

Humanizing Education in the Fight  
for Black Lives

—

Conversation Sower Guide

# Background

---

## HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

At the Center for Humanizing Education Research (C-HER) we believe critical reflection can spur a reimagining and transformation of education toward one that is humanizing and healing. The Covid-19 pandemic and 2020 Uprisings rapidly uncovered the festering wounds of hyper-capitalism in a society built on the suffering of Black bodies. For too long, the designers of our school policies have ensured Black communities are under resourced, rigorously tested, and swiftly punished. Without serious interventions toward justice, schools will continue to bloom violence through inequity and turn Black babies to bodies to be consumed by capitalism.

We strive to provide tangible interventions by leaning into the discomfort of all of the ways we, as people within institutions, perpetuate anti-Blackness. In a world with so much harm, our hope is to atone through research that gives practitioners tools to create justice in the everyday moments we are gifted with as we exist within the material constraints of schools, organizations, and other institutions that serve young people. And still, we commit to the continued uncovering of the wounds of hyper-capitalism, and to building environments where we can reflect on our roles, re-learn, re-imagine, and re-create education spaces in the fight for Black lives. We hope this facilitator's guide serves as a tool for you as you deconstruct your own identity and relationship to schooling, and collectively reconstruct a dream for Black freedom, justice, and liberation.

Before facilitating with your colleagues, please take the time to carefully read this guide and get a solid understanding of anti-Blackness. These materials require deep reflection, and as such, may be difficult. Only you and a trusted group of co-conspirators can truly discern the political climate of your school, organization, or other institution, and the individual racial identity development of folk on your team. With that in mind, read through the recommended texts to ensure you are aware of your own cultural identity, racialized history, and the impact this has on your interruption of or participation in anti-Blackness. If your institution is not familiar with restorative or transformative justice, we recommend you begin with the elements of circle to establish some community building before embarking on this journey. To build of the collective knowledge of our communities, after facilitation, let us know what you [think](#). We invite you to surrender to the unknown of this dark portal— maybe darkness is exactly what we need in this moment, maybe lightness was only a creation of anti-Black racism, maybe everything we know is based on a violent untruth, and maybe the darkness is our only hope.

**Scope and Sequence.** If possible, we recommend you hold these conversations with at least two individuals, ideally, you will find ways to compensate a Black staff member to lead and an accomplice to engage in the more difficult one-on-one interventions. The suggested circle process creates space for community members to identify shared values and offers time for conversation sowers to understand their learners to anticipate conflict areas. When you begin to define anti-Blackness, always pause to consider the safety of Black and other POC, never allow blatant bigotry to go unspoken for, this will harm group dynamics and reinforce anti-Blackness and the prioritizing of white comfort over Black harm. There will be mistakes, if you are a non-Black conversation sower, apologize in action, tangible offerings that make our lives easier: grocery cards, favorite food orders, real support. Your colleagues might need more time to process the definition of anti-Blackness, take time to ensure all non-Black folk are committed to understand what they will never understand. We invite you to move from defining to describing and finally dismantling. This is an educator's meditation on Black feminism and afropessimism—an imperfect attempt to bridge theory and practice—an abolitionist vision of a world where our youth enjoy the boundlessness of childhood imagination and are celebrated, rather than criminalized for their brilliance. A route that does not end in social death and performative policy change. A place where Black children are safe enough to live beyond statistics. Where Black people can heal from generational trauma and grow old, sitting in rocking chairs, watching the leaves dance to catch the sun.

- 1) Build in Circle
- 2) Define Anti-Blackness
- 3) Describe Anti-Blackness
- 4) Create Space for Abolition

# Build in Circle

---

## OBJECTIVE

Participants will be able to practice the elements of circle to uncover **values** and build **relationships**.

## CEREMONIAL ELEMENTS

- **Centerpiece:** The centerpiece is for people to focus their eyes on as the group engages in deep conversation about anti-Blackness. While the elements of a centerpiece are ultimately up to the taste and instincts of the **circle keeper(s)**, consider including pictures of the ancestors, victims of state violence and/or pictures of heroes, respectively. Anytime pictures are used, be sure to include diverse intersectional identities. Participants can also contribute to the centerpiece and bring items they think are appropriate, including quotes, books, pictures, artifacts, and anything that relates to the conversation.
- **Talking piece:** Traditionally, a talking piece gives a group permission to talk; in our practice, it gives us permission to *listen*. Too often, we wait and prepare what we want to say when others are talking rather than genuinely listening. Circle is a space where we engage in the uncomfortable practice of sitting in our bodies and *listening to understand* — not to be understood.

## CIRCLE KEEPER(S) INSTRUCTIONS

*Introduce and explain the **talking piece**. Remember this is an item of importance to the circle keeper(s) and/or an item that relates to the subject of the conversation.*

*If you choose to use a **centerpiece**, also explain these elements. Even if you choose not to use a centerpiece you, always have tissue readily available.*

## ADDITIONAL PRACTICES TO CONSIDER

**Opening, Introduction & Framing.** The circle keeper(s) provide context for the circle. This can be done with quotes, poems, passages, a short story of a personal connection, etc. Here you create a safe container for future dialogue.

**Icebreaker.** The circle keeper(s) offer a reflection question that opens up the space and allows everyone to share. Think about the number of times you've sat in circle together, the amount of time you have, and the energy of the space. For example, if the group is new, it is important to choose a check-in question that makes people feel comfortable and/or safe (*Ex. What did you want to be when you were a young person?, If you could have any superpower, what would it be?*) However, if the group has been together for some time and/or is limited for time, a nonverbal or one-word check-in may be more helpful. (*Ex. Fist of five: How do you feel on a scale of one to five?* Community shakes out their hand and shares; everyone takes an opportunity to observe how folks are feeling.) Follow your intuition.

**Values.** Because we live in a violent society, many of our interpersonal conflicts are defined by our values and how we move in them. In circle, we begin with and return to our values to ensure we are able to gain a deep understanding of each other's individual beliefs—why and how each person walks in their values, and more importantly, how are we pushing ourselves to walk more truly in these values together. When it is our first time together as a group, we often use the sentence stem, "*What value do you have in yourself, that you are strong in, that you can bring to our village to co-parent our baby?*" Then each community member says, "*I give our baby X because...YZ.*" Afterward, community members are able to agree or ask open-ended questions about a value in order to more clearly define them as a group.

**Dialogue.** As people engaged in long-term systems-change work, you motivate your audiences and stakeholders to take action and change behavior through the stories you share. Stories have the unique ability to help people overcome fear, create empathy, and to act upon newfound beliefs. As people of the global majority, our families' histories, values, morals and traditions are passed down through story. Unfortunately, this cultural gift is stripped from us in a society that values time and technology over genuine human connection. Thus, we must practice telling stories in a safe space where vulnerability is encouraged, and self-reflection is celebrated...

- **Set Norms.** Some groups decide to set very specific norms to reinforce the agreed upon shared values (see Values).
- **Get Creative.** Integrate art, games, readings etc. into the circle process to provide a safe container for community learning.

**(Dialogue cont'd)**...This allows us to more deeply walk in our values and authentically show up as our full selves, as we fight systems and keep the self-degrading effects of imposter syndrome at bay. As youth workers fighting systems, circle provides a space to define our social, personal, and political self in a community where we are accountable to ourselves and others. For this reason, dialogue often includes two questions, one for each side of an inner/inter/intrapersonal conflict. For example:

- 1) Tell a story about a time you were harmed...2) Tell a story about a time you caused harm...
- 1) Tell a story about a time you felt misunderstood...2) Tell a story about a time you misunderstood someone...
- 1) Tell a story about a time you supported someone...2) Tell a story about a time someone supported you...

*Note: The most difficult role of the **circle keeper(s)** is to listen to both stories and find the language to summarize and connect our stories. Reflect on common themes, words used repeatedly, and acknowledge vulnerability, etc. Depending on the subject, folx might need a quick shakeout afterwards (see Get Creative).*

**Closing.** Ideally, and especially if it's the group's first time in circle, the circle keeper(s) want to have enough time at the end where everyone can share how they feel. As this may be a new process for folx, this allows you to understand other people's experiences with and in the space, note feedback and make adjustments for your next time together. Appreciations, celebrations, one-word feelings, and quote reflections are all appropriate for the closing. Again, follow your instincts, you want something that leaves folx feeling complete when you close.

# Define Anti-Blackness

---

## OBJECTIVE

Participants will be able to define anti-Blackness.

