

# Introduction: Black Lives Matter and Rural Education

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In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, which demanded that many of us work and learn from home and that we mask and distance ourselves from others, we witnessed, from our couches, at our desks, and on our cell phones and tablets, the violent murder of George Floyd by the Minneapolis Police Department. With so much at stake, individuals and communities were compelled to organize and march, together, for Black lives. Journalists and scholars took a keen interest in the presence of Black Lives Matter protests across various landscapes. Rural communities (re)emerged as a place of critical thought and action, disrupting the dominant images of rural spaces as White, monocultural, and conservative. For decades, the tendency to imagine racial inequality as only a problem of urban spaces has obscured Black struggle in rural communities. The Black Lives Matter protests of the summer of 2020 reminded us that Black matters are also rural matters.

There is a long history of scholarship and literature on the struggle for Black life and education in rural communities. It is critical that we return, for example, to W. E. B. Du Bois's (1903/2018) *The Souls of Black Folk* and especially his chapter, "Of the Meaning of Progress." In this chapter, Du Bois writes of returning to a rural community in Tennessee where he had, as a young man, been a teacher. "Progress" is a site of loss as he mourns the death of Black people he had come to love and as he considers how new buildings signal the forfeiture of Black control of their educational institution:

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My log schoolhouse was gone. In its place stood Progress; and Progress, I understand, is necessarily ugly. The crazy foundation stones still marked the former site of my poor little cabin, and not far away, on six weary boulders, perched a jaunty board house.... I peeped through the window half reverently, and found things that were more familiar. The blackboard had grown by about two feet, and the seats were still without backs. The county owns the lot now. (pp. 57–58)

Du Bois reminds us of how essential rural schools and schooling have been for Black struggle and development, and Du Bois's writing teaches us to question the ways in which larger progress narratives function to obscure dispossession, displacement, and disenfranchisement within Black rural communities.

Since Du Bois published *Souls*, many—including James Anderson, bell hooks, Robin D. G. Kelley, Joyce E. Allen-Smith, James B. Stewart, and Vanessa Siddle Walker, to name a few—have written of the struggles of Black rural people in America and the crucial roles that formal and informal education have played in the fight for racial justice. This special issue of the *Journal of Research in Rural Education* draws from this heritage. The study of the Black Lives Matter movement and education unearths crucial questions for investigating and understanding the current conditions of racial and educational inequality in rural America. We are convinced that there is much to learn about the meanings of and organizing for Black lives in rural communities in the 21st century.

This special issue includes contributions from educational researchers, interdisciplinary scholars, activists, and graduate and undergraduate students whose work and writing center rural people, places, and experiences from various regional contexts. It features conceptual essays and empirical studies that focus on the relationship between rural communities, the movement for Black lives and education.

In what follows, we, the coeditors, offer a brief reflection on the articles and road map for the issue as a whole.

The contributors to the special issue consider the rural as a homeplace. The majority of us, including the coeditors, once called or currently call a rural community home. This connection drives much of our interest, purpose, and investigation. We draw from, value, and present the critical knowledge of racism and rural education that was developed and sustained by our ancestors, elders, and youth. The special issue begins with the question and theorizing of the rural homeplace as a site of not only struggle but resistance (hooks, 1990). In Sandra C. Nichols's contribution, "A Three Cord Strand: Three Generations of Black Women's Educational Experiences in Mississippi," she centers the struggle for Black education in rural communities through the stories and perspectives of her mother, her daughter, and herself. Rooted in counter-storytelling, she uncovers similarities and differences in rural educational experience across generations and demonstrates the importance of the village—especially the role Black women educators have played in the preservation of life and learning in rural Mississippi. We learn that rural homeplace is a space of intergenerational knowledge of struggle and education.

Similarly, Emmanuel Harris II's "Black Soil in the Mississippi Delta: Thriving on the Farm Against the Odds" collects the educational experiences of Black rural elders to emphasize the historical connections among land, learning, and life. Drawing on interviews and archives, Harris presents the struggle of Black farmers (there are fewer and fewer every year) against the threat of dispossession, and how a family of educators strove to sustain a rural life for their children and grandchildren. His study demands that we consider the historical struggle for Black landownership within rural communities and how sustaining Black rural life is rooted in connection to these lands.

