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Against the Dark: Antiblackness in Education Policy and Discourse

I argue that analyses of racial(ised) discourse and policy processes in education must grapple with cultural disregard for and disgust with blackness. This article explains how a theorization of antiblackness allows one to more precisely identify and respond to racism in education discourse and in the formation and implementation of education policy. I contend that deeply embedded within racialized policy discourses is not merely a concern about disproportionality or

inequality, but also a concern with the bodies of Black people, the signification of (their) Blackness, and the threat posed by the Black to the educational well-being of other students. Using school (de)segregation as an example, I demonstrate how policy discourse is informed by antiblackness, and consider what an awareness of antiblackness means for educational policy and practice.

A RECENT ISSUE of *National Geographic* celebrated “the changing face of America” in which “race is no longer so Black and white” (Funderman, 2013). Featuring portraits of men, women, and children of multiracial heritage, the story points to the year 2060, when the US Census Bureau estimates that white people will no longer be the majority of the nation’s

population. These images, then, represent an imagined—and ideal(ized)—future, in which Americans are so mixed that race becomes meaningless, or at least, more fluid. “If we can’t slot people into familiar categories,” the accompanying article explained, “perhaps we’ll be forced to reconsider existing definitions of race and identity, presumptions about who is us and who is them” (Funderburg, 2013). If these portraits represent the “us,” then the United States will be a country completely rid of dark-skinned Black people: Most of the 25 people featured are light in complexion and not one is darker than the proverbial brown paper bag (Kerr, 2006). In this nation that has ostensibly advanced beyond Black and white, it is the Black that becomes anachronistic, an impediment to the

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realization of Americans' national-popular imagination of who "we" want to be. Even as the nation (and indeed, the world) embraces a certain kind of multiculturalism, people strain against the dark (Gordon, 1997, 2000; Kelley, 2002; Sexton, 2008, 2010; Wilderson, 2010).

In this context, Black youth, families, and communities struggle to make sense of what are widely regarded in Black cultural spaces as cases of (anti-)Black suffering and death: the killings of Oscar Grant and, more recently, Trayvon Martin, Eric Garner, John Crawford, Mike Brown, and Akai Gurley; Marlene Pinnock, the 51-year-old Black grandmother, punched repeatedly in the face by a white California Highway Patrol officer; Jordan Davis, age 17, sitting in the back seat of a car with a group of friends, shot dead by a white man who believed they were playing rap (that is, Black) music too loud; Renisha McBride, age 19, shot and killed through a locked door by a white homeowner who said he feared for his life. In schools across the nation, recent stories attest to this anti-Black social imagination: A teacher in Illinois repeatedly referred to two Black students as "nigger," even after they asked him not to (Malm, 2014). In Florida, school officials warned a young Black girl that she needed to either straighten or cut off her naturally curly hair, or face expulsion (Munzenrieder, 2013). And in New York, a school principal called Black teachers "gorillas" and derided their "big lips" and "nappy hair" (Klein, 2013).

Although most educational researchers and practitioners would acknowledge all of these stories as lamentable examples of racism or (multi)cultural insensitivity (or in more critical scholarship, as the enactment of white supremacy), thus far there has been little theorizing in education on the specificity of anti-Black racism, or what I contend is the broader terrain of antiblackness. Intellectual inquiry on antiblackness, which is mostly situated in comparative literature, philosophy, performance studies, and cultural studies, insists that Black humanity is, as Frank Wilderson asserted, "a paradigmatic impossibility" because to be Black is to be "the very antithesis of a Human subject" (2010, p. 9). Antiblackness scholarship, so necessarily motiv-

ated by the question of Black suffering, interrogates the psychic and material assault on Black flesh, the constant surveillance and mutilation and murder of Black people (Alexander, 1994; Tillet, 2012). It also grapples with the position of the Black person as socially dead—that is denied humanity and thus ineligible for full citizenship and regard within the polity (Patterson, 1982). And in all the theorizing on antiblackness, there is a concern with what it means to have one's very existence as Black constructed as *problem*—for white people, for the public (good), for the nation-state, and even as a problem for (the celebration of) racial difference (Gordon, 1997, 2000; Melamed, 2011).

Inspired by this theoretical work on antiblackness, I argue here that any incisive analyses of racial(ized) discourse and policy processes in education must grapple with cultural disregard for and disgust with blackness. I aim to explain how a theorization of antiblackness allows one to more precisely identify and respond to racism in education discourse and in the formation and implementation of education policy. Briefly, I contend that deeply and inextricably embedded within racialized policy discourses is not merely a general and generalizable concern about disproportionality or inequality, but also, fundamentally and quite specifically, a concern with the bodies of Black people, the signification of (their) blackness, and the threat posed by the Black to the educational well-being of other students.