## PRE-READING

- o Dumas, M. J. (2016). Against the dark: Antiracism in education policy and discourse. *Theory Into Practice*, 55(1), 11-19. (see appendix)
- o kihana miraya ross, Opinion: [Call It What It Is: Anti-Blackness, when people are killed by the police, "racism" isn't the right word.](#)

## ADDITIONAL PRACTICES TO CONSIDER

Note: *It is best to have two facilitators because when folks begin to push back during norms, the second facilitator can pull them aside to check-in, have a conversation, and explain deeper. Be conscious of intersectional dynamics (i.e. your school may not have conversations on Queerness, misogynoir etc.) in the language you use and hold pre-conversations with any individuals who might struggle with concepts before going into the learning space.*

## INSTRUCTIONS

**Icebreaker.** *Where does discomfort show up in your body?*

- o Give individuals a few examples: knot in the throat, heart beats out of your chest, then allow 3-5 minutes to process before sharing out.
- o Connect to today's objective: all meaningful change happens outside of our comfort zones, spaces traditionally prioritize the comfort of white bodies, and here we must center the safety and comfort of those most impacted. To do that, we need to be keenly aware of our comfort levels. What is a stomach pain in one person is high blood pressure for a Black person, your commitment to discomfort is a commitment to always center the needs and safety of Black folks.

**Define Values.** *Think of a value you are strongest in; how can you bring that forward to have a radically honest conversation?*

### Recommended Values to Surface

- Authenticity: code-switch free zone (individuals are disproportionately impacted by state violence, the pressure to perform professionally is exhausting we need an authentic space),
- Compassion: empathy in action, empathy is understanding what you can never understand and still striving to understand
- Accountability: individuals take action to shift behaviors and policies where possible.

**Set Norms.** *What norms do we need to move into this learning space?*

### Recommended Norms to Surface

- Move up, move back: if you are a person with more privilege, take the opportunity to move back in this conversation
- Center the voices of Black womxn, Black trans folks, Indigenous voices, QTPOC voices.
- Embrace the discomfort: This will be uncomfortable, and it is necessary for our young people.

**Individual share.** *What is anti-Blackness? Pull a quote from the reading that struck you.*

**Question & Answer** as a group:

If all suffering in the Black community is symptomatic of social death and continued enslavement, in what ways do we see this in our own personal lives? How are we socialized to perpetuate anti-Black racism?

## HOMWORK

Non-Black individuals are invited to grapple with this definition and marinate on the multiple sites of violence they've witnessed. Black individuals are encouraged to take space and time to heal and invited to communicate their needs.

**Facilitator read** a definition of anti-Blackness:

"The foundations and structures of the world we live in are inherently anti-Black; it is not only individuals and old-fashioned racists that perpetuate anti-Blackness. Thus, to maintain and reform the systems around us is to uphold whiteness, and to uphold or positively identify with whiteness will always be anti-Black."

—Afropessimism

**Question & Answer** as a group:

1. If school as institutions are inherently designed to be anti-Black, how do students resist this oppression? In what ways does your school reinforce or reimagine these sites as opportunities for just interventions?
2. At our school anti-Blackness looks like \_\_\_\_\_.

# Describe Anti-Blackness

## OBJECTIVE

Participants will be able to describe the systemic nature of anti-Blackness, identify anti-Blackness in institutional practices, and locate the interpersonal interactions through which they interrupt and/or participate in and perpetuate anti-Blackness.

## PRE-READING

- [National Equity Project: Lens of Systemic Oppression](#) (this link is not perfect and does not encompass the depths of anti-Blackness, it provides a system model to identify the mechanics that produce anti-Blackness)
- Vignettes from “Progressive Dystopia”-Savannah Shange (see appendix)
- [Humanizing Education in the Fight for Black Lives](#)

## ADDITIONAL PRACTICES TO CONSIDER

Note: We suggest taking time to meet into affinity groups for non-Black folx to process and Black folx to define needs and safety. Always give the option for Black folx to step away from space. Allow individuals to vote on continuing whole group or in affinity groups.

## HOMEWORK & NEXT STEPS

- Non-Black individuals should be invited to marinate on the multiple sites of anti-Black violence. Black individuals should be encouraged to take space and time to heal and communicate their needs.
- Have individuals email facilitator(s) a picture of their trees.
- Place all trees in google slides.

## INSTRUCTIONS

**Icebreaker.** *When you were young, what did you say you wanted “to be” when you “grew up?”*

Note: Share how understanding anti-Blackness is about allowing our students to reach self-actualization. It’s important we remember our dreams from when we were younger, our ability to live in those dreams, and our ability to provide multiple opportunities for our students to dream beyond society’s manufactured models.

## Review previously defined **values** and **norms**.

- **Describe** the systemic nature of anti-Blackness, identify anti-blackness in institutional practices and locate the interpersonal interactions through which they perpetuate anti-blackness.
- **Review** values definitions from the previous sessions. In the opening reflection question, have individuals re-share their closing response from last week and their thoughts since coming to understand schools as sites of institutional harm?

**Activity.** *This exercise was adapted from an activity in preparation to visit the [National Memorial for Peace and Justice](#). It is the only memorial dedicated to enslaved individuals terrorized by lynching. To deepen our understanding of how we benefit from and perpetuate anti-Blackness and social death, we use the metaphor of a Slave State’s Forest. We must figure out how to provide the existing trees nutrients while prepping the soil with seeds to grow new trees.*

## Explain the metaphor

Here, the **trees** that make up a forest are symbolic of the structural and systemic violence’s that create the conditions for anti-Blackness to thrive and for the continued social death of Black folx. (see Individual Tree Reflection Example)

- the **roots** are the systemic values and beliefs that uphold anti-Blackness.
- the **trunk** signifies the structures – how do these values affect behavior, accumulate, and interact across institutions historically (NAEP)
- the **limbs** are institutions – how do institutions uphold this violence in policy and practice?
- the **fruit** are the interpersonal interactions and community beliefs. (ex. It’s a student’s choice to “participate in their education,” fighting with a student over a hoodie, suspending a student with an IEP before assessing support systems, calling the police to classrooms over disruptive behavior, students “need to know” white canonical texts,” following the curriculum, “they’re too “traumatized” to learn.)

Note: Share how all of these thoughts, beliefs and individual practices grow the strange fruit of anti-Blackness and anti-Black racism and contribute to the continuation of slavery in this country and globally. Black death is deeply woven into the fabric of our being.

**Individual Tree Reflection** (30 min). Folx are prompted to individually create a tree. The facilitator provides the option for a breakout room where folx can ask follow-up questions as they work toward drawing a tree.

Note: Participants will not share out trees today. While this seems slow, it's important for you as a facilitator to protect all individuals from harm and discern whether breakout groups are more appropriate for the follow up conversation than whole group share. Have individuals email a picture of their trees.

**Close.** *This is a heavy activity and a necessary metaphor for our work, every time we perpetuate anti-Blackness we contribute to Black death. While uncomfortable this is about living in our values. Final Question: What value do you want to grow within yourself to do this work?*

# Individual Tree Reflection: Example

---



# Create Space for Abolition

## OBJECTIVE

Participants will be able to build commitments around addressing anti-Blackness in their schools, organizations or youth serving institutions.

**Essential Question:** How do we follow our passions to create justice for our Black students and their communities within the state, against the state, and beyond the state?

## PRE-READING

- o [Humanizing Education in the Fight for Black Lives: Lessons from the Field](#)

## ADDITIONAL PRACTICES TO CONSIDER

Note: Choose whether to breakout into affinity groups or to remain in the whole group for the gallery walk.

When sharing, identifying and categorizing needs, be sure to prioritize voices that are too-often pushed to the margins of society first. How we treat our Black colleagues is indicative of how we see our students. Do we listen and make space for their voices? All individuals should be striving to move back and center new voices.

## INSTRUCTIONS

**Icebreaker.** *In ten-word story form, why do you do the work that you do?*

Note: Share how understanding anti-Blackness is about allowing our students to reach self-actualization. It's important we remember our dreams from when we were younger, our ability to live in those dreams, and our ability to provide multiple opportunities for our students to dream beyond society's manufactured models.

**Review** previously defined **values** and **norms**. While it might feel redundant to review values and norms each session, this ensures the safe space you are creating is contained by the collective agreements set. Think of it as a framing of the space and reminder that we are stepping into the discomfort of our more human selves.