Moving from these freedom dreams to an analysis of racial segregation, Serena M. Wilcox, in her "Still Separate: Black Lives Matter and the Enduring Legacy of School Segregation in Rural Georgia," helps us understand the perspectives of Black mothers, who, through social media, "call out" how the schoolhouse contributes to racial terror and encourages other Black parents to resegregate their schools on behalf of their children. Within this context of the rural homeplace, these Black mothers' action expresses what Wilcox calls a "reparative compromise"—a critical response to integrated rural school districts in which racism is ignored by White school leaders, parents, and policymakers, and in which segregated schools provide a safer and culturally relevant space of educational growth and development. Wilcox's article, like those of Harris and Nichols, is grounded in and theorizes race and schooling with the help of the educational imaginations of Black rural elders.

The educational imaginations and voices of youth—as well as the imaginations and voices of educators of these youth—are also crucial to the current movement for Black lives. During the Civil Rights era, youth led the movement for integration and the fight for equality by conducting sit-ins and freedom schools, and this history provides an invaluable resource for today's youth activists who demand Black Lives Matter on the streets and in their schools. In the summer of 2020, we witnessed rural youth organize and join in protests, and several articles in our special issue highlight the role of youth in rural activism for Black lives and their perspectives of the movement and the change they want to see and are making in their schools. In "Activism in the Boonies for Black Lives and Educational Change: A Critical Conversation with Youth Rural Activist Gem Amber Sun Helper," Ezekiel Joubert III speaks with a youth rural activist about her organizing for Black lives and education in upstate New York. Helper describes what it means to be a youth engaged with other young people and their families to challenge the ways schools have mishandled acts and symbols of racial violence in schools. Helper shows how youth not only desire to become leaders for social change, but that they have a critical understanding of the policies that shape racial inequality in educational spaces.

We learn from youth-driven protests and activism that the movement for Black lives demands intersectional and international points of view. Expressed in demands that "All Black Lives Matter," youth often propel the movement to consider overlooked communities that identify as LGBTQ and as part of the Diaspora. Amy Walker's "Black Lives Matter to Latinx Students: Exploring Social Practices of Latinx Youth as Activists in the Rural Midwest" explores the protest signs and symbols of Latinx youth protesters, as they moved beyond the spatial boundaries and purposes laid out by adult organizers of a protest in her home town. Walker's analysis suggests that these youth view Black Lives Matter as a cross-racial movement and that they view their own participation as an act of racial solidarity.

Youth participation in antiracist activism is not without complexity and contradiction, especially within rural spaces that include neighbors and community members who reject or distrust such activism. In "The Threat of Visibility and State-Sanctioned Violence for Rural Black Lives Matter Youth Activists," Erika Kitzmiller and Elizabeth Burton explore differences in how two youth in a small town in Pennsylvania related to Black Lives Matter protests. The *threat of visibility* is examined to show how the reality of everyone knowing who you are and where you live can affect youth involvement in protest. Kitzmiller and Burton demand that we reckon with risks that youth activists take, even as we admire their action and demands for racial justice.

The actions of youth during the Black Lives Matter era have transpired not only in the central squares of small towns, but also on rural college campuses. In their article, “And the Band Played On: Student Activism and the Black Lives Movement at a Rural Regional Public University,” Crystal R. Chambers and Loni Crumb, in collaboration with Jayla Cofield, Nicholas Fullenwider, Chloe Pearson, and Amber Sturdivant, describe the actions and experiences of a group of band members who “took a knee” when they were supposed to be playing the “Star Spangled Banner” before a college football game. Their study highlights the social and emotional labor Black students perform when they choose to protest at historically White and rural campuses. Chambers and Crumb also seek to hold professors and university administrators accountable for providing spaces for Black students to process social isolation and to care for their own emotional well-being.

