparing to go to middle school.

When she toured the school and asked why the gifted and talented students were predominantly White in a “majority Caribbean and Orthodox Jewish neighborhood,” the principal evaded her questions and made comments that made Sarah feel uneasy about sending her children to the school. Sarah recalls that the principal remarked:

Well, you know, mom you’re going to have to let go of them at some point because we could provide them with so much more than you can.

To which Sarah responded:

Interestingly enough, I do believe you might be able to provide them with things that I can’t, but I’m absolutely certain I can provide them with things that you can’t as well. So, I guess that’s a decision I’m going to have to make. ... And I started homeschooling them.

In these moments, home education policies and associated state laws became a facilitator for Sarah to resist the racialized subjugation that she had been witnessing throughout her sons’ early education years and as she considered middle school options for them. However, Sarah not only experienced the racialized educational terrain in witnessing discrimination and exclusion, she also repeatedly collided with the limits of inclusion as a method of educational redress in public gifted and talented classrooms. Ferreira da Silva’s (2016) examination of affirmative action court rulings is helpful for considering what Sarah recognizes:

opportunity means the freedom to enjoy social mobility—not to be discriminated against in situations of competition. Such a view of social justice could not be further removed from the account of social inequalities in denunciations of colonial expropriation, racial violence, and patriarchal domination articulated in 1960s civil rights women’s movements, for instance. And yet equality of opportunity would be the prevailing basis for supporting affirmative action as an instrument for social redress. (p. 192)

Though her children were eligible to join gifted and talented programs, she was consistently met with the contradiction that these rigorous academic programs reproduce racialized subjugation, primarily view education as a tool of competition, and deemphasize critiques of power in curriculum, pedagogy, and school management.

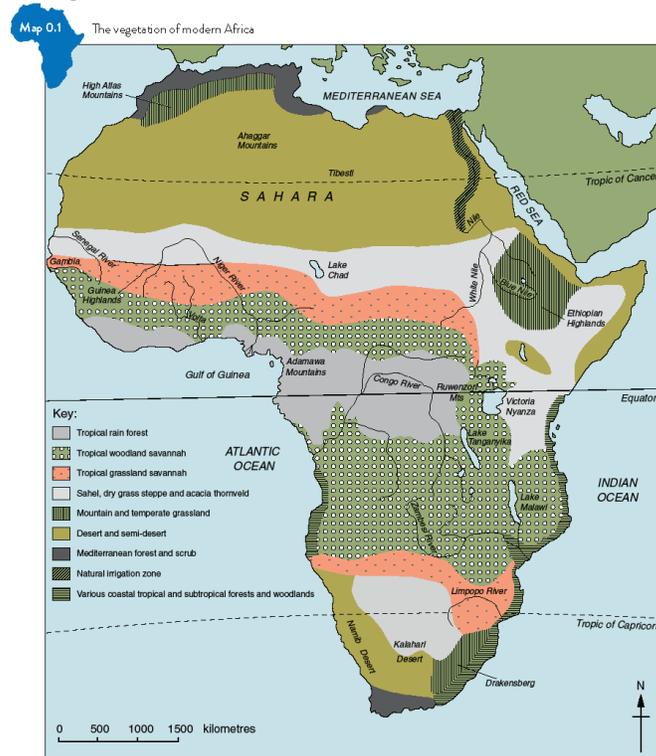
### Worldschooling Pedagogy

During our conversations, Sarah emphasized her focus on critical-creative teaching and learning while discussing her sons' "creative learning days," where they have produced animations, music, music videos, and a short film. She also shared about her family's examination of colonial impacts during their 3-month worldschooling trip across London, Paris, Marseille, Lisbon, and Dakar. Their trip sparked discussions about colonial extraction as they visited museums:

one of my sons was able to make the observation that ... the pictures are either super pompous and show extreme royal wealth or they look just sad and miserable ... So really ... helping them understand that the reason people fled Europe in search of other lands was because there were limited resources there and because there was so much poverty. ... And so they went in search of ... more wealth, more access, and brought it back.

During our second interview, Sarah shared a map from their previous year's focus on pre-colonial African history (see figure 2).

**Figure 2**  
**Map of the Vegetation of Modern Africa**



Remembering Sarah had previously discussed the Colonial Impact Trip, we had the following exchange:

**Cee:** And did you have a particular concern, too, about how the vegetation of modern Africa is represented?

**Sarah:** Well, you know, one of the things that we were talking about was why? Why was Africa infiltrated? ... there are a lot of rivers, a lot of vegetation, therefore a lot of natural materials. And that there was a lot of wealth in Africa. And that's why there were so many people coming to Africa to see what they could get. ...and how that impacted the scramble for Africa and the colonization of Africa, but also how that impacted all the ... different wars and all the different kingdoms and the boundaries and parameters of those kingdoms.

**Cee:** And I am curious, what does this document help you notice about teaching and learning approaches and your home education practice?

**Sarah:** Seeing this document makes me think about all the discussions we had around it. ... I feel like if they were in a classroom ... they may not have gone into some of the deeper ... impact of the cultural geography.

In this exchange, Sarah demonstrates the possibilities for teaching the required subjects with a critique of power and representation, which critically expands her sons' study of History. She is actively disrupting European countries' historical narratives about their royal elite. She is also unsettling the colonial gaze on Africa as an under-resourced continent by beginning with an "acknowledgment of the founding violence of modern representation" but recalling "the need for another point of departure for describing global existence" (Ferreira da Silva, 2016, p. 204). Instead of glossing over this colonial view, she flips the gaze toward the continent's rich vegetation as a way of unpacking political structures and struggles, while noting the greed and extractive processes that facilitated colonialism. Her approach actively centers teaching and learning priorities that are often left out of focus in required content standards that facilitate state policies for raising academic achievement. Sarah's pedagogy brings up the following questions for critical policy analysts: What is the critical policy analyst's charge in this moment of growing educational censorship? What does it look like to protect critiques of power in home education and public education broadly? With all that has happened, continues to happen, and will happen, where is our ethical outrage (Ferreira da Silva, 2007)?

### ***Critical Moments: Proposed Changes to Policy Regulations***

Despite these interstices for subverting the dominant curricular imaginary, both Rashida and Sarah speak to the difficulties of doing this work with no funding from the state. Both addressed homeschoolers' ineligibility for organized sports, and Rashida specifically addressed limited opportunities to collaborate with public schools:

**Cee:** If you could change anything about home education regulations in your state, what would you change and why?

**Rashida:** That we don't get any funding. ... the narrative is that if you homeschool, you have this abundant amount of money. ... Or changing the fact that in some other states they do allow... the kids to play sports with public school. ... That's not the case here. ... And I would say just for me, it would just be more of an opportunity to collaborate with those in public school.

Further, when I asked Sarah about changes she would make to policies, she questioned the school-funding-tax matrix as she discussed specific food benefits provisioned for children during the pandemic:

**Sarah:** ... I'll never forget during the pandemic when they were giving out ... food benefits for families of kids that were in school. And I said, well, that's interesting because last I checked, we still pay taxes ... we're still calculated in the number of students in public school. Yet none of that money comes to homeschool families. ... we're financially contributing to the public school system, but yet not benefiting from any of the resources.

Sarah also discussed how homeschool students do not receive high school diplomas despite the time and careful attention they pay to following recordkeeping procedures and adhering to reporting requirements:

**Sarah:** to require for us to submit like hours, homeschooled coursework materials, grades for all these years, and then to give us a letter that basically says you kept him at home ... Seems kind of ridiculous.

These moments and recommendations for change reveal that, in this policy context, parents seemingly face a conundrum: if you want to access publicly funded affordances, place your children into harmful spaces where racialized educational subjugation runs rampant in curriculum and pedagogy or you're on your own. That is, they remind how raciality operates in ways that create the racially and economically subjugated through founding and ongoing colonial violences that exacerbate the conditions for suffering via legalized land extraction and legalized labor expropriation, blame one for their suffering, and *justify harm as just another instance of structural racism*.

#### **Discussion:**

#### **A Radical Call to End Racialized Educational Subjugation**

This black feminist analysis of homeschooling policy's productive effects for Black home educators is significant for exposing the ways that raciality facilitates educational regulation and illuminating how mothers' critical-creative teaching subverts the dominant curricular imaginary found in traditional school settings. It is also significant for levying a critique against the ways global state capital drives production/accumulation in its own interest. Presented together, the stories

highlight the political significance and tensions of Black home education, which contributes to emergent praxes for reimagining black education present-futures. The decision to homeschool begins with the demand to eliminate racialized educational subjugation for children yet this decision is also informed by navigating larger patterns of discriminatory educational practice, traditional educational funding models, and the state's figuring of proper educational engagement. This article witnesses Black mothers as they decide to homeschool in response to the racialized educational terrain, refuse to surrender their children to the state, and call out the problematic status quo in public education.

Specifically, we witness Kiarre Harris's response to a school district that "failed" her children. We also witness Rashida's opting out of standardized testing and her contestation of school overreach with extended learning time. In each instance, state officials read these actions as actualizations of cultural deviance that necessitate intervention. When the state intervenes, parents are subject to violent (or potentially violent) state-sanctioned acts as stipulated by compulsory schooling law's legal authority to fine, imprison, and separate. Parents are also subject to school officials' conceptions of appropriate parental actions within public school participation (Peters, 2019). State and school officials' translation of these actions, and their power as policy enforcers, are roles subsidized by raciality. They operationalize "what is" considered "ethically, juridically, and economically proper" (Ferreira da Silva, 2022, p. 51) in ways that discipline, punish, and harm. The stories also expose how the racialized educational terrain is contoured with the ongoing presence of colonial-racial violence, which is encoded in the educational regulations that operationalize home education policy. In action, principles of necessity help resolve truancy as propensity toward criminality (scientific); contestation against the status quo as deviance (ethical); and forced family separation, fining, and imprisonment as a justified legal consequence for curbing propensity toward criminality (scientific, ethical, juridical, and economic).

The political dimensions demonstrate Black mothers' decision to homeschool as politically significant in their contestation of educational subjugation and the problematic policy enforcement context underlying it. This context relies on writing economically and racially subjugated children, rather than the system itself, as "the necessary objects of educational reform" (Carter, 2024, p. 2). It also demonstrates the need for critical educational policy and Black home education scholars to further explore these tensions. That is, how Black families' physical and emotional safety is compromised when the state's educational regulation apparatus intervenes with violent enforcement procedures. Furthermore, the political dimensions demonstrate how a black feminist analytical "imaging of what happens and has happened as well as what has existed, exists, and will exist otherwise—all and at once" (Ferreira da Silva, 2020, p. 43) can serve the important task of eliminating racialized educational subjugation by acknowledging "the founding" and ongoing "violence of modern representation" without falling into

its traps as we reimagine ethical and political education demands for black education (Ferreira da Silva, 2016, p. 204).

Additionally, both Rashida and Sarah demonstrate how they stay informed about the regulations to facilitate their educational visions despite the latent threat of noncompliance. Their knowledge helps them operate in the policies' interstices, which require them to teach certain subjects. In the intervening space between the requirements and demonstration of academic proficiency, they choose to subvert dominant curricular and pedagogical imaginaries in favor of elevating "the ideas and the visions that Black communities create regarding an emancipatory future and the eradication of anti-Blackness" (Daramola, 2024, p. 348).

The stories presented here also affirm the Black home education literature, which emphasizes the important physical and psychological safety benefits of home education and culturally affirming curricula (Baker, 2024). Rashida composes her curricular praxis with a local and digital community. She curates learning experiences aimed at inspiring and responding to her children's interests. Sparked by her family's unschooling journey, her critical-creative curricula and pedagogy directly speak to her vision of questioning everything as well as encouraging her children to take ownership over their learning. The vision to question and take ownership over their learning is in direct resistance to a school system that emphasizes compliance over curiosity. Rashida also emphasizes her pedagogical role as "guide" rather than *enforcer* as a way of delivering on her stated vision for unschooling.

Sarah also subverts the dominant curricular imaginary through her vision for educating confident, creative, and critically engaged "young Black men-in-training." In the example presented above, and in both interviews, her critical-creative curricula and pedagogy celebrate art, music, and expressiveness across the African diaspora while simultaneously exposing colonial conquest narratives that traditional school curriculums often cover up, gloss over, or condone in their refusal to question the politics of knowledge. As noted earlier, both participants' visions are facilitated by curated curricula that levy "anticolonial and racial critiques of global state-capital" (Ferreira da Silva, 2020, p. 40) and suggest something about the liberatory potentialities of Black home education, as one expression of reimagined educational present-futures, amidst a fraught educational policy context that needs to be interrupted.

Additionally, Rashida's and Sarah's suggested policy changes illustrate how policies limit their children's extracurricular participation, constrain their engagement with public schools, and refuse to award high school diplomas. As Rashida points out, homeschool and public-school learners are systematically separated from one another through sports and other community activities that take place in school buildings—as if they don't have similar interests, curiosities, or needs. Additionally, Sarah points out that home educators pay taxes that fund their local school systems, yet they are "not benefiting from any of the resources." Further,

homeschoolers in New York, and in the six New England state policies examined, do not receive high school diplomas to certify their secondary school completion. However, parents are required to carefully maintain records—that are sometimes lost or misplaced—which prove they have met required subjects and taught the required number of instructional days and hours. They must also pay out-of-pocket to regularly assess their children’s grade level competencies. In these ways, policy regulations operationalize the logic of necessity and construct public schooling as the proper mode of education for economically subjugated parents and children who want to access publicly funded extracurricular activities, collaborative opportunities, and secondary education credentials. While the participants did not express that they are struggling to meet the basic needs nor the creative interests of their children, their comments reveal how the state’s organized abandonment of homeschoolers should also be examined as scholars inquire into child welfare. Furthermore, child welfare should be conceptualized and supported beyond stricter laws around notification of intent, stronger qualifications for parents, and increased assessment-with-intervention for homeschooled students.

#### **Scholarly Significance for Reimagined Futures: Toward Transformative Justice**

The moments presented in this paper demonstrate the danger in calls for greater regulation in the image of global state-capital as subsidized by raciality. Through this inquiry, Harris’s story demands that the educational scholarly community rethink current educational reform approaches that rely on neoliberal practices of regulation and accountability. Yet, ironically, the CRHE (2024) is calling for similar forms of regulation in its *Make Homeschool Safe Act* and in its green rating of New York State’s policy requirements for home education. As mentioned earlier, policy and regulative efforts that leverage the political dimensions of raciality in the name of educational equity, quality, and safety are “tricky ground” (Smith, 2005, p. 85) for addressing Black children’s wellbeing. In this current moment of seismic educational shift, we are facing the potential loss of federal oversight of the public education system, which stands to exacerbate structural inequalities for racially, economically, and linguistically subjugated learners as well as learners with disabilities. As we navigate this potential shift, it is incumbent upon us to be more strategic and clearer in conceptualizing and delivering on our ethical and political education demands. Further, this critical policy inquiry demonstrates Black home education as one transgressive and counter-hegemonic educational option in the wake of these shifts. Thus, the analytical engagement presented here provokes the following methodological questions, what might educational justice look like on terms that do not subtly echo the political dimensions? How might we collaboratively reimagine our ethical and political education demands to avoid repeating the state-authorized harm that has been experienced?

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***Black Work, Resistance, and Institutional Reckoning*****Talkin' Bout  
a(n) (Educational)  
Revolution*****Asif Wilson, Kristy Ulrich Papczun, & Khalila Lomax*****Abstract**

This paper illuminates the experiences, analyses, and speculations of Black parents, teachers, and community organizers who experienced and resisted school closures in Chicago over a 20-year period. Framed through Joyce King's Critical Studyin' conceptual framework and utilizing kitchen table talk methodologies, the co-authors provide valuable insights into how Black communities experienced school closures and the consciousness emergent from those deadly acts of violence. In doing so, this paper highlights the ideals of Black parents, teachers, and community organizers that counter the grand narratives of school closures as the right and only thing to do. The article concludes with implications that call for more structural, yet personal, analyses of the antecedents and outcomes of school closures that can lead to more life-giving and life-sustaining alternatives.

*Keywords:* Critical studyin', kitchen table talk, Black education, school closures, resistance

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### Introduction

Between 2001 and 2013, the Board of Education at Chicago Public Schools, in collaboration with previous mayors of Chicago, closed, turned around, or consolidated over 200 schools (Lutton et al., 2018). Most of those school closures disproportionately impacted Black students and Black teachers in Black communities (Pearman & Greene, 2021). Symbiotically wrapped in this nearly 15-year history of educational enclosure (Sojoyner, 2016) are movements of resistance and refusal often led by Black students, Black parents, and Black teachers. Their actions and dreams for more just educational contexts illuminate, among others, the active role(s) that Black families have always played in imagining and actualizing more just teaching and learning experiences in P-20 schools. Currently, there is a moratorium on school closures in Chicago through 2027; however, the future of Black schools and Black education in Chicago (and elsewhere) remains uncertain. Given the history of school closures as a solution to the manufactured financial crises in urban schools, there is a fear and real possibility that more school closures may occur in the future. Yet, at the same time, there is also an opportunity to pay finer attention to the voices of Black families organizing for educational justice. In doing so, Black education and the contours that surround it may be better suited for the moments that tomorrow will bring.

We—the co-authors—employ kitchen table talk methodologies to provide valuable insights into how Black communities experienced school closures and the consciousness emergent from those deadly acts of violence (Aggarwal et al., 2012; Ewing, 2018; Shedd, 2015; Stovall, 2016). In doing so, this paper attempts to illuminate the ideals of Black parents, teachers, and community organizers that counter the dominant narratives of school closures as the right and only thing to do. A more structural yet personal analysis of the outcomes of these actions can provide a deeper understanding of the impacts of school closures and potential solutions to them that are more life-giving and life-sustaining. We invite readers to take up and wrestle with the approaches, analyses, and dreams shared here, not in prescription but in ways bound to their context, the his/herstorical<sup>1</sup> conditions of said contexts, and their aspirations for more justice-centered education in the future.

After sharing the conceptual underpinnings, we expound on what kitchen table talk methodologies are and explain our use of the approach. We then situate the his/herstory of school closures and resistance to them in Chicago as related to the study. Following these contextualizations, we share an excerpt from a kitchen table talk that occurred during a campaign, titled *Closing Schools is a Hate Crime*, to raise awareness of, and abolish, school closures. In alignment with kitchen table talk methodologies, we share the complete transcript of the conversation being studied, to holistically represent their stories, as well as the shared space and collective building of consciousness that we seek to highlight in this study. We conclude the article with implications and calls to action for the future.

### Critical Studyin': Framework

We employ Joyce King's (2006, 2011) Critical Studyin' framework to better understand how Black people, in storying their own lives, come to understand the contours of systematic and anti-Black oppression. Additionally, we utilize this framework to understand the ways that Black people, in deepening their analyses of oppression in their worlds, develop the tools, what King (2006) refers to as literacies, to move against oppression in their speculation about the future. As such, we start by discussing the characteristics of Critical Studyin'. We follow this description with a contextualization of the framework's application to this study.

Critical Studyin' (King, 2006) derived from the notion that Black people have always contemplated our freedom (Anderson, 1985; King, 2006), even amid endemic anti-Black violence that murders our bodies, minds, and spirits on the streets and in classrooms (Love, 2014, 2016; Williams, 1987; Wilson, 2021). King (2006) defines Critical Studyin' as a "praxis of remembering or theorizing how to reconnect the dismembered existential reality of African descent people" (p. 338). We use it for its conceptual framing and commitment to justice and liberation. S.E. Anderson (1985) reminds us that the goal of Critical Studyin' is to become "cognitively free of ideological constraints on knowledge, thought, and morally engaged pedagogy" (p. 338). King (2006) builds on this aspiration, articulating Critical Studyin' as a form of politicization, supporting Black people in recovering "historical consciousness, identity, and collective memory" (p. 344). For educators and others interested in educational justice, Critical Studyin' "offers a pedagogical alternative to alienating knowledge that rationalizes injustice, corrupts scientific reasoning, and obstructs critical moral agency" (King, 2006, p. 339).

King (2011) defines Critical Studyin' through two conceptual tools: Diaspora Literacy and Heritage Knowledge. Diaspora Literacy refers to the process of "de-coding concrete situations. . . in the culture of everyday Black life" (King, 2006, p. 345). This form of consciousness development is intersectional, accounting for the multiple forms of oppression Black people experience across their identities. It is also the method by which Heritage Knowledge, which King (2006) defines as a "group's memory of their collective history" (p. 345), is formed. In this sense, Diaspora Literacy refers to the process(es) of Black consciousness, and Heritage Knowledge refers to the outcome(s) of said processes.

A number of scholars have utilized Critical Studyin' as a framework to illuminate and analyze the intersections between Black education and educational (in)justice. A majority of these studies take up Critical Studyin' to contour the praxes of Black educators (Acosta et al., 2017; Bryan et al., 2016; Busey, 2018; Wilson, 2024; Wilson & McMillian, 2024). Others have utilized the framework to illuminate the anti-Black contours of K-12 schooling while at the same time advancing more justice-centered conceptualizations for Black education within these sites (Albright et al., 2025; Cochran-Smith, 2009; Cochran-Smith et al.,

2016). Very few studies outside of this one apply Critical Studyin' to Black families' educational dreams and actions (Khubchandani, 2022; Marchand et al., 2024). This study builds upon these empirical and conceptual queries, adding to the available literature articulating Black consciousness.

We use the framework of Critical Studyin' and its associated conceptual tools to situate and illuminate the contours of consciousness, what King (2006) calls a "liberating knowledge for human freedom" (p. 339), emergent from a group of Black parents, teachers, and students critically studyin' their experiences and resistance to school closures in Chicago. Given the framing's collective and communal positioning, we elected to adopt kitchen table talk as an appropriate and aligned methodological approach to the study of Black freedom.

### Talkin' Around the Table

Kitchen tables and the activities that surround them have played important roles in Black living in the afterlife of enslavement (Smith, 1989). Co-founder of Kitchen Table: Woman of Color Press, Barbara Smith (1989), reminds us that "the kitchen is the center of the home, the place where women in particular work and communicate with each other" (p. 11). Often mediated by food, emotion, and dialogue, kitchen tables, in the Black cultural sense, provide respite from the complex navigation of life frequently associated with fatigue, stress, and fear. Yet, these very tables are also sites of joy, celebration, humor, and a life void (even if momentarily) of the harms of structural oppression. The stories shared over meals, laughter, and joy build connections, memories, dreams of freedom, and serve as sites of healing. As Navarro, Williams, and Ahmad (2013) remind us, the kitchen table reflects "a cross-cultural space of conversation and potential alliance-building" (p. 448). Ideas converge at the table through the stories shared, and the emotions verbalized. As a result, new forms of Heritage Knowledge emerge through the collective meaning-making and the Critical Studyin' that ensues. There are individuals, but the conversation is communal. One person may start a sentence, and another may finish. There are always cues from the other people at the table that also move the conversation.

Scholars have utilized these notions of the kitchen table and the critical studyin' often emergent from these sites to introduce kitchen table talk as a methodological approach to empirical research that values the "everyday talk" (Kohl & McCutcheon, 2015) within communities of color as an "improvisational exegetical method" (Lyiscott et al., 2021) of theorization, memory, and futurity. This study uses kitchen table talk methodologies to share the experiences and emergent analyses of seven Black parents and educators impacted by school closures (see Table 1).

We use kitchen table talk as a methodology in this paper for two reasons. First, the data for this study emerged from a conversation around an actual kitchen table. Second, we take up kitchen table talk here because of the communal nature of the dialogue presented—particularly the conscious building, the dream-

**Table 1**  
**Names and Background of Narrators**

<i>Name</i>	<i>Background</i>
Ms. Irene	Parent and Grandparent at Overton Elementary (closed in 2013)
Ms. Bobbie	Parent at Harper High School (closed in 2012)
Ms. Braggs	Attended Ross Elementary (closed in 2013) as a child
Tricey	Student and Parent at Overton Elementary (closed in 2013)
Erminia	Sister to faculty member at Bowen High School (closed in 2013) Grew up in Bowen neighborhood
Stovall	University Professor, Co-founder and Teacher at Social Justice High School (born out of a 19-day hunger strike)
Asif	University Professor, Teacher at May Community Academy (closed 2013)

ing and visioning happening, and the “alliance building” (Navarro et al., 2013, p. 448). Kitchen table talk methodologies present entire conversations that take place among Black folks through printing the entire transcript for the audience. This study is no different. This becomes important as the words, affirmations, and back-and-forths between the narrators offer analyses within the storytelling, grounded in shared histories and identities, critical of racist structures and systems. Any analysis by the researchers—us as co-authors—is subordinate to the analyses happening already through the community members’ shared space and conversation—the critical studyin’. As such, we have elected to share our analyses after the full, and uninterrupted, kitchen table talk through a detailed transcript to honor the stories presented in the collective voice of the Black community members. We do not offer data coded in small bits or themes that emerge from coding, as this is not in alignment with kitchen table talk methodologies and the meaning-making that happens around kitchen tables in Black culture. In short, kitchen table talk methodologies inform not only the analyses and implications drawn in this paper, but also the conventions used in presenting its contents, such as preserving the transcript as a whole and offering our analyses afterwards (Kohl & McCutcheon, 2015; Lyiscott et al., 2021).

### **The Study**

Near the start of a new school year in Chicago in 2024, thirteen Black parents, teachers, and students gathered around two adjoined kitchen tables in the rear of the Front Porch—a convenience store turned community center operated by a church in the Back of the Yards community in Chicago. The large room, which often hosted community events and healing circles, was the group’s office for the day. Over six hours, split into two days, the group gathered to plan a year-long campaign that involved the curation of stories from Black parents, students, and educators in Chicago who experienced and resisted school closures.

The opening activity of the gathering, the first of several in the year-long project, involved each attendee sharing an artifact of their selection and a related story that represented their memories of school closures. One by one, each of us shared our stories, supplemented by pictures, memorabilia, and other artifacts reflective of our memories. While each member of the conversation came to the table with individual experiences and analyses of their worlds, particularly to school closures in Chicago, the studyin' that ensued blossomed into a collective analysis rooted in a symbiotic relationship between the personal and the political.

Grounded in oral histories and community conversations that served as socially enacted "creative engagements" (Anderson & Daya, 2022, p. 1675), the data collection for this study happened at individual gatherings, while the data analysis resides at the structural level (Fine, 2006; 2016). Group conversations throughout the larger campaign, including this kitchen table talk, were audio recorded and transcribed. The authors re-listened to the audio of this specific conversation multiple times during team meetings to illuminate the verbalized but not word-articulated affirmations and responses that are valuable parts of the collective meaning-making. This form of analysis irradiates the "saying" along with the "said" (Simon & Eppert, 1997, p. 182). Preliminary impressions and "hunches" shared during research team meetings framed the initial data analysis. Further data analysis entailed numerous passes through the transcript to identify Diaspora Literacy and Heritage Knowledge from King's Critical Studyin' framework, combined with our personal experiences with school closures.

In the sections that follow, we share a transcript of an excerpt from that conversation, highlighting seven of the 13 people (although many of the collective responses are from the entire group), introducing rich personal stories complemented by affirmation, structural analysis, and hope. Upon listening to the audio of the entire conversation, the authors identified this exchange between these seven Black community members as exemplifying the critical consciousness building through their critical studyin' of Black education, drawing from their Heritage Knowledge and engaging in Diaspora Literacy. Thus, these seven individuals were identified as participants for this study.

### ***Our Positionality***

In this paper, we are co-authors and participants. We were all facilitators in the Closing Schools is a Hate Crime campaign. Ahead of the campaign's start, we planned out sessions with other members of the coordination team (a group of parents, teachers, and students responsible for designing the sessions). During sessions we co-facilitated activities alongside members of the coordination team. We were also part of a research team attempting to memorialize the activities, analyses, and speculations emergent in the campaign. One of us participated in the kitchen table talk conversation analyzed for this paper. In addition to these roles, all three of us have been personally and politically impacted by school closures.