- **Describe** the systemic nature of anti-Blackness, identify anti-blackness in institutional practices and locate the interpersonal interactions through which they perpetuate anti-blackness.
- **Review** values definitions from the previous sessions. In the opening reflection question, have individuals re-share their closing response from last week and their thoughts since coming to understand schools as sites of institutional harm?

**Gallery Walk.** As participants look through Trees on google slides have them reflect, *what needs to happen at our school to interrupt anti-Blackness? Think about practices in the locust of our control, curriculum, classroom management, SPED supports, family engagement, how can we use our space as a site of organizing?*

### Individual share and identify needs.

1. Have participants share out needs and take visual notes through jamboard or google slides.
2. After everyone shares their needs, take a moment to categorize needs into the following chart:

*What needs require us to work within, against or beyond schools?*

<u>within schools</u>	<u>against schools</u>	<u>beyond schools</u>
Ex: create new protocols and practices to support Black students	Ex: build momentum to disrupt inequitable District policies	Ex: develop community partnerships to offer culturally sustaining pedagogies and political education for all

**Close.** Have participants choose commitments based on needs and capacity. Share out commitments. Ex: I commit to listening to Black womxn.

# Acknowledgements and Appendix

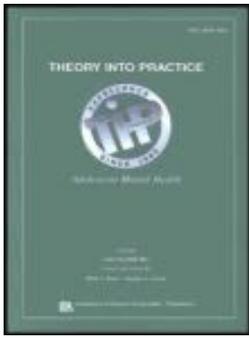
---

To begin and end with Blackness, we thank the Black youth who led the first session with unapologetic criticality and a spirit of curiosity. We are ever grateful to the Black scholars, Micia Mosely, kihana miraya ross, and Savannah Shange who shared their time, wisdom, and insight for the launch of the University of San Francisco's Center for Humanizing Education and Research (C-HER) summer series. It is a gift when individuals can come into a space and teach while making you laugh and cry simultaneously. It's worth noting that Dr. Shange graciously allowed us to include excerpts from her book, and still, we strongly encourage you to purchase your own copy of "Progressive Dystopia: Abolition, Antiracism, and Schooling in San Francisco" from a Black-owned bookstore. We send love and gratitude to the brave practitioners who served as conversation sowers, Jyairrah Martin, Eghosa Obaiza, Cici Jevae Gordon, Gertrude Jenkins, Ebony Johnson, and Hoang Pham. Thank you for embodying a commitment to the deep reflectional praxis abolition requires. A special shoutout to the dope editor, formatter, and word alchemist Zakiya Scott, with AP stylebook memorized, you make the English language a little bit less painful.

This conversation sower guide is inspired by all of the folx above and by my beloved community of homies, co-conspirators, cousins, siblings, aunties, and grands. While I am the "primary author," as a Black queer woman and descendent of chattel slavery I know none of these ideas are "mine." All of this is possible because I come from a village of organic intellectuals, gardeners, and abolitionists who continuously planted seeds of hope and love. A final shoutout to the C-HER steering committee and my professors Danfeng Koon and Seenae Chong. Without expectation of acknowledgment or gratitude, they consistently utilize their privilege as non-Black POC to create space for Black people. They never once questioned my instincts on the creation of this guide and always encouraged my creativity. I am never told my ideas are too radical, and just asked, "what are your dreams and how can we help make them happen?" With this spirit, we pass the work to you and invite you to dream with us, question with us, and work within, against, and beyond the state to provide our students the humanizing education they are rightfully owed.

With love and gratitude,

Cecelia Jordan & The C-HER Team



## Against the Dark: Antiracism in Education Policy and Discourse

Michael J. Dumas

To cite this article: Michael J. Dumas (2016) Against the Dark: Antiracism in Education Policy and Discourse, Theory Into Practice, 55:1, 11-19, DOI: [10.1080/00405841.2016.1116852](https://doi.org/10.1080/00405841.2016.1116852)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00405841.2016.1116852>



Accepted author version posted online: 07 Dec 2015.  
Published online: 07 Dec 2015.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 447



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

*Michael J. Dumas*

---

## 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

---

Dr. Michael J. Dumas is an Assistant Professor in the Graduate School of Education and Department of African American Studies, University of California, Berkeley.

Correspondence should be addressed to Dr. Michael J. Dumas, Graduate School of Education, University of California, 5607 Tolman Hall, MC 1670, Berkeley, CA 94720-1670. E-mail: [michaeldumas@berkeley.edu](mailto:michaeldumas@berkeley.edu).

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*.<sup>1</sup> 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.

## References

- Alexander, E. (1994). "Can you be BLACK and look at this?": Reading the Rodney King video(s). *Public Culture*, 7, 77–94.
- Anderson, J. D. (1988). *The education of Blacks in the South, 1860–1935*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina.
- DuBois, W. E. B. (1935). Does the Negro need separate schools? *Journal of Negro Education*, 4, 328–335.
- Dumas, M. J. (2010). What is this 'Black' in Black education? Imagining a cultural politics without guarantees. In Z. Leonardo (Ed.), *Handbook of cultural politics and education* (pp. 403–422). Rotterdam, Netherlands: Sense.
- Dumas, M. J. (2011). A cultural political economy of school desegregation in Seattle. *Teachers College Record*, 113, 703–734.
- Dumas, M. J. (2014). "Losing an arm": schooling as a site of black suffering. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 17, 1–29. doi:10.1080/13613324.2013.850412.
- Dumas, M. J. (2015). Contesting White accumulation: Toward a materialist anti-racist analysis of school desegregation. In K. Bowman (Ed.), *The pursuit of racial and ethnic equality in American public schools: Mendez, Brown, and beyond* (pp. 291–311). Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press.
- Funderburg, L. (2013, October). The changing face of America. *National Geographic*. Retrieved from <http://www.ngm.nationalgeographic.com/>.
- Garza, A. (2014, October 7). A herstory of the #Blacklivesmatter movement. *The Feminist Wire*. Retrieved from <http://www.thefeministwire.com/>.
- Gordon, L. R. (1997). *Existence in Black*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Gordon, L. R. (2000). *Existencia Africana*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Hartman, S. V. (2007). *Lose your mother: A journey along the Atlantic slave route*. New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Horsford, S. D., Sampson, C., & Forletta, F. M. (2013). School resegregation in the Mississippi of the West: Community counternarratives on the return to neighborhood schools in Las Vegas, Nevada, 1968–1994. *Teachers College Record*, 115, 1–28.
- Kelley, R. D. G. (2002). *Freedom dreams: The Black radical imagination*. Boston, MA: Beacon.
- Kerr, A. E. (2006). *The paper bag principle: Class, colorism & rumor and case of Black Washington DC*. Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee.
- Klein, R. (2013, July 10). NYC principal accused of making racist remarks, calling Black teacher 'gorillas'. *The Huffington Post*. Retrieved from <http://www.huffingtonpost.com>.
- Kohn, L. (1996). *Priority shift: The fate of mandatory busing for Seattle and the nation*. Seattle, WA: RAND/University of Washington.
- Malm, S. (2014, October 30). Teacher who called students the 'N-word' and 'slaves' when they objected to term African-American is fired after outrage. *Daily Mail*. Retrieved from <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/>.
- Massey, D. S., & Denton, N. A. (1993). *American apartheid*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University.
- Melamed, J. (2011). *Represent and destroy: Rationalizing violence in the new racial capitalism*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota.
- Munzenrieder, K. (2013, November 26). Orlando-area Christian school threatens to kick out Black girl over her natural hair. *Miami New Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.blogs.miaminewtimes.com/>.
- Orfield, G., & Eaton, S. E. (1996). *Dismantling desegregation*. New York, NY: New Press.
- Orfield, G., & Lee, C. (2004). *Brown at 50: King's dream or Plessy's nightmare?* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Civil Rights Project.
- Patterson, O. (1982). *Slavery and social death*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard.
- Roediger, D. (1994). *Towards the abolition of whiteness*. London, UK: Verso.
- Roithmayr, D. (2014). *Reproducing racism: How everyday choices lock in white advantage*. New York, NY: New York University.
- Sexton, J. (2008). *Amalgamation schemes: Antiblackness and the critique of multiracialism*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota.
- Sexton, J. (2010). People-of-color-blindness notes on the afterlife of slavery. *Social Text*, 28, 31–56.
- Tharps, L. L. (2014, November 18). The case for Black with a capital B. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com>.
- Tillet, S. (2012). *Sites of slavery: Citizenship and racial democracy in the post-civil rights imagination*. Durham, NC: Duke University.
- Tillman, L. C. (2004). (Un)intended consequences? The impact of the Brown v. Board of Education decision on the employment status of black educators. *Education and Urban Society*, 36, 280–303.