As the Black Lives Matter movement has grown and helped us understand contemporary structures and discourses of racism, rural educators have had to make pedagogical and curricular choices related to how they would (or would not) address police killings of Black people and collective resistance to systemic racism. While some school districts and states have banned (or are seeking to ban) any mention of Black Lives Matter and racial justice activism from school curricula, teacher education, and professional development, such efforts are simultaneously and continuously opposed and resisted at multiple levels of our education system. Juan Manuel Niño and Marisa B. Perez-Diaz’s article, “Social Justice Leaders Serving Students of Color in Southwest Texas Rural Schools,” explores the experiences and perspectives of rural educators who have responded to our historical moment of the pandemic and social uprising to turn their practices in the direction of empathy and social justice. Their article shares how rural teachers, as social justice leaders, take seriously their role in confronting racial oppression in their pedagogy and in their schools by committing to a practice of equity and inclusivity.

Contributors to this special issue are interested in rural education and the movement for Black lives, not only as scholars and researchers, but as educators and activists who want to participate in and contribute to social change and critical education. It is fitting, then, that our special issue concludes with an article that examines the role of public intellectuals in the movement for Black lives in rural communities. In her article, “‘We’re Not Done Yet’: Public Intellectuals, Rural Communities, and Racial Equity Organizing,” sociologist Alexis Grant-Panting draws on the Black sociological tradition and autoethnographic reflection to examine the social complexities of organizing a gathering in her rural Texas community to dialogue about racial inequality. She also shares key lessons that

she learned in her public intellectual role, including how different racial groups seemed much more interwoven and entangled in rural communities, as compared to what she had experienced in urban communities.

As coeditors, we admire and recommend the articles of this special issue and thank the authors for their contributions. We recognize that, despite the richness and nuance here, there is much more to learn about the Black Lives Matter movement in rural spaces and what this movement means for the educational lives and hopes of rural youth and adults. We hope that this special issue will encourage educational scholars to attend to what Michael J. Dumas (2008) called the Black educational imagination, as well as to support and foreground critical research needed to understand the struggles for life and education in our society’s *forgotten places* (Reynolds, 2017). In a world where racism seems to never cease and where our geographies too often determine our racial understandings and movements—and with Du Bois’s musings on progress echoing in our ears—we hope, nonetheless, that this issue’s articles suggest a way (or better, ways) forward.

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# A Three Cord Strand: Three Generations of Black Women's Educational Experiences in Mississippi

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*This article depicts a qualitative narrative study that reflects on the educational paths followed by three generations of Black women from rural Mississippi. The purpose of this study was to expand the documented footprint of Black women's educational experiences in the rural Deep South by exploring my own educational experiences as a researcher and as a participant as well as the experiences of women in my immediate family. Reflections, connections, and analyses address 20 years of lived experience in Mississippi school systems. The intersectionality of critical race theory (CRT) rooted in Black feminist theory provided the theoretical framework. The research questions addressed were: What are the similarities and differences among three generations of Black women educated in Mississippi? How can this information assist us to better understand the historical and present intersectional struggles of Black education in rural areas? The intersections of gender and race were explored. Mapping as inductive analysis using writing as inquiry allowed me to garner a deeper meaning of the stories. The approach to story analysis was iterative as I moved in and out of several steps. My insights and reflections depicted a supportive village that helped to guide the women through their studies. The overall finding was that these women's sustained success in rural Mississippi educational settings was linked to having a nurturing and supportive network of educators throughout their academic careers. We need to investigate other Black women's educational experiences in rural education settings to increase representation and to demonstrate the congruences and particularities of learning what matters to Black women in rural communities.*

Education in the Deep South, specifically Mississippi, has been riddled with inequities and blatant prejudice toward Black women since the state's inception. Black women in Mississippi were deemed invisible, disposable,

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and unvaluable. This perspective was evident across eras, as Black women were often omitted from protections sanctioned by policy, rights, and privileges. Centuries of inhumane treatment of Black people in Mississippi greatly affected their access to education in a system deeply rooted in institutional racism (Cornelius, 1843; Davis, 1845; Mississippi Convention, 1861). The present study explores the rich history of three generations of Black American women's educational experiences in Mississippi. While comparable reflections can be found in oral histories, they are rapidly decreasing as our elders cross over. Moreover, the search for supporting artifacts for this study indicated that the need to document these experiences is increasingly urgent. Formally preserved artifacts and written accounts of schooling in Mississippi for Black women are scarce, especially for those who attended school prior to the 1960s.