*Asif*

In 2013, the school I started my teaching career at, the school I learned how to be a Black teacher at, was closed. While the decision to close May Community Academy on Chicago's westside, alongside 49 other schools was a detrimental blow to Black communities and Black teachers (whom were the recipients of the bulk of the closures), the experience pushed me to do more as a teacher and emergent scholar to illuminate the structural violence that school closures reproduce. Now, I attempt to use research as a tool for justice by bringing to light to the structural violence impacting Black and other dispossessed communities. Additionally, and maybe more importantly, I aim to use research as a method to story and memorialize the praxes of people, in community with others, resisting these enclosures to life. In part, these personal and political moments make up who I am and the educational worlds I hope to exist in one day. They also contributed to the collective space we attempted to create and maintain during the campaign, particularly related to the structural analyses of school closures.

*Kristy*

I am a white teacher who indirectly experienced school closures when our local public middle school was closed where my spouse taught during the massive school closings in 2013. Once the closure was announced, I participated in organizing against the closure with community members, meeting in living rooms, drafting our two-minute speaking points, collaborating with activists to resist other school closures. Our resistance largely named the performative and curated structures, often couched as community engagement by the district, that maintain and reproduce social inequities through educational policies that shutter schools. My experience continues to resonate within me as I engage in research centered on the stories we tell about schools and furthers my teaching practices as a way to work toward justice.

*Khalila*

As a Black person in an urban community, I understand the significance of school community and school closures. My hometown Youngstown Ohio has, and continues to, experience school closures. These closures, like Asif and Kristy, have personally impacted my family and me. My mom's high school was closed in 1993 and my dad's high school is slated to be closed at the end of the 2025-2025 school year. I have now come to understand these closures as part of a larger legacy of school closures in Youngtown that have resulted in the closure of all but one consolidated high school for Fall 2026. These closures have forever changed the dynamic(s) of my hometown and the shared cultural experiences once present in the empty buildings. I bring these understanding of how school closures affect

communities to my personal and professional work. I see similarities across the Midwest in community remembrance and mourning around school closures.

### ***The Transcript***

In presenting the narrative of this conversation between Black community members, which took place as part of a more extensive campaign to construct a vision for Black education in Chicago, we attempt to illuminate individual stories of pain as a result of systemic educational violence and a collective hope for the future of Black education. Presented as a transcript, we hope the shared stories reflect this individual and collective consciousness. We chose to include the entire transcript as a whole story, consistent with kitchen table talk methodologies, to allow the reader to see the building of collective consciousness that happens throughout the conversation and storytelling. At times, there are references to the “group” to reflect the collective affirmations, questions, and criticisms that emerged from the conversation. At other times, we share individual stories to illuminate the differences in experiences, analyses, and actions. We elected to present the transcript in ways that aspired to preserve the Black language used by the group, highlighting the Heritage Knowledge which the group drew upon and the Diaspora Literacies with which the group engaged. This more authentically represents the actual talk and the group’s collective meaning-making. We also view this as a refusal to clean the transcript for conventional research expectations, honoring the stories and consciousness as they were shared and created (Tuck & Yang, 2014; Whitney et al., 2024). We reserve any integration with analysis for later, where we offer parts of the exchange with our thoughts.

Before sharing the kitchen table talk transcript and our emergent analyses, we find it important to situate Chicago’s his/herstory of neoliberal education reform. In doing so, we hope to provide readers with a deeper and richer understanding of the socio-political context of education in Chicago.

### **Chicago: Schools on the Make**

Chicago has been at the forefront of neoliberal educational reform for decades, from the mayoral takeover of the Chicago Public School district in 1995 to the charter school movement to the massive school closures in 2013. Chicago’s education landscape was a model for charter school proliferation through the privatization of public goods (like schools) through market-based ideologies (Lipman & Haines, 2007; Lipman & Hursh, 2007; The Chicago Reporter, 2021; Resseger, 2018). Then Mayor Richard M. Daley presented a plan, titled Renaissance 2010, to The Commercial Club of Chicago that disclosed plans to close 60 neighborhood public schools and open 100 new schools by 2010 (Lipman, 2011, p. 42). During this time period, Chicago was undergoing rapid gentrification, pushing Black working-class families out through public housing demolition and

continual displacement. The new residents would need new schools. As a result of these policies and practices, the Chicago Public Schools Board of Education has closed, consolidated, or turned around over 200 schools since 2001 (Lutton et al., 2018). Black communities have been some of the hardest hit by these closures, yet their voices and aspirations were often left out of decision-making. Eighty-eight percent of the roughly 70,000 students impacted by these enclosures have been Black (Lutton et al., 2018).

Education in Chicago continues to stand at the intersection of elite business interests and communities' calls for racial equity. This systematic contextualization illuminates the intertwined relationships between white supremacy, capitalism, and education reform in Chicago. It is also the backdrop for over a century of documented resistance to these life-taking reproductions of violence. Black Chicagoans have always had to fight for their right and access to educational equity since migrating to urban cities during the first and second waves of the Great Migration. These movements for educational rights and access, too many to list here, signify the agency and power of Black parents, teachers, and students to both imagine and actualize more liberatory forms of education, even amid unrelenting reproductions of anti-Black violence.

There is a deep his/herstory of resistance in Chicago to educational injustices, from Freedom Day in 1963 to the next iteration of independent Black-centric schools that launched in the 1970s (Todd-Breland, 2018). Black women educators in Chicago, such as Barbara Sizemore, were precursors to hoped-for Black community control in local schools as they "created an environment for Black educational achievement" and rejected white-centered desegregation legislation in the 1960s (Todd-Breland, 2018, p. 51). It is in this long lineage of resistance and reclamation of educational rights that the Black educators, parents, and students in this study continue to fight school closures through their activism, storytelling, and reimagining of Black education in Chicago.

We hope these contextual markers help readers more critically understand the experiences shared within the transcript that follows. What the seven parents, teachers, and community organizers share is, in many ways, reflective of the dialectical relationship between limits to life and resistance to those limits that have always existed within the contours of Black education in Chicago. Through their commitment to gather for this campaign, by sharing their pasts and envisioning the future, you will read in the transcript how they offer their personal stories, like Tricey's fight for denied special education supports, amid school closures. You will also read how they support each other's stories through conjuring resistances of the ancestors—like Ms. Irene's simile of the slave ships, to draw on this deep history of resistance to injustices.

**Talkin' Bout a(n) (Educational) Revolution**

**Erminia (28:28):** I live [in] South Shore, South Chicago, in that hub, and it was just interesting to see the disparity in schools that were in the neighborhood . . . I could not go to South Shore. I was not trying to go there. I definitely wasn't going to Bowen, because Bowen and South Shore, they were very rough schools, and then the other schools you would have to travel. CVS was enough. So there was this dynamic of very rough schools in the area, neighborhood schools, or you had to find a Catholic school to go to. And so, then you started to see more charter schools popping up. . . . around '97, '99 is when I started to really see . . . charter schools, and what are they doing in the community. . . I did have, you know, friends who went to schools and they were challenged, or they had to find other schools, alternative schools to go to. . . Sullivan was a school that was put in the area, you know, for challenged youth. They made it a larger school, then a small school, then they made it an alternative school. So that was, I guess I could think that was something that I saw that kind of migrated from. It wasn't closed per se, but it migrated. It's unfortunate that there are lack of resources, especially in underserved populations such as South Chicago, the East Side of Chicago, and it's still private. I'm right? I'm here because I want to change that.

**Ms. Braggs (31:03):** One of the grammar schools that I attended as a child was Betsy Ross, and I did not know that Betsy Ross was a part of one of the fifty school closed until I started doing this work with Mama Irene and Women and Mothers of Multiple Colors. The principal at the time, his name was Mr. McGee, I'll never forget, and he was a really good principal. . . . I would really love to find out why they felt like . . . that school was under enrolled, or whatever? I would really like to find out the reason that that school was part of the fifty school closings because they had really good programs. There was music. We had a piano class, we had a choir. We had a lot of different good programs when I was attending that school. So . . . I'm really interested in finding out why it was on the list to be closed down.

**Tricey (32:10):** Okay, so [in] . . . 2012 a couple of my daughter's teachers came to me and told me that she had a learning disability and behavior issues. . . . So going into 2013 . . . she got evaluated. She got IEP and everything. And then, they was getting ready. . . to get the resources that she needed, and the schools closed.

**Stovall (32:46):** Mmmmm!!!

**Asif (32:46):** Hmmm???

**Tricey (32:46):** But she did receive an IEP, she did get evaluated, and they said that she needed these, uh, services like she was, she was really struggling, and so she transferred. They transferred her to Mollison. When she got to Mollison the classrooms, I think they had like 40 to 50 kids in class.

**Group (33:06):** Mmmmm.

**Tricey (33:06):** Kids was in the hallways eating lunch. Some kids didn't have classrooms to go to, and I was going up to the school because she was supposed to be getting services that she needed. And they looked in the system and said she never had an IEP.

**Stovall (33:22):** Awww Jesus.

**Tricey (33:23):** [They said] she never went through this evaluation. My mama was with me . . . when we went through the process, and so two years she at the school, we struggling to get her this help. They going through principals. She never got the help that she needed. So, I transferred her to another school. But before that, I go back a little bit before that, I was taking her to therapy and things because I know she needed these services on my own. I mean, when I'd get off work, I'd take her to see a therapist and things like that. And so . . . they had her in a special ed class, but not in the system.

**Group (33:55):** Mmmmmm.

**Tricey (33:57):** So, because the teachers there cared for her. Some of the teachers that was at Overton, Overton was the school she was going to when they closed, she got the IEP. So, when they transferred her over, they transferred some of the teachers, and the teachers knew her well. My mom was saying, like it was a community school, like it was a close knit. We were like family in the school. So, the teachers moved at Overton how to deal with Zaria, and they knew, you know, the help that she needed. So, the teachers from Overton took her in at Mollison. It was, it was giving her that one on one hand. They once put her in a Special Education class, but once again, it wasn't in the system. So, it was like, you know, she really wasn't getting the full support. They was taking time when they could, and so I was struggling for like, six years, trying to get her help that she never, ever received. I had teachers write letters, you know, when I was taking her downtown, trying to get her these, you know, get her these programs and just that extra up. And so I brought a letter. I have more. So, one of her teachers from Overton. Her name is Miss Linda. And so anytime Zaria would have like issues, because once again, she was diagnosed like dyslexia and behavior issues, they'll take her to Miss Linda. No, this is the wrong letter, but Miss Thomas. I'm sorry. They'll take her to Miss Thomas class, because Miss Thomas, like I said, don't have to deal with her. Miss Thomas is a teacher still today, and I am going to talk to her about, you know, coming in and, like, just talking about the issues that she have. How many kids did not receive those services because of the school closures. You know, my daughter never got the help she needed. She end up, because of that, she ends up dropping out of school. And so, this is one of the letters with Miss Thomas saying that anxiety needed, you know, some type of help, and that they

was taking her out of her first-grade class, her second-grade class, to bring her to her class. You know, the other teachers, they didn't have time because they had, like, 50, you know, 40, 50 kids in their classroom, so they couldn't take time with anxiety to help her. And so, this has been ongoing since she was all the way up to her sophomore year. So, with that, she ends up dropping out of school because CPS failed so many kids.

**Stovall (36:35):** So. . . what I'm hearing from y'all. . . as y'all are talking, there's something that happens. So, what y'all think about Mollison and having all those, having all the young folks in the building?

**Tricey (36:51):** Mmm hmmm

**Stovall (36:51):** Literally, like, literally like that from that overcrowding,

**Ms. Irene (36:56):** Like a slave boat!

**Stove (36:58):** Literally finding in two years the place is depopulation.

**Asif (37:03):** Mmmmm

**Tricey (37:03):** Ain't that strange?

**Stovall (37:05):** I mean, like, completely depopulated, right? So that that thing around how people get, how you start in one space, like you say, overcrowding your folks in the hallways, because the same thing was happening in a couple of schools a little further south, grade schools. You know, it's overcrowded, but then two years later it's nobody in the building, right? So, the same thing, it's like Hope. Before Hope became a charter, when it was a high school, burst[ing] at the seams, right? So, we started Social Justice High School [in] . . . '05, Hope was bursting at the seams, when we got on. . . they got on the closure list, it was depopulated.

**Group (37:49):** Mmmm hmm.

**Ms. Irene (37:50):** And see they had like, three reasons why they were closing schools . . . [first] they was like the school was underutilized.

**Group (38:00):** [Affirming]

**Ms. Irene (38:00):** Overton had over 500 students there, they said the test scores, but think about it, if the test scores is low, is that the parent fault or the students fault? The administrative fault? . . . and our test scores . . . went up for the last two years. It has shot up, right? And then they say . . . the building was in poor condition. Once again, is that our fault, or is there something to do with administration and maintenance?

**Tricey (38:31):** But it wasn't a failure.

**Stovall (38:33):** But the building is in perfect shape, and it actually got, got recognized as an architectural treasure.

**Ms. Braggs (38:40):** Yeah, and you should go inside. It has some of the Maurice artwork, he was the artist. A lot of his drawings is all up at Overton. And that was one of the Anthony Overton young men. . . . Then I don't find it no coincidence, like he just said that all of these schools were over, yeah, over populated, like they were these students on top of students, and then suddenly, because when you guys know that you've been working on or getting ready to shut down my schools now, all of a sudden they're under enrolled. That's not a coincidence.

**Ms. Bobbie (39:20):** Because they open[ed] up the boundaries that you can go to any school you want to so when they open up the boundary, because when there was neighborhood school you had to go where you lived at, there was no exception to the rule. If you went to another school, you have to give a address. Some other people take their kids and use their sister's address to get them to go to that school. That's how a lot of them schools came in under enrollment.

**Ms. Irene (39:42):** But when . . . they opened up the boundary, right? We heard they were closing 50 schools. We went to [inaudible] schools up north. They wouldn't even open doors for us, they wouldn't even open up. It was like we were back in 1953 or something. We couldn't get in there. No way.

**Ms. Bobbie (39:46):** Closed that door!

**Ms. Irene (40:01):** They closed that door and wouldn't let us in. And then when we went to Mayor, what's his name?

**Group (40:10):** Rahm Emmanuel

**Ms. Irene (40:12):** When we went to [the University of Chicago] Lab [school], the kids was out there, out the window, you know, supporting the other young people. They would not let our young people use the bathroom.

**Ms. Bobbie (40:21):** It was cold out there.

**Ms. Irene (40:22):** It was cold out there. So, we see the racism in our face every doggone day. And we should not allow this system. I don't care who it is. If you have taken up to harm our generation, future children, then we going to call you out or knock you down. I mean, because it may not be impacting you, but it has impacted us that I cannot go to the hospital I was born at, Michael Reese. I can't go back into 534 Cabrini Green, the project is all gone now. We don't have no schools, and then we have police killing us anytime they want to. So, if it impacts you, it impacts me.

**Group (41:10):** Mmmmm

**Ms. Irene (41:10):** If it hurt you, it hurt me. We have to think like that, because if we don't guess what's going to happen, we just waiting in line for our turn. I don't want to wait in line to be on no chopping block. Imma fight.

### **From the Personal to the Political and from the Political to the Personal**

This 13-minute exchange of pain, resistance, and futurity set around the two adjoined and mismatched kitchen tables at the rear of the Front Porch reveals the interconnected relationship(s) between Diaspora Literacy and Heritage Knowledge. Further, it blurs the artificial boundaries drawn around theory and action that seek to separate the two. As the group developed a shared understanding, a new consciousness, of the systematic enclosure(s) of their lives, and the lives of others, they began to articulate responses rooted in resistance to and refusal of these systemic limits to life. These responses weren't always new ideas. Instead, the talk elucidated that the people surrounding the table had all that they needed—each other.

Contextualized through these understandings, Ms. Irene, Ms. Bobbie, Ms. Braggs, Tricey, Erminia, Stovall, and Asif shared visions of new educational possibilities within symbiotic relationships between experience and systems and between oppression and resistance. These visions, memories, and analyses were personal and political. At times, the analyses constructed around the table were grounded in shared individual experiences that were collectivized through dialogue. In other ways, the shared personal experiences humanized and made tangible the oppressive structures that contributed to and produced the harm of school closures.

Take, for example, Erminia, and how her personal story illuminated her experiences navigating school closures in her community, making real the toll(s) that school privatization took on her life, her family, and her community. Or Ms. Braggs, who, in sharing her story, found that it was “no coincidence” that schools once full of life, like Betsy Ross Elementary, where she attended, were depopulated and eventually slated for closure. These examples, coupled with the others shared throughout the dialogue that took place that summer afternoon, shed light on the complex, or maybe not-so-complex, contours of structural oppression. That is, in sharing their personal stories, complex phenomena related to the socio-political contours of Black life were rendered personal and tangible. The shared experiences were roots that led to deeper, more structural analyses of school closures as a continuation of the afterlife of enslavement.

However, this connection—between the personal and the political—didn't occur in isolation. This collective experience, collective history, collective recollection is Heritage Knowledge (King, 2006). The transcriptions of these personal stories illuminate the outcomes of this complex relationship with Black life and loss. There is a collective experience surrounding community schooling and a collective loss associated with school closures. The afterlife of slavery is a com-

munal cycle of life, loss, collective joy, and collective mourning. Furthermore, this collective history, an emergent form of Heritage Knowledge, was inextricably linked to Diaspora Literacy and the collective consciousness of the socio-political contours of Black life and loss.

Conversely, the personal stories shared were also politicized through the collective meaning-making and story-sharing that took place as the conversation continued. Take, for example, the ways that Stovall made the connections between Tricey's experiences navigating the lack of special education services available for her daughter, Ms. Bragg's assertion that school closures are "no coincidence", and Erminia's memories of the contexts of school privatization. In doing so, he supported the group's political understanding(s) of school closures. His words supported a threading of the narratives in ways that connected and systematized them. These narratives were grounds to question. Ms. Irene and Ms. Bobbie built upon this analysis, likening school overcrowding to "a slave boat" and bringing into question responsibility—reversing the common claims that students, parents, and school leaders are the responsible catalysts for school closure—while also sharing the policies and practices that shaped school depopulation and overcrowding over time.

In both of these situations, whether personalizing structural harm or politicizing personal experiences, it was the people's experiences and analyses of them that were the Diaspora Literacy(ies) that led to the Heritage Knowledge developed. Throughout the conversation, personal stories were shared, affirmed, and systematized. The collective "mmm hmmm" and other affirmations and connections offered by listeners around the table added to these literacies about Black life and education. They contributed to the developing Heritage Knowledge that ensued. The collective understandings continually became more personal yet systemic. Individuals came into the dialogue with very personal stories and, through the kitchen table talk, the spiraling of their exchanges built new collective memories and dreams.

While each shared story was rooted in varying places and positionalities, they converged towards a shared consciousness, a new form of Heritage Knowledge that could only emerge through this type of gathering and sharing. Each singular narrative coalesced into a unified analysis related to the oppressive function of school closures and the resulting work required of individuals acting in collectives to respond to these intersections. As Ms. Irene shared at the conclusion of the transcript, the stories were more than words. They were calls to action.

### **Black Schools Are the Heartbeat of Communities**

This study set out to better understand the experiences, analyses, and aspirations of Black parents, Black students, and Black teachers in Chicago who witnessed and resisted school closures over a 15-year period. The dominant narratives of school closures are often shrouded in narratives of financial crises that position

them as the only and right thing to do. On the contrary, the stories and storied lives within the 13-minute exchange shared here as a transcript illuminate the role that Black schools hold for Black futures, Black justice, and Black stability. Within Black schools, dreams and futures are created. When those vital institutions, what Ms. Irene likens to the “heartbeat of a community” (personal communication) are closed, lives are lost, memories are lost, and futures are destroyed.

The stories shared within this study illuminate the ways that Black folks’ everyday talk—talk that situates and shares their lived experiences with others, with room to grow into collective understandings and meaning-making—gives way to new forms of Diaspora Literacy and Heritage Knowledge. The Critical Stud-*in*’ that took place around the kitchen tables joined together at the Front Porch led to newfound ways of critically understanding school closures for what they are—hate crimes reproductive of anti-Black violence. Additionally, the dialogue gave way to newfound agentic identities amongst the people at the table. That is, people emerged from the table with new visions for the future and their roles as a community of movement actors navigating towards those named aspirations.

As stated at the start of this paper, we share these narratives, analyses, and speculations related to more justice-centered educational futures for Black children and families in cities like Chicago, not for replication. Instead, we hope that readers (regardless of their personal and professional identities) can use the resulting motivation(s) and inquiries found in the words and analyses shared to take up space in community with others, to engage in rich conversations that, as Freire (1970) reminds us, build people’s capacities to critically read and rewrite their worlds. In part, we hope that parents and educators can find motivation from the narratives and analyses shared here to dream beyond the current conditions manifest in their lives. At the same time, we also hope that other educational scholars and policy makers can utilize methodological approaches like kitchen table talk to challenge the hierarchies inherent in more traditional forms of research that empower the researcher and disempower the researched. In this sense, scholarship becomes more than intervention, more than proposal for anew. It is a remembrance of the power that people have always held and utilized to create change in their lives. If we are ever to create more just educational conditions for Black children to dream up and actualize less harmful worlds than the present, then we must work collectively in unison to move against the reproductions of oppression present in our lives.

### Note

<sup>1</sup> We use the term *herstory* in addition to *history* here to honor the labor of women resisting (educational) injustice(s) in past, present, and future. We also continue to grapple with more inclusive ways to write into the fluidity of gender.

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***Black Work, Resistance, and Institutional Reckoning*****Transforming Black Education  
in New Mexico:  
The Black Education Act as a Model  
for Equity and Cultural Empowerment**

***Charles E. Becknell, Jr., Joseph Ulibarri,  
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### Abstract

This article critically examines New Mexico's Black Education Act (BEA) as an innovative state-level policy designed to confront systemic *antiblackness* and promote educational equity for Black students. Enacted in 2021, the BEA mandates culturally responsive curricula, anti-racism training for educators, professional development, mechanisms for addressing racial discrimination, and meaningful community engagement. Drawing on BlackCrit, Borderlands Theory, and Freedom Dreams, this study employs a qualitative case study that integrates legislative and policy analysis, educational outcomes, and stakeholder data. Through a critical examination of the BEA's development and implementation, the article explores how the policy addresses the unique challenges faced by Black students within New Mexico's multicultural, yet often *antiblack*, educational landscape. The findings suggest that the BEA serves not only as a corrective to historical erasure and institutional neglect but also as a replicable model for states seeking to institutionalize anti-racist, culturally sustaining education policy. This study contributes to the growing scholarship on educational justice by offering a praxis-oriented framework for policy transformation grounded in Black epistemologies and community activism.

*Keywords:* Black Education Act, educational equity, *antiblackness*, critical policy analysis

### Introduction

New Mexico often celebrates its multilingual, multiracial, and multiethnic diversity, yet a troubling educational reality lies beneath this narrative. Black students, though a small percentage of the state's population, face historic systemic neglect in a school system that has long failed to affirm their identities, histories, and educational needs. The passage of New Mexico's Black Education Act (BEA) in 2021 marks a pivotal response to these inequities. More than a legislative reform, the BEA is a radical assertion of cultural visibility and structural justice. This study examines the BEA as a product and catalyst of Black grassroots activism. It argues that it offers a community-rooted, equity-centered model of educational policy grounded in Black liberatory traditions. We situate the Act within broader discourses on racial justice, culturally responsive education, and structural reform, framing it as a replicable model for reimagining public education in pursuing racial justice.

The *Martinez v. State of New Mexico* decision (2019) established that the state failed to meet its constitutional obligation to provide equitable education to at-risk students, including those from low socioeconomic backgrounds, Indigenous, English learner, and dis/abled communities. Although the previous *Yazzie/Martinez* ruling (2018) does not explicitly name Black students, it exposed broader systemic failures, opening rhetorical and political space for further advocacy. In Black communities, mobilization within this opening led to demands for targeted intervention, cultural affirmation, and systemic accountability. These demands shaped the foundation of the BEA.

The Act outlines a series of mandates, including culturally responsive and anti-racist training for educators, curricular reforms that center Black history and culture, equity-focused professional development, a statewide advisory council, and a reporting portal for racial discrimination (New Mexico Legislature, 2021, §§ 3–6). These mandates aim to improve academic outcomes and create environments that affirm, support, and protect Black students, fulfilling the constitutional guarantee of a uniform and sufficient system of public education (NM Const Art XII § 1) where all children can “learn and succeed” (*Yazzie/Martinez, 2018*). More than a set of mandates, the BEA is the product of persistent, community-driven activism. Parents, students, educators, and advocates shaped its vision, embedding lived experience and Black freedom dreaming (Kelley, 2002) into the public policy structure.

We analyze the BEA through the lens of Black Critical Theory (BlackCrit; Dumas & ross, 2016), Freedom Dreams (Kelley, 2002), and Borderlands Theory (Anzaldúa, 1987). These frameworks illuminate the structural and affective dimensions of *anti*blackness in New Mexico’s educational landscape, providing critical tools for examining the BEA as both policy and praxis. Grounded in these liberatory traditions, we employ a qualitative case study approach that centers Black systems of thought and community narratives as vital sources of knowledge. This theoretical-methodological alignment enables us to examine how grassroots vision and state policy intersect to reimagine education as a site of justice and possibility.

### **Theoretical Framework: Black Critical Theory & *Anti*blackness**

Our theoretical framework emerges not only from disciplinary commitments but also from our location in the Southwest borderlands. Living and working in a region shaped by colonial conquest, Indigenous dispossession, and multicultural statecraft, we recognize the need for analytic tools that capture the specific ways Black life is rendered simultaneously hypervisible and invisible in New Mexico. For this reason, we draw on Black Critical Theory (BlackCrit), Anzaldúa’s Borderlands Theory, and Robin D.G. Kelley’s concept of Freedom Dreaming. Together, these frameworks allow us to examine how Black students navigate educational systems that are structured by *anti*blackness, obscured by state-sponsored multiculturalism, and contested through collective imagination and organizing.

Grounded in Black liberatory traditions, Black Critical Theory centers *anti*blackness as a foundational condition of racialized structures (Dumas & ross, 2016). BlackCrit foregrounds three key insights: 1) the pervasiveness of *anti*blackness; 2) the positioning of Blackness in tension with the neoliberal-multicultural imagination; and 3) the necessity of creating space for Black liberatory fantasy. These insights inform our examination of how policy, discourse, and educational structures intersect to marginalize or affirm Black students in New Mexico.

*Anti*blackness, rooted in slavery, colonization, and imperialism, systemati-

cally devalues Black life through dehumanization, marginalization, and structures of white supremacy (Andrews, 2021). Beyond individual racism, *antiblackness* manifests in physical, psychological, and symbolic violence, particularly in educational contexts where it shapes deficit-based perceptions of Black students and informs broader patterns of criminalization and neglect (Dumas, 2016). This systemic bias is further evidenced by exclusion from gifted programs (Grissom et al., 2017), disproportionate discipline, and overrepresentation in special education (Harper et al., 2021; Blanchett, 2006). Together, these patterns show that Black students are underserved, structurally devalued, and rendered expendable by systems that deny their intellectual, cultural, and political life.

To expand on this lens, we turn to Gloria Anzaldúa's (1987) *Borderlands/La Frontera* Theory, which conceptualizes liminal space as a site of both marginalization and generative possibility. In a state that promotes a tri-cultural narrative privileging First Nations, Hispanic, and Anglo identities, Black communities in New Mexico often occupy an unacknowledged 'borderlands' position. Anzaldúa's concept of *nepantla*—a space of rupture, ambiguity, and creative reimagination—provides a language for interpreting the BEA as an intervention that emerges from the refusal of erasure and the assertion of presence. *Borderlands* Theory extends *BlackCrit* by emphasizing how state-sponsored multiculturalism can obscure *antiblackness*, even as it proclaims inclusivity.

For instance, while early drafts of the BEA's curricular reform language were couched in inclusive terms, Black educators and parents reported being excluded from key decision-making processes. This highlights how performative gestures of diversity and inclusion can coexist with substantive exclusion. *Borderlands* Theory helps us name this disjuncture—a symbolic presence without structural power—as a defining feature of Black experiences in the state's educational imaginary.

Robin D.G. Kelley's (2002) concept of *Freedom Dreams* further enhances our framework by insisting that Black imagination is a political and liberatory act. *Freedom dreaming* rejects the inevitability of oppression and gestures toward alternate futures rooted in Black cultural memory, ways of knowing/systems of thought (Carr, 2024), and collective world-building. We approach the BEA not merely as a legislative achievement, but as a *realized dream* of educational justice; an expression of Black futurity grounded in organizing, memory, and resistance. Kelley's work complements *BlackCrit*'s call for liberatory fantasy, allowing us to read the BEA as a policy artifact and a visioning practice.