- Wells, A. S. (1995). Reexamining social science research on school desegregation: Long- versus short-term effects. *Teachers College Record*, 96, 691–706.
- Wells, A. S., Duran, J., & White, T. (2008). Refusing to leave desegregation behind: From

graduates of racial diverse schools to the Supreme Court. *Teachers College Record*, 110, 2532–2570.

- Wilderson, III, F. B. (2010). *Red, white & Black: Cinema and the structure of US antagonisms*. Durham, NC: Duke University.

### 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.



Savannah Shange

Progressive  
Dystopia

Abolition,  
Antiblackness,  
+ Schooling  
in San Francisco

DUKE UNIVERSITY PRESS *Durham and London* 2019

# Contents

Acknowledgments / ix

1 #OurLivesMatter Mapping an Abolitionist Anthropology / 1

2 "A Long History of Seeing" Historicizing  
the Progressive Dystopia / 22

3 "Why Can't We Learn African?" Academic Pathways,  
Coalition Pedagogy, and the Demands of Abolition / 44

4 The Kids in the Hall Space and Governance  
in Frisco's Plantation Futures / 66

5 Ordinary Departures Flesh, Bodies,  
and Border Management at Robeson / 92

6 Black Skin, Brown Masks Carceral Progressivism  
and the Co-optation of Xicanx Nationalism / 123

7 My Afterlife Got Afterlives / 151

Appendix / 161

Notes / 169

References / 183

Index / 201

authority figure again as he shrouds screaming at children in obligation. It's a place *we have to go to* until we shift not the geographies of power, but, in his framing, *the geography of the students themselves*. Leonard's apparent juxtaposition of white supremacist ideologies and progressive multiracial commitments is an example of how the former is foundational to the latter; the (lack of) mismatch between these two stances sparks the onset of dystopian malaise.

Whether described in Leonard's words as a weighty "*some of our kids*," "*just a few kids*," or "*the same ten kids*," as was bandied about in an impromptu upper-class staff ranting session a few months earlier, these seemingly neutral terms for apportioning the student body actually function as racialized signifiers of blackness. When I asked in that rant session who people thought the "ten kids" were, Kate's response was, "Well, you know—the ones who are always in the hall!" Laughter followed, but I pressed further, asking each person to write their own list and see if we were actually on the same page. Of the five other staff present, the students appearing on at least three of the six lists were Nate, Meisha, Tarika, DeAndre, Nashanta, Azizi, Arturo, and Cyarea (only DeAndre and Tarika appeared on all five). After a little NBA draft-style discussion nominating additional students, I mentioned that all the students were Black. "Nah-uh, what about Arturo?" Kate fired back. Apparently, the presence of one Latinx kid, whose adjudicated status and choice of AAVE<sup>8</sup> arguably blackened him, evacuated the blackness of the Usual Suspects. Further, the collective list was mostly girls, reflecting a pervasively gendered framing of propriety in the Robeson space, one that I take up as a central concern in the next chapter, along with Kate's predilection to selective colorblindness.

#### Settling Justice: Coloniality and the Robeson Racioscape

In the meeting at hand, Aaron deployed the Usual Suspect rhetoric when he asked us to keep in mind how great Robeson students are, reminding us that "the problems are a distinct minority, so don't let them set the tone." Ironically, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) sat prominently on Aaron's office bookshelf, as he echoed W. E. B. Du Bois's century-old ruminations on how it feels to be a problem. Shifting gears from reflection to action steps, Aaron asked what support teachers felt they needed from administration and from each other to effectively de-escalate encounters with students. Curiously,

this was the point in the meeting when the Escalaters stepped forward, citing one example after another where students with whom they sparred in the hallway were not suspended when the teachers thought they should be, or that students “got off easy” by the time they got to Tina and Aaron.

Aaron pushed back on this assertion, saying bluntly, “It’s okay to escalate with kids, but don’t be surprised if you get disrespected. It’s happened to me, but if *I* started it, *I’m* not gonna be pissed.” He thumped his hand below where his button-up shirt parted, to emphasize the “I”’s, his caved chest inverting Mr. Agusalim’s braggadocio. His physical performance of humility could have been a tactic to compel the Escalaters to depersonalize student conflict or an impromptu impassioned reflection; this ambiguity between strategy and spontaneity was a hallmark of Aaron’s leadership style.

“Well, maybe we should be pissed!” Kate retorted, amid a gurgle of side chatter and fidgeting that had erupted. She insisted that achieving a social justice mission meant holding kids to higher behavioral standards through increased disciplinary penalties. In the familiar strident voice that I could hear barking out equations through the wall that separated our classrooms, she argued that it was important for teachers to stand their ground with students.

As a school, we need it to be the Apocalypse to be in the hallway when you are not supposed to. The only ones who pop off on me are the ones I don’t know, and honestly at that moment I don’t care. This is not your school, right? This is our school. That’s it. You can disrespect me, and you can get a referral—that’s it. I am not going to provide therapy in the hallway, I am not going to think about your trauma. Get in your classroom—that is your only choice. We *all* need to flex on this a little bit. Often, when kids are being out of pocket in my class, I have them go outside and read the name on the door—I’m like, “That’s not your name, that’s my name. So what I said goes,” and that’s all it needs to be.

Woven into the ire of this soliloquy are three key markers of Robeson’s racial terrain. First, in the deluge of Black women’s voices from her colleagues Nyla and Zahra to Lisa Delpit’s studied prose speaking to the importance of building relationships with students, Kate still insists that she “doesn’t care” when that gulf of knowing results in confrontation. In that moment, her feelings trump the information that she been known about pedagogical best practices, ignoring the gentle moral directives Tina and Aaron offered in the “Escalate vs. De-escalate” handout from just fifteen minutes earlier. Even in Robeson’s color-conscious progressive space where institutional

narratives of racism are locally hegemonic, the enactment of policy is still overdetermined by the affective experiences of individual nonblack people, resulting in a pattern of *emotionally contingent politics* whereby cerebral commitments to racial justice are undermined by nonblack people’s visceral commitment to order.

Second, there is an active *denial of Black suffering* indexed by her opposition to “providing therapy in the hallway.” From a rudimentary labor perspective, a teacher’s contract involves only so many hours for so many tasks, and the chronic underfunding of California’s schools ensures that far too many tasks are packed into far too few hours. However, Kate was not arguing that she didn’t have the skills or time to effectively counsel students. Instead, her remarks and her pedagogy more broadly position DeAndre and them in what Saidiya Hartman and Frank Wilderson call the “position of the unthought” (2003). Her declaration that “I will not think about your trauma” in the context of a racial slave-estate built and maintained through violence effectively means “I will not think about *you*,” thus evacuating the possibility of a Black subject in the sociopolitical field of the school. Kate then reminds us of the ruse of agency in the afterlife of slavery: “Get into the classroom, that is your only choice.”

Finally, to rationalize her #WhiteFeels<sup>‡</sup> and the denial of Black subjectivity, Kate positions Robeson as a colonial settlement in which she has rightful dominion. Rather than a benevolent vision resonant with the “Community, Social Justice, Independent Thinkers” mission of Robeson, Kate here advances a plainly imperial view of the school space: “This is not your school—it is our school.” Employing the spatial settler strategy of possessive nomenclature (“read the name on the door”) and then using that name to justify ownership of the land, Kate then drafts the rest of the staff to join forces with her—“We *all* need to flex on this.” Her inclusion of all staff members in her colonial imperative follows the logic of the settler-slave estate in which all white folks are settlers, regardless of their current class position (Smith 2016). In the afterlife of slavery, this ubiquity of enforcement has transmogrified into the figure of the white police officer, whose

‡ #WhiteFeels, closely related to #WhiteTears, is a hashtag used by race-conscious social media users to highlight the fragility of white liberal allyship, and to more broadly critique the centering of white people’s emotional experiences at the expense of material costs to Black lives and lives of color. For more on #WhiteFeels, see Damon Young, “White Tears, Explained for White People Who Don’t Get It” (2015).

authority is embodied in every white person (Martinot and Sexton 2003). Slippage, though, is primary in this kind of assertion of authority, which perhaps amplifies its expression.

