

A BLACKCRIT ETHNOGRAPHY ON THE CO-CREATION OF TEXTUAL SANCTUARY
AS MEANS TO UNDERSTANDING AND RESISTING ANTIBLACKNESS AT A U.S.
URBAN HIGH SCHOOL

By

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ABSTRACT

A BLACKCRIT ETHNOGRAPHY ON THE CO-CREATION OF TEXTUAL SANCTUARY AS MEANS TO UNDERSTANDING AND RESISTING ANTIBLACKNESS AT A U.S. URBAN HIGH SCHOOL

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Like racism in U.S. society, antiblackness or the human races necessity for violence against Black people is an immutable fact. The idea that Blackness is inherently problematic in the public imaginary—needing to be marginalized or disposed of—directly frames how urban schools are organized for the education of Black children. This is a problem of public schooling for which my research aims to respond. The tendency to view schools as free of antiblackness (read violence free) undermines changes in schooling curriculum, climate, and policy that work toward equity for Black children. Instead, the prevailing belief that schools are free of antiblackness (or the view of not considering antiblackness at all) perpetuate antiblackness and the associated violence that disproportionately impacts Black children. The purpose of my literacy driven BlackCrit Ethnography, was to unearth what Black youth's critical engagements with literacy reveal about antiblackness as it operationalizes as symbolic violence in their urban schooling and societal experiences. Specifically, I relied on the language and literacy practices Black youth embody as they navigate urban education in ways that pinpoint the criticality of Blackness and antiblackness in their lives. My study was guided by the following questions: (1) What understandings of antiblackness emerge through Black youth's critical engagements with literacy? (2) How do Black youth's understandings of antiblackness through critical engagements with literacy function as resistance to antiblackness? Data collection for my project included audio-visual recorded after-school sessions, literacy artifacts, observations, interviews,

dialogic journaling, and student academic and disciplinary data. The study took place during the 2016-2017 academic year with nine Black youth (six girls, three boys) at an urban high school in Philadelphia, PA. The Black youth informed me how they operate as texts that are deeply critical of antiblackness. In order to exist in an anti-Black nation-state, the youth demonstrated the ways they individually and collectively operate as critical textual sites or archives of Blackness, that when properly engaged, have the potential to be expressed in ways that oppose and lessen the material and psychic impacts of antiblackness. Moreover, the space we cultivated that was Black-centric, proved to be crucial for affirming and cultivating the development of these textualities. Despite the precarity of Black life resulting from the many ways antiblackness is sustained in U.S. social institutions such as public schools, this research establishes the brilliance of Black youth to center their joy as a radical act of resistance to the symbolic violence of antiblackness. They do this through strategic, purposeful engagements with literacy.

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*There are nights when I cry for Latasha Harlins
And other Black youth long gone, buried
In the soil their ancestors knew/know all too well
And yet, I have never met Latasha, Tamir, etc.*

*I have met them only in my dreams
Dreams that will never come true, here
Dreams that perhaps never should, because
they are free where(ever) they are
I simply dream of freedom.*

*In dedication to the Black children who are free
and those who dare to dream of and fight for freedom.*

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

I open my dissertation research by outlining the ways the unique experiences of Black people in the United States of America (U.S. and America) get conflated with larger systems of oppression that renders the specific violence against Blacks invisible. This is achieved through the detailing of my own experiences as a Black person in the U.S. This invisibility—which I purport is often facilitated by the urban school—causes Black youth to misrecognize antiblackness, which is the issue that brought me to my study. Throughout my dissertation I argue that black youth textualities can serve as vehicles to disrupt this misrecognition, so I then take time to briefly define textualities. Next, I introduce and frame the problem for which my research addresses, which is that antiblackness directly frames how urban schools are organized for the education of Black children. For this, my research focuses on Black youth deeply theorizing antiblackness in their urban school and society and then using those documentations as ways to liberate themselves from the society and schools which enact violence against them, including the urban educators which by nature of their professional position contribute to such violence. This is followed by my outline of how I address the problem: I rely on the language and literacy practices Black youth embody as they navigate urban education in ways that pinpoint the criticality of race and racism (Blackness and antiblackness) in their lives. Moreover, I explain my use of symbolic violence as a way to theorize how antiblackness is operationalized in urban schools. My dissertation and larger research agenda exists across three fields, including Language and Literacy, Urban Education, and Critical Race Studies. Rooted in critical race theory (CRT), I engaged in a Black Critical Theory (BlackCrit) ethnography. I then share my epistemology and positionality, which are both centered on Black ways of knowing that emerge from the antiblackness that frames Black life. Lastly, I detail what I hope my dissertation

accomplishes in the fields of Language and Literacy, Urban Education, and Critical Race Studies.

BACKGROUND

Eyes on the Prize: Misrecognizing Antiblackness and Delusions of Racial Equality

I was raised in a household that was rich in racial literacy (Guinier, 2003, 2004; Sealey-Ruiz, 2012, 2013)—my African American parents routinely and frankly discussed how Black people in America (and Black people throughout the world) were psychologically and physically oppressed as a result of racism or what I came to know more specifically as antiblackness (Day, 2015; Dumas, 2016a; Morrill & Tuck, 2016; Moten, 2013; Sexton, 2008; Sharpe, 2016; Wilderson III, 2010). However, larger American discourses of racial progress—the belief and positioning of past wrongdoings against Blacks as constricted to the past, thus eliminating the possibility for them to ever happen again—led me to believe that the racism I learned about, would never be as bad as it was for example in eras such as U.S. chattel slavery or Jim Crow. As a child, I could not have predicted that my early adult years would exist in a heightened context of racial terror against Blacks, which is the current era of #BlackLivesMatter. I was never shown any evidence that racial equality for Blacks would be truly obtained, yet, I was led to believe that it would happen and in some moments in my life, I thought it was slowly happening. For example, I remember learning about the brutal beating of Rodney King, which took place two years after I was born, and developing a deep understanding of violence against Black bodies, but not necessarily thinking that incidents such as this would continue throughout my lifetime. Similarly, in learning about Elizabeth Eckford attempting to attend Little Rock Central High, I never thought that I would show up to an all-white school and be turned away by a white mob screaming for me to be lynched. Incidents such as these were not in the realm of my social

imagination (Mills, 2000), although perhaps they should have been. Discourses regarding post-racial (especially post-racial violence) ideologies worked to distance the past or rather bury it. However, I came to realize that broad conversations of racism (a system working to oppress all non-whites) and post-racialism caused me to not understand or rather misrecognize the specificity of antiblackness—the human race’s necessity for violence against Black people (Wilderson III, 2017)—as a permanent fixture of American life. Herein lies the issue that brought me to my dissertation: The unique experiences of Black people in this country get conflated with larger systems of oppression that work to render the specific ways violence comes to frame Black life as invisible. As a result, as Black people move through the world and are naming incidents that they feel are deeply racialized and violent, non-Blacks are able to dismiss these claims by noting that they only (or at least disproportionately) happen to Black people—making it a Black problem, not an American problem. Through this, I came to understand that antiblackness does not have to look like the beating of Rodney King or the turning away of Elizabeth Eckford, and in fact, that it will most likely never look like these images. My dissertation works to unearth the ways antiblackness operates in the lives of Black youth—as revealed through their voices and lived experiences—in an effort to lessen the ways it gets misrecognized.

Not an Elegy for the *Prize*: Toward Recognizing Antiblackness

As a child who attended predominately urban Black schools, I knew that the urban school served as a prime site for the ways Black youth learn to misrecognize antiblackness as business as usual practice. Influenced by Milner, Murray, Farinde, and Delale-O’Connor (2015) my conceptualization of “urban education and urban sociocultural and sociopolitical contexts” (p. 531) encapsulates (1) being educated in or adjacent to a large U.S. city, (2) serving a population

that is predominately historically marginalized youth of color, and (3) that serves a range of socio-economic backgrounds, with a majority of students coming from low-income families. For example, in urban schooling, Black students are often expected to have the capacity to handle the dilapidated buildings, decades old textbooks, and inexperienced teachers (Kozol, 1991). This gross display of antiblackness however, becomes seen as normal and expected (not seen as antiblackness). The efforts of my parents to prepare me to move through life with a deep consciousness about being Black, particularly being aware of the overt and covert ways racism can and will be enacted against me (e.g. police brutality and school segregation), were often countered by the idealism of racial equality. American schooling, the prime most site of socialization (read miseducation per Dr. Carter G. Woodson), served as the major platform through which these ideals, that as a Black person I had equal opportunity in America, were communicated to me. As a result, urban schooling worked to undermine or rather replace the consciousness cultivated by my parents and the broader Black community around the realities of existing as a Black person in the world; the reality being that antiblackness being endemic prevents Blacks from receiving full equality. Needless to say, I was conflicted coming of age as a Black child in America. I was expected to believe that race relations in America were better than the past and that I had an equal opportunity in this world in my future. Curricular tools such as the 1992 documentary *Eyes on the Prize* worked to instill this idealism. The underlying thesis of the documentary is simple: Black people have had a difficult time in America due to racism, but as time moves forward, racism decreases and life for Blacks gets better. A major example used in my lifetime to support this thesis has been the election of America's first Black president, Barack Obama. The *prize* referenced in the title of the documentary is assumed to be a combination of freedom, racial equality, and the American dream. The reality, however, is that Black people

have been looking for the *prize* since they were first forcefully brought to this country. Of the countless times I have been shown this documentary throughout middle and high school by my mainly white teachers, in conjunction with other curricular tools that work to instill ideals of racial progress, no one ever articulated the (im)possibility of Black people reaching the *prize*, and that perhaps, we should focus our eyes on a prize that is not structurally unattainable. Black people must reframe ideals of this *prize* and create their own, one that is centered from and in their unique experiences with the U.S., the world.

My interests in examining a permanent barrier—antiblackness—that created the conditions for the *prize* to be unattainable to Black people in America frames the current study. It is important I note that as a former secondary English teacher in inner-city Philadelphia, I became both interested in examining the ways antiblackness operates in the lives of Black youth, and more so, I wanted to examine the ways Black youth use literacy (and the ways Black youth are embodiments of literacy) to make sense of antiblackness. Black people have always used literacy to author themselves out of the confines of antiblackness to make life anew (Anderson, 1988; Edwards, McMillon, & Turner, 2015; Fisher, 2008; Williams, H.A., 2009) by focusing on their own prizes; prizes not centered on achieving racial equality, but rather on the cultivation of consciousness, affirmation, and uplift of themselves and the larger Black community. In other words, the creation of Black life in America is not and cannot be rooted in the idealism of racial equality in a context designed in violence against Black people. In 2014 during an Outkast Reunion Tour, musical artist Andre 3000 (André Benjamin) wore a jumpsuit that read “Across cultures darker people suffer the most, why?” This rhetorical question by Benjamin invites us to understand that antiblackness is an ideological and physical phenomena that persists globally. Moreover, I view the question as a charge for “darker people” to confront antiblackness by

wrestling with old and new forms of life making that refuse antiblackness. In this work, I engage this question posed by Benjamin—and similar questions by countless others—through my examination of antiblackness in the lives of urban Black youth through the ways they rely on their critical engagements with literacy to compose textualities that fashion life beyond suffering. I think Benjamin’s question is provocative, but incomplete. Therefore, I remix and extend it by asking, Antiblackness causes darker people to suffer the most across cultures, but what are these communities doing to understand and refuse this suffering? Specifically for my work, how do the ways Black youth compose themselves in an anti-black society allow them to extend themselves beyond antiblackness? Here, the multiple literacies engaged by my participants demonstrate the necessity to abandon pursuits of the *prize*, and to compose attainable futures rooted in refusals of antiblackness.

Black youth textualities as key to recognizing antiblackness. I theorize *textualities* in this dissertation as the way people use literacy (reading, writing, and speaking) to make meaning. The combination of reading, writing, and speaking that a person uses to read the word and the world represent an individual’s textuality. So, when speaking of Black youth textualities, I am referring to how the multiple literacy enactments birthed from the unique social location of being Black in America represent the ways Black youth compose themselves in an anti-Black world, and moreover, how they use these self-compositions to read the world around them—to engage in and with America. Kirkland (2017) discussed the substance of Black lives as Black (textual) life. Cherry-McDaniel’s (2017) conceptualization on the utility of Black textualities becomes useful here:

Black textualities can provide new forms of texts and embrace new ways of reading and articulating the world, for the purpose of self-determination, performing citizenship, and

engaging in meaningful activism. Black textualities...provide blueprints for constructing robust forms of human existence, life, and love (p. 46).

As put forth by Kirkland (2017, p. 16) “Black textual expressivities” or “the hidden and excluded textual expressions of those who have been traditionally silenced in ELA” create pathways for the re-envisioning a new world. The textualities produced from my Black youth participants then, and more specifically the ways their actual bodies quite literally operate as texts themselves (living works moving through the world being read—often being misread—and reading), serves as a powerful and most precise analytic for examining antiblackness as it operates within their lives.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Antiblackness as U.S. Social Practice

The world is wrong. You can't put the past behind you. It's buried in you; it's turned your flesh into its own cupboard.

Claudia Rankine, *Citizen*

The history of the United States of America is the history of Black suffering in America. Here, it is important that I note settler colonialism or the striving “for the dissolution of native societies” (Wolfe, 2006, p. 388). Within the United States context, the presence of “Indigenous people obstructed settlers’ access to land” (p. 388), resulting in attempts to eliminate the populations through actions such as genocide and blood quantum regulations. In terms of enslaved Blacks, their presence augmented the wealth of white slave owners, due to their lack of knowledge of the land and their free labor, which resulted in their exploitation (Wolfe, 2006). While my dissertation is focused on examinations of Blackness and antiblackness, the larger project of U.S. settler colonialism that is interconnected with antiblackness, particularly the ideal that such invasion functions as a structure and not an event (Wolfe, 1994, 2006), works to serve

as a macro analytic. Settler colonialism (read invasion) set the conditions or rather was the condition that facilitated the subjugation of Blacks on U.S. soil. The foundation of the U.S. and how privilege and disadvantage is bestowed upon groups is built on land theft and Native American removal and the social construction of Blacks as necessary, yet disposable beings; a construction that continues today. “Where colonial dispossession is the paradigmatic signifier of white settler supremacy” in many white settler colonies, “in the continental United States it has been the legacy of slavery and antiblack racism” (Day, 2015, p. 103).

Throughout history, both Blackness and being Black have been routinely projected by the dominant cultural force of whiteness as having little to no value to society (Browne, 2015; Kendi, 2016; Patterson, 1982, 1998; Roberts, 1999; Wilderson III, 2010; Wacquant, 2001). The lack of value Blackness has been positioned to have is largely illustrated through the violence enacted against Blackness and Black bodies. I engaged in my dissertation research understanding that the violence experienced by Blacks is a social practice in that everyone in U.S. society knows it happens and will continue to happen (Young, 2011). Therefore, when considering violence against Black people, it is not so much about examining individual horrible acts (while important), but more so about understanding it’s systemic character or rather the context of antiblackness which allows violence against Blacks to become social practice (Young, 2011). Like racism in American society, antiblackness is an immutable fact (Dumas, 2016a; Moten, 2013; Sexton, 2008; Sharpe, 2016; Wilderson III, 2010). This necessity for violence exists within the social construction of Blacks as property, problem people, and inherently criminal: these social constructions were solidified during U.S. chattel slavery and still serve as the predominant ways that Blackness is constructed in America. For example, after the death of Freddie Gray in Baltimore, ABC News used the word “thug” roughly 800 times to refer to the

predominately (if not all) Black protesters (Greenwald & Jones, 2016). The anti-Black conditions of slavery continue to unfold into the 21st century because we are living in the “wake”: “to be *in* the wake is to occupy and to be occupied by the continuous and changing present of slavery’s as yet unresolved unfolding” (Sharpe, 2016, pp.13-14). The “wake” provides the rationale or framework for interpreting why events eerily similar to Rodney King’s beating (1991) and Elizabeth Eckford being denied access to equitable schooling (1957) persist. Or worse, why the #BlackLivesMatter era defining murder of Trayvon Martin (2012) and the choking and flipping of Shakara at Spring Valley High (2015) have become even justified in the American psyche. Antiblackness has always been core to U.S. social practice.

Anti-Black U.S. Social Practice and the Organization of Urban Schooling

Slavery served as the context for Blacks—property—to be victims of gratuitous and wanton violence (Hartman, 1997; Omi & Winant, 2014; Sithole, 2016; Yancy, 2016). The economic institution of slavery was enacted, in part, to maintain whiteness as superior, and thus, such violence against Blacks became a necessity (Hadden, 2001; Hartman, 1997, 2008; Marable, 2015). In the afterlife of slavery, marked by “skewed life chances, limited access to health and education, premature death, incarceration, and impoverishment” (Hartman, 2008, p. 6), enacting violence against Black people to sustain white supremacy endures. Toni Morrison captured the violence present in the afterlife of slavery in her Time Magazine interview, *The Pain of Being Black*, when she stated, “Black people are victims of an enormous amount of violence. None of those things can take place without the complicity of the people who run the schools and the city” (Angelo, 1994). Therefore, the idea that Blackness is inherently problematic in the public imaginary—needing to be marginalized or disposed of—directly frames how urban schools are organized for the education of Black children. This is a problem of public schooling for which

my research aims to respond. The tendency to view schools as free of antiblackness (read violence free) undermines changes in schooling curriculum, climate, and policy that work toward equity for Black children. Instead, the prevailing belief that schools are free of antiblackness (or the view of not considering antiblackness at all) perpetuate antiblackness and the associated violence that disproportionately impacts Black children. Woodson (1933) gave us insight into this when he explained that American schooling depresses and crushes “the spark of genius in the Negro by making him feel that his race does not amount to much and never will measure up to the standards of other peoples” (p. xiii). As Sojoyner (2016) outlined, “the formal education of Black people as articulated by the U.S. nation-state has been about the suppression of Black freedom” (p. xi); thusly, contributing to schooling as a site of Black suffering (Dumas, 2014). The enormous amount of violence enacted against Blacks by both the schools they attend and the cities in which they live, is only able to occur because this violence lies at the root of American history. The complicity then, of the people who run the urban schools persists because antiblackness is synonymous with American life, which makes it difficult for both Blacks and non-Blacks to see it or rather differentiate it from every day (business as usual) interactions between Blacks and non-Blacks.

While the endemic nature of antiblackness to America frames the lives of urban Black children, as discovered in my upbringing, larger racial discourses (e.g. post-racial, race neutral, and colorblind ideologies) work to position antiblackness as a nonfactor in their social and academic worlds. Moreover, antiblackness and the context of American history which birthed it (U.S. chattel slavery), is often categorized as an issue and ideology of America’s past that has no impact on current or future time and space. As a result, this ahistorical view often frames research on the urban schooling of Black youth that typically focuses on broader conceptions of

racism, without actually addressing the ways antiblackness, specifically, frames the organization of Black youth schooling. Moreover, research has not examined how the presence of antiblackness in the lives of Black youth play a role in their navigation of society and the urban school. The overlooking of the effects of antiblackness in the lives of Black youth in urban schooling is revealed by the fact that “thus far there has been little theorizing in education on the specificity of anti-Black racism” or what Dumas (2016a) contends “is the broader terrain of anti-blackness” (p. 12). Moreover, there is no research that documents how Black youth engage in this theorizing specific to the ways they understand antiblackness’ operation in their everyday schooling experiences. Structural attempts to put the *past* framing the conditions for urban Black youth in America behind us, lead Black youth to believe that the systems governing American social life and education are equal and fair, and that any failure to thrive in such systems is primarily a result of their inadequacy, and by consequence, their Blackness.

Since school environments, curriculum, policies and individual educators have a documented history of creating and sustaining the anti-black experiences of Black students that impact their social and academic lives (Anderson, 1988; Carter, 2005; Dumas, 2014, 2016a, 2016b; Ferguson, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Loewen, 2008; M. Morris, 2016; Noguera, 2003), urban teachers and urban teacher educators must acknowledge schools as sites of antiblackness and thus sites of violence. While coming to understand urban schooling as a site of anti-Black violence, educators of Black youth must also confront the ways they are implicated in the necessity for violence against Black children. As a body of institutions in a nation predicated on antiblackness, urban education in the U.S., is not simply a site that is influenced by antiblackness, but rather part and parcel to its functioning. For this, the educators housed in urban schools, are not simply helpless bystanders who have no choice but to adapt to inequity

driven by antiblackness, but rather are key facilitators in its production. Urban educators can work to disrupt the cycle of complicity regarding the violence enacted against Black children. Furthermore, once confronted, educators of Black youth must work to continuously lessen the necessary violence against Black children enacted in/by schools—understanding this violence as the total and permanent climate of the urban schooling of Black youth. With this understanding, the perpetuity of the entangled relationship of antiblackness and violence, educators of Black youth must note that this is due to violence in response to Blackness functioning as a regime, a structure and not an act or performance (Wilderson III, 2017). What this means is that addressing antiblackness is not a finite problem to be solved, but rather an unsolvable problem that needs to be continuously and intentionally addressed and resisted, nonetheless. Urban educators, particularly those who are non-Black, who claim to commit themselves to Black youth “must re-examine themselves constantly,” and understand that they must “take on a new form of existence; they can no longer remain as they were.” (Freire, 2000, pp. 60-61)

Disrupting Antiblackness: Centering Black Youth As Urban School Transformers

While urban educators of Black youth must work to confront how they are implicated in antiblackness in urban schooling, my dissertation does not primarily focus on this or even privilege this line of inquiry. For prioritizing this line of inquiry would mean to conduct research that first and foremost worked to benefit the 82% white teaching force and the 80% white individuals who serve as principals in our nation (U.S. Dept. of Ed., 2013). If I did this, solely focused on how my research in a majority Black, urban school could benefit the majority white educators of the U.S., I would be directly contributing to the violence of Black children. Given this, my dissertation prioritizes Black youth and their ability to make sense of antiblackness as a way to author *themselves* outside of antiblackness. Thusly, my work positions Black youth as the

future of urban education (urban education transformers) and American societal transformation by directly engaging in what Freire (2000) refers to as the “great humanistic and historical task of the oppressed” (p. 44). In other words, my research focuses on Black youth deeply theorizing antiblackness in their urban school and society and then using those documentations as ways to liberate themselves and the society and schools which enact violence against them, including the urban educators which by nature of their professional position contribute to the violence. Freire (2000, p.44) explained,

Only power that springs from the weakness of the oppressed will be sufficiently strong to free both. Any attempt to “soften” the power of the oppressor in deference to the weakness of the oppressed almost always manifests itself in the form of false generosity; indeed, the attempt never goes beyond this.

In efforts to reject research steeped in false generosity or false empathy (Delgado 1996; Warren & Hotchkins, 2015), I work to unearth the power that springs from or rather is already present in Black youth (their textualities) as the tools that can and will provide new insights for the ways urban schooling begins to better and more directly address antiblackness.

Through this centering of urban Black youth theorizations of antiblackness, necessary structural and pedagogical implications for educators of Black youth are birthed, but more importantly, Black youth utilizing their collective knowledge and resistance of anti-blackness as a compass to developing pedagogies of possibility are birthed. As I will reveal throughout my dissertation, Black youth have compelling things to say regarding urban school teaching and learning. Moreover, as Kinloch (2012, p. 4) explained, “it’s past time for teachers, teacher educators, researchers, and other interested persons to listen to their opinion in ways that center students in curricular work, pedagogical practices, and educational policies.” As historic and

contemporary witnesses and receivers of anti-Black violence, Black youth must actively engage in raising their consciousness in regard to how their school environments, policies, individual educators, and curriculum is rooted in a necessity of violence against their bodies. Carter (2008, 2005) theorized this type of consciousness as critical race consciousness.

When students possess a critical race consciousness, they demonstrate an awareness and understanding of race as a potential barrier to their schooling and life success. They also understand the historical and current impact that racism has in perpetuating social inequality in America, particularly for members of the African American racial group (Carter, 2008, p. 14).

Black youth must come to learn that Black people will continue to be brutalized in the streets of America and continue to be denied equitable opportunities in the classrooms of America. Indeed, decades from now, a new era of #BlackLivesMatter will take form. Understanding this is not meant to construct a sad reality, but rather, “if we are lucky, the knowledge of this positioning avails is particular ways of re/seeing, re/inhabiting, and re/imagining the world” (Sharpe, 2016, p. 22). The Black youth I worked with provide us a clear example of how urban youth and urban schools serving Black youth (and all other context and populations) might take up the necessary work of constructing the world in a way that is unfamiliar, in a way that is not predicated on antiblackness.

ADDRESSING THE PROBLEM

Recognizing Antiblackness through Literacy, Urban Education, and Critical Race Studies

Considering the omnipresent nature of antiblackness (its ability to cross/push/construct boundaries of thought, time, and space), I respond to the problem of the ways antiblackness works to frame how society and urban schooling is organized for the education of Black youth in

an interdisciplinary manner. My dissertation is rooted in the fields of Language and Literacy, Urban Education, and Critical Race Studies: I rely on the language and literacy practices Black youth embody as they navigate urban education in ways that pinpoint the criticality of race and racism (Blackness and antiblackness) in their lives. Since my research examines antiblackness—an inherently violent phenomenon—as it plays out in the everyday lives of Black youth (seldom overt and physical enactments of violence), I specifically looked at how Black youth witness and receive enactments of antiblackness as they function as symbolic violence. Bourdieu (2001) explained symbolic violence as “a gentle violence, imperceptible and invisible even to its victims, exerted through the most part by the purely symbolic channels of communication and cognition (more precisely, misrecognition), recognition, or even feeling” (p. 1). I was drawn to addressing the ways antiblackness operationalizes as symbolic violence (a violence that thrives on its ability to get overlooked due to being misrecognized) in urban schooling, because as I outlined at the onset of this chapter, the miseducation of Black children in urban schooling is deeply connected to them being taught to misrecognize antiblackness. This misrecognition then, still provides the platform for the violence of antiblackness to exist, however in a more “gentle” and “invisible” form. When referring to symbolic violence as it plays out in the schooling of Black boys regarding “punishment practices as symbolic enforcers of a cultural hegemony in the hidden curriculum,” Ferguson (2000, p. 51) outlined symbolic violence as the “painful, damaging, mortal wounds inflicted by the wielding of words, symbols, and standards” (p. 51). These wounds (read violence), I argue, are dictated by antiblackness operating as symbolic violence.

An Urban Black Critical Ethnography on the Textual Lives of Black Youth

The language and literacy practices of Black youth, the site of my critical analysis, served as the major vehicle for identifying the words, symbols, standards, and experiences that make antiblackness recognizable. Stemming from Critical Race Theory (CRT), I employed a Critical Race ethnographic design rooted in qualitative methodologies. I used Critical Race ethnography (Duncan, 2002, 2005; Vaught, 2011) because it allowed me to operate with the belief that race and therefore racism is present in every aspect of American life. I was not researching whether or not antiblackness against Black youth in urban schools exists, but rather how it exists. While working with the students, it became clear that my critical race lens and analysis would need to be extended in order to better make sense of their experiences as Black youth. As a result, I specified my Critical Race ethnography by extending it with Black Critical Theory (BlackCrit). As Dumas and ross (2016) outlined, CRT as a general theory of racism cannot adequately interrogate what Wynter (1989) refers to as the specificity of the Black. CRT is not positioned to address how antiblackness (which is different from white supremacy) “informs and facilitates racist ideology and institutional practice” (Dumas & ross, 2016, p. 417). My BlackCrit ethnography then, is not meant to reject the larger project of CRT—as its located within the broader critical race project—but rather as a framing that provides space for further development and imagination as the field thinks more deeply about Blackness in the social construction of white supremacy (Dumas & ross, 2016).

Overall, ethnography is a useful methodology in that it is “about representing what’s already represented in our participants’ lives, bringing those hidden textualities of human experience to the fore” (Kirkland, 2013, p. 190). So, the textualities of Black youth as I have stated, have long since documented antiblackness. My goal in this project was to help bring these

textualities to the fore. The data for ethnography is everywhere, which is important in understanding how Black youth make sense of symbolic violence through their engagements with a variety of critical literacy practices, because literacy, too, is everywhere. Lastly, antiblackness is everywhere. The lives of Black youth are “ongoing narratives that deserve telling” (Kirkland, 2013, p. xi), so I highlight these narratives. Daily, Black youth experience antiblackness on multiple levels simply by nature of the color of their skin. As a result, experiencing anti-blackness is so normalized that pinpointing how it operates in one’s life is no easy task. In an effort to lessen the difficulty of this task, I relied directly on the texts of the students’ lives. The dynamic ways Black youth have continuously composed themselves mentally, aesthetically, emotionally, and spiritually, etc., within the racialized context of the United States is the data I sought in this study to allow Black youth, teachers of Black youth, and society to recognize the specific ways this population experiences antiblackness in the form of symbolic violence.

Humanizing and person-centered research. The textualities of Black folk have been speaking, have always spoken up; and through these practices have told America (and the world) about antiblackness—their voices just were not heard and/or neutralized, as attributed to their status as nobodies (Hill, 2017). The fact that antiblackness is undertheorized and understudied in urban education research for example demonstrates this. As a result, my dissertation examines what is already present, theorizations of antiblackness as revealed through the commonplace, everyday language and literacy practices of Black youth. In discussing theoretical and methodological dilemmas in critical approaches to language research, Souto-Manning (2013) highlighted the importance of research looking closely and listening carefully “in order to understand the perspectives and experiences of participants in their own terms rather than

superimposing our own perspectives of what is problematic and needs to be transformed” (p. 201). My project then becomes a study in critical language and literacy, not simply because I as the researcher say it is, but as a result of the “person-centered” exploration of participants deeming what is “problematic and oppressive,” which Souto-Manning (2013, p. 204) noted must be more central to critical language researchers. Moreover, my study is situated within a network of scholars engaging in humanizing research (Paris, 2011b).

Humanizing research is a methodological stance which requires that our inquiries involve dialogic consciousness-raising and the building of relationships of care and dignity for both researchers and participants. Although such a stance is important in all research, it is particularly important when researchers are working with communities who are oppressed and marginalized by systems of inequality based on race, ethnicity, class, gender, and other social and cultural categories. This ethical need for a humanizing stance emerges as both researchers and participants seek to push against inequities not only through the findings of research but also through the research act itself (pp. 140-141).

The dialogic-consciousness raising that takes place in my work arose as a result of my listening and hearing Black youth. So, the dynamical force of my dissertation research is not necessarily the discovery of some novel or rare language and literacy practice that Black youth possess (while there is much to be discussed around the beauty and innovative language and literacy practices of my participants) but rather, it is simply in paying attention to the already existing ways Black youth use language and literacy to critically analyze their worlds. Moreover, the dynamicity of my research comes from the educational possibilities, particularly the development of specific equity forward pedagogies that can emerge when we simply pay

attention to Black youth and the ways that are already engaged in expression and critique and how this can inform urban education. My dissertation serves as both a call and a charge to researchers and educators of Black youth to simply learn from and with the youth they attempt to “study” and “teach”; especially Black youth whose minds and bodies have served far too long as the subjects of violence, symbolic and otherwise. I “expose, disrupt, misdirect, discredit, and otherwise neutralize¹” this silencing by interpreting and extending Black youth’s language and literacy practices to theorize antiblackness as symbolic violence.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Coupled with my interest in the power of literacy to allow individuals to address and analyze critical conditions in their lives, the following research questions are guided by my earnest desire to better understand students’ sense making processes specific to antiblackness, and the ways it operates as symbolic violence in their schooling and societal experiences as Black youth. The chief research questions for my dissertation study are as follows:

1. What understandings of anti-blackness emerge through Black youth’s critical engagements with literacy?
2. How do Black youth’s understandings of antiblackness through critical engagements with literacy function as resistance to antiblackness?

¹ On August 25, 1967, J. Edgar Hoover (then FBI Director) sent a memo to all of the FBI offices, which directed them to “expose, disrupt, misdirect, discredit, and otherwise neutralize the activities of black nationalist, hate-type organizations and groupings, their leadership, spokesmen, membership, and supporters, and to counter their propensity for violence and civil disorder” (Churchill & Vander Wall, 1990, p. 92).

EPISTEMOLOGY AND POSITIONALITY

Insurmountable Black Caskets: Roots for an Epistemological Frame

My epistemology or way of thinking regarding my approach to this research underpins my theoretical perspectives and methodology and vice versa. Before detailing this however, I share a brief vignette that captures these epistemic beliefs.

During the Spring of 2017 I had the opportunity to visit the National Museum of African American History and Culture in the nation's capital. Level C3, "Defending Freedom, Defining Freedom: The Era of Segregation 1876-1968," houses the Emmett Till Memorial. At the center of the curation lies the original casket in which Emmett Till was buried. During my visit, the line to see the casket extended well beyond the Memorial entryway, wrapping around the showroom floor. A quick observation revealed to me that a majority of the people in line at the time were also Black. Entering the memorial was also different from other parts of the museum, as there was a docent at the entryway who periodically repeated the rules of entry, which included things such as no photography and keeping hands off of the casket. In this moment, I wondered why no other particular part of the Museum caused such a gathering, for all of the museum is truly marvelous. Perhaps we all needed to see the vessel which held the destroyed body. Perhaps I waited in line to be reminded or rather to remind myself that at the center of all of the Black history and culture on display, was the fact that, in America, Black people did not own their bodies.

This vignette reveals that my epistemology is directly informed by the violence continuously enacted against Black bodies (antiblackness), particularly, the ways in which the concept of the "wake" and Black people living in the afterlife of slavery serve as the knowledge base that brings me to this research. Considering that it is American heritage to destroy the Black body (Coates,

2015), I came to know (especially after viewing Till's casket) that America has never stopped killing Emmett Till (Tyson, 2017).

This knowing I possess facilitates my axiology or what I believe to be valuable in research. Since Black people experience an enormous amount of violence, I believe that efforts to lessen and subvert this violence (for example, urban schooling working to create environments and curricula that lessen antiblackness) must privilege the voices and experiences of Black people. This is especially true in this heightened era (#BlackLivesMatter) of attacks against Black youth. Decades after Emmett Till, Black youth remain primary targets in society for a denial of their freedom. In Smith's (2014) article "America's Persistent Struggle to Love Black Youth," he explained,

Black children are presently under continual assault by well-maintained practices of white racial domination and exclusion, resulting in the marginalization of Africans and African Americans into adulthood. These children are under attack physically, psychologically and emotionally from the classroom to the movie screen and everything in between. Black children are being unjustly singled out and tormented; while some are denigrated and crucified in the media, others are shot in cold blood for merely wearing a hoodie or listening to loud music.

What becomes understood is that the U.S. has a difficult time seeing Black children as worthy of love, as worthy of being a part of the nation. My position then, is that research must counter and disrupt this unloving of Black youth. Indeed, fighting against the nations struggle to love Black youth is the fight of our current day:

A fight to avenge the unethical murders of folks like Rekia Boyd, Kenneth Chamberlin, Trayvon Martin, Jordan Davis, Renisha McBride and so many others. The black struggle

of the twenty-first century is the global fight to create a new world where black lives matter – a fight for a black future (Brady, 2014).

In order to fight for a Black future, however, we must first fight for our Black children in the here and now. To fight for our children means that we must be willing to expose seemingly race neutral transgressions committed against Black youth in an effort to challenge the ways Black bodies have been routinely controlled, this way Black youth have the ability to create their futures knowing how to refuse antiblackness in meaningful and liberatory ways. For this, my epistemology is aligned with #BlackLivesMatter, as I conduct this research with “an affirmation of Black folks’ humanity, our contributions to this society, and our resilience in the face of deadly oppression” (Garza, 2014). Put simply, in every aspect of my research, I operate with the knowledge that despite America’s history of facilitating Black suffering, not only do Black Lives matter, but that urban schooling must come to hold and operate with such an epistemic belief.

“I am the afterlife of slavery”: An Ancestral Positionality

My entire life as a Black boy who is a descendant of Atlantic chattel slavery provides the context for my positionality that informs my research. The afterlife of the disturbances to Black life that affected my forefathers greet me daily, live with me eternally. In larger conversations of Blackness, it is often communicated that Black history does not begin with slavery. While in conceptualizing global Blackness this is true, in the context of America and in the context of my specific Black identity—a descendant of slaves in the U.S.—Black life on this continent does begin with slavery. Naming slavery as the beginning of Black history (in the U.S.) is important because not only does it capture the fact that slavery was a disruption to the proceeding rich history of global Black life, but it also allows us to understand that Blackness in the U.S. will always exist in the afterlife of slavery. For this, my interests regarding antiblackness in the

“wake” is deeply and intentionally subjective in that every day I exist as a Black person in an anti-Black society. As Freire (2000, p. 50) explained, “To deny the importance of subjectivity in the process of transforming the world and history is naive and simplistic. It is to admit the impossible: a world without people.” So, while I engage in empirical and theoretical research on antiblackness, just as my Black youth participants, I, too, am both directly and indirectly impacted by the presence and effects of antiblackness. For the purpose of this outlining of my positionality, the series of anti-Black events that framed my entry into my doctoral studies serves to further highlight this positionality.

At the onset of beginning my doctoral program in 2013, the public death and abuse of Black youth seemed to be ceaseless. In fact, months before beginning my studies, the trial regarding the murder of 17-year-old Trayvon Martin in Sanford, Florida was being covered on every major news outlet. He was killed by George Zimmerman, a 28-year-old Hispanic white male. Trayvon was returning to the house of his father’s fiancée while carrying Skittles and a fruit drink. Zimmerman, program coordinator for the town’s neighborhood watch, called police to report that Trayvon was walking around looking suspicious and even suggested that he might be on drugs. Police told Zimmerman that he should not follow Trayvon. Moments later, the two got in a scuffle—as a result of Zimmerman continuing to follow him—which ended with Trayvon being shot in the chest at close range. Trayvon was neutralized. Trayvon’s death was/is a necessity in the “wake.” As I prepared to teach my first undergraduate course, TE 250: *Human Diversity, Power, and Opportunity in Social Institutions*, that Fall of 2013, I tuned in daily to witnessing Martin essentially being placed on trial for his own death. TE 250 primarily explores diversity, power, and opportunity as it plays out within America’s schools, a course designed and largely taken by pre-service teachers who are mainly white and female. I began to think about

Trayvon as not just a Black boy on the streets of America, but as a student, and the myriad of ways he has experienced antiblackness throughout the course of his life, especially including in schools. Moreover, I wondered if at Miami Carol City High, where Trayvon attended, if he learned about the breakability of his body; brought on by antiblackness that would eventually result in his death? As a result of this death, which prompted the #BlackLivesMatter movement, for months to come, I was consumed with the question: What implications does the death of Black children have for urban schools, and more so, how are urban schools implicated in the death of Black children? I knew that in order to even begin answering this question that I would need to examine antiblackness.

Unfortunately, the months and years that followed gave me ample opportunities to wrestle with this question, as I witnessed Black people being abused regularly across the nation throughout my studies. For example, Sandra Bland was pulled over for failing to signal in Waller County, Texas and ended up dead in her jail cell three days later on July 13, 2015 (the end of my second year of doctoral studies). Considering that Sandra Bland was pulled over for a simple traffic stop and was beginning a new job, her family and many others believe that she did not commit suicide as the reports reveal, but that she was murdered. In 2016, Bland's family received a 1.9 million settlement for the wrongful death of Sandra. During the summer of 2016 as I was crafting my dissertation proposal, I was being constantly bombarded with the videos of Alton Sterling and Philando Castile—which auto-played on social media without warning—literally dying on film after being shot by white police officers. While these instances are crucial to highlighting the effects of antiblackness, all too often, Black suffering is framed solely through the lens of what happens in the streets of America. This singular framing often causes educators to forget about how this treatment carries over into America's institutions (e.g. our

nation's urban schools) or rather is already embedded within these institutions. As a language and literacy researcher who is committed to the education of Black youth in PK-12 urban spaces, examining the ways Black youth experience the effects of antiblackness in schools in an effort to develop school environments that lessen these effects is of the highest priority in my research agenda, as informed by my positionality.

As Black people were being murdered throughout my doctoral studies, simultaneously, in schools, African American students were seeing their share of violence through a range of symbolically violent events that included but were not limited to: being told not to dress like Santa Clause because Santa is white (Pearson, 2013), being told America does not need another Black president (Clark, 2013), being locked in a closet for time-out (Brown, 2014), and also a school resource officer flipping a student out of her chair and dragging her across the classroom floor (Fausset and Southall, 2015). While these examples—with the exception of the latter—were not physical attacks, they do represent the symbolic violence that students not belonging to the white, dominant race experience in schools as a result or rather in conjunction with white supremacy and antiblackness.

RESEARCH CONTRIBUTIONS

For while the tale of how we suffer, and how we are delighted, and how we may triumph is never new, it always must be heard. There isn't any other tale to tell, it's the only light we've got in all this darkness."

James Baldwin, Sonny's Blues

Blackness Matters

Antiblackness can no longer be overlooked or conflated with broad conversations of racism; this lies at the core of what I want my dissertation to accomplish. The tale of antiblackness, and more so, how Black youth learn to find delight and triumph in spite of antiblackness must be examined and told. To see educators and researchers of Black youth who

are interested in race, social justice and equity rooting their work in the specificity of antiblackness is what I hope this work inspires. It is my goal that the Black youth here, in conjunction with my analysis, reveal the urgent necessity for this shift in research to occur. In line with Smith (1993, p. 76), “In America, race matters, but blackness matters in more detailed ways.” To overlook the mattering of details in the lives of Black youth, which shape Black youth life, is irresponsible. Antiblackness and everything that stems from it, such as symbolic violence and Black suffering, is a problem—not the Black bodies who boldly exist in spite of being shrouded in antiblackness. For this accomplishment to materialize, researchers and educators who engage in work with Black youth must better understand the ways their work and their individual being is implicated in antiblackness. This understanding gives space to then develop pathways to continuously resist antiblackness as it functions in and with their lives.

Antiblackness is a reality in the lives of all Black people. So, research and teaching that attempts to understand and examine Black youth experiences without engaging theorizations of antiblackness, is only further contributing to the historic project of making antiblackness invisible. To engage with Black youth and to not engage antiblackness, renders it as irrelevant to the understanding of Black life in America, this world; which is a violent fallacy. While at a macro level, I imagine the specificity of antiblackness being more directly engaged in research and teaching, below I outline the exact ways I see this accomplishment playing out within the fields of Language and Literacy, Urban Education, and Critical Race Studies.

Blackness and language and literacy. A major way I have articulated antiblackness thus far has been through U.S. chattel slavery. Anti-literacy slave laws and practices, which forced Blacks to steal literacy, did not take into account the ways this would result in the development of literacies that are inherently critical and subversive. In the context of the U.S., I position Black

people as the creators of critical literacy, since literacy in the Black community was birthed out of a need to be cautious of a society which denied them access to traditional, mainstream white ways of knowing. The literacies of Black folk or rather the souls of Black literacies are rooted in criticality, rooted in resisting oppression and surviving being in the “wake.” Put simply, at the core of the souls of Black literacies is the desire to get free or to imagine America otherwise. As a result, when theorizing antiblackness in the lives of Black youth’s educational experiences, their language and literacy practices are necessary, which is why my data collection focuses extensively on these practices. It is my hope that not only do researchers continue conducting research that examines the language and literacy of Black youth, but that all researchers that work with Black youth deeply consider using Black textualities as data collection methods and analytic tools to understand their phenomena under study.

Tuning into the ways Black youth create life and sustain life more abundantly through their language and literacy engagements in an anti-black context, is a pedagogy of getting free, which researchers, educators, and institutions must learn from. With her work with Black males and writing for example, Everett (2016) noted that “we must recognize their complex positionalities and the issues that many of them face on a daily basis” (p. 317). It is my hope, that language and literacy researchers and educators begin to recognize the literacies of Black youth in all of their brilliance. Historically, Black youth have been positioned as uneducable and as nonwriters (Haddix, 2009) or as those incapable of possessing dynamic language and literacy practices. In line with Martin (2011)—although referring to mathematics—, I hope this research serves to help reject these ideals and instead have us “accept, and insist on, the brilliance of Black children as axiomatic.” I want researchers and educators to see the textualities of Black youth as roadmaps and blueprints to social justice: Black youth textualities can serve as mentor

texts to social justice teaching and learning, positioning Black youth as deeply literate. Lastly, I hope my work here contributes to the community of language and literacy scholarship that continues to push the limited ways literacy has been traditionally conceptualized. We must begin to see the lives of Black youth as embodied texts, as living and breathing archives of life that exist across time and space (housing the past, present, and futures of Blackness). When we reach this understanding, the field will immediately have to work to reframe anti-Black ideals of Blacks existing in perpetual and disproportional states of illiteracy.

Blackness and urban education. Urban schooling must confront the realities that frame the life of Black youth that are dictated by antiblackness. As I outlined in the opening of this chapter, Black youth are often deeply aware of the ways their Blackness is positioned as a problem, however, urban schools (in conjunction with other institutions) facilitate the misrecognition of antiblackness. Black youth feeling assaulted, yet schools ignoring or often even denying these assaults, results in a world of violent confusion for Black youth. Through the analysis of antiblackness in the lives of my urban Black participants, I hope that urban schools reverse this misrecognition; instead facilitating the process for students and educators to recognize antiblackness. For example, in the schools that I attended as a youth and those like that of my participants (predominately Black), conversations of racism should and must operate at the specific level of antiblackness. In others words, an urban school serving a majority of Black students must consider a pedagogy that refuses antiblackness opposed to simply engaging in unspecified antiracist teaching pedagogies. While perhaps not as catchy and precise as the language of anti-racist pedagogy, urban schools serving Black youth must build refusals of antiblackness pedagogies, as the unique violence against Black people must be central when working to build better urban teaching and learning spaces.

This hope of mine will require that urban education be attuned with the experiences of Black youth outside of schooling. In a world where one can easily search the internet for an unarmed Black child being shot by police or vigilante citizen, learn about how the amount of Blacks in prison has distorted our sense of reality, or walk through a neighborhood and see Black people being pushed out due to gentrification, it is the responsibility of urban schools to understand that they are implicated in these processes. To examine the urban school without examining the urban society is to engage in an incomplete analysis. I hope my dissertation helps to scaffold this knowing. How might urban school personnel come to deeply understand the historic and contemporary presence of antiblackness in urban schooling and then use that understanding as a tool to build more just and equitable schooling environments (i.e. curriculum, school policies, and school organization)? While this iteration of my work does not yet fully answer this, my hope is that it inspires answers to this question, and more so, demonstrations of what this actually can look like. For example, perhaps urban school leaders will begin to conduct professional development and other learning opportunities around antiblackness; engaging teachers and all staff in studying the history of Black life in America as it relates to schooling. From this research and my future research, I imagine walking into urban schools and hearing leaders and teachers engaging in dialogue and practices around lessening the effects of antiblackness. Moreover, at the core of this is my hope for Black youth to collectively work together to recognize antiblackness, name it, and bring it to the attention of their urban schools.

Blackness and critical race studies. In this project, I use Dumas and ross' (2016) foundational conceptualization of Black Critical Theory (BlackCrit). While the work of critical race scholars in education has set a necessary foundation to research with Black youth, in order to unearth the specificity of antiblackness, BlackCrit becomes necessary. I note here that I do not

see my use of BlackCrit here or in future research as a replacement of CRT, but rather always in partnership with CRT. In other words, I see CRT and BlackCrit both needing to be employed to make sense of the experiences of Blackness in America, but that only using CRT would be incomplete. It is my hope that critical race scholarship that looks at Black experiences in the U.S. begins to use BlackCrit and build on the early theoretical foundations that have been outlined by Dumas and ross (2016) and the empirical foundations that I provide through this research. From this future scholarship that I hope emerges from inspiration gathered from my project, I hope that BlackCrit becomes a way that we can train urban educators on transforming their schools to take an active stance on refusing antiblackness.

Considering that CRT and BlackCrit are rooted in the ways racism and antiblackness are endemic to America, respectively, I want my work to encourage more critical race scholars to more intentionally use American history as an analytic, as I do here. For example, my deep reliance on slavery as a way to theorize and track the currents of antiblackness in urban schools is something that I hope to see more of. As I do with my framing of literacy, what might it mean for language and literacy scholars using CRT and BlackCrit to use the anti-literacy laws of slavery to examine the impossibility of Black people ever being seen as brilliant enactors of literacy or even those capable of being literate? How might language and literacy researchers use CRT to build teaching and learning that grapples with this (im)possibility or that authors a teaching and learning outside of that? In this push for history in BlackCrit, I also hope that my work inspires critical race studies to centralize more Black theorist in educational research such as Dr. Carter G. Woodson. Even in this dissertation, for instance, I rely on Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence (which I supplement with other theories of violence), but what might it mean for me to develop a theory of educational violence as informed by say Frantz Fanon or to even

build my own theory? In my use of BlackCrit then, I hope to make the use of BlackCrit a prominent theoretical and methodological frame when working with and for Black youth.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

Antiblackness is a reality of life in the U.S. This reality—the omnipresence of antiblackness—not only organizes the systems and structures of Black youth’s social worlds, but it also organizes the urban schools they attend. Despite Black youth’s daily experiences with the material and psychic effects of antiblackness, post-racial and race-neutral discourses espoused by urban schools, facilitate the misrecognition of antiblackness by Black youth. In other words, just as in U.S. society, the U.S. urban school often operates as if antiblackness is not a reality, robbing Black youth of the truth, which causes them to interpret the overabundance of anti-Black assaults they experience as their responsibility. Even though this systemic facilitation of misrecognition in urban schooling exists, Black people have always possessed the capacity to name and detail antiblackness, particularly when provided spaces to do so. Moreover, Black people have not simply pinpointed antiblackness, but they have relied on their textualities to compose (write or create) entire existences that subvert and disrupt antiblackness. This subversion, which is rooted in the inherent criticality of the text and textures of their lives, is what propels the youth in my study to use their critical awareness of antiblackness to persevere and create meaningful lives in spite of antiblackness. Through my fusion of Language and Literacy, Urban Education, and Critical Race Studies, my Black Critical Ethnography demonstrates the possibility of CRT scholarship as social justice praxis. In this humanizing and person-centered research, I did not simply hear what these youth had to say, but in partnership with them, facilitated opportunities for the seeds of resistance to antiblackness to be planted.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter presents a review of literature that highlights the way my research is in conversation with the fields of Critical Race Studies, Urban Education, and Language and Literacy. Moreover, it provides the rationale for my study while also revealing how my work extends the work of these fields. The chapter is divided into two major sections: the theoretical framework and the review of the literature. The theoretical frameworks I use to guide my study are Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Sociocultural Literacies. Within CRT I specifically use BlackCrit and within Sociocultural Literacies I use Critical Literacy.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

Critical Race Theory (CRT)

Critical Race Theory (CRT), particularly as it has been theorized and applied in education, forms the first foundational component for my theoretical framework. CRT comes out of Critical Legal Studies (CLS). CLS, the successor of Legal Realism, emerged in the era of the Civil Rights Movement and Vietnam War, arguing that “the power and dominion of certain groups (white, male) over an unequal status quo was continuing, and social and political change was needed” (Taylor, 2009, p. 2). The advances of the 1950s and 1960s regarding the dismantling of discrimination in schooling, hiring, and housing, caused a major backlash against such progressive reforms to take form. CRT evolved in response to this backlash, which revealed itself as a “stalling of traditional civil rights litigation in the United States arenas such as legislative districting, affirmative action, criminal sentencing, and campus speech codes (Taylor, 2009, p. 2). CRT focuses directly on the effects of race and racism, while simultaneously addressing the hegemonic system of White supremacy on the “meritocratic” system (DeCuir and Dixson, 2004).

The legal system has been able to perpetuate the racial hierarchy in the U.S. for so long due to its colorblind nature, which rests on the belief that all men are created equal, therefore race and/or color are seldom considered as factors in meting out decisions. CRT emerged as a challenge to the “aforementioned ideology of color blindness, and the accompanying political discourse, viewing it as a pretext for racial discrimination” (Parker & Stovall, 2004, 173). CRT uses counter-stories or narratives, as well as historical triangulation of facts that have an impact on present-day discrimination, to argue that a color-blind view of race upholds white supremacy in terms of sweeping away racial classifications, but leaves political majorities intact, which in turn uses the power of racism to undermine minority interest” (Parker & Stovall, 2004, 173).

For example, within the past few years there have been several racially charged murder cases, which resulted in dead Black citizens and free non-Black citizens—the majority of them white males. Many individuals across racial lines believed to varying extents that race played a factor in these murders, however due to America’s color-blind jurisprudence, the fact of racial intent becomes almost impossible to argue and justify. While working to address overtly racist and violent acts such as murders, CRT’s purpose is not only to address these heinous acts, but also more general everyday racism, “where racism and prejudice are embedded in the simple psychological decision-making rules that we use to make inferences and draw conclusions about groups” (Parker & Stovall, 2004, 173). According to Gotanda (1991), CRT “offers a framework that would attack seemingly neutral forms of racial subordination, while counteracting the devaluation of minority cultural and racial institutions in a color-blind society” (as cited by Parker & Stovall, 2004, 174). CRT is positioned perfectly as a theoretical framework to better

understand the ways urban Black youth experience the embeddedness of antiblackness in their schooling and societal lives.

CRT is currently in a prime stage for serious application in disciplines beyond legal studies due to decades of foundational research that has solidified and affirmed it as necessary and fruitful practice. For example, in education, many scholars identify as critical race theorists (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004; Dixson & Rousseau, 2005; Gillborn, 2005, 2008; Harper, Patton, & Wodden, 2009; Howard & Navarro, 2016; Ladson-Billings, 2005; López, 2003; Milner & Laughter, 2015; Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000; Yosso, 2005); many “who use CRT’s ideas to understand issues of school discipline and hierarchy, tracking, affirmative action, high-stakes testing, controversies over curriculum and history, and alternative and charter schools” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012, 6). The pervasiveness of color-blind ideologies in educational sites, especially those serving African American students, and other struggles over race have led scholars to argue for the importance of using CRT as an educational framework (Parker & Stovall, 2004, 174). In this tradition, I consider myself a critical race theorist, evident through my narrowing in on the specific schooling hierarchies and controversies informed by antiblackness in urban schooling. The work I outline here on antiblackness operationalizing as symbolic violence as narrated through the voices and textualities of my Black youth participants is not only timely for a CRT discussion in education, but also highly appropriate. As highlighted by Taylor (2009, p. 1),

CRT comes from a long tradition of resistance to the unequal and unjust distribution of power and resources along political, economic, racial, and gendered lines in America, and across the globe, with the support of legitimacy of the legal system which makes possible the perpetuation of the established power relationships of society. Critical legal thinkers

have long resisted this maintenance of the status quo and have worked to identify and eradicate various forms of oppression in the courts, in our classrooms, and throughout society. CRT shares the emancipatory hopes of these forebears whose moral compass led their efforts towards the call for human freedom and equality.

While the violence of antiblackness as it operates in the schooling and social lives of urban Black youth is at the core of what I examine in this study, the emancipatory hopes and reimagined futures revealed through the voices of my participants is paramount. My intention in using CRT is twofold: 1) to expose the everyday common place nature of racism enacted against urban Black youth in school and society, and 2) to theorize how this exposé might serve as a roadmap to the ways urban Black youth author themselves into more emancipatory futures. In other words, as a theoretical frame, CRT helps me to disrupt the misrecognition of antiblackness in the urban schooling and societal experiences of my participants.