### Methodology: Qualitative Case Study

This study employs a qualitative case study design (Yin, 2009), positioning the BEA as a bounded case within New Mexico's unique sociopolitical context, where Black communities have long faced cultural erasure and systemic neglect. The case study method enables a multidimensional analysis of the BEA as both a

policy intervention and a form of political and cultural expression. Data sources include legislative texts, public comment transcripts, implementation guidance issued by the New Mexico Public Education Department, media coverage, and advocacy materials produced by Black community organizations.

We examine these materials using an interpretive approach we call deep witnessing, an ethic of listening rooted in Africana traditions of testimony, call-and-response, and communal presence. Rather than treating public records as neutral data, deep witnessing understands them as living texts, embedded with memory, struggle, and political vision. This methodology centers Black voices and ways of knowing, allowing us to read the BEA as a policy intervention, cultural artifact, and collective assertion of Black presence, possibility, and liberation.

In addition to these documentary sources, we analyzed semi-structured interviews conducted by BEA leadership in 2023 to gain firsthand insights into the development and enactment of the BEA. These interviews involved a purposive sample of stakeholders, including members of the Black Education Advisory Council, K-12 educators, parents and caregivers of Black students, and officials from the New Mexico Public Education Department. We confirmed our findings by comparing the interview data with public comment transcripts, media coverage, and implementation reports to ensure consistency and identify any differences.

Our analysis of these interviews, together with legislative and policy documents, followed a careful and iterative process. Specifically, we started by identifying key themes in the data, then examined how these themes related to each other to uncover deeper connections among personal narratives, institutional discourse, and legislative intent. We engaged in ongoing self-examination through collaborative discussion, thoughtfully considering how our intersecting identities informed our interpretations. Deep witnessing, in this context, served not only as a methodological tool but as an ethic of presence, care, and accountability to the Black communities whose experiences inspire this study. Through this thoughtful and layered approach, we sought to illuminate the complex dynamics that shaped the BEA's formulation and early implementation.

### Positionalities

We are a team of four scholars with diverse racial, cultural, and professional backgrounds: two Black men, one Black Afro-Latina mother scholar, and one Hispanic man. Based in the Southwest borderlands, our roles span assistant professorships at Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs), adjunct instruction at a community college, and legal studies at an HSI. We are multilingual (speaking both Spanish and English), neurodivergent, first-generation, and LGBTQIA+ individuals who bring a range of lived experiences to this work. Three of us are parents of Black children in New Mexico public schools, including two with a child with a dis/ability; we acknowledge that our children's experiences may differ from those of other Black children more broadly.

We approach this research with a shared commitment to honoring the knowledge, cultural wealth, and inherent value Black children bring to educational spaces.

Grounded in the Southwest borderlands, our location is not incidental but deeply tied to our theoretical and methodological commitments. Living and working in a region shaped by colonial conquest, forced migration, and layered systems of racialization, we draw on Black Critical Theory (BlackCrit), Anzaldúa's Borderlands Theory, and Freedom Dreaming to interrogate how Black life is rendered simultaneously hypervisible and invisible in New Mexico's educational landscape. Our situatedness in the borderlands informs both the questions we ask and the frameworks through which we pursue them.

### **Challenges in Black Education**

Black students in New Mexico navigate educational experiences shaped by a broader historical and sociopolitical framework marked by persistent disparities and ongoing efforts toward equity. Black education in New Mexico reflects a long trajectory from slavery and segregation to integration and contemporary reforms shaped by resistance, advocacy, and efforts to transform educational institutions. This section traces the historical context of Black education, examines the progress and setbacks following integration, outlines key policy shifts, such as the passage of the Black Education Act, and concludes with an analysis of present-day disparities and opportunities that continue to shape the educational landscape for Black students.

### ***Historical Foundations of Antiblackness in New Mexico***

New Mexico has a complicated past, situating itself among states with a history of tumultuous relationships between Indigenous peoples, colonizers, and forced labor. The Spanish trafficked the first enslaved Africans to New Mexico in the early 1500s, introducing African chattel slavery into a region whose socio-economic foundations were already shaped by the coerced labor and enslavement of Indigenous peoples. However, it was not until 1859, amid growing national attention to slavery, that the territorial legislature enacted its first formal slave code (Glasrud, 2013). New Mexico's efforts to gain statehood by aligning with Southern politicians complicated its stance on slavery. Ultimately, the Civil War and rising support for the Union made enforcing such laws politically untenable (Stegmeier, 2012). Consequently, the slave code was repealed in 1861 when the territory aligned with the Union Cause.

New Mexico has struggled economically and educationally since its inception as a colonized territory. To understand the state's educational opportunities, one must consider the socio-political contexts of distinct historical periods: the Native American Period (before 1540), the Spanish Period (1540-1821), the Mexican Period (1821-1846), and the U.S. territory and statehood period (1850-present). Before colonization, Native American communities sustained themselves through

complex ways of knowing rooted in oral traditions, storytelling, and intergenerational learning. When the Spaniards arrived, Franciscan friars began establishing mission schools as early as 1581, introducing a form of education designed to convert and assimilate Indigenous populations. The Spanish colonial government later institutionalized the first free public school in 1721 (Mondragon & Stapleton, 2005). After gaining independence from Spain in 1821, the Mexican government expanded access to public education and adopted a “local control” philosophy that continues to govern New Mexico today (Mondragon & Stapleton, 2005).

During the United States territorial period, the framers of the New Mexico Constitution committed to establishing “a uniform system of free public schools sufficient for the education of, and open to, all the children of school age” (NM Const Art XII §1). Despite this constitutional promise, New Mexico’s public schools have faced persistent challenges of systemic inequality and inadequate funding (Mondragon & Stapleton, 2005). The formal introduction of segregated schools in places like Silver City in 1915 further compounded these disparities (Fulton, 2021). Although New Mexico’s Black population remained relatively small, ranging from 22 individuals in 1850 to 5,733 in 1920, white migrants from the American South came with their deep-seated segregationist attitudes, particularly in southeastern regions of the state known today as “Little Texas” (Fulton, 2021; New Mexico History Museum, 2011). Thus, further embedding racial inequities within the educational system.

In 1923, New Mexico legislators passed a law allowing racial segregation (Fulton, 2021). Consequently, schools in Alamogordo, Artesia, Carlsbad, Clovis, Hobbs, Las Cruces, Roswell, and Tucumcari remained segregated until the landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* decision in 1954 (Fulton, 2021). Some towns like Tucumcari did not offer a high school for Black students, and those students had to travel over 80 miles each way to attend school in Clovis (Fulton, 2021). In Albuquerque, although the district had officially integrated its schools, officials still subjected Black students to discriminatory practices, such as being required to sit at the back of student groups during graduation (Baton, 2013).

While many described the segregated schools as abysmal in quality and material resources, some Black families nonetheless appreciated the segregated schools’ ability to affirm Black identity and foster a profound sense of care and cultural belonging (Melzer, 2013). Community-driven efforts to establish educational spaces for Black children reflect this promise. Early Black settlers, Francis and Ella Boyer, modeled this commitment when they founded the all-Black town of Vado, NM.

As part of the Boyers’ broader vision for self-determination and community development, they later established the Paul Laurence Dunbar School in 1926, which at its height enrolled up to 175 students (Berg & Walton, 2013). The Boyers’ efforts demonstrate a commitment to Black educational self-determination in New Mexico, rooted in resistance to structural exclusion and the cultivation of culturally affirming learning environments that meet or exceed the standard set out in our state constitution.

***Post-Integration: Black Educational Advocacy***

School integration did not address the decades and centuries-long unequal opportunities Black students faced, but the political landscape was shifting. Albuquerque passed its public institution antidiscrimination law in 1952, and Albuquerque Public Schools appointed its first Black principal, Dr. Lenton Malry, Sr., in 1964 (Fulton, 2021; Glasrud & Merrill, 2013). Dr. Malry became New Mexico's first Black State Senator in 1968. In 1969, the New Mexico State Advisory Committee of the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights visited Clovis, NM, finding ongoing discrimination in schools and businesses against Black and Hispanic communities. The committee issued a report with recommendations for further changes (New Mexico State Advisory Committee, 1969), reflecting growing national attention to racial inequalities in the state.

In higher education, progress was marked by the founding of the state's first African American Studies program at the University of New Mexico in 1970 by Dr. Charles Becknell, Sr. (Glasrud & Merrill, 2013). This initiative represented a critical moment in affirming Black intellectual traditions and institutionalizing the study of Black life, history, and thought in the state's flagship university. At the K-12 level, the 1974 Public School Finance Act introduced the State Equalization Guarantee (SEG) funding formula, designed to allocate education funds equitably across all public schools. Today, schools rely on the SEG for approximately 90% of their operational budgets (New Mexico Public Education Department, 2025), making it a key mechanism for addressing historical disparities in school funding.

Political representation and institutional advocacy continued to expand in the late 20th century. In 1995, educator Sheryl Williams Stapleton became the first African American woman serving in the New Mexico legislature (Glasrud & Merrill, 2013). A few years later, in 1999, a gubernatorial executive order established the New Mexico Office for African American Affairs, tasked, in part, with addressing the persistent dropout rates among Black students (Glasrud & Merrill, 2013).

While these representational gains marked progress, they also highlighted the limitations of symbolic inclusion in the absence of structural reform. As advocacy matured into organized policy efforts, Black communities began to articulate specific educational demands: curriculum that affirmed their histories, disciplinary policies that addressed racialized trauma, and institutional accountability. These priorities converged during a period of broader educational upheaval, setting the stage for the passage of the Black Education Act.

The following section outlines how community organizing, political alignment, and a reconfigured discourse on equity catalyzed the emergence of the BEA as a landmark policy initiative.

***From Advocacy to Legislation: Laying the Groundwork for the BEA***

The incremental gains in representation and the formalization of advocacy

channels eventually coalesced into a broader legislative agenda. As New Mexico's educational inequities became increasingly visible through court rulings and community mobilization, Black leaders and allies built the political and policy infrastructure necessary for a transformative intervention: the Black Education Act.

The state's persistent economic and educational challenges have led to decades of ranking last in education. During the first two decades of the 2000s, New Mexico adopted neoliberal school reforms and corporatization of school curricula to address the "failing schools" (Crawford-Garrett et al., 2023). *Martinez* (2019) resulted in profound shifts in educational policy and implementation, including a new balance between state and local control, where increased administrative oversight over education was encouraged (Oakes et al., 2020; Torres-Velásquez et al., 2019). Educational shifts included increasing focus on culturally and linguistically responsive instruction and improving conditions for Native American students and students with disabilities. The COVID-19 era beckoned systemic changes for students from various cultural backgrounds. Ryan Stewart served as New Mexico's first Black Secretary of Education from September 2019 to August 2021, leading the way through much of the pandemic.

In 2021, African American State Representatives Sheryl Williams Stapleton and Harold Pope, Jr., co-sponsored the Black Education Act to improve the educational outcomes of Black students. At the time of passage, Black students had a graduation rate of 74%, which was three percentage points below the average graduation rate for all students (O'Neill, 2021). Also in 2021, New Mexico passed the CROWN Act, protecting against discrimination based on hairstyles commonly associated with race and cultural identity. New Mexico revamped its Social Studies Standards in 2022, updating conversations around ethnicity, identity, and cultural studies to strengthen critical engagement with the power dynamics that have shaped New Mexico's history.

These updates were not without controversy, as some groups protested the new standards (Attanasio, 2022). For example, the Civics Alliance published a letter to the New Mexico State Advisory Committee of the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights stating that the newly adopted Social Studies Standards present an "unauthorized radical pedagogy" based on discussions of power, oppression, and equity (The Civics Alliance, 2023). Many conservatives, including Rio Rancho School board candidate Patrick Brenner, opposed diversity and equity programs and initiatives, including the anti-racism trainings codified by the Act, calling them bigotry (Attanasio, 2022; Jennings, 2021).

### ***Persistent Inequities in a Post-BEA Landscape***

Even as the BEA introduces a promising vision of racial equity, recent data and community feedback suggest that systemic disparities persist. This section

examines current indicators of educational inequity for Black students in New Mexico, as well as the limitations that persist despite policy reform.

Despite recent policy reforms, Black students in New Mexico continue to face persistent educational challenges. Families have cited weak partnerships between schools, workforce training programs, and companies, as well as insufficient funding for career and technical education (Jeffrey & Jimenez, 2021). Representation remains limited, with Black males comprising less than 0.5% of the education workforce (Sims, 2022).

According to the New Mexico Department of Education's *Black Education Act Status Report* (2024), only 34% of Black students demonstrated proficiency in language arts, 27% in math, and 30% in science—slightly outperforming American Indian/Alaskan Native students but trailing behind white students, who demonstrate 39%, 35%, and 35% proficiency in those subjects respectively. Of the state's 300,000 students, approximately 9,783 are Black. Among them, 34% are chronically absent, and only 69.4% graduate within four years—a decline from the graduation rate at the time of the BEA's passage. In higher education, Black faculty remain underrepresented, making up just 3% of full-time professors across New Mexico's universities, compared to 67% who are white.

### **Core Components of the Black Education Act**

The BEA's core components embed structural equity into New Mexico's education system through a multi-layered strategy that centers accountability, community engagement, and cultural responsiveness. Central to this approach is creating dedicated roles within the Public Education Department (PED), including a Black Education Liaison, Curriculum Coordinator, Family and Engagement Coordinator, Professional Development Coordinator, and Anti-Racism Hotline Manager (O'Neill, 2021). These roles coordinate programming, curricular reform, educator training, and student support. The Act also requires ongoing collaboration with the Higher Education Department (HED) and mandates annual reporting to ensure transparency and measurable progress.

What follows is an overview of the Act's governance framework, its approach to professional learning and disciplinary reform, and its efforts to transform curriculum and teacher preparation.

### **Governance and Implementation Infrastructure**

The BEA mandates collaboration between PED and HED and establishes a formal implementation structure through the aforementioned roles (N.M. Stat. Ann. § 22-23C-5, 1978). To ensure the community voice remains central, the Act established the Black Education Advisory Council, comprising up to 23 members appointed by the PED Secretary, representing K-12 and postsecondary institutions, families and students, HED, and various Black community organizations

(N.M. Stat. Ann. § 22-23C-3, 1978). The Black Education Liaison, housed within PED, supports the council and leads strategic planning, oversees public engagement, and facilitates the distribution of resources and information across schools and communities (N.M. Stat. Ann. § 22-23C-5, 1978).

In partnership with the Advisory Council and the Family and Engagement Coordinator, the Liaison also promotes culturally relevant curricula, facilitates partnerships with Black community organizations, and supports local education agencies, as noted by the New Mexico Public Education Department (2025). The Act also requires the development of white papers addressing Black student achievement and systemic racism, as well as the submission of annual status reports to track equity benchmarks and educational outcomes for Black students.

### ***Professional Development and Disciplinary Policy***

A cornerstone of the Black Education Act is its requirement for racial sensitivity and anti-racism training for school staff, overseen by the Professional Learning Coordinator (New Mexico Public Education Department, 2025). The Act also mandates that districts file disciplinary policies that prohibit racialized aggression and corporal punishment, subject to public hearings and approval by the PED. These efforts address Complex Racial Trauma (CoRT), a set of intersectional traumas disproportionately affecting BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) students across emotional, social, and physical domains (Cénat, 2023).

To enhance school-level accountability, the BEA established a reporting mechanism for racially charged incidents, now known as the Anti-Racism/Anti-Oppression (ARAO) portal, which the PED manages (Section § 22-23C-5 NMSA 1978; New Mexico Public Education Department, 2025). Race-based hate remains the most prevalent form of school-based discrimination, representing 63% of media-reported and 33% of teacher-reported incidents (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2019). Additionally, the Act includes a health equity provision that requires school policies to permit students to carry and self-administer their asthma medications—an especially critical support for Black students, who experience disproportionate asthma rates (National Institutes of Health, 2023).

### ***Transforming Curriculum and the Educator Pipeline***

A critical dimension of the BEA lies in its efforts to disrupt curricular erasure and foster educator diversity. These measures reflect a growing consensus that culturally responsive pedagogy and representation are not ancillary but foundational to Black student success. The BEA also prioritizes curriculum transformation and educator diversity. The Act charges the Black Education Liaison and Advisory Council, in collaboration with the Curriculum Coordinator, to identify and recommend instructional materials that reflect Black history and culture (New Mexico Public Education Department, 2025). These efforts respond to long-standing curricular exclusions; until

2022, New Mexico's social studies standards centered colonizer narratives while excluding marginalized voices (King, 2014; Warniment & Andrews, 2022).

The BEA states that affirming student identity through curriculum is essential for educational equity. It also mandates collaboration between PED and HED to increase Black teacher recruitment and retention, in recognition of research indicating that Black students are significantly more likely to graduate when taught by Black teachers (Gershenson et al., 2022). To that end, the PED and HED must restructure teacher preparation programs to include cultural awareness, racial sensitivity, and anti-racism as core components (Section 22-23C-6 (B), NMSA 1978).

### **The Black Education Act as Policy, Practice, and Possibility**

The BEA provides a valuable lens for examining how Black-centered policies emerge within systems historically structured by *antiblackness*. While the Act marks a significant legislative achievement in New Mexico, its enactment reveals tensions between its transformative vision and the systemic conditions it seeks to change. This section provides a conceptual foundation for understanding the Act's trajectory, drawing on Black Critical Theory (Dumas & ross, 2016) to frame three key tensions: (1) the historical invisibility of Black students within New Mexico's tri-cultural narrative, (2) the structural bureaucratic constraints on equity driven reform, and (3) the possibilities emerging from community driven enactments.

#### ***Institutional Invisibility and the Tri-Cultural Frame***

New Mexico's dominant tri-cultural narrative, centered on First Nations, Hispanic, and Anglo identities, continues to shape educational diversity, often rendering Black students and families institutionally peripheral (Anzaldúa, 1987; Dumas & ross, 2016). The BEA responds to this invisibility by establishing a Black Education Advisory Council and Liaison (New Mexico Legislature, 2021, §§ 3–5), creating representational and community-informed policy pathways. Still, implementing the Act within institutions that have historically been inattentive to Black educational needs requires confronting deeply entrenched norms and attitudes.

BlackCrit reminds us that even equity-focused reforms must navigate systems that have traditionally framed Blackness as incompatible with public education (Dumas & ross, 2016). Within this tri-cultural context, Black students and communities occupy a borderland, acknowledged but not fully integrated into existing multicultural frameworks. This tension signals not failure, but rather the ongoing negotiation required for institutional transformation, where visibility alone does not guarantee structural change.

#### ***Structural Constraints and the Limits of Policy***

The BEA outlines several transformative goals, including culturally rele-

vant materials, anti-racism professional development, and data transparency, as outlined in the annual Black Education Status Report (New Mexico Legislature, 2021, §§ 6–7, 9). Nevertheless, uneven district-level infrastructure, varied interpretations of state guidance, and limited funding hinder its implementation (New Mexico Legislature, 2021, § 10). These constraints reflect systemic challenges common to race-conscious educational policies operating within bureaucracies shaped by standardization, compliance, competing demands, and political opposition to criticality in education (Brooms, 2021; Dumas & ross, 2016).

However, rather than signaling failure, these structural challenges highlight the complexities of advancing liberatory policy in *antiblack* systems. Educators, administrators, and community members continue to drive the BEA's vision with creativity and commitment; critiques of implementation are more accurately critiques of system design. Despite these constraints, communities are advancing imaginative, localized practices that bring the BEA's vision to life.

### ***Freedom Dreams in Practice: Community Enactments of the BEA***

Even amid institutional constraints, educators, families, and advocates across New Mexico are actively reimagining what the BEA can become. Local leaders are embracing the Act's provisions for community engagement, parent representation, and a culturally grounded curriculum (New Mexico Legislature, 2021, §§ 5–6) by implementing programs, professional learning, and curricular practices that center on Black histories and futures. These enactments align with Kelley's (2002) concept of *Freedom Dreams*, which involves the collective imagining and building of more just educational realities.

As such, we should not judge implementation solely through compliance or uniformity, but rather understand it as a dynamic, evolving practice shaped by memory, advocacy, and visionary engagement. This dynamic is exemplified in the words of Devont'e Watson (2023), a community advocate and graduate of New Mexico's public schools, who reflected, "The BEA was more than just landmark legislation—it was a promise. A promise to recognize, address, and rectify the unique challenges faced by Black and African American students in our state. But promises, no matter how well-intentioned, are only as good as their execution."

Watson's reflection points to a broader truth: that community members have become the *de facto* stewards of the BEA's implementation. In the absence of formal mechanisms for accountability, groups of educators, parents, and civic leaders have formed grassroots oversight bodies to ensure the policy's transformative potential is not lost to institutional inertia. These enactments extend the BEA's vision beyond compliance and toward a praxis of Black educational self-determination.

As a senior education official involved in the BEA's development, Vickie Bannerman (2021) affirmed, "Even with this statute in place, without action, the Act means nothing. My challenge to myself and all others is to act. We saw something,

we said something, now is the time to do something.” Bannerman’s charge underscores the dual reality facing BEA implementation: the need for institutional accountability and the ongoing work of community-led activation. In the absence of fully realized structures of oversight, families, educators, and advocates are sustaining the Act’s intent through localized practice, collective vision, and critical care.

In this way, the BEA’s liberatory intent is activated by formal mandates and community-rooted practices that give the policy meaning and direction. The following section presents findings from our analysis of BEA implementation, highlighting how educators and communities are interpreting, negotiating, and extending the Act’s vision amid structural constraints.

### Findings and Implications

While the previous section traced the lived processes and contextual realities shaping how the BEA is being interpreted and enacted, the following findings and implications identify key patterns and thematic insights emerging from its implementation. These insights highlight the structural challenges and transformative possibilities inherent in the Act as it unfolds across New Mexico’s educational landscape. Drawing on *BlackCrit*, *Borderlands Theory*, and *Freedom Dreams*, this section highlights the importance of grounding race-conscious policy in Black ways of knowing, community memory, and sustained cultural advocacy.

#### Findings

1. *Policy as Praxis*: The BEA exemplifies how race-conscious legislation, rooted in Black ways of knowing and community-defined priorities, can serve as an intervention and a framework for educational transformation.

2. *Community-Driven Implementation*: Educators, families, and advocates enact the BEA through localized, culturally sustaining practices informed by historical consciousness, collective agency, and educational self-determination.

3. *Structural Tensions*: Despite the Act’s transformative intent, its implementation remains constrained by bureaucratic inertia, resource disparities, and uneven district capacities, highlighting the enduring challenges of embedding equity within existing institutional frameworks.

4. *Emerging Institutional Shifts*: Early signs indicate significant changes in educator awareness, curriculum development, and school climate, suggesting that, even within structural constraints, policy rooted in justice-centered values can catalyze reform.

#### Implications

1. *Scalable Policy Framework*: The BEA is a replicable model for states committed to institutionalizing racial equity in public education. Its infrastruc-

ture—including advisory councils, anti-racism training mandates, and accountability measures—demonstrates how comprehensive, culturally responsive policy can reshape educational systems.

2. *Need for Longitudinal and Comparative Research*: Future studies should assess the long-term impact of BEA initiatives on Black students' academic achievement, behavioral outcomes, and social-emotional well-being. Research should also examine how such policies influence teacher practices and explore cross-state comparisons to evaluate adaptability in different contexts.

3. *Policy as Justice-Centered Praxis*: Integrating BlackCrit, Borderlands Theory, and Freedom Dreams repositions education policy as a site of praxis, emphasizing liberation, imagination, and Black intellectual traditions as central to crafting equitable and responsive policy design.

4. *Call for Critical Scholarship and Community-Based Reform*: The BEA emphasizes the importance of justice-centered inquiry and participatory policy-making that centers Black cultural knowledge and lived experiences as foundations for transforming public education.

### Conclusion

In 2010, the New Mexico Public Education Department affirmed that best practices in Indian education entail providing a culturally responsive education to Native American students (Jojola et al., 2011, p. iv). Best practices require culturally responsive teaching rooted in Native students' experiences and linguistic realities. Four years after the passage of the BEA, we find ourselves seeking the same structural recognition of Black children's educational needs. The BEA codifies best practices in African American education, representing a pivotal shift in New Mexico's educational policy landscape that aligns with earlier commitments to cultural responsiveness, while addressing *antiblackness* and affirming Black presence in long overdue ways.

Grounded in BlackCrit, Borderlands Theory, and Freedom Dreams, the BEA operates as both a policy and a freedom project, anchored in Black struggle, radical imagination, and collective memory. Structural tools, such as anti-racism training, the Anti-Racism/Anti-Oppression portal, and culturally responsive curriculum initiatives, reflect this vision in practice. Our methodological commitment to *Deep Witnessing* underscores the importance of centering Black ways of knowing, community voices, and cultural memories in the policy analysis and implementation. Despite bureaucratic constraints, findings indicate that schools and districts are implementing the BEA in ways that center community agency, foster institutional transformation, and create space for new opportunities in affirming and sustaining Black student success.

The BEA offers more than policy—it embodies a continuation of Black educational resistance and futurity. By institutionalizing structures rooted in anti-rac-

ist training, curricular justice, and community partnership, the Act challenges long-standing narratives of exclusion. As Givens (2021) reminds us, “Fugitivity—and fugitive pedagogy in particular—is the metanarrative of Black educational history...a frame by which we might interpret Black Americans’ pursuit to enact humanizing and affirming practices of teaching and learning” (p. 11). In this light, the BEA is not simply a compliance-driven reform but a freedom project animated by memory, imagination, and collective care. The path ahead calls on scholars, educators, and policymakers to steward this vision—to not only implement mandates, but to nurture the possibilities they represent.

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***Legacies, Lineages, and Black Queer Futures*****Blackqueer Lives and Legacies:  
A Genealogy of the Pedagogy and Culture  
of Alain Locke, Countee Cullen,  
and James Baldwin****Robert Robinson****Abstract**

This historical-conceptual study reconstructs a Blackqueer pedagogical genealogy linking Alain Locke, Countee Cullen, and James Baldwin. Drawing on biography, intellectual history, and documentary film, it theorizes how queer chosen family and Black fictive kinship organize mentorship, aesthetic production, and educational practice across generations. Locke's ambivalent role as "midwife" of the Harlem Renaissance anchors an analysis of the pedagogical affordances and harms embedded in his relationships with Cullen and other Blackqueer cultural workers. The genealogy then follows Cullen as poet, playwright, teacher, and fictive parent to Baldwin, demonstrating how Blackqueer kin networks nurtured Baldwin's literary formation and educational praxis. Methodologically, the project foregrounds secondary sources to model an approach for excavating Blackqueer genealogies while marking the epistemic limits produced by archival silences. The paper argues that attending to Blackqueer lineages of care, domination, and resistance clarifies how pedagogy moves through bodies, intimacies, and cultural work within and beyond formal schooling.

**Introduction**

While histories of Black LGBTQIA+ individuals and movements have become a growing area of research, these specific histories in education have been quite limited. (S. Reid, 2022). As a meta-discipline, education necessitates a

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variety of approaches to account for the myriad contributions of Black folks in education and all areas of cultural and intellectual life both within and beyond the classroom (Danns et al., 2015; Kalantzis & Cope, 2014). This historical paper will trace the legacy of Blackqueer cultural and intellectual contributions through examinations of three Blackqueer men. This begins with the life, work, and simultaneously affirming yet problematic mentorship of Alain Locke. I then explore his fictive kin traditions that supported and complicated the careers of multiple artists and thinkers of his time and beyond. The genealogy itself will follow the pedagogical affordances and harms of Locke's legacy as manifested in the life and work of Countee Cullen and (via Cullen) James Baldwin. Locke's mixture of support and antagonism also undergirded his relationships with renowned literary figures such as Zora Neale Hurston and Langston Hughes—and with less artistically engaged figures like his contemporary Elise Johnson McDougald (Boyd, 2022; Magazine, 2022; Stewart, 2018) and his mentee Maurice V. Russell (*Queerplace—Maurice Victor Russell*, n.d.). Nevertheless, tracing one vein from Locke to Baldwin will afford us an opportunity to see how cultural life is sustained through these Blackqueer mentorship relationships. This is as much a history of artistic legacies as it is an analysis of complicated Blackqueer kinship and pedagogy.