Kate seems oblivious to her relative privilege during her diatribe, not only in the obvious racial and geographic sense, but also of her classed position in the uneasy hierarchy of the staff. Not every adult could tell kids to “read the name on the door” because lower-paid staffers like paraprofessionals and AmeriCorps interns who did not have a teaching credential or a master’s degree largely had to share classrooms or migrate from one room to another in order to work with students. Further, when compared to certified teachers, the folks in these contingent roles were more likely to be Black or to have grown up in The City, if not both. What, then, does it mean for Kate to recruit this multiracial room of adults—some Frisco natives, some transplants, some Black, and some wishing they were—to the project of “flexing” in the hallways? As I discuss in the next section, while a broad swath of members of the school community engage in racial mapping, they do so from different vantage points in the social topography, resulting in vastly different renderings of the grounds.

Kate’s colonial stance also extends into the space of The City. During our one-to-one interview, I asked Kate about her experience living in the traditionally Black Western Addition neighborhood. She abdicated any role in gentrification, reasoning that only one new bar had opened in the Moe during her tenure and that the Divisadero Business District was still “pretty sparse.” The fact that her residence, along with hundreds of other out-of-town renters *preceded* and indeed facilitated the slew of new restaurants on Divisadero Street (including one that specializes in [delicious] five-dollar toast) eludes her. At the moment of her “Apocalypse” outburst, Kate lived in the Mission District, where private Google buses have helped to transform the historic Latinx neighborhood into a bedroom community for Silicon Valley. Kate’s racial map of Frisco omits her agency as an actor, and pulls the city out of its historical context. Her presence is analogous to anyone else’s, and her “cheap” \$1,700 rent is happenstance, rather than design. “Yeah, so far it’s been, like, ‘Oh, my neighbors are Latin.’ It hasn’t been like I’m displacing somebody because I’m white. It’s just that I’m renting this place, but you could have rented this place because it’s cheap and it’s not really very nice.” In order to accomplish her feat, Kate invokes her rights as an autological subject (Povinelli 2006), an actor unencumbered by history or relationality who functions as the basic building block of liberal civil society. The “you” she calls on as alibi doubly invokes both me, as

a Black woman colleague, and her “Latin” neighbors as those in search of something “cheap” and “not really nice.” As an aside, a year later Kate was no longer living in the Mission or teaching at Robeson, not because she had been pushed out for her approach, but because she had left the K–12 classroom to embark on a career in educational policy.

While the comparison between hallways and plantations may seem grandiose, reading across space-time is a crucial tactic for writing Black futures. When we think of the contemporary public school as a plantation site; the easy move is to create an analogy between cruel masters/racist school staff on the one hand, and trapped slaves/impooverished students on the other. McKittrick pushes us to think past diametric frames to imagine a contested, collaborative flow of meaning rooted in historical experience: “As the plantation provides the future through which contemporary racial geographies and violences make themselves known, it is precisely within our collective plantation futures that fractured and multiple (Black and nonblack) perspectives on place and belonging are fostered and debated” (2011: 950). By lifting up the role of cross-racial negotiations over the meaning of place, McKittrick offers us an open set of plantation futures for the ‘hoods of San Francisco. Her work also allows us to engage with slavery not as an analogy for the present, but as an ongoing structural relation from which we are still seeking relief—it is the territory, not the map (Wynter 2006). To the contrary, any rhetorical moves that position present carcerality and dispossession as “like slavery” or even as *The New Jim Crow* (Alexander 2010) inadvertently assert the *plantation (as) past*, and reinforce the hegemonic narrative of emancipation as a truth rather than a promise. In the Robeson context, the founders and school leaders nurture the “fractured and multiple” nature of plantation futures by acknowledging structural racism, and attempt to deploy Robeson’s curriculum, disciplinary practices, and governance structure as tools for winning the struggle for racial justice.

In Robeson’s own promotional materials, the institution draws on the fantasy of prospective teachers who want to be “part of the solution”:

One thing that is unique is that we are a school for social justice. Words like justice and equity get thrown around a lot here in the Bay Area, and sometimes it’s hard to know exactly what people mean by them . . . Many working class families, especially African-Americans, are being driven out of the city by gentrification, and only 13 percent of San Franciscans are children, the lowest percentage of any major city in the country.

One in 100 American adults is incarcerated (2.3 million people)—the highest rate and number in the world. And public policy supports these trends: In California, spending on prisons has skyrocketed for decades while public school spending languishes at 49th in the nation. Here at Robeson, we think social justice means acknowledging the oppression inherent in this context, and making the deliberate choice to be part of the solution.

Because of its spatial location, Robeson discursively functions as an exception nested within another—a progressive sanctuary of liberation pedagogy in the nation's symbol of liberalism—San Francisco, whose literal "Sanctuary City" status seems to set it apart from the imperatives of nationalism and empire. Frisco, of course, is itself nested in California, the drought-stricken paradise where the globe's dreams come true. But there is no sanctuary from a world held together by the gravity of the violable Black body. Rather than render Robeson as a bounded antiblack space, I want to remap Robeson and other progressive dystopian spaces like it as coordinates in a global antiblack space. Its terrain is contiguous with Ferguson and New York, with Charleston and Seine-Saint-Denis, with Santo Domingo and Capetown.

At the same time, we need to remap multiracial modes of contemporary progressivism into the continental reach of white supremacy and antiblack racism. Each of the Robeson staff and school leaders that I have worked with over the past decade is genuinely and unequivocally committed to a vision of racial equity. However, that commitment fails to the extent that they continue to see themselves and their school as working *outside* the bounds of systemic racism, rather than always already ensconced within them. How, though, is this nested exception experienced by those of us who wear the guise of authority while manifesting the afterlife of the slave?

### Not All Settlers Are Masters: Uneven Geographies of Power

Each person who pushes through Robeson's heavy steel door must navigate its racial landscape, resulting in a conflicting set of user-generated maps of the social topography. These power-laden cartographies are reinforced by everyday grammars of belonging: "*their* neighborhoods," "*our* school," "*my* classroom," and the like. Possessive discourses are a tool for staff members

One in 100 American adults is incarcerated (2.3 million people)—the highest rate and number in the world. And public policy supports these trends: In California, spending on prisons has skyrocketed for decades while public school spending languishes at 49th in the nation. Here at Robeson, we think social justice means acknowledging the oppression inherent in this context, and making the deliberate choice to be part of the solution.

Because of its spatial location, Robeson discursively functions as an exception nested within another—a progressive sanctuary of liberation pedagogy in the nation's symbol of liberalism—San Francisco, whose literal “Sanctuary City” status seems to set it apart from the imperatives of nationalism and empire. Frisco, of course, is itself nested in California, the drought-stricken paradise where the globe's dreams come true. But there is no sanctuary from a world held together by the gravity of the violable Black body. Rather than render Robeson as a bounded antiblack space, I want to remap Robeson and other progressive dystopian spaces like it as coordinates in a global antiblack space. Its terrain is contiguous with Ferguson and New York, with Charleston and Seine-Saint-Denis, with Santo Domingo and Capetown.

At the same time, we need to remap multiracial modes of contemporary progressivism into the continental reach of white supremacy and antiblack racism. Each of the Robeson staff and school leaders that I have worked with over the past decade is genuinely and unequivocally committed to a vision of racial equity. However, that commitment fails to the extent that they continue to see themselves and their school as working *outside* the bounds of systemic racism, rather than always already ensconced within them. How, though, is this nested exception experienced by those of us who wear the guise of authority while manifesting the afterlife of the slave?

### Not All Settlers Are Masters: Uneven Geographies of Power

Each person who pushes through Robeson's heavy steel door must navigate its racial landscape, resulting in a conflicting set of user-generated maps of the social topography. These power-laden cartographies are reinforced by everyday grammars of belonging: “*their* neighborhoods,” “*our* school,” “*my* classroom,” and the like. Possessive discourses are a tool for staff members

to make positive claims and exhibit pride about student achievement, as well as a method of creating meaning through discourses of distance and proximity. Wrought with tension, these kind of claims on spaces and bodies seek to establish narratives of duty and filiality, but can be met with wariness, particularly across social locations of race.

Such ambivalence was on display at the first Black staff caucus—cum-interview I convened in my classroom, complete with vegan black-eyed peas, mustard greens, and cornbread warmed on hot plates I borrowed from Evelyn, the freshman science teacher. Simone, a middle-class Black math teacher raised in The City, maintained a diplomatic tone, in keeping with her role as a bridge between staff factions, couching her critique in “not all” rhetoric and using the “I statement” format hegemonic in liberal-progressive professional dialogue.