According to Parker & Stovall (2004), CRT and education seek to foster an engagement with praxis and movement toward social justice in K-12 schools and higher educational institutions. Through the partnership I developed with my Black youth participants, the development of practical ways for them to affirm their humanity, while also providing educators the ability to acknowledge the humanity of Black students and their own humanity through listening to these rich voices emerged. I include the central tenets of CRT as outlined by Vaught (2011), who used this framing of CRT tenets to engage in her critical race ethnography on public schooling.

- CRT posits that racism is endemic to the United States, and a permanent factor of American social and political life. So, a formative CRT focus is how to understand the function of racial oppression through ideologies and institutions that are integral to the dominant notions of America. Chief among those in education are ideologies and

institutions of meritocracy, individualism, and colorblindness.

- CRT both disputes and interrogates claims to positivistic, neutral knowledge, particularly ideologies of race and equity that are ahistorical and bereft of social analysis. CRT assumes that because racism is constitutional to societal inequity, adequate explanations of contemporary conditions require contextual and historical analyses of race and racism.
- CRT privileges the voices, stories, and epistemic knowledge generated by the lived experiences of people of Color. CRT scholarship implements counterstorytelling—a methodological practice of honoring and legitimating stories that counter the masternarratives—in this spirit.
- CRT is an interdisciplinary, transdisciplinary, and multi-disciplinary scholarly movement aimed at disrupting oppression through radical societal transformation. As such, CRT rejects liberal projects of incremental change within existing power structures (p. 15).

Black critical theory (BlackCrit). My employment of CRT as the first component for my theoretical framework is strengthened by my specific use of Black Critical Theory (BlackCrit). In conceptualizing BlackCrit Dumas and ross (2016) noted that CRT as a general theory of racism cannot adequately interrogate what Wynter (1989) frames as the specificity of the Black. In other words, CRT is not positioned to address how antiblackness “informs and facilitates racist ideology and institutional practice” (Dumas & ross, 2016, p. 417). I extend the work education scholars using CRT have put forth, by moving from broad conceptions of race and racism to specifically examining Blackness and antiblackness (Dumas & ross, 2016). BlackCrit is not meant to reject the larger project of CRT—as its located within the broader critical race project—but rather as a framing that provides space for further development and imagination as the field thinks more deeply about blackness in the social construction of white supremacy

(Dumas & ross, 2016). As outlined by Dumas and ross (2016, p. 417),

Understanding this distinction between a theory of racism and a theory of blackness (in an anti-Black world) is key: whereas the former may invoke Black examples, and even rely on Black experience of racism in the formation of its tenets, only critical theorization of blackness confronts the specificity of antiblackness, as a social construction, as an embodied lived experience of social suffering and resistance, and perhaps most importantly, as an antagonism, in which the Black is a despised thing-in-itself (but not person for herself or himself) in opposition to all that is pure, human(e), and White (Gordon, 1997; Wilderson, III 2010).

The necessity for my use of BlackCrit is demonstrated through the absence of theorizing or even mentioning of antiblackness in the foundational and key literature focusing on CRT and education (Decuir & Dixon, 2004; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Ladson-Billings, 2004; Solorzano, 1997; Tate, 1997). I want to be clear that I am not saying that the examinations of Black youth that have solely used CRT or have not explicitly theorized antiblackness are invalid, but rather to charge the field with moving in the direction toward the specificity of antiblackness via BlackCrit when working with Black youth. At the very least, this is what my work has to offer the field. In the 2018 *Urban Education* special issue, “Urban Youth, Schooling, and Education in the Era of Black Lives Matter,” co-editors Royal and Hill (2017), noted in the introduction that they “hope to enrich our collective understanding of the current historical moment” when referring to #BlackLivesMatter. However, in this articulation of their hope, while centering this special issue on an ideological and political intervention birthed because of anti-Black violence, they do not actually center the violence of antiblackness as a lens. Specifically, in Dixon’s (2017) article in this special issue, “What’s Going On?": A Critical Race Theory

Perspective on Black Lives Matter and Activism in Education,” she uses CRT as a frame to discuss a prime Black example (#BlackLivesMatter), but does not engage further at the specific level of antiblackness. Again, I highlight Dixon’s (2017) CRT article not as a way to invalidate the work in relation to what I present here, but rather to push critical race examinations of Black youth in education to better, and more deeply grapple with BlackCrit and/or other theories better suited to examine the specificity of anti-Black racism to name the assaults being experienced by Black youth attending urban schools.

In my use of BlackCrit and the explication of antiblackness in conceptualizing urban Black youth’s schooling and societal experiences, I must note that it is not a theory “best served by the kind of fixedness implied by the notion of tenets, a term most commonly associated with religious statements of faith, or rigid ideological schools of thought” (Dumas & ross, 2016, p. 429). As Dumas and ross (2016) explained, in their initial article on BlackCrit they wanted to resist the desire to develop tenets, but rather leave space for “further scholarship and collective deliberation” (p. 429). Here, I enter into this collective deliberation through my work with urban, Black youth. However, while Dumas and ross (2016) did not provide tenets per se, they did provide broad framings that were directly connected to the tenets of CRT, however, which specified blackness. The framings of BlackCrit put forth by Dumas and ross (2016, pp. 429-431) that guide my use of this theory include:

- Antiblackness is endemic to, and is central to how all of us make sense of the social, economic, historical, and cultural dimensions of human life.
 - a. BlackCrit intervenes at the point of detailing how policies and everyday practices find their logic in, and reproduce Black suffering; it is also to imagine the futurity

of Black people against the devaluation of Black life and skepticism about (the worth of) letting Black people go on.

- Blackness exists in tension with the neoliberal-multicultural imagination.
 - b. BlackCrit proceeds with a wariness about multiculturalism (and its more current iteration, diversity) as an ideology that is increasingly complicit with neoliberalism in explaining away the material conditions of Black people as a problem created by Black people who are unwilling or unable to embrace the nation's "officially anti-racist" multicultural future.
- BlackCrit should create space for Black liberatory fantasy, and resist a revisionist history that supports dangerous majoritarian stories that disappear Whites from a history of racial dominance, rape, mutilation, brutality, plunder, and murder.

Working from these framings of BlackCrit in urban schooling can help us understand "how antiblackness serves to reinforce the ideological and material "infrastructure" of educational inequity—the misrecognition of students and communities of color, and the (racialized) maldistribution of educational resources" (Dumas & ross, 2016, p. 432).

I utilized BlackCrit to guide my study because it is deeply aligned with my ontological and epistemological beliefs, outlined in Chapter One, rooted in the idea that Black life and non-Black life in the U.S. is dictated by antiblackness. My research here with the Black youth operated with the understanding that because antiblackness is endemic, when speaking with youth about their lived experiences, the naming and detailing of antiblackness would occur, even if that was not the prime focus of our conversations. What this reveals is that fundamentally, public schools in the U.S. (urban or not) are likely violent, assaultive places to Black children. Unfortunately, the diffuse nature of antiblackness limits our ability to capture the violence of it.

However, since Black youth exist in a context of unwarranted attacks (i.e. symbolic violence) I assert that they are well positioned to capture this anti-Black violence, providing us with the language to make antiblackness visible. Moreover, in this project, the intentionality of centering our community on Blackness works to embody BlackCrit's tension with the neoliberal-multicultural imagination. This community became our way of building our sanctuary where we were able to cultivate liberatory fantasy led by the voices and experiences of the Black youth.

Sociocultural Literacies

The second foundational component for my theoretical framework is Sociocultural Literacies. Scholars have long used sociocultural theories of literacy in research to accomplish a myriad of things, such as Heath (1983) examining the role home and community plays in learning language structure; Dyson (1993) viewing the spoken and written text of children to accomplish social work; and Scribner and Cole (1991) studying the ways literacy is acquired and practiced in society at-large or "literacy without schooling." Scholars have continued employing sociocultural theories of literacy in research, such as Paris' (2011) work that examined voice, power, and self or shouts of affirmation and cultural identity birthed through the ways urban youth author pluralistic cultural spaces. While there is no single framework on sociocultural perspectives on literacy, the openness in which I engage in the frame is captured by Perry (2012).

Research on sociocultural theories of literacy

has been concerned with understanding the ways in which people use literacy in their everyday lives, finding ways to make literacy instruction meaningful and relevant by recognizing and incorporating students' out-of-school ways of practicing literacy, and decreasing achievement gaps for students whose families and communities practice

literacy in ways that may differ from those in the mainstream or in positions of power (p. 51).

Sociocultural Literacies serves as the most ideal pairing with CRT and BlackCrit since it “considers and seeks to understand the cultural context within which children have grown and developed,” while also seeking “to understand how children interpret who they are in relation to others, and how children have learned to process, interpret, and encode their world” (Perez, 2004, p. 4). I use the critical race theoretical frames to make power dynamics negatively impacting the lives of Black youth visible in conjunction with my use of sociocultural perspectives on literacy to locate and describe the presence of these anti-Black power dynamics in the lives of Black youth.

Critical literacy. While the totality of sociocultural theories of literacy help to frame my research, I specifically root this theoretical framing in critical literacy, which was birthed from Critical Pedagogy (Wink, 2005). I use critical literacy because my project focuses on the ability and utility of Black youth to critically analyze their worlds through their Black literacy lives (Fisher, 2008). Literacy lives or everyday literacy practices can be understood as “what people do with literacy to manage and enjoy their lives, what opportunities, demands and constraints they face in relation to their literacy practices” (Barton, Ivanic, Appleby, Hodge, & Tusting, 2012, p. 53). According to McLaren (2015), critical pedagogy provides educators with concrete ways to understand “the role that schools play within a race-, class-, and gender-divided society,” which has caused theorist to develop “categories or concepts for questioning student experiences, texts, teacher ideologies, and aspects of school policy that conservative and liberal analyses too often leave unexplored” (p. 127). I operate with the assumption that “schooling supports an inherently unjust ideological and political imperative” that results in “the transmission and

reproduction of the dominant status quo culture” (McLaren, 2015, p. 126). In this sense, schools reinforce whiteness as the standard culture in America. The framing of critical literacy via critical pedagogy allows me to work with my participants to lessen this unjust imperative.

According to Freire & Macedo (1987), critical literacy needs to:

Develop pedagogical practices in which the battle to make sense of one’s life reaffirms and furthers the need for teachers and students to recover their own voices so they can retell their own histories and in so doing ‘check and criticize the history [they] are told against the one [they] have lived’ (Freire & Macedo, 1987, p. 15).

Critical literacy as a theoretical frame, allows my participants to (re)construct and (re)imagine the realities of their life experiences while detailing the meaning attached to these experiences for their benefit, their liberation. Centered in their textualities as informed by a range of their literacy practices—including their selves as embodied texts—the students deconstruct anti-black ideals in efforts to build up a positioning that erases deficit and pathological perspectives, while simultaneously critiquing the white, dominant power structure that works to maintain antiblackness. Through critical pedagogy and working with youth to build their/our collective critical consciousness, my participants “come to recognize and feel disposed to remake their own identities and sociopolitical realities through their own meaning-making processes and through their actions in the world” (Johnston, 2012, p. 192). Like my first foundational component to my overall theoretical framing (CRT and BlackCrit), Critical Literacy, is also rooted in the development of social critique and liberatory in design through “a commitment to justice and equity” that “promote critique of texts and the world as an important (initial) mechanism for social change” (Johnston, 2012, p. 192).

Fairclough (1989, p. 46) explained, “It can be said that power in discourse is to do with powerful participants controlling and constraining the contributions of non-powerful participants.” When it comes to racial discourse in the U.S. Black youth routinely have their voices controlled and constrained regarding their meaning making of antiblackness, which overtime contributes to their inability to recognize it in their lives. Because of their non-powerful status as dictated by white supremacy, their articulations of race and racism become marginalized and, more often than not, erased. For example, in relation to how non-powerful actors get marginalized in discourse Urciuoli (1996, p. 8) documented, “participation can be sabotaged, information manipulated, people shut out of interactions, treated as non-persons, made the butt of jokes, treated as if they were stupid, or had nothing to say, or were out of control.”

According to Gee (2010), humans contest the value of different languages as well as the value of different ways of knowing the world. He further explained, “We can use language to make or construe certain sign systems and certain forms of knowledge and belief as better or worse than others, as relevant or privileged or not in a given context” (p. 136). Therefore, critical literacy, which is rooted in a sociocultural theory of language, is particularly concerned with teaching learners to understand and manage the relationship between language and power (Aronowitz & Giroux, 2003; Janks, 2000). In this sense the ways in which we read the world and the meanings we give to these readings are “ideological, rather than simply descriptive or factual” (Cervetti, Pardales, & Damico, 2001). Thus, in my dissertation, engaging Black youth in critical literacy documentations of their experiences with antiblackness is about “enabling them to detect and handle the inherently ideological dimension” of the way the texts of their worlds are constructed (Lankshear, 1997, p. 46). The way these scholars frame power, provide

understanding for the often-oppressive conditions of communication that Black youth are forced to exist in, particularly in their schooling sites. My dissertation both exposes and challenges anti-black sign systems and certain forms of knowledge in schools that result in Black youth experiencing symbolic violence. I believe that what Black youth have to say is utterly important to bettering their conditions in American schooling and society. As a result, I use critical literacy as a key theoretical framework “for questioning power relations, discourses, and identities in a world not yet finished, just, or humane” (Shor, 1999, p. 126).

Critical literacy is important due to its ability to evoke an imagining of identities built on youth’s lived experiences (Dyson, 2003) while also allowing youth to use their literacy productions as ways to promote social change (Morrell, 2007; Simon, 1992). According to Janks (2000), this changing must include “both changing dominant discourses as well as changing which discourses are dominant” (p. 178). Critical literacy is also in direct alignment with my critical race (BlackCrit) ethnographic design, which places student voice at the center through a great deal of collaboration. In order to discover the many ways antiblackness as symbolic violence is present in the lives of students they need to engage in activities that allow them to explore who they are. As both a reflective and reflexive tool, critical literacy allows individuals to question the social construction of self (Shor, 1999). Black youth are routinely sent messages that their bodies and minds are deficient. My method of collecting data that engage students in critical literacy provides students with a space to question these received images and experiences, which prompts them to work to challenge the inequity that stems from this cycle.

Various views of critical literacy. The commonality of the various ways critical literacy has been conceptualized overtime is that it is a “social and political practice rather than a set of neutral psychological skills” (Siegel & Fernandez, 2000, p. 18). Critical literacy challenges the

status quo as a means to create new paths for self and social development. With anti-blackness being the root of the symbolic violence which students experience, as student gain an understanding of how symbolic violence operates in their lives, critical literacy practices will allow them to resist paths designated for them that are both violent and anti-black. As explained by Shor (1999), this type of literacy in the form of words helping us to rethink our worlds “connects the political and the personal, the public and the private, the global and the local, the economic and the pedagogical, for rethinking our lives and for promoting justice in place of inequity” (p. 1). In the case of urban schooling, Black youth can cultivate a power within them that allows them to make schooling conditions better for them on their own terms, from their own perspectives. In order to rethink a new world, it is necessary to understand that there are multiple approaches to take. Similarly, there are many ways critical literacy can be conceptualized, while still reaching the same outcome. Gathering interpretations from a range of scholars, Shor (1999) explained:

Critical literacy, then, is an attitude towards history, as Kenneth Burke (1984) might have said, or a dream of a new society against the power now in power, as Paulo Freire proposed (Shor and Freire, 1987), or an insurrection of subjugated knowledge’s, in the ideas of Michel Foucault (1980), or a counter-hegemonic structure of feeling, as Raymond Williams (1977) theorized, or a multicultural resistance invented on the borders of crossing identities, as Gloria Anzaldua (1990) imagined, or language used against fitting unexceptionably into the status quo, as Adrienne Rich (1979) declared (p. 2).

Particularly focusing on Foucault’s (1980) ideas, I then view this project as Black youth developing the capacity to revolt the ills of an anti-black world through the use of their self-

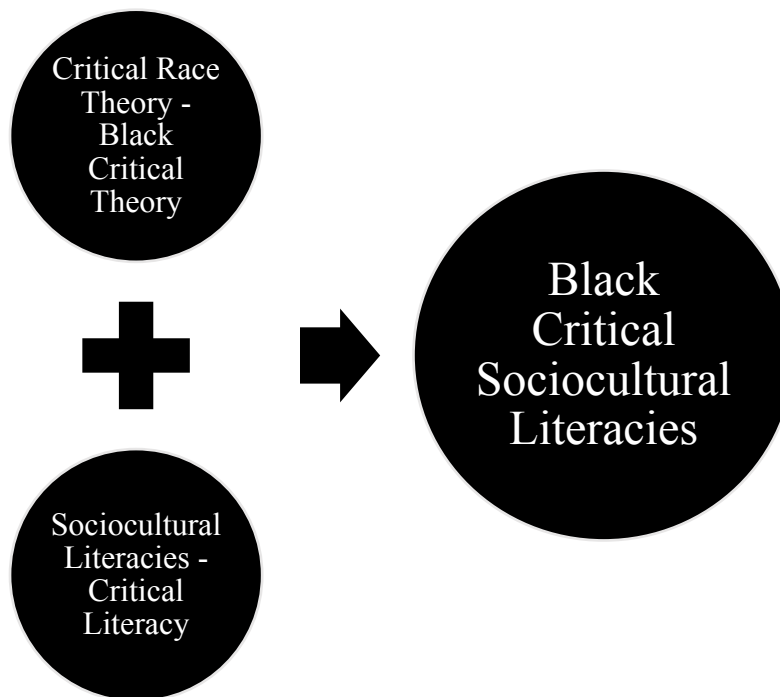
constructed texts that allow them to see the possibilities of a school, of a world that does not thrive on the subjugation of Black people.

Morrell (2002) defines academic literacy as “those forms of engaging with, producing, and talking about texts that have currency in primary, secondary, and postsecondary education” (p. 72). He then defines critical literacy “as the ability not only to read and write, but also to assess texts in order to understand the relationships between power and domination that underlie and inform those texts” (p. 72). Anderson and Irvine (1993) define critical literacy as “learning to read and write as part of the process of becoming conscious of one’s experience as historically constructed within specific power relations” (p. 82). Aronowitz and Giroux (2003) note, “critical literacy would function as a theoretical tool to help students and others develop a critical relationship to their own knowledge” (p. 132). Gathered from these various definitions is that critical literacy skills are necessary for all youth, in the case of my dissertation particularly for Black youth in the effort to document symbolic violence as a function of anti-blackness. As Meiners (2007) explained “reading and writing critically are essential tools for survival in a current educational system in which students of color are disproportionately in special education, suspended, and expelled, which all contribute to a higher likelihood of incarceration” (as cited in Winn & Behizadeh, 2011, p. 149). Considering this, having Black youth document their experiences with violence and anti-blackness is not simply about literacy, but this work is about their lives. Christian (1987) expressed a similar sentiment about writing when she stated, “...what I write and how I write is done in order to save my own life. And I mean that literally. For me literature is a way of knowing that I am not hallucinating, that whatever I feel/know is” (p. 61). Herein lies the importance of students in my dissertation documenting the words, symbols, standards, and experiences they have had with antiblackness through a variety of

literacy engagements. Educators have a responsibility to assist Black youth in understanding that despite the pathological discourses society has constructed around their bodies, that what they feel and know is their true experience; no one else can define who they are. Critical literacy is positioned perfectly as a theoretical framework for my research in that I use it as a tool to disrupt anti-blackness and to expose the realities of Black youth, youth who are not hallucinating, but instead experiencing violence connected to a racist legacy of white supremacy and Black subjugation.

BLACK CRITICAL SOCIOCULTURAL LITERACIES: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS AT THE INTERSECTION

Figure 1: Graph: This figure shows the intersection of my theoretical frameworks



My use of BlackCrit and Critical Literacy combine to create a really unique theoretical framework for understanding the ways antiblackness dictates the organization of society and urban schooling as revealed through the embodied critical literacies of urban Black youth.

Antiblackness, particularly the way it operationalizes as symbolic violence in urban schools produces Black suffering. Cervetti, Pardales, & Damico (2001) explained,

critical theories of literacy are derived, in part, from critical social theory, particularly its concern with the alleviation of human suffering and the formation of a more just world through the critique of existing social and political problems and the posing of alternatives (p. 6).

Black youth engagements with critical literacy, I propose, can help lessen Black suffering. As outlined in the previous chapter, at the core of Black engagements with literacy is criticality; authoring ways to imagine America and the world for Black people otherwise. I label this inherent criticality—understanding antiblackness as endemic and thus composing life to subvert this subjugation—Black Critical Sociocultural Literacies.

As Dumas (2016b) noted, “Black suffering in schools is a setup, and we are not, and were never meant to survive. However, it is in our movement for Black lives that we refuse this future and create another. Right now.” The critical literacies of my participants expose us to this “setup” of Black suffering. Through this framing, we come to understand that “meanings are always contested (never givens), and are related to ongoing struggles in society for the possession of knowledge, power, status, and material resources” (Cervetti, Pardales, & Damico, 2001). In the case of schooling and antiblackness, Black youth routinely experience violence because of the unequal power balance society has created in part to the legacy of slavery outlined previously and white culture maintaining control over our nations institutions and overall ideologies (Morgan, 1997). This dominance that creates inequitable conditions is exposed through a critical examination of my participants’ current urban schooling and societal

conditions and reconstructed through their engagements with language and literacy (Cervetti, Pardales, & Damico, 2001).

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

In the first section of my literature review, which speaks to Critical Race Studies, I explain how the U.S. as a slave society institutionalized antiblackness and Black suffering. I then reveal how after the formal institution of slavery ended, the slave society continued. Next, I discuss the role of whiteness and white people in the impact of antiblackness in the U.S. In the following section on Urban Education, I discuss the roots of urban schooling through the lens of a slave society. This is followed by a discussion of how schooling facilitates the misrecognition of antiblackness. In the next section, I bring us into the current state of urban schooling, as theorized as existing in the legacy of a slave society. Lastly, in this section, I explain how the design of urban schooling (including the roots and the legacy) creates the conditions for antiblackness to operate as symbolic violence. In the third section, Language and Literacy, I rely on literature to explain the inextricable link between literacy and antiblackness. I then move to detail the ways literacy can serve as a disruptive intervention to antiblackness. I extend the use of literacy as disruptive, to the ways it can provide the foundations to reimagine entire new social and academic worlds.

CRITICAL RACE STUDIES

A Slave Society: Antiblackness and Black Suffering Physically Manifested

Between me and the other world there is ever an unasked question: unasked by some through feelings of delicacy; by others through the difficulty of rightly framing it. All, nevertheless, flutter round it. How does it feel to be a problem?

W.E.B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk*

The transatlantic slave trade, which introduced chattel and plantation style slavery to the U.S. (Rawley & Behrendt, 2005), ensured that the foundation of our nation would be rooted in the institutionalized degradation of Black people (Alexander, 2012; Blackmon, 2009; Hill, 2017; Reidy, 1997). As Davis (1999) outlined, “the Negro slave thus became an intrinsic part of the American experience” (p. 41). Even though the U.S. had only a peripheral role in the Atlantic slave trade, “during the three decades preceding the Civil War” they became “the greatest slave power in the Western world and the bulwark of resistance to the abolition of slavery” (Fogel & Engerman, 1995, p. 29). The question DuBois explicated from his experiences as a Black person in America outlined in the epigraph for this section—How does it feel to be a problem?—was embedded within the U.S. by design. The construction of Blacks as problem people pre-slavery and throughout, served as insurance for the eventuality of Black people one day being emancipated: Even though free, the design of Blacks occupying a perpetual problem status would be solidified. As captured by Maya Angelou (1994), during the transatlantic slave trade, Blacks were “sold, stolen, arriving on a nightmare. Praying for a dream” (p. 272). The metaphor of Africans arriving on a nightmare and then being forced to build new life in that nightmare reveals the immediate suffering they experienced within America, as they no longer legally owned themselves. In order to be shuffled across the world’s oceans and seas as property, white colonialists had to disassociate Blacks with being human; indeed, the value of the African slave was not in their humanity (Davis, 1999; Hartman, 1997; Patterson, 1982; Williams, 2014).

While the United States began as a slave society (Loury, 1998), whites’ interest in marginalizing Black people and viewing them as less than human existed before the formal institution of slavery. In fact, “the racialization of identity and the racial subordination of Blacks

and Native Americans provided the ideological basis for slavery and conquest” (Harris, 1993, p. 1715). As outlined by Smedley & Smedley (2005, p. 19),

The fabrication of a new type of categorization for humanity was needed because the leaders of the American colonies at the turn of the 18th century had deliberately selected Africans to be permanent slaves (Allen, 1994, 1997; Fredrickson, 1988, 2002; Morgan, 1975; A. Smedley, 1999b). In an era when the dominant political philosophy was equality, civil rights, democracy, justice, and freedom for all human beings, the only way Christians could justify slavery was to demote Africans to nonhuman status (Haller, 1971; A. Smedley, 1999b). The humanity of the Africans was debated throughout the 19th century, with many holding the view that Africans were created separately from other, more human, beings.

The justification of Black people as separated from “other, more human, beings” situates the larger problem which frames my study, Blacks being constructed and engaged with as problem, less than human people. As Marable (2001) outlined, enslaved African Americans and American Indians were “specifically excluded from the social contract which linked individuals and classes to the state through sets of rights and responsibilities” (p. 7). U.S. law recognized Blacks as chattel slaves by the 1660s and two decades after this recognition, slave codes appeared, which codified the ways that Blacks were already being deprived of their liberty in everyday American social practice (Harris, 1993). For example, “Blacks were not permitted to travel without permits, to own property, to assemble publicly, or to own weapons; nor were they to be educated” (Harris, 1993, p. 1718). The impact and legacy of slave codes is felt today, especially in regards to structural limits on Black property ownership (Conley, 2010; Oliver & Shapiro,

2006; Sugrue, 2014) and the continued miseducation of Black children (Ladson-Billings, 2006; M. Morris, 2016; Noguera, 2009; Sojoyner, 2016).

This brief history of the deliberate creation of ideologies, laws, and institutions to frame Blacks as less than human and problem people lies at the core of America's facilitation of Black social suffering. Social suffering is "a cultural struggle to reconstitute a positive sense of meaning and purpose for self and society against the brute force of events in which these are violated and destroyed" (Wilkinson, 2005, p. 45). Within the context of the United States and essentially the world, Black suffering can be understood as the collective struggle of Black people to assert and defend their humanity. The construction of Blacks as problem people, which is carried out through controlling Black bodies, simultaneously created and perpetuated anti-blackness, which is the living legacy of slavery (Brady, 2014). Studies of anti-blackness are motivated by the question of Black suffering, thus studying anti-blackness "interrogates the psychic and material assault on Black flesh, the constant surveillance and mutilation and murder of Black people" (Dumas, 2016a, p. 12). An old concept, as Browne (2015) noted, surveillance is nothing new in the life of Black people, but rather the fact of antiblackness. According to Patterson (1982), anti-blackness also wrestles with the idea of Black people as socially dead (e.g. individuals denied humanity), which makes them ineligible for full citizenship. Patterson (1982) further explained that the dominant image of the slave was positioned as the permanent enemy of America—the domestic enemy. This upholds Blacks as socially dead in that they are viewed as having no value to add to the social fabric of the country, no contributions worthy of being acknowledged. These various views of antiblackness reveal the basis for my engagement in my project. Since Black people are both understood as and positioned as socially dead while still being very much alive, they are constantly fighting to prove that fact. Pulling from the work of

Gordon (1997; 2000) and Melamed (2011), Dumas (2016a) revealed “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” (p. 12).

A Slave Society: Reprise and Reformation

While the formal institution of slavery in the U.S. has technically ended, we are currently living in the “wake” of slavery. As theorized by Sharpe (2016, pp.13-14) “to be in the wake is to occupy and to be occupied by the continuous and changing present of slavery’s as yet unresolved unfolding.” In essence, to be in the wake means to live in a society where slavery is not yet done, to exist in the afterlife of slavery (Hartman, 2008). In this afterlife,

slavery’s mark on the now manifests as the prison, as poverty, as policing technologies; it emerges in insurance ledgers and in the organization of urban space. It also appears in the space cleared by so much death. Slavery’s afterlife surfaces in the gaps between the recorded, the forgotten, and the never will be (Dillon, 2012, p. 121).

In the “wake,” Black people feel the residuals of at once, having not owned their bodies (and how this is carried out today). In the 1935 call to establish The National Negro Congress, Asa Phillip Randolph stated:

In the courts of the land, the Negro is denied justice. He is legally kept from jury service, and made to face daily unfair trials and inhuman sentences. Negroes are mobbed and lynched while Congress cynically refuses to enact a federal anti-lynching law. They are excluded from public places, even from restaurants in the nation’s Capitol (Grant, 1968, p. 241).

Randolph's 1935 call provides insights into the "wake" as a state of violent exclusion and disposability. A major way Blacks experienced and still experience suffering in society is through being denied justice, which was largely exercised through state-sanctioned social control—stemming from social control enacted during modern U.S. slavery. At the time of emancipation, many Blacks had hope that the days of suffering would come to an end and "the conception of themselves as equal citizens of the American republic galvanized blacks' political and social activity during Reconstruction" (Foner, 1987, p. 863). However,

as blacks made their way from southern plantations to southern and northern cities, they discovered that their mere presence triggered some subliminal urge in whites to police, watch and monitor them, to terrorize them into passivity and to keep them under control (Hawkins & Thomas, 1991).

In conjunction with the fear whites expressed toward Blacks and the racism and poverty already present, Blacks in America became reduced to crime and pathology post-slavery (Hawkins & Thomas, 1991) without any consideration of the white supremacy that created these conditions. As outlined by Brady (2014),

This history continues after the abolition of plantation slavery, through jim crow segregation and systematic lynching into the contemporary period of the prison industrial complex, stand your ground laws that protect anti-black vigilantism, and the recent report that shows that a black person is shot by a cop every 28 hours. Anti-Blackness is the zombie of this history, the undead structure of slavery that still persists today and perils black lives.

According to Hawkins and Thomas (1991), slavery was viewed by many whites as the best way to control Blacks. However, once slavery ended and the masses of Blacks were largely free,

society had to quickly develop a way to maintain this social control—hence, living in the “wake.” The solution eventually became modern day police units. “As thousands of former slaves flocked into the urban areas of the South and North, white municipal officials attempted to continue the pattern of racial dominance by using the police as the first line of defense against black freedom” (p. 72). Even prior to emancipation, the police system served to oversee Black slaves and free Blacks, with the specific goal of hindering slaves to escape (Myrdal, 1944). Through this system, police “were given the widest license to seize, whip and punish Negroes and generally to act as the agents of the masters” (Myrdal, 1944, p. 532).

Understanding Whiteness (and white people)

While police have been used throughout Black communities as a major way to enforce and perpetuate Black suffering (Skolnick & Fyfe, 1993) white society at-large, too, has aided in the denial of Black freedom and humanity (Feagin, 1991; Glaude, 2017; Kendi, 2016; Lipsitz, 2006; Schuman, 1997; Wacquant, 2008). Much of this stems from white colonial settlers of our nation who “institutionalized a possessive investment in whiteness by making blackness synonymous with slavery and whiteness synonymous with freedom, but also by pitting people of color against one another” (Lipsitz, 2006, p. 3). In other words, while white individuals are conferred with a psychological and social wage for being and investing in whiteness (Roediger, 1999), our nation as a whole (the overall American way of life) has come to enforce, re-produce, and perpetuate anti-black sentiments. This distinction is important in that antiblackness and therefore Black suffering is not solely perpetuated by individual non-Black actors, but rather it is also facilitated by whiteness and white supremacy in its totality, as a system. Moreover, “an archaeology of race and racism should aspire to identify what whites secured from particular

racial discourses, not simply how blacks and other marginalized racial subjects were instrumentally disempowered by anti-black racism” (Mullins, 2006, p. 62).

For example, it is widely documented that the U.S. federal government has played a major role in the suffering of Black communities. According to Lipsitz (2006), “During the 1950s and 1960s, federally assisted urban renewal projects destroyed 20 percent of the central-city housing units occupied by blacks, as opposed to only 10 percent of those inhabited by whites” (p. 6). Government funded highways that were built to allow suburban commuters with access to downtown workspaces, destroyed housing in minority communities while also disrupting every day, neighborhood life. This example of highway construction reveals how whites invested in themselves—providing access for white workers to jobs in city centers—while creating conditions that limited and disrupted Black life. As Lipsitz (2006) further explained:

The processes of urban renewal and highway construction set in motion a vicious cycle: population loss led to decreased political power, which made minority neighborhoods more vulnerable to further urban renewal and freeway construction, not to mention more susceptible to the placement of prisons, incinerators, toxic waste dumps, and other projects that further depopulated these areas (p. 8).

Black communities are routinely blamed for the conditions of their communities without an examination of the aforementioned. The placement of prisons, incinerators, and toxic waste dumps work to construct these Black spaces as danger zones. This positioning then results in Black people being perceived as dangerous, without any rational explanation. Massey and Denton (1993) elaborated on the ways whiteness worked to shape U.S. communities by explaining that the construction of the “black ghetto” was not created by happenstance, but was a

result of a series of deliberate decisions made by white Americans to “deny blacks access to urban housing markets and to reinforce their spatial segregation” (p. 179).

White Violence and Black Suffering. While deliberate attempts by the federal government and the complacency of everyday white citizens in these events bear witness to the way Black suffering has played out in society, Massey and Denton (1993) further revealed that the major tool that whites used to construct Black ghettos was violence. Even though all white individuals may not have been individually responsible for building highways, they were directly responsible for policing the movement of Black bodies in efforts to make sure they stayed in their Black enclaves; they were responsible for investing in whiteness. The fact that white institutions (e.g. federal government) created and currently maintain Black ghettos and white citizens actively accept their existence reveals “white society is deeply implicated in the ghetto” (Massey & Denton, 1993, p. 4). In thinking about the inequity often present in Black schools and factors like the achievement gap, I purport that white society is also deeply implicated in this unfair educational landscape. On the surface, relegating Black citizens to one section of a city or one school may not seem devastating, however research in urban geography (Bullard, 1994; Cole & Foster, 2001; Pulido, 2000) has widely documented that neighborhoods with high concentrations of Black and Brown populations are often not the best places to live, environmentally.

Lipsitz (2006) explained “if African Americans had access to the nutrition, wealth, health care, and protection against environmental hazards offered routinely to whites, seventy-five thousand fewer of them would die each year” (p. 10). This presents the question if America could prevent seventy-five thousand fewer deaths in Black communities throughout the nation, would they? How is such a great amount of suffering in one community allowable? Bell (1992)

presented a hypothetical in his chapter “The Space Traders,” which explained that if America had the option to trade (read get rid of) its Black citizens for wealth and unlimited resources, the country would. The chilling fact that seventy-five thousand fewer Black people would die each year if it were not for antiblackness turns Bell’s hypothetical into a reality. Of course, getting rid of every Black person at once would be impossible. However, due to the way whiteness excludes Black people from access to vital benefits (e.g. nutrition, health care, etc.), America is involved in a vast elimination of sorts: an elimination that goes unnoticed due to its diffuse nature. As revealed, conditions are created which limit the resources and opportunities Black people have access to. Overtime, policies that are responsible are misrecognized and become invisible, which leads to onlookers and some Blacks themselves believing that they are responsible for what many view as a lifestyle of tragedy—one that is not in alignment with mainstream, white American culture.

The historical project of whiteness accomplishes its goal to subjugate Black people without having to do much work, because individuals in these communities create a life that may be counter to the ways of (white) American life in order to survive and end up being rigidly policed, as if they had a choice. In essence, Black people are excluded from mainstream ways of being and then are assaulted on all fronts for not complying with the mainstream. According to Brewer and Heitzeg (2008), fifty percent of all prisoners in the U.S. are Black, while citizens who identify as Black only compose roughly thirteen percent of the U.S. population. Over three quarters of a million Black men are currently imprisoned, two million are under correctional supervision, and “one in every 8 Black men between the ages of 25 and 34 is in prison or jail” (p. 628). In addition, “African American women are 3 times more likely than Latinas and 6 times more likely than White women to be in prison” (p. 628). Whiteness reveals itself in the prison

industrial complex in that Black citizens in the federal prison system receive sentences that are twenty percent longer than those given to whites who have committed the same crime (Lipsitz, 2006, p. 11). The overrepresentation of Blacks in prisons is the epitome of social death (Patterson, 1982) or Black bodies literally being removed from society; such as with the fictional account in *The Space Traders* and the non-fictional account of seventy-five thousand Blacks who die each year from things that could have been prevented if America was not rooted in antiblackness and Black suffering. It has been noted that “if blacks received the same sentences as whites for these offenses, the federal prison system would require three thousand fewer prison cells, enough to close completely six of the new five-hundred bed institutions” (p. 11). Not only are Black individuals suffering in their neighborhoods due to federally funded, anti-black policies, but they also suffer by being grossly overrepresented in America’s prisons, a system itself deemed by many as synonymous with inferiority and slavery (Davis, 2011; Wacquant, 2002).

In Post-racial discourse, people often point to the end of slavery and the success of notable Black individuals as a sign that American society has progressed and is largely non-racist (Bell, 1989; Lee, 2012; López, 2010a, 2010b; Tesler & Sears, 2010). However, the flaw in post-racial ideologies is that while slavery was a breeding ground for the creation of whiteness in America, whiteness has survived beyond the days of slavery. Whiteness has transformed into a phenomenon that can exist without an explicit method of demoralizing Black people. As a result of this embedded investment in whiteness, the willingness that white individuals have to protect their privilege in this country makes limiting these privileges to Black individuals effortless: a major component of being white is guarding unearned advantages (Leonardo, 2004). This sums up why Black suffering is a continual state in that it is not just about one period in time such as

slavery or an unarmed Black person being shot by police, but it is about the continual collective investment in whiteness that occurs throughout time; causing Black people to consistently experience trauma of all varieties. While I make a distinction that the possessive investment in whiteness and antiblackness are not only limited to slavery, the two have “always been influenced by its origins in the racialized history of the United States-by its legacy of slavery and segregation, of “Indian” extermination and immigrant restriction, of conquest and colonialism” (Lipsitz, 2006, p. 3).

Despite this knowledge that the U.S. is a slave society which as a result enacts an unlimited amount of unwarranted violence against Black people, we have yet to know about the ways Black youth live through suffering in this society and specifically within their urban schools. Particularly in the literature on antiblackness, most of it deals with theorizing the ways in which antiblackness came to be and how it manifests in societies, but it has yet to consider the ways it directly operates in the lives of urban youth as told by them. My research closes this loop by bridging theorizations of antiblackness together with urban education research focused on the direct experiences of Black children.

URBAN EDUCATION

Understanding Black Urban Schooling in a Slave Society: The Roots

Urban Black youth are educated on land where they once occupied it as legal, national property. As property, Black children (along with Black adults) did not own their minds or bodies as they were the possession of the Portuguese, British, French, Spanish, and Dutch. The function of Blacks as property is concisely captured in a statement Frederick Douglass often uttered to audiences, years after he escaped from slavery: “I appear before you this evening as a thief and a robber. I stole this head, these limbs, this body from my master and ran off with

them” (Coates, 2017, p. 248). In Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, the land which houses the PK-12 schools I attended (in the William Penn School District, William Penn having owned slaves himself), taught at, and have now collected research data at, slaves existed. African slaves arrived in Philadelphia immediately after the arrival of William Penn (Turner, 1911): in Philadelphia there were slaves from the West Indies at work by 1684 (McManus, 1973). For this, there is a foundational link between U.S. land, slaves as property, and American schooling curricula. In the particular case of my research site, at the very least, addressing the lands which houses the urban school and the students under study is necessary. Black youth are sanctioned by the state to be educated on land in which they were legally deemed uneducable; land on which they had to become robbers of themselves to reclaim ownership over their bodies.

During U.S. chattel slavery, race and property were conflated, which positioned the Black slave as a specific piece of property (Harris, 1993, p. 1716); blackness itself in the U.S. context became owned by the nation. Harris (1993) further explained in a footnote that in 1661, a Maryland legislature enacted a bill outlining that “All Negroes and other slaves shall serve Durante Vita [for life].” In essence, a Black person would be considered property over the course of their entire lifespan, from birth to death. There were deep implications for education. Gathered from Charles Wesley’s 1975 article “The Education of Black Americans,” Carroll Massey, Vaughn Scott, & Dornbusch (1975) shared that,

The House of Burgesses in Virginia declared, “We have as far as possible closed every avenue by which light may enter their minds - they would then be on a level with the beasts of the field and we would be safe.”

In thinking about slavery’s influence on land, property, and curricula in the education of Black youth today, we must consider the implications for the uttering of the phrase *Durante Vita*, for

life. What might it mean to teach Black children in the legacy of being property *Durante Vita*? Moreover, how are urban schools with majority Black student bodies either perpetuating or resisting Black youth as property *Durante Vita*? The connection between land, property, and curricula is of utmost importance to my dissertation research. Thus, for me, conducting research with Black youth in America, also meant to conduct research with the history of Black youth, Black people in America. As noted, this history is the history of American property and how that translates in the contemporary to being in the “wake.” Despite this history which frames Black life in America, both schools and society routinely evade the subject—often through post-racial, colorblind, and race neutral discourse. For example, the College Board (under pressure from the Republican National Committee and other conservative groups) developed “clearer and more historically precise” language for the Advance Placement (AP) U.S. History curriculum. In regards to slavery, the 2014 standards noted that enslaving Blacks in perpetuity was “reinforced by a strong belief in British racial and cultural superiority.” The 2015 standards eliminated any mention of white ideals of superiority inspiring plantation slavery, and instead frames white supremacy as “a byproduct of economic necessity” (Flanagin, 2015). In this framing, white supremacy becomes justified for the context of the time and deemphasized, while glossing over the nation’s deep roots in racism. However, American schooling’s attempt to gloss over racial history, when examined, reveals the construction of Black urban schooling today.

After emancipation, many white northern missionaries, full of zeal, went to the south to educate Blacks (Anderson, 1988; Bush, 2004; Jones, 1992; Williams, 2009). However, this enthusiasm began to diminish “as white southerners persecuted the missionaries and as the optimistic teachers themselves began to realize that they had failed to understand the full effects of generations of slavery” (Newby & Tyack, 1971, p. 195). Bullock (1967, p. 93) further

revealed that educators “decided to sell the idea of Negro education to white Southerners by sacrificing the principle of racial equality. They decided, too, that the best way to assure the sale was to emphasize its value to the purchaser” (as cited in Newby & Tyack, 1971, p. 196). Thus, the education of Black youth is rooted in the full effects of Atlantic chattel slavery and sustained through sacrificing racial equality and being more valuable to whites than to Blacks. This makes Black education one of America’s earliest projects in interest convergence or when “the interest of blacks in achieving racial equality will be accommodated only when it converges with the interests of whites” (Bell, 1980, p. 523). The education of Black youth in America, then, is designed with the caveat that it has to privilege whites socially and financially—most centrally connected to the full effects of slavery. Historically, this was achieved through industrial education (Newby & Tyack, 1971, p. 196). Indeed, many educational reformers of the time believed that African Americans should focus on manual labor and not academic preparation (Walker & Archung, 2003, p. 24). These reformers included Blacks as well. During his 1895 Atlanta Compromise speech Booker T. Washington stated,

Our greatest danger is that in the great leap from slavery to freedom we may overlook the fact that the masses of us are to live by the productions of our hands...it is at the bottom of life we must begin, and not at the top (Okihiro, 2014, p. 186).

Former Harvard University President, Charles Eliot often referred to Blacks as “savages who must learn a Six-day workweek before being accorded political and economic parity with whites” (Tozer, Violas, & Senese, 2002, p. 110). As Spivey (1978, p. ix) explained, while slaves were free legally, “cotton still had to be picked, tobacco fields to be tended, and menial labor was required.” Spivey (1978) conceptualized the history of Black people in America as a labor history, which serves as a rationale for whites supporting Black education. At its onset, Black

education worked to continue slave labor or “a neo-slave system” while providing the nation with an uninterrupted flow of capital.

Schooling and the Misrecognition of Antiracism. As documented thus far, antiracism has facilitated a vast amount of Black suffering. However, it is often times difficult to understand the ways American schooling, specifically the urban school, facilitates antiracism and thusly also produces Black suffering. This view is due to the fact that most Americans view schooling as a site that can lessen suffering or at the very least not cause more harm than good. For example, many Black students may often have an understanding that African-Americans have historically been treated unfairly, but at the same time may not have the language or depth of understanding to see how this unfair treatment plays out in their current schooling. As with my opening in Chapter One, growing up I understood the story of Elizabeth Eckford as unfair, but never really considered how this same unfair treatment may be present in my learning, albeit differently. Black youth are taught to misrecognize antiracism, and moreover are taught to misrecognize the urban school in its totality as an anti-Black institution. Policies and practices that traditionally benefit white students and victimize Black students such as “biased curriculum; standardized testing, ability grouping, disproportionate rates of suspension, detention, and expulsion; and inadequate school funding,” are positioned as race neutral, leaving Black youth to believe that their Blackness is a problem, not the actual racism of schooling (Donaldson, 1996). In other words, schools get Black youth to misrecognize anti-black racism by making the problems of racism appear as if it is a Black problem. Additionally, I believe this misrecognition is due to the fact that education (not schools necessarily) in the Black community has been regarded as a site of liberation. Education is a site of liberation, which is why U.S. policies and practices have worked to prohibit Blacks from becoming educated in

formal and informal ways throughout history. As with Frederick Douglass having to steal his own body back, Black people also had to steal an education. As an ex-slave explained, “slaves would slip out of the Quarters at night, and go to dese pits, an some niggah dat had some learning would have a school” (Williams, 2009, p. 20). Moreover, “slaves were not allowed books, pen, ink, nor paper, to improve their minds.” (Williams, 2009, p. 9). Well beyond slavery, the exclusion of Blacks from education continued. For example, in the early 20th century there was an emergence of high schools and Blacks were purposefully excluded (Anderson, 1988). The ways education has been historically equated with liberation, while valid, can serve as a foundation for the ways Black youth misrecognize antiblackness in their urban school.

“The self-conscious use of education as an instrument of liberation among African Americans is exactly as old as education among African Americans” (Payne & Strickland, 2008, p. 1). Martin (1998) explained that “historically, African Americans have understood the importance of public school education to the individual and collective elevation of their people” (p. 42). He further detailed that African Americans believed that a common education was the key to “solid citizenship and socioeconomic ability” (Martin, 1998, p. 42). Even as it became revealed that mainstream goals of Black education would be to make them second-class citizens, Blacks were still optimistic that education would increase their social position (Church & Sedlak, 1976). Givens (2016, p. 1) explained,

Dominant systems of education have overwhelmingly supported the ideals and goals of white supremacy and are not arbitrary; they have been strategically crafted and executed. Schooling systems have functioned as channels through which members of the African Diaspora could be inundated with ideology that would stunt their political, economic, and social progress; thus, supporting the goals of white supremacy.

Even with this understanding, Blacks “possessed a folk faith; they sensed the power and esteem that was associated with being educated in America” (Church & Sedlak, 1976, p. 439). We see this same liberatory view or folk faith as it played out in Du Bois’ (1903) fictional account of John, in “Of the Coming of John.” John, a Black male who understood the transformative power of education went off to school, but as he departed the white people cried out “it’ll spoil him, -- ruin him” (Du Bois, 1903, p. 230). Whites often held the belief that “learning will spoil the nigger for work” (Anderson, 1988, p. 20). What comes to be understood from this literature is that education should and can be a site of liberation, but overtime it has been intentionally designed in antiblackness to limit its liberatory properties. A major component of this design has been the perpetuation of theories on Black inferiority, many of which used pseudoscience to claim that Blacks did not have the same mental capacity as whites. As Davis (2003) outlined, this pseudoscience was widely accepted because “imperialist incursions in Latin America and in the Pacific needed to be justified, as did the intensified exploitation of Black workers in the South and immigrant workers in the North and West” (p. 360). Eugenics organizations like the Galton Society, helped to legitimize the belief in the different levels of intelligence between Anglo and African Americans in the 1920s, like the text of Dr. Carl Brighman, *A Study of American Intelligence* (Selden, 1999, p. 16). Referencing prior research, Ladson-Billings (2006) explained that “theories of Black inferiority continued and picked up throughout the 1960s, where scholars identified cultural deficit theories to suggest that children of color were victims of pathological lifestyles that hindered their ability to benefit from schooling” (p. 4). These theories continued well into the 1990s with works such as Herrnstein and Murray’s (1994) *The Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life*. These deficit theories that are often used to explain low performance of Blacks in school puts the blame on Black students and families

(Carroll Massey, Vaughn Scott, & Dornbusch, 1975). Exploring the roots of the education of Black youth in America leads us to understand that

African Americans have been told systematically and consistently that they are inferior, that they are incapable of high academic achievement. Their performance in school has replicated this low expectation for success. In addition to being told that they cannot perform at high levels, African American students often are taught by teachers who would rather not teach them (Ladson Billings, 2000, p. 208).

How does the history of education being reserved for whites allow us to understand Black youth experiences in urban schools today, in the “wake?”

Understanding Black Urban Schooling in a Slave Society: The Legacy

Despite schooling being constructed as a positive and equitable endeavor for all students, “for many black children and families in the United States, Britain and elsewhere, schooling is a site of suffering” (Dumas, 2014, p. 2). Dumas’ (2014) examination of schooling through the lens of suffering is suited well to understand the legacy of the schooling of Black children in a slave society. Specifically, we must come to understand and research this suffering, as “it is the suffering that we have been least willing or able to acknowledge or give voice to in educational scholarship, and more specifically, in educational policy analysis” (p. 2). The legacy of racism sets the context for schooling to be a negative space for African American students (Decuir & Dixson, 2004). Particularly when it comes to urban neighborhoods, the urban school within those neighborhoods is positioned as one of the few places of safety.

For example, Duncan-Andrade (2011) explained that there are “four major sources of traumatic stress in students’ lives that educators must be prepared to address: (1) institutional violence; (2) physical violence; (3) root shock; and (4) wealth inequality” (p. 313). Moreover, he

purported that educators must address these four sources of trauma in order for youth of color to “take on the seemingly intractable forms of inequity facing our society” (p. 309). Labeling the sources of trauma as toxins, his argument is for teacher education to move toward a focus that “aims to develop educators better equipped to respond to the ‘socially toxic environments’ that emerge from racism, poverty, and other forms of oppression,” that disproportionately impact students of color (Duncan-Andrade, 2011, p. 310). What is left out of this important call for educators to respond to socially toxic environments, however, is the call for urban schools to first see themselves as socially toxic environments. The urban schools is a violent institution. While “schools are often characterized as a safe oasis in the violence of inner-city neighborhoods,” Herr and Anderson (2010, 416) explained, “this view is due to an undertheorization of violence and a misperception of apparently orderly schools and classrooms as violence-free.” When understanding the education of Black children in urban schools, it is important for educators to focus their attention on the ways violence is embedded within the institution. “Urban schools did not create the injustices of American urban life, although they had a systematic part in perpetuating them” (Tyack, 1974 p. 12). While I agree with Tyack, we must extend this line of thinking and not let urban schools off of the hook. We as urban educators must begin to ask ourselves the question: How do we participate in anti-black violence? Answering this question begins with us coming to realize that “we all participate in something larger than ourselves, something we didn’t create but that we have the power to affect through the choices we make about *how* to participate” (Johnson, 2004, p. 26). Urban schools are not mere bystanders who adopt unjust practices, but are in fact co-creators of societal injustices. For example, Love (2014) explained how Black male students who embody Hip Hop swag—“wearing, articulating, and celebrating their Hip Hop cultural belonging”—are often labeled by teachers and school

personnel as “unteachable, threatening, and criminal” (p. 301). Speaking of anti-Black racism specifically, Wun (2016) outlined how Black girls are “more likely to be subject to disciplinary infractions through both formal and informal processes by adults and their nonblack peers” (p. 2). “The overrepresentation of African American students in the use of exclusionary and punitive consequences is of major concern in schools” (Skiba, Michael, Nardo, & Peterson, 2002, 319). Moreover, much research has documented the ways in which urban school settings create conditions that are neither safe or welcoming places for Black children (Delpit, 2006, 2012; Lewis, James, Hancock, & Hill-Jackson, 2008; Sojoyner, 2016), with a great deal examining the separate experiences of Black girls (Evans-Winters, & Esposito, 2010; Fordham, 1993; Haynes, Stewart, & Allen, 2016; Hines-Datiri & Carter Andrews, 2017; E.W. Morris, 2007; M. Morris, 2016; Watson, 2016) and Black boys (Coles & Warren, 2017; Ferguson, 2000; Flennaugh, 2015, 2016, 2017; Howard, 2013a, 2013b; Howard, Flennaugh, & Terry, 2012; Monroe, 2005; Noguera, 2003; Rios, 2001; Warren, 2017). Urban education reform research has also highlighted the ways urban schools negatively impact Black children while proposing new directions for more equitable urban schooling futures (Anyon, 2014; Ginwright, 2004; Henig, Hula, Orr, Pedescleaux, 2001; Warren, 2005).

As much of the literature review has worked to outline thus far, it can be understood that the negative experiences of Black youth in urban schools are not facilitated by their Blackness, but rather facilitated by the othering and criminalizing of their Blackness. Delpit (2012) noted that a major reason “African American students are not excelling is that we have all been affected by our society’s deeply ingrained bias of equating blackness with inferiority” (p. 9). Similarly, research has argued that Black youth and other youth of color are treated unfairly in urban schools and urban society because people come to view them as being “responsible for

creating their own physical surroundings, social context, and psychological conditions” (Tate et al., 2014, p. 4). This reveals why it is deeply important to engage both the history of the U.S. and the history of U.S. schooling as it relates to antiblackness when teaching and researching with Black youth in urban settings; it reveals that Black youth are not at all responsible for their suffering. This stance of mine is supported by Milner and Lomotey’s (2013) call for urban education researchers to address the historical gaps often left out of the field.

Much of the literature on urban schooling and Black youth unearths the many ways urban schooling is largely focused on policing the ideas, attitudes, and movements of Black youth. While not explicitly stated, altogether this literature reveals how urban schooling for Black youth works to police Black futures as well. Moreover, outside of educational research we see documentation of the ways schooling polices the present and future selves of Black youth. As highlighted in Chapter One, throughout my dissertation studies these documentations have included, but are not limited to: Black youth being told not to dress like Santa Clause because Santa is white (Pearson, 2013), being told America does not need another Black president (Clark, 2013), being locked in a closet for time-out (Brown, 2014), being flipped out of a chair and then dragged across a classroom floor by a school police officer (Fausset and Southall, 2015), and attending class where a white male teacher repeatedly uses the “N-word” and most recently told students to not date Blacks “because they are not worth it” (Murphy, 2018). While actions of racism may not always be committed consciously (Richeson & Ambady, 2003), teachers and students come to rationalize antiblackness in schools as normal and expected practice. These deficit views of Blackness and Black students moves beyond dispositions to also infiltrating school policies and curriculum, causing deficit views of Black children to become normalized in all aspects of American schooling (Solorzano & Yosso, 2001). What might it mean for research

to wrestle with the documented violence, deficiency, criminality, and savagery of the urban school opposed to seeking to examine the anti-Black social constructions of Black youth and communities as violent, deficient, criminal, and savage? Echoing Wynne (1999, p. 6), “avoiding the issue of racism concerns me most because of its consequences on children.” For this, I purport that time is up on the glossing over of anti-black racism in urban schooling.