### Methods/Methodology

As a historical project, this work will draw from the secondary sources of biography, historical articles, biographical essay, and documentary. This is the first iteration of this work. The goal is to highlight an approach to historical inquiry that makes visible the subtleties and complexities of Blackqueer social relationships. By following this line, I aim to develop a method of tracing Blackqueer genealogies to excavate Blackqueer, trans, and feminist networks. In the future iteration of this specific essay, I will place these secondary sources in conversation with more primary sources, which include correspondence of the figures, periodicals of the respective periods, clippings, obituaries, pamphlets, notes, and other relevant material. (Hughes, 1993; Leeming, 2015; Molesworth, 2012; Rampersad, n.d.; Stewart, 2018). A limitation of this work is the high reliance on secondary sources. Though I place biographies, shorter articles and essays in conversation, I still base the core of these analyses on a subsection of historical findings. Nevertheless, by interweaving biographical analyses, I ensure that while I rely on some sources more than others, I simultaneously take up other sources' perspectives of the social networks to frame my own analysis.

Methodologically, this work will employ the framing of queer chosen family and Black conceptualizations of fictive kinship to complicate some of these mentoring relationships. (Hill Collins, 1991; Reed & O'Riordan, 2023). While Alain Locke has been credited for "mothering" the Harlem Renaissance, his sometimes harmful or even predatorial approaches exclude him from the tradition of "othermother" (Hill

Collins, 1991, p. 179; Stewart, 2018). Queer chosen family, with a multilayered framing—still not one rooted in some of Locke’s harms—can explain some of the blur between platonic, sexual, and familial bonds within Blackqueer networks. Fictive kinship within the respective queer and Black communities, and especially in Blackqueer networks, elucidates how mentors, colleagues, and friends became something more than the generic title (Hill Collins, 1991; Reed & O’Riordan, 2023).

The term “queer chosen family” came to the fore in academic research as a result of the study and subsequent book by scholar Kath Weston (1991/2005). Weston found, “chosen families often constituted closer ties than families of origin (kinship relations formed through blood, genes and biology)” (Andreassen, 2023, p. 24). The historic ballroom community operates as an example of Blackqueer versions of this. Scholar Shamari Reid argues that these types of fictive kinship spaces teach us much about the power of affirmation and community as sites of pedagogical possibility (S. Reid, 2022). In this article, I explore chosen family through the types of powerful bonds that often transcend friendship into an endearing sibling, nibbling, parent, auntie, uncle engagement. Under this framing, elder queers take on a maternal/paternal role regardless of assigned gender or generational differences/similarities, and complex relationships render deep commitments.

Similarly, the very Black tradition of fictive kinship, which Black Americans carried from African traditions, extends the notion of a “village” to highlight how Black intra and intercommunal dynamics expand the breadth of family levels of care. If one mentions the term “play cousin” to any Black American from the Millennial generation to the Boomers, they will respond with head nods, *mmms*, and resonances. Patricia Hill Collins articulated the tradition of other mothers within this broader concept of fictive kinship. Collins’ definition identifies the phenomenon as a Black feminist approach to extending authentic care for future generations beyond the folks in one’s own home or bloodline. She writes, “othermothers—women who assist bloodmothers by sharing mothering responsibilities—traditionally have been central to the institution of Black motherhood” (Hill Collins, 2000, p. 178). By recounting the reflections of Stanlie James, Collins highlights the power of these additional family structures: “This fictive kin who stepped in to counsel my daughter was upholding a family tradition that had been modeled by my grandmother some fifty years before” (p. 179). Black folks have survived and thrived because so many Black community members have helped shape members of the subsequent generation. In this study, artists like Countee Cullen were perpetual members of non-traditional/non-nuclear families. Cullen was raised by his grandmother, then adopted by Reverend & Mrs. Cullen, and ushered into the Harlem Renaissance by folks like Alain Locke & W.E.B. Du Bois. James Baldwin was adopted by his stepfather and then mentored by Cullen after receiving extra support from white elementary school teachers. These expansive versions of family ushered in a renaissance and cultural legacy by extending the support and bonds that nurtured would-be thinkers, educators, and artists.

### Introducing the Midwife of the Harlem Renaissance: Alain Locke

Alain Locke was born Arthur Leroy Locke on September 13, 1885 in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. His birth and early upbringing established a complicated foundation for the rest of his life. In the tome that is Locke's most comprehensive biography *The New Negro: The Life of Alain Locke*, historian Jeffrey Stewart argues that Locke was intensely ill in his early years, which intensified his connection with his mother (Stewart, 2018). Though his time with his father was short-lived, the young child had developed a sense of distrust and animosity towards the elder Locke.

Both of his parents were formally educated—his mother in teaching and his father in legal tradition. Sadly, because of layoffs and racial tensions regarding his degree of training, his father lost clerking jobs and took up work as a janitor, teacher, and manager following a two year period of being his son's primary caregiver. Though young Alain took to his father's readings of classic literature and other cerebral activities, he shied away from his attempts at traditionally "boy-associated" pastimes. Over the summers, when his mother was home, Locke clung to her and tasks that his father saw as more feminine. The father cemented this division when he spanked young Alain. Infuriated by this, mother Mary Locke informed her husband that this would never happen again. Less than two years later, just before Alain's seventh birthday, his father passed of heart complications. The already tight bond between mother and son, according to biographer Jeffrey Stewart, became a co-dependent relationship (2018).

Because Locke's parents impressed upon him the value of education, he took to critical engagement and reason quite early. His teachers celebrated his "specialness" and Locke himself also recognized that in addition to his feminine proclivities, he was also prone to same sex desire. Though his small size and health complications positioned him as an outsider to a degree, his wit and skilled loquacity ensured that the white boy peers kept him around, including the boys' naked trips to the watering hole.

After graduating high school at age 17, Locke attended the Central School of Pedagogy from 1902 to 1904. Very characteristic of the era, Black scholars, artists, and political figures began their academic training in normal schools, thus exposing themselves to a broad liberal arts education necessary to teach (Alridge et al., 2021; Bay, 2009; Danns et al., 2015). While at this institution, Locke demonstrated his tremendous promise, gaining acceptance to Harvard. From the School of Pedagogy to Harvard, to Oxford, to Howard, and back, Locke established himself as a scholar of European classics and aesthetics as well as Black intellectual thought and culture. These experiences, research, and education prepared him to be both a renowned Black presence to document the "New Negro" era, even as it cultivated opportunities for Locke to mentor

and support up-and-coming Blackqueer cultural producers of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century (Franklin, 2019, Stewart, 2018).

Though Locke began his professorial career at Howard University's education program, he established his pedagogical chops at the School of Pedagogy. This established a foundation for how he navigated the rest of his academic experience. During his time at Harvard as an undergraduate, he extended the earlier philosophical and linguistic visions of his training in the classics. When Locke returned to the classroom as a professor following his Oxford training, it was with the intellectual and pedagogical training of over seven years. Locke's mother was also an educator, so this placed increased value on both educational attainment and teaching as a profession. While his mother navigated Black educational spaces of Camden, she carved space for her son to traverse the predominately white educational spaces of his formative years, which ultimately supported his intellectual growth and career-associated social acuity. Moreover, his strength as a reader, writer, and thinker eventually garnered him admission into Harvard and the prestigious Rhodes Scholarship to pursue study in England.

Any analysis of Alain Locke must account for his struggle to navigate interlocking systems of domination (hooks, 1989). As a semi-closeted Black gay man in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century, Locke faced the challenge of navigating the romantic-sexual dynamics of a relatively underground queer space, even as he endured the racial and class tensions of the Northeast and Mid-Atlantic United States. Maintaining his scholarly identity was his key to international travel, recognition, and acclaim. Nevertheless—as many Black scholars and famous artists or activists have noted—their popularity might lessen some of the sting of racism, sexism, class, and/or heteropatriarchy some of the time, but such status does not completely shield them from the effects of hegemony. For Locke, this meant enduring racist experiences at Oxford and subtle homophobic tensions with other scholars at Howard (Stewart, 2018). As a student at Harvard, he had to convey a sense of academic careerism. This meant he often bumped shoulders with university elites, thus building connections and strengthening his reputation as an aesthete. Locke was a philosopher and concrete surveyor of culture. For Locke, the discussions of Black art for appreciation's sake was definitely a line, but he was also interested in the politics of race that undergirded the art (Grant et al., 2016). This focus helped him to create the space necessary to highlight Black cultural production, frame the sociopolitical verve of the Harlem Renaissance, and support budding artists and thinkers.

### **Alan LeRoy Locke, Countee Leroy Cullen, and Fictive Kinship: A Complicated Mentorship**

In his mentorship relationship, Locke maintained a nurturing presence, even as the connection felt at once awkwardly murky. Scholar Jeffrey Stewart argues that Locke was the midwife of the Harlem Renaissance. The argument is import-

ant for several reasons. One, as a closeted, effeminate gay man, Locke did not conform to gender norms. In addition, Locke maintained a complicated but co-dependent relationship with his mother. By naming him as mother, Stewart elucidates the role his mother played as a consistent presence and role model in her son's life. Furthermore, by positioning Locke as "midwife" and "mother" (even if Stewart's positionality relative to making such a claim is up for more intense discussion), Stewart offers us a chance to look at the Black feminist framing of "other mothering" (Collins, 2000, p. 178; Stewart, 2018, p. 335). In her articulation of Black feminist theory, renowned sociologist Patricia Hill Collins argues that other mothering is a part of a Black American consciousness and praxis with connections to African roots. This type of nurturing is gendered in description, ultimately discussing a fictive kinship rooted in care.

Locke fostered many mentorship relationships with newer artists and intellectuals. Some of the more prominent relationships include his support of Zora Neale Hurston, Langston Hughes, Elise Johnson McDonald, Maurice V. Russell, and Countee Cullen. The latter artist would be one of Locke's prominent mentees. Cullen was born in 1903 as Countee Leroy Porter. His paternal grandmother moved him to Harlem when he was nine. Following her death in 1917, the 15-year-old Countee moved in with the Reverend Frederick A. Cullen and his wife Carolyn Belle Cullen. The Reverend took an active role in the adolescent's life, providing spiritual and social guidance while opening a world of creative and intellectual possibility. The couple treated Porter so much like family that he legally changed his last name to Cullen.

For the bulk of his high school years, the young Cullen attended the prestigious Dewitt Clinton High School, then based in Hell's Kitchen (now known as Haaren Hall of John Jay College). Cullen was a precocious student with high ambitions. As a teen, Cullen spent much of his time fully engaging in student government, the classics, and Romantic and Victorian era literature. Committed to his craft, he dedicated extensive time to learning various poetic structures. The late City University of New York English professor Charles Molesworth argued that this would prove beneficial in his poetry competitions, which would eventually establish his trajectory as a writer (Molesworth, 2012). It was this same youthful vigor and thirst for greatness that connected Cullen to Alain Locke. Seeking to become a contender for the Rhodes Scholarship, young Cullen reached out to the accomplished philosopher and aesthete to request a letter of recommendation for the Rhodes Scholarship. Like Locke, Cullen danced the line between deference and arrogance in his initial letter:

I have learned that you are our race's sole representative as a Rhodes scholar. As I am desirous of bending my efforts towards such an award, I am writing you in hopes that, aided by the advice of one who has gone that way, before, I may marshal *my* efforts in the long logical and effective manner. I am not known to you personally, but you may have heard of me in some small way through the

press. (Stewart, 2018, p. 336)

In this snippet Cullen's ego is on display. Though his biological parents had not raised him, Cullen experienced several life events that contributed to his success—first of which was the fortuitous adoption by the Reverend Frederick A. Cullen who was a well-respected Harlem pastor. He also attended the prestigious Dewitt Clinton High School and won the literary prize. These factors put the younger Cullen on the radar of increasingly famous Harlemites. Nevertheless, the tone of the message captured the same gravitas his soon-to-be-mentor had already exhibited in his undergraduate years.

Though he was deeply frustrated with his first years at Howard University, Locke agreed to support Cullen—considering the fledgling poet as both a reminder of his past and perhaps future apprentice. Both spoke between words—a palpable nod that was characteristic of queer men of this time. Both men's authoritative biographers note how Cullen and Locke danced between prose. Cullen's initial comment murkily hinted at a gentleness and desire to be further acquainted: "I trust that I may be allowed to know more of you, for next to the attainment of a goal, is the pleasure of knowing those favored ones who have been fortunate enough to reach that goal" (Stewart, 2018, p. 336). Locke appeared to catch the subtext, potentially adding romantic layers to the mentorship: "I saw thee in a multitude of things...and in my fowling net snared your soul" (p. 336). The duo spoke to an intimacy beyond the static template of mentorship. In some ways, this is a queering of a mentorship relationship, redrawing boundary lines—a culture of covert queer desire and community against the backdrop of a society rooted in compulsory cis-heteropatriarchy. On one end, Locke appeared to be a queer "midwife" who, with the talent and relationships of these young cultural producers, introduced the world to the New Negro. On the other end, the near two-decade age difference—along with Locke's social location and socio-political power—could have easily placed young Cullen within the fowler's predatory "net" beyond the mere warmth of familial context. Just as Cullen danced the line between ego and deference, Locke danced the line between mentor and low-level suitor.

Amidst their correspondence, Locke kindly intimated to the younger scholar, "I have always thought that the wisest institution of the Catholic church was the confessional. It's only drawback its moralistic background and condescension. If I were inventing a religion I would try to work out some beautifully ritualistic mode of reciprocal confession" (Molesworth, 2012, p. 75). Locke was alluding to a mutual dynamic of vulnerability. Cullen, recognizing a space of safety—perhaps Locke's attempt at flattening the hierarchy—replied in an equally (and maybe queerly) cryptic nature after Locke sent him an anthology of gay writing: "I loved myself in it...I suppose some of us erotic lads, vide myself, were placed here just to eat our hearts out with longing for unattainable things" (Molesworth, 2012, p. 76) "especially for that friendship beyond understanding" (Stewart, 2018, p. 338). After they finally met in person and Cullen stayed at Locke's apartment, Cullen

wrote “You cannot, I am sure, appreciate the value I place upon that visit. I hope it was, enjoyable it was in itself, merely a prelude to a greater intimacy between you and me” (Stewart, 2018, p. 336). The poetic exchanges between these two men seem to speak to a closeness beneath the surface—a murky dynamic that was complicated by age and the subtleties of queer homosocial dynamics within their time. Nevertheless, the 20+ years of their relationship maintained that of mentor-turned-friend. Locke met Cullen’s adoptive father, looked over his drafts, and exchanged vulnerabilities. The confessional as a two-way sacred space of queer vulnerability, then, serves as a more fitting symbol of their relationship. More than friends, they became family.

In his earlier writing, Cullen drew from Locke and trusted his opinion. Locke maintained a degree of power in Black spaces and thus cultivated a social network that opened doors for Cullen within broader Black spaces. Biographer Charles Molesworth argues “Locke was often eager to induce his literary friends to move and develop in certain direction” (2012, p. 71). This was a commentary about his literary suggestions, but the same is true in broader contexts. Locke recognized the 20-year gap and aimed to help Cullen across literary, cultural, social, and romantic lines. In fact, Cullen nudged Locke to help him write a letter to a prospective love interest to convey that “Cullen was romantically interested in him” (Stewart, 2018, p. 338). In these exchanges, the horizontal relationship is asserted over the maternal relationship. Soon, “Cullen began addressing Locke by his boyhood name, Roy. It was as if from that point they were less mother and son, and more, brothers in arms” (p. 338). Locke helped Cullen to explore his closeted sexuality within a burgeoning Black gay Harlem which spurred social, cultural, and political possibilities on an international scale. Locke knew this freedom himself, having freely found sex, love, and passion during his European travels. Such a freedom eventually invigorated his intellectual pursuits, and he sought to offer a version of that liberty to his protégé. In a way, aiding Cullen in the U.S. context might have helped Locke to navigate his own sexual being in his home country.

People of the time knew that Cullen was one of Locke’s mentees, but Locke wasn’t his sole advisor. His peer mentors included the likes of Arna Bontemps—the Louisiana born and California raised author of many children’s books; Langston Hughes—renowned poet and multi-genre author, and Harold Jackman—his life-long friend from high school and best man in his first wedding. Other folks, such as his first father-in-law W.E.B. Du Bois, also played a significant role in his life before, during, and after the short-lived marriage. The vastness of Cullen’s network proved to be generative in terms of support, constructive and biting criticism, cultural enrichment, intellectual stimulation, and subtle queer community (Molesworth, 2012). Still, his relationship with Locke proved to encompass artistic, intellectual, and social worlds. As a fictive mother, Locke aided Cullen in breaking into the literary world and thinking through his queerness.

### From Othermother to Stage Mother: Locke as Harsh Critic

Locke's approach wasn't always the kindest. He was no stranger to self-importance, which was useful to the degree that it fostered his smooth navigation of prominent circles—a characteristic his protege, Cullen, shared. In fact, Locke's protection and elevation of the growing number of gay, bisexual, and "sexually ambiguous" artists and cultural workers (Stewart, 2018, p. 418) fostered a surge in famous Blackqueer artists, art, and presence in the burgeoning Renaissance (Taylor & Reinhard, 2024). At the same time, he maintained a cattiness that made his intellectual reading feel more like colloquial reads.

Clearly, Locke's reputation preceded him. In fact, Hughes initially feared meeting Locke and confided in his friend Cullen how Locke "frightened me stiff." Feeling dwarfed by the intellectual powerhouse, he asserted "I know he'd find me terribly stupid" (Molesworth, 2012, p. 84). This is especially important to note as Locke had a crush on Hughes and not-so-gently hinted as much (Hughes, 1940/1993; Rampersad, 1986, 1988; Stewart, 2018). Though Hughes would spend some time with him, he would ultimately reject a romantic engagement. Nevertheless, when he moved to D.C. and needed support, he would return to his mentor to ask for job opportunities (Hughes, 1940/1993).

Unlike Hughes, Cullen's sentiment concerning Locke was less humble at first; he "courted Locke's mentoring and felt much more nearly his intellectual equal, at least potentially" (p.83). Of course, this did not ease or minimize Locke's tone. Even after Cullen's death, he would diminish his mentee's latter years and posthumous book of poetry. Upon the publication of Cullen's last volume, the mentor-in-mourning remarked, "*On These I Stand*, is only a self-culled anthology with six fragile unpublished poems added. They sadly tell the story of a dimmed talent, and its cause" (Molesworth, p. 336). The comment was as much a mourning of Cullen as it was of the declension of Renaissance artists' work. Nevertheless, it captured the harsh and cold pen that Locke did not even withhold from his mentees.

Locke would do the same to Zora Neale Hurston, the former Howard University student whom he also supported as a renaissance cultural figure. He was among a group of gatekeepers of the Black intellectual and cultural class which had gendered implications. "It was not so much that women could not be part of the movement or that every man would be promoted, but that a certain type of man and woman—a sexually ambiguous Black writer such as Nella Larsen and Zora Neale Hurston became dominant in the renaissance that followed largely because of the taste of literary men like Locke, Johnson, Van Doren, and even Liveright" writes Locke's biographer (Stewart, 2018, p. 417). When he used his powers for good, these figures carried favor. Hurston was among them.

Nevertheless, Locke's sharp critiques sometimes did more to crush than con-

struct. In response to *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Locke offers praise first: “But as always thus far with this talented writer, setting and surprising flashes of contemporary folk lore are the main point” (1938). After a snippet of praise, he goes on to say, “It is folklore fiction at its best” and “Progressive southern fiction has already banished the legend of these entertaining pseudo-primitives...Having gotten rid of condescension, let us now get over oversimplification!” (1938). The irony of Locke’s critique of “oversimplification” is that he oversimplified Hurston’s analysis of Black people. Bent less on the need to qualify Black folks’ brilliance for white audience, Hurston painted Black people in what she deemed to be all their beauty, including the perfected imperfections. Locke publicly adhered to a certain brand of respectability within/surrounding Black art. And while he cherished space for Blackqueer authors to thrive, he simultaneously shortcut some of their possibilities through his gatekeeping. Stewart writes, “But in critiquing *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Locke was making public his misogynist project of the early days of the Negro Renaissance. Part of his queer project of becoming ‘the man’ of Negro literary criticism in the 1920s had been to marginalize Black women’s critical agency” (2018, p.748). His oversimplification of her work denied the social complexity and agency of Black women, thus reifying misogynoir instead of highlighting Hurston’s rendering of Black women’s stories (Jarman, 2023, p. 103).

Still, there is something partially endearing underneath Locke’s analyses. He took the work seriously enough to engage it critically, and his understanding of the potential of the literature spoke to his sometimes-feeble attempt at constructive criticism. Locke evidenced as much when he reviewed Cullen’s first book of poetry, enthusiastically naming Cullen “A genius!” (Molesworth, 2012, p. 128). While the critiques came on a bit strong at points—naming it “a work of extreme youth and youthfulness over which the author later may care to write the apology of ‘juvenillia,’” Locke at least spoke to the intended spirit and balance of his mentee’s manuscript by noting its “distinctive and matured style.” Though harshest with Hurston, Locke tried to balance his critiques of Cullen. Locke’s private and public approaches to care, nevertheless, nurtured Cullen’s career and social life. Just as Countee Cullen’s adoptive father fostered his adolescent spiritual growth and intellectual life, Locke provided a space for Cullen to shape his writing, *confess* his sexual and romantic desires, and expand his social network.

### **From the Closet to the Classroom: Cullen as Poet, Playwright, and Pedagogue**

Though he found some ease in his conversations with Locke, Cullen had a complicated relationship with his own queerness. Cullen was out to some, but he tried to make heterosexual marriages work. His first marriage to W.E.B. Du Bois’ daughter, Yolande Du Bois, was short-lived. The marriage, at best, was a marriage of convenience—she was able to please her father by marrying a prominent

literary figure, and he was able to solidify his mark among the Black culturally elite (and hopefully silence gay rumors) by marrying the daughter of one of the most important thinkers of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century (Molesworth, 2012). Cullen won the prestigious Guggenheim Fellowship, which supported his journey to Paris shortly following their wedding. The new bride, however, had to finish her school year while her new husband galivanted Parisian streets with his best man, Harold Jackman. When she finally arrived in Europe, Yolande had become increasingly ill; Cullen did little to appear at her side. Tensions continued to wear on in these early months until Cullen confessed to Yolande his homosexual attractions. The couple set about preparing for divorce shortly after.

Unaware of the initial details, W.E.B. Du Bois apologized on behalf of his daughter, infantilizing her, and framing her as naïve about the ways of love. Funny enough, she was very aware of what *love* looked like in their faltering marriage. In the critical months following their nuptials, they spent no time together. He provided financial assistance as she endured the medical struggles, but there is no record of him being at her side. Yolande was both aware of the rumors surrounding Cullen, and courtesy of his confession, confirmed in these latent suspicions. Her father's analysis was short-sighted. Like the women in Locke's life, Yolande was victim to the misogynoir of both her father and her soon-to-be ex-husband.

Despite the unsuccessful marriage, Cullen once again attempted heterosexual nuptials in 1940 to a woman named Ida Mae Roberson—a marriage that would last until his untimely death in January 1946. Various sources suggest that Cullen entertained relationships with several gay men up until (and maybe even during) their marriage (Molesworth, 2012; Perrée, 2023; Stewart, 2018). Sadly, unlike Hughes and Locke who never married, Cullen bore the weight of compulsory heterosexuality, even as he navigated complicated queer desire.

In the last decade of his life, Cullen committed much of his energies to teaching. As a middle school educator, he served as both a certified French teacher and writing teacher. Though Cullen taught French, his strength as a published author played a significant role in how he showed up for his students. He had begun writing children's books as he attempted work as a playwright. He would sometimes share his works in progress with his students, treating them less as tutees and increasingly as interlocutors who could speak to the value (and shortcomings) of his work (Molesworth, 2012).

Surprisingly, when he considered teaching shortly after finishing his Master of Arts degree, Cullen confessed to a friend “that he lacked the sense of firm belief that he felt teachers should possess” (Molesworth, 2012, p. 265). His friend, in turn, responded “I do not feel that teaching will go hard with you, nor that you will allow it to give you any unnecessary concern—I feel that sense of humor will stand in good stead” (p. 265). Perhaps this was more prophetic than Cullen would have ever known. When he began his teaching career 8 years following Harvard,

“Cullen would go on to be a highly successful teacher” (p. 266). Incorporating solid writing strategies, emphasis on memory, and assets-based approaches, he took his role as teacher very seriously.

Though Cullen’s primary focus was on literature, his undergraduate training included courses in “history of education, educational psychology, principles(s) and problems of education, and elements in the methods of teaching high school English” (p. 266). He clearly had solid coursework within the field of education alongside his Harvard graduate degree. This proved quite helpful in the multiple roles he took on. In addition to teaching French, he also taught English and creative writing. His former student Elvyn/Elvin Davidson remembers Cullen’s pedagogy fondly:

[O]ur teacher was a man named Countee Cullen, who was a black poet. And he said I’m gonna make ... I’ll take sixty boys in this class he said I’ll make them good students. And out of that sixty, I remember now, only one turned out bad. Every one of the fifty-nine little boys either doctors, lawyers, policemen, judges, different things...

he had a method of teaching which probably unusual. He uh, taught us that you could, there’s nothing that you can’t read and there’s nothing that you can’t do. There’s nothing that you can’t figure out. And he says we’re gonna teach you how to memorize things. And what he would do, take out class and we’d walk around a block, a city block and come back. He’d say I want you to write down everything you saw...

He said you have to learn how to memorize without being aware that you’re memorizing. I want you to look at something and be able tell me what you saw. I want you to read something and tell me what it says in your own words without repeating what... and he taught us to ... he said you should be able

Junior high school supposed to be three years, but everybody in class did it in two, which was what he promised that we would do and everybody did it... (Bowen, Piehler, & Davidson, 2000)

Davidson’s recollection of Cullen reveals his philosophy of education and teaching practice. The fact that Cullen provided explicit educational support to Black boys is such a powerful example of his commitment to Black folks and to an over-policed and under-supported population in schools. According to Davidson’s account, Cullen successfully: (1) expedited the boys’ completion of junior high school; (2) increased their use of memory and writing strategy; (3) affirmed their literacy by supporting comprehension, decoding, and retention strategies across contexts; (4) taught them to be analysts of the world that surrounded them; and (5) inspired a host of successful professionals (Elvyn V. Davidson, 2000)—among them, James Baldwin (Molesworth, 2012).

Though Cullen had no children of his own, he was both the product of and contributor to fictive kinship, chosen family, and othermothering. Cullen would engage in a sparring relationship with Langston Hughes at times, but they were

somewhat like bickering brothers. In their youth and early adult careers, they competed for the same prizes. Cullen introduced Hughes to Locke. The two shared poetry and provided feedback, even as their egos struggled through the commentary (Molesworth, 2012; Rampersad, n.d.; Stewart, 2018). Both had two strong opinions about Black art: Cullen vying for a classical approach to Black experiences with hopes of universality and Hughes playing with verse in order to capture the complexity of Black style, Black life, and Black aesthetics. Despite their differences, they respected each other and inhabited the same circles. Cullen had multilayered yet tender relationships with Harold Jackman, Alain Locke, Langston Hughes, and even Claude McKay (A Caribbean bisexual poet who took on a similar classical approach to poetry and with whom Cullen had friction for a period)—among others. He maintained a rich queer family amidst the complicated inner-tensions that induced him to pursue relationships with women (Molesworth, 2012; Rampersad, n.d.; Stewart, 2018). This rich verve of queer energy, according to Molesworth's interpretation of Alain Locke, supported the space Cullen needed to creatively engage as an author. Moreover, this energy, though not explicit, could have supported his nurturing approach as an educator. Blackqueer and Blackqueer feminist pedagogical scholars (Alexander, 2005; Lewis, 2011) argue that their Blackness and queerness are an embodied text, parts of the non-explicit curriculum in the classroom. Though Cullen was not out, his explicit care as fictive parent, and implicit modeling as queer (even if closeted) figure created an opportunity for young Baldwin to cultivate his literary and social future.