SIMONE: It's not every teacher, but I feel like sometimes people assume negative intent when they see a Black kid. We have a lotta Black students who are very hungry for Black community. They not only kick it with each other, but try to have solidarity with each other. How they frame that in their little fifteen- and fourteen-year-old minds is a whole different thing! But when they see a teacher coming down the hallway, even if it's me, or if it's a white teacher, you can feel that tension with Black students, like “What is he or she gonna say to me?” It's like this constant bucking against—it's something that's been institutionalized throughout their whole education. I think teachers do it subconsciously, thinking “What are they up to? Are they up to no good? Why are they being loud?”

ZAHRA: Loud voices! That's another thing that's getting on my nerves—that people assume that just cause a kid is being loud that they are doing something wrong!

Simone highlights how “bucking against” can manifest in reaction to the teacher role, whether it is played by herself or by white staff members. Rather than attributing this tension simply to student resistance or race-neutral “boundary testing,” by linking it in her narrative to a nascent Black solidarity among young people, Simone helps distinguish between the practice of Black solidarity and the simple fact of blackness. The fact that students buck against her as a Black teacher does not mean their actions aren't racially motivated, a fallacy hawked by the same multiculturalist logic that argues Black cops can't be racist. Instead, it is an example of how Black teachers navigate the racial terrain of schools in ways that can contradict institutional man-

dates. For instance, duty-driven directives like Kate's "we need to flex on this" can have a counterintuitive impact on Black teachers; Linwood H. Cousins (1999: 306) noted that when increased policing was desired, "such coercion of teachers, especially those who had tenure, generated increased empathy and acquiescence toward students and their behavior." At Robeson, this increased empathy was not only manifest by Black teachers, but also by some Frisco native NBPOC<sup>9</sup> and white staff members who had variously been "blackened" by dint of their use of Black English, familiarity with City geographies, and predilection to call a spade its true name, even when it was "cracker" (or, more common at Robeson, *güero*). Josue was chief among them—notorious for refusing to count down outside his classroom and harboring hallway wanderers in his class during preps, he used his social location as a City-born Pinoy to build connections with Black students and families. Zahra and Simone's comments come in a broader national context of increased militarization and police presence in schools, particularly those serving Black and Latinx youth (Meiners 2007; Tuzzolo and Hewitt 2006).

The past two decades have seen the emergence of the school-to-prison pipeline as the dominant critical framework for problematizing harsh disciplinary measures in urban schools, with California as a common case study given its infamy as the carceral capital of the US (Gilmore 2007). These critiques infuse Robeson's institutional common sense, with Simone's stats class even using racially disproportionate incarceration rates as a topic for learning how to apply the mathematical skill of probability. Like the promotional materials declare, Robeson wants to be "part of the solution" to oppression—recall how Aaron made a deal with the cops to not park in front of the school? However, all this *signaling* of Robeson's exceptional status have failed to actually *make* Robeson an exception to the rule of Black punishment. Instead, it persists as a manifestation of the school-prison nexus (Meiners 2007).

When put in the context of the other high schools in the district, Robeson's overall 6 percent suspension rate for students across race puts it in the middle of the pack. The suspension rate spikes to 20 percent for Black students, signaling a major discrepancy in practice, but one that is still normative in San Francisco—five schools had higher suspension rates for Black students, the two highest at 50 percent and 49 percent respectively. However, Robeson actually *is* exceptional in one arena: with a population of 24 percent Black students and 80 percent of student suspensions being for Black students, *Robeson had the most disproportionate suspensions of Black*

*students in the city* out of all nineteen public high schools serving students in the 2012–13 school year. As could be surmised, this disproportionality in punishment is not equitably distributed. Even though Robeson's Latinx student population was 54 percent, only 13 percent of suspensions went to Latinx students that year at Robeson. How, then, do we reconcile Robeson's exceptionally punitive disciplinary practices with its institutional narratives of exception? What are the mechanisms that allow Robeson schoolpeople to continue to celebrate the institution as a "win" for social justice? Further, how do Black folks navigate the contradiction inherent to Robeson's progressive carcerality?

When I asked Tina, the Asian American coprincipal, to account for the disproportionate number of behavioral referrals and suspensions meted out to Black students at Robeson, she responded at first with a hesitation out of keeping with her self-described "alpha Scorpio" demeanor. Tick-ticking her rhinestone-speckled acrylic nails on the side of her walkie-talkie, she equivocated, "Um, I think it's . . . I think it's culturally . . . respo- . . . I think it's the fact that . . ." Dropping her hands onto the table, she leveled with me.

I think it's racism. I was trying to think of a different [*pause*] but I think it's racism. I don't mean it as a negative way. I think folks who didn't grow up predominantly in African American culture find high volume extremely disrespectful, whereas my family is very loud. And so, I, although I find it annoying, don't find it necessarily, like, disrespectful. I think that folks do have an emotional reaction to volume, and our Black students are loud. It's interesting. When folks write a referral, I see why they're writing it. A lot of times, the word "volume" comes up, like inappropriate volume. For *you*. That *you* find inappropriate.

For Tina to say that she didn't mean racism in a "negative way" means she is using a notion of racism that is not synonymous with intentional bigotry and hatred. Her racially coded, indirect language choices allow her to name systemic racism without naming racists. The phrase "folks who didn't grow up in African American culture" stands in for whiteness, or perhaps for those allied with it—she herself, as a Chinese American woman raised in alabaster Colorado, wasn't raised around any Black people at all, and yet she doesn't feel assaulted by raised voices. Further, by saying "My family is very loud," Tina reaches back to racist caricatures of Chinese people as noisy and uncouth (Shah 2001) as a source of kinship with Black people. That these "folks" have an "emotional reaction" that leads to disproportionate policing and punishment of Black children points again to the outsize role nonblack

affective experiences of blackness play in shaping the practices of progressive political projects.

By leaning on “you” several times, she enacts a supervision style that asks white (and whitened) teachers to take personal responsibility for their disciplinary impulses, rather than lodge the weight of their complaint onto the bodies of Black students. Tina rehearsed this move of turning the lens back onto teachers over and over during her first year as an administrator, and it proved to be an effective implementation of antiracist (if not abolitionist) practice. Tina continued with her analysis, shifting toward the pedagogical responsibilities entailed in assuming white middle-class norms as disciplinary limits. “If we’re gonna define what appropriate volume is, then we have to be explicit about it. What is the appropriate volume, and how are we going to teach that to students, because they’re using this ‘inappropriate volume’ when they’re outside of school, and it would be actually completely appropriate and acceptable.” While the “we” and “they” Tina uses account for how the boundaries of appropriateness are racialized, they also homogenize the Robeson staff into a “we” that subscribes to bourgeois white notions of propriety. Christina Sharpe reminds us that “the weather is the totality of our environments; the weather is the total climate; and that climate is antiblack” (2016: 104). In this “weather,” Black Robeson staff can be pushed from the safety of “we” to the target of “they” at any point during their workday, reflecting the tenuousness of multiracial alliance under the heading of “teacher.”

Speaking from their tenuous position straddling boundaries in the racial landscape, Black staff members shared about a sense of hypervigilance that they brought to work with them. Zahra, a mid-twenties Black woman who grew up moving from one small Bay Area city to another, connected her intimacy with Robeson youth to a sense of structural vulnerability. It was her first year working full-time at Robeson, and her relative youth and supplementary position as a guidance counselor made her a target for teaching staff to pull rank.

Like in my classroom, if I have my door open and like we are laughing and joking and singing something and it’s after the bell, I’m thinking, “Is that going to be a problem?” And it has been a problem. Last week there was an interaction in my classroom with Mr. Agusalim and one of the students: he busted in after the student and was like, “Where’s your pass?” And he was asking me if he had showed me his pass. And I was like, “No, I knew he was in my room, but I’m helping another student and

I’ll get to him in a second.” But he ignored me and said to the student in a clearly angry way, like, “Well, where’s your pass? I just talked to you.” And the student escalated then too. So there is a certain level of policing that I feel on a day-to-day basis.

Mr. Agusalim projected a sense of self-importance so great that most of the staff referred to him as “Mr. Agusalim” even in the casual environment of Robeson, where the principals went by first names to fellow staff members. A child of middle-class Indonesian immigrants, Mr. Agusalim had moved to San Francisco from the Midwest and often functioned as the political and pedagogical advocate of “law and order” solutions to Robeson’s ills. Here, his drive to monitor Black children’s movement was so powerful that it dissolved the boundaries around Zahra’s classroom, neutralizing her authority in her own space and literally embodying police presence in the ostensibly safe space of the classroom. The Black teacher’s classroom, invaded in this way by a colored carceral presence, becomes indistinguishable from the MUNI trolley car boarded by transit cops looking to ticket those without passes, or from the New England boardinghouse full of fugitive slaves, or from public housing apartments in the Sunnysdale projects down the hill that are subject to arbitrary inspection by a social worker.