Urban Schooling as Inequitable by Design: Antiblackness as Symbolic Violence

Radical theories of schooling purport that “educational institutions are organized around and reflect the interests of dominant groups in the society; that the function of school is to reproduce the current inequities of our social, political, and economic system” (Ferguson, 2000, p. 50). Moreover, it upholds that schools reproduce social inequality through a “hidden curriculum,” which reflects the “cultural hegemony” of white Americans. This “hidden curriculum” in schools works to exacerbate inequality opposed to diminish it (Ferguson, 2000, 50). Iadicola (1981) explained, “The school’s role in sorting and placing students with the “correct” cultural disposition to perpetuate the social and cultural order is central to its role as an agency of social control” (p. 362). Schools reward the cultural capital of the dominant class (MacLeod, 2009). This “cultural production in education refers to the ways in which schools and teachers reproduce social inequalities through the promotion of certain forms of cultural knowledge” (Jennings & Lynn, 2005, p. 19). By embodying the dominant cultural capital as superior, schools inflict symbolic violence—“the painful, damaging, mortal wounds inflicted by the wielding of words, symbols, and standards” (Ferguson, 2000, p. 50)—against students not belonging to the white race. Ferguson’s analysis of Bourdieu and Passeron’s symbolic violence revealed that not only are African-American youth violently attacked in society, but that this vicious routine is perpetuated by the schools that aim to educate them. The wielding of words,

symbols, and standards that embody white cultural capital is how schools promote white supremacy and as a result, promote antiblackness. Similar to the experiences African-American youth face outside of school, (i.e. being called thugs, being followed in stores, and being over-represented in the penal system), they also face similar experiences in school.

Unlike physical violence, symbolic violence is perplexing for the simple fact that it is not a form of overt coercion, typical violence; and for this reason alone, it is damaging for all of those on the receiving end (Scott, 2012, p. 532). Herr and Anderson explained that it is the very invisibility of the operation of symbolic power that makes it so effective. Invisible tactics, those incapable of being seen stop efforts of resistance in their tracks before they even materialize. There is no way to resist the unseen without a proper intervention of sorts. Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) explained,

Every power to exert symbolic violence, i.e. every power which manages to impose meanings and to impose them as legitimate by concealing the power relations which are the basis of its force, adds its own specifically symbolic force to those power relations (p. 4).

Again, the act of concealing the power relations, which essentially seal the exertion of power contributes to the lack of awareness those subjected to symbolic violence have in regards to saving themselves from their subjugation.

In regards to violence in the schooling of urban Black children, it can be deduced that “inequitable social relations are maintained not simply through bad teaching, as current school reform efforts assume, but through the everyday ‘pedagogic actions’ of ‘world class’, dedicated and caring teachers” (Herr & Anderson, 2010, p. 419). Pedagogic actions in schools serve as one of the main extensions of symbolic violence. The mundane action of knowledge being passed on

to a student from a teacher is an act of symbolic violence by nature of schools and the particular knowledge teachers' share and value from their students is rooted in systems of power. Schools and the teachers housed there impose meaning on students, never once stopping to consider how various student populations may make sense of the knowledge being imposed upon them differently. In some cases, the difference of meanings constructed due to the varying epistemologies of students that may not directly align with the schools can be so drastic that harm is done to students who cannot understand or connect with the meaning imposed by the cultural arbitrary. Herr and Anderson (2010) used misinterpretations in feminist scholarship as an example:

Feminist scholarship that promotes an ethic of caring in schools often fails to understand how a caring attitude can function as a velvet glove that serves to obscure the exercise of symbolic violence or even collude in making the dominant habitus seem more universal and natural (p. 419).

In their analysis of *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture*, Herr and Anderson (2010) discussed how Bourdieu and Passeron expose the

subtle and usually unconscious mechanisms through which dominant groups in society make their own particular form of cultural capital appear to be the natural way of being in the world. Taking arbitrary cultural capital (e.g. white skin, a particular way of pronouncing words, a manner of dress) which has no inherent superiority and succeeding in imposing it as a dominant social norm through social institutions, particularly through formal schooling (and more recently the mass media) represents a form of 'symbolic violence'(p. 419).

Additionally, it was noted by White (1980) that those with political and economic power—White Americans—legitimate and maintain their position in society by presenting their ideas as the only rational and valid ones.

Through this process of gentle domination, the dominant group “includes the ideas, attitudes, and values that are systematically endorsed and taught throughout society to maintain the existing social order. The school’s role in this process is to perpetuate and transmit knowledge which is considered legitimate by the ruling class and systematically to define the sphere of ‘orthodox’ culture and the sphere of ‘heretical’ culture” (White, 1980, p. 50). Those assumed to be orthodox are white Americans and the cultural styles associated with their dominance as a racial group and Black Americans are positioned as heretical. Blacks are seen as being at odds with the orthodox culture. Inherent in this explanation and mere assumption that Blackness is in opposition to something normal, the assumption that Blackness is not just different but deficient is symbolic violence. However, the invisibility of the forces that perpetuate this Black and white dichotomy make it nearly impossible to recognize. The grave injustice committed by a cultural arbitrary is that if students do not assimilate either by nature of not knowing they should or simply not wanting to, they may have a difficult time succeeding in the social order. Iadicola (1981, p. 363) explained,

The knowledge system or culture of the group/class that rules the social order will be the cultural arbitrary. Thus, all pedagogic action with the school serves to reproduce the structure of power relations within the society by ranking students in terms of their knowledge of the cultural arbitrary imposed.

Assimilation is not a compromise; it requires an individual to give up parts of themselves—in many cases the most meaningful contributions to one’s identity—in order to resemble something else.

It is clear that symbolic violence manifests itself in the power struggle between the dominant group in a society and those not belonging to that group. However, one of the more brutal aspects of it as social practice is its self-sustaining property; symbolic violence and the damages that are incurred as a result continue without a hitch because the victims begin to believe they are responsible and perhaps deserve their positioning in society. Initially, students may question or wonder about the way they are treated in schools or become disillusioned by the fact that they worked hard and are still not where they believe they deserve to be, but overtime the fury slowly fades away and students come to believe they are where they deserve to be. Students may take a “that’s just the way it is” attitude. Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) noted that symbolic violence imposes “recognition of the legitimacy of the dominant culture on the members of the dominated groups or classes, it tends at the same time to impose on them, by inculcation or exclusion, recognition of the illegitimacy of their own cultural arbitrary” (p. 41).

Education in America works to privilege whites and positions their culture at the center of all public schooling institutions, which makes them the addresses of public education. While students not belonging to this cultural arbitrary of dominance also attend schools and deserve an education that caters to their needs, they are not the targeted audience; indeed they are the illegitimate addressees. How can Black students be constantly told to work hard in a system that does not measure itself on their success? Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) explained, “symbolic violence through pedagogic action may incidentally inculcate the information constituting the dominant culture in students not belonging to the dominant group (white), but the intended goal

is to inculcate the *fait accompli* of the legitimacy of the dominant culture” (p. 41). In essence, a dangerous effect of symbolic violence is not that students have beliefs or values of the dominant cultural arbitrary instilled in them, but that they understand the legitimacy of the dominant culture; in turn the illegitimacy of theirs. This is an important component of symbolic violence in that it works to fuel the invisibility of the social practice. Black students across the country are not equipped to resist or question practices that are symbolically violent because they see the actions as legitimate, they have occurred throughout their entire schooling experiences. Similar to violence in society, Black youth may understand that physical violence against their bodies is wrong, but U.S. jurisprudence continues to justify it by supporting and/or ignoring it. Urban educators must not fail their students as society already has. They must acknowledge the violent ways Black children are treated in schools and correct their wrongs. This is a call for urban educators and urban institutions to acknowledge the historical and strategic implementation of violence against the Black body in urban schools and to develop ways to address it. Only then, will urban schools begin to transform to spaces that are truly safe and violence free for Black children.

My project provides a needed way forward for urban schools to narrow in on the specificity of Blackness when creating schooling environments that are geared toward anti-racists pedagogies. While urban education is often associated with Black and Brown students—due to the ways urban functions as coded language or a proxy for race—much of this research has not actually named antiblackness. Moreover, I add, that in this specific naming of Blackness and antiblackness as opposed to race and racism, the historic social context of Blackness must be engaged by the urban school. This section of the literature review closes the gaps in urban education research on the experiences of Black youth, by bridging the societal and schooling

context, with a deep emphasis on history. Lastly, since literacy has historically been equated with Black education, this literature implicitly reveals the ways literacy has always been a site of resistance in Black communities.

LANGUAGE AND LITERACY

Why Literacy?: The Inextricable Link Between Literacy and Antiblackness

Rogers and Mosely (2006) explained, “with social struggles for freedom and justice, literacy has always been deeply enmeshed with race” (p. 462). Collins and Blot (2003) explained, “African Americans were deemed ‘naturally’ unfit for literacy by colonial era intellectuals and Enlightenment philosophers more generally. In particular, the argument was that African Americans were inherently inferior to Europeans because they lacked the capacity for reason” (p. 79). In the examination of the fight for quality education within the African American community it is important to note that historically, literacy and education were synonymous. Excluding Blacks from literacy was the major way the community was barred from gaining full access to society by having the rights and privileges of full citizenship (i.e. access to formal schooling). Thus, the social construction of Blacks as nonwriters, non-enactors of literacy, is structurally embedded within American society and its social institutions, such as the urban school. According to Doc Daniel Dowdy, a former slave in Madison County, Georgia, “The first time you was caught trying to read or write, you was whipped with a cow-hide, the next time with a cat-o-nine-tails and the third time they cut the first jint offen your forefinger” (Cornelius, 1983, p. 174). Prompted by the Stono Rebellion of 1739, where Angolan slaves who were highly literate in Portuguese (particularly the leader Jemmy) seized a store of firearms and began killing whites in the colony of South Carolina (Thornton, 1991), South Carolina’s Act of

1740 was enacted which among other things denied the teaching of literacy to slaves. In the reprinting of the act by Halpern and Lago (2008, pp. 16-18), Section XLV stated:

Whereas, the having slaves taught to write, or suffering them to be employed in writing, may be attended with great inconveniences; Be it enacted, that all and every person and persons whatsoever, who shall hereafter teach or cause any slave or slaves to be taught to write, or shall use or employ any slave as a scribe, in any manner of writing whatsoever, hereafter taught to write, every such person or persons shall, for every such offense, forfeit the sum of one hundred pounds, current money.

As evidenced here, there was capital to be maintained by excluding the slave from literacy, which is logical considering slavery's role in America's rise as a capitalist super power.

Conceptualized as property, slavery worked to separate the mind and body of the slave, in fact it worked to render the mind and thinking as an impossibility for Blacks. As Barrett (1995, p. 419) explained, restricting Blacks to make life without literacy "is seemingly to immure them in bodily existences having little or nothing to do with the life of the mind and its representation."

The value placed on the bodies of Blacks during slavery in opposition to the minds of Blacks has long been documented in reality and fiction. In the film *Great Debaters*, there is a scene where Denzel Washington who plays Melvin Tolson, a debate coach at a historically Black college, references methods used to control slaves as outlined in the Willie Lynch Letter. He explained the mantra of plantation slavery was to, "Keep the slave physically strong but psychologically weak and dependent on the slave master. Keep the body, take the mind." As a result of this, I align with Barrett (1995, p. 419) when she states, "to enter into literacy is to gain important skills for extending oneself beyond the condition and geography of the body." Antiblackness is rooted in the tradition of "keep the body, take the mind" conceptualizations of Black people. As a result,

using literacy to directly resist this pillar of antiblackness to extend oneself beyond the violent conditions and geography of the Black body is paramount.

Literacy as a Disruptive Intervention to Antiblackness

Using literacy as a vehicle for Black youth to document their experiences with antiblackness is important due to the ability of violence to silence populations. Kirkland (2013) explained, “The study of literacy quite literally means to search past silences, to listen to the behaviors of words as they perform meaning in people’s lives” (p. 9). In Kirkland’s (2013) work with Black males he shared that in many ways the society in which the students are a part of, enforces the code by which they are to be barred from literacy; barring Black populations from literacy is a global phenomenon, which has proven detrimental for Black communities throughout the world. It has been detrimental because when a population is not able to express themselves, their voice is erased. For example, in the 16th century, Spanish colonialists burned every written text of the Mayan people, which both physically and symbolically erased their collective voice (Peterson, 2002). During modern U.S. slavery, Blacks were punished severely if they attempted to read or write, because text revealed a world beyond bondage (Williams, 2009). This world beyond bondage, “provided the means to write a pass to freedom and because it most often happened in secret, the very act of learning to read and write subverted the master-slave relationship” (p. 7). Indeed, literacy reveals a world beyond bondage and in the case of schooling, beyond Black subjugation via anti-Black symbolic violence. Literacy reveals a world where it is neither normal or okay for Blacks to be treated inequitably, violently.

Thinking of modern U.S. schools, if students are not engaged in practices of critical literacy, they may not develop the means to effectively disrupt power imbalances in their school sites that are responsible for the violence they experience. The need to “steal” knowledge in

slavery was a precursor for the way African Americans would have to fight for knowledge post slavery. Today, African Americans are marginalized in education due to the role whiteness has played throughout history as a means to oppress (Feagin, 2010; Leonardo, 2009; Lipman, 2013). America currently has an education debt that “comprises historical, economic, sociopolitical, and moral components” as a result of the exclusion of Blacks from an equal education (Ladson-Billings, 2006, p. 3). My dissertation aims to reconcile this debt by first getting students to explore the ways they have been personally affected by it. As noted by Anderson (1988), Black people came out of slavery with a burning desire to learn to read and write and were outraged at the institution of slavery for keeping them illiterate. One ex-slaved mentioned, “There is one sin that slavery committed against me which I will never forgive. It robbed me of my education” (Anderson, 1988, p. 5). As expressed by this ex-slave, Blacks were marginalized since they were placed in society without any literacy skills and expected to compete with white citizens whose families had been literate for generations. Despite this negative history of barring Blacks from literacy, the power of literacy still remains. The major beauty for me of literacy is that while Blacks were being denied access to it during slavery and well beyond, they were simultaneously engaging in very dynamic literacy practices—critical literacy. This literacy that Blacks used and still use has been instrumental in critically examining conditions of American life that negatively impact Black communities.

Given the power of language and literacy and the often-overlooked ways Black youth compose the text of their lives, many educational scholars have examined language and literacy practices with Black youth and other youth of color and how it unearths and speaks back to inequity. Particularly noting Kinloch’s (2011) edited collection, *Urban Literacies: Critical Perspectives on Language, Learning, and Community*, I, too, operate in this tradition for my

dissertation of using literacy with historically marginalized youth to disrupt systems of inequity and structural unfairness. When thinking of literacy as a disruptive intervention, I am reminded of the work of Wissman (2007), who working with Black females explained that they used language and literacy to navigate the complexities of the sociopolitical landscape and to resist the politics of silencing, through their desires to author themselves outside of dominant discourses. Or McCormick (2000), in her work with urban teenage youth, where she discovered that the poetry students developed provided them a “sanctuary within, a place to play out conflict and imagine multiple possibilities for identity” (p. 194). The language of a “sanctuary within” directly connects to the idea of revealing words beyond bondage, a world beyond current normalized social contexts in America shrouded in inequity and anti-blackness. A big part of my contribution will be that I am building from and with scholars who examine literacy practices of youth of color, and while my research does that as well, it is more about the language and literacy practices as specifically a research tool to study antiblackness. I build on the work of researchers who have documented the richness of the literacy lives of Black youth and move that work to now centering these literacy lives as timely and necessary analytic that allow us to reimagine a Black urban education otherwise, beyond the confines of what we now know to be.

Like Kinloch (2010), I am concerned with how the lived experiences of urban youth represent literacy stories, or narratives, about place, struggle, and identity, especially considering that these stories are typically not part of the work that students do in schools (Mahiri & Sablo, 1996), a place that reproduces and sustains violence. Using the framing of “literacy is who I am...with literacy, my word’s my weapon” (Kinloch 2010, p. 11), the data I collected is rooted in the idea that literacy is deeply embedded within the lives of Black students and that when

cultivated and engaged, can serve as a powerful analytic of/for American life. In operating with this framing of literacy, I seek to build this notion for students and myself that despite countless efforts, Blacks cannot be truly barred from literacy, because literacy is who Black people are. As noted earlier, Black youth compositions of self arise from the U.S.'s suppression of these compositions of self. With this framing, it is my hope that Black youth will be able to resist and disrupt any narrative that ignores the realities of their existence as Black children in America, the world. As purported by Souto-Manning (2010), "Children are already skilled and intentional. The challenge then is for teachers and schools to embrace this notion and acknowledge the skills and intentionality children bring with them to schools" (p. 156).

Beyond Disruption: Literacy as Humanized Reimagining

My dissertation seeks to honor the multiple literacies present in the lives of Black youth through an exploration of their literacy lives and the way they come to critically examine the world through their individual literate bodies. Watson (2016) suggested that educators "focus on youth's multiliteracies practices as exemplars of what youth can do" and to "discuss youth's multiliteracies practices as new forms of civic learning and action" (p. 61). While reflecting on what counts as literacy Bausch (2014) explained, "I found that the more I thought about literacy, the more I found that my definition broadened. It began to encompass literacy as a book, a story, a painting, a song, a poem, a dance, a slide under a microscope, a mathematical formula" (p. 9). I place Bausch's conception of literacy at the fore of this section in order to note that I, too view literacy in a definition much broader than simply reading, writing, and speaking (Collins & Blot, 2003; Moje, 1996); "not simply a technical and neutral skill" but rather "always embedded in socially constructed epistemological principles" (Street, 2003, p. 77). Using texts and literacy practices not always used in classrooms will allow me to "mitigate the discontinuity between

these students' real lives and their lives in school" (Mahiri & Sablo, 1996, p. 165). As Watson & Marciano (2015) noted, Morrell and Duncan-Andrade (2002) used poetry in school where the lived experiences of youth were fore fronted in conjunction with reading rap lyrics that were then paired with poets from the literacy canon. This pairing spurred "critical dialogue and a critical engagement of the text" (p. 91). For this, when I say that students are theorizing antiblackness as symbolic violence in my dissertation, this presents itself in any of the above literacy forms mentioned by Bausch (and even those not mentioned). This is important considering that symbolic violence is a largely invisible phenomenon that many participants may not have the language to directly explain. Opening up the documenting of these experiences to other literacy modalities will allow for details to emerge in students' stories that may have been missed by strictly sticking to traditional modes of literacy. Symbolic violence as a function of antiblackness silences Black youth in schools by taking away the power to name it. However, engaging youth through both new literacy modalities and methods that they are already using such as journaling (Kinloch, 2010), texting (Paris, 2010), poetry, spoken word, and freestyles (Caraballo & Lyiscott, 2008; Christensen, 2000; Kim, 2013; Low, 2011; Lyiscott, 2017; Paris, 2011a, 2011b; Wissman 2007, 2011), narratives (Vasudevan, & Rodriguez Kerr 2012), photographs, drawings & symbols (Greene, Burke, & McKenna, 2013; Greene, Burke, & McKenna, 2014; Hampton, 2011; Kaplan, 2013; Paris, 2011a), school and community mapping (Green, 2015; Kinloch, 2010), etc. will allow students to make the invisible visible. Even the ways in which youth tell stories of literacy on their bodies, particularly the ways tattoos function as literacy artifacts (Kirkland, 2009), represent the ways in which making the invisible visible become embodied, quite literally, by Black youth. In direct alignment with how I see my broad use of literacies, Burke, Greene, & McKenna (2016) used a combination of photographs, narratives, and

neighborhood maps generated by youth that worked to highlight their lived experiences, deeming them as key sources that can help to expose and challenge the inequitable distribution of resources in their lives. These modes of literacy, which are outside of the traditional literacies relied on by schools, allow for a more humanizing exchange with the school and students' lives. Camangian (2010, p. 180) explained:

Humanizing literacies are possible when urban teachers utilize nontraditional instructional approaches that privilege the very texts that are most relevant to young people—their lived experiences. Such approaches can tap into youth confusion and anger by utilizing reading, writing, and oral communication to transform unjust social conditions.

Humanizing literacies are important for my study since I am working with Black youth to critically analyze their school conditions, conditions that often dehumanize them. For this reason, we cannot solely rely on traditional literacies that are used by schools; relying simply on traditional literacy practices would work to reinforce the marginalization students experience in classrooms daily by not engaging in literacies that are central to their lives beyond schooling.

Pulling from a range of scholars Hayes (2015) echoed Bausch when she stated, Literacy is not simply just the process of reading and writing, but it is a multi-layered hybrid of interpretive skills built through cultural and social practices within various communities, which allow people to encode and decode messages daily, far, far beyond just words on paper (p. 26).

Using a “multi-layered hybrid” approach in this research allows this decoding to be done in a way that utilizing a single method may not allow. In further extending what literacy is, Collins and Blot (2003) explained, “Many compose themselves by composing: diaries, letters (now of

course often electronic), jotted-down poems, songs, especially in late adolescence, and for those many adults working with “information,” there are ubiquitous notes, memoranda, schedules, and reports” (p. 1). Collins and Blot (2003) further explained, “one line of argument is that literacy practices such as reading and writing are integrally connected with the dynamics of identity, with the construction of selves” (p. xviii). Just like our identities are multi-faceted so are the ways that we engage in literacy on a daily basis. Therefore, only using a multi-layered approach to engaging my participants in literacy to document symbolic violence will be useful.

According to theorist of New Literacy Studies, the social context in which youth live and cultural diversity significantly alter the literacy process (Morrell, 2002). This fact was demonstrated earlier through the explanation of the social context of U.S. chattel slavery and the ways the literacy learning process for Blacks was staunchly resisted. “Often, the failure of urban students to develop “academic” literacy skills stems not from a lack of intelligence but from the inaccessibility of the school curriculum to students who are not in the “dominant” or “mainstream” culture” (Morrell, 2002, p. 72). As the history of our nation shows—in this violent way—historically marginalized communities are often denied access to privileged activities such as literacy and then are positioned as not being capable to engage in such activities. However, as discussed, these populations such as Blacks with literacy end up being more capable enacting literacy since they had to not only fight to learn the basic nature of the activity, but then also independently learn to critique the same process that worked to exclude them. Thus, critical literacy is rooted in the disruption of unearned power imbalances. Considering this history, our nation’s educational institutions cannot be the only place where we seek to develop students’ literacy learning. In line with this, New Literacy theorists note that educators must “examine nonschool literacy practices to find connections between local literacies and the dominant,

academic literacies” (Morrell, 2002, p. 72). Since society and schools often silence Black youth, we must locate the myriad of ways that they are literate independent of traditional academic literacies—as research has shown works to exclude Black youth more often than not. When describing research conducted with youth and their out-of-school literacies, Mahiri and Sablo (1996) explained that engaging in literacy practices helped the participants make sense of their lives and social worlds. In addition, this literacy engagement gave the youth “a partial refuge from the harsh realities of their everyday experiences” (p. 174). Youth were constructing their identities while also experiencing “a sense of personal status as well as personal satisfaction” (p. 174). Ybarra’s (2018) work with (im)migrant youth revealed that working with you in such ways allows us to “reimagine literacy pedagogies in out-of-school learning spaces so that they provide opportunities for young people to see and co-construct their knowledge, center their experiences, and welcome the multitude of identities that come to bear on their learning” (pp. 133-134). The collective work done in my study with youth demonstrated how the literacy lives of Black youth in the fight against antiblackness results in personal satisfaction, centered on reimagining the possibilities of a new social reality.

Like Mahiri and Sablo (1996), I, too agree that the literacy work Black youth engage in “must name and link the issues that schools have difficulty addressing, including racism, poverty, gang violence, and drugs” (p.178). While necessary in my opinion, schools and the predominately white teachers typically housed there do not have the capacity or in most cases the willingness to address these issues. The nature of our educational institutions is rooted in societal inequity that is responsible for things such as racism, or in the case of my dissertation anti-blackness. So the question becomes, can a school shaped in the image of whiteness—and as a result anti-blackness—address these issues without admitting the necessity of restructuring

America's entire educational landscape? Since this has been a dilemma of education for centuries, my dissertation puts the power of developing ways to (re)imagine and (re)construct a new world in the language and literacies of Black youth. Macedo (1994) explained that issues such as inequitable schooling environments are part of a discourse Black Americans are familiar with, meaning that Blacks typically do not find it difficult to talk about. Those not belonging to historically marginalized communities on the other hand often do find these topics difficult. Therefore, through the uniqueness of their experiences, Black youth have the power to lead the charge in critically examining their conditions. In the Freirean sense, the oppressed will be responsible for liberating themselves. For this, Black youth and their perspectives and firsthand documentation of their experiences are placed at the center of my research. I do this, because like Skerrett and Bomer (2011), I believe that youth in American society who are often framed solely through deficit perspectives "carry out purposeful, practical richly literate lives" (p. 1257). These literate lives have the potential to help Black youth, their families, communities, schools, and society think about how we can re-shape urban schooling and the world.

CONNECTING THE LITERATURE

The subjugation of Black people is a necessity in the United States because the nation's existence, particularly its prosperity, is rooted in the ideology that this subjugation will always exist. This means that an individual Black person does not have to feel personally victimized by antiblackness in any given moment, for the fact that antiblackness is diffuse, functioning as the total context. Moreover, even if a Black person does not feel attacked at a specific moment, in the U.S. there is always the possibility for an attack to occur. For this fact, Black people are always on the precipice of being victimized by antiblackness. Despite this knowledge, antiblackness is a concept that is often rendered as a non-thing, a non-possibility in our nation's

post-racial imaginations. The specific attacks against Blacks are then often assumed to be caused by Blackness itself and not larger systems of oppression such as white supremacy. This similar overlooking and outright ignoring of antiblackness is mirrored in the education of Black children, particularly in urban schools serving predominately Black populations. As a theory of violence that is defined by its ability to be misrecognized, it becomes understood that antiblackness plays out in urban schools as symbolic violence. The necessity of subjugating Black bodies in urban schools becomes embedded within the urban institution in ways that normalize the violence, so much so that Blacks and non-Blacks accept the inequity (read violence) often associated with urban schools and urban youth. In the midst of antiblackness that is present throughout society and schools, Black people have and continue to author themselves in ways that subvert antiblackness. This literacy engagement, which lies at the core of Black existence in the U.S., can serve as a powerful analytic to unearthing and then developing strategies to not only subvert the system of antiblackness, but to build new worlds where this violence is lessened or perhaps even nonexistent.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

I open my methodology chapter by outlining the purpose of my Critical Race ethnography and sharing the research questions, which guided the ethnographic exploration. I then move to explain my use of qualitative methodologies to answer my research questions, particularly detailing my decision to align the methodology with my theoretical frameworks by specifying the research design to a BlackCrit ethnography. Next, I describe the research site and participants, which is followed by an explanation of my participant recruitment and sampling methods. I follow these explanations with an outlining of my collaboration with participants, as this is a defining feature of my overall research design. I then move to my data collection that is organized into two broad categories: (1) after-school sessions -- (a) audio-visual recorded after-school sessions and (b) literacy artifacts and (2) outside of after-school sessions -- (a) observations, (b) interviews, (c) a group text message (dialogic journal), and (d) student academic and disciplinary data. Before fully delving into my explanation of data collection, I take time to briefly explain the importance of food in this project. Lastly, I discuss my data analysis.

METHODOLOGICAL PURPOSE

The purpose of this Critical Race ethnographic study, extended by BlackCrit, was to discover what Black youth's critical engagements with literacy reveal about antiblackness as it operationalizes as symbolic violence in their urban schooling and societal experiences. Through the byproducts of these critical engagements with Black youth textualities, the goal was to pay attention to the ways Black youth have always been critical of their academic and social environments in efforts to lessen the anti-Black violence that has come to structurally frame their existence. I chose to engage in a BlackCrit ethnography to learn from Black youth about their

racialized experiences in schooling and society, with the intention of centering Blackness and their particular Black textualities. Relying on my theoretical frameworks CRT and BlackCrit and Sociocultural Literacies and Critical Literacy (Black Critical Sociocultural Literacies), and literatures (Critical Race Studies, Urban Education, Language and Literacy) I developed my research questions to examine the utility of critical literacy in understanding the lives of Black urban youth in the context of antiblackness.

Research Question 1: What understandings of antiblackness emerge through Black youth's critical engagements with literacy?

Research Question 2: How do Black youth's understandings of antiblackness through critical engagements with literacy function as resistance to antiblackness?

RESEARCH DESIGN

Qualitative Methodologies

I decided to root this project in qualitative methodologies in order to understand how Black youth are affected by their interactions with the world around them (Merriam, 2002). I operate with assumption that the world Blacks interact in and with is anti-Black. According to Merriam (2002) "all qualitative research is interested in how meaning is constructed, how people makes sense of their lives and their worlds. The primary goal of a basic qualitative study is to uncover and interpret these meanings" (p. 39). Within my qualitative design, I examined social inequality with a focus in working towards change (Rudham 2012). Social inequality that is examined in critical ethnography can encompass a range of unequal power imbalances. Moving from macro conceptions of social inequality to micro, I specifically examined inequality regarding race. I sought to represent the culture, consciousness, and lived experiences of Black youth who both live and are educated in the midst of asymmetrical power relations (Quantz,

1992). As Quantz (1992) noted, I entered my work with “conscious political intentions that are oriented toward emancipator and democratic goals” (pp. 448–449). In my ethnography, I attempted to understand how and where the oppression of Black youth happens in school, and the conditions that allow it to happen over time (Carspecken, 1996). My conscious political intentions were grounded in my ability and interest in naming race—specifically Blackness—as a site of societal and institutional oppression.

Qualitative research in my case was a necessity because Black youth constantly make meaning of the world (as with all people), however, their meaning making often is suppressed and outright ignored. In other words, the ways in which Black youth come to see the world is deemed as unworthy of attention. A focus on participants’ perspectives, their meanings, and their subjective views is one major characteristic of qualitative research (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999; Hatch, 2002). Working with Black youth who have been historically marginalized and thusly silenced in both school and society, makes the use of qualitative inquiry not only appropriate, but also important. Voices of marginalized groups are often silenced because they are viewed to be emotional, literary, personal, or false (Ladson-Billings, 2009, p. 24). Numbers on the other hand “carry a special weight...are seen as ‘objective’ and ‘scientific’ whereas years of qualitative research observing school life can be dismissed as ‘subjective’ and ‘anecdotal’ (Gillborn, 2010, p. 257). Ladson-Billings (2009, p. 24), mentioned that a mainstream (white) worldview “tends to discount anything that is non- transcendent (historical), or contextual (socially constructed), or nonuniversal (specific).” In essence, Black people and other historically marginalized minorities often have their complex experiences reduced to numbers, which in many cases downplays the high levels of inequality in their lives or even makes them appear to be responsible for their treatment and positionality. For the aforementioned reasons, qualitative

inquiry was utilized in order to hear silenced voices that are often swallowed by method/ologies that overlook the unique experiences of people of color in the United States. This suppression and devaluing of Black youth meaning making must urgently be reversed, as it is this meaning making that allows them to survive in a world designed in Black subjugation. On a fundamental level, my study is about understanding the meaning my participants construct regarding antiblackness, for this reason, qualitative methodologies are employed.

(Black) Critical Race Ethnography. Critical Race ethnography is the specific qualitative methodology I employed and thus sets the basis for my research design. I refer to my design as a BlackCrit ethnography considering that I have extended CRT with BlackCrit. As Vaught (2011) noted, “critical race ethnography is a very young model for qualitative research on race and racism in schooling in society” (p. 23). For this, I must note that while I refer to my design as a BlackCrit ethnography, it is both wholly informed by and in conversation with Critical Race ethnography as the methodology continues to grow and develop. CRT informs the initial structuring of my research design and inquiry. However, I was very responsive to my participants as we co-created and co-negotiated our space, which resulted in the realization that there was a need to specify the Blackness framing their lived experiences. I reiterate that my use of BlackCrit is not meant to reject the larger project of CRT (Dumas & ross, 2016), but to make it specifically relevant to Blackness. Critical Race ethnography still being in a relatively youthful stage positions my work perfectly to demonstrate the way other CRT researchers might more readily engage in race specific ethnographies in the CRT tradition (e.g. TribalCrit ethnography). Many critical ethnographers engage in conversations around race and racism, but the difference in using critical race ethnography is the way I “adhere to and develop central conceptual arguments of CRT,” (Vaught, 2011, p. 24) and more specifically conceptual arguments of

BlackCrit. In other words, this is not just a random exploration of race, but rather one that rests within the tenets of CRT and framings of BlackCrit as outlined in Chapter Two.

Critical Race ethnography allowed me to operate with the belief that race (Blackness) and therefore racism (antiblackness) is present in every aspect of American life, or rather more appropriate, the fact that it dictates American life. This means that when I engaged in this study with Black youth, as mentioned previously, my aim was not to discover if anti-Black racism is experienced by Black youth, but rather how they experience it and how can it be disrupted, if at all. Duncan (2005) proposed a Critical Race ethnography, specifically, “the analysis of the various ontological categories that inform the way race functions as a stratifying force in school and society, as one measure to build around and advance the rich corpus of CRT studies in education” (p. 95). In essence, my extension of Critical Race ethnography to a BlackCrit ethnography allowed me to analyze education in America for Black youth, through a specific Black lens. In other words, moving from CRT to BlackCrit takes into account particular Black cultural ways of being and moving through the world, with an understanding that moving through the world is a different experience for non-Blacks. This then allowed me to challenge the assumptions in school and society that uphold white cultural norms that ignore the ways of being and norms of Black communities.

In terms of data collection, Critical Race ethnography proved to be extremely valuable and appropriate. According to Duncan (2005),

Critical race ethnography seeks to engage the multiple ontological categories that give meaning to lived experience. Engaging multiple ontological categories entails bringing to bear on our work data from different sources, for example, sociolinguistic, interview, observational, statistical, documentary and so forth, to provide stronger warrants for or

even more plausible alternatives to the claims that result from our inquiries. In my view, the experiences of oppression that people of colour in the US encounter are at times so outrageous and unimaginable to outsiders that it makes it difficult for even the most open-minded and reasonable person to grasp the enormity of some of our claims (p. 106).

Antiblackness, I posit, is one of those “outrageous and unimaginable” phenomenon that will be difficult for non-Blacks to grasp. Since antiblackness frames so much of Black existence there is so much to be documented which is why I used Critical Race ethnography opposed to other ethnographic approaches, as “critical ethnography should be data rich” (Vaught, 2011, p. 24). I have included multiple data sources in this study to document the students’ recognitions of antiblackness, and their subsequent resistance to it. As discussed in earlier chapters, antiblackness is such a specific type of racism that is layered with centuries of nuance, that for many who are not Black themselves, it will be very difficult for them to understand what it is like to exist in the world as a Black body. Thus, it is crucial when studying Black youth to use methodological approaches that take this into consideration, both by exploring the history and roots of anti-black racism as I did, but also centering race in research designs, data collection and methods. This helps to further demonstrate why the abundance of data collection tools I utilize are so important, particularly the focus on the multiple literacies of Black youth that work to form their textualities. Literacy is a part of who we are, as people we are literate beings. Therefore, I thought it would be important to engage students in various literacy encounters in conjunction with traditional ethnographic techniques such as interviews and observations, because antiblackness and thus symbolic violence do not often present themselves in traditional ways.

In my ethnography I challenged the mainstream narratives that shape our educational institutions and rejected any research where the “problem statement” places the blame on Blackness. Keeping the centrality of experiential knowledge, a key focal point to Critical Race methodology in mind, I focused directly on the words, symbols, standards, and experiences of symbolic violence that the participants revealed; how this all manifests itself in their everyday lives. Indeed, one of the major highlights of this study is the emphasis on the experiences of Black youth as told by them. This approach is important to me as a scholar in that as we think about reimagining schools that better serve Black youth, we get to redesign these spaces having the experiences of Black youth—who experience the brunt of anti-Black symbolic violence—as the foundation of this reimagining.

RESEARCH SITE

Uptown High

Uptown High School, a public, urban charter school located in Philadelphia, PA served as the site of my study. Uptown serves students from grades seventh through twelfth and educates students from 23 zip codes in the city of Philadelphia, with a total student body population slightly shy of six hundred. GreatPhillySchools.org gives Uptown High an overall quality rating of 9, the highest possible rating being 10. This rating consists of a combination of Uptown’s academic quality (math and reading), college bound rates, attendance, and safety ratings. Uptown High has a record of one hundred percent of their graduating seniors being accepted to two- or four-year colleges and post-secondary programs. Within the last decade U.S. News & World Report Best High Schools has given Uptown High notable distinctions and within Pennsylvania, Uptown High has ranked highly in the category *High School for Black Student Achievement*.

My Relationship and Interest in Uptown High. Uptown High was selected for the site of my research for various reasons. The most important reason is that I have previously worked at the site as a middle school English teacher before beginning my doctoral studies and developed a great rapport with staff and students. For this, I was openly welcomed to work with students at the school. In fact, I visited the school frequently throughout my doctoral studies, which allowed me to maintain the rapport that was built during my tenure at the site. Additionally, while a teacher at Uptown, I developed an after-school program for middle school boys that centered on examinations of social justice and identity as ways to influence student leadership. In many ways, it felt as if I never left the school which made the transition to conducting a full ethnographic study relatively seamless. In conjunction with remaining in contact with the site, I believe that my identity as a Black male played a role in both me choosing Uptown for research and Uptown choosing me. For example, despite the school serving a predominately Black student body and ranking highly in the state of Pennsylvania for Black student achievement, while teaching at Uptown, I was one of two Black male teachers in the entire school. From my perspective, this was one of the many reasons my presence in the school was welcomed when I first began working with students at the site in 2011 and being welcomed again five years later. Throughout the year of my data collection, there was one Black male teacher in the school who taught Physical Education, two Black male deans, and one Black male on the Special Education team (perhaps the most Black men the school has ever had on staff).

In addition to my personal connection with the site, the profile of Uptown High intrigued me. As a Critical Race scholar, I believe in the permanence of racism and its presence throughout society and society's institutions. Despite Uptown High being a highly structured, high performing, urban charter school that gets Black youth to college, I knew that symbolic violence

and antiblackness were present. As an instructor in this institution, I know that I even committed acts of symbolic violence against students just by nature of me being an extension of an educational institution rooted in the image of whiteness. Essentially, I was interested in unearthing the experiences of students who attend a school that in many ways appears to be beneficial to Black students (like most urban schools), but still simultaneously has the potential to promote inequity. This research is not meant to serve as an exposé of Uptown, but rather an exploration of how Black youth document their racial urban schooling and societal experiences, with Uptown being an avenue to explore those documentations. As stated, given my Critical Race stance, I operate with the assumption that all schools commit acts of violence against Black youth, and similarly situated minorities. This means that I could pull out a map of school districts in the U.S. that serve Black youth, close my eyes and point my hand to a region and go to that school and find Black youth experiencing antiblackness via symbolic violence. Across the nation at all PK-12 schools, Black youth experience antiblackness. This is a result of urban schools being created in a slave society and the perpetuation of antiblackness that is embedded not just within schools but society as well. For this, Uptown serves as a place holder for urban education institutions across the nation that serve Black youth. My research at Uptown is meant to push educators and researchers to understand how Black youth theorizations of antiblackness as violence can help us alter the academic and social environments of urban schools across the nation in order to lessen this violence.

Uptown High was appealing because unlike schools in the district that may have lower quality ratings by GreatPhillySchools.org for example, most people would not think of a school like Uptown to be a facilitator of symbolic violence steeped in antiblackness. This connects back to the problem of how we frame schools, particularly for Black youth, as positive, race-neutral

institutions that are there to save inner-city youth from pathological lifestyles. In this research, I disrupt that framing, by focusing on a school that is not considered to be “failing students,” and to think about how it could indeed be failing students in ways not often thought of. Due to educational institutions in America—despite how great they are for Black achievement—being rooted in white racism and antiblackness, I know that all schools project words, symbols, standards, and experiences onto Black youth that have the potential to be violent.

SAMPLING AND RECRUITMENT

Referencing the history of antiblackness I outlined previously and the ways this permeates urban schooling, if Black students are given the opportunity to discuss their lives, evidence of antiblackness will reveal itself. As a scholar who believes in the permanence of racism and the endemic nature of antiblackness, this is an immutable fact from my epistemological standpoint. Since I believe that all Black youth experience antiblackness, I could have walked into Uptown and randomly selected any students for my study and would most likely have come to very similar results and conclusions. However, while all Black youth experience antiblackness and most Black youth could speak about these experience, I used purposive sampling so that I could work with Black students who themselves were willing to engage (and already engaging) in conversations around social critiques of race and racism in their lives, conversations that are not typical in school settings. Considering the important emphasis of critical literacy engagements for my project, this also meant that I looked beyond students who could simply recall experiences, to those who would also be interested in engaging in a community of students to routinely discuss and examine these experiences with an emphasis on literacy engagement. Additionally, I would need to find students that had the time to committee to a project of this nature. Considering my interests in students who were interested in

building a Black-centric community around critically analyzing antiblackness, interested in speaking, writing, and reading (along with a myriad of other literacy modalities) in creative ways regarding antiblackness, and had the time, I began with purposive sampling to narrow down the high school student body.

So while my participants had the ultimate say of whether or not they would join the study, they were still chosen through purposive sampling, considered by Welman and Kruger (1999) “as the most important kind of non-probability sampling, to identify the primary participants” (as cited in Groenewald, 2004, p. 9). I say they were still purposively sampled, because they were selected based on my judgment and the purpose of the research (Babbie, 1995; Greig & Taylor, 1999; Schwandt, 1997), which caused me to seek Black youth who “have had experiences relating to the phenomenon to be researched” (Kruger, 1988 p. 150). The students who became my participants were selected then because they had the information needed to answer the research questions (Fraenkel, Wallen, & Hyun, 1993) and were willing to engage in a collective journey to answer the questions. Purposive sampling is the opposite of random sampling methods and it does not need underlying theories or a set number of informants (Tongco, 2007, p. 147). Therefore, my primary focus was not to determine a specific number of participants, but rather to select a group of students who would be “outspoken and opinionated” (Love, 2008, p. 88) in efforts to create rich data. More importantly, since this project spanned an entire academic year, I also needed students who would be willing and able to commit to engaging in the study throughout the entire time. My recruitment process to arrive at this “outspoken and opinionated” group was composed of three phases: (1) presentation of proposed research and distribution of research information session flyer, (2) information session, and (3) participant selection.

Phase 1: During the first few weeks of September 2016, I visited the study halls of all high school students to introduce myself, which included me explaining my former affiliation with Uptown and that I am pursuing a PhD where I focus on preparing teachers in urban settings to develop better and deeper understandings of race and culture. I then told each study hall that I am looking for students who are interested in developing an after-school space that is co-led by them and myself, where we engage in conversations and activities around their experiences as Black youth in their urban school, in Philadelphia, and the larger society. I then connected the project back to my PhD, explaining to them that our work would be used in the future in the field of education to help educators learn from our conversations. I explained that by participating in this project, the students would in a sense be urban teacher educators. At each presentation I passed around a sign in sheet to get a broad sense of student interest. Throughout the weeks of study hall presentations I hung flyers around the school for an information session, which I held after school during the third week in September. The first phase then included both direct student contact (study hall presentations) and indirect student contact (informational flyers-Appendix A).

Phase 2: After all students at the high school level had a chance to hear my presentation, I hosted an information session after-school for those who wanted to hear more details and ask more questions. As students walked into the information session, they were given a questionnaire (Appendix B) that probed into their interests in social justice in society, social justice in education, discussing race and racism, and their interest in literacy broadly. After students completed the questionnaire, I engaged them in a discussion regarding Terence Crutcher (who was murdered 1 week before the information session)

in order to get a sense for how the students were wrestling with Blackness and violence, particularly since many of the students seen his death on their social media platforms. After the session, I had students turn in their questionnaires if they were interested in joining the research project. At this time, students all had an understanding of the nature of the project and the commitments of the project (i.e. observations, interviews throughout the year, and attending group after-school sessions).

Phase 3: While I reviewed the questionnaires and reflected on the information session discussion, during phase three of the recruitment process, all students who expressed interest were invited to join the project. As noted, this was done because all the students in attendance at the information session became a part of the eligible sample. This fell within the line of purposive sampling, because the students who came to the session fit the description for the students I was looking for. I was not looking for those students deemed by the school and their peers as the “best-behaved” or “the smartest”, rather I sought any and all students who were committed to social justice and who had things to say about societal and schooling conditions that impact Black youth. Nine students ended up composing the group of my participants.

PARTICIPANTS

Table 1: This table shows the identity profiles of my participants

Name	Race	Grade	Self-Identified Gender
Toni	African American	12	Female
Maya	African American	12	Female
Sonia	African American	12	Female
Rochelle	African American	12	Female
Sasha	African American	12	Female
Anita	African American	12	Female
Calvin	African American	10	Male
Khalif	African American	12	Male
Raheem	African American	12	Male

RESEARCHER AND PARTICIPANT COLLABORATION

As a result of using Critical Race ethnography, the design of my research has an emphasis on extensive data collection, through the use of multiple procedures for gathering data, and the active involvement of participants throughout the research process (Creswell, 2012). Since data collection is key in critical forms of ethnography, a methodology seeking to move from how things are to how they could be, the various methods used to collect data are extremely important. However, “the data collection is less focused on time in the field or on the extent of data and more on the active collaboration between the researcher and the participants during the study” (Creswell, 2012, p. 478). The collaboration is primarily focused on methods that allow the participants to learn about themselves, including steps that “need to be taken to improve their equity, to provide empowerment, or to lessen their oppression” (p. 478). The collaboration

between my participants and I takes place in our after-school sessions, which I will discuss in more depth shortly. Our after school sessions, rooted in literacy, provided a collaborative space for us to think about how things could be—how education for Black youth could exist when Black youth intentionally develop the capacity to name and challenge antiblackness. At the core of this collaboration was the participants engaging in literacy to search past the silences Black voices are often shrouded in, particularly in school settings (Kirkland, 2013). While working with youth in Philadelphia, Camitta (1993) argued “that the youth she studies perceived that writing for their own purposes and in their own mediums could be a powerful and meaningful way to capture and even to alter their experiences” (as cited in Mahiri, 2004, p. 20). My dissertation study provided a platform for students to begin to alter their experiences with their school site through literacy in ways that will be productive for their future engagement in urban schooling and the world. The students had the opportunity to document their meaning making of antiblackness within the context of their lives in order to move forward in addressing the issue collectively; truly embodying the idea a student’s word is their weapon (Kinloch, 2010).

DATA COLLECTION

My ethnographic investigation of Blackness and antiblackness in the social worlds of youth was rooted in tracking Black youth’s critical engagements with literacy—especially the ways they composed themselves as Black youth through literacy—in order to unearth how they understood antiblackness as endemic both in-school and out-of-school and moreover how they perceived its enactments against their bodies. In essence, my goal was very simple: spend time with Black youth in order to get attuned to the ways they read about, write about, and talk about antiblackness in their lives—with the idea that reading, writing, and speaking is not confined to traditional conceptions. A major component to our time spent together was building community

around the sharing of food. Our emphasis on food does not function as a source of data per se, but rather as a facilitator of data. Data collection for my project can be separated into two broad categories: (1) after-school sessions and (2) outside of after-school sessions. Data collected during the after-school sessions included: (a) audio-visual recorded after-school sessions and (b) literacy artifacts. Data collected outside of the after-school sessions included: (a) observations, (b) interviews, (c) a group text message (dialogic journal), and (d) student academic and disciplinary data. At our first initial meeting, under the suggestion of Sasha, the students decided to name our collective Black Excellence. It is important I note that the language of Black Excellence does not just refer to the actual after-school space, but for the students and I, it came to represent the entire project. Naming the group Black Excellence was really the first introduction I had into the ways the students would use literacy to reveal their understandings of and resistance to antiblackness. For the students, Black Excellence was about our collective journey to reject antiblackness by positioning excellence and similar ideals (e.g. brilliance and beauty) as inextricably embedded within Blackness. As Sonia explained in her *Exit Interview*, “Black and excellence don’t usually go in the same sentence. So, I think for us to name the group that, it was like a big deal like.”

Food and the Creation of Safe Black Space

A very important and intentional aspect about the after-school space was that it centered not simply on sharing our lived experiences with each other, but sharing those experiences while eating. Food was a major facilitator of the data collected during after-school sessions. As Amina Dickerson, former president of the Du Sable Museum of African American History explained, “Sharing meals, breaking bread together, is very much a part of our black tradition. It’s our communal sharing, a kinship system, everyone coming together to share” (Sullivan, 1988).

Therefore, each session I provided food and beverages due to the role food plays in community building in the Black tradition. At the beginning of each session the students and I would gather around a table and eat collectively, given us time to relish in each other's company, while listening to music, dancing, taking photos and videos, just to name a few ways we entered our space. In thinking about the ways this space became a refuge for the students and myself from the harsh realities of the everyday, I believe that this aspect of the space—eating as prologue to our conversations and activities—was paramount to the development of this safe place. Food is comfort, food is safety. Throughout the sessions, after our initial meal was finished, we would periodically pass around leftovers, snacks, desserts, and beverages. The continuity of eating and sharing was never broken and in fact they became one. Food sustained us, sustained this project.

After-school Sessions

Black Excellence quickly took the form of an extra-curricular club as the students and I decided to meet once a week (many times twice a week) throughout the academic year between 60 – 90 minutes each meeting. This communal activity or “the interactions that occur as adolescents negotiate, reinvent, and jointly create their lifeworlds with others of their own age and with the adults who share their world” (Alvermann, Young, Green, & Wisenbaker, 1999, p. 222), was the prime site where data for my project was collected. The after-school space was directly influenced by the intersection of my theoretical frameworks Critical Race Theory and BlackCrit and Sociocultural Literacies and Critical Literacy. As previously outlined, in my use of the two frameworks together, what emerged for me is the joint lens of Black Critical Sociocultural Literacies. In seeking to answer my research questions, which focused on what Black youth's critical engagements with literacy reveal about the ways they understand and resist antiblackness, I came to understand that the data from the youth would be their Black Critical

Sociocultural Literacies: The answers to my questions came from my participants documenting the ways antiblackness dictates the organization of society and urban schooling as revealed through their engagements with critical literacies. As a result, the after-school space was an intentional part of the research design as it would be the space where these Black Critical Sociocultural Literacies would be revealed, cultivated, and flourish. It is important that I note that I did not lead the youth to the conclusions I gathered in my study, which I have broadly categorized as Black Critical Sociocultural Literacies. The activities and prompts that I facilitated invited the students into a space of such criticality that they arrived at the aforementioned conclusions that I document in my findings chapters.

Considering that this work is not typically done during the school day, an after-school space proved to be necessary as there was no pre-existing environment in the school that was engaging students in this way. The fact that there was no formal or informal schooling space for students to engage in this topic, does not mean that some of the students were not already engaging in such dynamic conversations amongst themselves or at home and in their communities (as many of them were). However, our co-creation of Black Excellence allowed for us to create a space that was intentional about a collective examination of antiblackness in the lives of Black youth. Given CRT's emphasis on experiential knowledge and counter storytelling, the space with students centered these lived experiences as stories that needed to be told, but also heard. Similarly, critical literacy as a tool to imagine new identities and worlds for social change, made this space a priority. In sum, the after-school space essentially was an open-forum where these Black youth who are often silenced in school and society had the space to talk about what they wanted and dictated how they talked about these lived experiences.

Audio-Visual recorded after-school sessions. The importance of the after-school sessions to the overall project is that they captured the core of the project, Black youth collective discussion and storytelling. While each data source was significant, the audio-recorded after-school sessions served as scripts for the collective critical textualities of the youth. All of the other data documented the individual textualities of the participants. This collective orality that emerged in the after-school session scripts provided insights into the ways Blackness and antiblackness shape their thought and engagements with their social realities as Black youth. “In African American culture, the oral tradition has served as a fundamental vehicle for cultural expression and survival” (Hamlet, 2011, p. 27). Moreover, I note that the orality of Black youth is a significant literacy practice that is often marginalized in schools or devalued. Thus, this co-created space centered in dialogue around Black youth experiences in an anti-Black society was crucial for setting the environment as “dialogue is a defining feature of African American oral tradition” (Banks-Wallace, 2002, p. 417). Given the open nature of our after-school sessions, orality being privileged over written text at times was essential in that speaking “is usually improvisational and to some degree communal—performed interactively, in dialogue with an audience” (Robinson, 2016). Due to our emphasis on oral improvisation, there was no pre-determined list of topics that were discussed at each session as the students and I agreed to make this resemble official schooling as little as possible. In fact, the only thing that came close to schooling is that we were meeting in a classroom, albeit after school hours. What mainly drove the conversations were students’ experiences with blackness and antiblackness during the school day, outside of school, on social media, and in current events. The literacy artifacts that the students and I engaged in were often developed by me in response to conversations that took place during the after-school sessions. In addition to the scripts of the after-school sessions, other

data gathered from this space included digital photographs and recordings of various activities and random, unplanned moments. For example, if a student was speaking in a way that resonated with the group another participant, unprompted, would pull out their phone and begin recording.

Literacy artifacts. In addition to the oral exchanges that were the audio-recorded after-school sessions, which produced scripts, my participants also produced written and visual artifacts based off of our whole group interactions. These artifacts were prompted by our collective engagement with reading specific literatures as well as our larger readings of the world, specifically the literature of American life. These physical artifacts became supplements to the group conversations, because as noted, the major focus was on the collective oral exchanges of the group. Again, there was no predetermined list of topics per se that the students and I would discuss. However, as part of my research design and the overall topic of research, I had an idea of the literatures and activities that I would want to have the students engage with at some point during the project in order to help us put our orality into more concrete forms, particularly as a way to produce a variety of data sources that would strengthen the data analysis. Additionally, as noted, many of the artifacts were developed in response to our collective conversation. For example, conversations of identity inspired me to have students draw body maps and conversations around politics inspired me to have students compose a 2016 Presidential Election response.

Life maps. At an earlier point of our project, the students drew life maps. The purpose of this artifact was twofold: (1) serve as a community building activity that revealed the similarities and difference of their lives and (2) place their individual life stories within the larger narrative of Black life in America and the world. Each student was provided with a piece of white computer paper and was asked to brainstorm at least six major events in their life that they

believed played a major role in shaping who they are. After the brainstorming, the students drew out all six (or more) life events and everyone shared their stories.

Video autobiography. Originally, I had the idea to have students engage in composing traditional, written autobiographies (which they composed drafts of), but we collectively decided to use a format that would allow them to speak. Moving from the written to the oral really aligned with the overall literacy moves of the project in allowing the voices of Black youth to be heard directly. Every participant found another participant who would record them narrating their autobiography. The guiding question for this video recorded artifact was, “Describe your life in relation to growing up Black in America.” Other than this broad framing, the students had the freedom to touch on any topics and move in any direction that they felt would best capture their story.

Concepts of racism. For this artifact, students were provided with a piece of white computer paper, pens, pencils, colored pencils and markers. Each student was instructed to draw how they conceptualized racism by simply drawing the images they associate with racism. This artifact was titled Concepts of Racism and not Concepts of Anti-Black Racism, because I used this activity to test a hypothesis embedded within my overall study, which is that when Black youth conceptualize racism they specifically think of forms of racism against Black people. Students were not given any instruction beyond “draw racism,” and each image depicted violence against Black bodies (both historic and current forms of violence).

