

# Anti-Blackness in Education and the Possibilities of Redress: Toward Educational Reparations

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In the weeks that followed police officers' gruesome murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor as well as the white<sup>1</sup> vigilante hunting of Ahmaud Arbery, the streets erupted in sorrow and rage. Protesters used their voices to create a monumental shift in the national conversation in the United States and elevated the decades-long work of activists demanding divestment, defunding, and even the abolition of the police. Demonstrators also utilized their platforms to give voice to a new language, calling attention to the specificity of anti-Blackness, anti-Black violence, and anti-Black racism.

These developments powerfully underscore the radical potentialities of this remarkable historical moment. Emerging from an unprecedented and ongoing pandemic disproportionately taking Black lives, as well as a national and international uprising against anti-Black police terror, is a phoenix of hope carrying newly invigorated Black dreams of freedom and resistance. Central to these dreams are theorizations and analyses of the Black condition. Activists, youth, and scholars are calling for a reckoning with anti-Blackness, as something distinct from racism, to grapple with society's inability to recognize Black humanity (Wilder-son, "Afro-Pessimism"; ross, "Call"). Anti-Blackness, as a theoretical tool and organizing frame, demands a sharper sensitivity to both the magnitude of the injury and the extraordinary efforts required to begin any process of meaningful redress. Significantly, a part of this recognition is a reenergized call for reparations for the descendants of human beings who were legitimately owned (juridically speaking), property to be bought and sold, used and abused as any white owner desired. As a scholar of Black education, I am particularly compelled to understand how the intersection of increased attention to anti-Blackness in edu-

<sup>1</sup> As my colleague Michael J. Dumas puts it, "White is not capitalized in my work because it [...] does not describe a group with a sense of common experiences or kinship outside of acts of colonization and terror. [...] Thus, although European or French are rightly capitalized, I see no reason to capitalize white" ("Against" 12-13).

cation specifically (Dumas, “Against”; Dumas and ross; Wun) and the injection of new energy into the fight for reparations, is informing and inspiring these radical dreams and seeding new possibilities and visions of educational justice for Black children. This is especially exciting because despite hundreds of years of struggle, there has never been a moment in this country’s history where Black folks *en masse* have achieved educational equity or justice.

While increased attention to anti-Blackness in the broader society has led to newly invigorated demands for reparations for centuries of anti-Black terror, the idea that the United States should provide reparations to formerly enslaved Africans and their descendants is nothing new. We often conceptualize this fight as something that began with the notion of “40 acres and a mule,” or that was championed by John Conyers, Jr., until his death. Yet, as early as the 1700s, Black people were petitioning for reparations (see Coates). Still, upon emancipation Black folks became the only race in the United States to ever start out, as an entire people, with nothing. While white families (foreign and native-born) received 246 million acres of free land through the Homestead Act (20% of white Americans descend from homesteaders), and white enslavers were compensated in Washington, D.C., for their loss of (human) property, Black folks have never been compensated for 400 years of suffering (Hannah-Jones).

Anti-Blackness provides an analysis of that suffering as connected to the idea of theft—the theft of Black bodies, the theft of anything Black folks dared to build and/or own as newly “freed” people, and critically, the theft from generations of Black families whose educational opportunities were systematically stolen from them. Interrogating this educational theft necessitates building on and extending decades of scholarship on the unremitting inequities Black students face in U.S. schools. Specifically within educational research, the language utilized to explore racialized disparities in schooling has shifted from the “achievement gap” to the “opportunity gap” to what Ladson-Billings calls the “education debt” (see Ladson-Billings). This notion of educational debt is particularly interesting as it centers what America owes to its throw-away children. Ladson-Billings argues that this debt is historical, economical, sociopolitical, and moral in nature, and must be addressed if we are to achieve meaningful educational progress. Here I want to build on the notion of educational debt in order to understand what this debt actually means for Black students specifically, and how what we might call *educational reparations* may serve to begin the process of meaningful redress.