#### **From one DeWitt Clinton Alum to the Next: Introducing James Baldwin**

Cullen's teaching tenure was an important time for his student Jimmy Baldwin. The would-be icon's biographer, David Leeming, observes "He was a minister's son who was living proof for the younger minister's son that a black man could be a writer" (1994/2015, Ch.3). James Baldwin was born into a large family. He was raised and adopted by his stepfather. His complicated relationship with his emotionally and physically abusive patriarch increased the younger Baldwin's negative view of his own looks and his resentment towards his father. Baldwin's exposure to Cullen, then, was more than just a student-teacher relationship, it was the site of possibility—a hope for a future.

Cullen maintained a powerful presence at school. This is evidenced "in his interview with James Baldwin." After matriculating to high school, Baldwin went back to interview his junior high teacher. In the interview, "Cullen spoke of how his students always wanted him to read his work and discuss it with them" (Molesworth, 2012, p. 301). That Baldwin was involved in this interview is testament to the role Cullen played in his life. Baldwin's biographer, David Leeming observes,

Cullen had a certain flair and a kind of elegance that the young Baldwin admired

and emulated. He had been to France and he knew French. By his very presence Cullen pointed a way around the mentality of despair and proved that many roads out of the ghetto were possible. Baldwin learned his first bits of French, a language in which he later became fluent, in Countee Cullen's French class at Frederick Douglass, and he always said that his dream of going to France originated with Cullen.

And there was a less tangible rapport that he spoke of—a comforting sense that Cullen and he instinctively understood something about each other, something that prepubescent inexperience would have made it impossible for Baldwin to identify then as homosexuality. Countee Cullen was everything that Jimmy's stepfather was not—a warm man, one who was not afraid to touch, who entered into his students' lives. In some ways he took the place of a father for the young writer, as Beauford Delaney would later. Baldwin “adored” him and his poetry and tried to write like him. (Leeming, 1994/2015, Ch.3)

Jimmy was too young to recognize it as Cullen had with his mentor, but something felt familiar about his presence. There was a queer knowing without knowing. Cullen helped him learn French, but he also opened a window into understanding himself and the world. Cullen encouraged his students to “read and write—and wait” (1994/2015). The wait was often the moments of clarity, revision, and possibility. By modeling compassion, education, travel, multilingualism, the writing process, literary pursuits—while nurturing diverse manifestations of manhood—Cullen helped Jimmy to see a pathway towards freedom.

In addition to his role within the classroom, Cullen also encouraged Baldwin beyond Frederick Douglass Junior High School. Baldwin also attended the distinguished DeWitt Clinton High School at the prompting of Mr. Cullen. He also recognized that college was not the only pathway to a literary career. Still, Cullen was not the only influence in James Baldwin's life. He also received attention and intellectual support from his elementary teacher, Mrs. Bill Miller who took him to cultural outings, donated clothes to the family, and humored his budding career as a childhood playwright (1994/2015). Around the years he had Cullen, Baldwin had also taken to Bill Porter, a teacher whom Baldwin's father accused of “corrupting” the young adolescent with books by “white devils” (p. 24). Like Cullen, Porter was also Harvard educated, but he differed in approach as he demonstrated a focus on self-reliance. Both Black men helped shape the young precocious writer. Cullen taught French, poetry, and fiction. Porter advised the young editor-in-chief on the newspaper while helping him navigate antiblackness and his father's anti-intellectualism.

Like Cullen, Baldwin sought to escape the church. He was set to become a minister; in fact, he began ministering while he was still in his teens. But it was the summer after he graduated Frederick Douglass, thus leaving these positive mentors, that he recognized his queerness. Nevertheless, young Jimmy stayed faithful to the ministerial calling through most of high school. Baldwin's father asked the young minister if he preferred writing or preaching. Knowing the truth

well, Jimmy confessed his penchant for writing. He preached his last sermon shortly before he finished high school. Just after he stepped down from the pulpit, he left the church entirely. While the church was Central to Baldwin's storytelling, as it provided the rhythm, culture, and cadence of Black life that the author would infuse into his work; it also confronted the truth of what he knew about his sexuality. In fact, *Go Tell it on the Mountain* (Baldwin, 1963), eerily captures the complex social, spiritual, and sexual dynamics that were a part of James Baldwin's formative years. Just as his mentor Cullen was a minister's son who became a secular author, Baldwin would soon follow in his literary and sexual footsteps.

### Baldwin All Grown Up

Not long after graduating high school, James Baldwin began a prolific career. He established himself as a playwright, poet, essayist, debater, novelist, screenwriter, cultural critic, and witness. Unlike his queer forefathers, however, Baldwin lived his queerness quite boldly. In 1956, Baldwin published *Giovanni's Room* (Baldwin, 1956) in spite of international culture against Blackness, queerness, and anything remotely socialist. Heralded today as a groundbreaking queer novel, the story tells of the tensions between two men who fall in love in Paris. David, the first-person narrator, falls for Giovanni, an Italian bartender. Like many of his fictional texts, Baldwin spread autobiographical elements from his life across characters (Leeming 1994/2015). The book was such a brave move and thus a form of public queer self-actualization that would never be possible for Cullen or Locke.

In time, James Baldwin would be one of the prophets who was not accepted in his hometown—let alone his home country. Though he spoke loudly and cogently, he was not so easily celebrated in the United States. To reap the benefits of queer life, Baldwin spent significant times in the Greenwich Village on the opposite side of Manhattan (Leeming, 1994/2015). Trips abroad would help him to flex his Cullen-inspired command of French while he also read, observed new surroundings, and embraced international experiences. It also gave him a reprieve from U.S.-style racism. Though he was aware that the contours of racism could never be relegated to the States alone (Baldwin, 1972), he simultaneously knew that the slightly lighter weight of European racism offered a bit more respite—an international vision he saw through his old mentor, Cullen.

Though he was not initially a traditional teacher, Baldwin offered a powerful critique and philosophy of education. To this day, much of his famous "Talk to Teachers" speech and subsequent essay ring true to what critical educators value, critique, and need in their practice. In it, he offers,

The purpose of education, finally, is to create in a person the ability to look at the world for himself, to make his own decisions, to say to himself this is black or this is white, to decide for himself whether there is a God in heaven or not. To ask questions of the universe, and then learn to live with those questions, is the way he achieves his own identity. But no society is really anxious to have that kind of

person around. (Baldwin, 1963/2022)

Baldwin's line here draws from a tradition in line with W.E.B. Du Bois and Carter G. Woodson. Like Du Bois in *The Souls of Black Folks* (1904/1994) and Woodson does in *The Miseducation of the Negro* (1933), Baldwin notes the tensions of learning too much. Those committed to the status quo or too fearful of the backlash that comes with confronting hegemonic power find a way to silence or render inelible the voices of strength and reason. Baldwin argues that the purpose of education is to offer a life of the mind across myriad contexts. The old adage carries weight here: ignorance is bliss. Education—or learning in general—removes the veneer so that one might see life more clearly. With that clarity comes an unhappiness, which eventually accompanies a sense of frustration and critique. This type of unsettling is generative in moving peoples and nations forward. Baldwin's own mentors incited in him this fire necessary to critically analyze and influence the world around him.

### The Evolution of Pedagogical Tradition Personified

Unlike his Blackqueer fore-parents, James Baldwin did not have college degrees. He was an autodidact whose voracious reading and writing positioned him to be actively engaged in the world of art and ideas. Locke and Cullen took courses in pedagogy along with course work and study in their respective fields, and both taught while they were relatively young. Baldwin, however, did not teach until the latter years of his life. Taking on visiting assistant professorships at schools like Bowling Green University, UC Berkeley, and Mount Holyoke, Baldwin assigned his work and the work of other writers he enjoyed; he took up robust discussions of race and politics, and—like his mentor Cullen—fostered a more interactive dynamic that positioned the students as co-thinkers, writers, and scholars in the classroom.

One student remarked,

One of my problems going to Mount Holyoke...was that, they always complained that I wrote in Black English, and—first they would complain that you're writing in Black English...

And so those were the kind of battles that I was fighting until Jimmy came along. And Jimmy said, write whatever you want to write, and not only write what you want to write, but this is my experience too. This is real, I can relate to this (*The Price of the Ticket—James Baldwin Documentary*, 1990)

Her account revealed Baldwin's pedagogical similarities to his mentor, Countee Cullen. Baldwin had suffered a barrage of critiques from editors over several decades, so he knew the weight of these critiques. As a Black author, he also could relate to the world of his Black students, thus affirming both their authorial choices and their lived experiences. The age difference must also be noted. Because he worked with adult students, Baldwin would often take them out for drinks, hold-

ing informal sessions to learn and build with them. His colleague also affirmed “I thought he was a marvelous teacher, and very invested, and really cared that he was getting through to the students, and that there was that connection, that there was a dialogue going on” (1990). James Baldwin had successfully captured the spirit of co-constructed learning in ways that supported his work, student thinking, and student writing.

### Complicated Legacies

From these histories, we can see the affordances and shortcomings of Blackqueer mentorship. Unearthing the histories of these figures reminds us that Blackqueer folks have always been a significant part of Black cultural, social, and intellectual life. Moreover, uncovering these hidden and explicit networks of multilayered Blackqueer life, we see the importance of representation. Locke’s reciprocal confessional approach helped Lock and Cullen to feel seen and heard. These men also opened their networks to each other; as messy as their lives were, it is important to note that Cullen’s wedding ushers and attendees were members of his queer circle. The same was true of the pallbearers at Cullen’s funeral (Molesworth, 2012). Similarly, James Baldwin found his love for Paris. Whereas his fore-mentors had to navigate the complicated politics of the closet, Baldwin was known as a homosexual. He didn’t just inherit an unspoken support for his queerness; he built on it and lived it aloud. Locke was somewhat of an other-mother to Cullen who helped him navigate the world around him, while aiding him to explore his own underground world of queer friendships and covert romantic relationships. Each generation opened a new possibility for the other: Locke entered prominence as an aesthete who provided space for Cullen to write, and Cullen entered the scene as a closeted author and eventual educator who mentored an openly queer multi-genre author.

Educators today would do well to consider how the personal is political and pedagogical (Robinson, 2025), Blackqueer embodiment is generative pedagogy (Alexander, 2005; Lewis, 2011), curriculum is autobiographical (Taliaferro-Baszile, 2010; William F Pinar et al., 1995), and interpersonal pedagogies are just as important as broad classroom pedagogies. Tracing Black lineages of care across race, class, gender, and sexuality allows educators to 1) see models of pedagogy they can employ 2) see the affordances and limitations of previous mentors and adjust their approach accordingly 3) recognize how important representation can be for Blackqueer youth. We know the need to be seen and affirmed for what we do and who we are. Tracing these lineages through research and making space for such presence in our teaching offers space for Blackqueer students to live freely and carve out their trajectory.

Nevertheless, we must look to such legacies without over-romanticizing. What we inherit through nurture is as important as what we inherit through na-

ture. With Blackqueer families, the fictive progeny often borrow approaches, habits, and dispositions akin to their mentors. Locke was a misogynistic dandy whose obsession with European influence—even alongside his love for Black aesthetics—passed on to Cullen who then passed them on to Baldwin. Though Baldwin would exert the least harm in his misogynoir, his static characterizations of Black women and public correcting from Nikki Giovanni reveal his short-sightedness (Baldwin, 1973). His queerness might have helped him to see the dangers of cis-hetero-patriarchy in his life and the life of his mother, but it did not keep him from missing some of the more pressing everyday struggles of Black women who were hidden in his face.

Still, the beauty of seeing and being seen (even in small covert spaces) supported these figures' outer lives. They were all precocious kids who inspired others to look after them. Would they have been successful otherwise? Probably—that level of speculation is beyond my powers of futurity. Yet, the soft and murky spaces of queerness in-between—the acknowledgment of what is and what could be—this is at the core of excavating queer histories. It is through these complicated pasts we recognize the power of classical forms in Cullen, inventive forms in Hughes, and bold proclamations in Baldwin. “A Talk to Teachers” resonates today because the hegemonic forces that inspired Baldwin over 60 years ago reinvent themselves today. By exploring Blackqueer figures' creative spaces of belonging and resistance, we are more equipped with examples to dream of vast liberatory futures through and beyond education. Moreover, by living and existing in our individual truths and creating space for others to see and do the same, we increase space for Blackqueer lives to expand the breadth and depth of Black culture.

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***Legacies, Lineages, and Black Queer Futures*****The Rainbow in Black:  
Recognition of Queerness  
in the Divine Nine*****August Darbonne & Carolyn Cross*****Abstract**

This article interrogates the complex and often contradictory relationship between Black Greek Letter Organizations (BGLOs) and Black Queer identity. Drawing on intersectionality and Black Queer Studies, the analysis situates contemporary debates within a broader historical lineage of anti-queerness in African American communities, tracing how racial uplift ideologies, respectability politics, and exclusionary gender norms shaped the Divine Nine. Through historical synthesis, archival scholarship, and digital content analysis of BGLO websites and national Instagram accounts, the study reveals persistent patterns of Queer erasure: organizations simultaneously rely on the cultural labor of Black Queer members while publicly minimizing their identities and inconsistently recognizing Pride Month. These tensions illuminate how BGLOs serve as microcosms of larger negotiations around Blackness, gender, sexuality, and belonging. The article concludes by calling for fuller acknowledgment of Black Queer contributions and for institutional commitments that move beyond symbolic inclusion toward genuine intersectional advocacy.

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### Introduction

In May 2021, a photograph of a recent African American male graduate sparked widespread controversy across social media platforms and within Black Greek communities (Meade, 2022). The image featured the graduate wearing a stole bearing the letters of Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc. while simultaneously donning high heels and attire some commentators described as a “women’s suit” (Meade, 2022, para. 2). This visual juxtaposition of traditional fraternity symbols with gender-nonconforming expression generated responses ranging from celebratory support to harsh criticism, reigniting longstanding debates about masculinity, gender expression, and queerness within historically Black fraternities (Latham, 2021; Meade, 2022).

This incident illuminates a broader tension that has persisted within Black Greek Letter Organizations (BGLOs) for decades. Queerness and the inclusion of Queer members in BGLOs have been contentious topics precisely because they challenge foundational organizational ideals of loyalty, trustworthiness, and traditional conceptions of masculinity and femininity that are deeply embedded within these institutions (Decaille, 2017; DeSantis & Coleman, 2008; Duran et al., 2023; Literte & Hodge, 2012). This tension becomes particularly significant when examining the nine prestigious BGLOs that comprise the National Pan-Hellenic Council, colloquially known as the “Divine Nine” (Ross, 2000, p. xvi).

This article examines the paradoxical relationship between Black Greek Letter Organizations (BGLOs) and Black Queer identity by analyzing inconsistencies in how queerness is recognized, represented, and addressed within these institutions. A notable contradiction emerges when examining organizational practices: while many Divine Nine organizations maintain public silence on Black Queer issues and some explicitly prohibit transgender individuals from membership, these same organizations simultaneously celebrate and highlight notable members who have identified as Queer or who would be recognized within the Queer spectrum according to contemporary understandings (Edwards, 2020; Walker, 2024).

This paradox extends to institutional recognition practices, where Divine Nine organizations publicly acknowledge various heritage months, including Black History Month, Hispanic Heritage Month, and Asian and Pacific Islander Heritage Month, yet demonstrate inconsistent acknowledgment of June as Pride Month. These contradictions reveal a complex tension between organizational traditions and evolving understandings of identity and inclusion within historically Black Greek organizations. BGLOs have supported social movements established by Black Queer individuals that benefit the larger Black community in the United States but perpetuate Queer erasure by ignoring the contributions of Queer originators of these movements and being silent on Black Queer issues or even celebrations such as Pride Month. This contradiction reveals complex negotiations of identity, tradition, and progress within institutions central to Black American collegiate and professional life.

For clarity, this article employs Siobhan B. Somerville's (2020) definition of "Queer" from *Keywords for American Cultural Studies* as "an umbrella term that refers to a range of sexual identities that are 'not straight' (p.198)." This inclusive definition encompasses lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and other non-heteronormative identities and expressions.

Legal scholar Kimberlé W. Crenshaw (1989) developed intersectionality theory, which serves as the methodological foundation for this work. Originally formulated to address the specific challenges faced by Black women through a Black feminist lens, intersectionality provides a framework for understanding how multiple identity categories—such as race, gender, sexuality, and organizational affiliation—intersect to create unique experiences of privilege and marginalization. This theoretical approach allows for nuanced analysis of how Black LGBTQ+ individuals navigate membership and recognition within BGLOs.

This article examines four key areas: the historical foundations of Divine Nine organizations, the intersectionality of Black and Queer identities within historical contexts of anti-queerness, the emergence of Black Queer Studies as an analytical framework, and case studies demonstrating how these organizations paradoxically recognize and marginalize their Queer members.

Through this analysis, we demonstrate how BGLOs reflect broader negotiations of identity within Black communities, serving as microcosms for examining how traditions of solidarity and uplift intersect with evolving understandings of gender and sexuality. By illuminating these contradictions, we aim to contribute to ongoing conversations about inclusion, representation, and the future of these historically significant organizations.

The authors maintain full transparency regarding their personal and professional relationships in this research area. Both researchers hold membership in Black Greek Letter Organizations, and one author identifies as gay. These affiliations provide direct lived experience that enhances our understanding of how queerness is marginalized within BGLO contexts. Our insider perspectives serve as both foundational knowledge and primary motivation for this investigation, given that we experience firsthand the organizational dynamics under examination. This positionality enables us to bring nuanced insight to issues that directly affect our communities and identities.

### **A Brief History of the 'Divine Nine'**

Throughout the early to mid-twentieth century, the United States saw the founding of multiple historically Black fraternities and sororities (Ross, 2000). The origins of Greek-lettered fraternities and sororities in the United States trace back to the formation of the Greek-lettered student society Phi Beta Kappa in 1776 (Current, 1990). From this organization, various social-based, Greek-lettered organizations emerged, with the Kappa Alpha Society established in 1825,

being recognized as the first social-based fraternity (Syrett, 2009). Yet as these fraternities, and later women-based sororities, grew across the United States, they developed a membership focus on White-American Protestants from the higher realms of society. Early fraternities and sororities on both a local and national scale systematically rejected Black, Latino, Catholic, Jewish, and other people considered outside the White Protestant upper classes.

Fraternity membership offered various incentives to members throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Syrett, 2009). Membership within fraternities provided members with mentorships among more experienced collegiate students along with a financial support network. Additionally, membership created a network between current collegiate students and alumni that gave members an advantage in highly competitive fields such as law and medicine.

As African-American enrollment increased in universities and colleges in the early twentieth century, exclusionary attitudes from student bodies rose, including membership within Greek letter organizations (Washington & Nuñez, 2005). Membership requirements, including exclusionary racial practices, became codified in the constitutions of fraternities and sororities at both the local and national levels (Gillon et al., 2019; Hennehan, 2020). This exclusion based on race excluded African American students from accessing established professional networks afforded to those with Greek fraternity and sorority membership (Syrett, 2009). Driven by this exclusion, African-American students initiated a movement in the early twentieth century to create organizations that welcome their own membership.

The first continuous, collegiate, Black Greek letter organization (BGLO) founded was Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc., in 1906 at Cornell University (Ross, 2000). Inspired by segregationist and exclusionary practices on campus, African Americans developed a literary group that evolved into the Black fraternity that exists today. The organization established a second chapter at Howard University, which would lead to multiple BGLOs being founded in quick succession on that campus. The first Black sorority, Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc., was established at Howard in 1908. In quick succession, Omega Psi Phi Fraternity, Inc. (1911), Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc. (1913), Phi Beta Sigma Fraternity, Inc. (1914), and Zeta Phi Beta Sorority, Inc. (1920) were all founded at Howard University. The creation of Black Greek organizations was not limited to Howard University. Kappa Alpha Phi Fraternity, Inc. was founded at Indiana State University Bloomington in 1911. Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority, Inc. was founded at Butler University in 1922. Finally, Iota Phi Theta Fraternity, Inc. was founded at Morgan State University in 1963.

In 1930, as BGLOs began to expand and charter chapters on campuses across the United States, the National Pan-Hellenic Council (NPHC) was founded to serve the purpose of unity and collaboration between the historical BGLOs (McKenzie, 2005). Five organizations would develop the NPHC in 1930, with two organizations joining in 1931 and an eighth joining in 1937. A ninth would join in

1997. Colloquially, the NPHC is known as the 'Divine Nine.' Table 1 provides a quick view of the nine organizations along with their founding locations and years that comprise the NPHC.

Founded with the ideals of racial uplift, each Black Greek letter organization has a mission of service and social action since their founding (Washington & Nuñez, 2005). The founders of Black fraternities and sororities belonged to the small number of African-Americans in the early twentieth century that attended institutions of higher learning. These students participated in the ideology of racial uplift, the notion that the Black intellectual class can attain the education and resources usually only afforded to the White population, then use those resources to educate and train the entire Black community to bring racial equality forward (Gaines, 1996). Entrepreneurs, teachers, and religious leaders became the self-appointed leaders of the Black community, as their education allowed them to be independent from the White elite and provided resources for the betterment of the Black community. As part of the educated minority, the founders of Black Greek organizations participated in this racial uplift, as they gained the education and resources from institutions of higher learning and established organizations that would provide service to the larger Black community.

Service and activism are a central principle to Black Greek organizations, in addition to the benefits of social cohesion. These roots can be traced back to the colonial period, manifesting as mutual aid and benevolent societies amongst African-American communities. Black fraternities and sororities continue this service through various outlets such as educational scholarship, support of minority owned business, health awareness, and political activism (Gasman et al., 2008).

### Black Homophobia in the United States

The roots of homophobia and queer erasure within Black communities of the United States have their origins in the system of chattel slavery, where familial

**Table 1**  
**Founding Place and Year of the Nine NPHC Organizations**

<i>Organization Name</i>	<i>Founding Place</i>	<i>Founding Year</i>
Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc.	Cornell University	1906
Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc.	Howard University	1908
Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity, Inc.	Indiana University Bloomington	1911
Omega Psi Phi Fraternity, Inc.	Howard University	1911
Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc.	Howard University	1913
Phi Beta Sigma Fraternity, Inc.	Howard University	1914
Zeta Phi Beta Sorority, Inc.	Howard University	1920
Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority, Inc.	Butler University	1922
Iota Phi Theta Fraternity, Inc.	Morgan State University	1963

bonds and sexual actions and norms were regulated by the White slave-holding society (Abdur-Rahman, 2006; Crowley, 2024). American racial and sexual systems emerged simultaneously during the nineteenth century, with scientific racism and early sexology developing intertwined classificatory systems that pathologized both Blackness and sexual deviance (Somerville, 2000). During slavery, Black bodies were subject to invasive scrutiny, with slave owners controlling intimate and reproductive aspects of enslaved people's lives while simultaneously hypersexualizing them in public discourse (Hartman, 2007; Spillers, 1987).

The Great Migration era witnessed increased policing of gender and sexual nonconformity in urban Black communities. Mumford (2016) illustrates how Black newspapers and community leaders during the Harlem Renaissance frequently condemned gender variance and same-sex relationships as "racial weaknesses" that threatened collective progress. Despite this, as Garber (1989) reveals, vibrant LGBTQ+ subcultures thrived in these same urban centers, such as Harlem's drag balls and other queer spaces attracting both Black and white participants.

The civil rights era further complicated these dynamics. Carbado and Weise (2003) document how prominent civil rights organizations often marginalized openly LGBTQ+ members, concerned that association with sexual "deviance" would undermine the movement's respectability. This is evident in the treatment of Bayard Rustin, whose crucial organizational role was frequently downplayed due to his homosexuality (D'Emilio, 2003). Moore (2010) argues that Black nationalist movements of the 1960s and 1970s often reinforced heteronormative ideals through rhetoric that positioned homosexuality as a "white disease" antithetical to authentic Blackness, despite the presence of queer individuals in these movements.

Religious institutions, particularly the Black church, played complex roles in shaping attitudes toward sexuality. Douglas (1999) traces how conservative theological positions on sexuality were often embraced by Black churches as part of broader survival strategies in hostile environments. However, Comstock (2001) notes that these same institutions sometimes provided coded spaces where gender nonconformity could exist, particularly through music ministries and certain leadership roles, creating what scholars have termed a "don't ask, don't tell" approach to queerness in religious spaces.

The AIDS epidemic of the 1980s and 1990s intensified both homophobia and silence around sexuality in many Black communities. Cohen (1999) documents how the crisis exposed existing fault lines while also galvanizing new forms of activism and community care. As Hammonds (1997) observes, the emergence of contemporary Black LGBTQ+ movements was significantly shaped by responses to this health crisis, with organizations like the National Coalition of Black Lesbians and Gays gaining prominence through their advocacy work during this period.

Harris (2016) examines how the post-civil rights emergence of Black LGBTQ+ activism challenged conventional frameworks of both Black politics and LGBTQ+ movements, creating new modes of resistance that addressed the

specific location of Black queer subjects. Lorde's (1984) influential writings during this period articulated a Black feminist and lesbian perspective that insisted on the interconnectedness of struggles against racism, sexism, homophobia, and economic exploitation. As Johnson and Henderson (2005) note, these articulations laid crucial groundwork for contemporary intersectional movements while challenging the historical erasure of Black queer experiences from both Black and LGBTQ+ historical narratives.

Intersectionality provides a crucial framework for understanding the complex experiences of individuals who identify as both Black and queer. For Black LGBTQ+ individuals, intersectionality means navigating systems of oppression related to both race and sexuality simultaneously, rather than as separate experiences (Bowleg, 2013; Collins, 2019). As Bowleg (2008) notes, being Black and queer in America involves experiences that cannot be understood by simply adding racism to homophobia but rather represent a distinct lived reality shaped by the interaction of these identities.

Research by Cohen (1999) demonstrates how Black LGBTQ+ individuals often face marginalization within both Black communities and predominantly White LGBTQ+ spaces, creating what Johnson (2008) describes as a "double outsider" status. Moore (2011) further examines how Black LGBTQ+ people navigate this complex terrain by developing strategies that affirm both their racial and sexual identities despite societal pressures to compartmentalize these aspects of their lives. According to Ferguson (2004), intersectionality reveals how race-based and sexuality-based oppressions are not only interconnected but also mutually constitutive, meaning they actively shape and reinforce one another.

Recent scholarship by Bailey and Trudy (2018) introduces the concept of "misogynoir" to specifically address the intersecting oppressions faced by Black queer women, while Snorton (2017) provides historical analysis of how Black and transgender identities have interacted throughout American history, often being erased from mainstream narratives.

### ***The Emergence of Black Queer Studies and New Frameworks***

Black Queer Studies emerged in the late 20th century as a critical interdisciplinary field that challenges conventional understandings of both Blackness and Queerness. E. Patrick Johnson and Mae G. Henderson's groundbreaking anthology "Black Queer Studies" (2005) marked a significant moment in establishing this field, interrogating the heteronormativity within African American studies and the whiteness prevalent in queer theory. This work created space for examining how Black LGBTQ+ individuals navigate multiple margins and centers within academic discourse and daily life.

Roderick Ferguson's "Aberrations in Black" (2004) introduced queer of color critique as a framework that examines how racial, gender, and sexual formations

are interconnected within capitalist systems. Building on this approach, Cathy Cohen's influential essay "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens" (1997) questioned narrow political frameworks based solely on identity, arguing instead for coalition politics centered on shared marginalization rather than fixed identities. Cohen's work critiqued both mainstream gay politics for prioritizing white middle-class concerns and heteronormative Black politics that excluded LGBTQ+ experiences.

Scholars like Dwight McBride (2005) and Marlon Bailey (2013) have further expanded Black Queer Studies by analyzing how pleasure, performance, and community-building operate as forms of resistance. McBride examines representations of Black masculinity and sexuality in literature and popular culture, while Bailey's ethnographic work on ballroom communities documents how Black and Latinx LGBTQ+ people create alternative kinship structures and performance spaces that affirm their identities.

Matt Richardson's "The Queer Limit of Black Memory" (2013) and C. Riley Snorton's "Black on Both Sides" (2017) represent more recent developments in the field, focusing on historical recovery and reimagining archives to uncover Black Queer presence across time. These scholars challenge traditional historical methods that have erased or pathologized Black Queer existence, developing innovative approaches to reading silences and gaps in conventional archives. Together, these works have established Black Queer Studies as a vital field that continues to generate new analytical frameworks for understanding intersecting oppressions and modes of resistance.