2016 Presidential Election. I introduced this artifact to capture students’ reactions to the outcome of the 2016 Presidential Election. Considering that our creation of Black Excellence was birthed in this political climate and was the topic of many of the conversations the students

were already having this became an artifact. I gave the students white computer paper and had them simply express their thoughts.

To be a problem. Considering our examinations of Blackness and antiblackness, it was very important for us to be in conversation with Black literature that has candidly engaged in these topics. In this artifact activity, the students and I engaged with WEB Du Bois' (2007) *The Souls of Black Folk* (originally published in 1903), particularly "Of Our Spiritual Strivings." We became really interested in the ways Black youth and people in general are framed as problem people and the students discovered through Du Bois (2007) that this framing is an old one, which promoted them to want to join the conversation. The students primarily focused on the first paragraph from this chapter:

Between me and the other world there is ever an unasked question: unasked by some through feelings of delicacy; by others through the difficulty of rightly framing it. All, nevertheless, flutter round it. They approach me in a half- hesitant sort of way, eye me curiously or compassionately, and then, instead of saying directly, How does it feel to be a problem? they say, I know an excellent colored man in my town; or, I fought at Mechanicsville; or, Do not these Southern outrages make your blood boil? At these I smile, or am interested, or reduce the boiling to a simmer, as the occasion may require.

To the real question, How does it feel to be a problem? I answer seldom a word (p. 7). For this artifact each student was provided with lined, notebook paper and responded to the above question: How does it feel to be a problem? The student responses were in written form.

Body maps. Each students was provided a piece of white computer paper and was asked to draw an outline of their body. They were then instructed to write all of the words that are used to define them as a Black youth in America, essentially the ways they have come to learn how

they are often described. On the inside of their bodies, they were told to write the words that they would use to describe themselves. This activity served as a very clear counter story, particularly highlighting the ways the Black youth body itself becomes a contested terrain (and has always been). The ways the students described themselves were remarkably different from how they understood the ways society describes them.

Fuck I look like. While learning from classic literatures was major, it was also very important for our group that we learned from and with the ways other Black youth have engaged in literacy to critically analyze their schooling and societal experiences. In this artifact, the students and I watched Kai Davis' spoken word performance titled Fuck I Look Like. Kai Davis is also from Philadelphia, PA like my participants. In this spoken word, Davis really takes antiblackness to task, especially the ways both Blacks and non-blacks perpetuate and are complicit in it. For example she ends by stating:

I will never equate stupidity with my melanin nor will I ever sacrifice my skin for the white man's standards. So never ask that I speak for anyone but me, represent anything but what I stand for, and fight for anything but what I believe in. And if anybody ever expects me to be anything but be myself they got me fucked up.

After watching the video the students and I engaged in a group conversation. Additionally, they were each given lined notebook paper and produced written responses.

School maps. While many conversations covered student experiences in school, I wanted to have the students engage in an artifact that would give a visual layout of these experiences. Students were given white computer paper and were asked to draw a map of the school. The directions were for students to write a negative sign (-) on areas where they felt

unsafe as students or places that were unwelcoming to their Blackness and a positive sign (+) on areas where they felt safe and that their Blackness was affirmed.

Black suffering concept. Considering that studies of antiblackness are concerned with Black suffering, the students developed drawings and/or mappings of how they conceptualized Black suffering from their particular points of view. Each student was provided a piece of white computer paper and was asked to depict the ways they see their understandings of racism against Black people producing suffering.

Imagining Black futures. Throughout the project, it became clear that the literacies of the students were in many ways connected to composing their individual futures, while simultaneously imagining Black futurity at large. As a result, we co-constructed several questions for the students to conduct Peer-to-Peer interviews, where their thoughts about a Black future were central. These interviews were video-recorded.

Variety tv show. Inspired by many of the impromptu activities and creative literacy practices the students were engaging in, we decided to create a variety TV show that explored our examinations of antiblackness in comedic ways. The students named the show Off My Chest. Off My Chest represented the students creating an unrestricted platform to say everything they ever wanted to say regarding race and racism (they wanted to get their thoughts and opinions off their chest).

Theories of antiblackness. Towards the end of our scheduled after-school sessions, I had the students visually conceptualize a theory of antiblackness based off our engagements throughout the year. This was different from the *Concepts of Racism* artifact in that this artifact explicitly communicated that the focus was on antiblackness specifically. Students were asked to use whatever paper they had available to depict their theories.

Outside of After-School Sessions

Participants Observations. I primarily operated as a participant observer throughout the entire project prompted by my role to “observe the activities of people, the physical characteristics of the social situation, and what it feels like to be part of the scene” (Spradley, 2016, p. 33). The major observations took place during the after-school sessions as this is where the participants and I spent the majority of our time together. In these sessions, I was not simply walking around the room with a clipboard trying to decipher how students were engaging in examinations of antiblackness, but rather I was directly engaged in every conversation and activity they did. While engaging with the students after-school, I began by first making broad descriptive observations, then focused observations, and eventually selective observations that connected directly to the research questions at hand. However, even as my observations became more selective, I still continued to gather macro observational data notes (Spradley, 2016). My selective observations narrowed in on the specific ways students engaged with the conversations and literacy artifacts and activities that centered on their conceptualizations of antiblackness as revealed through their lived experiences. There were several times where my observations moved beyond our intimate group space, particularly when students invited me to see them engaging in other extra-curricular activities (e.g. Step Team). The group sessions after school were the “social location” in which my ethnography and participant observations were rooted, however (Spradley, 2016). I expanded on my notes after leaving the social location of observation (Mack et al., 2005). It was important to have audio of the after school observations because it allowed me to see the ways the students experienced our interaction beyond my immediate observations and jottings (Jackson, 2008).

Non-Participant Observations. While participant observations during after-school session and other extra-curricular activities were prioritized, I also conducted a series of non-participant observations in participant classrooms. The goal of these observations were for me to gain a better understanding of how the students move through the school site as Black bodies, particularly how the lived experiences they communicated during our sessions played out in the classroom. In addition to the classroom setting, to gather more context, I also occasionally conducted non-participant observations in the school lobby, hallways, and cafeteria spaces.

Although I took consistent field notes, the audio and visually recorded group sessions facilitated “the process of converting classroom jottings into usable field notes by providing verbatim conversations and other details necessary for providing the level of ‘thick description’ needed for robust qualitative field research” (Jackson, 2008, p. 77). Indeed, I utilized thick description (Geertz, 1973) in the writing of all participant and non-participant observations. I believe I truly reached thick description in that my field notes did not simply rely on written notes, but also included the multiple literacy artifacts outlined earlier. As Spradley (2016) suggested, “this ethnographic record builds a bridge between observation and analysis” (p. 33). Through the various observation methods, my goal was to help expose the daily experiences that Black youth misrecognize, particularly the ways they experience anti-Black symbolic violence.

I also engaged in memoing, which is another important data source in qualitative research (Miles & Huberman, 1984, p. 69). According to Groenewald, (2004, p. 13) “it is the researcher’s field notes recording what the researcher hears, sees, experiences and thinks in the course of collecting and reflecting on the process.” Since researchers can become easily absorbed in the process of collecting data, they may simultaneously fail to reflect on what is actually going on throughout the process. For this reason, “it is important that the researcher maintain a balance

between descriptive notes and reflective notes, such as hunches, impressions, feelings, and so on” (Groenewald, 2004, pp. 13-14). I constantly engaged in memoing, moving between reflection and description, particularly since I spent such a large amount of time in the school and these descriptions made it easier for a more organized data collection process. This proved to be particularly helpful for the analysis stage.

Interviews. I conducted four semi-structured in-depth interviews over the course of the ethnography with each participant: (a) one life history interview, (b) two individual in-depth interviews, and (c) one in-depth exit interview.

Life-history interview. The first interview I conducted with each participant was a life history interview. This interview was targeted to gain information that provides a greater context to the participant responses I would gather from other interviews and after-school session data. According to Denzin (1978), the life history interview allows a participant to recount a series of events. It is the “unfolding history of one person’s... experiences’ and using this approach, the researcher becomes an ‘historian of social life’” (as cited in Hubbard, 2000). Denzin (1989) explained that the key in life history interview is that the collection of a person’s life events speaks to turning points in one’s life (as cited in Hubbard, 2000). As outlined by Hubbard (2000):

Reflecting on the past, provides an opportunity to relate events to social contexts and weave personal experiences with the wider social fabric. An individual's life history thus becomes an ‘entry point’ into understanding the social and economic structures which shape that life (Watson, 1993) and is a means of analysing ‘patterns of sociostructural relations’ (Bertaux, 1981)... Life histories may focus on individual experiences, but that focus does not preclude an examination of social structure.

Life history interviews aligned directly with my overall research design in that the voices, feelings, and meanings participants give to their daily-lived experiences are heard (Denzin, 1982). The life history interview independent of all other data collection methods provided me a wealth of information, particularly regarding the ways students have come to understand their Blackness over the course of their lifetime and how these understandings shape their engagement with their urban school and larger American society.

Hubbard (2000) explained that “through these subjective accounts of past experiences, researchers have the capacity to explore respondents’ perceptions of their sense of agency and their understandings of structural influences on their personal experiences.” Critical Race ethnography is all about analyzing conditions in efforts to see how things could be made better. Life history interviews then, allowed me to gain insights into students’ conceptions of what they think they can do within their locus of control, which provided a foundation for how we collaboratively worked towards change throughout the year. This style of interviewing is particularly important, as Denzin (1989) stated, “many times a person will act as if he or she made his or her own history when, in fact, he or she was forced to make the history he or she lived” (as cited in Hubbard, 2000). Through life history interviewing, the students and I were able to unearth the structural conditions responsible for occurrences in their life, through facilitating reflections on the entirety of their lives.

Individual in-depth interviews. The two individual in-depth interviews I conducted with each participant after the life history interview narrowed in on specific topics relating to the research project and the students’ lives. During the individual in-depth interviews in addition to asking questions, I also gained responses through photo and video elicitation. The elicitation techniques used included (1) “images that depict events that were part of collective or

institutional pasts,” which “may connect an individual to experiences or eras even if the images do not reflect the research subject’s actual lives” and (2) images that “portray the intimate dimensions of the social – family or other intimate social group, or one’s own body” (Harper, 2002, p. 13). This interviewing technique proved crucial for my study in that elicitation techniques connect core definitions of the self to society, culture and history (Harper, 2002). The photographs and video that I inserted in interviews were helpful in that they worked to disrupt the traditional interview of simply talking; the photographs operated as interview stimuli (Wagner, 1978 as cited in Harper, 2002, p. 14).

Exit interview. The exit interview was held at the completion of the study in order to gain insights into students’ overall experiences with the project and to provide them an opportunity to share any information they wanted regarding our collective work. According to Harrell and Bradley (2009) “Semi-structured interviews are often used when the researcher wants to delve deeply into a topic and to understand thoroughly the answers provided” (p. 27). Moreover, “they are well suited for the exploration of the perceptions and opinions of respondents regarding complex and sometimes sensitive issues and enable probing for more information and clarification of answers” (Louise Barriball & While, 1994, p. 330). As I have outlined, antiblackness and the ways it becomes operationalized as symbolic violence is a complex phenomenon, so much so that students may not often have the direct language to name how it shows up in their lives. Considering this complexity, the semi-structured nature of my interviews allowed for me to spend time probing to unearth student understandings and experiences with antiblackness. Each interview with participants proved to be effective because they were developed and built on intimacy; “in this respect, they resemble the forms of talking one finds among close friends” (Johnson, 2002, p. 104). As a participant observer with the youth in our

after-school sessions, I used in-depth interviews to “verify independently (or triangulate) knowledge” I gathered through participating as a member of this particular cultural setting, while exploring “multiple meanings of or perspectives on some actions, events, or settings” (Johnson, 2002, p. 104). I used a range of in-depth interviews because the topic the youth and I examined is often “taken for granted and not readily articulated by most members” and because the students sometimes held “complicated, multiple perspectives” on the phenomenon (Johnson, 2002, p. 105).

Dialogic Journal: Group Text Message. Inspired by the dialogic journaling that Kinloch engaged with her students in Harlem (Kinloch, 2010), I, too, decided that I wanted to engage in journaling with my participants. As cited in Tillman (2003, p. 229):

Garmon (2001) describes dialogic journaling as a process whereby individuals have private written conversations with each other over an extended period of time. Dialogic journaling usually focuses on specific topics that are of concern to the individuals, but may also include conversations that are initiated by any of the individuals and that are acknowledged and responded to by other individuals.

Originally my goal was to have each student keep a dialogic journal with me via text messaging. However, the students suggested that we engaged in a group text message this way we could all participate in dialogue over the course of the project together. Since there were nine participants this group dialogic journaling allowed us to keep a centralized record of our exchanges, while also allowing the youth to be inspired to respond to and with each other, opposed to just responding to me as the researcher. Similar to the organization of our after-school sessions, a pre-determined list of prompts was not established for the journaling. Instead, the communicating in this group platform was prompted and informed by discussions that carried

over from our group sessions, current events, social media engagements, and just the general everyday happenings in the participants' lives. Text messaging served to be extremely useful in this digital age as it allowed students to share photos, videos, voice messages, website links, and social media content.

Archival Data: student academic and disciplinary data. Archival data can be described as “materials originally collected for bureaucratic or administrative purposes that are transformed into data for research purposes” (Schensul, S. L., Schensul, J. J., & LeCompte, 1999, p. 202). Student assent forms and parental consent forms gave me access to the academic and disciplinary records of students, which covered all of their years at Uptown. The goal of accessing this archival data was to provide more context to their experiences at the urban school site, particularly how their articulations of antiblackness is in conversation with the way their academic and disciplinary actions have been documented throughout their Uptown experience. Moreover, these archival records were used to provide me with another lens to understand what each student brings to the group in terms of experiences with their school site as Black youth. This data was also helpful in referring to incidents during interviews when appropriate.

DATA ANALYSIS

My data analysis process was ongoing (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995) as the “analysis of ethnographic data begins in the field and continues past the time the researcher has left it” (Purcell-Gates, 2011, p. 147). Engaging in ongoing data analysis was particularly important for our communal activity, which was the after-school space, as throughout the project the data began to build off of itself. In other words, previous conversations and activities propelled us forward, so it was necessary to constantly re-visit the data. My ongoing engagements with my data allowed me to complete a more thorough analysis at the conclusion of the ethnography,

which included (1) organizing data into large conceptual categories, (2) finding initial themes, and (3) interpreting my results (LeCompte & Schensul, J. J, 2010). Throughout these three levels of data analysis, my theoretical frameworks and literatures assisted me in figuring out what to look for in the data and how what I found linked together to form relationships (LeCompte & Schensul, J. J, 2010).

I personally transcribed all of my data, with the exception of the life history interview and the two individual in-depth interviews. The purpose of not transcribing these interviews was so that I could have data to analyze early on in my study. These interviews were transcribed by a Black female graduate student at another university who runs her own transcription service. After speaking with this individual, I knew that the stories shared would not contribute to reinforcing deficit assumptions or incomplete stereotypes of Blackness and Black youth. Simply put, it was important that if any raw data was not transcribed by me that it be done by a Black individual.

All audio-recorded after-school sessions were transcribed by me throughout the ethnography. Considering that these sessions were centered on open dialogue—which often overlapped, paused, and was interrupted as with normal conversation—I felt that I would be the best person to transcribe these scripts. As a participant observer, I was able to distinguish between participant voices and make sense of the voices in relation to the physical dynamics of the space. I also transcribed all Exit Interviews and Literacy Artifacts that were audio and/or video recorded, such as the Video Autobiographies, Imagining Black Futures, and Variety TV Show. Throughout the study, I housed all of my data in a private, online, password protected DropBox folder.

Larger Conceptual Categories

My clustering of data into large conceptual categories emerged from the interaction between my theory and data (Bulmer, 1979). As I read through every piece of data in order to “stimulate theoretical thinking and analytical strategies” I constantly referenced the larger frames of CRT and Sociocultural Literacies as well as narrowed in on my specific utilization of BlackCrit and Critical Literacy. Clustering in this way allowed me to understand the phenomenon of antiblackness in the lives of urban Black youth better “by grouping and then conceptualizing objects that have similar patterns or characteristics” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 249). In order to arrive at these conceptual categories, I began with open coding (Creswell, 2003). Considering that coding and the overall data analysis process is often constructed as a mystified and difficult task, I highlight here that “coding is nothing more than assigning some sort of shorthand designation to various aspects of your data so that you can easily retrieve specific pieces of the data. The designations can be single words, letters, numbers, phrases, colors, or combinations of these” (Merriam, 2009, p. 173). My first round of open coding was categorized by colors into two large categories which represented each of my research questions: (1) understandings of antiblackness and (2) resistance to antiblackness. From there, I began to tease out more specific ideas within each of these broad research question categories based off of the exact words of participants, my words, and concepts from the literature (Merriam, 2009). In my last round of coding to reach my large conceptual categories, I grouped my open codes by engaging in axial coding (Strauss, 1987) or what is also referred to as analytical coding (Merriam, 2009, p. 180). In other words, I grouped the open codes based on participant words, my words, and the literature under large conceptual categories that housed clusters of open codes.

Finding Initial Themes

After establishing my larger conceptual categories I delved back into my data with this new organization in order to find emergent themes. I began by first examining “detailed bits or segments of data,” and then moved to “cluster data units together that seem to go together,” and then I named these new clusters, which became the themes under my larger conceptual categories (Merriam, 2009, p. 183). Since these emergent themes were the answers to my research questions, the naming of them were congruent with the overall orientation of my study, including insights from myself as the researcher, my participants, and the literature (Merriam, 2009).

Critical Incident Analysis

In my efforts to explain the ways antiblackness operationalizes as symbolic violence, I used critical incident analysis while uncovering themes and particularly when choosing the examples that represent the themes. Critical incidents “are not necessarily sensational events involving a lot of tension. Rather they may be minor incidents, small everyday events that happen in every school and in every classroom. Their criticality is based on the justification, the significance, and the meaning given to them” (Angelides, 2001, p. 431). Bourdieu suggested exploring symbolic violence via critical incidents as a way to illustrate and expose the faint footfalls of the phenomenon (Scott, 2012, pp. 534). Scott (2012) further explained:

In our daily institutional experiences, we can recognize moments at which what appear to be natural practices are teetering between the familiar and the unjust, a point at which we are aware we are on the precipice of engaging historically traversed institutional practices but at the same time catch a glimpse of the institutional conditions that legitimize these practices in the first place (p. 534).

The data that led me to my larger conceptual categories and my themes are filled with narratives of student lived experiences that demonstrate their grappling with anti-Black injustice embedded within their lives and how they have come to understand their urban school and societal structures as being the legitimizers of these unjust lived experiences. When reviewing my conceptual categories, I was particularly being mindful of data that revealed students grappling with practices that teetered between the “familiar and the unjust” as this proved to be the rich data that really made antiblackness visible.

Data Interpretation

After I engaged in a thorough organization of the results, I began to use these levels of organization to further analyze and interpret my data. As LeCompte and Schensul (2010) explained, the interpretation phase of analysis allowed me to articulate why the results that my study generated were important through searching for and then explicating the broader meanings. While CRT (BlackCrit) and Sociocultural Literacies (Critical Literacy) framed the development and execution of my study, I also relied on two different, yet related methods as tools to interpret my data: (1) Culturally Sustaining Pedagogies (CSP) – sustaining linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism in schooling, particularly in resistance to state-sanctioned schooling and (2) Critical Race English Education (CREE) – centering race and racism in English education to dismantle the white supremacy and antiblackness that marginalizes Black youths’ language and literacies.

Culturally Sustaining Pedagogies. According to Paris and Alim (2017, p. 3), “equity and access can best be achieved by centering the dynamic practices and selves of students and communities of color in a critical, additive, and expansive vision of schooling.” In order to reach this vision, we must begin to “reimagine schools as sites where diverse, heterogenous practices are not only valued but *sustained*,” which “demands a critical, emancipatory vision of schooling

that reframes the object of critique from our children to oppressive systems” (p. 3). This reframing of critique is rooted in the idea that CSP must be about sustaining the bodies (the lives) of Black youth so that they can survive (Paris & Alim, 2017). Implicit in my research with Black Excellence, was to understand the ways the youth sustain their Blackness (and therefore sustain themselves) in order to charge the urban school to support and provide ample space for this sustaining of Blackness. In other words, in reimagining the urban school for Black youth that does not yet exist, at the core of this reimagining must be the relentless and unwavering ideal that Blackness is valuable (to Black youth, to the urban school, and to society) and therefore must intensely be sustained. CSP counters the damage and erasure of Black youth in education by sustaining the lifeways of this community, particularly through disrupting “the pervasive anti-Indigeneity, anti-Blackness, and related anti-Brownness (from anti-*Latinidad* to Islamophobia) and model minority myths so foundational to schooling in the United States” (Paris & Alim, 2017, p. 2).

As I analyzed and coded my data, this understanding allowed me to interpret the data through situating our research collective as a disruptor of antiblackness, that birthed a myriad of examples for sustaining Blackness. The key features of CSP as outlined by Paris and Alim (2017, p. 14) include: a critical centering on dynamic community languages, valued practices and knowledges; student and community agency and input; historicized content and instruction; a capacity to contend with internalized oppressions; and an ability to curricularize all of this in learning settings. CSP as method for my data interpretation becomes significant in that thus far, the evidence in the field reveals that urban schooling is structurally designed to obstruct Blackness. Moreover, there is no new evidence that hints to this obstructing coming to an end. However, my participants demonstrated through their literacies that another way is possible.

Given this, I utilized CSP as an interpretive method not to evoke some idealism of the urban school breaking away from the confines of white supremacy and suddenly centering and sustaining Blackness. Rather, I used CSP to unearth the ways my participants have theorized and constructed (even if at the level of liberatory fantasy) the possibility of sustainable Black futures.

Critical Race English Education. CREE

explicitly addresses issues of race, racism, whiteness, white supremacy, and anti-blackness within school and out-of-school spaces. It also seeks to dismantle dominant texts (i.e., canonical texts, art, and media texts) while also highlighting how language and literacy can be used as tools to uplift and transform the lives of people who are often on the margins in society and P-20 spaces (Johnson, Jackson, Stovall, and Baszile, 2017, p. 63).

Since the prime data for my research comes from the literacies of my participants, it was important for me to analyze and interpret my data through a method that privileged these textualities. As outlined previously, studies of antiblackness are largely concerned with Black suffering. In alignment with this, the literacies of the students revealed a deep grappling with suffering; their literacies worked to notice, analyze, and then interpret Black suffering as it played out in their lives. According to CREE, the literacies of Black youth run counter to Black suffering, particularly the suffering experienced in ELA classrooms (Johnson et al., 2017, p. 63). In order “to empathize with Black students and their suffering,” Johnson et al. (2017, p. 62) argued “that ELA classrooms must become revolutionary sites for racial justice by shedding light on Black lives and creating classrooms where Black youth are empowered through Black literacies and tools that uplift and support the humanity of Black people.” While not a formal

ELA classroom, our collective engagements in literacy provided a model for the possibilities of ELA classrooms and broader urban school sites to sustain the humanity of Black people.

Black Excellence was a project in Critical Race English Education. Through a disruption of racial injustice and theorizing ways to transform their urban school and society the youth were leading themselves on their own path of CREE. Johnson et al. (2017) note that English educators “must start incorporating the multiple Black literacies and language Black students bring to classrooms” and that to “deny Black youths’ literacies is to dismiss their humanity, which often transpires from this endemic phenomenon of anti-Blackness” (p. 62). In conjunction with CSP, CREE served as an appropriate interpretation method as it deeply aligns with both of my theoretical frames, especially BlackCrit. CREE centers on Black literacies which “affirm the lives, spirit, language, and knowledge of Black people and culture” and are deeply “grounded in Black liberatory thought, which supports and empowers the emotional, psychological, and spiritual conditions of Black people throughout the Diaspora, and moves beyond traditional understanding of texts” (Johnson et al., 2017, p. 63). Lastly, the importance of CREE for me lies in the fact that “Black literacies are situated in a radical love for Blackness” (Johnson et al., 2017, p. 63). Much of the data I present in the next two chapters reveals, both implicitly and explicitly, the ways the literacies of my participants were first and foremost centered on an unapologetic love of Blackness, love of themselves. The love inherent in Black literacies then, is what allows my participants to survive antiblackness.

CHAPTER FOUR: UNDERSTANDING ANTIBLACKNESS

My first research question read: *What understandings of anti-blackness emerge through Black youth's critical engagements with literacy?* From reviewing the data, two large conceptual categories emerged: (a) the legacy of antiblackness and (b) the ubiquity of antiblackness. Within each category, several themes emerged. The themes within the legacy of antiblackness that surfaced included (a) control and subordination, and (b) erasure and disposability. The themes within the ubiquity of antiblackness are comprised of (a) societal roots (macro), and (b) institutional mirroring (micro).

CONNECTING CONCEPTUAL CATEGORIES AND THEMES

The data demonstrated that students' current understandings of antiblackness are informed by the entire history of anti-Black racism (*legacy of antiblackness*). A prominent example of this history is the economic institution of slavery, and the lasting impacts it has had on the experiences of African-descended individuals in the U.S. This evidence then, of the history of antiblackness, was penultimate to helping my research participants to notice how antiblackness over time has become a normal aspect of social relations in U.S. society, in such a way that it is always a force at play—whether visible or invisible. Crucial to students' understanding of the legacy of antiblackness was their understanding of the enduring pervasiveness of white violence and supremacy (*ubiquity of antiblackness*). Whiteness continues to be socially constructed in stark opposition to Blackness and Black identity. Such constructions work to sustain white supremacy by positioning whiteness as the American promise and Blackness as the American failure. In other words, the United States' inheritance of antiblackness—birthed in/of America's not so distant past—created and presently perpetuates the nation's anti-Black social climate. The urban high school, like that attended by participants in

this study, is not simply a product of the anti-Black climate. The school is indeed anti-Black whereby reproducing the logics, ideologies, and practices that maintain Black youth's dehumanization and racial subordination. The themes presented under each broader conceptual category illustrate these important findings in response to my first research question.

The Legacy of Antiblackness

Considering my use of CRT and BlackCrit, I was not on a mission to see *if* or *why* racism and the specificity of antiblackness was present, but rather *how* these phenomena impacted Black youth engagements in society, and their social world(s). For this reason, in setting out to answer my first research question, throughout the project, the students and I engaged in explorations of their thoughts on antiblackness and racism. In other words, we did not spend our time together debating whether or not antiblackness existed, but instead, we spent our time collectively naming and detailing the ways it has and continues to exist in our lives. Across the data, this naming and detailing immediately revealed that explorations of antiblackness cannot begin without first conceptualizing the roots of anti-Black racism that provide the evidence for the enduring legacy of antiblackness and how it impacts the lives of Black people today. Unearthing the legacy of antiblackness in American society proved particularly important for both the students and myself, as we all identify as Black people who are direct descendants of those enslaved on U.S. soil. The disruption of slavery on global Black life and the ways the legacy of slavery continues, then, served as a foundation to the ways the students understand antiblackness. In essence, data reveals that within the context of the United States, students conceptualize the legacy of antiblackness as inextricably linked to the legacy of U.S. chattel slavery and the afterlife of slavery (Hartman, 1997). Moreover, data revealed that understanding antiblackness in the U.S. through the lens of its legacy also revealed how this legacy is directly responsible for the ways

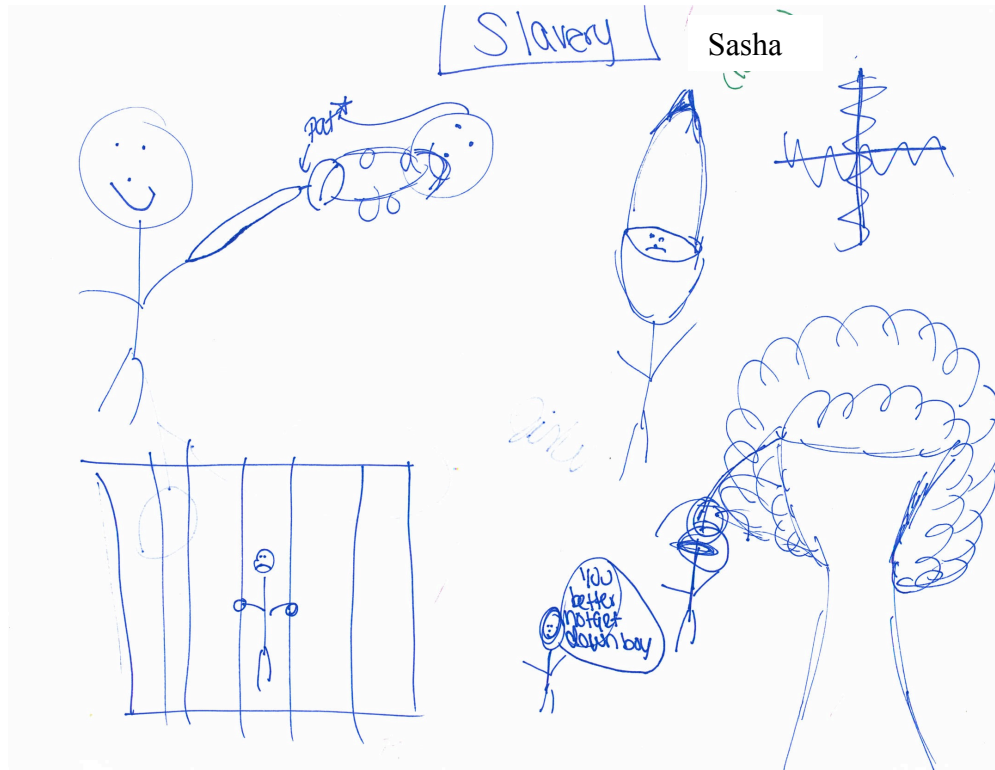
both Blackness and Black identity are constructed and deconstructed. The way the students understand antiblackness through the conceptual category of the legacy of antiblackness resulted in two themes emerging within this larger conceptual category. The first was control and subordination as fueled by historic and contemporary white violence and supremacy. The second was erasure and disposability that centered on (de)constructions of Blackness and Black identity.

Control and subordination. Across the data students referenced the history of America, a history of control and subordination fueled by white violence and supremacy. This theme was expressed by the students detailing how white people and whiteness as a system was and is a dominating force in American society that intentionally worked to oppress the Black community. Data shows that conversations of antiblackness cannot be effectively held without also investigating whiteness and white supremacy, as antiblackness ensures that white supremacy is maintained.

“Slavery.” Before students began to really theorize the specificity of anti-Black racism in their lives, I first engaged them in broad conversations around racism at-large. My goal in engaging broadly in racism was two-fold: (1) for us to collectively develop foundational knowledge and language about racism so that throughout the year, despite our varied experiences and levels of racial understandings, we would have some common knowledge, and (2) I wanted to see if the students understood racism in a broad sort of multicultural sense (all-encompassing) or if they understood it at the specific level of their Blackness; anti-Black racism. During one of our after-school sessions I brought a stack of white computer paper and simply asked the students to draw racism. I refer to this literacy artifact as *Concepts of Racism*. There was no further instruction or conversation beyond “draw racism.” Like the visual drawn by Sasha below,

every student (with the exception of Calvin) not only drew racism at the specific level of anti-Black racism, but they also rooted it in mainly historic enactments of control and subordination.

Figure 2: Picture: This figure shows a participant's *Concepts of Racism* artifact

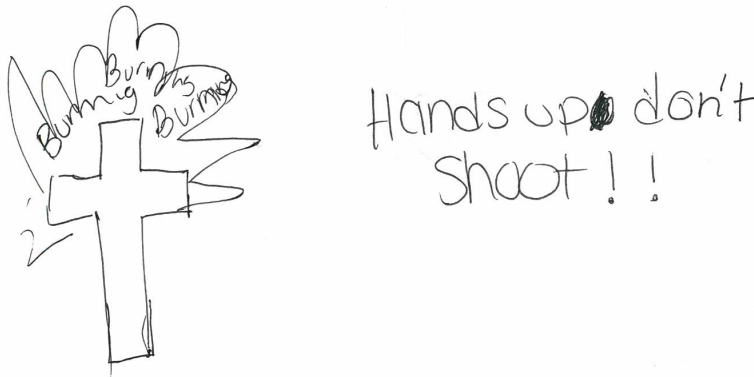


At the top center of her visual, Sasha writes the word “Slavery” as if it is serving as the title for the actual picture as well as the title for the larger narrative of Black suffering of which this the picture reveals. From her perspective then, a conception of racism must first begin with the forced control and subordination of Black people. In an effort to better make sense of her drawing, I read the four images clockwise, beginning at the top left. Going in that order, Sasha tells the narrative of anti-Black racism and thusly her understanding of antiblackness, by drawing (1) a slave owner whipping a slave as noted by the whip and the word “pat,” (2) a member of the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) standing next to a burning cross, (3) a Black man being lynched while a white man looks and says “you better not get down boy,” and (4) a Black man in prison. In these

four images that are inextricably connected, Sasha articulates the history of controlling the Black body—a control that is foundational to anti-Black racism. Reading the picture as I have done reveals a timeline of anti-Black racism, ending with our contemporary existence in an era of Black mass incarceration. This data example addresses the ways control and subordination of Blacks in the U.S. is timeless.

“Hands up don’t shoot.” In alignment with understanding antiblackness through first considering the legacy of antiblackness, Rochelle’s *Concepts of Racism* visual builds on Sasha’s by essentially bringing us fully into the contemporary understandings of anti-Black racism through the words “Hands up don’t shoot.” While in the picture below Rochelle does indeed draw a cross enflamed with the words “Burning, Burning, Burning,” what is more intriguing here is the placement of the burning cross next to the rallying cry, “Hands up don’t shoot”—a prominent protest chant in this era of #BlackLivesMatter. The juxtaposition of these two examples of anti-Black racism or rather the legacy of it, in effect reveal that crosses have never stopped burning but instead have taken new forms. The whipping and lynching depicted in Sasha’s *Concepts of Racism* become the shooting of unarmed Black people in Rochelle’s visual, again represented by the phrasing “Hands up don’t shoot,” a response to the historic white violence that has worked to subordinate Blacks. Both lynching and shooting represent the heart of anti-Black violence that is at the core of the legacy of antiblackness.

Figure 3: Picture: This figure shows a participant's *Concepts of Racism* artifact



“...eradicating groups of people.” Considering that all of the students drew explicit examples of anti-Black violence while conceptualizing racism with the exception of Calvin, I jumped at the opportunity to ask more directly about understandings of violence—especially the pictures—during every student’s second individual in-depth interview, which I refer to as *Semi 2*. The theme of *Semi 2* interviews revolved around the myriad of ways violence can be enacted against people, especially Black people (which made discussing students’ *Concepts of Racism* a good elicitation pairing). Through these interviews, I discovered that while Calvin did not draw explicit examples of anti-Black violence to represent his understanding of racism, the role of violence in his understandings of the legacy of antiblackness was still present. On one side of his visual he drew a member of the KKK and on the other side he wrote the words “wypeople” (read white people) and “Nigga bye.” While talking with Calvin during his *Semi 2* in reference to his *Concept of Racism* I stated: “Obviously you didn’t do like a burning cross or like a lynching but we know KKK represents violence, so yea just talk to me more about this and your understanding of racism. The following is the conversation that followed:

Calvin: So, I chose the KKK as like a symbol of violence because they were a violent group, they acted out of hate through violence on Black communities in the South and so it connects to racism, because they for one were racists; and also like, they were driving

Black people out of their homes and building crosses – I mean burning crosses in their front lawns and stuff and just harassing them and basically just – racism is harassing Black people, so that's why I drew that

Coles: Mhm and then the back, what words do you have?

Calvin: Oh, for the back, I put “nigga bye” and “wypeople.” And I don't know why I put “nigga bye,” but I can tell you why I put “wypeople”

Coles: Okay, why?

Calvin: So, I put white people because um they just are like, they founded racism, they continue to perpetuate it, they don't want to get rid of it, they benefit from it and they want to ignore it, they do a lot of stuff with racism. They deny it – that it's a thing and they think that it's a such thing as reverse racism which is just prejudice so, that's why I put that right there because they're just, just look at over the course of history, they just a violent group of people that are just mad about something; about being white maybe. And then it just like over the course of history they just been known for like eradicating groups of people, like aborigines in Australia or sub groups in Asia and stuff like that and like colonizing them and colonizing those certain parts of the world like Africa, India, and South America, America and stuff all because they just white and they just mad cause they are white.

Using the method of elicitation in *Semi 2*, by having students reflect on the *Concepts of Racism* that we engaged in at the beginning of the project, Calvin was able to use it too better articulate his interpretation of the legacy of antiblackness as fueled by historic and contemporary white violence and supremacy. Calvin's conversation is helpful to the larger theme of control and subordination in that he provides a more in-depth look at what Rochelle and Sasha's pictures were depicting visually. Through his assertion that white people “were a violent group” and that “they acted out of hate through violence on Black communities,” he pinpoints both the physical and emotional state of whiteness that worked to fuel the legacy of antiblackness: the hatred of whites for blacks facilitated the violence enacted against Blacks. This facilitation of violence controlled and subordinated Blacks. Furthermore, Calvin's statement that “racism is harassing Black people” is in alignment with the larger assumption mentioned previously, which is that when thinking of racism, Black youth do not think of broad enactments of racism, but rather specific anti-Black enactments that detail the harassment of the Black body and/or mind. What really connects the legacy of antiblackness in Calvin's *Semi 2* excerpt is when he explicitly

names the historic violence of white people that extends beyond the U.S. context, revealing that whiteness is responsible for the legacy of antiblackness and essentially anti-otherness; whiteness has created the conditions for any nonwhite group globally. By whites “eradicating groups of people, like aborigines in Australia or sub groups in Asia and stuff like that and like colonizing them and colonizing those certain parts of the world like Africa, India, and South America, America” we indeed learn from Calvin that white violence and supremacy as forms of social control and subordination are at the root of the ways Black youth understand antiblackness. Since Calvin and the others drew historic examples such as the KKK and lynching, I was curious as to how many of them would update their *Concepts of Racism* if given the chance. After asking Calvin what he would draw the following conversation took place:

Calvin: I think, I think I would draw like um I think I would draw like a burning cross or I would write out “Make America Great Again,” because it’s said by Donald Trump and racists

Coles: You said “Make America Great Again?”

Calvin: Yea, I would write that as symbol of racism and stuff like that if I were to do it again

Coles: Why would you write “Make America Great Again?”

C: Because, America was never great and it's a slogan used by Donald Trump and he's an overtly racist man who projects his rhetoric onto the public, like the rural areas where white people live and they eat it up and then they vote for him and then he takes away their healthcare, he threatens to take away healthcare of minorities and women but forgetting that they also are still are on the same health plans that minorities and women and children use just to live and so it's like I would right that cause it shows how stupid, it shows how stupid racism is and how stupid racist can get. Like they didn't do the research so that's why I would write “Make America Great Again”

In this part of his *Semi 2* interview, Calvin positions Donald Trump and more so what he represents at this time in American history as the most recent figurehead of American control and subordination and thusly directly contributing to the legacy of antiblackness via historic and contemporary white violence and supremacy. This example is important, because while

antiblackness is deeply institutionalized and often invisible, it shows that students do recognize when individuals embody racist rhetoric.

“They’ll never see their dads again.” The physical removal of Black bodies from society is a form of control and subordination. One of the ways this control and subordination takes place is through the disproportionate amount of Black people in prison or jail. During her *Life History*, Sonia began to discuss how her direct experiences with Black men in her family or rather the lack thereof has cultivated her interest in law and prison reform.

Sonia: Yeah like and then it’s I think as far as me, the way I, the reason why I got a whole, a whole like thing for black men. Like we don’t know- we don’t got no black men in my family. Like even the little ones that’s left, they ain’t about nothing. Like most of the people that I know, most of the men in my family either dead or in jail. That’s a problem. That’s heavy. Like I got friends who their dads in jail. They’ll never see their dads again. But that means they can’t have an impact.

Coles: That’s where you want to do your work?

Sonia: Yeah, that’s my whole thing. Like I’m trying to really get through this law thing so I could really help people. And then on top of that. Look at these cases and see if there’s really, the new Jim Crow is real.

Coles: It is real.

Sonia: You gotta minor – you gotta minor charge. You don’t need to be in jail for 35 years. No, you need to look at your case how we could, how we could lower this case. Or how we could get you out early. Maybe if we taught Black men how to teach other people they’d get out early. Like if you see them they be like ‘oh you could get out early if you doing something positive.’ Well what the heck you giving them to do? They just sitting there doing nothing for years. And then you try and tell ‘em. What they supposed to do, sit there with their hands folded for 30 years?

Coles: Right. Just Right

Sonia: Then they get out of jail like y’all not giving them nothing to do, I feel like it’s a set up with both sides. You claim you don’t want them there all that time but you not giving them nothing to do while they in there and then what you expect, what you think they gone do. They gone sit in there and do just what they’re doing. Fighting. Doing nothing. Getting in more trouble. I watch a bunch of documentaries and stuff. Where they gave them something to do and they completely changed their outlook on stuff. They, they, pretty much they had been in there for 15 years, they ain’t never touched a library. After they went through that program, they was in the library. They was talking to their kids again. They was doing like that kind of stuff.

As the title of Jeff Guo’s (2011) Washington Post article so accurately captures, “America has locked up so many black people it has warped our sense of reality.” What Guo (2016) calls “The

Hitch” or the fact that “A lot of black men aren't living at home and can't look for jobs — because they're behind bars” is directly aligned with Sonia's motivation for prison reform: “we don't got no black men in my family...most of the men in my family either dead or in jail.” The legacy of antiblackness presents itself in a way where this gross display of control and subordination of Blacks in prison becomes normal and expected. Through the history of subordination, we expect that Black men will receive long prison sentences for minor charges. Many of these minor chargers for things such as marijuana have not been overturned, meanwhile the legalization of marijuana has become a billion-dollar industry that mainly benefits whites. Black people who were sentenced for petty marijuana charges remain imprisoned. As Sonia said,” Like I got friends who their dads in jail. They'll never see their dads again.” This is directly about controlling the Black population. Here, I want to quickly note that while the larger conceptual categories and major themes of my study are distinct, they are in constant conversation. My goal in this dissertation is to explicate and do my best to breakdown antiblackness (to the extent that my data allows) in a way that makes sense and is true to the data. With that being said, Sonia's discussion of Black men in prison here serves as a great example of how all of these themes are distinct, yet in conversation together. The legacy of antiblackness is rooted in control and subordination that deemed Black people as property. As property, erasure and disposability became normal praxis enacted against Blacks. Although slavery legally *ended*, the foundations of control and subordination that birthed erasure and disposability were set—this foundation came to dictate race relations post-slavery (the societal climate). So regardless of where Black people are, they are imagined as a problem that must be erased. Because Blackness over the years has been viewed as such, a problem to be solved, systems in America—such as the criminal justice system work to ensure that as many Black people as possible are not

represented in society. As a result, our sense of reality in America is warped because antiblackness causes us to believe that Black people are inherently criminal (and should be controlled and subordinated) which then allows us to all be complicit in both Black men and women literally being gone from society.

“...because of fear of superiority?” Through this theme of control and subordination, the data shows that students were able to provide clear examples of the ways they understand whiteness and its impact on Black life. Additionally, students were able to go beyond examples to naming and questioning why whiteness functions the way it does. In Calvin’s *Semi 2* he names hate as a major reason whites enact violence against Black people and essentially all minority groups. In our *To Be a Problem* literacy artifact, Anita brought the word superiority up, which is deeply connected to hate.

Figure 4: Picture: This figure shows a participants *To Be a Problem* artifact

HOW Does It feel to be a problem? 12/12/16

~~from the way that we are~~
~~problem~~. Problems are usually an issue to be so to say that we are a problem can be portrayed as a bad thing. Because of our skin and religion we get blamed for things our are called problem? why are we exactly the ~~problem~~ problem? It is because of fear of superiority? They don't want anybody higher than the white skin.. That's why were a problem. And if that's the case, then i'm a Mf'n problem and i'm proud of it.

This activity was prompted by the students and I engaging with “Of Our Spiritual Strivings,” in *The Souls of Black Folks* by WEB DuBois (2007). In working to understand control and subordination, and here, more so the ideal of supremacy that fuels it, Anita wrote, “Why are we exactly the problem? It is because of fear of superiority? They don’t want anybody higher than the white skin...that’s why were a problem.” Anita demonstrates that in understanding the legacy of antiblackness, the images of violence such as slavery, lynching, burning crosses, and the killings of unarmed Blacks that result in rallying cries like “hands up don’t shoot,” are all enacted and sustained because of beliefs of white superiority and the fear that without violence, another group may think they are superior to whites or at the very least think they are just as worthy as whites. I interpret Anita as saying that the real problem in America is not Black people, but rather white people thinking it is a problem that Black people want to be equal. If Black people are granted opportunities to be equal in the absence of white violence, they may be just as good or better than whites, which according to Anita is a fear whites possess. Through Anita’s perspective then, she sees being a problem as positive: If she is a problem she is an agitator to the system of white supremacy. When she ends her statement saying “then I’m a Mf’m problem and I’m proud of it,” Anita demonstrates an example of a Black youth fully understanding the legacy of antiblackness and the ways it shows up in their daily life and uses that knowledge as fuel for resistance to control and subordination. Anita’s fuel for resistance sheds light on the ways this theme and the other themes discussed throughout this chapter propel youth to be conscious about their Blackness as they move through the world; a consciousness does not result in a sad and hopeless worldview, but instead a racial realist worldview that is centered in strength and tenacity to create life in spite of antiblackness.

Erasure and disposability. Since this was a project with Black youth that sought to understand the ways antiblackness operationalized in their lives, it makes perfect sense that a key way the youth understand antiblackness is through their own Black identity and how antiblackness constructs Blackness in U.S. society broadly. At the core of these understandings of Blackness and Black identity were the ways the students saw them as being erased and rendered as disposable. I see this theme as belonging under the conceptual category of the legacy of antiblackness in that this legacy, especially the roots of the legacy, are directly responsible for the ways Blackness has been erased and disposed of throughout history. For example, when Sasha started off her *Concepts of Racism* with the word “Slavery,” she revealed that within the context of the U.S. Black people were considered property and they currently live in the aftermath of *being* property. The power dynamics present when Black people were lynched extra judiciously (since they were property without rights) is the same power dynamic responsible for the systemic unarmed killings of Black citizens by law enforcement. As the data from the students in this section reveal, the legacy of antiblackness cannot exist without Black people living on the precipice of erasure and disposability.

“...people constantly praise white mediocrity...” As outlined in my methodology, the primary “social location” for my ethnographic study was our co-created after-school space. My time with these Black youth after-school was extremely informal and therefore there was no curriculum or lesson planning of sorts that guided what we discussed each time we met. While this was frightening at times for me as an educator (always wanting to have a clear plan of action or rather being expected by institutions to have a clear plan of action), I knew that as Black people, the youth have been and will continue long after our project to read the text of the word and the world through their lens of Blackness unprompted. In other words, I knew that Black

youth already engage with the world critically, as critically examining a society that thrives off of your oppression is just as present in the life of a Black youth as breathing; criticality serves as one's major compass. In order to bring out these hidden textualities of the students (hidden to me at least) I would often pose very broad questions and follow where the students took us. During our December 19th meeting, I asked the students "how does it feel to be Black in America?" The following is an excerpt from that larger conversation, which I refer to as *12/19 Script*.

Khalif: So basically, the question he asked was – alright so I wrote down the question.
How do it feel to be Black in America?
Sonia: We can only be killed by cops.

At the beginning of the *12/19 Script*, Sonia responds to my question as repeated by Khalif not with a feeling, but with an enactment of violence that she sees as reserved for Black people. Her statement, "we can only be killed by cops," really works to frame the ways Blackness has been constructed as disposable (and thusly erased) over time—as an inherent problem, which is distinct, but in direct conversation with the prior theme, control and subordination. Sonia shed light on the fact that Black people are constructed as inherently criminal and not worthy of life in America, because if they were, then they would not be the only group of people being killed by cops, the only people being systemically erased. A question that came to mind in response to her assertion was, why are Black people the *only* ones who can be killed by cops? While Sonia's exclusion of other people killed by cops can be debated, the point she is making is that the answer to the question of why are Blacks the only people killed by cops, is an answer that is necessary to the survival and superiority of whiteness: Blackness and Black people are killed (read erased) by cops because violence against Black bodies ensures and sustains white supremacy. For this reason, all of the participants drawing examples of anti-Black violence in

their *Concepts of Racism* makes sense: they see anti-Black racism as rooted in violence necessary to maintain white supremacy. The students continued in the *12/19 Script*:

Khalif: Naw, say like we trendsetters. Every culture, like we set the culture for every other culture. Like you go to Olney (neighborhood and major public transportation hub in Philadelphia), you see the Cambodians and you see them with they hats back and the Jordans on. That's us, that's us! Or you see them saying nigga, they want you to think nigga is an offensive word and it is, but we made that positive.

Calvin: Only us made that positive, not no one else.

Khalif: But you got to think of it like this, we're not getting our credit for that but instead you got Kim Kardashian and Kylie Jenner talking about box braids. You know how long we had braids, talking about box braids. What the fuck is a box braid?

Sonia: Yea, cause when twerking first came out and Black girls was twerking it was like "oh my god that's a disgrace," then white girls start twerking talking about "oh my god look at the new dance, it's so catchy," like what? We been doing this sweetie!

Toni: I just would like to say that it seems like when a white person does it, what we always been doing, it's now considered a trend.

Rochelle: That freaking dance! JuJu On That Beat, nobody started doing that

Toni: Right! Pause. You know the crazy thing – on twitter it was a white girl that had rhythm of doing JuJu On That Beat

Sonia: Yea! and they put her on the news, I'm like hold up though I've been seeing this on my timeline (stream of content on social media platforms) for days. What? She didn't even do it right!

Calvin: My thing is it's just like people constantly praise white mediocrity for like no reason. Like Toni said, it can be like a white person doing the JuJu On That Beat and they pipe that shit all over everyone fucking TL [timeline on social media], and Black people doing it is ghetto as hell? I don't have no problem with them doing it, but just don't give them more credit than deserved.

In an effort to move the conversation from one that focuses on police killings where Blacks are erased and disposed of, Khalif attempts to shift the conversation to Black people being leaders of popular culture aesthetics as "trendsetters." Through his assertion that "we set the culture for every other culture," he rejects notions of Black inferiority by providing clear examples of the influence of Black culture. From his perspective, how can Black people be a problem if everyone wants to engage in Black culture? However, the conversation quickly moves from simply discussing the contributions of American Black culture to critiquing the ways Black people do not actually receive credit for being trendsetters – the discussion becomes focused on cultural

appropriation, which is deeply about erasure. Studies of cultural appropriation operate with the notion that culture connotes some type of creative product, whether tangible or otherwise (Ziff & Rao, 1997). Through cultural appropriation, the originators of a cultural product—here hairstyles and specific dances—have this product adopted by those outside of the original culture completely void of context and history. While Khalif referenced Kim Kardashian and Kylie Jenner as having received praise for hairstyles that have long existed on the heads of Black people, he explained “we’re not getting our credit for that.” This contributes to erasure and disposability as it relates to constructions of Blackness in Black identity in that it positions Black people as incapable of being trendsetters (at least being acknowledged as such) by rendering them invisible and giving credit to non-Black people, as if they created the trend. More specifically, in the legacy of antiblackness, this group conversation reveals the erasure that comes with anti-Black racism. Herein lies the antiblackness of cultural appropriation; Black people who are already thought of as cultureless become further erased, after a while society (not Black people) can become disconnected to the original creators of the cultural product (whether intentionally or unintentionally). If Black people are constructed as inferior and as problem people, they cannot possibly receive credit for anything that non-Black people think is of value. As Toni noted, “I just would like to say that it seems like when a white person does it, what we always been doing, it's now considered a trend.” The students move beyond hairstyles to two dances, twerking and JuJu on That Beat. For both dances the students explain how Black youth created the dances and have been doing them long before white youth, but that white youth are the ones who get uplifted as doing something exceptional; even if they do not do it correctly, as Sonia exclaimed. Black identity and blackness as a whole becomes erased and “people constantly praise white mediocrity for like no reason.” However, contrary to Calvin’s point, there

is a reason: the legacy of antiblackness centered in erasure and disposability has constructed Black identity and Black people as having no real impact on American culture, throughout history. This script ends with Calvin stating, “I don't have no problem with them doing it, but just don't give them more credit than deserved.” However, as explained briefly thus far and as will be revealed throughout this chapter, the legacy of antiblackness constructs whiteness and white people as always deserving.

“...these people not gon wanna do nothing...” In thinking about the ways white supremacy positions whites as deserving and Black people as undeserving, many of the ways the students expressed understandings of antiblackness came from their schooling experiences. In the first individual in-depth interview that I conducted with all of the students (*Semi 1*), a significant portion of the conversation focused on their experiences with urban education in America from the particular location of being Black. In this interview, among other things, I sought to understand what it was like to be Black in urban schooling. While asking Raheem about his thoughts on what a quality education looks like and who gets it or rather who deserves it, he spoke of a lack of funding and a disconnect with teachers as a major barrier to Black students receiving a quality education. Both funding and teachers will be discussed more thoroughly in other themes across the data, however for this theme of erasure and disposability Raheem's discussion in terms of funding and teacher disconnect is relevant.

Raheem: That's the – and just like how society views Black people or Black students. It's like, they probably like “oh these people not gon wanna do nothing with they life.” So, let me just – like teachers be like “let me just come in here and get paid.” Teach these little kids and all that. But the kids, like the ones that want to actually learn and do something with they life, they don't get that opportunity. Because how they already view Black people like in general. They just categorize all Black people as like not wanting nothing for themselves. Or they're lower than others. So that's another issue.

Above, Raheem provides insights into the ways the legacy of antiblackness works to render the minds of Black youth as disposable in the urban school. The ways Black people are imagined in society as problems and undeserving directly shape the ways educators and the larger school site (dis)engages with them or rather erases the possibility of a bright future. According to Raheem, being Black robs one of the opportunity to “actually learn and do something with they life,” not because they are incapable, but because they have been conceptualized as such. In stating, “Because how they already view Black people in general,” Raheem brings into focus how contrary to popular notions of schooling, schooling is not an inherently positive space for Black youth. Schools are not free of the anti-Black racism that works to marginalize Black people. Simply put, schools have not been and never will be institutions free of anti-Black racism. As Raheem captures concisely, the legacy of antiblackness is fully present in schools, thus moving the construction of Black identity from erased and disposable Black citizen to erased and disposable Black student.

“...it’s a lot of dead bodies dropping...” Directly connected to the ways Black youth become seen as disposable across contexts, Anita further outlined the ways this disposability presents itself and moreover how it works to contribute to the overall legacy of antiblackness. Throughout Black Excellence we always put the past, present, and future in conversation with each other. As Black people, we collectively understood the ways all three moments in time are continuously linked. However, there were times when we more explicitly focused on one realm of time such as with the literacy artifact *Imagining Black Futures*. We see in the following excerpt from Sasha and Anita’s interview, the past and present become central to conceptualizing a Black future as revealed by Sasha first asking about the current state of affairs for Black youth.

Sasha: How would you describe the current climate in America for Black youth?