The connection to bondage is one made over and over by Black Robeson folks across boundaries of staff/student, professional class/working class, and native/transplant. Maurice, a student wellness advocate in his early twenties who was raised in The ‘Sco,<sup>10</sup> talked about his desire to be “free.”

Sometimes I have to catch myself, ‘cause I wanna be free too. Sometimes the kids are singin’ in the hallway, and I’ll start singin’ with ‘em—they need to be conscious of their volume, sure, but shut ‘em down? No! But I have to be careful because I don’t want other staff to be questioning me like, “How is he setting an example if he is just like the kids?” If I see a teacher that’s not of my race, I will be different, because that’s the way I grew up. If I see someone of another race, I feel like I have to hold more of a standard.

Rather than name whiteness, Maurice used “not of my race” to index a Black/nonblack framework for how he operationalizes his code switching, or the imperative to “be different” as soon as a nonblack colleague spies him singing along with the Jacka, Erk tha Jerk, or whichever other Bay Area rapper had dropped a hot single that month. Further, by saying he “wanna be free too,” Maurice positioned Black Robeson youth as his role models for

the embodiment of freedom, articulating a collective desire for the liberation soon to come.

Simone built on Maurice's contribution, forging a more academic notion of freedom in relation to the demands of the racial landscape. Like him, she was also born and raised in The City, and attended elite magnet schools as a kid.

But it's hard because it's still important for us to be free and manifest who we truly are with our students *and* at the same time manifest great thinking. Sometimes those misunderstandings between Black and non-Black staff suppress that energy that we need. I was an undergrad math major, and there was no one in my department who was Black. My idea of being professional, of being mathematical, was completely shaped by that environment.

Expressing an ethos that emphasizes the "warm" in the "warm demander" pedagogy celebrated by Delpit, Simone refused to separate Black excellence and Black ratchetery. Her classroom was one where she combined languages and habitus across class and race, mixing in bits of Tagalog and AAVE into her instruction around mathematical concepts, striking bus-stop poses and Instagram duck faces during a lesson. She located the Black/nonblack divide as a site for "misunderstanding" DeAndre as a scholar instead of a troublemaker. Simone's narrative of Black isolation in intellectual spaces recalls the impulse to solidarity that she discussed among loud students in the hallway, as well as Robeson's contiguity with other academic spaces governed by white norms, even in the absence of white students. Her story resonates with Maurice's and Zahra's to reveal a tension between hypervigilance around behavioral norms and a longing for embodied Black liberty. Robeson's racialized carceral logics land hard on the bodies of Black adults as they, too, traverse plantation futures of the school's hallways.

### Frisco Fugitivity: *La Perruque* and the Apocalypse

Twelve feet wide, fifty yards long—Robeson's corridors are spatial containers for the encounter between the state and the body, and yet we must pay as much attention to the *when* as to the *where* of Frisco's racial map. Temporality is what transforms space into distance, line into boundary, stasis into movement. Only by holding both space (geography, body) and time (history, memory) in the same frame can we begin to trace the travel of

He went on to historicize the struggles for ethnic studies and student walk-outs in The City as confrontations with the police, asking the young people, "Will you go down in history as warriors who fought, as people who fought against poverty and racism? Or will you go down as the lambs who were led to slaughter?" He invokes the police station as slaughterhouse, an image incongruous to Aaron's notion of the police as those who guard Robeson from Outsiders, even though they both center on the police as a harbinger of injury. Hector's contrast between "warriors" and "lambs," framed squarely in the context of revolutionary violence, was a direct affront to Aaron's waxing about Robeson developing "warrior-scholars" whose prowess shows in their academic achievements. Hector's warriors indeed have a common enemy, but that foe is the police themselves, while Aaron's brand of carceral progressivism puts him on the side of calling, rather than fighting the police. Indigeneity here is presented as a trope of both The City and the land—two dissonant registers of nativeness that are echo across the social field.

Hector's Frisco Native politics make a multiscalar intervention in carceral-progressive practice. On the level of ideology, he presented a counternarrative of what it means to be both people of color and from The City, one in which the primary imperative is collective self-defense against state violence. Further, his presence as a working-class Latinx man openly contradicting his white, elite boss makes a materialist intervention into the "reasonable" deference expected by later liberal progressivism. His, too, is a willful defiance, and his agile reworking of the school's discursive space recalls Cyarea and Jacki's refusals of confinement logics. After Hector's subversive improvisation, the assembly's closing stuck to Robeson's institutional script, one that privileged Insiders over Outsiders.

#### Producing *La Otra*: Multiracial Antiblackness

Aaron thanked all the speakers who shared the mic at the Town Hall, and called Aura and Bree to the stage to close us out. He beamed proudly and said, "These young women are going to share part of the Maya tradition with us, that powerful bloodline we all hold!" Though Hector had made an argument about Black and Xicanx people sharing Native blood, Aaron here slips his own whiteness into the first person of indigeneity. The girls walk onstage in front of a mustard-hued PowerPoint, lit up with the verse they were about to read. "Okay, y'all, repeat after us." Bree started with the

Spanish line, and then waited for the crowd to respond, followed by Aura reading the English.

*Si te hago daño a ti*  
If I do harm to you  
*Me hago daño a mi mismo*  
I do harm to myself  
*Si te amo y respeto*  
If I love and respect you  
*Me amo y respeto*  
I love and respect myself

As a *ceremonia*,<sup>15</sup> the reading of “In Lak’Ech” is cathartic. Tears flowed down Aura’s face and Bree’s voice trembled as she read the poem. Hundreds of kids –Nicaragüense, Xicanx, Black, Tonga, Pin@y, American-Born Chinese, Viet<sup>16</sup>—speaking with them in one voice, articulating love for both self and other, Black and Brown borrowing each other’s tongues in a gesture of solidarity.

Rituals like these are one mode of producing the category “people of color.” While “people of color” is a term that has been used in the Americas since the eighteenth century, often as a reference to freed African-descended people,<sup>17</sup> the latter half of the twentieth century saw its resurgence and repurposing as a broader nonwhite political identity. In many ways, the category “women of color” prefigures “people of color,” because much of the theoretical labor that permits the imagining of a politicized multiracial collective was done by women-of-color feminists who were in on the ground activist work as well as in the canonical volume *This Bridge Called My Back*. Writing about the impact of *This Bridge*—a 1981 anthology edited by Cherrié Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa that included Xicana, Black, Native, and Asian American women—Caribbean feminist Jacqui Alexander reminds us that “we are not born women of color. We *become* women of color. In order to *become* women of color, we would need to become fluent in each others’ histories” (2005: 269). Bree and Aura practice that fluency of tongue and *became* women of color on that stage, but the succor generated from the sound of their voices harmonized with two hundred others cannot bridge the gap between discursive unity and material antagonism. Indeed, the discourse of “people of color” enacted at Robeson works hegemonically because the more material conflict arose between racial groups, the more powerfully “unity” is reasserted as a method of dismissal. Further, rather than the horizontal mutuality between nonwhite people imagined

by Alexander, Anzaldúa, and Moraga, the terms of multiracial coalition here are arbitrated by white folks with positional power. White mediation of people-of-color politics is a defining characteristic of the enmeshed Bay Area nonprofit and educational sectors, and is a result of the systematic underemployment of Black and Latinx activists in the lower-paid direct-service positions within “social justice” organizations, as well as the prevalence of “allyship” as a mode of white progressive politics.

Though Bree is the one who speaks the phrase “Tú eres mi otro yo,” she actually does not embody the ontological subject-citizen produced through the institutional and regional discourse of multiracial progressivism. She can only conditionally enter the status of citizen by performing her fealty to the yoke of Black-Brown unity. “People of color” as operationalized here is a coalition of the known, haunted by the figure of *la otra*, the Outsider, who is also the slave. She can *act like* a citizen, in this case through the symbolic speaking of Spanish. Her Black face is made welcome in the house of Robeson behind the Brown mask of “yo.”