I begin with an, albeit brief, discussion of the scholarship on antiblackness, highlighting a number of themes and commitments in this interdisciplinary body of work. Then, using school (de)segregation as an example, I demonstrate how policy discourse is informed by antiblackness, and conclude with some brief discussion of what an awareness of antiblackness means for educational practice, and for the survival and well-being of the Black children and communities we serve.

First, a brief explanation: In my work, I have decided to capitalize *Black* when referencing Black people, organizations, and cultural products. Here, *Black* is understood as a self-determined name of a racialized social group that shares a specific set of histories, cultural

processes, and imagined and performed kinships. *Black* is a synonym (however imperfect) of *African American* and replaces previous terms like *Negro* and *Colored*, which were also eventually capitalized, after years of struggle against media that resisted recognition of Black people as an actual political group within civil society (Tharps, 2014, November 18). *White* is not capitalized in my work because it is nothing but a social construct, and does not describe a group with a sense of common experiences or kinship outside of acts of colonization and terror. Thus, *white* is employed almost solely as a negation of others—it is, as David Roediger (1994) insisted, nothing but false and oppressive. Thus, although *European* or *French* are rightly capitalized, I see no reason to capitalize *white*. Similarly, I write *blackness* and *antiblackness* in lower-case, because they refer not to Black people per se, but to a social construction of racial meaning, much as whiteness does. Finally, I sometimes reference *the Black*, which refers to the presence of Black bodies, or more precisely, the imagination of the significance of Black bodies in a certain place. As such, it could be written in lower case, to the extent that I am referring to the social construction of blackness. However, I choose to use uppercase to signify that what is being imagined here is the material Black body.

Theorizing Antiblackness

Antiblackness is the central concern and proposition within an intellectual project known as *Afro-pessimism*.¹ Afro-pessimism theorizes that Black people exist in a structurally antagonistic relationship with humanity. That is, the very technologies and imaginations that allow a social recognition of the humanness of others systematically exclude this possibility for the Black. The Black cannot be human, is not simply an *Other* but is *other* than human. Thus, antiblackness does not signify a mere racial conflict that might be resolved through organized political struggle and appeals to the state and to the citizenry for redress. Instead, antiblackness

marks an irreconcilability between the Black and any sense of social or cultural regard. The aim of theorizing antiblackness is not to offer solutions to racial inequality, but to come to a deeper understanding of the Black condition within a context of utter contempt for, and acceptance of violence against the Black.

Afro-pessimist scholars contend that the Black is socially and culturally positioned as *slave*, dispossessed of human agency, desire, and freedom. This is not meant to suggest that Black people are currently enslaved (by whites or by law), but that slavery marks the ontological position of Black people. Slavery is how Black existence is imagined and enacted upon, and how non-Black people—and particularly whites—assert their own right to freedom, and right to the consumption, destruction, and/or simple dismissal of the Black. “Through chattel slavery,” Frank Wilderson (2010) argued,

the world gave birth and coherence to both its joys of domesticity and to its struggles of political discontent; and with these joys and struggles the Human was born, but not before it murdered the Black, forging a symbiosis between the political ontology of Humanity and the social death of Blacks. (pp. 20–21)

This “social death” of the slave is introduced most explicitly in the work of Orlando Patterson (1982), who detailed how slavery involves a parasitic relationship between slave owner and slave, such that the freedom of the slave owner is only secured and understood in relation to power over the slave. For Patterson, slavery is “the permanent, violent domination of natively alienated and generally dishonored persons” (p. 13). Although slavery involves personal relationships between groups, it also operates as an institutionalized system, maintained through social processes that make it impossible for the Slave to live, to be regarded as alive for her- or himself in the social world.

This focus on slavery might seem anachronistic in the current historical moment, some 150 years after the (formal) end of the institution in the United States. However, Wilderson

maintained that the relations of power have not changed. He explained:

Nothing remotely approaching claims successfully made on the state has come to pass. In other words, the election of a Black president aside, police brutality, mass incarceration, segregated and substandard schools and housing, astronomical rates of HIV infection, and the threat of being turned away en masse at the polls still constitute the lived experience of Black life. (p. 10)

This lived experience serves as a continual reinscribing of the nonhumanness of the Black, a legitimization of the very antiblackness that has motivated centuries of violence against Black bodies. In this sense, even as slavery is no longer official state policy and practice, the slave endures in the social imagination, and also in the everyday suffering experienced by Black people.