Still, not all debts are equal. How can we begin to assess the nature of these educational debts with respect to Black students and teachers, and their families? Anti-Blackness as an analytical tool historicizes and exposes the debts owed to Black folks as originating in the brutal system of chattel slavery and analytically attends to how those wounds

continue to fester in slavery's afterlives (Hartman, *Scenes*). Thus, any honest assessment of educational debt for Black children must also attend to questions of historical harm and injury. While many understand Black educational injury (in the broad sense) as being rooted in school segregation and remedied with the historic *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court case decision, anti-Blackness in education compels us to question both the notion that segregation was the problem, and the potentiality of *Brown* (if actualized) as the solution (or an end in and of itself) to creating a liberatory educational landscape for Black children in particular. While Black students certainly deserve and are owed access to the material resources that often accompany genuinely desegregated schooling environments, many Black students have historically and contemporarily experienced integrated school settings as hostile environments.

In my own work, I situate this in what I call the “afterlife of school segregation” (ross, “Black Space”), which is a more specific rendering of Hartman’s “afterlife of slavery” (*Lose* 6) and centers the ways in which, despite the end of legal segregation of schooling, Black students remain systematically dehumanized and positioned as uneducable. Just as Hartman challenges a linear progress narrative of history, particularly the slavery-to-freedom paradigm, the afterlife of school segregation also refuses linear narratives of Black educational progress that fail to align with the lived experiences of Black students. Further, where Hartman questions whether the dominated can be liberated by universalist assertions that “merely dissimulate the stigmatic injuries constitutive of blackness with abstract assertions of equality, sovereignty, and individuality” (*Scenes* 123), it would behoove us to also question whether Black students *en masse* may achieve a liberatory educational experience in a system of “universal” public education “structured by anti-black solidarity” (Wilderson, *Red* 58). Hence, as we build toward a conceptualization of educational reparations, we must consider both the depth of Black educational injury and also the extent of what it will take to build toward meaningful redress.

While a full explication of educational reparations is beyond the scope of this current work, I want to begin to elaborate what educational reparations may mean for Black students in the afterlife of school segregation. At minimum, a project of educational reparations must recognize the ways anti-Blackness functions in U.S. schools and that this condition is irreconcilable (ross, “Revisiting”). In recognizing how these schools are irredeemable for Black children, that “they schools” (dead prez) will never be ours, we are better positioned to conceptualize liberatory educational experiences for Black children. In the broadest sense, then, educational reparations must necessarily move beyond the notion of school “reform” for Black children and consider the potentiality in reimagining the Black educational landscape in its entirety. For example, a part of my work explores Black educational fugitive space,

or the ways Black students and educators enact educational fugitivity through the social production of Black space in the margin (ross, “Black Space”). I argue Black educational fugitive space is born and created in direct response to the rampant anti-Blackness in the larger world, including U.S. public schools. In this sense, fugitive space may serve as makeshift land, and provide makeshift citizenship to people whose humanity is consistently made impossible on the outside. A project of educational reparations might consider what it would mean to build on this interstitial space toward a more robust blueprint for Black education outside of mainstream institutions of schooling. For instance, what would it mean to be able to structurally support a potential third Great Migration of Black folks—not from the South to the North, but out of mainstream institutions of U.S. schooling altogether? This may look like an optional pre-K-12 alternative system of public schooling for students and educators racialized as Black, or a collective of independent cadres where groups of students and educators enact radically different forms of education (see Nxumalo and ross).

Still, while a project of educational reparations should support Black folks in our re-envisioning otherwise possibilities, it would also necessarily attend to supporting Black students, teachers, and parents in what I call the “meantime in between time,” or what it is that we can do right now to mitigate Black suffering in schools and make the educational experiences of Black students better. In other words, more immediate redress would necessarily encompass providing Black students and educators with anything they need or desire to ameliorate their current reality. This may include anything from access to material resources, advanced courses, or curricular content that does not misrepresent or erase; to protection from systems of standardized testing, discipline, and punishment, as well as from the explicit and implicit biases of teachers. At the same time, educational reparations in the “meantime in between time” may also question what it means to create spaces within schools that move beyond improving test scores or graduation rates and actually attend to Black students’ overall well-being—or what well-being looks like in the context of anti-Black schooling. In other words, what kinds of educational environments might help Black students confront, navigate, refuse, and resist anti-Black violence and anti-Black racism in the larger society and in their schools?

While educational reparations are certainly not limited to these ideas, I offer these initial thoughts with the hope they may aid us in further conceptualizing educational reparations and that we may build on these initial ideas toward a more robust theorization. I offer this short musing as an invitation for further inquiry and collective thought—as an invitation to continue the collective conversation around what it means to conceptualize a liberatory educational project for Black students in particular—as an invitation to facilitate Black students’ move in the direction of genuinely being okay.

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