Anita: The current climate would be cold, because it's a lot of dead bodies dropping out in these streets and that is a cold thing. And like I would just like to put that like an analogy because the climate is cold because everywhere you go, Black youth is just dropping, dropping, dropping like everybody's just dying out in these streets you know. But I hope for my brothers, my black brothers to you know be safe in these streets wherever you are.

This excerpt from Sasha and Anita's *Black Futures Interview* is significant for the ways students understand the legacy of antiblackness and the ways it quite literally works to erase and dispose of Blackness and Black identity, because it moves from a micro to a macro conception of Black life, noting that Black youth exist in a climate that is cold to and for them. Blackness then has no choice but to exist within this cold climate (read climate of antiblackness) and the climate is endemic, because since the disruption of Black life via the institution of U.S. chattel slavery, Blackness has operated within a cold climate. Black bodies in America have always been "dropping, dropping, dropping." Anita ends her statement on Blackness existing in a cold climate of Black death with a hope, more so a plea for her "black brothers" to stay safe "wherever you are," signaling that there is really no place in America where Black youth (in her example Black boys) are exempt from being erased.

"...little black boys and little black girls as threats." Thus far the data presented in this section has provided clear examples of the ways the legacy of antiblackness works to imagine Blackness and Black identity (e.g. disposable via police shootings, erased via cultural appropriation, and both erased and disposed of in urban schools, etc.); constructions that are all rooted in the violent ways antiblackness renders Black youth as valueless. However, something that has been present but not directly named yet is how the legacy of antiblackness positions Black youth as threats, as people who need to be feared. In the *12/19 Script* when Sonia says "we can only be killed by cops" and in the *Imagining Black Futures* artifact where Anita urges her Black brothers to be "safe in these streets wherever you are," they both are implicitly revealing

that erasure and disposability is fueled by Blackness being historically understood as a threat. Despite the overwhelming evidence presented throughout the entirety of this dissertation that demonstrate that Black youth should be the ones who fear American society, antiblackness has worked to shift the right to fear to non-Blacks. During the *Semi 2* interviews with students we discussed violence, as mentioned previously, to think about the role it plays in the everyday life of Black youth. As an elicitation method, during the *Semi 2* interviews with each student we watched the clip of Shakara, a Black girl, being thrown out of her desk by a school police officer because she would not give the officer her phone. Calvin shared his perspective on the incident in the excerpt that follows.

Coles: You saw the video of course, I'm thinking a couple of years ago with the girl in Spring Valley, she had a cell phone and she didn't want to give it up and then that cop came in and like threw her? What do you think about that?

Calvin: Me – I feel like for one the cop should be in jail for the rest of his life and I just feel like [sigh] I just feel like that was unnecessary. If she didn't want to give up her phone just let her, like just let her rock out – that's not, you shouldn't be worrying about that. If she was going to fail let her fail, not saying that she would've cause if that's just her situation so you shouldn't be so bothered by it. And I feel like the police in general just need to fix how they train their officers when they go out to duty and it's like why are you going to accept the position as a police officer; or police officers go in the Hood and why would you go in the Hood if you gonna be scared of the people in the Hood, you be scared of Black people so it's like, I don't know why but they even see little black kids and little black boys and little black girls as threats.

Coles: You said and what?

Calvin: Like, they see black kids as threats.

I: Yea, that's scary.

C: And then, also feeds into this idea that we're adults almost cause you know in the media when it's a black child it don't matter the age or when they was born, they gonna call them an adult and use pronouns an adult: this man, this woman, but not this child. But they sure do it with like white kids, I mean they can be like 30 years old and they can murder they whole family and they'll change the whole

Coles: the framing

Calvin: Yea, the framing and the pictures that they use and it's like when it comes to us they use like mug shots, they don't even bother to like go on our social media pages and look, cause it's just as simple and you got all this time to dig up a mugshot like you really thought that through, that wasn't by accident.

Coles: Yea, it wasn't like at random.

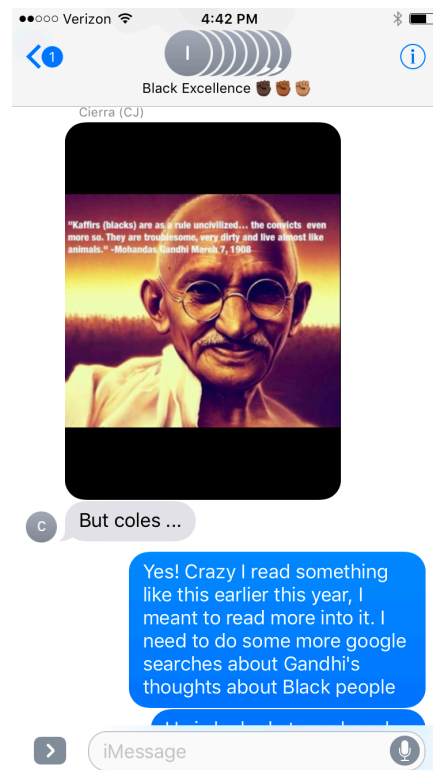
Calvin: Yea mugshots aren't just everyday pictures that you hang up on your wall and so I feel like it was unnecessary and I feel like he should just be fired, just go to jail till he rots yea, so.

I want to focus on Calvin's statement, "why would you go in the Hood if you gonna be scared of the people in the Hood, you be scared of Black people so it's like, I don't know why but they even see little black kids and little black boys and little black girls as threats." Calvin notes that he does not know why police and others see black kids as threats, but he does know that existing as a threat is the reality in which Black youth live. Moreover, this reality is what prompts Black youth to be systematically erased and rendered disposable. In response to Calvin's point, I said, "Yea, that's scary." The fear that I have, being scared that Black kids are understood as threats, is a real tangible fear that operationalizes in Black death and suffering – as discussed throughout this section. However, as we see with the actual example of Shakara and the police officer, the fear of a white police officer—an extension of the white supremacist nation—trumps any fear that Shakara may have had; which would have actually been justified given what followed. In fact, the legacy of antiblackness erases the justification of fear that any Black person might have. In the legacy of antiblackness, Black people cannot be fearful, because they are the ones who society fears. Calvin further examines this ideal here by explaining how "little black boys and little black girls" are referred to as adults in society, particularly in the media. By referring to Black kids as "this man, this woman, but not this child," we see that Black people never get to be children, they never get to be innocent. In fact, being born Black marks one for a life of erasure and disposability. Calvin juxtaposes the impossibility of Black childhood with the guaranteed possibility of white childhood when he noted that a white person "can be like 30 years old and they can murder they whole family" and still be referred to as white kids, at the very least viewed from a more humanizing view or being potentially innocent or having made a mistake. To

support his overall claims in this excerpt, Calvin gives an example of how the media uses mugshots or mugshot like images for Black people and more appealing images for white people. A major significance here to the overall theme of erasure and disposability is that negative portrayals of Blackness that lie at the roots of this nation's founding are institutionalized (e.g. law enforcement and media), which ensure that Black erasure and disposability remain timeless.

“...troublesome, very dirty and live almost like animals.” When the students and I were not in conversation with each other after-school we were engaging with each other in our very lively *Dialogic Journal* or group text message thread. One day while we did not have a meeting scheduled, Toni sent the image that follows to the group chat.

Figure 5: Picture: This figure shows a screenshot from our group *Dialogic Journal*



The image is a graphic sketch of Mohandas Gandhi that Toni came across on a social media platform. The words on the image read: “Kaffirs (blacks) are as a rule uncivilized...the convicts even more so. They are troublesome, very dirty, and live almost like animals.” – Mohandas

Gandhi March 7, 1908. Accompanying the image, Toni sent the words “But coles...” as if to say, “but wait, did you see or rather know about this?” Toni’s engagement with this image that she shared with our group provided deeper insights into the legacy of antiblackness and mindsets responsible for erasure and disposability, by extending the students’ understandings of antiblackness to one that goes well beyond the continental U.S. Toni’s engagement with this image provided students with the insights that antiblackness is global. This understanding gives Anita’s call for Blacks to “be safe in these streets wherever you are” an entire new meaning. Perhaps Anita understood that in saying wherever you are that there is no place of refuge for Blackness, no place where Black people are perceived as non-threatening. As explained by Gandhi, “blacks are as a rule uncivilized.” Notions of the uncivilized Black stem from anti-Black ideologies that rely on this imagining in order to put forth ideologies of white supremacy – ideologies that provided the justification for slavery and every other institution (e.g. prisons and schools) that followed which has sought to “civilize” Blacks. A global understanding of Blacks as “troublesome, very dirty” and “almost like animals,” fuels erasure and disposability.

The Ubiquity of Antiblackness

The second larger conceptual category that emerged as a response to my first research question is the ubiquity of antiblackness. By the ubiquity of antiblackness, I mean that throughout this segment of the data, the students revealed they understand antiblackness as being everywhere in society, antiblackness is omnipresent. People of all races come to see antiblackness as the way of life in society. Since antiblackness is normal, this means that an individual person or a system or institution does not have to actively think about Blackness or Black people in negative ways to engage in anti-Black racism. The routine control and subordination of Blacks that is responsible for the ways Blackness is erased and disposed of

operate as the foundation to the normalization of antiblackness. The omnipresence of antiblackness was not achieved by happenstance, but rather a byproduct of white supremacy. The way the students understand antiblackness through the conceptual category of the ubiquity of antiblackness resulted in two themes emerging within this larger conceptual category. The first was societal roots (macro), which frames antiblackness as the societal climate. The second was institutional mirroring (micro), which understands society's institutions reproducing the exact anti-Black actions and ideologies of society. Given the nature of my ethnography with urban youth at an urban school, the data largely unearthed the theme institutional mirroring (micro) through the idea of urban schooling as a set-up.

Societal climate (macro). Across the data students shed light on how antiblackness operates as the total climate for America. The data shows an extension of Tatum's (1999) analogy that racism operates as smog that we all breathe to the specificity of labeling the smog that we all breathe to anti-Black racism. The data in this section shows that in understanding antiblackness, one must first understand how it dictates everything in American life.

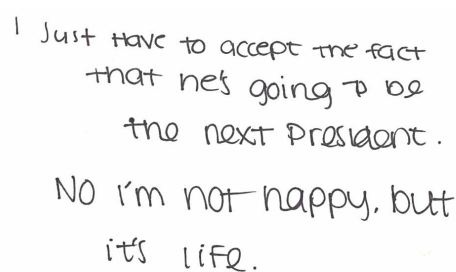
"AmeriKKKa." The 2016 Presidential Election in many ways worked to frame our larger discussions of race as the tail end of campaigning prior to the election of President Trump paralleled the development of our group. On the day after the election, November 9, 2017, an excerpt from my *Researcher Reflection Journal* reads,

I needed to see the kids and how today and really every day after will play out. This is a moment. I was waiting at the front desk talking to a social worker at the school who I know and a student (Sasha) came up to me and said, "We really need to meet today, this is just too much."

The comment "this is just too much" stems from sentiments of fear, surprise, and confusion many people across America were also feeling. People of color in particular associated Trump (and still do) with whiteness and white supremacy; he is seen as counter to the livelihoods of

marginalized peoples. Huber (2016) suggested that the racism seen in the campaigning of Trump “is a response to changing U.S. demographics that are shifting from a predominately white, to an inevitably non-white population” (p. 216). After the election, the students had tons of things that they wanted to discuss. One way they captured their thoughts down was through our literacy artifact, *2016 Presidential Election*, where I asked them to communicate in whatever way they felt best their feelings. Anita wrote the following:

Figure 6: Picture: This figure shows a participant’s *2016 Presidential Election* artifact



I Just have to accept the fact
that he's going to be
the next President.
No I'm not happy, but
it's life.



AmeriKKKa

When Anita says “but it’s life,” she is expressing that racism in the U.S. is a fact of life. In a sense, as many students communicated throughout our conversations, Trump is not the sole embodiment of anti-Black racism, he is just one example of what people perceive as such an embodiment. So Anita’s acceptance of the Election results, which made Trump America’s 45th president, is both an acknowledgment and acceptance of his presidency and acknowledgement and acceptance of the larger societal climate of antiblackness in the U.S. that would be present even if he was not elected. This is evident by her ending her statement with “AmeriKKKa,” with the three Ks representing the Ku Klux Klan. The election for Anita revealed that to her, anti-

Black racism does not have to be seen in order to exist, similar to the ways one does not have to always spell America as AmeriKKKa in order to know white supremacy is implied in the naming of the nation.

During an after-school session, Toni shared a tweet that she re-tweeted from Twitter to our *Dialogic Journal*, which read: “i really feel sick to my stomach. This has truly shown how many silent racists there are in this country alone. truly disgusting.”

Figure 7: Picture: This figure shows a screenshot of a Tweet shared in our group Dialogic Journal



So, when thinking about the climate of “AmeriKKKa” as Anita wrote, we see from this tweet that antiblackness is able to exist in a ubiquitous fashion not because it is loud, but because it is often silent. In understanding the legacy of antiblackness, through critically engaging with the word and world students understand antiblackness as being much more than lynching and police shootings. In order to survive as the societal climate of America, one of the things antiblackness

must be is hyper present to the point of invisibility, people (even the silent racists) forget it's there because it is endemic.

Another retweet by Toni that was shared to our *Dialogic Journal* sheds more light on the ways antiblackness operates as the societal climate.

Figure 8: Picture: This figure shows a screenshot of a Tweet shared in our group Dialogic Journal



The first re-tweet we see in this screen shot posted in our *Dialogic Journal* explains that “Trump bashed: Black people, Mexicans, Muslims, Women, Disabled people, LGBT folk and WON.” Essentially, we see that Trump bashed everyone who has been historically marginalized in this country making his presidency truly an embodiment of white supremacy, which is at the center of the marginalization of non-white peoples across the world. The fact that he was able to do all of these things and still win the presidency further reveals that white supremacy is the way of the land, which actively contributes to the ubiquity of antiblackness. The following retweet by Toni,

“I knew this country was a joke when y’all mourned the death of a gorilla longer than y’all ever have for a black life taken by the police,” moves the conversation back to the specificity of antiblackness. This tweet is in reference to a gorilla by the name of Harambe being killed at the Cincinnati Zoo in May 2016 after a Black child fell into the gorilla’s enclosure. American society went into a frenzy over the fact that the gorilla was killed in order to save the life of this Black child. In fact, a petition was created in order to have the parents investigated by Ohio’s Child Protective Services (Cooper, 2016). Moreover, the criminal history of the child’s father came into question – as if that has anything to do with a Zoo needing to shoot a gorilla to save a Black boy or maybe it does? Perhaps the shooting of the gorilla would have been justified if the boy needing to be saved was white? As Cooper (2016) explained,

Black people in the U.S. have always been in the unenviable position of having to argue that we deserve to be treated better than animals. Our history as chattel has made such arguments necessary. The moral clarity that white Americans have about the value of animal lives simply does not exist when it comes to the value of black lives. When people insist that this isn't about race, I look at where they place their outrage and empathy. Show me your outrage, and I will show you which lives you value.

The significance of Toni sharing this retweet with the group is that it provides another example of the ways students understood antiblackness, particularly the ubiquity of antiblackness as it works to operate as the total societal climate. Moreover, Toni’s sharing of her retweet put our group in conversation with other Black and Brown youth. By the original author of the tweet explaining that he “knew this country was a joke,” he is revealing that he knows that America has never and will never care about Black people.

“...we’ll always be less than that the white groups.” Since antiblackness operates as the societal climate that means that it frames every individual and institutional interaction, moreover it infiltrates our minds. In Khalif’s *Semi 2*, he shares his perspective on how he sees the ubiquity of antiblackness affecting his education and the way him and his peers view the relationship

between Black youth and learning. In this moment of the *Semi 2* we were discussing Khalif's definition of a quality education and his thoughts on how that looks different for different races.

Coles: Based off your definition of education and what you know about the world, does a quality education look different for Black people versus white people?

Khalif: Alright this is why it's different. Alright so, if I'm in a class environment right. And I'm actually tuned into what a teacher is teaching and I want to get great insight on it. I will, but my peers will laugh at me. Why are they laughing at me? Because it's been implanted in their brains that we're nothing more than what somebody tells us to be. No matter what's our higher potential that we'll always be less than the white race. And it's not really [sigh] It's not at all a great way of thinking, but that's just how we was taught to live. That's what we raised off of. If we was taught differently, if we was raised in a fixed world where we was all equal and we taught ourselves the difference in race and it wasn't any negative aspects on it, then maybe I wouldn't come to school and say 'well no matter how hard I try, I will always be two steps down from this person or that person. Or maybe I gotta try this harder than the other'. It's like Black people think in their own minds that other Black people are negative. So, if we think about that about ourselves how could we really think about anybody else.

Khalif underscores the ubiquity of antiblackness in his comment, "No matter what's our higher potential that we'll always be less than the white race". He is emphasizing that Black people are not immune to internalizing and reproducing the logics of antiblackness. Like everyone else, Blacks breathe in the air of antiblackness. The ubiquity of antiblackness ensures that everyone whether actively or passively enacts anti-Black racism. When he states, "that's just how we was taught to live. That's what we raised off of," he is not referring to specific lessons of antiblackness but rather growing up in a society where the social curriculum is one of antiblackness. Khalif also digs through some complexity here, especially the cyclical nature of anti-Black racism. In addition to explaining how antiblackness infiltrates the minds of Black youth, Khalif also works to name the systems at play in society responsible for this infiltration or rather he names that there is a system actively working against Blacks. When he says, "if we was raised in a fixed world where we was all equal and we taught ourselves the difference in race and it wasn't any negative aspects on it," he is signaling that he is deeply aware that the world is not

equal and that people do not naturally grow to construct notions of race, but rather antiblackness does the construction for us; it teaches us who is not equal.

“...and then white people say well you need to stop doing this...” Working to actually name that antiblackness existed as a system and that American structures worked to dictate the oppression of Blacks was something that the youth did often. For them, it was not just about understanding that antiblackness exists, but as evident by the larger conceptual category of the ubiquity of antiblackness, actually explicating the specific ways it exists everywhere. In other words, the students spent a lot of time making antiblackness visible, naming it. In her *Semi 2*, Maya moves to discussing America’s legal system which functions as a major facilitator of the anti-Black societal climate of the U.S. After I asked Maya about the ways Blacks experience violence the following conversation occurred.

Maya: Um well like in the court systems, uh like falsely accused of a crime based off of how you look and all stereotypes.

Coles: Did you see the Kalief Browder story?

Maya: No, but based off the stereotypes based upon us, also like the criminal justice system tends to just keep putting people in jail, mostly minorities and then white people say well you need to stop doing this and stop doing that, but the resources they give us, we can't – there's nothing we can do with it. So, it causes them [minorities] to be like these drug dealers and stuff because that's the only way they can make some money.

Coles: Mmm you're getting at such an important part Maya, I don't know if you're realizing it, I'm sure you do, but umm it's basically like you can be violent by like, essentially you make people think they are crazy right?

Maya: Mhm

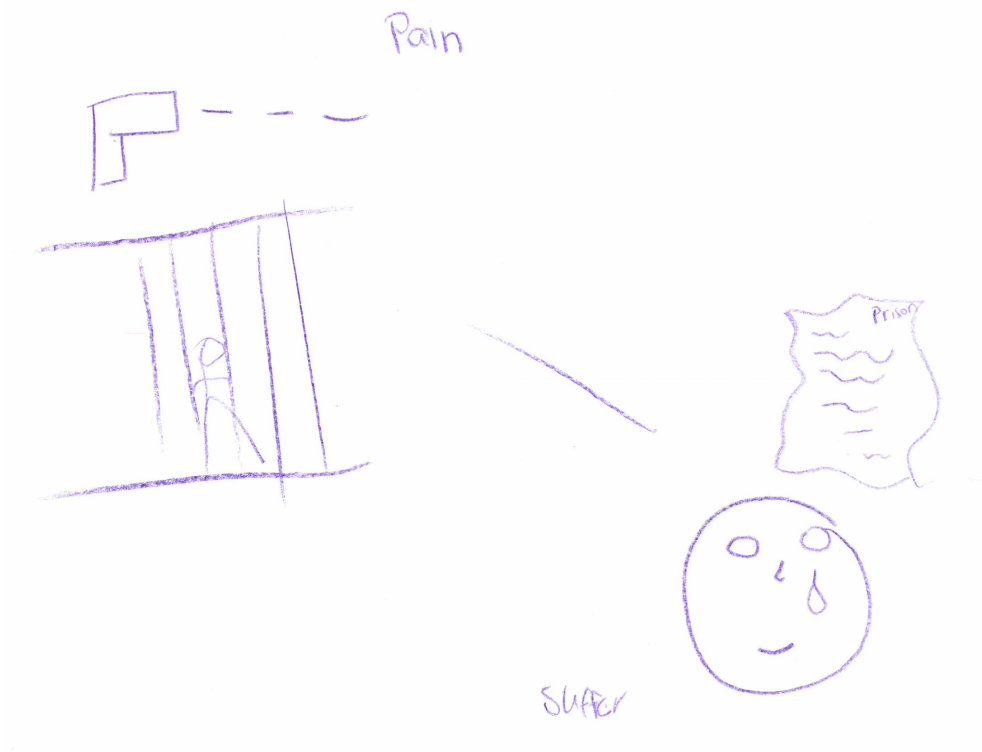
Coles: So, you say just stop doing it, but it's like well you take away all of my resources, so then or I go to jail because of some messed up stuff, but when I come out I can't get a job so what do I have to do?

Maya: Yup, so basically you fail the schooling system then they, from the failed school system they move right to prisons

Maya’s comments are in line with Khalif’s in the previous example, “...we’ll always be less than that the white groups.” I also placed both of these examples under the theme societal climate (macro), because while education and schooling are brought up, the focus of their examples are

on the societal climates that facilitate antiblackness in schooling. The next section will focus directly on specific school mechanisms of antiblackness, hence the theme, institutional mirroring (micro). Maya details that antiblackness operates as the climate in which Blacks and minorities broadly live in through her explanation of the inescapability of antiblackness. After noting how the criminal justice system continues to put people in jail, she captures the never-ending cycle of the anti-Black climate: Black people are not given the resources to be *successful* and when they fail—based off of standards that require the resources they were denied—they are punished. From her perspective, antiblackness excludes Blacks from the economy, which causes them to “be like these drug dealers and stuff because that's the only way they can make some money.” Antiblackness as societal climate violently limits Black life and a major way Black life is limited, is through prisons as Imani explained.

Figure 9: Picture: This figure shows a participants *Black Suffering Concept*



In alignment with the ways Maya (*Semi 2*) discussed jail, Raheem extends the conversation as outlined above in his *Black Suffering Concept*. From his image, we see a depiction of Blacks essentially existing in a world where, as Maya noted, “the criminal justice system tends to just keep putting people in jail,” as a result of inadequate resources to live. As I continue to put this visual in conversation with Maya, I see Raheem’s gun as representing “these drug dealers and stuff because that's the only way they can make some money.” We then see someone who is not in prison (a family member) reading a letter sent from prison causing that individual person, the family, and the community to suffer. Black suffering becomes the outcome of existing in a society where the total climate is anti-Black.

“...we know this not our environment...” Antiracism as the societal climate shows that across space and place Black youth understand that they are not truly exempt from the ills of white supremacy in America—a climate structurally counter to their Blackness. While speaking with Khalif during his *Semi 2*, we began to discuss what it is like leaving his all Black neighborhood each day to travel to a section of the city, where the residents are predominately white and from high economic backgrounds (the school predominately Black and low-income).

Khalif: I had to come downtown, to this section

Coles: Right, which is a white neighborhood.

Khalif: Yea, it's a white neighborhood and different police departments down here, CIA, not CIA, FBI uh

Coles: Local police?

Khalif: Homeland security down here, DHS and it's like then we have all that we have the tour guides and everything, we have white people living in the town homes and lofts and stuff down here and it's like okay we might have you guys over run in numbers but we know this not our environment, we still on your playing field so

Coles: hmm hmm, that's interesting. So basically, you're saying you all are being in a place like this, you all are sort of surrounded in a world that's not really yours?

Khalif: Yea, it's made to seem as though it's welcome and like a home feeling and after a while you being here it is, but coming in you know it's like I get up and I leave out the house with my friends and as we walk up the avenue, then everybody go to Broad Street, some people go to they schools here some people go to they schools down here and it's 2, well it's me and another one of my friends like we go to school downtown. It's like okay,

that's cool cause we get to see a lot, we got stores and stuff down there, but you know we can't hang out after school, we can't say what we want outside of school.

Here, Khlaif provides a clear example of the ways the societal climate at a macro level is dictated by antiblackness. Not only is he daily exposed to the subliminal message that a good education does not take place in a Black neighborhood, but also that, even when he leaves his Black enclave he is still not awarded the social freedoms of white America, as evidenced by his concise yet profound statement, “we know this not our environment.”

Institutional mirroring (micro). Since antiblackness is present in every aspect of society—to the point that it creates the climate of society—antiblackness then also deeply informs American schooling. School is one social institution in the U.S. that reflects the country’s anti-Black sentiments. I want to be clear here that I am not saying that antiblackness has infiltrated schooling, but rather antiblackness is American schooling. All one has to do is review the history of African American education to gather how antiblackness has always framed the schooling for Black children (Anderson, 1988; Williams, 2009; Woodson, 1933). While other systems and institutions stood out across the data (e.g. the media and prisons), the primary institution the students and I examined within the context of our societal explorations of Blackness and antiblackness was the urban school. What really stood out to me from the data is that the students’ understanding of the ways schooling was not designed for Black youth to be successful did not deter them from seeing education as necessary. Perhaps they see it as a necessary evil: if a Black child does not go to school they will be further burdened by antiblackness? In future work, I think it would be useful to more intentionally study this aspect of Black thought—the history of education, regardless of how violent it may be, being crucial for Black youth. For example, in a pilot study of my dissertation, I interviewed a Black student from

Detroit who I refer to as Jamal regarding his perceptions of schooling as symbolically violent.

Jamal attended a predominately white school and during his interview he stated:

At times I was like, I felt like I was going crazy and stuff I just felt like I couldn't take it anymore but actually my parents were like no keep pushing keep – you're doing this not only for you but for your siblings and for other Black people down the line as well.

I put Jamal in conversation with the students in this study, because I think he captures what lies at the core of Black youth, families, and communities understanding that schooling may not have their best interest or that schooling is a set-up, but still persisting in spite of that knowledge.

“...they set us up to fail.” While speaking with Maya during her *Semi 2*, the topic of funding came up as a major way she understood schooling being different for Black youth than non-Black youth. After asking Maya what is responsible for differences in education she stated the following:

Maya: Money. A lot of, like the school district puts a lot of money into uh majority uh of the suburban schools rather than the inner-city schools. It's like they set us up to fail. Like they set us up to lower our self-esteem. And some people, they just don't have that strength to be able to use that and to motivate themselves and move further. Some of them, they just succumb to what they've been told all their life to be.

In this concise statement, Maya actually covers just exactly how the urban school mirrors societal antiblackness. American society frames Black youth as inferior. Black youth then go to schools that are designed based off of those conceptions of inferiority. And without direct interventions, as Maya noted, “some of them succumb to what they've been told all their life to be.” Maya's use of the term set-up here is significant because it pinpoints that the only reason why antiblackness is ubiquitous is because it was set-up to be so. As expressed previously, anti-Black racism is not enacted by happenstance. For example, research that examines inequitable school funding has long confirmed Maya's notion that it is indeed a set-up—inequitable by design. Recent research from the Education Law Center and POWER (Philadelphia Organized to

Witness Empower and Rebuild) confirmed that the set-up endures. According to David Mosenkis, in the state of Pennsylvania where my study took place, “on average, the whitest districts gets thousands of dollars more than their fair share for each student, while the least white districts get thousands less for each student than their fair share” (Brandt, 2017). Considering the complexities of school funding formulas, in many ways funding is positioned as race-neutral or rather that no individual racist is actively making sure that Blacks and those living in poverty receive less funding. However, as Maya reveals, it is a set-up and the most effective set-ups never reveal who or what was behind the action.

“Let me get you to a prison...” While discussing the differences in education for Black youth, Toni contributed to the overall connection of schools and prisons in her *Semi I*. After being asked what is mainly responsible for the differences in education, we engaged in the following conversation:

Toni: Funding. There’s a lot of differences because of the city decides to put funding into prisons and not schools. Having schools that have potential and they shut down.

Coles: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm.

Toni: I feel like some kids are lost in the school system because they’re just a, they’re just a percentage in a building. They don’t care if you have a 4.3 GPA. Other schools shut down, gotta find a new one, gotta start over, Gotta come – come back here – coming over there. Like stuff like that

Coles: Just getting shuffled?

Toni: I feel like they, they, they praise so much education but they’re making it really hard for people to get education. And they’re just, you ever saw the 13th?

Coles: Yes. Yeah.

Toni: I feel like that’s the reason why they’re putting all this money into prisons, is basically in our schools, basically cause like, eventually, y’all gone drop out and sell drugs. So, let me help you out. Let me help you help me. Let me get you to a prison, so we can make these clothes and give me these coins. So, and then we gone flip it and put it [coins] into another prison and have your son and his son and his son and his son. It’s just a cycle. And we’re not gonna break it.

Coles: Yeah. That’s true.

Toni: And not everybody realizes it. Which is really sad.

Given what the data has revealed regarding the ways Blackness and Black identity is framed in America, we know that money is put into prisons instead of schools because Black people are conceptualized as criminals not academics. Since a great amount of funding however goes into prisons as Toni proclaims, that means that these prisons need to be filled in order for the money invested to make more money and more prisons. The ways urban schooling mirrors the societal climate of antiblackness creates the conditions for Blacks to be perceived as criminals or presumed guilty before they are ever presumed innocent in school infractions that are most often arbitrarily regarded as infractions. This institutional mirroring facilitates the amount of Black youth gone from our nation's urban schools to the cellblocks of penitentiaries.

“...but with white people it's like it's easy.” The idea that life in America is easy for white people and not for Black people routinely came up, both in formal data collection and informal interactions. This in itself is not a significant revelation, because most marginalized peoples understand that the structures that cause them to be marginalized contribute to making their life more difficult than the lives of those who benefit from their marginalization. For this, it makes sense that Black youth understandings of antiblackness reveal that they are aware that life could be and would be easier without antiblackness. While this may seem simple, I think in mapping out youth's understandings of antiblackness as it relates to schooling, it is particularly significant. When it comes to schooling, Black youth go in knowing that by nature of their Blackness, there will be structural (intentional and unintentional) barriers present that will work to make them feel as if schooling is not a worthwhile endeavor. Because Black youth view and understand that white youth do not have to face the same specific anti-Black barriers to education, they cannot conceptualize whiteness or white people such as teachers as being truly effective in their navigation of the set-up of schooling: white people do not feel (this is not about

understanding) the material impact of antiblackness. While talking with Anita during her *Life History*, while discussing schooling for Black youth, she began to talk about the majority of white teachers in the school. The conversation below took place after asking her to elaborate on her thoughts on the teaching staff.

Anita: Um, I really don't think that a teacher could do anything that'll be good to a black student.

Coles: What do you mean?

Anita: Like. I can't explain it. It's like, it's like no. You can't – I really can't put it into words. But it's like no-

Coles: Are you saying that they can't teach black students?

Anita: No, like they can, but like when it come to like making things better for black kids.

Coles: There's nothing that they can do themselves?

Anita: Basically, yeah

Coles: Why? You mean- they just don't have the like the experience, the knowledge or -

Anita: I would say that or they just don't know what we go through.

Coles: Because they're not black?

Anita: Basically

Coles: So, you're saying they can try their best but

Anita: Yeah like - it's not gonna get anywhere. You're not Black so. Thank you but

Coles: Explain that a little bit more though

Anita: [Laughs] Well, they try to like connect to us. But like you're not Black so you- like you're white like. I wouldn't say you could get anything or be anything you want, but it's more likely for you to do it than a Black person would cause we're just held to these stereotypes and these boundaries in life. We can't get nowhere we really want to, but with white people it's like it's easy. And they be like 'Oh we understand'. No, you don't. You don't understand cause you're not black. So, I mean. It's nice that you try to be heartfelt for us but it's not gonna work.

As Anita worked to find the words to communicate her stance, she was sure to state that white teachers can teach Black students, but outside of the transmission of academic content, there is nothing that a white teacher can do to make “things better for black kids.” In my attempt to get her to specify what exactly she meant, she eventually explained that Black kids are held to “stereotypes and these boundaries in life” that white people do not experience. For this reason—white people not experiencing racial oppression and in a sense, being complicit in that—Anita views white teachers’ attempts at making life better for Black kids or helping them overcome the

set-up of schooling simply as “not gonna work.” This is significant in that the majority of teachers at Uptown High and many urban schools that serve predominately Black students are white. Anita reveals a major component of the institutional mirroring or set-up of schooling, which is to have Black youth who are oppressed be taught by people who have no experience with their specific level of oppression, thus making it difficult for them to understand that schooling is a set-up. Again, this is not about white teachers who claim to understand what Black youth go through, but rather the impossibility for white teachers to feel what Black youth go through.

“...they not smarter than us they just have the means to do more than us.” In various data sources, students addressed not just that “with white people it's like it's easy,” as Anita explained in the prior section, but they actually worked to specifically name why it was easy for whites within an anti-Black society. The after-school sessions served as a prime place where students were really able to wrestle with their thoughts on Blackness and antiblackness due to the collaborative nature of the space. The following excerpt (*12/19 Script*) comes from a moment during an after-school session where students were working through their thoughts on Black intelligence.

Khalif: You know what it is though, because we lack some of the intelligence that they have that's the reason why they come at us like side ways

Researcher: But what do you mean Black people lack intelligence?

Calvin: I really don't think we lack intelligence

Khalif: Because we lack the education

Toni: Um Khalif, I have never heard you talk this much in my whole life

Sonia: Oh, you don't got class with him [group laughter]

Khalif: That's cause I think this important, seriously. I feel like because some of the other races are smarter than us and more kind of like hip to taking things.

Sonia: I really don't feel like they're smarter than us, I feel like they have more

Rochelle: More connections?

Sonia: They have more opportunities than we do, but I don't, when I say more opportunities I feel like more opportunities accessible to them. When you think about it, we got to fight for stuff like, when you think about it, alright, it's a blessing to have

somebody like Ms. Simmons [college counselor] at our school, whereas other people they don't even have that. This boy that came here this year, we was like "why you come here senior year?" He was like "oh cause we don't have no counselors at our school, like ain't nobody gonna help me get into college," stuff like that. But I feel like at a white school, that's expected. My aunt work at this school in Jersey and it's a predominately white school. They have a counselor for everything, literally. They got a counselor for scholarships, they got a counselor for applications, for everything. So, I feel like they not smarter than us they just have the means to do more than us.

At the beginning of this excerpt, Khalif appears to be playing into the ways Blackness has been historically constructed as inferior through his assertion that "we lack some of the intelligence that they have." In the second half of his statement he uses what he perceives as Black people's lack of intelligence as the reason whites "come at us like sideways" or treat Blacks as less than. The ease in which Khalif uttered the intellectual inferiority of Blacks is a result of the ways white supremacy and antiblackness are embedded within American society; the climate. Mixed in with Toni joking with Khalif about how much he's talking on this topic, Calvin and Sonia make it clear that they disagree with Khalif's conception of Blacks lacking intelligence in relation to whites. Opposed to declaring that Blacks lack any intelligence, Sonia locates the issue within resources being essentially denied from Blacks as a result of the ways Blackness is positioned as inferior in urban schooling. When she says "we got to fight for stuff," she is detailing just exactly how antiblackness works in American society, and more specifically, how schools mirror this to ensure that Black students do not do well. The detailing of schooling as a set-up here comes when Sonia explains, that at a white school she knows "they got a counselor for scholarships, they got a counselor for applications, for everything. So, I feel like they not smarter than us they just have the means to do more than us." The ubiquity of antiblackness makes structures such as those mentioned by Sonia invisible, forgotten, and ignored. People come to see the fact that a white school may have more resources than an urban Black school simply as business as usual, the way things are supposed to be. Through this lens, it

becomes evident how Khalif can say that Black people “lack some of the intelligence that they have,” because the air that he has breathed in throughout his whole life has made him believe that Blacks might lack intelligence, making it difficult to see how the institution is simply reflecting society.

“...it’s elitist and it’s very classist.” Considering this ethnography took place with urban youth in Philadelphia, the intersection of race and class, and specifically urban geography have been implicitly present in the students’ conceptions of Blackness and antiblackness. However, there were moments in the data where students directly named how anti-Black racism works at the intersections, especially as it relates to class. While interviewing Calvin during his *Semi 1*, we discussed what might be responsible for Black youth receiving a different education or one that is lacking in quality in U.S. schooling. Calvin asserted that education for Black youth was indeed different and I asked him how he knew. The conversation unfolded as follows:

Coles: Okay, what makes you say that? Like what evidence?

Calvin: What makes me say that is not even, not even knowing the curriculum across the nation

Coles: Right, you don’t even know that

Calvin: But just for the simple fact that, they don’t invest money in schools, especially public schools. And like academia is, it’s elitist and it’s very classist.

Coles: Mm-hmm.

Calvin: And it’s like the education system is so, it’s not, it’s not set up for kids like me or poor kids or Black or Latino to succeed and it’s like they’re not getting enough of what they need just because of their class and where they fall in the class in the social hierarchy in America. So, and it’s just like you see the government investing all this money going out of Space and I mean that’s nice and all but like what can Space do for me? It’s like it’s so much stuff. It’s like it’s kids - I feel like cause if you ever peep it – it’s really, it’s really geniuses that live in the hood.

Coles: Right

Calvin: They live in the hood, the hood mathematicians.

Coles: Mm-hmm.

Calvin: The fact, like, everything about it is just so – people don’t never peep it. You just, people in the hood are just so smart. But people just down, downplay them just for the simple fact of where they come from. It’s just like – I feel like if they were to invest in those kids, more than they do, if they invest in those kids equally as they do them rich kids, then maybe our future in America would look brighter than it does now. Because I

feel like, if we just like, Black kids, if we just push for our kids to do their best and get into colleges, I feel like – I really feel like they could change the world, because what can't they do?

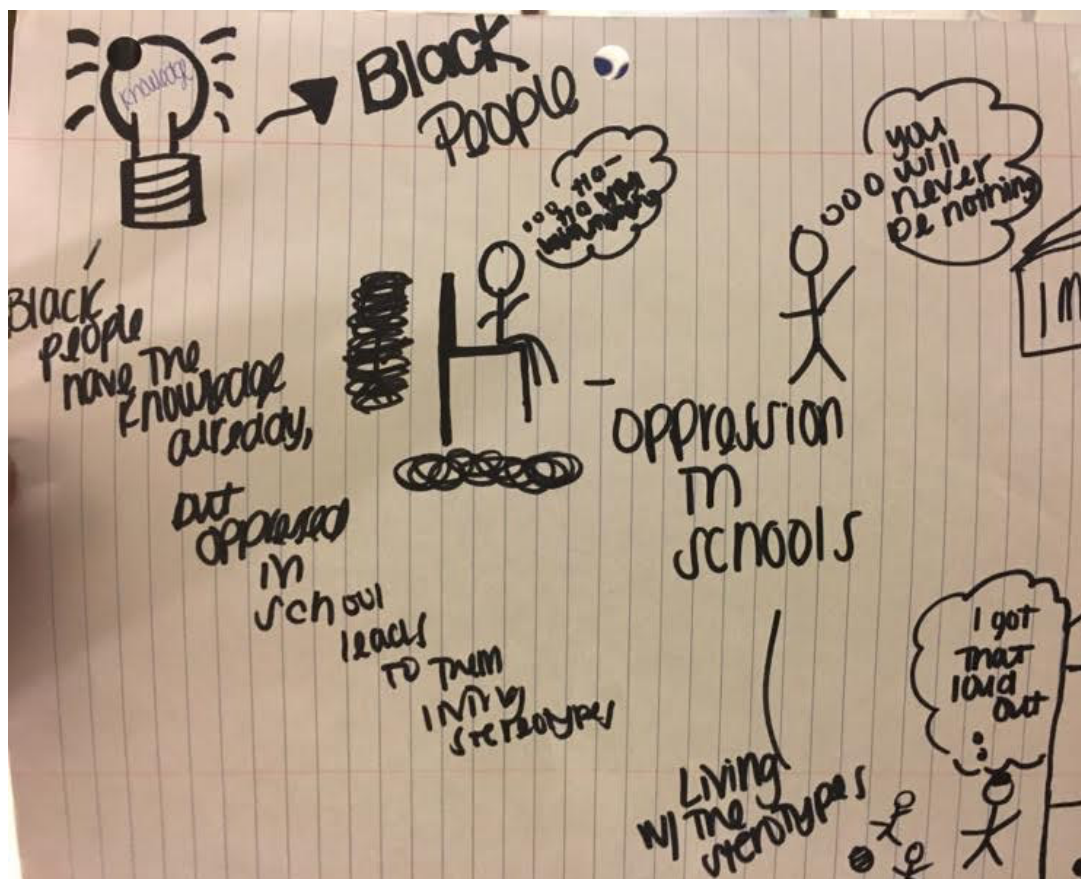
While Calvin definitely speaks of funding and the lack of investment in public schools, he really moves us from a narrow understanding of institutional mirroring discussed earlier (money, white teachers, and lack of college counselors) to a broader view that names the entire system of education as classist and elitist. This understanding of schooling as a set-up is important in that as Calvin shared about himself, one does not have to be familiar with the curriculum across the nation at every public school, because antiblackness lets us know that the entire system mirrors societal antiblackness. Through stating that education is “not set up for kids like me or poor kids or Black or Latino to succeed,” it becomes understood that schooling as a set-up is not negative for everyone. The same set-up that makes poor, Black, and Latino kids feel like “they’re not getting enough of what they need just because of their class and where they fall in the class in the social hierarchy in America,” is the same set-up that ensures that white students get enough of what they need.

A particularly interesting part of this interview is how Calvin see the government’s investment in Space as having nothing to do with him, which speaks to the larger ways schooling enacts antiblackness by making Black youth believe that things associated with advancement or rather things that Black people are excluded from have nothing to do with them. Explorations to space are an embodiment of the future of American society and the world. Considering that “it’s really geniuses that live in the hood,” but people “downplay them just for the simple fact of where they come from” is a prime example of society and the urban school working in tandem to structurally excluded Black people from the future. Black people who are framed as negative and intellectually inferior are restricted to where they can live, causing those physical geographies to

be associated with inferiority. Thus, when Black youth from the “hood” enter schooling, they are not given the opportunities that ensure their participation in the future. Calvin ends this excerpt of his interview saying, “I really feel like they could change the world, because what can’t they do?” The significance in this statement is that due to antiblackness, we are not currently able to see how Black youth can change the world on a large scale, but that does not exclude the liberatory possibilities for Black youth to one day change the world by continuing to author worlds within this one that continuously resist antiblackness.

“Black people have the knowledge already...” Towards the end of the formal study (I am still in contact with the students) I wanted to understand how the students were thinking about Blackness and antiblackness more concretely. Essentially, I wanted to gather their theories of anti-Black racism considering all that we engaged in over the course of the year. Earlier in the project we engaged in the *Concepts of Racism* artifact, which spoke to antiblackness, but I wanted to be more targeted. My *instructions* for this activity, which I refer to as *Theories of Antiblackness*, consisted of a very open prompt as with the majority of the work that we did. Maya’s *Theories of Antiblackness* artifact speaks quite clearly to schooling as a set-up.

Figure 10: Picture: This figure shows a participant's *Theories of Antiracism* artifact



In her image, we see a mapping of sorts that begins with the way schooling devalues Black knowledge. At the top left is a light bulb with the word “knowledge” written inside. An arrow extending from the right of the light bulb points to the words “Black People.” Under the light bulb, the words “Black people have the knowledge already, but oppressed in school leads to them living stereotypes” appears. In the center of the paper, we see Maya’s depiction of a classroom scene labeled “oppression in schools,” where a Black child is in a chair laughing as indicated by the thought bubble “Ha Ha Ha.” Before the student, stands a teacher by a thought bubble that reads “you will never be nothing.” After that there is a line that leads to the words “living w/ the stereotypes” next to a Black youth outside of a corner store saying “I got that loud out.” Since schools are positioned in society as the great equalizer and institutions that help not

harm, Maya's image is really enlightening because it rejects that narrative and really demonstrates how schools (more so than other institutions) work as primary facilitators of antiblackness. While all institutions mirror the societal climate of antiblackness, school as a primary site of socialization where youth spend a good portion of their time, signals that the institutional mirroring of schooling is the mirroring we should be paying attention to most. Maya affirms that Black people possess knowledge while noting that schools do not value that knowledge, which leads Black youth to find alternative modes to be successful such as selling "loud" (marijuana). The ubiquity of antiblackness here is in the ways society views Black people as drug dealers (and therefore criminals), while completely ignoring the way school operates as a set-up as Maya revealed to ensure that Black people do engage in activities outside of the mainstream economy. Even for people like Maya who may understand this set-up, overtime the images of the Black drug dealer become so pervasive that we believe that Black people selling drugs is just the natural way of life, we believe that Black people are naturally not meant for school.

"Get on TV tell us Black kids stop going to school." To understand institutional mirroring and the idea of urban schooling as a set-up means that one has adopted the idea that the education system is not designed for all students to be successful, which the students have all communicated through the data sources presented under this thematic thus far. Sonia took this understanding further during her *Semi I*, where she insisted that "they" or white people confirm that schooling is not for Black kids "instead of making us feel like we gotta chance when we don't?" At this point in our conversation, Sonia was discussing her friend who attends a school that was historically white, but has recently spiked in diversity. Her friend is a Black male. Sonia explained that "He stay getting suspended. He stay getting expelled. Stay and the stuff he be

telling me he get suspended and expelled for, I know for a fact it's not that deep. Like because he was late to class." The conversation continued:

Coles: Like little stuff

Sonia: He got sent to the principal. Like y'all try to set him up for failure and y'all don't want him to go. Like just say that. Like I'd rather y'all just be honest. 'Look I don't want you at my school cause you Black. Like you just gotta go. Like I just don't want you here.' If you was really – I feel like they should just be honest.

Coles: Then people would be like okay now we know.

Sonia: Get on TV tell us Black kids stop going to school. 'We don't want y'all to be educated. Just leave. Like what's the point. We don't care about y'all. I don't know why y'all keep coming here. Y'all taking money from our white kids. It's time for y'all to go.' Why don't y'all just be honest? Instead of making us feel like we gotta chance when we don't? I just want somebody to do that. I told my mom that last night.

Coles: did you?

Sonia: I said I want them to get on TV and be honest. Tell us how y'all really feel. 'Black people, y'all done fought for all these rights and we mad. We don't want y'all to have it. We keep trying to do stuff to y'all. And y'all just not getting it.'

Coles: Not getting it.

Sonia: Give it up. Tell us right now so I can pack my stuff to go.

Coles: At least we'd know right?

Sonia: I mean let us know so we can be like 'alright well. I mean they did tell us.' People say that I don't understand why y'all just keeping this façade on like y'all really care about us. Come on let it slide. Stop it. I just want them to – I just want them to let us know. For real. Cause we know. We know y'all don't care. I'll go get my passport now and just go somewhere that will make it a little bit better for me.

In this statement, Sonia captured the entire essence of the theme institutional mirroring within the larger conceptual category of the ubiquity of antiblackness. In a sense, she captured the overall theme of our entire project—not just naming the ways antiblackness operationalizes in our lives, but actually confronting and calling out antiblackness so that we may potentially find peace. When Sonia said, "I'll go get my passport now and just go somewhere that will make it a little bit better for me," she was revealing that she knows she cannot escape antiblackness but that she can at least find a reprieve, a place or space that might be "a little bit better." The script that she narrates as the "they" is such a compelling critical literacy practice; she is forecasting what a white person or what whiteness (if it became embodied) would say about schooling being

a set-up or rather a scam for Black youth. However, we know that white supremacy and anti-Black racism are so powerful because this utterance, the revealing of the entire system would never happen. Moreover, even if this imaginative TV broadcast did happen, things would not change drastically considering as Sonia put it, “we know y’all don’t care.” Before ending this discussion around the way urban schools mirror societal antiblackness, I do want to revisit Sonia’s idea of getting a passport and leaving the country, especially considering its implications for Black futurity or even fugitivity. How might we view Sonia’s idea to get a passport as futurity via fugitivity by ensuring her survival and sanity into the future? What might this resistance look like in the schooling of Black children—what does an education look like that is “a little bit better” for Black children? I wrestle further with these questions with the data that answered Research Question 2.

RECONNECTING CONCEPTUAL CATEGORIES AND THEMES

The data presented in this findings chapter answered my first research question, *What understandings of anti-blackness emerge through Black youth’s critical engagements with literacy?* The first large conceptual category my data was organized under, (a) the legacy of antiblackness, was composed of two themes: (a) control and subordination and (b) erasure and disposability. The data under the conceptual category of the legacy of antiblackness was largely centered on understanding antiblackness through the lens of historic and contemporary white violence and supremacy (control and subordination) as it emerged organically in our broader discussions of naming and detailing antiblackness. My intentionality of working with the youth to create a space that centered on Black youth’s literacies set the context for these themes to emerge. Secondly, the data under this conceptual category demonstrated that students understand antiblackness through the ways Blackness and Black identity have been negatively imagined

over time and more over the value (read lack thereof) that has been placed on Blackness throughout history (erasure and disposability). What these two themes reveal about Black youth understanding of antiblackness through critical literacy, is that antiblackness is both ideology and practice that functions by first creating the conditions for Blacks to be subordinate, and then using that subordinate status to both carry out and justify the marginalization of Blacks through both physical and symbolic forms of erasure and assault. In other words, the students critical literacies reveal that antiblackness thrives upon the perpetual social construction of Blackness as inferior. As a result, Black people and communities are subject to all forms of gratuitous violence.

The second larger conceptual category I used to organize data under my first research question, (b) the ubiquity of antiblackness, included the two themes: (a) societal climate (macro) and (b) institutional mirroring (micro). The data under the conceptual category of the ubiquity of antiblackness focused on the ways the students understood antiblackness as the total climate of U.S. society (societal climate (macro); everything is dictated by antiblackness. In addition, the data under this large conceptual category moved from the macro-level of antiblackness as total societal climate to the way that schooling operates as a set-up because it operates in tandem with U.S. society (institutional mirroring (micro)). From the data under these two themes, it becomes clear that Black youth are able to understand antiblackness as systemically embedded within society and society's institutions such as the urban school. The ubiquity of antiblackness that this data represents suggests that Black youth indeed comprehend school and society are centered upon control, subordination, erasure and disposability. These are inescapable, because of their omnipresence.

In the next findings chapter, I outline the ways the students demonstrated how they were not just understanding antiblackness as it shows up in their lives, but also the ways they constantly worked to resist antiblackness. While I present the ways the youth understand and resist antiblackness as two different chapters, it is important to understand that in their lived experiences, understanding and resisting are interconnected.

CHAPTER FIVE: RESISTING ANTIBLACKNESS

My second research question read: *How do Black youth's understandings of antiblackness through critical engagements with literacy function as resistance to antiblackness?*

From reviewing the data, two large conceptual categories emerged: (a) navigating antiblackness and (b) authoring Black futurity. Within each category, several themes emerged. The themes within navigating antiblackness included (a) racial realism and (b) consciousness, love, and fugitivity. The themes within authoring Black futurity included (a) decentering the white gaze, (b) centrality and honoring of the Black gaze (society), and (c) centrality and honoring of the Black gaze (urban school).

CONNECTING CONCEPTUAL CATEGORIES AND THEMES

The data demonstrated the multiple ways students resist antiblackness. These strategies are used to create and sustain their Black existence in spite of encounters with antiblackness in their everyday lives (*navigating antiblackness*). A prominent foundation for the development of these strategies that worked to organize the data under this conceptual category included the ways the students' critical literacies were imbued with beliefs of racial realism. Racial realism can be understood as the students believing that Black people will never be treated equally in the U.S. The racial realism that the students communicated via their literacies allowed them to develop meaning (consciousness, love, and fugitivity) for their life within the context of an anti-Black world, while constantly understanding that the U.S. and the world is not designed for this type of Black meaning making. The ways that students navigated antiblackness informed how they were able to move beyond the present context and begin conceptualizing a Black future that does not yet exist (*authoring Black futurity*). However, this authoring of a Black future, or the these students' capacities to engage their literacies to write a world where Blackness is more

valued and no longer marginalized, is not predicated on the idea that antiblackness will be erased. Authoring a Black future becomes about decentering whiteness and centering Blackness (both within society and their urban school). The centering of Blackness is not rooted in ideological and systemic supremacy as with the centering of whiteness. Centering Blackness as human and beautiful proved to be a precious resource to the ways the youth understood themselves in the world. The data presented here for research question two reveals that the navigational tools the Black youth enact that allow them to survive the present conditions of antiblackness provide them with the basis to begin to design a literal future or fantasy future for Black people; to imagine a future where Black people matter.

Navigating Antiblackness

In addition to much of the project being focused on students' collective naming and detailing of antiblackness as it operates in their societal and urban schooling lives, much of the project simultaneously dealt with the ways students created life for themselves in conjunction with the larger Black community in spite of antiblackness. In other words, the data revealed that the Black youth theorizations of antiblackness was not simply about them understanding how it exists, but also how they actually navigate the terrain of antiblackness. A prime form of resistance to antiblackness the data showed is the way the Black youth developed strategies to navigate it so that they would not be fully defeated by antiblackness. The navigation techniques students use to chart courses through the anti-Black context of the U.S. allows them to be prepared for the difficulties ahead facilitated by antiblackness. Moreover, navigating antiblackness allows them to do their best to circumvent these difficulties or at the very least to not be as bewildered and thrown off course when faced with difficulties brought on by antiblackness. The way the students demonstrated resistance to antiblackness through the

conceptual category of navigating antiblackness resulted in two themes emerging: racial realism and consciousness, love, and fugitivity.

Racial realism. Across the data it was clear that students held racial realist perspectives.

Bell (1991) conceptualized racial realism through noting that:

Black people will never gain full equality in this country. Even those herculean efforts we hail as successful will produce no more than temporary "peaks of progress," short-lived victories that slide into irrelevance as racial patterns adapt in ways that maintain white dominance. This is a hard-to-accept fact that all history verifies. We must acknowledge it and move on to adopt policies based on what I call: "Racial Realism." This mind-set or philosophy requires us to acknowledge the permanence of our subordinate status. That acknowledgement enables us to avoid despair, and frees us to imagine and implement racial strategies that can bring fulfillment and even triumph (pp. 373-74).

Black people do not have the privilege to be race-neutral or colorblind, because the societal climate of America being anti-Black reminds them daily both in explicit and implicit ways that they are marginalized. This is the evidence that Black youth are presented with; this evidence then causes them to understand that anti-Black racism does exist and that given the total history of America (and the world) that it will always exist. Throughout the entire project, the exact language of racial realism was never used by myself or the students (as this is an academic term), but as the data in this section shows, one of the primary ways students navigated antiblackness was through a deep belief in racial realism.