“In Lak’Ech” offers the chance for Black kids to playact at Latinidad, a provisional reindigenization based on the decolonial maxim that *la cultura cura*. Often used by educators and youth workers in reference to the transnational structural and street violences that ensnare urban communities, *la cultura cura*, or “culture cures,” is a reminder of the healing power of “indigenous” traditions for Latinx youth. The conflation of Latinidad and indigeneity reflects the enduring political legacy of Xicanx indigenism in the San Francisco racioscape. “Indigenism,” or “the act of self-consciously adopting an indigenous identity—which may not otherwise be self-evident—for a political or strategic purpose” (Latorre 2008: 42), provides an affirming and powerful lexicon of selfhood for both second- and third-generation Mexicanxs, as well as for the kids of more recent Central American migrants, who constitute a large part of the city’s Latinx youth.

Left Coast genealogies of urban migration and activism can obscure both the contemporary and historic presence of Afrx-Latinxs<sup>§</sup> through-

§ “Afrx-Latinx” is a term that can refer to both African-descended people in Spanish-speaking Latin America, like the Black communities of Nicaragua’s Atlantic Coast, or arguably the entire Puerto Rican diaspora, as well as to people of mixed Black and non-Black Latinx heritage. It differs from the term “Black-Brown” because while “Afrx-Latinx” inheres in a single body or single community, “Black-Brown” generally refers to relations *between* racially distinct communities or individuals. Even though the separation between blackness and Latinidad is tenuous to begin with, I find it useful to delineate between these terms for analytic purposes.

out Latin America, resulting in unduly clear demarcations between “Black” and “Brown.” At the same time, Xicanx indigenism advances a strategically essentialist Native-ness<sup>18</sup> to annex anyone with a Spanish surname into the enmeshed imaginaries of Turtle Island and Aztlán.<sup>19</sup> Taken together, these two consolidations—Latinidad compacted into the West Coast of the Americas, and indigeneity grafted onto immigration—artificially exclude most Black folks from the “yo” or the “I” who can claim their home as Califaztlán.<sup>20</sup> Thus, the reindigenizing move of “In Lak’Ech” will always fall short because blackness is bereft of indigeneity—we are the ones who can never come home. In Fanonian thought, the Black functions in a “structure of never-having-had” (Marriott 2016), and the only way to avoid that truth is to mimic the sociogenic location of another, in this case, that of the Brown. The antagonism between homecoming and homelessness is one that Black and Native scholars, activists, and spiritual workers have been tussling over for at least a generation, and the relation between blackness and indigeneity is a foundational question of Africana studies as a discipline. This is what the elders might call an “in-house conversation,” one that might not look pretty but is necessary to the work.

Robeson, however, is none of our houses.

When Luis Valdez wrote *Pensamiento Serpentino* in 1973, it was part of a squarely in-house conversation among Mexican-descended people. In the longer epic that Bree and Aura read from, Valdez uses a metaphor of God-as-playwright to weave a new origin story for Xicanidad, one that hinges on the decolonization of consciousness and the cleansing of Eurocentric ideals. He tells his folks,

We must all become NEO-MAYAS  
Porque los Mayas  
really had it together

Valdez writes passionately to wake would-be-Xicanxs from the slumber of Anglo ideology, arguing that in order to be free, “first el CHICANO must Mexicanize himself.” His vision did not include Black folks, except as illustrative of the parts the Creator-playwright may ask us to play. Setting aside the ongoing battles over antiblackness within Xicanx movements, Valdez was not marginalizing or excluding Black folks in this poem, because it was an *in-house affair*, one written to develop the sense of *orgullo* and autonomy necessary to construct a decolonial subject-self. However, the original political context of the poem is obscured by isolating a single stanza for the

“In Lak’Ech” exercise. The recitation by Aura and Bree after the fight was a response to crisis, and the first time that Robeson had used the poem at all. This Town Hall happened just a month before my intensive fieldwork concluded, and I did not attend another assembly in my subsequent trips for follow-up interviews and archival visits.

When I returned to Robeson three years later for the graduation of Cyarea and Jacki’s class, the “In Lak’Ech” excerpt was printed on the graduation program as an epigraph. After all fifty-three names had been called, and each graduating senior had crossed the stage and taken their sixty seconds on the mike to give appreciations, Tina asked all present to stand. Before declaring the commencement complete, all the seniors and their families recited “In Lak’Ech,” guided by a Black student reading the Spanish and a Latinx student reading the English, just as it was done the first time. Seeing my quizzical look, my former colleague Simone leaned over and said, “Oh yeah, we do this at every assembly now.” The crisis response has become normative, and the crisis-ordinary of late liberalism has taken a poetic work of Xicanx futurism and denatured it into a pledge of allegiance.

Before “In Lak’Ech” was institutionalized, even before Cyarea and Jacki were kicked out of Robeson, the material chasm between the Black “tú” and the Brown “yo” of carceral progressivism were made clear. After Bree and Aura finished the poem, and all the PA equipment was lugged back up two flights of stairs to Robeson’s main office, a few teachers were milling about, chatting and sharing their emotional reactions to the assembly’s success and the loss of the four kids most involved in the fight. Almost as an afterthought, Aaron mentioned that after the big parent meeting handing down consequences to Neveah, Spider, Tyrell, and José, he had pulled José and Spider’s fathers aside to tell them that the boys could petition to be readmitted to Robeson in the fall, since they seemed contrite and really weren’t responsible for starting the fight.

Ultimately, even after all the hullabaloo of the assembly and the school-wide announcements to the contrary, the Latinx kids who were involved in the fight got a pass. The price of violating the multiracial contract was only paid by the Black children. Of course, that’s not Spider’s or José’s fault—any kid who gets a chance to stay in a school that has all your homies and half-way decent teachers should take it. The decision to let José and Spider return was not even Robeson’s as an institution—it was Aaron’s prerogative in that moment as the white man who stood in for the state. He betrays the delicate Black-Brown trust built by rituals like the Town Hall, confirming

that *la Otra* is as Black as ever. I later asked Tina about the exception made for Spider and José, and it was one more on the long list of things she was pissed off at Aaron for, but that she felt she could do little about as the junior administrator, even with her nominative equity as “coprincipal.” In Valdez’s utopian epic, he asserts that for the Neo-Maya,

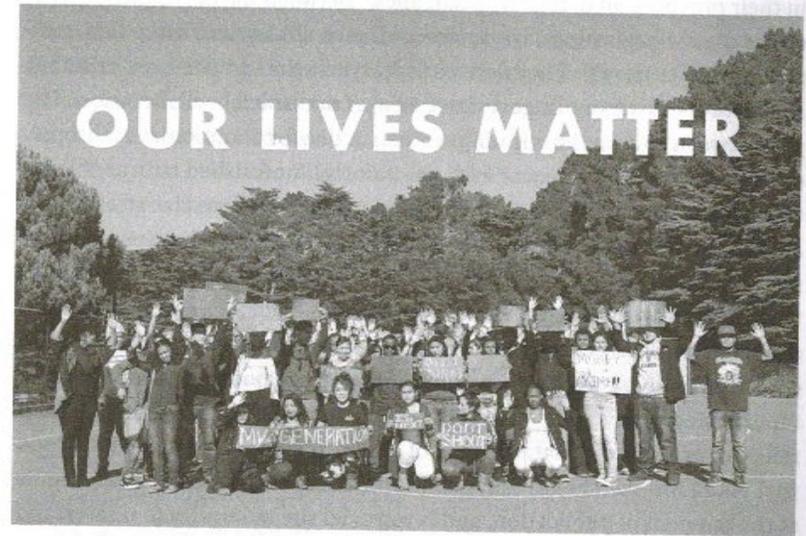
racial distinctions  
*no existen*  
*límites materiales*  
*no existen\*\**

Tell that to Neveah.

\*\* The stanza translates to: “Racial distinctions / don’t exist / material limits / don’t exist.”

## Chapter Seven

# My Afterlife Got Afterlives



Our Lives Matter. Courtesy Marcus Hung, Room 212 Productions.

The photograph that opens this book, captioned #OurLivesMatter, was captured as part of a wave of protests and mobilizations across the US sparked by the police murder of Mike Brown. Dubbed Black Spring in honor of the previous year’s Arab Spring uprisings in North Africa and Southwest Asia, young people took the lead in Ferguson, Baltimore, and Chicago (Beydoun and Ocen 2015). By this time, my fieldwork in San Francisco was over, and I was hustling between writing and adjuncting. One night that spring, Zahra called me in livid tears. She was the college counselor at Robeson, just a few years out of college, and one of only three Black faculty on staff. She is the