As Saidiya Hartman (2007) insisted, Americans are living in what she described as “the afterlife of slavery:”

Black lives are still imperiled and devalued by a racial calculus and a political arithmetic that were entrenched centuries ago. This is the afterlife of slavery—skewed life chances, limited access to health and education, premature death, incarceration, and impoverishment. I, too, am the afterlife of slavery. (p. 6)

Importantly here, the afterlife of slavery is not only an historical moment, but deeply impressed upon Black flesh, in the embodiment of the Black person as slave. Thus, Hartman maintained, she is also this afterlife of slavery.

Salamishah Tillet (2012) made clear the heaviness of the historical memory, the ever-presence of slavery in Black life:

Because racial exclusion has become part and parcel of African American political identity since slavery, it cannot simply be willed or wished away. This protracted experience of disillusionment, mourning, and yearning is in fact the basis of African American civic

estrangement. Its lingering is not just a haunting of the past but is also a reminder of the present-day racial inequities that keep African American citizens in an indeterminate, unassimilable state as a racialized ‘Other.’ While the affect of racial melancholia was bred in the dyad of slavery and democracy, it persists because of the paradox of legal citizenship and civic estrangement. (p. 9)

To the extent that there is ample evidence of the civic estrangement of Black people—their exclusion from the public sphere—one can theorize that the Black is still socially positioned as the slave, as difficult as it may be to use this frame to understand contemporary “race relations.” Here, “race relations” is necessarily in quotations because there is really no relation to be had between master and slave in the way one might conceptualize human relationships. For Afro-pessimists, the Black is not only misrecognized, but unrecognizable as human, and therefore there is no social or political relationship to be fostered or restored. As Wilderson argued,

Our analysis cannot be approached through the rubric of gains or reversals in struggles with the state and civil society, not unless and until the interlocutor first explains how the Slave is of the world. The onus is not on one who posits the Master/Slave dichotomy but on the one who argues there is a distinction between Slaveness and Blackness. How, when, and where did such a split occur? (p. 11)

And this is the broader challenge posed by a theory of antiblackness: There is no clear historical moment in which there was a break between slavery and acknowledgement of Black citizenship and Human-ness; nor is there any indication of a clear disruption of the technologies of violence—that is, the institutional structures and social processes—that maintain Black subjugation. Thus, Afro-pessimists suggest that one must consider the Black as (still) incapable of asking for (civil or human) rights. This does not deny the long legacy of Black racial struggle, but it positions this struggle as an impossibility, because the Black is (still)

imagined outside of the citizenship that allows claims for redress to be regarded as legitimate, or even logical.

Part of the challenge in theorizing blackness in contemporary race discourse is that Americans are living in an officially antiracist society, in which, as Jodi Melamed has documented, post-World War II racial liberalism and neoliberalism make some space for the participation of multicultural subjects (Melamed, 2011). That is, even as race continues to structure capitalism, which in turn facilitates white accumulation, the official stance of the state is against racism; blatantly racist laws and government practices have been declared illegal, and the market embraces outreach to a wide multicultural range of consumers. In this context, there is a rush to celebrate the social and economic advancement of select Black individuals and, perhaps more significantly, the success of other groups of people of color. In fact, it is the social and cultural inclusion of non-Black people of color that is often offered as evidence of the end of racial animus and racial barriers in the society. Therefore, the failure of large swaths of the Black population is purported to be a result of cultural deficits within the Black. The slave, always suspected of being lazy and shiftless, now must bear primary responsibility for not making it in a society, which—officially, anyway—thrives on multiracial harmony and civic participation.

Jared Sexton (2008, 2010) contended that in this era, multiracialism thrives largely at the expense of, and firmly against, blackness. His argument rests on the premise that the color line is more fluid during periods in which Black freedom is thought to be most contained. Thus, during slavery in the United States, multiracial communities could serve as “buffer classes between whites and blacks” which often “corroborated and collaborated with antiblackness” (Sexton, 2008, p. 12). The current period is marked by similar dynamics, with little organized Black political movement, resegregation of neighborhoods and schools, and, in fact, an easy deterritorialization and gentrification of historic Black urban homeplaces. The current Black Lives Matter movement (Garza, 2014), which has

emerged in the wake of so many cases of anti-Black violence, may yet shift Americans into a period of heightened anxiety about Black bodies, but Sexton’s description of the current period is valid: There is little fear of Black bodies and, arguably, an emboldened antipathy to the Black overall. This, in Sexton’s theorizing, opens up new spaces for multiracial inclusion. In this moment, the Black–white divide is seen as less consequential and not as much the result of white attitudes and behaviors. In these moments, Sexton maintained, the more significant boundary is the one constructed “between blackness and *everything else*” (2008, p. 13). And this is a boundary seemingly constructed and maintained by recalcitrant Black people against multiracialism, and more to the point, multiracial progress.