“Cause this economy it's like based off of wealthy white men.” As noted previously, among other topics discussed with students during their *Semi 1*, a primary focus on these interviews included students' understandings of education, especially what a quality education is for Black students. American schooling is often painted as a site that provides students from every background (e.g. race, class, gender) with the same access and opportunities to the future, with seldom acknowledgement of how for many historically marginalized communities this has not been the case. In my interview with Raheem, he builds on previous conversations of funding

that the data touched on under Research Question 1, but extends it to a discussion of the roots of funding inequality. After Raheem explained his thoughts on what a quality education looks like, I asked: “So, based off your definition of quality education, is a quality education for Black kids different than a quality education for white kids?” The following conversation followed:

Raheem: I think so because like it’s not even that. It’s for like class structure like middle class, low class, and high class. They have different like quality education and structure
Coles: Why is that?

Raheem: Cause like money. Money, I feel like. Money not supposed to run everything but money does. Money is power. So, like that can lead to a better education. Like you have more opportunities if you have more money. So, you can become more educated through those opportunities. But I don't think it's a Black versus white thing.

Coles: Okay. So more so money. Does money ever equate to race?

Raheem: Yeah. Cause it's a lot more rich white people than there are rich black people. Cause that's how like how this economy is built. So yeah, it is technically structured to race.

Coles: Explain a little more about that. You said that's how the economy is built. Like what do you – what does that mean?

Raheem: Cause this economy it's like based off of wealthy white men. Like it's not that many Black people cause they not giving them any opportunities cause of like the past with what Black people went through, what we went through. So, we don't have as much opportunities as white people like they were always living good. We had to fight to get to where we are. And like now that we at a equal, equal point. We still like gotta build up higher than to get to where they are.

Coles: What does it mean for you that we're at an equal point? Like what does that mean?

Raheem: That means like

Coles: Cause you're saying that we are equal, but then we also have to keep fighting to still get – so how are you defining equal then?

Raheem: I feel like white people they could just like they think they can build themselves up so easily. Like and just be there even though they could be on the same level as a Black person. A black person has to fight harder. Because of like the society and this economy. How they view black men, women, and all that. So, we have to fight harder even to be in the same position as white people. Even though they had to do so little. But they still in a higher position.

Coles: Okay. So really connecting all back to history. Do you think that there will ever be a point where Black people don't have to like keep fighting?

Raheem: I feel like that's just a part of what we have to do. Cause that's like thinking is racism ever gonna end. I don't think racism is ever gonna end, cause people gone always have their mindset and like pass that down. So that's I think we gone continue to have to fight harder.

Coles: But it could get like

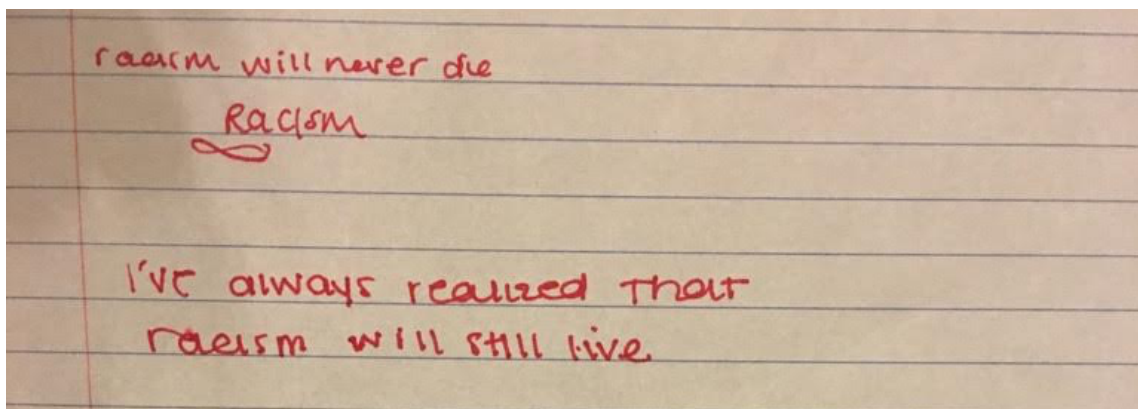
Raheem: It could get better, but it's not gone stop.

Although in this excerpt we were talking about if a quality education looks different for Blacks than whites and Raheem mentions money as a primary difference, he explains that it is more about class than race. Specifically, he stated, “But I don't think it's a Black versus white thing.” Noting that Raheem was talking about the inextricable link between race and class, but perhaps was not realizing it, I asked the clarifying question, “Does money ever equate to race?” My question then gets Raheem to think about the entire history of America and the relationship between money and race, which led him to state that money is “technically structured to race.” Here, Raheem's understandings of antiblackness helps him explain that Blacks do not have as many opportunities as whites since “this economy it's like based off of wealthy white men. Like it's not that many Black people cause they not giving them any opportunities cause of like the past with what Black people went through, what we went through.” Additionally, the way Blackness and Black identity has been imagined throughout time work to frame this conversation too, as evident in Raheem him stating that a Black person has to fight harder due to how the society and the economy “view black men, women, and all that.” The conversation leads us to a concise capturing of Raheem's racial realist perspectives. After I asked him whether or not Blacks will always have to fight harder than whites he asserted, “I don't think racism is ever gonna end, cause people gone always have their mindset and like pass that down. So that's I think we gone continue to have to fight harder.” The significance in this excerpt regarding navigating antiblackness, especially through a racial realist lens, is that not only do we get an understanding from Raheem that racism has always been around and that it always will be, but we also get an understanding that Black people will have to fight harder as time progresses (contrary to ideals of post racialism that have swept the nation over the last few decades). Post-

racial narratives often paint a picture that overtime racial minorities have to fight less. Raheem completely rejects any such narrative.

“racism will never die.” As seen with Raheem in the above example, a major way that students communicated racial realist perspectives was through their explicit naming of the eternal nature of racism, that racism has no ending point, which is the basis of racial realism. Anita expressed this view through her *Theories of Antiracism* artifact shown below.

Figure 11: Picture: This figure shows a participant's *Theories of Antiracism* artifact



As explained in the examples for Research Question 1, my instructions for the *Theories of Antiracism* activity were very broad. Through this activity, the students and I thought about how their understandings of racism developed over the course of the project, specifically with our collective engagement in the specificity of Blackness and antiracism. What first appears to be only words, under the word “Racism,” we see that Anita drew an infinity sign to represent her perspective that “racism will never die.” Below the infinity symbol she stated, “I’ve always realized that racism will still live.” Anita’s choice of the infinity sign is intriguing because there is no break in that symbol, there is no room then from her vantage point to either stop or even disrupt anti-Black racism. During our April 6, 2016 after-school session where the students engaged in this artifact, after everyone shared I became really curious about their racial realist

perspectives. I wanted to understand the roots of their perspectives. Below is an excerpt from our after-school session that day (*4/6 Script*) that shows how the conversation unfolded. After Anita explained the image above, I asked the group:

Coles: What makes y'all think that racism will always be here?

Sonia: Cause people will always be ignorant and people is always gonna feel more superior than other people

Rochelle: and people will teach other people and it will keep going

Toni: Racism will always be taught

Coles: Is there any possibility for racism to not exist in America?

Sonia: No, I don't think so

Raheem: No

Coles: Why do you think?

Raheem: Cause like y'all, said racism is taught and it's always gonna be racist people in the world, they not just gonna disappear.

Calvin: I always thought that racism would die off by old white people dying off but I'm just now realizing that it's taught to younger generations before they die off so it's just a continued legacy

Raheem: you just gotta kill all white people

Here, the students collectively refuse narratives that position racism as only existing in the past by detailing how racism is embedded within the U.S.; a national curriculum that is taught with each new generation. The uniqueness of antiblackness is that it does not have to be explicitly taught overtime, because it becomes normalized. When the students say racism is taught, while they are not excluding people actually having racist discussions with younger generations to teach them how to adopt those ideologies, I interpret this as them saying that racism is taught through the macro-level ways it plays out in society (not actual individual lessons). The ways we grow up to see who is privileged and who is marginalized through U.S. social institutions becomes the lessons of racism, the ways we are all taught how to continue living in a white supremacist and anti-Black nation. When Calvin stated that he “thought that racism would die off by old white people dying off,” he further revealed that racism is not attached solely to the physical mind or body, it is much more diffuse. For this, students’ navigations of racism via

these racial realist perspectives is directly informed by their understandings of racism. At the end of this excerpt, Raheem states, “you just gotta kill all white people.” It is important that I assert that Raheem is not calling for a literal killing of all white people, but rather he is evoking a fantasy where anti-Black racism, rooted in white violence and supremacy, does not dictate the societal climate. He is imagining a world where the legacy of white people does not exist or where the legacy of whiteness (not actual white people) does not exist. The racial realism in his statement then becomes the fact that since all white people will not be killed (or whiteness as a system), racism will never be killed. The impossibility of killing all white people works to reveal from Raheem’s mind why racism will always remain.

“...***Black kids are put on the back burner...***” Since youth spend a great deal of time in school, when examining antiblackness and how youth resist it, experiences in school and society have to be looked at simultaneously. As an extension of society, schools and the urban school as is the focus of my work, are primary facilitators of anti-Black racism (which has been especially highlighted under the theme institutional mirroring in Research Question 1). When considering racial realist perspectives then, it becomes evident that if Black youth do not believe that racism will end, that they also believe that the oppression and marginalization of Blacks in school will never end. During Sonia’s *Semi 1* interview, while discussing quality education she explained:

Sonia: I feel like Black kids are put on the back burner when it comes to quality education. Like for what they think quality education is. I feel like Black, Black kids are seen as ‘oh they not gone want to do it anyway.’ Like they put that, that stigma on us and then I mean if you constantly saying that, why would we care? I mean honestly, like I feel like if they had, if they had to pick between a predominantly Black school and predominantly white school to give them this wonderful new technology, they are not giving it to the Black kids cause they gone say, ‘look at they school now, they gone destroy.’ Well, y’all ain’t do nothing with this school for thirty years, what you think we gonna do with it? I just feel like it’s definitely different. I feel like, kind of sort of they prepare white kids better for life than they do us. Like I don’t never hear white kids complaining about um paying bills or nothing like that. It’s like automatic for them. Like they know what they doing. Black kids, we be having to get evicted several times before

we get it. And something like that. I feel like it's definitely a difference. Even with the funding, remember when you told us that thing we first did it, the difference per student. That really messed me up cause it's like yo that's crazy like

Coles: It's a big gap

Sonia: That shows – that definitely shows me now that y'all really don't, really care about us. Y'all really don't care what we do.

Through her critique of schooling we get Sonia's perspectives that just as in society, Black people will never gain full equality, which is the crux of racial realism. Sonia uses the urban school to demonstrate that Blacks will never receive equality because schooling—often considered a means to achieve equality—is structured to “prepare white kids better for life.” Her statement, “Black kids are put on the back burner when it comes to quality education,” reveals her understanding of the structural refusal of urban schooling in America to ever remove Black youth from the “back burner.” Being able to identify anti-Black racism in such a structural way as Sonia has done demonstrates resistance through making the invisible visible. By knowing that “they prepare white kids better for life than us,” Sonia can move through schooling and the world understanding that she as a Black girl is not inadequate, but rather that she has been presented with an inadequate education that may not make her as prepared as her white counterparts. Racial realism in this sense becomes a necessity for one's sanity in an anti-Black world. A Black child who views the world through a racial realist perspective does not have to second guess themselves and their capabilities because they have a clear understanding how antiblackness actively works to construct them as incapable. They know that they cannot allow schooling or society to fully measure (or measure at all) their worth.

“...like yea racism slavery but slavery is not the only thing out there...” Considering the role of students' understandings of racism in this conceptual category of resistance to antiblackness, understanding the past as always unfolding really contributed to racial realist perspectives in the data. Student beliefs that racism existed and will never end was informed by

their ability to see how the past, present, and future are always at play, resulting in the staying power of racism. I conducted an *Exit Interview* with each student, which I used as an opportunity to have a conversation with them about their entire experience in the project. Considering that we spent our time together discussing anti-Black racism, I wanted to hear from the students why they participated and more so why was exploring antiblackness something they felt Black kids should do. Maya shared the following response:

Maya: I think that people really don't understand, some black people really don't understand, like yea racism is slavery but slavery is not the only thing out there, it's more to it, it's like basically in African American history class where they talk about the same stuff, Harriett Tubman, it's basically like they have the surface they know the surface of it but they don't know deep down what it really means
Coles: and maybe how it still affects them today
Imani: Mhm cause a lot of people didn't know like slavery still exists and like schools are still segregated. They didn't really know that, they was like oh I never really looked at it like that.

To support her point in why Black youth should be engaged in explicitly talking about antiblackness, Maya refers to the way African American history is taught in schools. After acknowledging that racism has well extended itself beyond slavery, she highlights how in “African American history class where they talk about the same stuff, Harriett Tubman, it's basically like they have the surface” in order to insist that through this surface level learning Black kids do not get to understand “deep down what it really means.” She reveals more of her racial realist perspective when she mentioned that “slavery still exists and like schools are still segregated;” hinting at the fact that racism is structurally designed to never end. Using her African American history example, in school, students may come to believe that Blacks would never have to fight for freedom the way Harriet Tubman did or that in terms of segregation Black people can grow up to live wherever they want. However, Maya’s simple assertion that these

racial structures still exist, lets us know that this is not possible. Fighting for freedom will always be a part of the Black experience in the U.S.

“...because somebody don't call you a nigga don't mean they not treating you like one.” Asking the students about why they think other Black youth should spend time engaging in understanding antiblackness proved to be a particularly enlightening question during the *Exit Interview*. Sonia responded to the question with a similar racial realist perspective as Maya and the other students.

Sonia: Because they need to be aware, like a lot of black kids like, a lot of children especially like around my way they know about racism but they don't, they don't, I don't think people understand the full grasp and how wide range it is, like I feel like they just think somebody call you a nigger that's racism or somebody, cause you black they don't let you in a white community that's racism, people don't understand that racism is in every aspect of our life and that just because somebody not calling you a nigger to your face that don't mean they not treating you like one.

Coles: Umm you gotta say that again that was good!

Sonia: You irking! you irk me [laughter]

Coles: [laughter]

Sonia: Just because somebody don't call you a nigga don't mean they not treating you like one. So, like when we was talking about the school thing like the thing we was talking about the funding like that really stood out to me a lot cause it's like dang we go to school 15 minutes away from there, from Lower Merion and they get more money than us

Coles: Double right

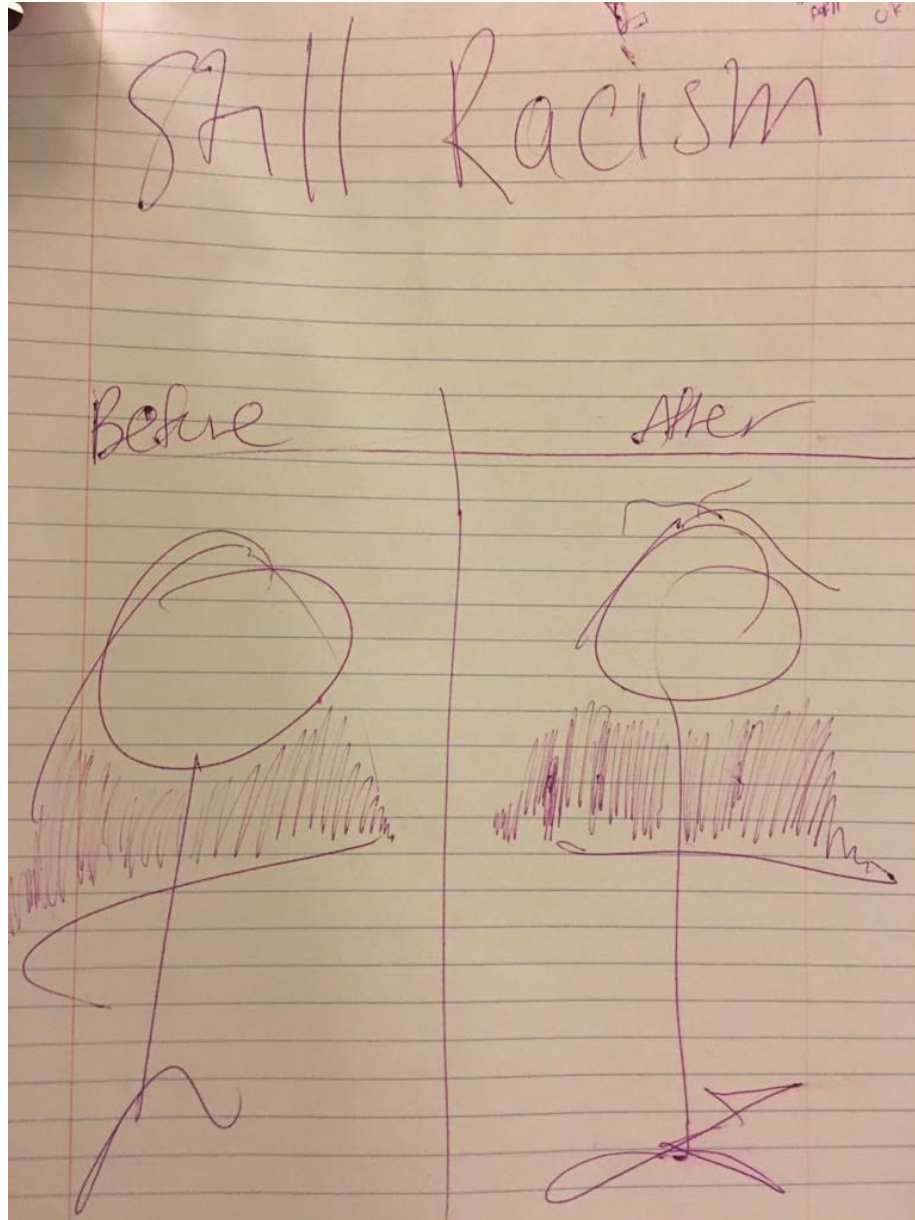
Sonia: And you would think cause we downtown we would get more, but that don't even matter like I feel like people just, race need to be talked about not only with Black kids but across the board, everybody need to know. Cause I feel like people really sleep on how wide range it is and how real it is, it's not going away. I really don't feel like it's ever going away cause like you always gonna have people that feel some kind of way about black people or other people in general so like yea.

Sonia leads into her racial realist perspective by first explaining that a lot of Black kids that she knows are not aware of how “wide range” racism is, which causes them not to “understand the full grasp” of racism. She unearths just exactly how Black kids may misrecognize anti-Black racism by only understanding it as overt acts, such as being called a “nigga.” However, she notes that the reality of living as a Black person is that someone does not have to overtly call you a

racial slur or commit a recognizable racist act against you in order for racism to be present. I thought that Sonia's differentiation between direct acts of racism versus subtle racism was so clear and concise that I got excited and asked her to repeat it again. Before repeating we engage in laughter with her saying "you irk me" or that my excitement annoys her in a playful sense. Sonia then provides an example of subtle racism that exists by referencing a school funding conversation we had toward the beginning of the project, where we explored per student funding of schools throughout the Greater Philadelphia region. The example is both powerful and significant here because it shows how inequity and capital is not tied to a specific location or poverty-stricken area as is often painted, considering that the school where my participants attend is located in a predominately white and high-income section of Philadelphia. Sonia shows that due to subtle structures like funding that seem race-neutral but are not, racism is able to exist because in many ways it is difficult to pin point. When stating, "you would think cause we downtown we would get more," Sonia reveals how inequity and oppression are permanently attached to Blackness itself. Since Blackness is imagined as a problem and underserving, no matter where the Black bodies are located, anti-Black racism in the U.S. will find its way to enact violence. For this, it does not matter that the urban school my participants attend is in a white wealthy neighborhood (where the white kids of the neighborhood do not attend the school), but rather what matters is that the school is predominately Black and thus will experience the full effects of anti-Black racism, always.

"Still racism." In Rochelle's *Theories of Antiracism* artifact, she drew a clear picture of how she came to understand racism as time progressed throughout our project.

Figure 12: Picture: This figure shows a participant's *Theories of Antiracism* artifact



During the after-school session where this drawing took place, Rochelle explained her picture (4/6 Script).

Rochelle: So, this is a picture of me before and this is a picture of me after.

Researcher: What's the difference?

Rochelle: Nothing, there's still racism in the world and nothing's gonna happen

Researcher: So, Rochelle basically you're saying nothing has changed?

Rochelle: My mindset has not changed, it's still racism.

In Rochelle's *Theories of Antiracism*, we see two stick figure drawings of Rochelle with the word 'Before' above the first stick figure and the word 'After' above the second. When asked by me what the difference is in that shift of time from Before and After (as both stick figures are exactly the same), Rochelle clearly states, "nothing, there's still racism in the world and nothing's gonna happen." Her understanding of racism from her particular location as a Black youth in America is an understanding that is super important in understanding racial realism as a central way students navigate antiracism. Rochelle rejects the narrative that racial equality is attainable, or even that racism will ever go away, which allows her to better move through the world as a Black youth. Rochelle has a racial understanding that does not make her immune to anti-Black racism, but allows her to not be blindsided by anti-Black racism. As a result, as she moves through her social world she never has to second guess whether or not antiracism is at play or present, because she understands its enduring presence in her life. By understanding that racism will always be with her, Rochelle can avoid the frustration and despair Bell (1991) discussed that comes with the belief that one day in the nation racism will not exist.

"Whites will always be the dominant race." The cultural mismatch between Black students and white teachers was present in every aspect of our discussion of race and schooling. In fact, the conversations were so prevalent that there is a considerable amount of room and perhaps urgency for scholars such as myself to center the erasure of Black teachers in their work as deeply connected to anti-Black racism in schooling. I would argue that the lack of Black teachers and overabundance of white teachers might in fact be the major way anti-Black racism operationalizes in schools, considering the prevalence of that topic in this project. While speaking with Anita during her *Semi I*, we discussed how in urban schools across the nation it is normal to walk in a school that has a predominately Black student population and see a

predominately white teaching staff. In order to get her thoughts on this demographic mismatch being the norm and what would happen if the mismatch was reversed, we engaged in the following conversation.

Coles: Do you think that an all white school with all white students would allow all Black teachers to teach all white students?

Anita: No.

Coles: So why is it acceptable this way?

Anita: That's just how society is.

Coles: Explain.

[Both Coles and Anita laugh]

Anita: Um, I don't know. Just how it is. Whites will always be the dominant race. You can never over power them. As long as we try it.

I end with this example under the theme racial realist perspective, because it captured what is at the root of the racial realism students use to navigate antiblackness: “whites will always be the dominant race.” As noted by the examples used thus far and those that will be used subsequently, racial realism is not an ideology that is oppressive for the Black youth, but rather quite the opposite. Navigating antiblackness via racial realism is liberating. Considering the history of America and that there has been no major structural and/or ideological intervention to suggest otherwise, to move through life it makes sense for Anita to assert that “whites will always be the dominant race.” I must be clear however that this is not rooted in the belief by Anita or any of the other students for that matter that whites are inherently superior, but rather an understanding of the facts of living in the U.S. That's “just how society is.”

Consciousness, love, & fugitivity. As the data revealed, a combination of consciousness, love, and fugitivity is crucial to navigating antiblackness in that it works to counter the effects of antiblackness. This theme was largely fueled by the way the students came to develop love and pride for their Blackness and the greater Black community, and moreover, how they were able to use this as resistance. When Black youth cultivate consciousness in relation to their Blackness

and develop deep understandings about their history that author different narratives than anti-Black narratives that position Blackness as nothing to be prideful of, they begin to navigate the terrain of antiblackness through turning inward to “love Blackness to death” (Johnson et al., 2017) or by literally escaping it through fugitivity. Moreover, the theme of consciousness, love, and fugitivity helps to explain why racial realist perspectives are liberating for Black youth and not oppressive. While understanding that racism will always remain, the combination of consciousness, love, and fugitivity allows youth to understand that in spite of the infinite nature of anti-blackness, they can resist it by (1) staying knowledgeable about the ways antiblackness operates (consciousness), (2) being proud of Blackness and being Black (love), and (3) creating places of private refuge where Blackness can thrive (fugitivity). This theme then shows the way the Black youth demonstrated how they build on the ideology of racial realism to conceptualizing ways to change their worlds and making it better, whether those contributions are validated by society or not. Moreover, the significance of Black consciousness, love, and fugitivity is that it does not rely on or even consider validations from a society, a world that survives on antiblackness.

Under this theme, consciousness is synonymous with the term woke or to stay woke.

Under a “Word We’re Watching” entry, Merriam-Webster (2017) explained:

Stay woke became a watch word in parts of the black community for those who were self-aware, questioning the dominant paradigm and striving for something better. But stay woke and woke became part of a wider discussion in 2014, immediately following the shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri. The word woke became entwined with the Black Lives Matter movement; instead of just being a word that signaled awareness of injustice or racial tension, it became a word of action. Activists were woke and called on others to stay woke.

According to Pulliam-Moore (2016), among black people talking about Ferguson, “stay woke” might mean something like: “stay conscious of the apparatus of white supremacy, don’t

automatically accept the official explanations for police violence, keep safe.” So, the theme consciousness, love, and fugitivity, largely driven by being woke can be understood as staying conscious about the role of anti-Black racism in America, the world. Being woke serves as a lens for the youth to move through the world without being surprised at the way anti-Black racism structures society, because they have already been actively working to understand this reality. The data examples presented under this theme show Black youth asserting the power and brilliance they believe Blackness and Black people to possess.

“That’s my message, you know, *Black power*.” At the end of every interview (formal or informal) I had with the students, I always left time for them to share any other thoughts that they had regarding what we discussed. As mentioned previously, considering the hidden textualities we all have within us, despite my efforts, I knew that I may not always create the environment or ask all the questions that would truly allow them to share all they have to offer. From reserving time at the end of interviews, I feel like I often got some of their most compelling critical literacies—particularly since at those times they are not constrained to responding to a question but can share what has naturally been brewing within them. At the end of Khalif’s *Life History* interview, after asking him what else he would like to share, the following conversation ensued.

Khalif: If you listening to this and you white. It’s not fuck you. It’s not that. It’s not R.O.C. Rise Over uh Crackers. It’s not that, alright.

Coles: Wait rise up crackers?

Khalif: Rise Over Crackers. I thought about it yesterday. I started cracking up when I thought about it.

Coles: Oh, you came up with that?

Khalif: I was like no it’s – If you listening to this it’s not no us versus you and you versus us. I just want you all to know you all created that concept. It was never like that you know like. I don’t hate you. I hope we don’t hate you. You know but. But basically it – this is not, this is not a racial battle. It’s not to say who’s better than the other. The whole idea is you wouldn’t want your loved ones down and your family members hurt. And I don’t want my culture hurt. And I don’t want my family members down. We seen what it

was like and we're done. We don't we don't want to get back at you or anything like that. Just want equality. That that's it. But any Black people hearing this you know. If you have any doubts or anything. I didn't always have this mindset. You know. It, it's I go through each day. Every decision, and I always have butterflies in my stomach. I go "ugh". But something always push me to say go 'head. You always gotta try. Once you do that you gone start to succeed one by one. And once you get up there don't lose, don't lose yourself lose your soul in trying to progress. Don't forget where you came from. I know sometimes it's hard...you know the ones around you that are like you that you can help, do so for them. One by one. Everybody gon' come together. We gone get there. It's gone take time. It starts with you like once you take that first step that is the first step. Don't depend on somebody else to do that.

Coles: Right right

Khalif: You know what I mean. That's, that's my message. You know, Black power.

This excerpt from Khalif works to serve as a basis for understanding Black love as supported by Black pride, especially pride as the difference between white power and Black power. Black love and Black power, unlike white power, have nothing to do with hate or the oppression of another racial group. In fact, Black love and Black power work as counter to and rejects violent oppression. Khalif is clear to outline this when he addresses white people, explaining to them that "I just want you all to know you all created that concept" of "us versus you and you versus us." Furthermore, he notes that from the perspectives of Black people, "this is not a racial battle," but an effort to resist any force that works to hurt his family and Black culture at-large. After he moves from addressing whites to Blacks, the love for Blackness he has is revealed through his encouragement of Black people to keep pushing and to not "lose, don't lose yourself lose your soul in trying to progress" (read don't lose your Blackness as that is paramount to this progress). This is further evident from his statement, "Don't forget where you came from." It is important that I explain that when Khalif said "We gone get there. It's gone take time," that the "there" he is referring to is not some sort of post-racial future where anti-Black racism is eradicated. Here, consciousness and fugitivity both become central as well. In this vision of "getting there" from Khalif it appears that he is not necessarily considering racial progress in relation to whiteness,

but just deeper investments in Blackness as revealed by his notion that “everybody gon’ come together” a vision exclusive to Blackness. Loving blackness allows this vision of seeking refuge outside of whiteness (fugitivity) to come to fruition and the consciousness is what allows one to see a need to fight while not losing a sense of one’s Blackness (the whole reason they are fighting in the first place).

“Black and excellence don’t usually go in the same sentence.” The students naming the group Black Excellence is a form of resistance centered in Black critical literacies in itself. Before delving into any deep collective work, the students knew that my interest included spending time with them to understand their experiences in school and society as Black youth while paying attention to the role of antiblackness in their lived experiences. Given that we would be discussing antiblackness, I was always intrigued by the students naming the group Black Excellence. The group name provides another example of how having a racial realist perspective is not depressing or limiting, but in fact opens up possibilities to imagine things otherwise. So, in naming the group, the students deeply understood the presence of antiblackness and its permanence, however, they also understood that despite its permanence, they can continuously work to refuse the whiteness that is responsible for antiblackness. One way they saw themselves doing this was through affirming their excellence, in many ways an excellence that allowed them to engage in the critical examination of antiblackness with brilliance, love, and humor. To get more in-depth information on how each student came to support the naming of the group I asked them about it during the *Exit Interview*. The following is an excerpt from this conversation with Sonia.

Coles: You all named the group Black excellence, I think Sasha originally said it, but you all agreed to it. Just that term alone, Black excellence, what does that mean to you?

Sonia: To me that means like, it’s like an empowerment phrase. Cause you don’t never hear, you don’t hear a lot of places or a lot of people say that. Black and Excellence don’t

usually go in the same sentence. So, I think for us to name the group that it was like a big deal like, cause I don't know if you know but after school before group start we be waiting for you, they be like 'where y'all 'bout to go?' We be real loud, WE GOT BLACK EXCELLENCE!

Coles: Oh, y'all tell everybody? [laughter]

Sonia: Like I feel like it just made us, even if we didn't notice it, it made us proud to say it cause that's a, I feel like that's a powerful group. I think you should keep it.

The significance here is when Sonia explained that “you don't never hear, you don't hear a lot of places or a lot of people say that. Black and Excellence don't usually go in the same sentence.”

As a result of Black and excellence not being associated with each other, Black and Excellence when coupled, becomes a deep source of love for the Black youth. Insights into how this naming translated into love is revealed when Sonia shared that after school they are sure to let everyone know just exactly why they are still in school, “WE GOT BLACK EXCELLENCE!” Under the larger conceptual category of navigating antiblackness, it becomes evident that to be able to conceptualize Black Excellence, one must first be willing to confront the reality of racism. As Sonia explained, antiblackness has rendered Blackness as the antithesis of excellence; understanding this allows one to reclaim excellence and move towards a future that centralizes it. As a source of consciousness, love, and fugitivity then, Black Excellence becomes a symbol of racial awareness that can work to sustain Black people into the future—a future where their Blackness and excellence will not be erased.

“...at night I study Black people. I love Black people.” During my *Exit Interview* with Toni we of course engaged in a conversation on the meaning of Black Excellence, however she provided insights on just exactly why Black people are excellent.

Coles: So if you had to define Black Excellence in your own words what is it?

Toni: Being Black

Coles: So you're saying that just being Black is excellent already?

Toni: Yea cause I feel like, just because our skin color, we are pushed back. But then again it makes some people work even harder just because of their skin color. Some

people are jealous of Black people. Some people try to look like Black people. Even though we were made fun of back in the day, it's just like Black people is the trend
Coles: Black people are the what?
Toni: The trend
Coles: The trend, oh okay.
Toni: Black people is life. When I study at night, I study black people. I love black people.

Here Toni extends understandings of Black Excellence from the previous example with Sonia, by asserting that although Black people may not be viewed as excellent, they are. This consciousness or knowing that she puts forth allows her to reject anti-Black ideals that dare to question the excellence of Blackness. As evidence, she mentions that “some people try to look like Black people” despite how Black features and culture have been and continue to be positioned as a source of comedy. Blackness and Black people being a “trend” and something to be made fun of, exposes the disposability of Blackness in a different way from physical death: American society can pick up and play with Blackness when it wants to and the moment it is done playing can toss Blackness back on the shelf or in the trash can. Therefore, the notion that Black people are not excellent works as a tool to enact anti-Black racism. The importance in this example is that Toni demonstrates Black consciousness, love, and fugitivity through proclaiming that there has never been a time when Blackness was not excellent. When I asked what Black Excellence means and she responded “being Black,” she was refusing to entertain the ways Blackness has been negatively positioned in America, creating her own ideological space of Blackness that escapes anti-Black ideologies. Moreover, Toni’s example here embodied this theme through her stance that Black life must have nothing to do with how non-Blacks view and imagine Black people.

“...it's important to be black like if that makes sense.” Our *Dialogic Journal* was very crucial in our collective engagement throughout the course of the ethnography. In many ways, it

worked to set the tone of our work and to provide another space outside of our physical interactions that allowed us to build relationships. At our first meeting, Sasha took everyone's cell phone number and created our *Dialogic Journal* through the platform of a group text message. Without being told to name the group, she named it Black Excellence followed by three raised fist emojis in different shades of Black. All of the students strongly supported this textual and visual naming of the group.

Figure 13: Picture: This figure shows a screenshot of the name of our group *Dialogic Journal*



Since Sasha originally named the group, I was really curious about how she came to the name, which we discussed in her *Exit Interview*.

Sasha: I just feel like it's appreciating or an understanding that you're Black. Like I feel like you need to know, like cause you can be Black and just be Black and live your Black life, but if you understand like the importance of, cause it's important to be black like if that makes sense. Like you should know, you should be educated, I just feel like you should be so educated and Black excellence is basically educating yourself about your culture like so a lot of Black people don't know where we came from. I don't even know where I came from like I have the stereotype idea of where I came from, but like you know I feel like Black excellence is knowing everything and it just helps you understand why your parents get so upset when you don't do well in school. Like my dad is always like you have to do the extra mile because people don't believe you're gonna do it, especially cause you're a woman, it's just like I'm black like whatever. I'm black but it's and as I grow up it's just I realize that that's really not the case.

Coles: I've always thought it was interesting that um your thoughts on Black excellence though make sense, I was gonna ask you, considering that we were talking about heavy stuff like racism, antiblackness, and that's what I told you all, how did that come to mind though. What made you think of Black Excellence, cause a lot of people wouldn't.

Sasha: Because it's what happens to us like we have, I feel like excellence is like another word for being confident in being Black I should say.

Coles: Despite all that?

Sasha: Despite yea, so it's just like you know being comfortable in your skin and understanding why some people aren't comfortable in their skin and understanding what we really go through, because you can go through all of this stuff and be like 'well I'm Black like I don't know what people say about me but that's just how,' like you know? So, I feel like the excellence was becoming a better Black person. It just summed up confidence and all of that, does that make sense?

Coles: It makes perfect sense

Sasha: I feel like I'm talking in circles

Coles: I like it I didn't even think of it like that, so. It kind of goes along with your, how you think of woke, it's almost like they can be the same thing, like black excellence means that you're striving to be woke and to be educated.

In this excerpt, Sasha demonstrated how consciousness, love, and fugitivity serves as a tool to navigate antiblackness through her description of Black Excellence, which she conceptualized as “it’s appreciating or an understanding that you’re Black.” Her take on Black Excellence here is intriguing because it is not just appreciating being black (love) but also having an understanding of what it actually means to be Black (consciousness). When she said “like cause you can be Black and just be Black and live your Black life,” she is revealing that one can attempt to live a Black life that is not mindful of the history and realities of Black life—a way of navigating the world she seems to reject. This navigation she rejects, one that avoids being conscious, is not one that would be effective in navigating antiblackness. In the context of this project, in Sasha’s meaning making of Black Excellence, understanding antiblackness is crucial to understanding what it means to be Black, which propels one to love Blackness and seek spaces of refuge to cultivate and relish in this love. If one understands that “it's important to be Black,” one can more successfully navigate antiblackness. Again, understanding the importance of being Black will not eliminate antiblackness, but it can serve as a powerful tool to counter the violence of antiblackness—a violence that argues that being Black is not important. What really stands out in this excerpt is when Sasha said, “Black excellence is knowing everything and it just helps you understand why your parents get so upset when you don't do well in school.” Through her

earlier conversation we can come to understand that parents getting upset can be a result of their Black child not yet realizing the importance of Blackness or how being Black makes them capable of doing anything. In this example, we also see how Blackness intersects with her being a woman. From her perspective, it is even more important for her to understand her excellence and the importance of being Black due to the added obstacles she will face as a Black woman. As the conversation comes to an end, we see consciousness, love, and fugitivity in her closing comment, “I feel like the excellence was becoming a better Black person. It just summed up confidence and all of that, does that make sense?” From Sasha we come to understand resistance as striving to be a better Black person, and to be a better Black person means actively working to find ways to love Blackness, understanding what it means to be Black, and refusing narratives that disassociate Blackness with excellence.

“You can look up stuff and learn more.” Consciousness, love, and fugitivity is not a passive existence, but rather an active one. Raheem provides an example of how he has actively engaged in cultivating consciousness and how other Black youth can do so as well. During his *Semi I*, curious about what Raheem considers to be knowledge and how he has gained knowledge outside of school, we spent some time talking about the ways he learns from his family. Raheem explained, “My mom is very educated. My step dad was very educated. And then like my grandma. I don’t get book knowledge from her, but I just get life knowledge. Like things you should do in life, what’s right and what’s wrong.” We then engaged in the following conversation:

Coles: Um so family is a big one. What other ways have you – like where else do you get knowledge from when you’re not in school?

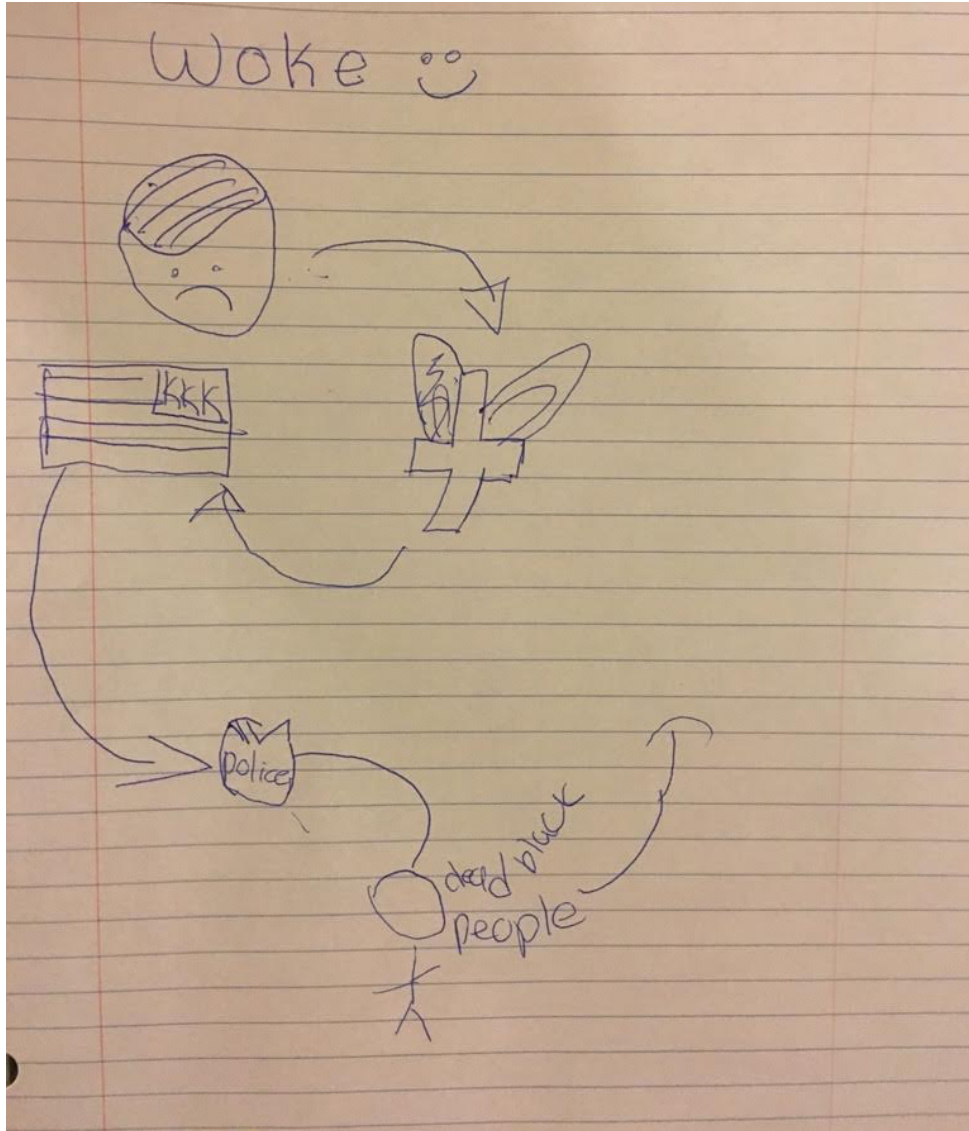
Raheem: Your community like in general. If you know your history about yourself. Not even from school, and like the internet. Like if you go, like the internet you can look up stuff about your history, about Black people – they’ve done this and that and all that. So, that inspires you, that educates you. You can look up stuff and learn more. Like you can

teach yourself a whole language on the internet and all that. So, it's like the resources that we have today. Like the internet and all that.

Through Raheem's explanation of continuously learning about Black history—Black people have “done this and that and all that”—leads one to be inspired and educated. The fugitivity of this seeking consciousness comes through the ways Raheem rejects schooling, a space that has been established as anti-Black, as the only or even primary place for Black youth to learn about and engage with the world. The more one cultivates consciousness in relation to their Blackness in the world, the more this consciousness sparks a love for Blackness and creates pathways for fugitivity.

“*woke* ☺” Across the data students showed that being woke (read being conscious) is important to navigating antiblackness, because it allows one to focus on resisting antiblackness opposed to wasting time debating if it exists. In other words, consciousness is rooted in the understanding that white supremacy and antiblackness dictate U.S. life, an understanding that allows Black youth to eventually develop ways to resist these phenomenon. In Toni's *Theories of Antiblackness*, we get insights into how deep understandings of racism (consciousness) in America work to allow Black youth to navigate society in ways that prioritize love and fugitivity.

Figure 14: Picture: This figure shows a participant's *Theories of Antiblackness* artifact



To supplement Toni's artifact, I include her brief description of the artifact from *4/6 Script*.

Toni: I said woke with a smiley face. So, this is Trump and then this is the burning cross, cause I know he relate to the KKK. And then I did the American flag with the KKK then I did the police, then I did black people that's dead.

People of color in particular associated Trump (and still do) with whiteness and white supremacy; he is seen as counter to the livelihoods of marginalized peoples. Toni maps out antiblackness in the era of Trump that begins with his image and ends with "dead Black people." Between the two ends of Toni's picture are a burning cross, the American Flag with the letters

KKK in the top right corner, and then a police badge. Above all of this however, as she noted is the word “woke” with a smiley face, which shows that Toni has a clear understanding of white supremacy and antiblackness and because of her understanding, she is able to still find refuge and comfort in her existence. In other words, Toni is not living a happy life because of white supremacy and antiblackness, but rather she is living a happy life in spite of white supremacy and antiblackness. She is a fugitive to these systems, as revealed by her literally authoring herself outside of her mapping of antiblackness and white supremacy via the word “woke” and the smiley face separate from the drawing. This is why “wake” work (Sharpe, 2016) is important; it is not about coming to consciousness for the sake of being hopeless, but for the sake of knowing how to create liberatory futures in the context of an anti-Black society. It is difficult, perhaps impossible to create liberatory futures when one does not understand the details of how they are currently not fully liberated.

“Don’t let them brainwash you.” While speaking with Khalif during his *Life History*, he revealed how being woke for him has functioned with love and fugitivity, simultaneously.

During the interview, I asked Khalif to speak on his understandings of race in America as a Black male. The following conversation took place:

Khalif: So let’s go back. Let’s let’s go back like really far back. Like let’s go back to Atlantic slave trade. Let’s go back to uh uh Portuguese, um. Let’s go back to Portuguese uh and Dutchmen you know. I forgot the word. Conquistadors?

Coles: Conquistadors

Khalif: Come over to Africa, getting slaves taking them over. No not getting slaves but getting actual people and turning them into slaves. You know. But let’s talk about how white people wasn’t the first people actually to come to America. How Africans was the first ones to come to America. How we was the ones to actually create rice and then give it to Asians. You know. Let’s go back like why are you telling me these things? What is it in me, deep down inside that makes me special? I shouldn’t just look at my skin color and say ‘well I’m cute you know well. You know’.

Coles: Right right

Khalif: A lot of girls say I’m handsome. You know. I want to know deep down, my roots. Why am I special? What makes me different from you? Why do your people hate mine?

And why do my people hate yours? And how can we overcome this barrier of hate. You know? What do I need to contribute? So, I took it all the way back. I researched. I studied. I researched and I read and I listened to audio tapes. You know. And I came up with the like the concept of I am a King, I am smart, I am brilliant. I do have potential. But at the same time, I do have a racial barrier over my head. I do have a lot of hate and discrimination in front of me. You know? I do have a lot of obstacles that I must first accomplish to then move ahead and help out my uh my parents my race to actually tell them that you know like when you watch these old TV shows and everything. I mean well when you watch the modern movies. And you watch the Chinese movies, and the slave movies and everything. Like these guys wasn't white. They're actors. Like it was us who did this first. You know. It was us who created it. Don't let them brainwash you. And you- and have them thinking that you are less than you actually are. You are special. Like you are beautiful. You know what I'm saying. Like the same way how like a lot of white people have split ends and like thin hair, we have thick beautiful hair. Like when my hair grow. My hair is crazy. When I get my hair cut, like when my hair grow, my hair is thick and curly and everywhere at the same time. I think I got like 3 types of different hair. I got nappy hair, curly hair, thick hair, and you know like it changes up.

Coles: It's rich right.

Khalif: When I get my hair cut, I have waves you know. I have like smooth baby hair. Like bro, they don't have that. We have that. I'm special cause I'm unique. I have different characteristics. I'm not bounded to one thing.

Coles: Right. Right.

Khalif: So I feel as though when I see my nieces. I tell them each and every time, 'you know you beautiful right'. You know look at yourself in the mirror. This is you, you know. Like don't forget who you are.

Khalif speaks to the theme of consciousness, love, and fugitivity by rooting this conversation in history. We see how he enacts consciousness through his rejection of dominant narratives of history and telling us what he knows. When he stated, "I researched. I studied. I researched and I read and I listened to audio tapes," we get an understanding of how staying woke can serve as a powerful compass to navigating antiblackness. Staying woke allows one to decipher what is real and what is false. For example, opposed to believing that the people who are depicted on TV as having been the originators of particular things, Khalif's consciousness allows him to know that those depictions are not accurate and that "it was us who did this first...It was us who created it. Don't let them brainwash you." By Black people being erased from these TV images for example, they are sent negative messages about themselves. However, Khalif reveals that when

one is conscious about the ways white supremacy and antiblackness work to create the erasure, Black people can discover the truth, which can then lead them to turn to a fierce loving of Blackness. We learn from Khalif that to stay woke means to not allow “them to brainwash you.” Moreover, to resist brainwashing shows the ways consciousness and fugitivity work in tandem: consciousness creates the mindset in an individual that they have to free themselves from the confines of antiblackness and white supremacy.

“...it’s important for me to understand my purpose in life...” Another segment of Khalif’s Life history is useful in highlighting the theme of consciousness, love, and fugitivity, which I think is important to include following his previous data example. In this section of our conversation, Khalif demonstrated that in order to take care of his self, he has to actively work to reject the negative narratives that frames Black life, specifically the life of Black men and boys.

Coles: In your household was race and racism ever discussed? Like did your parents ever sit down and talk to you?

Khalif: Hell yeah

Coles: What kind of things do they say?

Khalif: Aw man. I am black man. I am-my understanding and how I’m about to interpret this is two different things.

Coles: Okay.

Khalif: Let’s just say I took the good way out of this. Okay. Like I took it and I understood it in a good way. Cause a lot of people they don’t know. Like I’m a young Black man in America. I am in danger and it’s important for me to understand my purpose in life and to know my value. And know that once I step out of the womb, I am a number. And seen as a statistic and it’s up to me to change it if I want to change it. Versus slacking behind, slack behind and be a part of this minority group that’s seen as the devil. That’s seen as hated. That’s seen as can’t accomplish anything but has to depend on white people to define who I am. You know. How I interpret that was okay. Okay I don’t know what the fuck you’re talking about at all. Like what are you talking about like. Hmm?

Following up to his last data example of not letting the U.S. brainwash you, here, Khalif provides a clear example of his active rejection of the brainwashing, his fugitivity. From his understanding, Black people are understood in America as belonging to a “minority group that’s

seen as the devil. That's seen as hated. That's seen as can't accomplish anything but has to depend on white people." While he knows that narrative is so strong, permeating throughout every aspect of U.S. society, his response to the narrative is "I don't know what the fuck you're talking about at all." Khalif's consciousness about this narrative then and his rejection of it allows him to affirm his self in the world as a Black man who is not the devil or needs to depend on white people, which allows him to create a life as a Black boy counter to what society has dictated.

"...know whose tryna take you down and you know how to win." Perhaps one of the most precise examples of navigating antiblackness under the theme consciousness, love, and fugitivity came from Calvin during his *Exit Interview*. As with everyone else, I asked Calvin his thoughts on why he felt that Black youth should engage in learning around antiblackness. Calvin explained:

Calvin: It's important for Black kids to learn about antiblackness to know what they're up for and know what to not get themselves involved in. And also, it's just good to be self-aware because you know, like I said you know what you're up against like you know who's tryna take you down and you know how to win.

Coles: So, you said know who you're up against, know who's tryna take you down, and then you know how to win?

Calvin: Mhm.

Through Calvin, we learn that staying woke or being conscious is primarily about knowing "what you're up against," knowing "who's tryna take you down," and using that information to "know how to win." In order to navigate antiblackness, being woke prompts Black youth to stay attuned to the many ways antiblackness can work to take them down. This awareness then allows Black youth to refuse antiblackness and love themselves fully, which already sets them on the path to winning—a winning that has nothing to do with whiteness. This winning, which is characterized by fugitivity (fleeing the confines of antiblackness), should not be understood as an

eradication of anti-Black racism, but rather persisting through antiblackness while also creating a new way forward through the development of mental and physical spaces outside of antiblackness. Consciousness, love, and fugitivity, is about an existence that works to lessen antiblackness by authoring a liberatory fantasy where antiblackness is not central to Black existence at all.

Authoring Black Futurity

Early on in the project, while working with the students it became clear to me that Black youth constantly engage in a literacy that is connected to using their past and present to compose a future. In other words, the way the students engaged with the world was informed by them constantly navigating the past while also authoring their future. By authoring a Black future, I simply mean the ways the Black youth imagined what the future for their Black life and the greater Black community could and should look like. These ideals of future were often rooted in ways for antiblackness to be lessened or obstructed. The futures that students authored consisted of both real tangible futures and fantasies or rather futures that could and should happen if things such as antiblackness did not exist at all. Authoring their futures served as a major resistance strategy to antiblackness. For one, antiblackness as rooted in violence against Black people works to limit the presence of Blackness and Black people in the future. So, by using their Black literacies to project themselves into the future and to create narratives that support that futurity operates as resistance. As artist and interactive designer Ayodamola Tanimowo Okunseinde (Ayo) noted, “Blackness is being removed from the future,” both physically and representationally (Kuttner, 2017). Ayo explained that physically, “Black bodies are being violently removed from the future through police killings, mass incarceration, and other systems of racial oppression” and representationally, “Black people are either misrepresented or

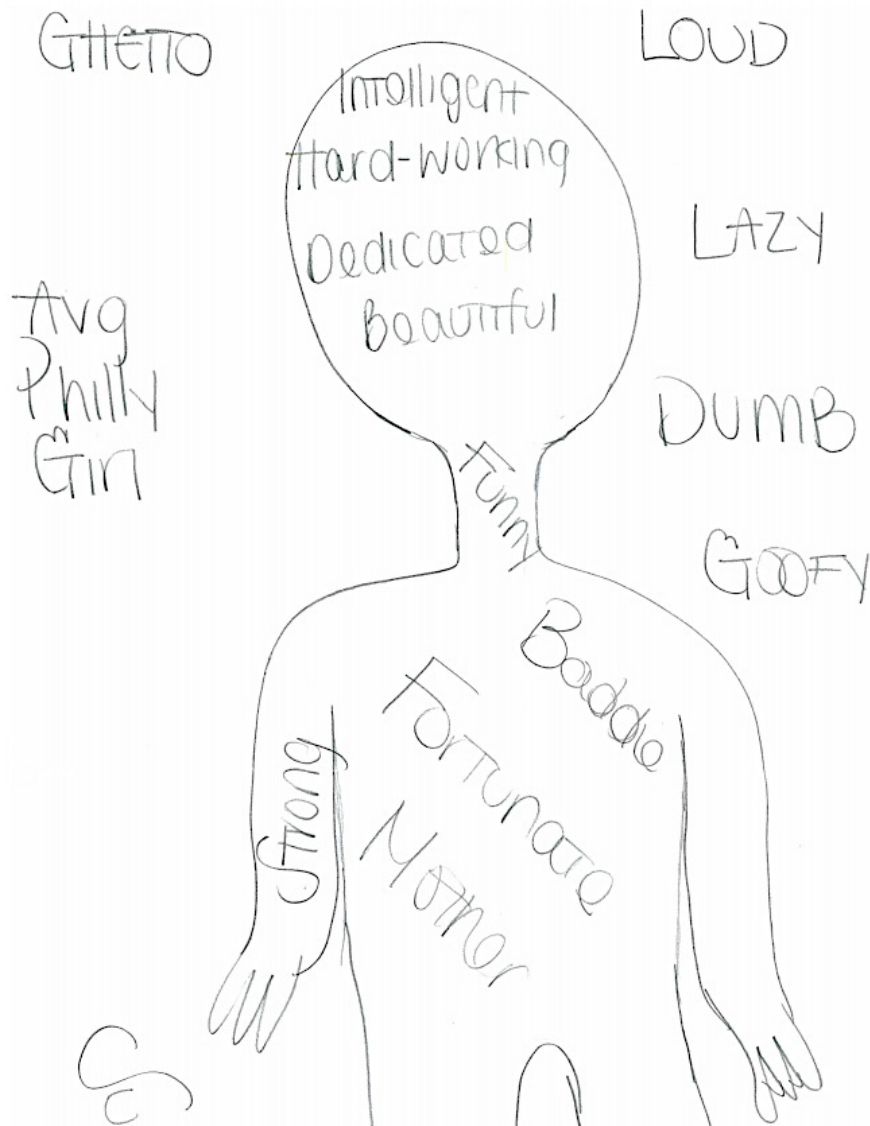
completely unrepresented in popular visions of the future” (Kuttner, 2017). Therefore, for Black youth to actively engage in thinking about and designing a future for themselves and for Blackness at-large is foundational to resisting anti-Black racism. Under this conceptual category of authoring Black futurity, the data speaks to the ways Black youth forecast Blackness into the future. The way the students demonstrated resistance to antiblackness through this conceptual category resulted in three themes emerging. The first theme was decentering the white gaze. The second was centrality and honoring of the Black gaze (society). The final theme was centrality and honoring of the Black gaze (urban school).