### ***Contemporary Black Queer Movements and Institutional Responses***

Recent decades have witnessed the emergence of vibrant Black Queer social movements that respond to both historical erasures and contemporary challenges. Bailey and Mobley (2019) document how the founding of organizations like the National Black Justice Coalition (2003) and MOBILIZE! (2005) created unprecedented institutional support specifically addressing Black LGBTQ+ needs. These organizations operate at the intersection of racial justice and queer liberation, challenging single-issue approaches to activism.

The Black Lives Matter movement, co-founded by Queer Black women including Alicia Garza and Patrisse Cullors, represents a significant shift in mainstream Black political organizing. As Cohen and Jackson (2016) observe, the movement explicitly centers previously marginalized experiences, including those of Black LGBTQ+ individuals, departing from earlier civil rights frameworks that often sidelined queer concerns. Ransby (2018) analyzes how this approach embodies a radical Black feminist tradition that recognizes interconnected systems of oppression.

Educational institutions have demonstrated varying levels of responsiveness. Harper and Gasman (2008) analyze how some Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) have established LGBTQ+ student organizations and in-

clusive policies, while others maintain more conservative approaches. Within public health institutions, Wilson et al. (2016) highlight both progress and persistent gaps in addressing the specific health concerns of Black LGBTQ+ communities, particularly around HIV prevention and transgender healthcare access. These institutional responses reflect broader societal negotiations around intersectional justice that continue to evolve in contemporary America.

### **Recognition of Queer Members**

To understand how the nine BGLOs that comprise the NPHC recognize and acknowledge the contributions and legacies of Black Queer members and address Queer issues, the authors utilized the national websites of each of the nine organizations and the official Instagram profiles of each organization. The authors conducted a content analysis of the national websites to determine if and how the queerness of notable members is acknowledged, while the official Instagram of each organization was analyzed for any acknowledgement of June as Pride Month for the previous three years.

Utilizing the national websites of the nine BGLOs that comprise the NPHC, the authors sought to determine how influential members who identified or were identified as Queer are presented and if their Queerness is recognized by the organization. Not every NPHC national website contained web pages that detailed famous or notable members, but for those that did, the authors selected moments in which queer members were highlighted and discussed how their queerness was or was not addressed on the national website. Omega Psi Phi Fraternity, Inc., Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc., and Phi Beta Sigma Fraternity, Inc. each contained webpages that discussed a notable member that also has identified or was identified as queer during their lifetime. The following section discusses the findings of these pages.

### **Recognition of Queerness of Notable Members**

An article posted on Omega Psi Phi Fraternity, Inc.'s national website mentions Bayard Rustin as a member of the organization and close advisor of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. (Omega Psi Phi, 2025). Discussing his contributions to the Civil Rights Movement, the article does not mention Bayard's Queer identity, only stating, "Despite facing criticism for his background, Rustin's unparalleled expertise in nonviolent tactics and organizing made him indispensable to King's efforts (Omega Psi Phi, 2025, par. 6)." The article makes no mention of Rustin's efforts in the LGBTQ+ Rights Movement and activism for AIDS education (Carbado, 2017; d'Emilio, 2004). While the article only states Rustin's background, it should be noted that Rustin openly identified as gay and received criticism due to his openness about his sexual identity.

Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc.'s official website includes a page with a short biography of each of their founders (Alpha Kappa Alpha, n.d.). The biogra-

phy of Lucy Diggs Slowe discusses her positions as an early officer of the sorority and her career achievements after her educational career. After her academic career, Slowe lived in a home with another woman, Mary Burrill (Schmidt, 2019). Although neither woman openly identified as queer during their lifetimes, modern historians theorize they may have been in a romantic relationship in the early twentieth century, a time when openly same-sex couples were not widely accepted. Historians cite Slowe's refusal to move onto campus despite pressures by Howard University officials and the handing of Slowe's finances and estate by Burrill after Slowe's death as having led to the speculation that the women were in a romantic relationship (Miller & Pruitt-Logan, 2012; Schmidt, 2019). This personal relationship between the two women is not mentioned in Alpha Kappa Alpha's biography of Slowe, despite spousal and relationship history being present in biographies of other founders.

Under the membership section of Phi Beta Sigma Fraternity, Inc.'s official website is a page dedicated to the fraternity's Alain Leroy Locke Honors Chapter (Phi Beta Sigma, n.d.). According to this page, the chapter was established in 2009 and, "recognizes Sigma Men in the collegiate ranks for their high academic excellence and profound service to their university or college campus and surrounding communities (Phi Beta Sigma, n.d., par. 1)." This specific page does not provide a biography of Alain Leroy Locke or a discussion on why the honors chapter is named after him. Locke identified as gay in close circles and among intimate friends but lived this part of his life in semi-privacy, not being out to the general public (Haslett, 2018; Sellers, 2014). Along with the lack of a biography about Locke, there is also no mention of his queerness or of his activism within the Black queer community and issues in the early twentieth-century United States.

### ***Acknowledgement of Queerness Through Social Media***

Due to the small amount of biographical information on BGLOs national websites, the authors searched through each organization's official Instagram page to determine if and how June was recognized as Pride Month by the organization. The authors theorize that recognition of Pride Month would show a level of attentiveness to queer issues by BGLOs. While holidays and commemorations such as Black History Month, Hispanic Heritage Month, Mother's and Father's Day, etc., are recognized by social media posts, the authors were curious to see if Pride Month was also recognized in the same manner. Following the consistency of the website analysis, only the official Instagram pages of the national organization were utilized for this study, meaning local chapters or regional social media accounts were not utilized for this study. Due to the large number of chapters and regions among each NPHC organization, a detailed analysis of chapter and regional social media pages would not be feasible within the confines of this article. The search for Pride Month posts on the official Instagram for each organization was

conducted over a span of the past three years. A summary of the results can be found in Table 2.

A search through NPHC's official Instagram pages showed a disparity in how Pride Month is recognized among the nine organizations. Of the four sororities, each one has made a post recognizing Pride Month at the beginning of June in the previous three years. In contrast, Pride Month posts from fraternities have been nearly non-existent. Three of the five NPHC fraternities have never made a post acknowledging Pride Month in the previous three years. Two fraternities, Phi Beta Sigma Fraternity, Inc. and Iota Phi Theta Fraternity, Inc., have each made one post acknowledging Pride Month. Phi Beta Sigma made a post acknowledging Pride Month in 2022, but not in 2023 or 2024. Iota Phi Theta made a post acknowledging Pride Month in 2024 but had not in 2023 or 2022.

### Discussion

The initial focus of this study was on how BGLO national websites addressed and recognized queerness among notable members. However, insufficient biographical information on these platforms necessitated a methodological shift toward analyzing Pride Month recognition across BGLO national social media platforms. Through systematic review of official Instagram accounts for each National Pan-Hellenic Council organization, distinct patterns emerged between sororities and fraternities. The analysis reveals that all historically Black sororities have consistently acknowledged Pride Month each June since 2022. Conversely, historically Black fraternities demonstrate markedly different engagement patterns, with the majority failing to recognize Pride Month during the study period. Only two fraternities provided exceptions to this trend: Phi Beta Sigma Fraternity, Inc. acknowledged Pride Month in 2022 but ceased recognition in subsequent years, while Iota Phi Theta Fraternity, Inc. acknowledged Pride Month solely in 2024. No other fraternities within the sample acknowledged Pride Month during the examined timeframe.

**Table 2**  
**NPHC Pride Month Post from 2022-2024**

<i>Organizations</i>	<i>Pride Post in 2024?</i>	<i>Pride Post in 2023?</i>	<i>Pride Post in 2022?</i>
Alpha Phi Alpha	No	No	No
Alpha Kappa Alpha	Yes	Yes	Yes
Kappa Alpha Psi	No	No	No
Omega Psi Phi	No	No	No
Delta Sigma Theta	Yes	Yes	Yes
Phi Beta Sigma	No	No	Yes
Zeta Phi Beta	Yes	Yes	Yes
Sigma Gamma Rho	Yes	Yes	Yes
Iota Phi Theta	Yes	No	No

The observed disparity in Pride Month recognition between historically Black fraternities and sororities appears to reflect broader gendered attitudes within Black communities regarding LGBTQ+ advocacy. Data from a 2021 Pew Research study reveals significant gender differences in perspectives on organizational responsibility toward Black LGBTQ+ individuals (Cox, 2023). The survey found that 62% of Black women considered it important for Black equality organizations to address distinct challenges facing Black gay and lesbian individuals, compared to 51% of Black men. Similarly, 61% of Black women endorsed organizational attention to challenges confronting Black transgender individuals, while only 49% of Black men expressed comparable support. These findings [Inference] suggest that the consistent Pride Month acknowledgment among historically Black sororities and the relative absence of such recognition among fraternities may mirror these gendered differences in attitudes toward LGBTQ+ inclusion within Black institutional spaces.

A 2013 study surveyed sorority members at an urban, private research university within the United States (Neumann et al., 2013). While the study did not identify how many, or if any, historically Black sorority members participated, results showed that respondents were largely accepting of members and potential members who identified as lesbian or bisexual and held the belief that same-sex attraction in women was not inconsistent with their sorority's values. Similarly, a 2014 study found a positive correlation between fraternity membership and negative attitudes towards LGBT individuals and issues (Worthen, 2014). Similarly, it is not specified how many, if any, historically Black fraternities have participated in Worthen's study, but the trends identified in that study correlated with the failure to acknowledge Pride Month among historically Black fraternities.

The disparity in Pride Month recognition between historically Black fraternities and sororities aligns with documented national patterns indicating greater acceptance of LGBTQ+ individuals and issues among Black women relative to Black men, and correspondingly, among sorority members compared to fraternity members.

### Conclusion

The unacknowledged legacy of Black Queer-identifying members and silence on Black Queer issues by NPHC organizations through their national websites and Instagram pages is not a unique phenomenon among Black or Black-aligned social and educational organizations and narratives. Black Queer histories and legacies have had a contentious history within the United States. From the denied and erased legacies of Black Queer contributors to the Harlem Renaissance to the exclusion of Black Queer content from The College Board's Advanced Placement African American Studies course, the erasure of Black Queer legacies by NPHC organizations is just one link in a continuous chain (Brugal & Ceballos, 2023; Rice, 2024)

While queer erasure amongst Black spaces has been present in the past and present, a discussion must also be held on how this erasure has the potential to continue into the future. A 2018 critique of the critically acclaimed movie *Black Panther* for the lack of Black Queer representation in its vision of a Pan-African future (Meyer, 2020; Mntungwa, 2022). The exclusion of Queer representation in 2018's *Black Panther* continues this legacy of Queer erasure in Black spaces and cultural institutions.

The authors of this article call upon NPHC organizations to lead the charge in not only acknowledging but fully embracing and celebrating the histories, legacies, and contributions of their past, present, and future Queer members. These organizations should proudly acclaim the contributions of members to Black Queer advancement in the same ways they acclaim members for achievements in other fields of social progression. NPHC organizations have the opportunity to bring awareness to multiple aspects of intersectionality that impact their membership and the Black American and Black diasporic community at large. The authors also call upon NPHC fraternities to begin acknowledging Pride Month on their national platforms, as they also do other important occasions such as Black History Month, Hispanic Heritage Month, and Juneteenth.

While the authors do commend the NPHC sororities for acknowledging Pride Month on a national scale, we also call on them to acknowledge the contributions of queer members and raise awareness and advocate for issues that impact the Black queer community. If not, the sororities can fall into the action of performative allyship by making social media posts but not pushing for true social change (Kutlaca & Radke, 2023). Overall, while NPHC organizations have been agents of change and callers of action for the Black community since their founding in the early twentieth century, they each should progress towards embracing the intersectionality of the Black American and Black diasporic communities in their advocacy and progress from the engrained homophobia and heteronormativity that has been built into their organizations.

The revelation on the absence of acknowledgment of Queer people and issues among NPHC organizations as shown in this study comprises only a small part of a much larger conversation that could not fit in the confines of this article and journal. The authors seek to continue and expand this study in the future, including a phenomenological study on the experiences of queer-identifying members of NPHC organizations and a deeper dive into the historical roots of homophobia and transphobia among NPHC organizations. Scholarship on queerness among NPHC organizations, fraternity and sorority life, and the Black community as a whole is ever growing, and the authors look forward to contributing to this growing field of scholarship and research.

### Addendum

Revisions for this article occurred throughout June of 2025. The authors wanted to acknowledge that on June 1<sup>st</sup>, 2025, all four of the NPHC sororities made posts commemorating Pride Month on their respective official national Instagram pages. On June 28<sup>th</sup>, 2025, Phi Beta Sigma Fraternity, Inc. made a post commemorating Pride Month and specifically stated that this post was made on June 28<sup>th</sup> as an acknowledgment to the anniversary of the Stonewall Riots, which Phi Beta Sigma called, “a pivotal moment in the fight for human dignity (Phi Beta Sigma Fraternity, Inc., 2025, para. 1).” Phi Beta Sigma also stated, “We acknowledge there is still work to be done in these areas, both within our fraternity and the communities we serve ((Phi Beta Sigma Fraternity, Inc., 2025, para. 2).” No other NPHC fraternity made a Pride Month acknowledgment post in 2025.

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***Revolution, Reconstruction, and Reimagined Futures*****Raised on the Porch,  
Rooted in Resistance:  
Black Rural Education in Praxis*****Jamon H. Flowers, Tameka O. Grimes, Amy Price Azano,  
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### Abstract

This manuscript situates Black rural education within a broader struggle against erasure, anti-DEI policies, and persistent deficit framings. Drawing from a “front porch conversation,” we conceptualize the front porch as a site of intergenerational knowledge, resilience, and truth-telling. Using critical pedagogy of place, Black geographies, and rural cultural wealth as theoretical anchors, we examine the intersections of race, place, and education. Our dialogue and analysis highlight the enduring legacies of desegregation, the racial trauma uniquely intensified in rural communities, and the inequitable access confronting Black rural youth. We counter these challenges with narratives of joy, familial strength, and cultural wealth that underscore the vitality of Black rural literacies. Ultimately, this work positions Black rural education not as peripheral, but as central to reimagining equity and justice in U.S. education. We call upon scholars, practitioners, and policymakers to honor and amplify Black rural voices as a blueprint for resistance and hope.

Keywords: Black rural education, rural cultural wealth, critical pedagogy of place

### Why Rural in Black Education

We present this manuscript in the context of a particular moment. The last 100 days of this collaborative work coincides with the first 100 days of the 2025 Trump administration. Since the current president’s second inauguration, we have seen the threats from Project 2025 (Dans & Groves, 2023) come to fruition. Germane to our scholarly work is the dismantling of the US Department of Education (Trump, 2025a) with its related Executive Order (EO; Trump, 2025b) and Dear Colleague letter (US Department of Education, 2025) attempting to excise diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) efforts from public schools and institutions of higher education. In the past two weeks, a new executive order, “Restoring Truth and Sanity to American History” (Trump, 2025c), instructs the Smithsonian Institution, along with its museums, education and research centers, to “remove improper ideology,” specifically naming the National Museum of African American History and Culture (among others) as falsely promoting “narratives that portray American and Western values as inherently harmful and oppressive.” These executive orders refute institutional racism and attempt to whitewash US history (Loewen, 1995), further threatening to silence historically marginalized voices.

A year prior, during Black History Month (February 2024), this group of authors participated in a Black Rural Education webinar, during which Dr. Means noted that anti-DEI is not new, expressing concern that momentum could threaten existing programs supporting Black youth—a concern now taking root at institutions across the country. During the webinar, and here again for the manuscript, we offer insights about why race is an important construct within a rural education context and why rurality offers a unique spatial lens for Black education. In this intersectional space, we address complex topics such as desegregation, mental health

and racial trauma, educational access and opportunity for Black rural youth, and representation of Black leaders. We titled the webinar a “Front Porch Conversation,” hoping to create a sacred space like the actual front porches where many of us in our rural youths learned from our grandparents and other kinfolk. By way of our subjectivities, we expand on our front porch descriptions offered during the webinar.

### ***Our Front Porches***

A rural front porch serves as a symbol of resilience and reflection, a space to celebrate joy, process hardships, and make sense of the world. In developing this work, we conceptualize the front porch as a site for communal learning, of intergenerational knowledge sharing, where voices are invited and heard. In many ways, front porches are the antithesis of formal educational spaces. They are often unplanned and unrehearsed. They require no credentials, scripts, or lesson plans. They are spontaneous, casual, and unhurried. Where schools routinely need explicit support in making spaces inclusive, front porches are naturally (figuratively and literally) open. They are safe spaces for storytelling, passing down lessons and ways of knowing. Importantly, they are places where folks are welcomed with a “Come sit awhile.” The six of us are friends, mentors/mentees, professor/student, and long-standing colleagues in rural education. This is our front porch conversation with each other and with you, the reader—come and sit awhile.

**Flowers** is a Black, cisgender man and an assistant professor at the University of Georgia in Educational Administration and Policy. His research centers on the experiences of Black principals in rural communities. Dr. Flowers’s rural roots begin in North Carolina, which he describes as a “small but wonderful town.” His earliest front porch memory is tied to the voice of his great-grandfather, Mr. Eubart Allen Flowers, who would sit on the front porch after long Pentecostal Sunday services, “Just having conversations about life and things of that nature.” Neighbors would honk as they drove past, and his great-grandfather would raise his hand in greeting—a ritual that felt ordinary and sacred.

**Grimes** is a Black, cisgender woman who serves as an assistant professor of Counselor Education at Wake Forest University. Originally from North Carolina, her introduction to rural education came during her time as a teacher in rural South Louisiana. Dr. Grimes’ research focuses on rural school counseling and the impact of racial trauma on rural students, particularly how expressive arts can be used to facilitate healing in youth affected by such trauma. Her front porch reflection includes a childhood friend who served as an older mentor, helping to shape her appreciation for community-based wisdom.

**Azano** is a White, cisgender woman who serves as professor and directs the Center for Rural Education at Virginia Tech. Acknowledging the historical privilege related to her racial identity and the institutional leverage she has as a univer-

sity administrator, she developed the mission of the Center for Rural Education to address educational and opportunity gaps in rural schools and communities, particularly for learners and educators from historically marginalized populations. An eighth-generation Appalachian, she grew up in Virginia's Shenandoah Valley where front porches were always busy with the comings and goings of neighbors and an expansive collection of aunts and uncles and cousins. She learned there two enduring lessons: to never get too big for your britches and to always remember where you come from.

**Means** is a Black, cisgender man. He is a professor of Educational Leadership at Clemson University. He studies postsecondary education access and opportunity for rural students with a focus on rural Black students. Originally from South Carolina, he was not raised in a rural community but was raised by his grandparents who were pointing to the ways rural culture expands beyond a particular time and place. The front porch of his youth held his grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins in what he describes as his first classroom.

**Williams** is a Black, cisgender woman who is a professor and department chair at Michigan State University's Department of Educational Administration. She describes her start in rural education by sharing, "I came to love or have a passion for rural ed as a child growing up in rural Alabama." Her front porch learnings originated with her paternal grandmother who had a seventh-grade education and lived next door to her growing up. "We would play spades on her front porch on her wrought iron table...and just talk about life and what it meant to exist in that space."

**Alford** is an undergraduate student at Virginia Tech from a rural community in the far Southwest region of Appalachian Virginia. She identifies as "a biracial kid from a rural area" who learned from her mom and family that education is key to creating "change within your community." Her own front porch memories began as a little kid playing with plastic ducks and smoking fake cigarettes with her grandpa on his front porch next to the Clinch River. The most impactful memory, though more recent, was when she sat with a group of the women in her family, talking about what college might look like for her and how the experience would be different from her quiet life in Appalachia.

### Why Black in Rural Education

We situate this work within a conceptual framework informed by a critical pedagogy of place (Gruenewald, 2003), Black geographies (Allen et al., 2019; Howard & Baker, 2024), and rural cultural wealth (Crumb et al., 2023). Seeking to bring together the sociological focus of critical pedagogy with the ecological focus inherent in place-based education, a critical pedagogy of place (Gruenewald, 2003) aims to undergird "the production of educational discourses and practices that

explicitly examine the place-specific nexus between environment, culture, and education” (p. 10). Here, we utilize this framework to argue why rural is more than a geographic container for the experiences of Black learners. A critical pedagogy of place prompts us to ask, “What happened here? What will happen here?” (p. 11).

While a critical pedagogy of place positions physical geographies historically, socially, politically, and culturally, Black geographies focus on spatial knowledge, Black lives and narratives, and a sense of place (Allen et al., 2018). As Howard and Baker (2024) argue, Black geography “critiques traditional forms of geography that perpetuate discourses that equates Blackness with subordination, as ungeographic, and as metaphor” (p. 6). They strengthen the call for extending this work into rural spaces, which often exclude Black bodies and are too often considered white rural spaces; as they summarize, there is “...an assumption of Black (and brown) as ‘urban’ and rural as ‘white’” (p. 11). They posit, “This hegemonic narrative of rural as white is so prevalent that it frequently masks the facts of racial demographics” (p. 6), biases that can disrupt data collection and analyses. For example, in majority-Black rural towns where research designs begin by presuming a minority. We situate this article to respond to their call to employ a Black geographic lens “...to take up the complex convergence of race and space” (p. 12).

Finally, we tie the aforementioned theories to rural cultural wealth (Crumb et al., 2023) as an opportunity to push back on a deficit framing of Black rural education. Extended from Yosso’s (2005) work in identifying social capital (i.e., aspirational, familial, linguistic, resistant, navigational), comprising community cultural wealth as strengths for historically minoritized communities; rural cultural wealth describes how rurality situates these strengths (Crumb et al., 2023). Rural cultural wealth recognizes: (a) rural resourcefulness as community members overcoming socio-contextual adversities (e.g., food and housing challenges) that threaten wellbeing; (b) rural ingenuity as inventiveness—acknowledging a strong tradition of creative problem-solving; (c) rural familism characterized by intergenerational support and living in communities of care; and (d) rural community unity as collective strengths, particularly when communities organize to offer support in times of crisis.

Together, these theoretical threads allow for a complex understanding of Black students in rural schools. A critical pedagogy of place offers an understanding that a “place” is far more than a zip code or geographic container but rather a place where front porches (i.e., who built them, who could enjoy them, where they were allowed to exist) are historied. This notion of history is further embedded into Black geographies, particularly as we consider how knowledge and whose knowledge carries from one generation and one place to the next. As we situate our work in the rural South, it is imperative we consider this interplay between space and race. Finally, our use of cultural wealth adds the dimension of rurality. People make the place and vice versa, and we ask how is it that folks in rural places contend with both race and schooling?

A front porch conversation could of course pick up these hefty and theoretical notions. But, often, they might simply be your Granny telling a tale—family lore about the time “so and so” went to “you know where.” But, if you listen closely, you might just learn why that story has been passed down generation after generation. These theories helped us listen carefully to the front porch conversation we had last year. They allowed us to listen for the spots where place matters, where spaces were or were not equitable, and how rurality intersected, created, or responded to these moments. They allowed us to make sense of the dialogue shared from our webinar-based front porch conversation, while honoring our personal experiences and professional scholarship.

### **Front Porch Learnings: “Say it Louder”**

For this manuscript, we return to the video and a transcript of our dialogue to make sense of the light we hope to shine on Black rural education. Our inductive approach began with each of us watching the recorded webinar, moderated by Alford, and carefully reading through the transcript. Given the aforementioned theories, we left notes in the margin. In responding to Alford’s prompts, many of us noted “relationships” or “mentor” with several, specific notes about grandparents. These notes prompted conversations about familial knowledge; a key aspect of rural cultural wealth, and why that surfaced in the conversation. We noted where the legacy of segregation shed light on issues related to racial trauma. Our emails, shared documents, and Zoom meetings helped us further refine themes that were evident in the conversation and ones we wanted to extend into this manuscript. Here, we organize that analytic process, along with our reflections and what came from our meetings, into thematic takeaways.

### ***Legacy of Desegregation:***

#### ***What Do We Get from Our Past to Take Us Forward?***

What we got from that era was an education where we were not othered and not constantly compared to and discussed against gaps. – Dr. Williams

I think when thinking about history, also making sure that we are figuring out ways to honor and celebrate...rural Black history. – Dr. Means

Particularly when we talk about Black history, we think a lot about the trauma and the deficits. I think what you bring to the table when you think about desegregation and integration, really afford us the opportunity to look at it from a strengths-based perspective. – Dr. Grimes

Who’s educating the next group of teachers? If my colleagues are not aware of the historical pieces (or it’s not important to them), then oftentimes our preservice educators may not get the education that’s needed to even give the correct homage, if you would, to the past. – Dr. Flowers

The scholars here have vast personal experiences and scholarly expertise. While integration came after a long-fought win during the Civil Rights movement, the webinar helped to shed light on a different perspective. Before integration, not only did Black schools hold children in a space of strength, but Black educators were also lifted up in highest regard in the community. As Dr. Williams explained, Black teachers and administrators were demoted after *Brown vs. Board of Education*, and the Black teaching force has not regained the numbers since integration (Tillman, 2004). In rural communities, this meant making the assets and purveyors of place and knowledge of Black community members less visible. In his scholarship on Black leaders, Dr. Flowers advocates for greater representation.

In his own schooling experience, he had just one Black teacher—his 8th grade English/Language Arts teacher, and, perhaps not at all by accident, Dr. Flowers began his career in education as a high school English teacher. As a Black administrator, he had fewer opportunities to find mentors in that space and, through his research, has substantiated the experiences for Black educational leaders who find they must be strategic and savvy, and at times, being very aware of a double consciousness at work (Du Bois, 1903); explaining there's a Black side, a white side, and a rural side to the work.

Reflecting on my own experience growing up in a rural community with only one high school, many of my teachers had also taught my parents, yet throughout my entire schooling I had just one African American teacher.— Dr. Flowers

My first three teachers were Black women. They made me feel that I had everything and that I could compete with anybody in the world and that still sticks with me to this day.— Dr. Williams

As an undergraduate student, Alford offers an important, intergenerational reflection:

Say it louder! I think at this point in my life understanding Black history, we have to understand the past to move to the future while also sitting in the moment and realizing that we are still part of that change that our ancestors created so long ago. I feel this needs to be capitalized today more than ever before because we are seeing the history of people who may not look the same, believe the same, or talk the same being erased on the federal level.

### **Educational Access for Black Rural Youth**

How are we creating humanizing educational spaces for rural Black youth? To me, that means that we're not treating rural Black youth as a problem to be solved, or a burden. We're not viewing their families as a deficit.— Dr. Means

I declined so many undergrad offers from universities because it was too far from my grandmother. I was like, I'm not going over an hour away from my grandmother and my family because that was my comfort. — Dr. Flowers

There are all these barriers to access that still need to be addressed. We are mak-

ing some gains, but we are not there. So, when we think about what does that mean for opportunities and students in these areas who are brilliant, but they don't have the access – that sets them back in ways that has nothing to do with who their families are. – Dr. Williams

And I think if I could advocate for anything in this conversation, it would just be for creating those pathways that would provide resources and support to bring in school counselors who are trained to have these conversations to help open up some of those discussions about opportunity and access. – Dr. Grimes

Black families in rural communities are an asset and not an obstacle to overcome, and Black rural youth have talent and a full range of educational gifts. In conversations about access and opportunity, “We can't get there if we don't start from a place of thinking about the humanity of the youth that we are working with,” explained Dr. Means. We advocate for supporting Black youth from a humanistic and pedagogical perspective and by addressing real discrepancies in access, such as fewer advanced placement courses, fewer experienced teachers, and inequitable infrastructure (e.g., high-speed internet) in the Black Belt region of the US South, along with interconnected economic and health challenges faced by rural Black youth (Owens, 2019).

There are many factors to consider in providing support, access, and opportunity for Black youth from rural communities. Like Dr. Flowers above, Alford understands the tension of leaving for college and wanting to maintain the comforts of family close by. Prior to beginning her journey at Virginia Tech, she participated in the Black College Institute (BCI), a summer program for rising high school seniors interested in social justice. And while it was not designed for rural learners, it was her rural school counselor that introduced her to the program.

It opened the door to me possibly pursuing Virginia Tech. Like when I came here, I understood what it was like to be a person from a rural area. Coming into an institution with so many people, it was intimidating. But with doing BCI and just having those connections here, but also at home, it gave me the opportunity to become the person I am.