Multiracialism, in Sexton’s view, “premises its contribution to knowledge, culture and politics upon an evacuation of the historical richness, intellectual intensity, cultural expansiveness, and political complexity of Black experience, including, perhaps especially, its indelible terrors” (2008, p. 15). Transcending the *Black-white binary*, multiracialism ostensibly moves people past the narrowness and anachronism of blackness and toward a more profitable global economy and more sophisticated cultural milieu. Embracing non-Black bodies of color thus facilitates, and is facilitated by, antiblackness, and can be justified as antiracist precisely because it is inclusive of more than white.

“The [B]lack body,” Lewis Gordon contended, “is confronted by the situation of its absence” (1997, p. 73). This absence—this social death or afterlife of/as the slave—positions Black people as the embodiment of *problem*, a *thing* rather than a people suffering from problems created by antiblackness. Part of the aim of Afropessimist scholarship is to insist on the humanity of Black people. “Those of us who seek to understand [B]lack people,” Gordon concluded, need to “bear in mind that [B]lack people are human beings” (p. 78). In an anti-Black world, this is easier said than done. In the end, there may be, as Wilderson suggested, no “roadmap to freedom so extensive it would free us from the epistemic air we breathe” (2010, p. 338). Even so,

like Gordon, Wilderson suggested that theorizing antiblackness is important simply as an existential and political recognition of Black humanity, as a means “to say we *must* be free of air, while admitting to knowing no other source of breath” (p. 338; italics in original).

Education Policy as a Site of Antiracism

What does it mean to suggest that education policy is a site of antiracism? Fundamentally, it is an acknowledgment of the long history of Black struggle for educational opportunity, which is to say a struggle against what has always been (and continues to be) a struggle against specific anti-Black ideologies, discourses, representations, (mal)distribution of material resources, and physical and psychic assaults on Black bodies in schools. During the years of state-sanctioned slavery, white slaveowners would often beat their Black property for attempting to learn to read; for Black people in bondage, learning to read was understood not only as a pathway to economic mobility, but, perhaps more importantly, as assertion of their own humanity, a resistance to being propertied (Anderson, 1988; Dumas, 2010). A century later, Black children faced down snarling, spitting mobs of white parents and elected officials who were incensed that their own white children would have to sit next to Black children, and fearful that their white education would be sullied by the presence of the Black. And this, then, is the essence of antiracism in education policy: the Black is constructed as always already problem—as nonhuman; inherently uneducable, or at very least, unworthy of education; and, even in a multiracial society, always a threat to what Sexton (2008, p. 13) described as “everything else.”

School desegregation is perhaps the most prominent education policy of the past century in which Black people have been positioned as problem. Racial desegregation of schools in the United States has been made necessary due to generations of state-supported residential segregation, a form of “American apartheid” (Massey

& Denton, 1993) in which government housing policies allowed whites to accumulate land (and, therefore, wealth) at the expense of Black people (Dumas, 2015; Roithmayr, 2014). Residential segregation was rationalized as a necessary means to avoid *race mixing*—the presence of Black people particularly, but other people of color as well, was seen as a detriment to the quality of life and economic stability to which white people were entitled as a result of their skin color. A similar narrative emerged as whites organized in opposition to school integration; anti-Black racism was at least one primary cause of white flight from school districts that were ordered to desegregate (Kohn, 1996). In many cities, whites went to great lengths to create districts or school-assignment plans that concentrated whites in the most heavily resourced schools, and relegated Black children to underfunded schools with less experienced teachers and crumbling physical infrastructures (Dumas, 2011, 2014; Horsford, Sampson & Forletta, 2013).

In short, school desegregation policy was precipitated by antiracism. However, school desegregation researchers are more likely to frame their analyses through the lenses of access and diversity, emphasizing the educational benefits of cross-cultural interaction and the importance of providing more equitable allocation of educational resources (Orfield & Eaton, 1996; Orfield & Lee, 2004; Wells, 1995; Wells, Duran, & White, 2008). In contrast, theorizing antiracism in school desegregation policy shifts the focus to interrogation of policies that led to the displacement of Black educators and the destruction of school communities that affirmed Black humanity (Tillman, 2004). Antiracism allows one to capture the depths of suffering of Black children and educators in predominantly white schools, and connect this contemporary trauma to the *longue durée* of slavery from bondage to its afterlife in desegregating (and now resegregating) schools. And taking Sexton’s (2008) analysis of multiracialism into account leads to a more nuanced and careful critique of how schools pit the academic success of (some) Asian American students against and

above the academic difficulties of Black students. Here, schools can be celebrated as diverse despite the absence of Black students in the building and/or in the higher academic tracks. Ultimately, the slave has no place in the most privileged and highly-regarded school spaces; the Black becomes a kind of educational anachronism, not quite suited for our idealized multicultural learning community.