Decentering the white gaze. Throughout U.S. (and world) history, whiteness and white people have operated as the standard. This standard positions whiteness and white people as central to the lives of all people across race and space; whiteness has been socially constructed in the U.S. as the blueprint to what it means to be successful, good, and meaningful. As noted within the theme of control and subordination from Research Question 1, white people are socially constructed as superior and any person who is not white, gets constructed as less than or outright inferior depending on how far from whiteness they are (read how close to Blackness they are). Foundational to antiblackness then, is the centrality of whiteness in American life, and more so, measuring Black people against whiteness and white people. As Toni Morrison explained, “As though our lives have no meaning and no depth without the White gaze. And I have spent my entire writing life trying to make sure that the White gaze was not the dominant one in any of my books” (as cited in Paris & Alim, 2017, p. 2). Across the data, students not only documented the ways whiteness works to control and subordinate Black life, but also how the actual perspectives of whiteness (the white gaze) comes to frame how Black people are actually supposed to live, and why this white gaze must be disrupted and decentered. The students

showed through the data that decentering the white gaze, a fierce act of resistance to antiblackness, would be necessary to move forward in any way towards a brighter and Blacker future. Toni Morrison understood the decentering of the white gaze as necessary to discover “boundless creativity, a world of imagination and possibility” (Paris & Alim, 2017, p. 3). When students engaged in authoring Black futurity, across the data the ways they imagined whiteness being de-centered was prevalent and thus crucial to the overall question of resisting antiblackness: whiteness must too be resisted.

“Ghetto, loud, lazy, etc.” Central to our collective explorations of Blackness and antiblackness throughout Black Excellence were our collective explorations of identity. Through our continuous reflections on identity, we were able to stitch together the ways anti-Black racism has worked to frame our existence; a framing that largely works to ignore what Black youth have to say for themselves, how they define who they are. In Sonia’s *Body Map*, we see this disconnect as she juxtaposes her understanding of self with the way she perceives society as having portrayed her Black identity.

Figure 15: Picture: This figure shows a participants *Body Map* artifact



On the outside of her *Body Map*, which is representative of the white gaze and society largely, she listed: Ghetto, Loud, Lazy, Avg Philly Girl, Dumb, and Goofy. On the inside of her body, how she views herself, she listed: Intelligent, Hard-Working, Dedicated, Beautiful, Funny, Baddie (attractive), Fortunate, Mother, and Strong. The white gaze, as demonstrated through Sonia's *Body Map*, causes her to exist in continual conflict with the world in that she is viewed as all things negative other than the positive ways she positions herself. Sonia decenters the white gaze here by rejecting the idea that she as a Black youth is a problem. Words such as

Ghetto, Loud, and Lazy become coded language in an anti-Black society to describe Black people. Sonia's *Body Map* embodies my belief that Black youth are always engaged in critical literacy work, in that in order to persist in an anti-Black world they have to constantly check and analyze who they are versus who the world tells them they are. Sonia demonstrates prime criticality here, one that provides a glimpse of how she navigates antiblackness through decentering the white gaze. What particularly stands out is the first word inside her body (at the top center): Intelligent. Since Blackness is constructed as inferior and underserving because of inferiority, asserting her intelligence reveals Sonia's resistance to antiblackness, specifically its relevance to the theme decentering the white gaze.

"They never showed the Black children who have opportunities..." During our February 27th session (2/27 *Script*) the students and I spent a lot of time talking about stereotypes and how they work to frame the ways society and its institutions interact with Black youth. Specifically, we started to think about the specific platforms that perpetuate these stereotypes. Through this conversation, students pinpointed the ways the white gaze is responsible for this and why not only should the white gaze be decentered, but that it must be staunchly refused. At this point in the conversation of the 2/27 *Script*, I just finished asking the students: What do stereotypes about Black kids do for schools?

Sonia: I feel like, like when you look at movies right on TV, like think of Freedom Writers, like The Great Debaters like movies like that. They portray Black classrooms as a bunch of gang banging broke kids like, it's rare that you see a movie, unless it's a documentary, that's like 'oh my God those black people were awesome. Like that classroom was A 1.' ATL half the kids was going to school, um what else I say, Freedom Writers. What's another movie, Madea, KeKe Palmer in Madea.

Toni: What's the movie when the lawyers would travel everywhere and they were Black?

Anita: The Great Debaters

Toni: That's the opposite

Coles: So you mean more movies like that should be around?

Sonia: But think about it they were in poverty.

Coles: They were still poor

Toni: But you know who the figure was, the male figure was, he was Black. In most movies like that, teacher's aren't Black, they're white.

Sonia: Even though, I see what you saying, and that was a, but as far as they still portrayed them as poor Black kids tryna get up. They never showed the Black children who have opportunities, you always gotta be fighting for something in the movies.

Coles: Why do Americans, why do white people, what do people benefit from seeing movies like that? Where Black kids are portrayed as struggling?

Toni: "Oh I feel bad for them, slavery happened a long time ago, you should just let it go. But 9/11! Is a sad day where we lost our heroes, but slavery is over, you guys gotta get past it." Fuck outta here.

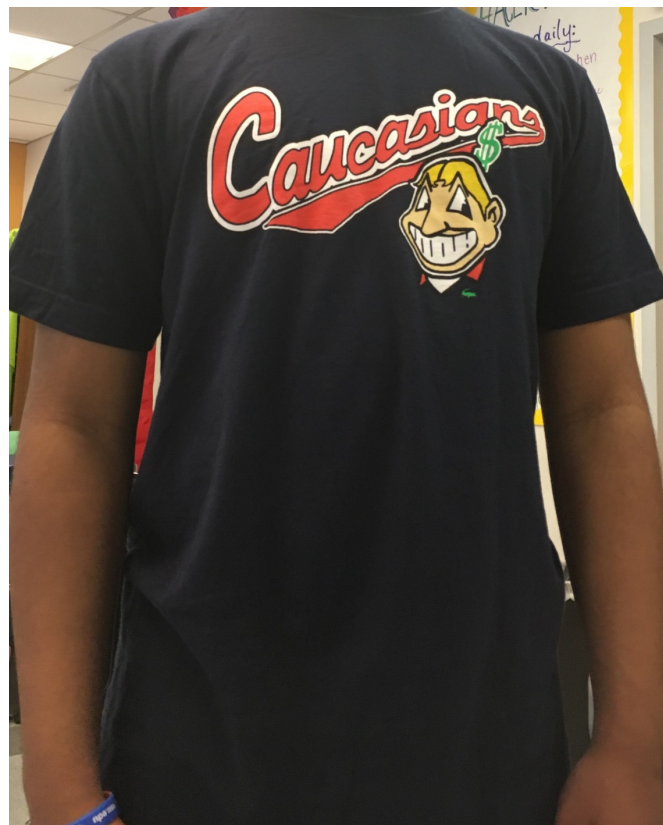
Anita: I agree with Toni.

Through this group exchange we see students naming and detailing how movies centered on Black youth are filled with stereotypes (ex. gang banging broke kids) about Black youth culture, stemming from the white gaze. At one point, Toni attempts to highlight a movie that centers a main Black character and overall a Black cast, however Sonia quickly reminds us that "they still portrayed them as poor Black kids tryna get up. They never showed the Black children who have opportunities, you always gotta be fighting for something in the movies." We learn from this data example that the white gaze imagines Black youth in a continual state of despair, always fighting and never taking time to enjoy their life in a way that is not in relation to whiteness. Sonia's pushing back against these movies (including those that center Black figures) is an attempt to decenter the white gaze by rejecting the narratives these movies reveal regarding Black people. Toni joins in on this decentering of the white gaze, when she essentially articulates her interpretation of how the white gaze might look if it could be reduced to a single statement. At the end of this, when she states, "Fuck outta here," she is dismissing this white gaze that intentionally devalues Black ways of knowing.

"Caucasians" Considering that we engaged in ethnography, the data encompassed much more than the formal data sources outlined in my methodology. Especially with literacy being central to this work, the physical literacies of students played a role in our overall project. During

one of our after-school sessions, I noticed that Calvin was wearing a shirt that said “Caucasians.” What intrigued me about the shirt was that it was presented in a way to mirror sports teams such as the Redskins of the National Football League, the Cleveland Redskins of Major League Baseball, and countless sports teams across the country, that use Native American’s as a mascot. On Calvin’s shirt, opposed to a racist caricature of a Native American serving as a mascot, it is replaced with a white male. The feather emerging from the back of the head on most Native American mascot caricatures is replaced here with a green dollar sign.

Figure 16: Picture: This figure shows a participants T-Shirt with the words “Caucasians”



The resistance to antiblackness here shows up in Calvin wearing this representation that essentially works to rewrite the objectification of Native Americans by instead objectifying whites, specifically the white male. The white gaze here is not only decentered, but it is flipped. Removing oneself from the gaze of whiteness allows us to see the ways in which white

supremacy and capitalism become one to structure American life. As America currently stands, the objectification and marginalization of whiteness in such a way does not exist and due to the legacy of white racism and supremacy may never exist. However, through Calvin's adorning of this shirt we get a glimpse of a fantasy for a future where whites are objectified, marginal, and powerless: rendered to mere mascots or constructed as a distant memory. In a future predicated on Black liberatory fantasy, perhaps as this shirt, white people feel the material effects of being rendered invisible.

"I learn to much about white people." Another major way that students worked to decenter the white gaze, was to decenter it from their learning in the urban school. Just as in society, whiteness has always operated as the status quo of America, thus schools are centered in whiteness and more over white supremacy. The White supremacy is demonstrated in school knowledge being centered in white ways of knowing and by the myriad of ways youth of color, particularly Black youth are marginalized in schools. While speaking with Calvin during his *Lifer History*, we discussed his view of a quality education and the difference of a quality education for Black youth and non-Black youth. The following conversation followed:

Coles: Let's, let's kind of move here. Cause you kind of I mean basically that's where we are. But when you, based off your definition of quality education do you think that's different for Black youth versus white youth or any other youth really?

Calvin: Quality education? Well I think quality education should be the same for everyone

Coles: So it should be the same?

Calvin: It should be the same, but it's like you gotta, you gotta, um. Your curriculum has to be catered towards whoever you're going to teach. If you're going to teach white kids, then teach them about European history and just like we learn about European history. And they need to learn Black history and what it's like. Or get a glimpse of what it's like being Black so they can understand and don't grow up being ignorant. I feel like we learn enough. I learn too much about white people.

Here, Calvin explains that students of all races should be learning equally about each other's history and culture. He conceptualizes a quality education then, as white kids learning Black

history in the same way Black kids learn European history. In this imagining of a future or what education could and should look like, whiteness is decentered and has to share space. Currently, from Calvin's perspective, white kids are not given "a glimpse of what it's like being Black." On the other hand, since schools are Eurocentric, Black kids are all too familiar with glimpses of white life. The significance here is that Calvin is explaining that white kids need to learn about Black history "so they can understand and don't grow up being ignorant." It seems that Calvin is imagining a time where if white kids learned more about Black life, anti-Black racism might be lessened, not eradicated. What might a future look like where white students actually learned deeply about Blackness and Black history? Ending his response with "I learn to much about white people," we get a clear picture of his authoring of Black futurity. Through asserting that he learns to much about white people, Calvin is calling for a future where this overlearning stops; a future where whiteness is no longer at the center of all learning.

"He can say he know somebody...but he can't say oh I feel you..." Across the data the theme decentering the white gaze was demonstrated mainly through students' conceptualizing of educational spaces and the ways whiteness is over represented via the curriculum or teachers. As a result, when authoring Black futurity, it came to critiquing that over presence of whiteness as a way to imagine an educational experience otherwise. In other words, authoring a Black future where whiteness was marginal in many ways came in the form of the youth critically analyzing the ways whiteness takes up unnecessary space now as a way to implicitly say that for things to be better it can no longer take up so much space. While conducting Sonia's *Life History*, she began to discuss that the white teachers in her school are not capable of deeply connecting with her on issues that she experiences in society as a Black person. While discussing barriers to education Sonia shared, "And then I feel like a barrier is that we don't really have nobody to

relate to. It ain't too many black teachers in school besides you, besides I don't even know who else. I don't even know." There is a lot to say about whiteness here and the need for it to be decentered in the future for Black youth, considering that Sonia could not think of Black teachers. She went on to explain:

Sonia: I'm just like it's just certain things I feel like Uptown, schools over all just don't have like, you don't have, whereas I could say as a Black person, I have experienced racism or I have experienced some kind of some kind of act of prejudice against me. Mr. Case can't say that. Mr. Bowman can't say that. He can say he's seen it. He can say he know somebody who felt bad about it, but he can't say, 'oh I feel you cause I been through that or I understand what you're saying because I been through that.' He can't say-he can't say that. He could only say from another person's point of view. So, it's like, I feel like whereas if I tell my mom, 'mom look what happened to me today' she could be like 'I understand where you coming from cause that might have happened to me' or something like that. So, it's like, that's the only barriers I feel that Uptown has that we don't have anybody to deeply connect in the everyday instruction.

By explaining that she cannot currently come to school and engage in a conversation with a teacher who can say "Oh I feel you cause I been through that or I understand what you're saying because I been through that," Sonia is implicitly saying that there needs to be teachers who can connect with her. In authoring a Black future, the teacher demographics of urban schools would look drastically different, as there would not be a majority of white teachers. For example, in a Black future, a school with a majority Black student body would also have a faculty and staff that is majority Black. It has been widely documented that Black students desire teachers that can connect with their lived experiences, this means that white teachers would need to be made marginal to the education of Black students. This does not mean that they need to be completely erased (as Black teachers were erased from classrooms post *Brown v. Board of Education*), but it does mean that they should not be centered.

"You didn't hear about it because it's not about you." While speaking with Sonia during her *Semi I*, she began to explain how there is such a thing as being educated on

knowledge that is not considered knowledge by the (white) teachers in her school or by the larger project of U.S. schooling. To gather more insights into the ways she was thinking about what gets labeled as official knowledge versus unofficial knowledge, I asked her to explain what it means to be educated or to receive an education.

Sonia: Yeah. Like education to me is a, education to me is – you could be book smart, street smart, you could be wise and educated like that. Like you could be educated. Like I feel like that's another misconception. People think you only educated if you go to school. But that's not true. You could be – I know a lot of people that's educated within they community. Like educated. You could be educated in politics and not never had went to college. Like that's my dad. Well my dad was educated. He knew Philadelphia laws like somebody else would know their ABCs or something like that. Like he never went to school. My dad didn't even have his high school diploma. Education to me if I had to if I had to give a definition for education, education is what the individual takes and likes keeps it. Like mentally. So, like if you, if you like in the streets. And then if you take that. And you just learn 'em and that's what you passionate about you educated in the streets. If you go to school and you go to school for a year. You educated in school. If you take life and like take experiences, you educated and wisdom. So, it's like, you could be educated in a whole lot of things other than books.

Coles: Right

Sonia: So, I mean people be sleeping on that too.

Coles: I like that how you said that um experiences. Let me ask you this based off that what you just said. You can talk about your school, but then schools in general. Do you think schools value that? Like other types of education so like the experiences that you bring to school or like your peers bring to school like your life and all that? Like your parents' wisdom and all that?

Sonia: No. I think that they accept it, but they don't, that's not valid. Like I feel like in school, like especially here, if it's not educational, they don't, they don't it's not it's not seen as like the end all end all. When people like, like for example if you say, if like I don't even know like situations even even even current event situations that you might be educated on, they [teachers] like 'oh where you get that from?' Oh, I just know. Like that's just something that I been through. Like I just know. 'Oh, but that's not, that's not. How could you really say?' Like even if we could say stuff that we know. Like for instance, somebody had brought up the thing about the Timberland scandal. And the Timberland man had said the tree on the thing was from somewhere like some people he said that in one of the classes. Somebody said that in one of the classes. And they was like 'where you get that from?' we like 'cause we educated. Like we just know.' Like that's –like if –like in the black. Like for instance in the black community you educated about like discrimination. Like that's what you know. Like we know about that kind of stuff. So, I feel like they the teachers be sleeping on it.

Coles: It's not like a book [laughter]

Sonia: Yeah like that's not something. That's not in the encyclopedia. We know that like, that was said. They be like 'Oh no, well we didn't hear about it.' You didn't hear about it because it's not about you. Like what you mean. Like I hate when people say that.

In this example, Sonia breaks down the various ways that people can be educated beyond what teachers consider the “end all end all” or the knowledge that will lead to the most successful outcome, which is most often imagined by schools as being connected to white ways of knowing. She begins with a narrative of her dad who “didn’t even have his high school diploma,” but who “knew Philadelphia laws like somebody else would know their ABCs.” Through her father, who she mentioned was in prison in Research Question 1, we get a glimpse behind the systemic curtain. We learn how not being educated via traditional schooling—which is centered in white ways of knowing—despite actually having knowledge can further marginalize Black people in society. For example, how might Sonia’s dad not having the Eurocentric stamp of approval that he finished the American high school, have contributed to him being systemically excluded from opportunities that eventually resulted in his imprisonment? Sonia explained that people be sleeping on or overlooking and downplaying this kind of knowledge, because it is not book knowledge. Sonia seems to imagine a world where both street knowledge and book knowledge could be equally valued, or at the very least that non-book knowledge could be considered. After asking her whether schools value other knowledge, Sonia provided an example of how teachers downplay knowledge that Black students have just because they are not aware of it. In addition to the Timberland scandal, she specifically talked about how “in the black community you educated about like discrimination.” While this entire excerpt is important to understanding decentering whiteness in relation to resisting antiblackness, the significance is revealed when Sonia stated, “You didn’t hear about it because it’s not about you.” Sonia is saying that white teachers and white people largely may not hear or know about

every single thing that Black people do and that that is perfectly fine. The statement reveals that Black people can possess knowledge that they have gathered in their communities that was not learned in a school by white teachers. As the youth author a Black future, Sonia contributes in this excerpt by adding that white people do not have to know, understand, or affirm something for it to be valid.

“They aint stoppin me though...” As discussed at several points throughout my dissertation, our project ran parallel to the 2016 Presidential Election. What was particularly prevalent were conversations on the campaigning of Donald Trump, to him being elected as the 45th President, to the aftermath of that presidency. Since we were engaging in critical literacy to explore Blackness and antiblackness, the politics of Trump (and the Americans who supported him) served as a prime example of antiblackness from the perspective of many of the students. During Raheem’s *Life History*, as with all of the other students, I asked him what barriers he perceived as being in his way to getting where he wants in life. At first, he mentioned that he did not really see barriers, but then explained that the world itself might be a barrier. This part of his *Life History* went as follows:

Coles: But when you just think about life in general what, do you think that there might be possible barriers that would stop you from getting to what you want?

Raheem: Um not really. So, like just this world. You know like Trump and all that. I don't know. I feel like white people feel like they about to get some more power. And I don't know. They ain't stopping me though cause I'm still gone do me. I'm still gone do great. I don't care about nobody else.

Coles: Right, right.

Raheem: So yeah. That would be the only thing. Like them trying to bring me down, but I'm still gone do what I gotta do.

In this example, Raheem immediately connects Trump to whiteness and power: Trump becomes an embodiment of white power. When Raheem says, “I feel like white people feel like they about to get some more power,” he is explaining that with the election of Trump, white people are

feeling invigorated around racism. While the students' racial realist perspectives revealed that they understand racism has always been here and is here to stay, Raheem reveals that the ways racism is displayed can heighten at various moments in history. In this moment, he sees the potential for white racism to heighten and become more visible as being directly prompted by the election of Trump. Despite him positioning "this world," "Trump and all that," and the power "white people feel like they about to get," as barriers to his future, he simultaneously rejects them as barriers to his future, he decenters them. This rejection of whiteness is evident in his statement, "They ain't stopping me though cause I'm still gone do me. I'm still gone do great." Raheem provides a stance that directly highlights the theme of decentering the white gaze as authoring Black futurity, by deeming whiteness and all its embodiments (such as Trump) as irrelevant to his future. While we know whiteness itself will remain, the significance in this is the resistance to white power, continuously composing life in ways that work to decenter the white gaze.

"What can he do? Build a wall?" Khalif discussed Trump during his *Life History* interview as it relates to decentering the white gaze as well.

Coles: What kind of road blocks do you see potentially blocking your success?

Khalif: Khalif

Coles: So only you? Nobody, you don't think there's other – you think you're your worst

Khalif: My worst enemy

Coles: Worst enemy. Okay. Is that because?

Khalif: To be honest, that's how I feel. Especially with black people. A lot of black people afraid of Donald Trump. I feel as though he is nothing to be afraid of at all. Nothing he can do to us that hasn't already been done. We have been through everything. We started off as kings and queens. And then we lost everything when we became slaves. The bottom of the pit and then they put us under the pit. And then we rose back up. And we fought. Like right now, we still in the middle of this war and it just seem like it's not. You know. What can he do? Build a wall. Take away welfare. What's that gonna make us do, just grind more and get more money like he can't do nothing that hasn't already been done. No man on earth cannot do nothing that's not already been done do. The worst thing that can be done in life is me making decisions to not reach my full potential.

For me not to say I want better for myself, my niece and nephews, my kids and my future. Other than that, there's not a thing a man can do to me that I cannot stop.

Khalif notes, "A lot of black people afraid of Donald Trump." He then rejects any ideals that people should be afraid of Trump through his explanation that there is "Nothing he can do to us that hasn't already been done." This is significant because Khalif is acknowledging that anti-Black racism again is here to stay, but that Black people can begin to focus on other things (while not losing sight of how antiblackness frames their life) that can allow them to ensure their presence in the future. When referring to Trump, Khalif stated, "What can he do? Build a wall," which is to say that we know that whiteness will always ensure that racism is enacted, but that does not mean that Black people have to center these enactments. I see this excerpt from Khalif as a call for Black people to develop ways to author themselves and the Black community into the future in ways that are neither dictated or restricted by whiteness; the white gaze must be decentered.

Centrality & honoring of the black gaze (society). One of the most enlightening findings that came from this project that was evident early on, was that in the midst of antiblackness, Black people have always focused on their selves and their communities as points of guidance to make their worlds and the world a better place. In other words, centering and honoring Black ways of being and knowing has always served as a way to author the Black community out of the confines of an anti-Black society. I do not intend to communicate that Black people are able to exist in ways that eradicate antiblackness, but that they have and continue to exist in ways that are rooted in such deep affirmations of Blackness that they do not allow antiblackness to consume them fully. Black people can create life in such a way that lessens the effects of antiblackness, by focusing on Blackness. In essence, where there is pain, there is even far more joy. Living in a world that is centered on the white gaze means that one of

the most effective acts of resistance is actively re-authoring the world to center and honor the Black gaze. Centering Blackness is not oppressive as Blackness does not serve a violent or oppressive purpose. When it comes to the youth authoring Black futurity, centering and honoring the Black gaze was paramount. The following examples of this theme show the myriad of ways the youth worked to utilize the centrality and honoring of Blackness to propel them into a better future.

“...we always *find joy in everything*...” The overall project with the youth was one that immediately proved to be centered in joy and love, which I now know comes from the fact that we centered and honored Blackness in every aspect of the work. As a result of the centrality of Blackness, a space of joy and love was bound to emerge. In Raheem and Calvin’s *Imagining Black Futures* artifact, we get a glimpse of the ways the literacies of Calvin reveal the possibilities of what can happen when Blackness is centered.

Raheem: What makes you so excited about being Black?

Calvin: What makes me most excited about being black is the fact that we as a people are so resilient and we always find joy in everything and just the culture, just black culture.

Raheem: How would you describe the current climate in America for Black youth?

Calvin: I would describe it as, it’s like, it weighs itself out. So it’s good and bad if you think about it. It’s bad for the simple fact that Donald Trump is president and we have a lot of stuff going on in our community like microaggressions, antiblackness, homophobia, this that and the forth. I think it’s also good, it’s a good climate for Black kids because we’re starting to be more seen out in the media, we’re being more represented like Moonlight and Get Out.

In response to Raheem’s first question, we immediately understand that in Calvin’s foundational conceptions of Blackness he defines it in a way that reveals the way he both honors and centers it as both an identity and a culture. When he says, “we as a people are so resilient,” it can be understood that the fuel for the resilience stems from the Black gaze, a gaze that, despite “stuff going on in our community like microaggressions, antiblackness, homophobia” still works to ensure that Black people survive into the future in joyous ways. What the Black gaze does is

allows Black people to focus on the things that they can control, which is centering and honoring everything that uplifts and affirms them culturally. The Black gaze is not about moving through the world as if whiteness and the white gaze is not still at play, hence Calvin's mentioning of Donald Trump, but it is an intentional decision to focus inward on all things Black. For example, while there are countless movies that depict life through a white gaze, Calvin chooses to focus on a future where groundbreaking movies depicted through the Black gaze (e.g. *Moonlight* and *Get Out*) are the ones that we as a community center and honor.

“...black people living their everyday lives carefree...” One of the major ways the data revealed the theme of centrality and honoring of the Black gaze was through the students putting an emphasis on Black people affirming themselves and enjoying their Blackness. During Calvin's *Exit Interview*, we discussed the naming of the group Black Excellence, as I did with every other participant. Calvin provided a take on the naming of the group that really highlights the centrality of Blackness and essentially how the concept of Black Excellence serves as an authoring of Black futurity in itself.

Coles: So now you all decided that the group name would be Black Excellence and I think Sasha you know when she created the group she sort of talked that with you all and that's what it was. In your definition what is Black Excellence, how would you define it?
Calvin: To me, Black Excellence is just being carefree and living who you are, rather you boujie or ghetto, whether you boujetto or sophistiratchet or sophisticated or ratchet. I feel like Black Excellence is doing what you want to do and striving for your goal, whether it be a big goal or small goal. I just feel like Black Excellence is Black people living their everyday lives carefree and just loving one another.
Coles: Just loving one another, okay.
Calvin: Or like just contributing to help another Black person or Black child's future.

Calvin begins his explanation of Black Excellence by defining Blackness without boundaries.

Calvin sees Black Excellence as not exclusive to a specific type of Black identity, but rather all encompassing, “boujie or ghetto, whether you boujetto or sophistiratchet or sophisticated or ratchet.” In a sense Calvin is saying Black Excellence, has nothing or at least should have

nothing to do with social or economic status, education level, etc., but that Black Excellence is simply about living out one's Blackness without a care in the world. In many ways, Black people are not provided the privilege of being carefree and living who they are (given the white gaze) as Calvin explained, so in this example I see a call for a Black present and a Black future where Black people exist freely in the vastness of Blackness, and this vastness is honored. The most important component of this centering of the Black gaze is that it is not measured by whiteness at all, hence whiteness or white people not being mentioned in Calvin's statements. The centrality of Blackness begins and ends with Black people "just loving one another."

"Go off, we matter." During our March 30th after school session (*3/30 Script*), I wanted to engage students in a collective freestyle or improvisation around Blackness. The students and I often watched spoken word pieces together so I wanted to see if they could come up with a rhythmic freestyle that articulated their thoughts on being Black. In many ways, our after-school sessions severed as freestyle sessions within themselves, considering that topics and ideas would be thrown out either by myself or the students and we would all chime in. There was a rhythm and a cadence to our group. For the purpose of the paper, I will break the freestyle up to highlight the various voices speaking. Unfortunately, the script of the freestyle will not do it justice, but the words are relevant in working to understand the ways the students came to center and honor Blackness as a resistance strategy in authoring Black futurity.

Sonia:

Years ago we was Negros

Now we presidents and CEO's

Anita:

Picking crops, nonstop

Yo, everyday we was on the block

Maya:

It's not a block, it's a crop

Calvin:

Yea we CEOs, yea we running shit

And if you ain't with the movement you can get hit

Toni:

Oooo, wait, caught me off guard, shit. Aye

Izayah:

Black Excellence

Maya:

What, what

All:

Black excellence

Black excellence

Maya:

And we even had a Black mothafu- president

All:

Black excellence

Black excellence

Toni:

I said yo, what's really good

People really be on our wood

Claiming that they created everything

Pause. What you do? Nothing

Yo we can do anything that we want to do

[Group Laughter]

Calvin:

Black boys

Black joy

Black girls

Black magic

Toni:

Black love

Black everything

Black pride

That's love

Go off

We matter

Go off

We matter

We matter

We matter

I see the overall nature of this freestyle as one rooted in centering and honoring the Black gaze.

When Calvin said, "Yea we CEOs, yea we running shit. And if you ain't with the movement you can get hit," he is saying that regardless of what non-Blacks think about Black people, they are surviving and persisting in this anti-Black world. Moreover, if you attempt to halt this survival

and persistence “you can get hit,” whether literally or figuratively. Considering all of the data that has been outlined thus far, when the students talk about being CEO’s and when Maya mentions a Black president, I do not see that as them speaking to post-racial narratives or as ignoring the presence and effects of anti-Black racism, but rather as a refusal to actively center those things. Instead, the students work to center Blackness. The students here reveal that it is okay to center and honor the fact that there was a Black president, without putting an asterisk on the statement denoting that whiteness still reigns supreme. Izayah jumps in on the beat and says “Black excellence,” which eventually becomes the hook (chorus) of the freestyle. As discussed previously, Black excellence in itself for the students represented an authoring of Black futurity, a resistance, in that their conceptions of the term centered Blackness in a way that resisted antiblackness. In this freestyle we see all the students coming together to assert the humanity of Blackness and to center that humanity. By ending the freestyle with “we matter we matter, we matter,” Toni is in direct conversation with her early statement “Claiming that they created everything. Pause. What you do? Nothing.” Her assertion that Black people matter is a proclamation that white people did not create everything. This collective resistance to antiblackness projects Blackness into the future by letting us know that “we can do anything that we want to do.”

“Don’t tell me I can’t say nigga.” Khalif provides an example of how he imagines Blackness being centered in regards to Black cultural expression in school. Considering the cultural mismatch between teachers and students (Black students, white teachers) it is not surprising that teachers would not always understand the ways the Black youth express themselves—teachers intentionally and unintentionally ignore the Black gaze in the urban school. Unfortunately, this misunderstanding is what often prompts teachers to

disproportionately discipline Black students, resulting in their eventual push-out. Black youth have the right to express themselves in ways that are familiar to them that white teachers should not attempt to regulate. While speaking with Khalif during his *Life History* he talked about the ways a good teacher of Black students must understand the culture—at the very least be willing to learn.

Coles: So now you know obviously there's tons of Black kids here right. But a lot of white teachers. So, in your opinion, what do you think makes a teacher a good teacher of Black students vs a bad teacher to Black students? Like what's that difference?

Khalif: Their understanding the process. Like that level of understanding.

Coles: Like explain that.

Khalif: Don't tell me I can't say Nigga. You don't have the right to say that. It's nothing you can say. Cause if you gone tell me I can't say Nigga. I can't say – Nigga is making you feel uncomfortable.

Coles: But it's not making you feel uncomfortable is what you're saying?

Khalif: Yeah, I can say nigga. I know the origins of it. I know the roots of it. That that's my property to say that. It's not your – now it might not be fully professional to say it you know or in good manners. But I have every right to say it. You can't tell me I can't say that. If you do then I feel as though that's another thing you taking away from me. I don't like that. I feel as though the way how I talk to my peers, it's a certain level that you should let go and It's a certain level that you should put a stop to it and say 'no this is how you should go about it'. You should not try to stop everything I contribute to this community and try to shift it into what you think is appropriate and not appropriate. Cause then you're disrespecting me, disrespecting my character and everything that I stand for.

Coles: And your culture right, like being Black.

R: Yeah. I don't like when I'm in school and it's like what we do is play fight. That's our thing. That's our thing. If you don't want that that's cool. That's completely understandable. When I say 'yo Nigga' that's my thing. That's my language, that's how I was raised. You know. Now if I walk around 'Yo them bitches over there'. It's like don't call girls that. Come on they females. Completely understandable. Now we're talking. You know. But overall trying to change me and what what's inside me. Basically, tryna take my black card away from me. No! No!

Coles: So basically, telling you like the way you are outside of school you can't be in school. Which is not necessarily good cause then your changing yourself.

Khalif: Yeah you killing the culture. No. I don't approve. Not even a little bit.

In this example, Khalif explains how he regularly uses the word Nigga and that he knows the origin and meaning behind it. When he stated, "Don't tell me I can't say Nigga. You don't have the right to say that," he is calling for Blackness to be centered in school, especially at his school

where the student population is predominately Black. The word Nigga has been adopted by many Black people as a word representing comradery and even endearment. However, due to the controversy of the word, particularly as it relates to how it is understood through the white gaze, white teachers telling Black students that they cannot use it creates a restriction on Blackness that is not necessary from Khalif's perspective. One might ask, does Black youth saying the word Nigga in their casual conversations prevent them from learning? The answer I would offer would be no. I want to be clear that I do not present this to debate whether or not Black youth should be allowed to say the word Nigga, because they are already saying it. I present this example because in order for Blackness to be centered and honored, whites (white teachers in this example) must confront their discomfort about the Black gaze, such as Black language. For example, Khalif said, "I can't say – Nigga is making you feel uncomfortable." Centering Blackness means that in the future Black people will not allow the discomfort of whites to limit how they engage in their Blackness. As Khalif explained, when it comes to Black culture, "it's a certain level that you should let go," while referring to white teachers. The refusal to allow whiteness to regulate Blackness becomes ever clear when Khalif stated, "But overall trying to change me and what what's inside me. Basically, tryna take my black card away from me. No! No!" When it comes to resisting antiblackness, and authoring Black futurity, "killing the culture" is not to be accepted any longer. Instead, schools that educate Black children must learn to center Blackness or rather let Black kids lead and do the work of centering and honoring Blackness by simply existing.

"Honestly, I would sacrifice myself..." In this example from Khalif's *Life History*, he offers perhaps one of the most compelling narratives of authoring Black futurity via the theme of centrality and honoring of the Black gaze. While interviewing students about their lives, I was

sure to spend time exploring the goals that they have for themselves. While I did not ask about goals in relation to race, since race is such a major aspect in the lives of Black youth however, race and goals appeared to be inextricably linked, especially with Khalif. The following conversation reveals how he saw the centrality and honoring of Blackness—particularly centering his Black self—as composing what he perceives as a Black future that is way past due.

Khalif: Let's talk about long term goals though. Long term goals. I want to be I want to be an example. Like role model for the culture you know. I want to basically reach out and help like a lot of younger and like people my age whatever. But just help them out that mindset. You know.

Coles: And what is the mindset? Just like if they can't. since they're black they can't achieve?

Khalif: Yeah, you can't really do much. You stuck to what you know and that's it.

Coles: Yeah just change that. Yeah.

Khalif: Yeah, I would love to change that. That's really one of the things like honestly, I would give up my soul if Black people overall would get that concept as if like anything was possible. Honestly, I would sacrifice myself for the overall purpose for the Black culture to overall evolve. I feel like that would be more important than me, you know what I mean? I think if Black people as a whole just took one huge. Just one. Just one huge step. It would change everything. Everything. I think honestly when I say everything, I don't think it would be one thing on earth that wouldn't be affected by Black people. You know. That's just sad to say. It's just not there. But I just feel like we are gon' get there one day. But when it happens, they gone know.

Coles: Yeah cause everything is gonna

Khalif: They gon' know. They gon' go 'oh shit.' Like return of the Jedi. Return of the Niggas. [laughter]

Coles: [laughter] Did you say return of the Niggas?

Khalif: Yeah. Like we back son!

Khalif shares that his long-term goals are centered essentially on uplifting the Black community.

When he stated, "I want to be I want to be an example. Like role model for the culture you know," he is sharing that he wants to take all of the knowledge that he has gained as a Black youth and share it with those who will be coming of age in this world after him, and even with those who are currently coming of age alongside him. Khalif's long term goal is rooted in selflessness. For him, the centrality and honoring of Blackness through making sure that all Black people understand their worth and then change the world is paramount to him. He

articulated this clearly when he stated, “I would give up my soul if black people overall would get that concept as if like anything was possible.” Khalif presents a liberatory fantasy where he is willing to literally give up his life, his soul, so that the Black community could take “one huge step.” When he said, They [white people] gon’ go ‘oh shit.’ Like return of the Jedi. Return of the Niggas,” we get a moment to imagine a world where, after Khalif sacrifices himself, across the globe Blackness becomes central and everything becomes affected by it. The significance and relevance of this example to authoring Black futurity is that “it would change everything.” According to Khalif, if he was able to sacrifice himself in order for Blackness to be centered, there would not be “one thing on earth that wouldn’t be affected by Black people.” What might this world look like? How can Black youth continue to critically engage in literacy to push the boundaries of what a Black future could look like? Khalif’s ability to resist antiblackness in such an imaginative way, such a liberatory way, demonstrates the dynamic ways the literacy lives of Black youth are narratives that urgently deserve to be told and heard.

Centrality & honoring of the black gaze (urban school). While conceptualizing this project with youth, I did not imagine that the lack of Black teachers in their urban school would be such a huge component of how the students thought about antiblackness. While research has addressed how *Brown v. Board of education* is directly responsible for Black teachers being pushed out of classrooms (Fairclough, 2004; Hudson & Holmes, 1994; Tillman, 2004), there is a considerable amount of room for research to examine that legal case, in addition with other related policies and actions that resulted in this Black teacher shortage through the lens of antiblackness. In this larger project, the lack of Black teachers is significant because children grow up thinking that white teachers (the white gaze), especially white women, are the only people capable of disseminating knowledge and the only ones capable of being nurturing. Black

women and Black men (the Black gaze) become people who lack both intelligence and the capability to be nurturers. Given this, urban schools serving a majority of Black students that have a teaching staff that is predominately white, works as one of the primary foundations of anti-Black racism in American schooling. Under this theme of centrality and honoring of the Black gaze (urban school), under the larger conceptual category of authoring Black futurity, the data examples reveal how Black youth imagine Black centered schooling environments—largely fueled by Black teachers—as crucial to their ideals of Black futurity.

“...we as a black community need to like learn and be motivated...” Much of the data around the centering of Blackness in school focused on the fact that while whites may be able to share academic content, there are limits to how much they can do that goes beyond academics. This is not about whether white teachers should teach Black students, but I am providing evidence that there are major limits to their teaching that are not measurable in typical standards of teacher effectiveness. While speaking with Sasha during her *Semi I*, in our discussion around quality education, she talked about the lack of Black teachers as lessening the quality of education for Black students.

Coles: We kind of talked about this before, but based off our new conversations, how do you think race plays a role in like quality of education?

Sasha: In school? Oh, I think it plays a huge role. I think that um like just what I was saying about the whole Black teachers teaching, like black teachers teaching history.

Coles: Yeah. Yeah.

Sasha: Would be very different from a white teacher teaching history because they can only go off of what the text book says. I feel like

Coles: Not their personal experience?

Sasha: Yeah, not their personal experience. Like I feel like whenever like whenever we get a Black teacher inside of the school like Mr. Shannon.

Coles: How many do you have now?

Sasha: I don't have any Black teachers.

Coles: But one, Mr. Shannon. He's 9th grade?

Sasha: No, Mr. Shannon is not my teacher. He's, I think he's 8th or 9th. But he was my study hall teacher for a while. And he would talk to the class like even though he was like really annoying.

[Both Sasha and Coles laugh]

Sasha: He just was like ‘we as a black community need to like learn and be motivated’. He was putting on all these motivational videos and even though it was annoying. It was kind of like a white teacher don’t care. They come in and let us talk or whatever. But he just was like ‘y’all don’t get it.’ And I kind of get what he was saying even though it was annoying. It was kind of like he cares like. I just feel like they care because they know where we were coming from. Even though we may not have all came from a struggle, we all are a minority.

Sasha begins her discussion of the difference between Black teachers and white teachers and how it relates to quality by noting that a white teacher can only reference a textbook, but a Black teacher can reference a textbook plus their lived experiences to connect with students. The centering and honoring of the Black gaze becomes important, because no other gaze has the ability to engage in authentic affirmations of Black life. Black children in urban schools do not often encounter Black teachers who are able to connect with them beyond an academic subject. Considering what has been revealed about antiblackness thus far, it is super important that Black youth see a Black adult telling them to keep pushing through the world and stay motivated, despite the world not wanting that to happen—despite antiblackness. While in this example Sasha is referencing study hall, it is significant because she says that white teachers “come in and let us talk or whatever,” signaling that they’re not invested in a similar way as a Black teacher. One should not expect this investment by white teachers to materialize, since white teachers do not have the lived experience of being Black. In essence, putting yourself in one shoes is not the same as ever actually having to live in those shoes. So even though as Sasha noted, “we may not have all came from a struggle,” she stands by the fact that the Black gaze is needed in school.

“...they’re better teachers for every race across the board...” In a world where Blackness is conceptualized as inherently bad, Black students going to school every day and not seeing Black teachers works to further perpetuate that social ideal. If schools are considered as *the* places of knowledge, yet it is rare to see a Black teacher in these spaces, then the conception

of Blackness as inferior becomes perpetuated and Black youth become complicit in having a majority of white teachers, because why would they expect anything otherwise? During Calvin's *Life History*, while discussing the demographics of the teaching staff, he began to talk about a Black female teacher at Uptown and how "it's almost like having a family member." The conversation continued:

Calvin: I feel like the white teachers that they do hire here, they're very young and inexperienced to me. I feel like it's a lot of old, it's a lot of middle aged Black teachers that wanted to teach at inner city schools, but don't have the opportunities just for the simple fact that their education gets looked over because of the young white college students, fresh out of college. Looking for experience. I feel like they need to go back and get more experience like with just substituting. Just being a student teacher even though they had to only go through that during college. I just feel like I really wish I could see more black teachers cause it would, I feel like the learning environment would be better. And I feel like even though it's Latino and white kids, I just feel like Black people just in general, I feel like Black people just in general see themselves represented in Black people.

Coles: And there's white and Latino kids here, but it's 94% Black.

Calvin: Yeah, I feel like if you were to have Black teachers too, I feel like. It was like a study that black women, black female teachers are like, they're better teachers for every race across the board, for every student. And they say students feel comfortable with them. And students feel like they grasp their information with them. I feel like I grasp information whenever I'm with a Black teacher. It's just like I wish I could see more Black female teachers and Black male teachers because like it's, it's, it's like you have fun while learning, it's like

Coles: Right, they can relate.

Calvin: It's like they keep up – they don't even have to keep up with the trends. They just know. It's just a thing.

Calvin begins this excerpt from his interview by explaining how qualified and experienced Black teachers are often overlooked for "young white college students, fresh out of college." This statement is really important because Calvin is pinpointing one aspect of the issue: Black teachers are not in predominately Black urban schools because they do not want to teach or because they are not qualified, but because systemically, young white teachers are preferred. The white gaze is centered and honored at Uptown. While Calvin may not have evidence that shows this overlooking of Black teachers taking place—one should not expect him to because

antiblackness often operates invisibly—the evidence he does have is that in his urban school, the majority of the teachers are young and white. We see Calvin explicitly revealing why the Black gaze via Black teachers is a necessity when it comes to authoring Black futurity when he stated, “...I really wish I could see more Black teachers cause it would, I feel like the learning environment would be better.” The significance comes when he stated that “Black people just in general see themselves represented in Black people.” Raheem highlighted this significance in his *Semi 2*, while he was discussing the ways schools are violent towards Black youth. I insert a brief excerpt from Raheem’s interview below to put him in conversation with Calvin.

Raheem: Like having more white teachers, some people don't feel like they can connect to those white teachers so they feel emotionally unstable towards like education now because of how they view, it's just white people. They think white people can only be teachers, white people can only do this, so I feel like that's another violent way. I feel like we should have more Black teachers.

It is irresponsible of urban schooling to be complicit in teaching staffs that do not resemble the demographics of the students. I would argue that schools that do not actively work to increase Black teachers in their schools where the population is predominately Black are actively engaging in antiblackness. Later in the excerpt Calvin does provide evidence when he references a study that found that “black female teachers are like, they're better teachers for every race across the board, for every student.” Through this knowledge we see that the centrality and honoring of the Black gaze extends beyond representation for Black students and to the creation of comfortable environments for all students.

“...we just gotta get enough black influences.” While the necessity of Black teachers to center and honor the Black gaze in the urban school was present throughout the data, the presence of Blackness in schools in general was also present. During Sonia’s *Life History*, she spent a great deal of time explaining why urban schools just need Black adults present,

regardless of their role. What might an urban school look like that acknowledges that students live in an anti-Black world and then creates a school environment that operates in a way that is resistant to that anti-Black context? I believe Sonia began to answer a part of that question with her call to bring in Black influences.

Coles: So going off what you were talking about earlier. It seems like one of the big things is teachers right and the staff in general not really reflecting. But one, I'm interested in your opinions around that designation but also since we know things aren't perfect, how do you think they could better serve students who look like you?

Sonia: I feel like the only way. Not the only way. But one of the best ways is to get more Black influences inside the school. That's that's the key thing with me is like Black influences in side school. They don't gotta. They don't gotta take over these teacher's jobs. They can have more people like you. More people to like maybe hit the lower grades and build a program like this. Or have more like we got Ms. Pam as a Black counselor. We got another lady who I know a couple people talk to, but it's not enough like it's not enough Black people in the school cause kids go through. Black kids go through a lot and a lot of these teachers they be like 'I don't understand why they just-why they just don't come talk to me'. They don't come talk to you because they can't, you can't relate. Like certain things like if I were I feel like if I would have told a white person drugs and alcohol in my immediate family is heavy, they would be like 'oh my God' or like they might not have said that because I'm opening up to them, but that's the thought like 'oh my Gosh, she really be going through that.' Whereas a Black person would say—not that that's what be going on in a lot of Black communities—but you could say 'I know somebody who had that.' Or 'that ain't as crazy, I understand where you coming from.' So, I feel like we just gotta get enough Black influences. That's the way Uptown can help, because overall as far as getting the competition out there, they do an amazing job with that to me. They, we talk about everything like even when Trump got elected. The teachers kind of shut the day down like we was talking about that so I feel like they got that part down. Whereas we can feel like we can have a voice. But its certain stuff that we know we can't say. Or we know that I wouldn't necessarily tell her this because she not gon' know, she not gon' know how I'm feeling. It's just it's just different. So, I feel like like more Black influences in school. Like maybe outside sources that can come in and talk to kids. Like have more, I don't know like not I'm not saying take these teachers jobs. Cause you know everybody needs a job everybody need a check. Everybody a lot of these teachers do a really good job at teaching but just more black people to talk to in the school. Like it aint that many in this job. So that would, that would be a um a big pointer.

Sonia begins by noting that the Black influences she thinks schools desperately need “don't gotta take over these teacher's jobs.” A call for Black influences in urban schools is an acknowledgement that Black children have to be educated on so many things beyond the official

urban school curriculum. This is evident when she stated, “They can have more people like you. More people to like maybe hit the lower grades and build a program like this.” In our collective, we engage in discussions of Blackness and antiblackness, so when Sonia says more people like me, she is thinking of a future where schools actually allow Black influences to come in to center Blackness, especially examining it in relation to the urban school. Sonia’s call for Black influences becomes important when she discussed how a white teacher may not be able to understand or rather handle personal information that she may be going through as a Black student. For example, she explained that if she attempted to talk to a white teacher about the presence of drugs and alcohol in her family they may not fully grasp it, whereas from her perspective a Black teacher would. I also read this as, even if a white teacher did attempt to understand it, how might that further work to create negative notions white teachers may already have of Black students? We really get to see why the centrality and honoring of Blackness is a necessity in this example towards the end when Sonia acknowledges that Uptown does provide space for students to voice their opinions, but that that is all it is, space. Sonia said that what’s missing is the Black influences in that space that is provided. Even with Uptown allowing students to “have a voice,” there are some things that she would not necessarily tell a white teacher “because she not gon’ know, she not gon’ know how I’m feeling.” Implicit in this example by Sonia is also the idea that Black influences would allow Black kids to see the possibilities of what they can be, because they both share the Black gaze. As Raheem stated in his *Semi I*, “You could look up to white people. But it’s still like -You want look up to somebody who is just like you.”

“When you got like white teachers, you don’t be like ‘oh, I wanna be like him.’”

Following up with Sonia’s idea of Black influences and Raheem’s comment about wanting to

look up to people just like you, I provide another example by Raheem that gets at similar ideas.

While speaking with him during his *Semi I*, we began to discuss the presence of white teachers in urban schools and what that means for students.

Coles: Why do you think that people just accept that? Why is it okay that all throughout the country, there's these schools with all these Black kids, Latino kids and like all white teachers? How do you think we got here?

Raheem: I just think cause they – Even black people sometimes think they're, like white people are smarter. And white people think that white people are smarter. So, they think they can be the only educators. The only people to teach other people stuff. But that's not the case but they want to cause they feel like 'Oh, I can teach them this that and the third cause I'm like above them. I know more than them.' When that sometimes might not be the case.

Coles: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm.

Raheem: So that's maybe why.

Coles: Why do you think um? It's probably connected to that right but why do you think more black people don't want to or aren't teaching?

Raheem: Cause they didn't grow up with black teachers. When you got like white teachers, you don't be like 'Oh, I wanna be like him.' No cause you can't connect to that teacher. Like I don't wanna be like none of my teachers cause they rude and they get on my nerves. But like if I had a Black teacher, a cool teacher that I could connect with like, tried to help me improve my life. Not just wanna come here and get paid. Like tried to actually help me do things with my life. Like that's a good person. I wanna be that when I get older. So, I feel like a lot of people didn't go through that so they can't.

Raheem provides a direct rationale and support for why his urban school must work to center and honor the Black gaze. After asking about the current reality of predominately white teachers in his school and urban schools across the U.S., he stated that “Even black people sometimes think they're, like white people are smarter. And white people think that white people are smarter.” He clearly understands that this is not the case, that whites are not inherently smarter than Blacks, but rather that this is how notions of intelligence have been socially constructed in the U.S. This social construction is directly connected to his next statement relating to Black students not wanting to be teachers because they do not see that as a profession for them: The lack of Black teachers may send a message to students that teaching is not for Black people. Due to what Raheem perceives as a lack of connection that Black students have to white teachers he stated,

“When you got like white teachers, you don’t be like ‘Oh, I wanna be like him.’” The urban school must disrupt and decenter the white gaze and center and honor the Black gaze.

RECONNECTING CONCEPTUAL CATEGORIES AND THEMES

The data presented in this findings chapter answered my second research question, *How do Black youth’s understandings of antiblackness through critical engagements with literacy function as resistance to antiblackness?* The first large conceptual category my data was organized under, (a) navigating antiblackness, was composed of two themes: (a) racial realism and (b) consciousness, love, and fugitivity. The data under the conceptual category of navigating antiblackness was largely centered on the ways students relied on their racial realist perspectives to help them persist through the anti-Black context of their nation and urban school (racial realism). Secondly, the data under this conceptual category demonstrated that students often move beyond ideals of racial realism to actively working to become more knowledgeable about antiblackness, while simultaneously composing life in ways that affirm their Blackness and offer some form of liberation (consciousness, love, and fugitivity). What these two themes reveal about Black youth resistance to antiblackness through critical literacy, is that this resistance is rooted in an awareness about the realities of being Black in the U.S., where the prime characteristic is being consistently denied equality. Beliefs in racial realism prompt the Black youth then to not be defeated by antiblackness, but instead to do everything in their control to create a life that actively rejects antiblackness.

The second large conceptual category that worked to organize data under my second research question, (b) authoring Black futurity, included the three themes: (a) decentering the white gaze, (b) centrality and honoring of the Black gaze (society), and (c) centrality and honoring of the Black gaze (urban school). The data under this conceptual category focused on

the ways the students demonstrated resistance to antiblackness by making whiteness and white people marginal to their daily lives. At the very least the students revealed how they do not allow white perspectives to dictate how they move through the world, particularly how they conceptualize their futures (decentering the white gaze). In addition, the data under this large conceptual category outlined the ways the students sought to compose and imagine life in the midst of antiblackness that privileged Black ways of knowing and being, both while in society and in their urban school (centrality and honoring of the Black gaze (society and urban school)). From the data under these three themes, it becomes clear that Black youth believe that in order to resist antiblackness, they must intentionally resist and decenter the oppressive structures and ideologies of whiteness. As a result of the reach of whiteness in U.S. life, decentering the white gaze becomes a struggle. However, this struggle results in a humanizing project, because it propels the Black youth to create sanctuaries, places of refuge that ensure their futurity by giving them the space to cultivate consciousness, love, and strategies of fugitivity. The themes under the conceptual category of authoring Black futurity proclaim that while antiblackness may be here to stay, Black youth will be here to stay as well, greeting antiblackness with resistance at every step of the way.

CHAPTER SIX: DISCUSSION

Antiblackness creates, defines, and dictates how Black and non-Black people engage with the social world. As the literacies of the youth demonstrated, for example, their engagements with their urban school were framed through the understanding that there is a certain limit to the quality of *education* they will receive because they are Black. As outlined by Asante (1991), “In most classrooms, whatever the subject, Whites are located in the center perspective position” (p. 171). The work done in my project was an effort to reverse the way schools in the U.S. actively de-center, dislocate, and make Black children into nonpersons (Asante, 1991, p. 171). Establishing a “third space” inside their high school (Gutierrez, 2008), that was organized to be *Decidedly Blackⁱ* (Warren, 2017), provided the time and environs necessary for my participants to engage in a meta-analysis of their many invisible encounters with antiblackness. This physical meeting place became a sanctuary of sorts—an oasis of safety and revitalization—found to be vitally important for: a) recognizing and coming to terms with the omnipresence of antiblackness; and b) authoring futures that would enable them to transcend the barriers that antiblackness erects. Despite the precarity of Black life resulting from the many ways antiblackness is sustained in U.S. social institutions such as public schools, this research establishes the brilliance of Black youth to center their joy as a radical act of resistance to the symbolic violence of antiblackness. They do this through strategic, purposeful engagements with literacy.

The sociocultural location in which these Black youth exist—inner-city Philadelphia and a predominately Black urban school—set the context for the ways they demonstrated how they compose and create life that allows them to author themselves out of the confines of antiblackness. I do not mean that the Black youth here have composed (written or created)

themselves in ways that have eradicated antiblackness in their particular lives, but rather that the data shows how they fashion existences that are subversive to anti-Black racism. Building from my engagement with their textualities, I theorized two levels on which Black youth textualities play out in their specific societal and urban schooling contexts. The first level is (1) Black youth as textual sites, which comprises of the ways these Black youth critically read, wrote, and spoke back to the world(s) around them. Significant to Black youth as textual sites is the ways the data showed that the Black youth carry the history of Black life in the U.S. with them as they navigate their daily lived experiences. The second level is (2) Black space as textual sanctuary, which refers to the actual physical and ideological space that I co-created with these youth, that would function to facilitate their critical engagements with literacy, such that they could fully realize themselves as textual sites necessary to author the futures they want for themselves, and not the futures projected onto their bodies. Not simply engaging in literacy practices, but personifying these Black literacies, is the foundation for Black youth as textual sites: The Black youth who participated in my study informed me how they operate as texts that are deeply critical of antiblackness. In order to exist in an anti-Black nation-state, the youth demonstrate the ways they individually and collectively operate as critical textual sites or archives of Blackness, that when properly catalyzed, have the potential to be expressed in ways to oppose and lessen the material and psychic impacts of antiblackness. Moreover, the space we cultivated that was Black-centric, proved to be crucial for affirming and cultivating development of these textualities.