Particularly now with the anti-DEI efforts in full bloom, it is critical we work to continue providing support for Black students from rural schools and communities to create greater equity in and access to higher education. Of note, since the original submission of this article, the BCI program has since been closed at Alford's university—evidence of the devastating and far-reaching impact of anti-DEI efforts.

### ***Racial Trauma in Rural Communities***

I think it [rural racial trauma] particularly a delicate situation to navigate because when you talk about trauma, you know that you're already dealing with experiences that have been difficult for people to manage. Understanding racial trauma in a rural context means asking people to talk about things that may be, as we say in the counseling world, retraumatizing. And that's what you don't want to do to folks. – Dr. Grimes

We also know that there's more and more hospitals in rural areas and medical centers in rural areas that are closing. We need to make sure we pay attention to what resources are available to think about our physical health, our mental health in rural communities. – Dr. Means

What we do have in rural areas and what administrators can bank on...is the families of the students because you can learn a wealth of knowledge through conversations with the families and building those partnerships. – Dr. Flowers

Racial trauma, those perceived or experienced instances of racial discrimination, are harmful everywhere, and schools are sites where these experiences are often perpetuated (Saleem et al., 2020). These experiences impact students' ability to be fully present in the classroom due to trauma responses such as anxiety, hypervigilance, and other responses deemed "behavioral issues" (Grimes & Roosma, 2022; Saleem et al., 2022). But in rural areas, especially rural areas where communities are tight-knit and where Black students may be in the minority, there can be a sense of heightened visibility within an interconnected web of relationships that make it difficult for young people to create distance and heal (Grimes & Roosma, 2022). Compounding these experiences are, as Dr. Means notes, a lack of adequate mental health support in rural communities and schools (Grimes et al., 2023). However, as Dr. Flowers reminds us, and the rural cultural wealth framework emphasizes, families are integral stakeholders in helping rural Black students build resilience, as well as advocating for changes within rural educational systems that perpetuate trauma on young Black bodies (Benman, 2022; Crumb et al., 2023). Building partnerships with rural Black families makes space for voices that can bring light to educational spaces and conversations.

### **A Light on the Porch**

In this work, we articulate a sense of urgency in amplifying the experiences of Black rural learners, families, and communities.

#### ***Black Rural Literacies***

Rural literacies (Bass & Azano, 2024; Donehower & Corbett, 2017; Donehower & Green, 2016), draw from a literacy tradition (Gee, 1991) that conceptualizes literacy beyond the acts of reading and writing. Our ways of knowing, of reading the world (Freire & Macedo, 1987), serve as a primary discourse. Our secondary discourses describe the literacies we learn or inherit as we move through space and time. They serve as socially situated identity kits (Gee, 1991) and, for rural folks, rural literacies describe the ways of knowing learned and communicated in rural spaces. In this sense, rural literacies are related to personal and community identities, social capital, schooling, social justice, and sustainability (Corbett & Donehower, 2017). As we employed our own rural literacies in the webinar with an explicit focus on the narratives and experiences of Black communities in rural

spaces, we noted components of joy with a respect for out-of-school learning.

### **Joy**

Nikki Giovanni's famous quote, "Black love is Black wealth," comes from her 1968 poem "Nikki-Rosa," which she begins:

childhood remembrances are always a drag  
if you're Black

The poem explains an insistence to see Black youth in deficit terms:

they never talk about how happy you were to have  
your mother  
all to yourself and  
how good the water felt when you got your bath  
from one of those  
big tubs that folk in Chicago barbeque in

The line "Black love is Black wealth" is *preceded* by the speaker's hope:

and I really hope no white person ever has cause  
to write about me  
because they never understand  
Black love is Black wealth and they'll  
probably talk about my hard childhood  
and never understand that  
all the while I was quite happy

In our reflection, we called on this poem and the poet's insights, noting the importance of considering humor and joy in the scholarship on rural Black education.

### **Valued Learning Spaces**

Front porches were places where we were taught life lessons—lessons about the critical assets and knowledge inherent in our families and communities. In a study exploring rural achievement—"the forgotten 20%"—Johnson and colleagues (2021) used quantitative analyses with a data set including 840,000 students in 8,798 public schools across time to document a significant finding: while rural students begin kindergarten slightly higher than nonrural students in math and reading, they eventually fall behind by middle school largely due to achievement declines during summer break for rural students. The study not only compared rural to nonrural but looked at Black-White achievement gaps in those contexts, finding that the Black-White achievement gap was significantly larger in nonrural schools compared to rural schools.

Related to these gaps, the study found in both rural and nonrural schools, "Black-White achievement gaps in math and reading were sizable at school entry and widened between kindergarten and eighth grade" (np). However, the data

show a seasonal trend with gaps widening during the school year and “narrowing again during the summer.” The authors note other research demonstrating how within-school practices “likely disadvantage Black children” related to teacher expectations and racial bias. While they cite literature pointing to the reasons for the widening achievement gap, they do not speculate about the assets Black youth experience in their communities during the summer, which might explain the narrowing of those gaps.

Rural summers are rich with front porches—literally and metaphorically. “The front porches were places where we were taught life lessons by those with more wisdom than we had,” explained Dr. Grimes, a reality for Black youth often overlooked. “When I think about rural Black education, I often think about my grandparents and the great knowledge and expertise and insights that they bring with them and have passed along to so many people in my family,” offered Dr. Means. Yet, too often for Black youth they experience colonized pedagogies (i.e., the teaching of grammar and “standard” English) that discredits home literacies.

A critical takeaway for thinking about Black rural education is honoring the ways of knowing and communicating, avoiding deficit stances, and welcoming the deep joy evident in these spaces.

### Hope

I think we have a lot to look forward to from young people, particularly rural Black youth in our country. – Dr. Means

The hope for me is in the community and how throughout generations it will continue to sustain itself. – Dr. Williams

Creating spaces for these types of dialogues. We need to hear the counternarratives, especially in the midst of the silencing that is occurring. – Dr. Grimes

I hope rural education and its leaders are no longer sidelined but valued, with voices heard and policies that reflect and improve our communities. – Dr. Flowers

You have to have uncomfortable conversations to have more progressive futures. – Alford

We share our front porch conversation—and our hopes—with a broader audience to center the stories, struggles, and knowledges of rural Black communities. As Dr. Means explained, his porch was an intergenerational, sacred space to learn: “That front porch was one of the first places where I began to learn more about who I am and about life.”

With this, we reiterate an explicit acknowledgment of anti-Blackness and articulate a sense of urgency in amplifying the experiences of Black rural learners, families, and communities. Yet, even as policies attempt to silence these stories, the front porch remains a physical, emotional, and intellectual space, a site of resistance, affirmation, and truth telling.

Our reflections challenge readers to rethink the spatial assumptions of Black-

ness and rurality, to see Black rural education not as peripheral but as central to understanding educational equity in the United States. What happens when we stop locating Black youth only in urban narratives and rural communities only through white experiences? What new insights emerge when we explore the intersection of race, place, and power in forgotten corners of the South and beyond? In a moment when Black histories are being actively erased, our front porch becomes a classroom, a sanctuary, and a site of protest.

This article calls upon scholars, practitioners, and policymakers to recognize Black rural education not as an intersection of margins but as a vibrant field of study and action in its own right. We offer this front porch conversation as both an archive of memory and a blueprint for what is possible when Black rural voices are heard, honored, and centered in the fight for educational justice. Like the recent act of U.S. Senator Cory Booker, who reclaimed the Senate floor with the spirit of civil rights legacy by quoting John Lewis—reminding us that the people still hold power and that there is value in getting into “good trouble.” We, too, see this work as a refusal and an invitation—a refusal to be erased and an invitation to imagine otherwise.

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***Revolution, Reconstruction, and Reimagined Futures*****Starting from Day One:  
Cultivating Black Boy Promise Through  
Social Justice College Access Programming**

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### Abstract

This study explores the experiences of Black boys in a Social Justice College Access Program (SJ-CAP), using an asset-based approach to understand their college-going potential. Findings from the current study showcase the benefits of Black boys' participation in such a program, demonstrating how it fosters college aspiration and readiness as early as the ninth grade. Participation also provided cultural affirmation and empowerment, offering them an opportunity to defy limiting stereotypes imposed by racism, ultimately leading to an increased sense of belonging within educational spaces. This study provides valuable insights into the literature on the challenges and opportunities that Black boys face in their pursuit of higher education, while serving as a beacon of hope for other SJ-CAPs aiming to support Black student success.

### Introduction

*Understanding Black students through resistance alone limits the possibilities of educating, studying, and engaging Black students in a humanizing manner.*

—Antar A. Tichavakunda, 2022

The college-going potential of Black boys is often overshadowed by the challenges they face existing in a racialized society. College opportunities for Black boys are limited by criminalization (Kennedy-Lewi et al, 2016), low expectations from teachers (Kohli & Jackson, 2016), and tracking into remedial courses (Oaks & Saunders, 2008). As a result, Black boys are vastly underrepresented in higher education, and recent trends show a consistent decline in college enrollment amongst Black young men (Fry, 2023). In 2011, among all high school graduates who enrolled in college, Black boys represented 42%; by 2023, the rate had fallen to 37% (Fry, 2023). Yet, studies demonstrate that college aspirations remain high amongst Black boys, while support from K-12 faculty and staff remains limited (Crumb et al, 2021; Strayhorn, 2009).

Fortunately, several college preparatory programs are intentionally designed to support Black boys and mitigate the disproportionate effects of exclusionary educational practices that often characterize urban K–12 schooling contexts (Dupree & Gusman, 2009). College access programs provide additional support, such as academic tutoring and college knowledge, to increase higher education enrollment among underrepresented populations (Howard et al., 2016). Although a great deal of literature detailing college access efforts attests to underrepresented youth (McDonough & Miller, 2016), or even Black students in general (Cormeaux et al, 2020), there is scarce literature noting college access programs that work exclusively with Black boys. Building on emerging scholarship that centers the possibilities and potential of Black boys, this study highlights the perspectives of 32 Black boys who participated in the Day One program, a Social Justice College Access Program (SJ-CAP). Day One was created as a pipeline to Los Angeles Mentoring Program (LAMP), a sister Social Justice College Access Program

(SJ-CAP) that serves Black 11th and 12th-grade students of all genders, after staff observed that few Black boys were applying to the program. Designed for 9th and 10th-grade Black boys, Day One fosters college-going aspirations through a culturally affirming model led by an all-Black staff, a curriculum that centers Blackness, and an emphasis on critical consciousness as a core college readiness outcome (Howard et al., 2016).

These features help to address cultural and racialized barriers and counter deficit accounts of Black boys in contemporary discussions of achievement. As such, the purpose of this study is to investigate the experiences of Black boys involved in Day One in relation to their college preparation. Specifically, we focus on Black boys during their transition into high school, particularly during 9th grade, as their academic performance during this crucial period serves as an indicator of academic persistence, high school graduation, and college matriculation (Noguera, 2013).

The research questions that guide this study are:

1. What are the experiences of Black boys in a social justice college access program (SJ-CAP)?
2. In what ways, if any, do students describe the SJ-CAP supporting Black boys' college potential?

These questions are vital for both understanding the educational experiences of Black boys and implementing effective partnership programs. By focusing on the student experiences in “Day One” as a Social Justice College Access Program (SJ-CAP), we seek to engage in asset-based scholarship on Black boys; one that centers their promise and college-going potential.

## Review of the Literature

### *The Status of Black Boys and College Attainment*

Due to institutional barriers and blatant racism, there are glaring disparities in educational attainment amongst Black boys that have made college-going difficult. For instance, Black boys are vastly underrepresented in indicators connected with academic progress and achievement, such as enrollment in honors and Advanced Placement (AP) courses (Holzman, 2004; Noguera, 2009). They are also disproportionately overrepresented in categories associated with academic failure and school discipline (Hines et al, 2021). As a result, in 2021, only 67% of Black boys graduated from high school across five of the nation's most diverse states, including Michigan, Philadelphia, Maryland, Minneapolis, and California (Reeves & Kalkat, 2023). Additionally, in states like California, where affirmative action has been banned since 1996, 60% of Black high school graduates have not qualified to enroll in local public four-year colleges (Hines et al, 2021; Reddy & Siqueiros, 2021). Furthermore, of the Black students who do enroll in a California State University (CSU) or University of California (UC) campus, less than half

of them are boys/young men (Reddy & Siqueiros, 2021). Even further, due to low faculty representation, racial microaggressions, and other racialized stressors, Black young men also graduate from college at lower rates than any other race (Allen, 2010; U.S. Department of Education, 2020; Reddy & Siqueiros, 2021). Such patterns of hardships have far-reaching consequences, including lower median incomes, higher levels of unemployment, and increased likelihood of being pushed into the criminal justice system (Bowleg et al, 2019; Dancy, 2014; Noguera, 2013; Thomas & Stevenson, 2009). Despite the deficit framing of Black boys' education in the literature, Black boys are entering college proportionally with their national population, largely in part due to college access programs (Kim & Hargrove, 2013).

### ***Higher Education as a National Imperative for Black Boys***

For many K-12 students, obtaining a college degree constitutes having better chances of earning employment and securing higher incomes throughout their careers (Trostel, 2015). While studies assert the majority of 12th graders profess they want to go to college to pursue these ends, far fewer are prepared to go (Bailey & Karp, 2003). Underrepresented students, especially those attending schools in high-poverty communities, are less likely to leave their K-12 education feeling prepared for the rigor of a four-year university (Noguera, 2003). This is especially the case for many Black Americans, who face several obstacle—including academic, social, psychological, physiological, racial, and systemic—when in pursuit of higher education (Gandara & Bial, 2001; Oakes, 2005). While the number of Black students graduating from high school and attending college has consistently increased, they continue to be underrepresented in comparison to other racial groups. Black boys are more likely to attend schools that are under-resourced and have limited access to college preparatory information and rigorous curriculum (Allen, 1992). Further, many Black boys attending under-resourced schools are not eligible to apply to four-year universities and are also not prepared to excel in higher education. For example, 65% of Black students in California graduate without completing the required courses to apply to the University of California and California State University systems (The Campaign for College Opportunity, 2019). Additionally, while two-thirds of California's Black students enter college, only 51% complete college in 6 years.

As mentioned, the intentional SJ-CAP in this study seeks to build equity and foster a college-going culture for 9th-grade Black boys in urban high schools. Previous research documents several other benefits of social justice college access programs, including but not limited to racial identity development, racial socialization (e.g., preparation for bias), academic self-efficacy and agency, critical consciousness, and college-going behavior (Watts, 2003; Howard et al., 2016; Flenbaugh et al., 2018). While there is ample evidence showing several positive

benefits of such programs for Black students, few SJ-CAP engage with Black students at the intersection of the school- university- community, and no studies have examined how student involvement in such programs impacts college academic preparation, transition, and retention for Black boys. Furthermore, existing studies have not documented the programmatic components of SJ-CAP. This research is pertinent for understanding how to scale up these programs in a way that supports implementation fidelity and promotes program sustainability for Black boys. While scaling evidence-based interventions in educational contexts is an ongoing challenge, there is emerging literature about how to scale up programs in the school-university-community context (DeWire et al., 2017). This study helps to push the evidence-based programming field forward to understand the support for Black boys as students, and the various ways universities, communities, schools, districts, teachers, and other key stakeholders can implement and integrate programming related to Black boys' school achievement.

### Conceptual Framework

In college access and readiness scholarship, Students of Color—such as Black boys—are too often framed as lacking the necessary motivation or intellectual capabilities to be labeled as having college potential (Castro, 2021). Research that highlights college access interventions for Black youth often positions students as empty vessels, in need of various forms of capital (i.e., human, cultural, or social) to succeed in higher education (Castro, 2021). Instead, this study draws upon the possibilities framework to reframe inquiry at the intersection of Black boys and college preparation from a deficit to an asset-based perspective. Clark and colleagues (2024) write, “[w]e conceptualize possibilities as a framework that centers the promise and potential of Black youth and identify several dimensions of possibilities as real, tangible, and critical ways that educators can equip and support students in their educational experiences as well as their becoming” (p. 6). The possibilities framework is best suited to frame this study first because it acknowledges and uplifts the potential of Black boys and their ability to do well in college. Day One, as a SJ-CAP for Black boys, saw a critical need in college access interventions that tapped into Black boys' college possibilities in a way that specifically addressed their needs. Day One sought to provide the tools, resources, and college knowledge necessary to enroll and succeed in postsecondary education. Secondly, to best understand the perspectives of Black youth, we then used the possibilities framework to better understand how (if at all) the program supported their college promise.

Clark and colleagues (2024) suggest that Black boys' possibilities are fostered through these seven dimensions: Caring, Dreaming, Belonging, Enjoying, Agency, Protecting, and Affirming. We used the possibilities framework to critically examine how these dimensions are manifested in a SJ-CAP and how Black

boys experience them. Specifically, we highlight how Day One supports Black boys Dreaming, Belonging, and Affirmations. Dreaming is connected to aspirations, curiosity, and imagination (Clark et al, 2024). Black boys are criminalized from a young age; thus, they are rarely allowed to dream or imagine themselves freely without the disruption of racial stereotypes (Dumas & Nelson, 2016). In this study, we highlight how Day One—as described by study participants—helps cultivate college and career aspirations, enabling Black boys to envision themselves as future college students.

Belonging refers to a sense of connection with others, where Black boys are made to feel seen and cared for on an academic, social, and psychological level (Booker, 2006; Brooms, 2017, 2019; Brooms & Wint, 2021; Clark et al, 2024). Academically, Black boys need to feel represented and appreciated within the contours of the classroom, within the curriculum, and by educators to feel a sense of belonging (Clark et al., 2024). Relatedly, belonging socially involves providing access to meaningful relationships with peers and adult institutional agents. Lastly, belonging is also built psychologically—this means that the thoughts, values, and behaviors of Black boys are welcomed and valued (Clark et al, 2024). These concepts are useful in showing how Day One supports Black boys' sense of belonging as college-going youth and future undergraduates. In particular, we show how culturally relevant peer mentorship with Black undergraduates contributes to feelings of belonging.

Lastly, affirming is described as a central tenet of the possibilities framework (Clark et al, 2024). Promoting college potential among Black boys involves creating an environment where students experience celebration, support, and are made to feel valued. Importantly, Black boys' promise is positioned as essential to their becoming. This involves being cognizant of and responding to the sociocultural realities of Black boys. As a SJ-CAP that promotes the development of critical consciousness as a component of college readiness, Day One engages in important conversations surrounding intersecting forms of oppression such as race, class, and gender. Through the affirmation lens, we find that Day One supports Black boys' college possibilities by expanding students' sociopolitical development and cultural affirmation.

### **Data and Methods**

This paper draws on phenomenological qualitative data that was designed to better understand the experiences and perspectives of Black boys previously involved in the Day One SJ-CAP. A phenomenological research design was chosen as it promotes reflection and meaning-making on a shared lived experience, such as participation in Day One (Ravich & Carl, 2019). Using semi-structured focus groups with 32 Black boys, the study sought to examine how (if at all) aspects of the program contributed to their college knowledge and motivation to pursue

higher education. Conducting semi-structured interviews allowed “the researcher to respond to the situation at hand, to the emerging worldview of the respondent, and to new ideas on the topic” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). At the time of the interviews, participants were juniors and seniors in high school, reflecting on their time in Day One as ninth and tenth graders. The data for this study was collected in the Spring of 2021 through the Summer of 2022. In the next section, we provide critical information on the uniqueness of the Day One and the larger umbrella program, LAMP.

### **Context**

LAMP is a partnership between a historically white university and several predominantly minority-serving high schools and community organizations in Los Angeles County. LAMP prepares historically underrepresented students, specifically Black students, to become competitively eligible for admission to flagship universities, and to encourage the pursuit of graduate and professional education, using a social justice framework and holistic approach (Howard et al, 2016). The program was created in response to low Black application and enrollment trends following the passing of Proposition 209, the California anti-affirmative action initiative (Howard et al, 2016). As opposed to other race-evasive approaches to college readiness, LAMP curriculum prioritizes educating students about the historical context of race, class, and gender inequalities in the American education system. Equipped with college access tools and a critical consciousness of injustices within education, LAMP students go on to become change agents and leaders in high school, college, graduate school, and within their career fields (Howard et al, 2016).

Since 2018, LAMP has expanded its programming to allow more dedicated time to serve and support the processes of recruitment, application, retention, and completion of the program for young men of color, particularly Black boys. LAMP leadership designed the new initiative in response to the historically low number of competitively eligible Black boys in the program. In previous years, the participation of Black boys never exceeded 40% of each cohort. For this reason, Day One was created as a high school retention and SJ-CAP designed to tap into the college potential of Black boys in the ninth and tenth grades, or essentially from “Day One” of their high school careers. Those who qualify are encouraged to apply to the LAMP Academy cohort, which provides additional culturally relevant support to high school juniors and seniors, including college courses, campus visits, and peer mentors.

Day One students participate in two years of academic mentoring with an undergraduate student. They also have the opportunity to participate in a one-week summer residential program at a selective university. Students live on campus and engage in workshops that encourage positive academic identities and career exploration.

### **Data**

Study participants were recruited in the Spring of 2022 and Summer of 2023 after having participated in Day One. Since the program is designed to serve Black boys, most participants identified as such. Participants were between the ages of 17 and 18 at the time of the interview. Every year, since 2019, between 25 and 30 Black boys are selected from participating Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) schools to take part in Day One. 32 boys were selected from the 2022 and 2023 cohorts. Their self-selected pseudonyms are Bruce, Giant, Jah, Jerry, Jordan, LR, Mike, Polk, Rock, Tre, Cole, Richard, David, Ross, Jerry, Travis, Shade, C, Jaylen, Bobby, Ron, Steven, George, Jackson, Christian, Turbo, Slim, Bob, Birdman, Kai, Mike, and Tim. Given our sample of all Black boy students, all research team members were recruited and trained in relational interviewing methods. To improve the quality of the interviews, all research team members, except one adult staff member, were previous participants or staff of LAMP. This strategy was intentionally employed given the mission of LAMP and Day One to provide continued mentorship and examples of student success.

### **Analysis**

Using a multi-step thematic analysis, interviews were coded to identify specific themes, patterns, and individual quotes that summarized the key discussion point (Emerson et al, 1995; Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). The research team reviewed interview data through several iterations and compared across domains. Researchers refer to this process as the “constant comparison method” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This method is repeated until the point of saturation, and the data represent its appropriate domains and themes (Ryan & Bernard, 2003; Ayres, 2008). The first step included an initial open coding process to jot down ideas and highlight salient quotes (Saldana, 2021). In the second round of coding, the research team created large concepts within the transcripts. Some of the concepts included excerpts that demonstrated or discussed college knowledge, such as Day One addressing the needs of Black boys and the influence of mentors. The research team then met to discuss the larger concepts emerging from the data. The most salient concepts that emerged were (1) the power of mentorship when representation is a component of college readiness, (2) how Day One created a community of care, and (3) how Day One helped them envision a future life in college. It was at this stage the research team employed Clark and colleagues’ (2024) Black boys’ possibilities as an analytic framework for the final round coding, sing on Dreaming, Belonging, and Affirming.

### **Findings**

This section details the findings and analysis from semi-structured interviews conducted with 32 Black boys depicting their involvement in a social justice-ori-

ented, college readiness program, and their subsequent interest in attending college. Student responses are all analyzed using the possibilities conceptual framework. The possibilities approach offers “a challenge to the ways that Black boys are constructed and arrested through their engagement in educational spaces” (Clark et al, 2024). To understand the most effective structure and support the implementation and sustainability of evidence-based Black boy school achievement programs, researchers analyzed interview data within a larger context that encompasses race, gender, social justice, and equity. Student responses aligned mostly with three of the dimensions within the possibilities framework:

- ◆ Dimension I: Dreaming- In what ways does Day One participation affect Black boys’ college and career aspirations?
- ◆ Dimension II: Belonging- How do Black boys who participate in the Day One program perceive their belonging in the program?
- ◆ Dimension III: Affirming- To what extent does Day One create an affirming educational environment for Black boys?

***Capable from the Jump:  
Dreaming New Futures into Being***

In Day One, Black boys are positioned as having college potential as early as the ninth grade and are prepared as such. According to study participants, the residential program was especially enlightening as they were invited to stay on a college campus for the span of a week, as college students. They attend college and career readiness workshops, engage in social engagements as a cohort of Black boys, and learn alongside other Black high school students (e.g., the sister SJ-CAP program happening at the same time), undergraduates, staff, and faculty. Staying on campus in such an environment provides a sense of “exposure” that Black boys find illuminating. As Slim shared:

I feel like this whole experience has been really good because we got to dorm and stuff, get a little taste of college life and there were people who came and presented and we saw their walks of life and how they do things. And I feel like it was kind of an inspiration and we got a lot of information that we didn’t have before. I liked the classes a lot and I just feel like it was an overall positive experience. I would recommend it to anyone to come.

Slim’s reflection highlights how being physically embedded in a college environment, such as living in the residence halls, attending workshops on campus, and hearing directly from students, staff, and professionals, provided both practical knowledge and inspiration. For Slim and others, this kind of immersive experience allowed them to see college as not just possible, but desirable and within reach. Other Black boys echoed this sentiment, noting how Day One allowed them to envision themselves as future college students by immersing them in campus life. As Mike stated:

My experience with the summer program has been quite good so far because of all the opportunities that are presented, being able to stay in the dorm, college life in general, overall college life, campus work. And I think that could really help me in the future figuring out what college life is.

Mike's reflection underscores how *dreaming* is nurtured through direct experience. The opportunity to live on campus, navigate the environment, and witness college life firsthand allowed him to imagine a future where he belonged in that space. This kind of experiential learning helped participants do more than observe college life; it helped them internalize a belief that they, too, could belong in those spaces. Beyond simply seeing college, Day One made it feel like a community that they too could be a part of. For some, this realization came with a deeper understanding of how limited exposure has historically shaped the futures of Black boys. For example, Cole shared,

They [Day One] want to give people exposure to the next level of education and I guess that just means I should actually try because [pauses] I know people that wish they would've gone to college but they had no exposure and they didn't know how to get there. I won't take it [the program] for granted...I felt like I gained a peace of mind where going into college is not that hard if you stay on top of your stuff, it's not like an impossible thing that you hear people talk about all the time...Probably my biggest takeaway would be I could do it if I really try and if I want to do it.

Many study participants shared a similar sentiment around Day One, exposing Black boys to college life. For many, the exposure sparked a shift in how they imagined their futures, one where they could attend college. As Cole suggests, there is also an awareness that higher education access is limited for Black boys when he states that he knows "people that wish they would've gone to college but they had no exposure and they didn't know how to get there." Shade, another participant, made a comparable comment, stating that "you hear a lot of Black kids are not even exposed to college". But through Day One, Black boys are able to reimagine themselves as college-bound. As Ron shared, "I feel like this program has really said that I'm capable of going to college and that I could go to college." This sentiment reflects the *dreaming* dimension of the possibilities framework, where students begin to see college not as a distant or unattainable ideal, but as part of their lived possibility (Clark et al., 2024).

While Ron's reflection highlights a decisive shift in self-perception, many participants also described how Day One moved them beyond simply imagining college to actively preparing for it. Study participants expressed how Day One encouraged them to envision and plan for a future where higher education was attainable. In particular, the Black boys of this study spoke to the way Day One presented a "path to college" or the career of their dreams. Participants credited Day One as a place where they not only dreamt about college but were given the knowledge and tools to attend a higher education institution. They were giv-

en actionable steps, while also gaining insight into what college life looked like through their peer mentors. For example, Jah shared,

[Day One] definitely helped a lot because in my mind I'm like, "Okay, look, if college is this, then you gotta make it happen." It definitely gave me more of an insight of what it might be like to be in college... When it came to actually talking to people, meeting new people and all that, it kind of helped me just get an idea of how it might be in the real world when it comes to career and stuff like that. And then a lot of the discussions that us kids and the mentors had, we talked about jobs and stuff like that and they gave us some insight and some advice to help us on our path. And I think that definitely helped. It made figuring out what career I want and when I want to be in that career, it made it 10 times easier.