Education Practice and the Possibility of Black Life

W. E. B. DuBois, writing about integration of schools in 1935, argued that segregated schools were still needed due to the “growing animosity of the whites” (p. 328). White public opinion, he explained, was overwhelmingly opposed to establishing racially integrated schools. In such a context, he believed, it was impossible for Black children to receive “a proper education,” which, in his view, included “sympathetic touch between teacher and pupil” and the teaching of knowledge about Black history and culture as a group, as citizens. One can read DuBois as seeking an education for Black people that creates spaces to disrupt the exclusion of the Black from the cultural and political regard extended to those who are presumed Human.

Most educators would like to believe that modern Americans live in a different time than DuBois—that the animosity of whites against Black people has declined, or is no longer the norm, especially among well-intentioned educators who profess to care about all children and who are likely to have been educated in colleges of education with expressed commitments to equity and diversity. The scholarship on anti-blackness insists that the very imagination of all children was never intended to include the Black, and that the Black becomes antagonistically positioned in relation to diversity visions and goals. It is the Black that is feared, despised, (socially) dead.

But how is any of this helpful? First, as Wilderson (2010) suggested, it is important for educators to acknowledge that antiblackness

infects educators’ work in schools, and serves as a form of (everyday) violence against Black children and their families. This acknowledgment is different from a broad stance against intolerance or racism, or an admission of the existence of white privilege. Teachers, administrators, and district leaders should create opportunities to engage in honest and very specific conversations about Black bodies, blackness, and Black historical memories in and of the school and local community. They all might explore together what it means to educate a group of people who were never meant to be educated and, in fact, were never meant to be, to exist as humans.

More systemically, educators might begin to imagine an education policy discourse and processes of policy implementation that take antiblackness for granted. Thus, any racial disparity in education should be assumed to be facilitated, or at least exacerbated, by disdain and disregard for the Black. Differences in academic achievement; frequency and severity of school discipline; rate of neighborhood school closures; fundraising capacity of PTAs; access to arts, music, and unstructured playtime—these are all sites of antiblackness. That is to say, these are all policies in which the Black is positioned on the bottom, and as much as one might wring one’s hands about it all, and pursue various interventions, radical improvements are impossible without a broader, radical shift in the racial order. This is perhaps, however fittingly, a pessimistic view of education policy. However, its possibility is in fomenting a new politics, a new practice of education, committed to Black—and therefore human—emancipation.

Note

1. Not all scholars who theorize antiblackness or engage with Afro-pessimist ideas identify as Afro-pessimists. In this article, I highlight scholars who identify as Afro-pessimists and scholars whose work informs Afro-pessimist theorization of antiblackness. In short, it should be understood that there is no singular theory of antiblackness and, as such, no list of tenets or principles that

might be said to unify all those who intellectually wrestle with antiblackness.

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Additional Resources

1. Baldwin, J. (1963/1998). A talk to teachers. Collected essays (pp. 678–686). New York, NY: Penguin Putnam.

In this classic essay, originally published in 1963, the acclaimed novelist and human rights activist James Baldwin explains the social suffering of Black children in U.S. society, and how that impacts their experience of schooling. He advises teachers to be honest about antiblackness (although he does not use that word), and to help students understand the importance of struggling against the forces that continue to conspire against Black freedom.

2. The Black/Land Project website (<http://www.blacklandproject.org>)

The Black/Land Project is an independent oral narrative project which collects stories of Black people's relationships to land and place, in the interest not of preserving Black history (keeping it in the past), but instead, imagining and enacting Black futurity. Educators might explore pedagogical possibilities of local oral narrative projects with

Black children and their families, as a way to push back against the anti-Black impulse of marginalizing and erasing Black bodies in schools and communities. Narratives of school segregation, desegregation and resegregation by race and class might also inform conversations about school-level policies and practices that contribute to or aim to resist antiblackness.

3. The Incognegro website (<http://www.incognegro.com>)

The Incognegro website is a collection of reflections, interviews and other resources related to Frank Wilderson III's pioneering scholarship and thought on Afro-Pessimism, which posits that blackness exists in an antagonistic relationship with the social world. Educators can gain a richer sense of some of the pedagogical and political objectives of analysis of antiblackness, and consider the possibilities and challenges of acknowledging antiblackness in their own classrooms and in their advocacy of Black students and communities.