BLACK YOUTH AS TEXTUAL SITES

The Black youth in my study demonstrated that the history of Black life they carry is what provides the context that enables them to critically understand and make sense of antiblackness in contemporary U.S. society. The history they hold within them, which is

responsible for my conception of Black youth as textual sites, is twofold: 1) the history of Black subjugation and 2) the history of Black resilience and perseverance. This twofold lens of history embedded within the Black youth serves as the rationale for why my research is not a project about hopelessness, but rather a project of critical hope (Duncan-Andrade, 2009). Critical hope “rejects the despair of hopelessness and the false hopes of “cheap American optimism”” (West, 2008, p. 41 as cited in Duncan-Andrade, 2009, p. 185). Critical hope leads us to understand that existing in the U.S. in a Black body will be difficult always, but, that existence is still possible nonetheless. In other words, the fact that Black people are inundated with anti-Black assaults does not eliminate the presence of Black triumph. In fact, the context of enduring antiblackness fuels the struggle toward triumph via ideals of critical hope. In 1900, James Weldon Johnson captured this twofold perspective of Black history that the Black youth in my study embodied in *Lift Every Voice and Sing* or the Negro/Black National Anthem. Two excerpts from *Lift Every Voice and Sing* that I feel really capture my concept of Black youth as textual sites and the ways these sites are geared towards critical hope include:

Sing a song full of the faith that the dark past has taught us,
Sing a song full of the hope that the present has brought us,

We have come over a way that with tears has been watered,
We have come, treading our path through the blood of the slaughtered,
Out from the gloomy past,
Till now we stand at last

The Black youth in my study demonstrated how as textual sites, they are connected to the larger network of Blackness in the U.S. that continuously looks to the past as prologue or a roadmap to develop ways to resist antiblackness and preserve themselves beyond expectation. Antiblackness is endemic, but as the youth demonstrated, Black people have agency to resist and push back against antiblackness.

The introduction and framing of my research problem in Chapter One of my dissertation began with an epigraph authored by Claudia Rankine (2016), which stated, “The world is wrong. You can’t put the past behind you. It’s buried in you; it’s turned your flesh into its own cupboard” (p. 63). I was compelled to use this language to situate my research problem, because the history of being Black in America is often understood as something Blacks should put behind them. In fact, in a racist society such as the U.S. “the obliteration of the black past is absolutely essential to the preservation of white hegemony, or domination” (Marable, 2006, p. 20). However, history will always frame the difficulties of being Black in America; the past will never be behind any of us. My dissertation is a project rooted in the lives of Black youth as they experience urban schooling and society. The data from these lived experiences worked to support Kirkland’s (2017) notion that the substance of Black lives is built on Black textual life. My study confirmed the idea that the textualities of Black youth are rooted in history—Black youth are archives of Black history (the history of subjugation and degradation as well as the history of resilience and perseverance). Moreover, the work here extends the idea that Black textual life is embedded within the literacies of youth to moving the conception to the idea of Black youth as textual sites themselves, not just holders of text. Understanding the past was central to this project, central to these students’ experiences and expressions of their Blackness—an understanding that also became evident in the data, referenced by my participants in the previous two chapters. The specific history of U.S. chattel slavery (Black people existing as property) and living in the wake or afterlife of this slavery will forever frame the barriers to accessing “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” for African-descended individuals in America. Despite this knowledge however, the world as Rankine noted, actively works to position the past as

something that is not a part of us, the world actively works to sever us—particularly Black people—from the past.

Connecting the Past to the Present

Attempts to sever Blacks from the past make sense when considering the historical logic of whiteness or that “black Americans have nothing to complain about, because they have no collective history worth remembering” (Marable, 2006, p. 21). Antiracism can only flourish (read be rationalized and justified) “through the suppression of black counternarratives that challenge society’s understanding about itself and its own past” (Marable, 2006, p. 20). The white supremacist roots of these attempts to sever Blacks from the past operates to position Black people as responsible for their social status (as responsible for the gratuitous violence they experience). Such a positioning contradicts the truth, which is that America’s history of exploitation, dispossession, and genocide is the culprit of Black suffering and will always be. Moreover, the truth is that Blacks have a deep collective history that is not only worth remembering, but as the students here showed, is living within them daily. Just as Black people cannot escape antiracism, America cannot escape its history founded upon antiracism.

The data from the Black students in my study demonstrated just exactly how America’s history with Black people, particularly antiracism, will never be past, because Black youth walk through the world with the entire history of Blackness in America buried within them. Marable’s (2006) thoughts on why whites remain unmoved by America’s racial history of antiracism supports this claim in the data:

For them, the white past by its nature is remote from the present; the black past reveals nothing but an abyss. To explore the dark unknown is to lose touch with reality. Linking the black past too closely with the present could compromise their future. I think most

African Americans intuitively understand all this, and recognize that their moral claim on American institutions is inextricably bound to their past. For us, the past is not simply prologue; it is indelibly part of the fabric of our collective destiny. Indeed this alternate understanding of history, even more than race or culture, is the most important quality that makes African Americans as a people different from other Americans (p. 14).

This fundamental ideal—the importance of history to Black Americans—that was evident in my data analysis, led me to an understanding of Black youth as textual sites. When the youth used their literacies to detail images of slavery or the rallying cries of #BlackLivesMatter protests, they revealed the ways they see the history of control and subordination as essential to how they come to understand their Black presence in the time and space in which they currently exist.

Rochelle's understanding of racism through the images of a burning cross and the protest chant "Hands up, don't shoot," revealed how she relies on past and current anti-Black violence and Black strategies of resistance to make sense of racism. There were no conversations held during our project that focused on the history of cross burnings, but this aspect of history was buried in Rochelle, she just needed the right space and context to reveal that knowledge within her.

Marable's (2006, p. 1) concept of living history or the fact that "we all live history every day" serves as a great rationale for my theorizing of Black youth as textual sites. It also explains why all peoples (particularly whites) cannot be understood as textual sites, since "it is a people's proximity to state power—most simply in the ability to vote—that decides how they think about 'living history' in the United States" (Marable, 2006, p. 15), and I would add, how they enact living history.

Understanding Whiteness and Being White in America

The literacies of these Black youth also revealed that existing as a textual site is not simply about being an archive of Black life, but also having a deep understanding of whiteness and white life. For example, under the theme of control and subordination, when Calvin explained that as a group white people are known for eradicating cultures throughout the world, he was articulating that in order to ensure his survival (or at the very least fight for his survival), he must also house an understanding of the cultural mechanisms (i.e. whiteness and white supremacy) that could one day lead to the eradication of his very being. In fact, in conjunction with knowing and housing Black life, I argue that knowing and understanding white life is just as important to Black youth as textual sites. Black life depends on knowing whiteness. Dyson (2017) captured this necessity when he explained,

Black folk have had to know white culture inside out... We have to know as much as we can know about you to keep you from wrecking our lives because you had a bad day. We have to know all we can know about you to keep you from firing us or gentrifying our communities and shipping us to the outer perimeters of hell (p. 154).

In an interview, Dyson provided more insights on this key feature of Black youth as textual sites, by explaining that Black lives are at stake when they do not know whiteness in a way that white lives and livelihood are never at stake when it comes to knowing Blackness (Stockwell, 2017). The bodies of Black youth then, are as Rankine (2016) explained cupboards or as I theorize, the bodies of Black youth are textual sites. My assertion that the bodies of these Black youth are textual sites means that as each new generation of Black people are born, implanted within their skin, encoded within their DNA is the living history of Black life in America, which, too, includes the living history of their oppressors. This history or what Kirkland (2017) refers to as

Black (textual) life is “carved into lineages of Black bones and lives on the lips of Black people, detailed in our scars and in the souls of folk tucked away in forgotten neighborhoods and forsaken histories” (p. 16). As I explained earlier, this history is concerned with both the pain and joy of being Black. For example, when Maya Angelou (1994, p. 164) wrote “Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave / I am the dream and the hope of the slave” in her poem *Still I Rise*, she was describing the ways Black people become textual sites by relying on the Black past, particularly the knowledge of anti-Black oppression and what has been done to rise above oppression, which lies at the core of Black textualities. When Angelou repeatedly exclaims, “still I rise,” in the poem, she is revealing that the force that propels her to rise is the living history of Blackness juxtaposed with whiteness. The persistence and perseverance of Black people throughout U.S. history in the face of an unimaginable overexposure to anti-Black violence I claim is key to this living history. The concept of living is a result of the resilience and fortitude of Black (textual) life. The data from my study demonstrated that this living history propels Black youth to rise, or rather that this textuality operates as central to the ways Black youth actively work to compose themselves in the U.S.

The historical shadow that looms over the data reveals the ways that textualities of Black youth come into direct conflict with ahistorical dominant narratives about Black people that deny our humanity and resistance to anti-Black, white supremacist logics, structures, and social relations. History has always been at the core of Black life in the U.S. and will always be, however, the present and future are also always engaged simultaneously. This blending of past, present, and future or “past-future visions” that emerged from the data align with Afrofuturist narratives that “insist that who we’ve been and where we’ve traveled is always an integral component of who we can become” (Nelson, 2000, p. 35). Under the theme of racial realism,

when Raheem explains that racism will not end because the economy is based off wealthy white men, his articulation of the impossibility of quality education for Black youth is rooted in an understanding that is informed by his past-future visions. We gain similar insights through the theme erasure and disposability through Calvin's assertion that white people, particularly cops, see little Black boys and little Black girls as threats; an ideology that has dictated the ways the nation has engaged with Black life and will continue to engage with Black life. Additionally, under the theme societal climate (macro), when reacting to the 2016 Presidential Election of Donald Trump, Anita's composition of America as "AmeriKKKa" also provides insights into how Black youth as textual sites move beyond history. Anita uses her literacy to show how the roots of white supremacy (here depicted as the KKK) directly inform the current political climate, and since the KKK is American, how it will always inform the nation, and fuel its anti-Black context.

I gathered then, that the way the youth write and create their existence is continuously informed by the textualities and textures of Black life that lived before them (past), live with them (present), and will live on after them (future). Black youth existing through the world as textual sites, as living and breathing archives of Black life is the exact reason why ahistorical ideologies (e.g. downplaying the effects of slavery) that work to devalue the significance of the past on the present realities of Blackness operates as a direct assault to Black bodies and Black life. As Marable (2006) previously suggested, antiblackness is largely enacted through the suppression of Black counternarratives, the textual lives of Black folk. As people who exist across time and space (housing the past, present, and futures of Blackness), to devalue the past means to devalue the Black body since it is navigating the present and future, through continuously explicating wisdom from the textualities of past Black life.

Archiving Black Life in America Across Time and Space: Black Youth Textualities and *Becoming Human*

My theorizing of the Black youth in my study as textual sites helps to provide a lens into the ways antiblackness is enacted against Black people. Each Black mind and/or body that is wiped out by our anti-Black nation state is a textual site. In the data then, when the students are depicting incidents such as a lynching or the prison industrial complex, they are providing us insights into the ways these archives of Blackness are systemically erased or kept away. For example, in the theme societal climate (macro), Maya's discussion of the court system unearths how black youth as textual sites are criminalized, resulting in Blacks being often falsely accused and then imprisoned, which means that their textual selves can no longer contribute to the larger project of Black textual life. Similarly, when Anita describes the current climate of the U.S. for Black youth as cold within the theme erasure and disposability due to the exorbitant amount of Black "dead bodies dropping out in these streets," she provides a prime example of the disruption this loss of these Black texts have on the nation, making it cold. One of the biggest ways to destroy a people is to destroy their textual contributions to the world, their histories and discoveries. For example, Peterson (2002, p. 38) explained that "in 1562, Fray Diego de Landa ordered that all Mayan books be collected and burned" in an effort to destroy the history of these people. When will we, in the U.S., begin to see the systemic anti-Black violence enacted against Blacks as a method to destroy Blackness, and the "books" which Blackness produces?

Antiblackness is wholly about the dehumanization of Black people. This study for me then, is about much more than the literacies of Black youth (which are often decontextualized), but rather, it is deeply about their actual lives, and the ways they resist being dehumanized. Therefore, when we see entire Black communities mourning, say the death of an unarmed Black

child, we can work to understand it as the community seeing that loss (the burning of yet another book) as significant to the archives of Black life that we need to survive.

Furthermore, my assertion that my Black youth participants are textual sites stems from the fact that their literacies revealed the ways they survive in a world thirsty for the repudiation of Black life, making this a project in their own humanization. For example, under the theme erasure and disposability, Toni's text message regarding Gandhi's belief that Blacks "are troublesome, very dirty, and live almost like animals" provides us with an understanding that the youth used their literacies to challenge these anti-Black ideologies espoused by people they are taught to admire in their schooling. Black youth as text, we learn from this data example and others, is deeply about carving out a space for their humanity on their own terms. For example, when Sonia explains that Black and excellence do not usually go in the same sentence within the theme consciousness, love, and fugitivity, she outlines that the students named our collective Black Excellence to humanize us. If they relied on the lens of non-Blacks such as Gandhi, their humanity would never be equated with excellence. For this, they define their humanity for them and by them on their own terms in a "real loud" way. This reclamation of their humanity via literacies disrupts the suppression of Black counternarratives.

A major part of this humanity is not only rejecting anti-Black ideologies however, but also detailing how antiblackness operates in ways that concretize these ideologies. Within the theme institutional mirroring (micro), Maya's detailing of the ways a lack of funding in urban schools sets Black kids up to fail, is humanizing because it unearths the ways that Blackness is not a failure, but rather the conditions surrounding Blackness work to position it as such. We see this same humanizing aspect of Black youth as textual sites when the students are collectively engaged in detailing the ways white people are constantly praised for mediocrity within the

theme erasure and disposability. Cultural appropriation is dehumanizing. When the Black youth reject society giving white people more credit when engaging in Black culture than Black people are given for creating this culture, they are asserting their humanity. Therefore, the humanizing nature of Black youth as textual sites is evident in the ways that they re/see the relationship of Blackness and the U.S., a re/seeing that is guided by their history and lived experiences. As a result, Black youth as textual sites is concerned with “the great humanistic and historical task of the oppressed” (Freire, 2000, p. 44) that I referenced in Chapter One, truly making it a humanizing pursuit. The Black youth in my study focusing on themselves to collectively make sense of their worlds and to push back on anti-Black oppression does not rely on false generosity by the oppressors (read whiteness and white people). To wait to be liberated by the systems and individuals, the nation, that by virtue of its foundation seeks to be anti-Black, the Black youth here would be aiding in their dehumanization. This then becomes a project in humanization (Kinloch & San Pedro, 2014; San Pedro & Kinloch, 2017) because it is for the black youth and by the black youth, they are not waiting and have no desire to wait or call on a great white hope, savior, etc. In fact, their literacies relish in the denouncing of such a dependence on whiteness. For example, within the theme decentering the white gaze, Calvin’s adorning of the shirt with “Caucasians” as a mascot represents an embodiment of denouncing whiteness.

As outlined by San Pedro and Kinloch (2017), projects in humanization “encourages researchers and participants to rely on their cultural, familial, linguistic, and historically situated identities to link stories to a broader set of educational, political, and social concerns—injustice, inequity, and oppression—in an effort to eradicate them” (p. 378). Therefore the desire embedded within the literacies of Black youth to imagine a different world where antiblackness is eradicated in this project was not clouded by those who may benefit from an anti-Black world,

such as a white teacher or principal. This speaks to why my presence as a critical Black educator in the space was necessary in this work as well. As a Black person in America, I too, desire a world free of antiblackness and in our space my presence does not work to obstruct the imagining of a world where black youth are liberated, in that I too deeply benefit from that liberation. For this, it was super important that to be humanizing, the space was exclusively Black. Similarly, when the students discussed specific schooling examples, especially the need for Black teachers, we began to understand that they see Black teachers as committed to the preservation to their textual beings and the impossibility for non-Black teachers to connect to the depth of those textualities as well as understand the necessity of that preservation as a direct attack on antiblackness. For example, within the theme centrality and honoring of the Black gaze (urban school), when Sonia discusses the necessity for her school to have more Black influences, she is alluding to the fact that the urban school can be a humanizing space of refuge for Black youth, if it invests in the centering of Blackness. Under the same theme, Raheem's conversation regarding not wanting to be a teacher because all of the teachers are white, provides further insight into why exclusively Black spaces or as close to this is at the forefront of the ways these Black youth as textual sites imagine a new world. The Black youth have shown that the white gaze that frames their societal and urban schooling experiences is dehumanizing, and thus, moving in the direction of spaces that are safe for and exclusive to blackness become humanizing.

Acknowledging the Tensions of Black Youth as Textual Sites

Black youth are textual sites, but is important to not expect or assume that all Black youth are holders and theorizers of Blackness in identical ways. A problem I see with this concept is that there will be a desire to develop a standardized model or way of theorizing the concept of

Black youth as textual sites. It must be understood that Blackness as a lived experience is vast, and therefore, it is important that this variety of experiences be considered when educators are engaging the textualities of Black youth. Specifically, the myriad of lived experiences Black youth have must be considered in the teaching and learning of Black youth as intersections with Black identity such as geographic location, socio-economic class, gender, and sexuality birth unique textual sites. While, as my data demonstrated, there will most always be certain understandings and commonalities of living while Black in America, Blacks youth as textual sites must not be solely constricted to such framings. If not expanded upon in humanizing ways, the concept of Black youth as textual sites can be misused and wrongly implemented, as other anti-oppressive scholarship such as multicultural education and culturally responsive pedagogy have been previously. This concept is not intended to be a trendy lens to better make sense of our engagements with all youth: all youth are not textual sites—at least not in identical ways. For example, the way I have arrived to this concept via my exploration of antiblackness cannot be applied in a parallel way to white, Asian, Latinx, and Native American youth. The concept of textual sites is about the specific history (oppression and resilience) that informs the lived socio-political experiences of Black youth in the U.S. coupled with the Black community's distance from state power (read white supremacy)—a power that is anti-Black by design. While my concept cannot be easily applied to different racial groups, as each group has a different historical and contemporary relationship with white supremacy, I do see the concept as helping urban education, critical race, and literacy researchers and educators working with youth of color think about history more intentionally. There is a significant amount of room for the concept of textual sites to be taken up with other historically marginalized youth of color in the U.S. and beyond U.S. borders, but again, it must be operationalized with the intent on understanding the

ways that racial groups specific history is responsible for current lived conditions and rooted in an analysis of power as dictated by white supremacy.

While the concept can function as a metaphor, it is also a reality. A tension I see with this work is that the concept will be trivialized as simply a metaphor. Black youth as textual sites is a way to think about intentionally engaging Black youths current lived experiences with the totality of the history of America. Moreover, it is a direct stance and attack against ahistorical ideologies and practices that frame the urban schooling of Black children. What this work says is that Black youth move through the world as historical beings, they operate as time machines. This expansive view and understanding of time is deeply important to the critical literacies of Black youth. Black youth have the ability to be critical of many things they are presented with that thrive on their subjugation, because they have the capability and desire to consult prior knowledge of Black life. For example, Black youth may reject post-racial rhetoric around the presidency of Barack Obama since prior and after him every president has been a white man. The meaning in this work comes from educators rejecting ahistorical work. What is it that can be done to educate Black youth in urban schools that takes a deep and sincere consideration and engagement of the history of Black people in America? Again, Black youth as textual sites is a metaphor useful to imagine the depth of possibility for engaging Black youth in rich conversations about the meanings accorded to race, and being Black more specifically, in America. This theorization moves beyond surface discourses of oppression to a more empowered dialogue with Black youth about the myriad ways they can re-write the future for themselves, and thus, reject Black nihilism. The use of the language of black youth as textual sites brings about the ideas that black youth must be engaged in ways that rely deeply on the relationship between the past, the present, and the futures they will create.

Networking Black Youth as Textual Sites with the Literature and Theoretical Frameworks

Black youth as textual sites is directly counter to the long history of educational research and teaching that has constructed Black youth as non-holders of knowledge. BlackCrit lets us know that antiblackness is endemic and Black youth as textual sites reveals that Black youth move through the world with this understanding at the core of their compositions of self. When urban schools that serve high percentages of Black students are comprised of school leaders and educators who operate in ways that are colorblind or rooted in conceptions of anti-racist pedagogy or multiculturalism that ignore the specificity of Blackness and antiblackness, it is insulting to the Black youth. By urban schools operating as if Blackness is marginal in a school full of Black students, they are ignoring the realities of the Black youth, their families, and communities. Black youth as textual sites informs us that Black youth exist in a world where they know Blacks are treated unfairly. Yet, they then come to a school that completely ignores and overlooks this unfairness or rather attempts to sell the idea that they can escape this unfairness via schooling, which is largely sold through the promotion of meritocratic ideals of success. Black youth as textual sites provides a critical foundation for a shift in urban education in that there is no time—and there was never time—for entire schools to operate as if Blackness is not central in the social and academic lives of Black students. There is countless research that documents Black youth resistance to schooling. Black youth as textual sites provides insights to these conversation of resistance. In the urban school, Black youth are taught explicitly and implicitly that race is not really that important, meanwhile the reality is that race is very important to who they are. Given this, Black youth as textual sites contributes to the ongoing development of BlackCrit, a theory that is deeply interested in unearthing these tensions. In addition, for the larger project of CRT Black youth as textual sites allows us to move beyond the

counternarrative. Understandings of and resistance to antiblackness are embedded within Black youth: As texts, Black youth are not reactionary to white supremacy and antiblackness, they are just the text that are read last or not read at all. We must start reading these textual lives.

In regards to Sociocultural Perspectives of Literacy, Black youth as textual sites gives us a specific way to name the type of critical literacy work that was being done throughout my project. Throughout my dissertation as I have asserted that Black people are leaders of critical literacy, I still felt like the term did not fully capture the depth of the youths critical engagements with literacy. To be clear this is not an abandonment of the term critical literacy when working with Black youth, but rather a way I have come to specify the ways critical literacy operationalizes in the lives of Black youth. The data here goes beyond academic notions of critical literacy and has birthed a concrete example of how it actually exist beyond practice to an embodiment, a lifestyle. Critical literacy is not just something people do, but it is who they are. At the core of Sociocultural Literacies is how people use it in their everyday lives. Black youth as textual sites becomes a tangible way for educators and scholars to see that Black youth use it in a very specific way, a way that is inextricably connected to their Blackness. When educators are considering the ways in which literacy making is about context, the context that cannot be forgotten is that of Blackness.

Putting myself, Marable (2006), and Kirkland (2017) in conversation, reveals that the living history housed by Black textual life situates Black youth as textual sites. Viewing Black youth as textual sites gives us the insights to know that literacy is not just about academic literacy, which means that research and teaching that positions Black youth as outside of meaningful literacy based on their school interactions further perpetuates antiblackness, by excluding the most meaningful parts of youth from their academics—how they engage with the

world outside of the classroom. This is not to say that what schools value must be completely eliminated, but that what Black youth value can and will make their school engagements much more valuable. Lyiscott (2017) underscored this point when she explained that “centering Black textual expressions can be a step toward an affirming and engaged pedagogy, which at the same time aims to cultivate the analytical skills, critical thinking, and social awareness necessary for student success” (p. 52). Black youth as textual sites teaches us that Black youth are capable of dynamic literacies, in part, because without prompting, these young people read and write the world around them in myriad ways that allow them to center their joy and affinity to being Black. Bringing these capabilities to the fore in anti-Black schooling environments does not need to look like a teacher trying to create a whole lesson on what they think are aspects of Blackness. Instead, it is about teachers opening the space for Black students to be themselves in academic spaces, which will cause the classroom environment to drastically change by becoming humanizing. What we know is that Black youth attempt to show up as themselves in urban schools and classrooms daily, and face strict policing as a result. Given this, the power of simply allowing black youth to be themselves should not be underestimated and since schools are rooted in white ways of knowing and being, a lot of work will need to be done in allowing this to happen.

Recommendations and Implications

Blackness cannot be seen as marginal to the lives of students in urban schools. And because of this, educators and school leaders cannot work in predominately urban Black contexts and be unfamiliar with Black ways of knowing and being. As Dyson (2017) noted, Black people have to know about whites. This work reveals that in order to truly tap into and appreciate the richness of Black youth as textual sites non-Black educators must do the work of knowing

Blackness. As the theme honoring and centrality of the black gaze demonstrated, urban schools where black youth attend are meant to serve them, and for this their Blackness must be centralized and honored. Moreover, the specificity of antiblackness must also be engaged. The urban schooling of Black students cannot rely on broad conceptions of anti-racist training or multicultural education, but as this entire project has shown, Black youth need a very tailored schooling environment that works to lessen the impacts of antiblackness. I understand that the project of American education is and will always be bent towards white supremacy, but the recommendation here is that urban schools recognize this fact and then engage with their Black students and communities to develop an environment that is as subversive to the white supremacy that lies at the core of our educational institutions, to the fullest extent possible.

BLACK SPACE AS TEXTUAL SANCTUARY

Existing in a context where antiblackness is omnipresent results in the need for places of refuge that restore Black souls damaged by the suffering brought on by anti-Black oppression. Black people in the U.S. have historically stolen themselves away from oppression: There is a deep history of Blacks becoming fugitives of antiblackness, carving out spaces within the U.S. where they have control over their lives and safety from the conditions of white supremacy, even if for a brief moment. My conception of sanctuary is rooted in the necessity of refuge from antiblackness that propels Black people to fellowship together in exclusive Black spaces. My understanding of this place of refuge acknowledges that these spaces do not erase away antiblackness, but that they function as a revival—a space of healing and recharging that allows Black people to continue the fight of persisting in the anti-Black nation-state that is the U.S.

Reviving Black Life in America Across Time and Space: Black Youth Textual Sanctuaries and the Search for *Somewhere*

In Danez Smith's (2017) poem *summer, somewhere*, he transports readers to a liberatory fantasy where Black boys who have been killed (throughout time via state-sanctioned violence such as lynching and being murdered by police) exist in a world that is a sanctuary, a world that they created and that is exclusively for them, somewhere. To capture the ways these youth have transcended to this haven Smith writes, "please, don't call us dead, call us alive someplace better." Throughout the course of the project I began to become attuned to the ways our collective space, Black Excellence, made us all feel alive, which led me to begin to understand the space as a textual sanctuary for textual sites (the Black youth). Specifically, findings from my work maintain that textual sanctuaries are a necessary (literal and figurative) site of resistance to antiblackness that centers the lived experiences of Black youth via their critical engagements with literacy. As the creator of this concept which emerged from my research, I define figurative textual sanctuaries as the critical literacy examinations of the self against current and historical narratives that are composed within and in response to oppressive environments/moments that birth hope, healing, and (re)imagined futures. Textual sanctuaries become literal spaces when a collective occupies space and wades or explores together in order to discover the interconnectedness of their critical literacy examinations of self, birthing a tangible and collective resistance. For example, under the theme decentering the white gaze, when Raheem mentioned "They ain't stopping me though cause I'm still gone do me," in reference to white people as a potential barrier to his future, he was demonstrating the ways in which he was thinking of a future *somewhere*, where he was alive, unbarred by whiteness. This project provided the students a place to pour out their literacies and have them be felt and heard in ways

that the larger society does not see as a necessity. There was something about the Black-centric intentionality of the community we built that provided us with a sanctuary, even if fleeting. In Black Excellence, we, too, were alive someplace better. This search for better or rather focus on how things are already better is shown within the theme centrality and honoring of the Black gaze (society), when Calvin explained that being Black excites him because “we as a people are so resilient and we always find joy in everything and just the culture, just black culture.” These Black youth, who are textual sites, were carving out a space for themselves within the hostile world of antiblackness where they could engage with themselves and each other, even if for a moment, with Blackness being central and in turn engaging their full humanity. Particularly being propelled by the idea that antiblackness—namely the inherent violence of this physical and ideological phenomenon—works to silence the texts and textures of Black people. As a result, the idea of a textual sanctuary—brought on by the data revealing to me that Black youth are textual sites—became a way I began to theorize a response to the antiblackness the students were resisting. The data from this project revealed to me that the students having an exclusively Black space to unload their literacies (read to unload themselves) was invaluable to the ways they collectively worked to create safety for themselves. The students did not have to ask permission in our space to be themselves, this space was led by this authentic being.

In my theorization of the need for Black space as textual sanctuary, I began to map on to the ways Black youth and Black people more broadly have always worked to carve out these spaces of sanctuary. To be clear, Black people have demanded sanctuary throughout time, and still are currently, but it has not been provided in systemic ways; there have been no sanctuary cities for Blacks. In fact, in Philadelphia where my research took place, attempts for Black sanctuary such as MOVE (The Movement) were wiped out (read bombed on U.S. soil). Move is

often described as “a mostly black, radical organization that believed in shedding technology and manmade law in favor of natural law” (Yuhas, 2015). Before the bombing, police commissioner of the time, Gregore Sambor, yelled into his megaphone “This is America. You have to abide by the laws of the United States” (Demby, 2015). According to Assefa (1988, p. 3), on May 13, 1985

Police shot 10,000 rounds of ammunition in a 90-minute period from automatic weapons, machine guns, and antitank guns. Finally they dropped a bomb from a helicopter, starting a fire that incinerated five MOVE members and six children. Sixty-one homes lay in smoldering ruins, about 110 houses were damaged, and 250 people were left homeless.

Were the members of MOVE not American? Is the community they wanted to cultivate within America anti-American? The goal is that this research contributes to understandings that Black exclusive spaces are not anti-American (again, many Black people are American citizens and have built America).

Even in the face of obstruction, Black exclusive spaces are necessary and must continuously be intentionally created. Black-centric spaces are not rooted in oppression in the ways white spaces often are. As Brinkhurst-Cuff (2017) explained,

“white spaces” – think far-right groups – are almost always layered with prejudice and the flawed notion of ethnic superiority. They are made in opposition to diversity and multiculturalism – and that, coupled with the uniquely powerful positions white people hold in society, is why they are unacceptable and reek of segregation. Black-only spaces rarely exist for the same purpose; instead they are founded on the basis of the true lived experiences of struggle. By denying white people entry to them we are not reflecting existing power structures, we are trying to subvert them.

Jones’ (2015) article posted on *Everyday Feminism* outlined five reasons why Black-only spaces are needed, which included: (1) Non-Black people actively oppose us having this space, (2) We need an escape from everyday racial oppression, (3) We need our own space – yes, even from other people of color and white allies, (4) we need to address issues within our communities, and (5) we need to heal, uplift, and love. In theorizing Black space as textual sanctuary for the Black

youth who move through the world as textual sites, it becomes important to see the work as being about the preservation of Blackness. Therefore the students here were connected to the larger legacy of Black people abandoning the want for sanctuary to be provided by the anti-Black nation state, and instead creating their own sanctuary on their terms. Black Excellence was a place where the students were not told that their past does not matter and where they were affirmed—especially regarding their current lived experiences, and where they were supported in developing dynamic ways to author themselves into the future. Spaces like this, I argue, is what all Black youth need to have access to in the U.S., a nation designed in the subjugation of Black people. As I have acknowledged before, it was clear that the youth had engaged in conversations regarding their lived experiences before our project at varying levels, their knowledge and past knowledge of living while Black was archived within them. However, what this project really revealed for me was that there was something powerful about the physical and communal time that we spent together naming and detailing those lived experiences (past and present). The sanctuary was in our collective unloading and uplifting. The youth were able to lighten their loads, their burdens of antiblackness, by sharing them with each other. Opposed to assuming that the youth were all understanding and resisting antiblackness (or acting like antiblackness did not frame their existence at all), the students put their lived experiences on the table and mapped them across each other's lives, making the invisible visible. Moreover, the sanctuary aspect was not just about some place where the youth felt safe then, but a place where they could be Black and relish in all of their Blackness, uncensored. As textual sites, in Black Excellence, their texts were not spell checked as they often are in both U.S. society and their urban school.

In America, many Black youth find themselves without sanctuary. As unearthed by my participants, the students find themselves constantly battling the antiblackness present in society

and the presence of antiblackness in their urban school. However, when the students are in community with each other, whether through our after-school program or in other spaces, they are engaging in textual sanctuary led by their critical literacies. In our fight to really make Black youth feel comfortable in U.S. urban schools, we have to be willing to disrupt these spaces, which have operated as the antithesis of sanctuary for Black youth.

The 2016 Presidential Election: Conceptualizing Textual Sanctuaries in the Current Political Climate

As outlined previously, my engagements with students for my dissertation paralleled the campaigning for the 2016 U. S. presidential election, and the actual election of the nation's 45th President, Donald Trump. As a result, this political moment in many ways worked to frame our larger discussions as the tail end of campaigning prior to the election of President Trump paralleled the development of our group. This political moment is present in many of the data points, particularly the ways students thought about current enactments of antiblackness and white supremacy. For example, within the theme of control and subordination, Calvin explained that if he revisited his views on racism he would write Donald Trump's campaign slogan—Make America Great Again—since for him it symbolizes racism, also noting that Trump is an “overtly racist man who projects his rhetoric onto the public.” Within the theme consciousness, love, and fugitivity, Toni maps out antiblackness in the era of Trump that begins with Trump's image and ends with “dead Black people.” The literacies of the students served to capture the current socio-political climate in the U.S. as conceptualized by these Black youth. The students demonstrated that they saw not simply Trump, but the entire election as an example of the ways Black youth are not safe in the nation.

Feelings of being unsafe were captured in larger U.S. discourses outside of our project, as well, such as in the heightened attention on college students urging their universities to become

sanctuary campuses. According to Reilly (2016), a sanctuary campus is a term derived from sanctuary cities or cities that “have pledged to do what they can to protect residents from deportation.” A major campaign promise from Trump was to “increase deportations and end the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program,” putting many undocumented students at risk (Reilly, 2016). Specifically, he promised to “immediately deport approximately 2 to 3 million undocumented immigrants” (Schultheis, 2016). Throughout the fall of 2016 as universities across the nation were ensuring that they would protect their undocumented students, in a sense serving as sites of refuge, I began to think about these very physical and ideological spaces being created for individuals who are not citizens of America in relation to the space being cultivated by my participants and I. As the youth and I were being really intentional about being in and creating community around their lived experiences in the U.S., I began to ask myself what does sanctuary in the U.S. look like for Black youth who are citizens—specifically those who trace their ancestry to U.S. chattel slavery? Moreover, I started to question whether or not there has ever been sanctuaries for Black citizens, particularly in ways backed by powerful institutions, such as American universities.

My interrogation into the ways the nation has not offered spaces of sanctuary for Black youth is not intended to take away from the necessity of sanctuary campuses for undocumented citizens. As a project in humanization, my work stands in solidarity with Black and Brown immigrants. In alignment with the Urban Youth Collaborative (2017), I deeply believe that the ways we resist must include “all undocumented communities – Latina, Black, Asian, Muslim free from the federal criminal legal system *and dismantle the local criminal legal system that has denied Black communities from ever finding sanctuary in this country* [emphasis added].” My interrogation is an attack not on undocumented students and their need for sanctuary, but on the

anti-Black nation state that rests on Black people not being provided sanctuary. As outlined by the Urban Youth Collaborative (2017), while 50 cities in the U.S. claim to be sanctuary cities,

Black and Brown youth and their families in these same cities are not protected from unjust, unforgiving and discriminatory local criminal legal systems. From “broken windows” policing, to Stop and Frisk, to criminalizing the poor and to the school-to-prison pipeline, systems that Black and Brown youth are forced to navigate everyday make finding sanctuaries an impossible task.

Black life in the U.S. has never been positioned in a way where the necessity of refuge was considered or rather prioritized. In fact, in the U.S. Black life is predicated on the exact opposite of refuge: Blackness in many ways is understood through its non-ownership of safe space, being without sanctuary always. Within the theme societal climate (macro), Khalif highlights this when he explained that while there may be a majority of Black students in his school (located in a white neighborhood) that he knows this is still not their environment—referring to both the school and the surrounding neighborhood. We come to understand that even in this predominately Black school, which should be a sanctuary for the youth, they still know that it is not a space that belongs to them. Khalif’s data example is supported by coverage of the April 12, 2018 arrest of Donte Robinson and Rashon Nelson (both 23-years-old) at a Starbucks in Philadelphia. After two minutes of arriving into Starbucks, the manager called the police and the two young men were arrested for not purchasing anything and refusing to leave (Stevens, 2018). This incident at Starbucks confirms Khalif’s sentiment that this is not an environment for Black youth. Where do Black youth go for sanctuary? Moving from the macro, the literacies of the students revealed how their urban school is not a sanctuary and how urban schools actually push Black youth into unsafe places. For example, under the theme institutional mirroring (micro), Toni’s discussion of the nation investing in prisons in order to push Black youth there since they will “drop out and sell drugs” speaks to the ways she has come to make sense of her urban high

school as violent. She does not see school operating as sanctuary, and instead, acknowledges the institutional arrangements that obstruct her search for sanctuary. This continuous searching that Black youth do to find shelter from the onslaught of messages about their inferiority reveals that most space and place has the potential to harm Black youth as a result of an education that is anti-Black in nature.

For Black people, geography matters. For example, *The Negro Motorist Green Book* of 1949 began by stating, “it has been our idea to give the Negro traveler information that will keep him from running into difficulties, embarrassments, and to make his trip more enjoyable” (Schomburg, 1949, p. 1). In this same introduction it is noted that,

There will be a day sometime in the near future when this guide will not have to be published. That is when we as a race will have equal opportunities and privileges in the United States. It will be a great day for us to suspend this publication for then we can go wherever we please, and without embarrassment (p. 1).

As the Starbucks incident revealed, perhaps Black people still need a travel guide of sorts, something outlining where Blackness will be safe and not victim to embarrassment. This is especially true considering that Rashon Nelsonⁱⁱ (Starbucks arrestee) explained in an interview that “he was worried about the situation spinning out of control and that he might possibly die” (Held, 2018). Moreover, as the data examples of Khalif and Toni demonstrate, there is an urgent need for Black youth to be provided with spaces where they feel like they are in their environment; an environment that does not have ulterior motives to funnel them into an unsafe space (e.g. prison) or death, being left completely without space. The idea that these Black youth need sanctuary connects to the larger history discussed throughout my dissertation that Black people live in the afterlife of slavery and property, a marker characterized quite literally by Blacks not being able to be safe in most places determined by the fact that they were once official property of the nation state.

Acknowledging the Tensions of Black Space as Textual Sanctuary

As I have documented throughout much of my dissertation, the urban school is often not a sanctuary for Black youth. A major tension then with my conception of Black space as textual sanctuary and the need for this space in urban schooling is actually creating textual sanctuaries, particularly how the urban school itself can work towards transforming itself as a sanctuary for the cultivation of Black textualities. The history of Afrocentric schools (Asante, 1991; Irvine, 1990; Lee, 1992; Shockley & Frederick, 2010; Shujaa, 1994), in fact, has been a direct counter to this tension I see of textual sanctuaries being implemented since American schooling is bent towards white supremacy. Since most U.S. urban schools are not rooted in Afrocentrism, to engage in such Black-centric transformative practice will be difficult. Considering the work presented here, I do not think that the creation of such sanctuaries are an impossibility, but I do acknowledge the fact that my desire of such space is counter to the ways the urban school has functioned for Black youth. If urban schools are inherently anti-Black, where is the room for textual sanctuary for Black youth? While there is much more work to be done on the transformation of entire urban institutions into textual sanctuaries, there is a considerable amount of room for this tension to be muted by educators co-creating sanctuaries within the urban school as done in my study.

In addition to the tension of Black space as sanctuary being cultivated in anti-Black space, is the issue of who can develop these co-created space with Black youth. As an exclusively Black space, it is important that critical Black educators be the major co-creators of community with Black youth in the development of textual sanctuaries. However, given the demographics of urban schoolteachers and leaders, in some cases Black educators may not be readily available to engage in this work—especially outside of the typical school day. This is a

major problem because a core component of the exclusive Black space in my project was my presence as a critical Black educator. The students routinely and openly discussed how this space would be completely different if a non-Black person, particularly a white teacher, was working with them. In order to work through this tension, educators who are serious about providing youth sanctuary must be intentional and active in their search to find community leaders, activist, and educators who might be interested in facilitating such a space. The importance of a critical Black educator exists in the idea that the sanctuary is not about educating non-Blacks on Blackness. Indeed, teaching and learning between the youth and I took place in a variety of ways, however, this teaching and learning was not about Black people teaching non-Black people about our lived experiences. Such teaching is not and never will be sanctuary. A Black textual sanctuary operates with a for us, by us imperative.

Establishing Textual Sanctuaries: Implications and Recommendations for Improving Urban Education for Black Youth

Before providing the two major practical components in establishing textual sanctuary it is important that I take time to further explain the ideological basis of the concept. The major form of violence the urban school enacts against Black youth comes through the ways they facilitate students' misrecognition of antiblackness. The urban school does not directly name antiblackness because it is implicated within it, meaning the urban school would need to name and begin resisting itself. This cloaking of antiblackness is violent, because Black youth know antiblackness is real, yet the urban school as a part of the larger anti-Black nation-state has to make Black youth think that antiblackness does not exist. This cloaking of antiblackness by the urban school in turn focuses on promoting social constructed ideals that assert that Black youth are inherently pathological and incapable of learning. Each day, Black youth are mandated to attend schools that structurally contribute to the suffering of Black youth on every level. Given

this, my concept of the textual sanctuary must most importantly be understood as a stance, an imagining of a needed way to hold the urban school accountable of anti-Black organizational structures (e.g. policies, practices, and the logics that guide their development). The stance of the textual sanctuary is about first understanding the urban school as an anti-Black site and then taking practical steps forward to establish space with the specific intention to oppose or lessen the impacts of antiblackness. Warren (2017) describes such space as *Decidedly Black*. That is, physical space designed to cater specifically to the needs, interests, desires, and perspectives of Black youth, moving them from the margins to the center of education practice and policy making.

In a textual sanctuary, Blackness should be able to flourish, unapologetically and Blackness is unpoliced. With the understanding that Black youth are rich textual sites, and thus deserving of exclusive space where their textualities can be expressed without inhibition or judgement, the concept of textual sanctuaries provides urban education practitioners a way of thinking about approaches to better serving Black youth to the end that such a partnership with Black youth works to subvert antiblackness and white supremacist schooling arrangements. Black youth have to subvert antiblackness and white supremacy in order to exist. What might the education of Black youth look like if the urban school felt that it was absolutely necessary to subvert antiblackness and white supremacy endlessly? This is not easy work, but it is necessary work: It is the work that we must look towards as we continue to engage schools in ways that humanize and sustain Black children.

In Chapter One, I explained that my work is not focused on the discovery of an unheard of Black language and literacy practice, but that it is first and foremost about paying attention to the already existing ways Black youth use language and literacy to critically analyze their

worlds. Establishing textual sanctuary is less about creation and more about the development of what already exists at the core of Black youth (their critical textual lives). The first component of thinking about establishing textual sanctuaries with Black youth then is to understand that they are already engaging in theorizations about their Blackness and antiblackness considering that their lived experiences are shaped by these phenomenon. Whether through social media engagements, conversations with family and friends, the meaning behind their tattoos and fashion, (dis)engagements with schooling, etc., Black youth are documenting their lived experiences. As a result of this, the textual sanctuary is not an intervention into the lives of Black youth. On the contrary, the work that educators do with Black youth in the space of a textual sanctuary, and the ideas that emerge from this space must be regarded as an intervention to disrupt the antiblackness of urban schooling. Again, the textual sanctuary is a model rooted in, and established through the voices and experiential knowledge of Black youth. Therefore, any affinity space developed that does not seriously consider Black youth as textual sites and leaders of transformation as told through their literacy lives, cannot be considered a textual sanctuary.

The second component necessary in the establishment of a textual sanctuary is the collaboration with a critical Black educator. In line with Freire's (2000) concept of the great humanistic and historical task, where the oppressed lead their liberation, a textual sanctuary which is rooted in examining the world as is to think about a new world, means that a critical educator who also is Black will be necessary. The idea that Black youth are textual sites means that they would benefit from being in partnership with an educator who moved through the world with a similar textual reference, the embodied history of Black life. This is not to say that non-Black critical educators cannot and should not attempt to build community with Black youth, but rather to say that my data demonstrated that central to this work was my presence as a critical

Black educator. A critical Black educator becomes necessary in that no time in the space should be spent trying to explain Blackness. For example, during our after-school sessions, there were several times when white female teachers attempted to walk in the room and the students became immediately silent. One teacher in particular did not speak to me or the students but stayed on the periphery of the room. She was promptly asked to leave. Just like Black exclusive space is not about educating non-Blacks on the lived experiences of Black life, it is also not a spectacle. The textual sanctuary is about everyone in the room deeply benefitting from examinations of antiblackness, because their literal lives depend on it. It can be very easy for a non-Black person (even with good intentions) to distance themselves from the sharing of Black students and become simply a spectator. In a textual sanctuary, everyone is fully invested in seeking to understand and resist antiblackness.

LIMITATIONS

The limitations of my study or future considerations for my research can be organized into three categories: observations, time in the field, and the intersection of race and gender. The youth and I intentionally prioritized the after-school sessions where I was a participant-observer, as our main ethnographic social location. The after-school sessions served as the basis for our community in that it was not during the school day, which allowed students to fully immerse themselves in the community without worrying about missing classes. However, as the students all were involved in multiple extra-curricular activities and lived in various parts of the city, our after-school sessions (usually 1-2 times a week for 60-90 mins) only represented a glimpse of the possibilities of the kind of work that could be done if more time after-school was available or if the students and I also met on weekends. For example, preliminary work that I have done with youth around antiblackness and symbolic violence has taken place during the summer, which

allowed for more time with participants. Additionally, a limitation was that my participant-observations in our after-school sessions were privileged over non-participant classroom observations. Since antiblackness largely operates as invisible, I designed my research in prioritizing tuning into the ways the Black youth themselves named and detailed antiblackness. However, I think being more intentional about non-participant observations in classrooms could have served to compliment the ways the students engaged in explications of antiblackness in our after-school sessions. In other words, while the literacies shared and developed in the after-school spaces were the core of the project, better complimenting participant observations with non-participant observations could have provided more richness and depth to my data.

The second limitation is in regards to the time spent with the students. While the formal ethnography took place over the course of a year, it would be great to have developed other ways to spend time with youth. The limited time in the field also speaks to the expansion of the social location in that more time would have naturally allowed for our space to stretch beyond the confines of our after-school meetings. For example, while the students and I engaged in rich conversations regarding their homes and communities, it would have been insightful to be invited into these homes and communities as way to fully immerse myself into the lives of the participants, particularly as a way for me to see how they may be engaged in sanctuary making outside of our project. More time with the students outside of our meetings could have provided insights into data around how the youth navigated and resisted antiblackness in real time. In other words, my project was about thinking of ways to cultivate textual sanctuaries for the Black youth, however as I have stated before, the Black youth lived very literate lives, and so more time in the field would possibly allow me to see these glimpses of sanctuary already present in the lives of the students.

The third limitation of my study is that it lacked a specific gender analysis, within my larger specificity of antiblackness. The priority in my research was to move from broad conceptions of race to the micro level of Blackness. However, within this research design, I did not include specific theoretical framings and epistemologies that were rooted in the analysis of Black boys and girls separately. It is widely understood and documented that intersectionality for marginalized populations is important, especially considering much educational research has given a lot of attention to the experiences of Black boys. Also, larger American discourses often speaks about anti-Black violence that effects Black men and boys, while completely overlooking the ways in which anti-Black violence is deeply present in the lives of Black women and girls as well. Particularly since the majority of my research participants were Black girls, I could have been much more intentional about including a specific gender analysis. Throughout the data, the students naturally uttered phrases like “as black male” or as a Black woman,” revealing that there was room to probe more in interviews and in our collective meetings around the ways the students understood antiblackness through both their race and gender.

FUTURE RESEARCH

My future research will continue to be situated within the fields of Language and Literacy, Urban Education, and Critical Race Studies. While my future research agenda lies at the intersection of these three fields, for the purpose of this section, I briefly outline how I see my future work engaging with these fields separately. I will continue to build out research that uses this data as a foundation to further investigate my theorizing of Black youth as textual sites and the need for exclusive Black spaces in the form of textual sanctuaries. I also plan to continue to push the ways in which the field of Language and Literacy conceptualizes literacy by moving beyond traditional forms of reading and writing, being sure to highlight the importance of orality

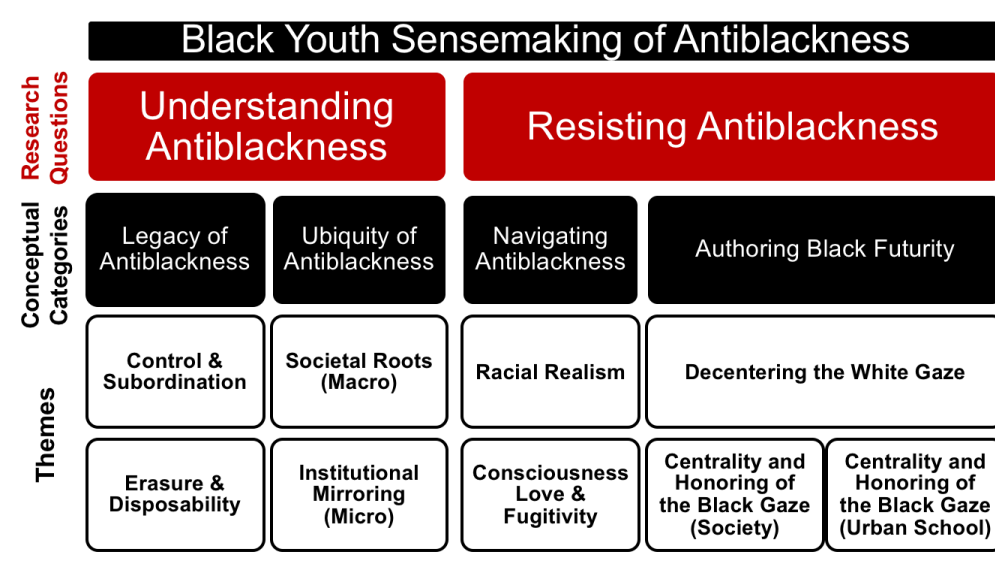
in the Black tradition, particularly as a foundation to Black literacies. This work will also be used in my future research in English Language Arts (ELA) teacher education, in thinking about ways educators can begin to partner with Black youth to lessen the impacts of antiblackness, especially the ways they show up in English classrooms. In the field of Urban Education, I will continue to engage in research that pushes the field to consider the specificity of anti-Black racism (especially the unique role of slavery's afterlife and violence in the lives of Black children). For example, How might urban school leaders and teachers come to deeply understand the historic and contemporary context of antiblackness in urban schooling (that effects all youth of color) and then use that understanding as a tool to build more just and equitable schooling environments via curriculum, policies, etc.? My future research in the area of Critical Race Studies will continue to contribute to the literature focusing on the specificity of Blackness, specifically through the use of BlackCrit and other Black-centric theoretical frameworks. Specifically, I will continue in the tradition of Critical Race research that is participatory in nature and that centers the lived experiences of the youth and communities (such as Torre, 2009) I intend to build community with through research.

CONCLUSION

The participants in my study revealed the concrete ways antiblackness informs every aspect of their lived experiences. The data showed that the Black youth see the legacy of antiblackness as enactments of control and subordination and erasure and disposability. This legacy has resulted in the ubiquity of antiblackness, which for the youth is responsible for the societal roots (macro) of antiblackness and the institutional mirroring (micro) of antiblackness. The students' commitments to racial realism and consciousness, love, and fugitivity showed the major ways they navigated antiblackness. Lastly, the data provided insights into the authoring of

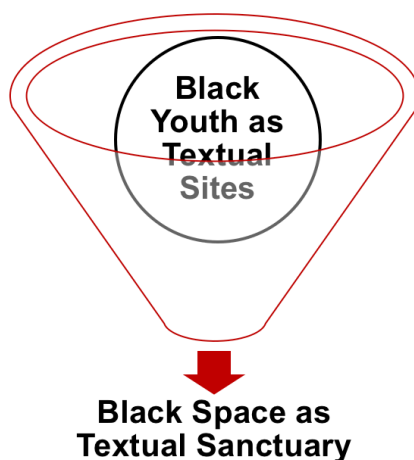
Black futurity, through the ways students consistently decentered the white gaze, while simultaneously centering and honoring the Black gaze in both society and the context of their urban school.

Figure 17: Graph: This figure shows a graphic of the research questions, conceptual categories, and themes



From the data that resulted in these larger conceptual categories and themes, I put forth the concepts of Black youth as textual sites and Black space as textual sanctuary.

Figure 18: Graph: This Picture shows a graphic of my conceptualization of Black youth as textual sites and Black space as textual sanctuary



The sanctuary that the youth and I created is counter to the ways Black youth are taught to misrecognize antiblackness as it informs their lives. Black textual sanctuaries facilitate the process of recognition: the recognition that the U.S. is an anti-Black nation and that urban schools are both implicated and complicit in the violence experienced in schools, and thusly the violence experiences in Black communities. Through our collective naming and detailing of antiblackness, the sanctuary became an active space of acknowledging the ways structures in society and the urban school actually work to enact violence against the Black youth, symbolically. In order for Black youth to propel themselves into the future in ways that are humanizing and sustaining, it is necessary for them to recognize obstructions to this futurity. This recognition cannot and should not be seen as a project in hopelessness, but the exact opposite. As the texts and textures of the students demonstrated, their collective engagements with antiblackness actually provided the foundations for their critical hope (Duncan-Andrade, 2009). Conceptualizing Black youth as textual sites and the necessity for the development of Black space as textual sanctuary demonstrates the possibilities of urban schooling centering and honoring the voices and lived experiences of Black youth in order to create urban schooling environments that are anti Black suffering.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

Join! Join!



Do you want to be a part of a **creative, fun, and important** after-school program where you can share your opinions about school and life as Black youth in America?

Do you want to think about how to help make schools in Philadelphia and across the country better for Black youth?

Let your voice be heard!

Join The Urban Literacy Coalition today!

Information Session:

Thursday, September 22nd

Directly After-School (3:15pm)

Room: TBD

Speaking Our Minds, Bettering Our Future

APPENDIX B

Preliminary Interest Questionnaire

Name:	Age:	Gender:
What grade are you in?		
What Section of Philadelphia Do You Live In?		
Why are you interested in participating in the project?		
Are you available to meet two times a week after school for 90 minutes?		
Do you like to write (e.g. essays, poetry, songs, rap lyrics, spoken word, anything, etc)? If so what are your favorite things to write and why?		
Are you interested in social justice (e.g. Black Lives Matter, fighting for equal education, etc.)? What about social justice do you like?		
What is your understanding of racism in the United States of America? Feel free to provide examples to express your point.		
How comfortable are you discussing issues of race and racism?		
Please provide any other information you would like to share about yourself that you think will be helpful for me to know:		

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ⁱ This is a physical space designed to center the desires, interests, and perspectives of Black youth in its composition and maintenance. See Warren's (2017) *Urban Preparation: Young Black Men Moving from Chicago's South Side to Success in Higher Education* for an expanded discussion of *Decidedly Black* space.

ⁱⁱ See Stevens, M. (2018, April 15). Starbucks C.E.O. Apologizes After Arrests of 2 Black Men. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/15/us/starbucks-philadelphia-black-men-arrest.html>