In this quote, Jah attributes a few things about his college aspirations to Day One. He mentioned that he was able to receive "more of an insight" on "what it might be like to be in college." Jah, alongside many of the Day One participants, mentioned that frequently being on a college campus as a part of the program allowed them to visualize themselves in college. As Richard stated, Day One "helps students understand how to be more responsible" and that going to college "is not such a reach, how people say it is". Instead, Black boys are taught "to be more prepared". In this way, Black boys saw college as a real, tangible possibility. Additionally, Jah states that his experience in Day One allowed him to "meet new people." In the program, students meet Black boys from other schools, Black undergraduates who serve as their mentors, and Black graduate students. They are also introduced to Black staff and faculty on a college campus, as well as Black professionals within various fields. The Black boys from Day One were exposed to careers in technology, health, music, and education, to name a few. As Jah explains, this exposure gave him an "idea of how it might be in the real world" with regard to entering the workforce after college. This allowed for the Black boys of this study to envision, or dream of, a college and career path of their own.

Like Jah, other participants emphasized how Day One broadened their understanding of both college and career possibilities through direct exposure to professional spaces and networks. These opportunities extended beyond traditional academic preparation to include immersive experiences that many felt were unavailable in their regular school settings, especially as Black boys. Shade, for example, highlighted the significance of industry visits and the sense of community fostered through the program:

Some things that Day One does that my school doesn't [are] the field trips that we take. For instance at a Microsoft Field trip, that's different. I don't think of my school doing something like that, to go to the headquarters and see what they are doing—to improve the world and stuff.

Shade's reflection illustrates how Day One cultivates *dreaming* by expanding participants' awareness of future career possibilities. Visiting a major company like Microsoft offered more than just a field trip; it exposed students to real-world ap-

plications of innovation and showed them that careers in technology and making a positive societal impact are within reach. For Black boys who often attend under-resourced schools with limited access to such opportunities, these experiences help reframe what is possible.

In addition to expanding exposure to professional industries, Day One also challenged narrow definitions of success often placed on Black boys. According to study participants, learning about alternative pathways other than those traditionally offered to Black boys was also an important component of Day One programming. In this sense, *dreaming* was not just about seeing oneself in college or a specific career, but about imagining a fuller range of possibilities. Take, for example, Polk, who said,

[Day One] gave me knowledge, to be honest. It was fun. It got me focused on colleges. If football doesn't work out, I [know I] have another option. I can go to school, or I'm not only football-based. That's what it also told me. You can still go to colleges with scholarships and stuff—educational scholarships.

In the quote above, Polk described how Day One opened his understanding of his future outside of sports. In particular, he speaks to football as a way to afford college. Polk states that the Day One program gave him the knowledge that he needed to imagine college beyond a football scholarship. Instead, he learns that he can pay for college with academic scholarships. This finding was seen throughout with study participants, as they emphasized the importance of sports in their lives. Many of them spoke about football as their hopeful career and pathway to college. This is consistent with extant literature, which shows that sports are one of the few places where Black boys receive affirmation, visibility, and feelings of belonging within schools (Solomon, 2014). According to study participants, Day One provides similar forms of affirmation and belonging (as evidenced by this and forthcoming findings). Part of that affirmation is understanding that college is attainable, especially outside of the narrow roles society often dictates for them. For example, Mike, a participant of Day One, stated,

I think programs like Day One are important for Black men. The reason is because just seeing people of your same [race], especially with all the stuff you may see on TV and how we're incriminated and how we're shown on public media. I can definitely say that just seeing people who are on the right path and have already made their way, are walking the path of success definitely changes your own views of success. It'll make you want to succeed, which is something that I think we tend to forget that we have the ability to do so. I feel like just having that ability just to see the future will definitely change your outlook on who you are as a person and how your future may be.

In this quote, Mike speaks to the way Day One changed his perception of success. He starts by demonstrating an understanding of racial stereotypes, perpetuated by the media. Many of the Black boys interviewed in this study spoke to the

different ways that racism shaped their lived experiences both inside and outside of the classroom. They knew what they were up against (e.g., low expectations) and found that Day One introduced them to different modes of success outside of sports, for example. In this respect, Day One allowed Mike and many of the other Black boys to dream of a college degree and career path as professionals. As Mike said, Day One made him want to succeed in a way he had not thought about before. It allowed him to dream and imagine how his “future may be” outside of what he already knew or what was expected of him by society. Black boys are often racialized as dangerous deviants within society, a stereotype that extends into schools (Brown et al, 2013). Participants of Day One were cognizant of how they were racialized and subsequently perceived by the public. For many of the Black boys in the study, Day One provided several opportunities to dream of a future outside of the box that racism tries to fit them into.

This finding section highlights how Day One creates space for Black boys to imagine themselves differently. By exposing them to college life, providing access to Black mentors and staff, and a curriculum that centers their racial identity, Black boys begin to dream beyond what society prescribes for them. What emerged from these narratives was not only a shift in aspiration but a deeper recognition of the societal expectations that have historically shaped their educational trajectories. They are not bound to the fates established for them by the constraints of systemic racism but instead encouraged by Day One to imagine their possibilities as endless. If a college degree and career outside of what students know (i.e., athletics and criminalization) is something they aspire to attain, Day One is there to help Black boys explore those possibilities. This is why Day One positions Black boys as “capable from the jump.” Cultivating their ability to dream is foundational to affirming their potential and disrupting the constraints that society places on them.

### ***Belonging Through Brotherhood***

The second finding is related to belonging as a multifaceted, foundational human need that encompasses social, psychological, and academic dimensions (Clark et al., 2024). According to study participants, Day One acted as a transformative site of belonging, where they felt seen, heard, and valued as Black boys (Brooms, 2019). Socially, belonging involves providing opportunities to Black boys to build and benefit from meaningful, positive relationships with adults (e.g., teachers and staff) and peers (Clark et al, 2024). On a social level, one of the most significant sources of support, according to study participants, was the Day One mentors. Each mentor identified as a Black undergraduate student, many of whom had previously participated in the Day One or LAMP program as Black boys themselves in high school. Drawing on these shared experiences, mentors often served as trusted sources of support. Most study participants described experienc-

es where they sought advice or guidance from their mentors. Bruce, for instance, shared that he felt uncomfortable when he first arrived at the Day One summer residential program. He explained that he felt “bad and then awkward” but that when his mentor “talked about how he got through life” that he “really enjoyed” learning more about him. Bruce described going on to share about himself as well, specifically his life and “where [his] priorities lie in terms of college”. As mentor and mentee, they shared their experiences, and then Bruce explained that he had received “a bunch of college advice as well,” recounting the talk as something that was “really helpful and that [he] really enjoyed too”.

Study participants often emphasized the unique way their mentors formed lasting relationships with them in ways that made them feel seen, heard, and cared for. Mentor and mentee relationships went beyond receiving college-related guidance. Instead, mentors are people who care about their feelings, wellness, and needs; They create spaces for vulnerability. Jordan, in particular, shared a tender moment between him and his mentor. He explained,

[Day One mentors] didn't just want to be your mentor. They really wanted to be your friend. They wanted to get to know you. They wanted to get to talk to you, have a connection with you. And then from there they would say, 'I'm not your mentor, but I'm a mentor to you. But before that I'm a friend. So I'm going to help you and guide you. I'm going to do all this, but you can come to me as a friend and talk about anything.' And that's what they did with me, because I was going through a hard time and just was there for me. They're just good people.

For Jordan and many of the other Day One participants they highlighted the importance of having a mentor during the program. The holistic approach that the mentors took in developing relationships with them was integral to their positive experiences. By connecting with the students on an academic, social, and personal level, the mentors were able to meet their needs both in and out of the classroom.

To belong academically, Black boys should feel both connected to and represented within the curriculum. The Day One program is guided by elements of Critical Pedagogy (Duncan-Andrade & Morell, 2008), Social Justice Youth Development (Freire, 1970), Critical Race Theory in Education (Solorzano, 1991), and Sociopolitical Development (Watts et al, 2003). As such, Day One—in addition to providing college related information—engages Black youth in conversations surrounding interlocking systems of oppression (e.g. race, class, gender) and their impact on schooling in the U.S. Over the years, study participants have been asked to analyze pop culture media such as Boondock saints, write a research paper on the school to prison pipeline and conduct an autoethnography on their racialized experiences as Black boys in schools. The classroom, which was predominantly composed of other Black boys, served as a space to discuss issues related to the Black experience. This type of curriculum affirms the intellectual capacity of Black boys by valuing their lived experiences. In classrooms where the identities of Black boys are centered and their stories are embraced, Black

boys experience a deeper sense of belonging (Clark et al, 2024). Jah shared that one of his biggest takeaways from the Day One program was being provided an all Black space to discuss the realities of being Black in America. He said,

Being around African American kids—[talking about] all the things that are mature to the level that I would hope that they would be—was pretty great. Seeing things the same way as some of those kids and some of the conversations we had, I would never expect to have a very deep conversation about politics or racism or anything like that with somebody my age...it was pretty great. [Being able to] shar[e] stories.

Sharing space with other Black boys as well as all Black undergraduate students, staff, and faculty was instrumental to their academic belonging. The classroom became a place for Black boys to have serious and vulnerable conversations in a safe space where others could relate or provide relief and understanding. For Jah, having the opportunity to have deep conversations about racism and politics with peers his age disrupted the expectation that such discourse was out of reach in the classroom. In this way, the program cultivated an academic culture that did not demand assimilation but instead encouraged affirmation, dialogue, and growth. This is critical for academic belonging, which, as Clark et al. (2024) note, is not merely about presence in a classroom but about being intellectually and culturally recognized within it.

For some, the experience of learning alongside only other Black boys created a rare and affirming sense of academic belonging that did not happen in their own schools. Many described it as a “brotherhood.” Ross, for example, said that he “gained a lot from [Day One].” Not only did he “learn how to do math the right way,” but he gained “a lot of brotherhood here [at Day One].” As Giant explained, there “was an emphasis on [building] rapport, [specifically] with your Black brothers...” This created a sense of brotherhood inside and outside of the classroom, something that Cole said “we don’t have that a lot growing up as a Black kid. And even just being around other Black people without feeling judged. Just being able to be yourself around each other.” Cole went on to explain that he thought schools could learn from Day One in terms of “bringing a sense of brotherhood in schools”. In high school, he said, “nobody ever reaches out to each other to see if we did the work,” whereas Day One emphasizes the power of community. Instead of taking an individualistic approach to success, Day One teaches the value of collectivism, a lesson that Cole explained is often missing from schools. He said, “[Day One] gives us a sense of ‘we could do it together’ and makes [succeeding] way easier...” This emphasis on collectivism, rooted in shared identity, mutual accountability, and emotional safety, allowed students to feel supported in their academic growth as Black boys. Academic belonging, as described by Clark and colleagues (2024), is achieved in this case by being surrounded by peers who care for, affirm, and motivate each other.

While the presence of peer support and a sense of brotherhood played a critical role in fostering academic belonging, participants also described how seeing themselves reflected in their instructors deepened that sense of connection. In Day One, Black boys were not only surrounded by affirming peers but also taught by educators who often shared their racial identity and held high expectations for their success. Slim shared,

The teachers were good to start off. I feel like they really related to us and kept it at our wavelength, their personality and stuff. It was just good to experience because you don't really see many Black teachers. So to hang out with teachers of color, it's just a good experience, I feel like.

Slim's reflection illustrates how representation among their Day One teachers contributed to a sense of comfort, relatability, and validation, which are key to developing a sense of academic belonging. Being taught by educators of color who could connect with students "at [their] wavelength" helped bridge the cultural gap often experienced in traditional school settings. For many participants, this was a rare and meaningful experience that affirmed both their identities and their intellectual capabilities. As noted by Clark et al. (2024), academic belonging involves not only being present in learning spaces but also being respected, understood, and challenged within them. In Day One, the presence of racially representative educators fostered an environment where Black boys felt seen and supported, and where high expectations were paired with cultural affirmation. David, for example, shared that he had "always been good at math and always picked it up fast," but that he "did the work without knowing what [he] was actually doing."

Mr. Carter [was] giving me a reason or explaining what I was doing [in a math problem]—I've been good at [math] for so long [but] him telling me what I've been doing this whole time and going into detail why the things I've been doing is giving me the right answer and why what I'm doing is the right way to do it was interesting to me. It made me just feel like—I am awake now. I unlocked something that I didn't know...Now I can even progress further in math.

David's story demonstrates how Day One teachers not only positioned Black boys as capable but also guided students toward a deep understanding in the classroom. Before Day One, David said he was good at math, but did not truly understand the reasoning behind the specific strategies used to solve problems. With Mr. Carter's pedagogy, David felt "awake." He had "unlocked" something, which suggests a moment of intellectual empowerment that transitioned him from procedural performance to conceptual mastery. Travis shared a similar sentiment, explaining that he also learned the most in math. When asked why he felt so strongly about this particular Day One class, he said because "[t]he teacher will teach you the real reason why it is like this and why it happens, which I thought was pretty helpful." Tre also shared that Mr. Carter helped him to "look at things

from a different angle”, specifically to “not just see math as numbers” that needed to be solved “but actually practically using them.”

These reflections reveal how Day One fostered academic belonging not simply through representation, but through meaningful, student-centered instruction that affirmed Black boys’ intellectual potential. Participants consistently pointed to the ways teachers like Mr. Carter broke down complex material, explained underlying concepts, and made learning feel relevant to their lives. This type of instruction positioned Black boys as thinkers and problem solvers. It validated their capacity to master rigorous content when taught in ways that were clear, purposeful, and connected to their ways of knowing and learning. Academic belonging, then, was cultivated through both relationship and rigor. As Clark et al. (2024) suggest, students feel a sense of belonging when they are seen, challenged, and respected within the learning environment. On Day One, learning was not passive; it was a communal and affirming process where Black boys could ask questions, engage deeply, and begin to see themselves as capable of academic excellence.

While instructional quality and representation influenced how Black boys experienced academic belonging, participants also discussed the more profound, internal shifts that occurred as a result of feeling seen and supported in the Day One environment. These shifts reflect what Clark et al. (2024) describe as psychological belonging, which involves the extent to which students’ thoughts, beliefs, and behaviors reflect a sense of mattering and self-assurance in educational spaces. For many, Day One provided a space where they not only learned but felt empowered to express themselves, take academic risks, and grow in their confidence. Mike, for instance, reflected on how different Day One felt compared to his high school classrooms. He said,

One thing definitely in [Day One] that I didn’t get the chance to do in my own high school is that... I was able to share a lot more and just talk a lot more, because I felt comfortable in the environment. Sometimes [in] my high school classes... I didn’t share as much or participate as much. I kind of just limited my own participation, which definitely hindered the confidence in myself. I feel like [Day One] definitely gave me that confidence when [I] participated that I do know this or I can do this, compared to sitting there and like, and maybe a high school Zoom class...

In his reflection, Mike spoke about how his participation in Day One empowered him to have confidence in himself. He shared “[Day One] definitely gave me that confidence that when [I] participated that I do know this or I can do this.” Day One participants are invited to engage in a curriculum that centers the lived experiences of Black boys and draws from their funds of knowledge. Thus, they feel more connected to the content and well-positioned to contribute to the space. Through critical pedagogy, Black boys are empowered to use their voices, and this newfound confidence follows them into the world they inhabit (Giroux, 2007).

Day One participants also spoke to the uniqueness of the Day One communi-

ty and space in contrast to their high schools. Black boys within Day One build a community with other Black program participants, undergraduate students, faculty, and mentors. Study participants spoke to the importance of cultural representation in educational spaces. For example, LR shared,

When a school is representing your culture, you feel a sense of pride within yourself. You feel like, "I'm in a community where people love me, where they care for me, and where they have respect for me." When you're not in [a] space like that, you feel secluded and you feel lonely, [and] different. And it's not bad to be different or to sometimes be alone, but you shouldn't feel like that all throughout your high school...

In the above excerpt, LR shared how cultural representation contributed to an increased sense of belonging. On the contrary, without this representation, Black boys feel as LR stated, "secluded... lonely, [and] different." This finding was consistent with the existing sense of belonging literature (Brooms, 2019) and other Day One participants' experiences. Day One participants also identify mentorship as an important aspect of the program. Specifically, how the mentors shared similar experiences and backgrounds that helped shift Day One participants' perspectives on college. For example, Mike shared,

[Day One] definitely enlightened me... about college because after having mentors going through the same experience or having been through the same experience, just knowing that college is not this huge, unknown battleground I'm going to be walking into. But receiving information that may just enlighten my knowledge about what I'm going to be going into... has definitely improved my whole outlook on college as a whole.

Like other participants, Mike was able to relate to the undergraduate mentors in Day One, many of whom graduated from their high school or neighboring schools. This proved to be valuable for the mentees because they were able to envision a similar future for themselves and feel like they belong in college. The Day One environment increased Black boys' sense of belonging and motivated them to do well in school so that they could return:

It's a great environment to be in and I know that of course with school, everything's not going to be the same way it was in that program, but I just know that their program is almost like a [sanctuary] or like a place that I can go back to if I'm able to keep up my grades and just stay consistent.

Mike's point about keeping his grades up is important and an essential part of the program's effort to consistently engage participants. Throughout the academic year, participants remain in contact with their mentors at their schools and attend the 'Saturday Academy' once a quarter to continue receiving support from the program.

Taken together, these narratives demonstrate that Day One fosters a profound sense of belonging by addressing the social, academic, psychological, and

communal needs of Black boys. From peer and mentor relationships to culturally responsive pedagogy and classrooms that validate lived experiences, Day One constructs an environment where Black boys are not only seen but are also supported, challenged, and affirmed. Participants described feeling more confident, more engaged, and more connected to both content and community. As Clark et al. (2024), Booker (2006), and Brooms (2019) remind us, belonging is not a passive state but an active, relational process shaped by opportunity structures, cultural affirmation, and meaningful connection.

### ***Education Through Affirmation***

Educational spaces can serve as sites of possibility or peril for Black boys. The atmosphere of these spaces are often determining factors of student success or such peril. When Black boys have a positive perception of school climate, they are more likely to succeed academically (Kwong & Davis, 2015). Day One creates an affirming environment through race-conscious college knowledge, culturally relevant peer mentorship, and daily interactions. Clark and colleagues (2024) contend “an affirming environment acknowledges and celebrates [Black boys] lived realities, including the sociocultural contexts of their lives.” Similar to many Day One participants, Mike spoke about the support he received from the program:

Just know that ... the [Day One] program, in general, will definitely allow you the opportunity to just be you and just be a kid, be a teen. It's okay to have struggles or it's okay to run into failures, but just know that in that environment, they're always going to pick you back up and make you continue to walk forward.

In the quote above, Mike talks about how Day One provides participants with an opportunity to exist and receive unconditional support on their journey of becoming. Historically and presently, Black boys have been robbed of their boyhood and are often presumed to be adults (Carey, 2020) and criminalized as such. Through this criminalization, Black boys can infer that their lives do not matter (Carey, 2020). Carey (2020) posits “when Black boys and young men matter comprehensively, they will be fully seen as human, sentient beings, whose value will reside in their mere existence, and their humanistic flourishing within that existence, instead of through ways that cultural and social forces orient them to matter in certain, fragmented and predictable ways.” Day One humanizes Black boys and affirms that their existence matters. Through this model, Day One participants are taught to affirm their peers and understand that they are a part of something greater than themselves:

Then, also checking in [with] my peers and friends to see how they're holding up because it's not just about me. It's about everyone as a whole checking in on them, if they're doing good, bad, [and] try to boost their self[-esteem] up.

Day One participants spoke candidly and consistently about the value of community in their lives and academic pursuits. This value is constantly affirmed

by the Day One program – participants are educated and empowered to become change agents in their communities:

Well, since I was more prepared and they prepared me well, the only thing I can do is just prepare other people. So I can go back and teach the youth or whatever, tell them what I learned and what they need to do to get there (to college).

Like many Day One participants, Jordan shared his desire to share the knowledge gained from his participation in the program. Other participants echoed this sentiment, emphasizing the importance of pouring back into their communities. One student, LR shared:

My goal as a young Black male is to grow my [community] and educate them and uplift them, so the generation after me has a better opportunity at freedom and making a successful living than the generation before me.

This spirit of collective responsibility, demonstrated by LR, reflects one of Day One's core values of group accountability—which encourages participants to not only support one another but also hold each other accountable. As LR shared, his goal is to ensure “the generation after me has a better opportunity at freedom and making a successful living...” This act of knowledge sharing helps build navigational capital within their communities. (Yosso, 2005) Through program participation, individuals are empowered to overcome isolation within education and work collaboratively toward a common goal. Similarly, participation in Day One helped build participants' social capital (Yosso, 2005) by instilling a ‘lift as we climb’ mindset. Yosso (2005) describes this form of capital as “networks of people and community resources.” As a result of their positive experiences, program participants are motivated to encourage others to apply and reap the benefits as well. Take Jerry, for example, who was introduced to the program by a sibling who previously participated in the program:

Yeah, so I first learned about LAMP from my older brother, Evan. I think he went there either 2016 or 2017, I think. And so after he went through the program, he actually went to UCLA at that time. So after he went there, I forgot about it, and he was like, “Oh, it's a very good program, you could learn a lot from it.

Jerry's reflection illustrates the positive impact on students' academic trajectories, emphasizing the supportive pipeline the program creates. Much like many other participants, Jerry benefited from having someone in his network who had previously gone through the program and was able to speak of its advantages with him. This encouragement was instrumental in his decision to participate. Day One participants often share their experiences with their peers, helping to spread awareness of the program and providing others with valuable access to it, which can ultimately lead to college. This network—referred to as a “family” by LAMP staff—affirms that students are not alone in their pursuit of higher education. Day One fosters a sense of belonging while providing students with the necessary

knowledge, skills, and tools to be successful in college and beyond. Day One is more than just a program; it is an intentional, supportive system designed to help students build the confidence and resilience necessary to be successful.

### Discussion

The insights gained from this study's findings not only shed light on the transformative impact of Day One but also extend implications to other SJ-CAPs. This program serves as a pivotal intervention that not only encourages Black boys' dreams of higher education but also equips them with the necessary tools, knowledge, and support to be able to turn those dreams into tangible realities. The study reveals that, early in their high school journeys, Day One empowers Black boys to discover their college potential. Through the provision of actionable steps and insights into college life through peer mentors, the program allows participants like Jah to envision themselves in a college setting. This early exposure plays an integral role in demystifying the college experience.

Furthermore, the Day One program introduces Black boys to a variety of career paths beyond the traditional narratives often associated with them. Polk's experience highlights how the program broadens their understanding of future possibilities, going beyond sports as the primary avenue to college. The emphasis on educational scholarships as an alternative pathway illustrates the program's commitment to expanding the horizons of Black boys and challenging limiting stereotypes. Positive representation emerges as a cornerstone of Day One's impact, resonating with Mike's reflection on the importance of seeing people of his own race on the path to success. The program serves as a catalyst for shifting perspectives on success, instilling confidence, and inspiring Black boys to envision futures beyond societal expectations. It acts as a counterforce to racialized stereotypes, offering a transformative space where success is redefined and attainable, contributing to a broader societal shift in perceptions of Black boys' capabilities.

In summary, this study's findings offer valuable insights that align with and significantly contribute to existing literature on the challenges and opportunities Black boys encounter in their pursuit of higher education. Day One's multifaceted approach, encompassing early college awareness, mentorship, cultural representation, and community-building, provides a comprehensive model for addressing the complex dynamics associated with Black boys' educational trajectories. This model can be a beacon of potential for similar programs aiming to uplift and empower students from marginalized communities. As we continue to strive for equity in education, the Day One program exemplifies a proactive approach to reshaping the narratives of Black boys, challenging systemic barriers, and fostering pathways to success in higher education and beyond.

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## *Taboo: The Journal of Culture and Education* Guidelines for Authors

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### Vision

*Taboo: The Journal of Culture and Education* is an academic forum for the transdisciplinary study of the critical pedagogical implications and relationships within education. *Taboo* was founded on the notion of radical contextualization, encouraging students and scholars to draw from a variety of theoretical and methodological perspectives to question current approaches in schools, systems, and in higher education. Drawing upon a variety of contextualizing disciplines and critical theoretical ways of knowing including cultural studies, curriculum theorizing, critical race theory, political economy, feminist studies, the social foundations of education, critical pedagogy, interculturalism, queer theory, historiography, symbolic interactionism, literary theory, as examples. Beyond simply articulating critical perspectives we seek contributions willing to speak the unspoken and/or the irreconcilable. We hope to foster discussions across and through different disciplines including explorations into how dialogue and discourse operate throughout and within different educational times/spaces/places. The journal encourages a wide range of contributions from who work within these general areas, expanding methodological practices. *Taboo* seeks provocative and controversial submissions.

### Journal Issues

**Thematic Issues:** *Taboo* was first published in 1995 and in 2025, we will celebrate its 30<sup>th</sup> year. To lead up to that milestone, *Taboo* will produce thematic issues until 2025. This unique model will invite multiple editors to spearhead each issue. Assisted by *Taboo's* editorial collective and assistants, each issue will be a *deep dive* within a theme. To suggest a thematic issue please send the name(s) and affiliations of the proposed issue, the topic/theme of the issue, a draft of the call for manuscripts, a tentative timeline, and CVs of the guest editor(s). Editors must ensure that all articles in the special issue go through a blind-peer review process. Editors will be asked to submit final manuscripts with peer reviews to the editors on the negotiated deadline. The entire special issues or specific manuscripts of the special issue may also go through an additional peer-review and/or editorial review process with *Taboo* prior to publication. Authors can expect to receive a decision in one month. Upon approval of the issue, one of the *Taboo* editors will be assigned to work with the thematic issue team.

**Articles and Essays:** *Taboo* accepts *traditional* academic articles as well as differently conceived submissions. We invite thoughtful, provocative, and well-researched articles, we also encourage authors to play with form and content. Articles will go through a double-blind peer-review process. Articles should be from 3000-7000 words (including references).

**Diatribes:** *Taboo* accepts opinion pieces. Diatribes are designed to be thoughtful and passionate pieces that utilize research in a provocative manner. They will go through a double-blind peer-review process and should be between 1000-1500 words.

**Submitting a Thematic Issue Proposal:**

*We are now actively looking for submissions for these issues*

1. Send a cover-letter with your manuscript and address the following items:
  - a. Issue Editor(s) email, addresses, affiliations
  - b. Proposed thematic issue and short description.
  - c. Justification for issue theme and how it links to *Taboo*'s vision
  - d. Indicate desired month and year of proposed issue
  - e. Indicate the research will comply with the rules and regulations of the ethics review board of your lead editors' institution (if appropriate)
  - f. Indicate that the articles for the issue will be written specifically for the issue
  - g. Submissions for *Taboo* thematic issues should be sent to:  
SubmissionstoTaboo@gmail.com

**Preparation for *Taboo***

Style: *Taboo* publishes articles that adhere to the guidelines of the *American Psychological Association (7<sup>th</sup> edition)*. However, articles from other style guides may be used for single articles.

**Acceptance:** Before publication of the issue, author(s) of each article will be asked to transfer copyright of the article to *Taboo: The Journal of Culture and Education*. The transfer will ensure the widest possible dissemination of information. *Taboo* has an acceptance rate of 15%.

*Taboo: The Journal of Culture and Education* is published electronically by Caddo Gap Press. The annual subscription rate for individuals is \$50 US and for institutions is \$100 US; for addresses outside the United States add \$30 per year. Single issues are available for \$30 each. Subscriptions orders should be addressed and payable to Caddo Gap Press, 3145 Geary Boulevard PMB 275, San Francisco, California 94118, USA.

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# Taboo

## The Journal of Culture and Education

*Taboo: The Journal of Culture and Education* is an academic forum featuring the critical theoretical and pedagogical constructs that focus on the relationship between education and its sociocultural context. Grounded on the notion of “radical contextualization,” *Taboo* presents compelling and controversial pieces from a wide range of contributors.

*Taboo* began as a publication of Peter Lang Publishing, with two issues published each year in 1995, 1996, and 1997. *Taboo* has since been acquired by Caddo Gap Press, which renewed publication of the journal with the Spring-Summer 2000 issue.

*Taboo* is published quarterly in electronic format and posted to the journal’s website. For those wishing to receive the PDFs of each issue the annual subscription rate is \$50 for individuals and \$100 for institutions and libraries. Issues are sent via email or mailed in PDF format on disk. For those who read the journal on the website Caddo Gap Press encourages contributions to assist with the costs of publication.

### Taboo Subscription Form

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