This trigenerational mapping of Black women's access to education in Mississippi may be relevant to many educators, administrators, community leaders, politicians, and citizens. While geographically located in Mississippi, the story may connect with people across the globe in rural, suburban, and urban locales, as well as with people of different races, ethnicities, and nationalities. History is

seldom told from the perspective of the Black woman. It is *herstory* that has been almost erased.

This article draws from a qualitative narrative study that reflects the educational paths of three generations of Black women with 20 years of lived experience in Mississippi school systems. The purpose of this study was to expand the documented footprint of Black women's educational experiences in the Deep South. By exploring my own educational experiences as the researcher and a participant as well as the experiences of women in my immediate family, I was able to begin the process. Critical race theory (CRT) rooted in Black feminist theory provided the theoretical framework of this study. The research questions addressed were:

1. What are the similarities and differences among three generations of Black women educated in Mississippi?
2. How can this information assist us to better understand the historical and present intersectional struggles of Black education in rural areas?

This article begins with a description of my theoretical framework. Next is a statement identifying the context—historical and cultural aspects—of this study. Following this overview are vignettes, including my deeply personal account of the three generations of Black women's educational experience in Mississippi schools. The three women whom I selected for this study are my mother, my daughter, and myself. I chose to study our experiences and connections because autoethnography is powerful, and our intimate relationships allowed me to explore and understand the content and context with greater depth and clarity. This article concludes with findings and next steps for future research. The methodology employed is explained in the appendix.

### Theoretical Framework

The theoretical foundation of this trigenerational study of Black women's education in Mississippi draws from Critical Race Theory rooted in Black feminist theory. The counternarrative represents my perspective as a Black woman educated in Mississippi (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). The struggles of the Black women represented in this narrative and the empowering actions that they took in response to their experiences of oppression are highlighted throughout the text. Reflective of bell hooks's (1984) insightful synthesis, connections were made between these Black women's space and "place" related to being educated in Mississippi from slavery to present day.

I used *intersectionality* as an interpretative framework to address the oppression we experienced as Black women. The concept of intersectionality emerged from legal studies and was used to describe the "location of women of color both within overlapping systems of subordination and at the margins of feminism and antiracism" (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1265). Race and gender intertwined, informing each other on how school structures affected the Black women in this study differently across generations. Applying intersectionality allowed me to gain a deeper understanding of my interpretation of racism and sexism within Mississippi's educational and legal systems over time. The next section describes the historical context for the vignettes that follow.

### Three Generations of Black Women

The Jim Crow system maliciously attacked Black Americans' access to education by establishing and executing a racial caste system shortly after the 14th Amendment was added to the U.S. Constitution. Primarily in Southern states, Black people were relegated to the status of second-class citizens, and the 13th and 14th Amendments to the U.S. Constitution became defunct between 1877 and the mid-1960s. Even more, the U.S. Supreme Court supported the Jim Crow system by upholding the constitutionality of racial segregation under the "separate but equal" tenet in the *Plessy v. Ferguson* ruling of 1896.

Following the Jim Crow era, the Civil Rights movement (1954–1968) sought to end legalized racial discrimination, disenfranchisement, and segregation in the United States. In 1954, the U.S. Supreme Court's ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education* mandated school integration. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 prohibited discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, or national origin. In the post-Civil Rights era, many believed that equality was established, especially after Barack Obama was elected president of the United States for two terms. However, the current Black Lives Matter movement (Teaching for Change, n.d.) is illuminating persistent disparities and calling for acceptance and justice. The Black Lives Matter movement is founded upon 13 basic principles: restorative justice, empathy, loving engagement, diversity, globalism, queer affirming, trans affirming, collective value, intergenerational, Black families, Black villages, unapologetically Black, and Black women.

The following vignettes reflect Cynthia Dillard's (2000) conceptualization of epistemology. They are documented accounts of "culturally engaged explanations of being human" (Dillard, 2000, p. 2). Grounded in the ethos of the community where the research was conducted were the language; the "tribe" or village; the sights and sounds; the spirituality; and the communal fellowship,

celebration, and mourning of a collective people. These vignettes also connected how I, the participant-researcher, was a part of the research process and what I learned about the human condition via my relationship with the research and the other participants. In this journey, I pondered my understanding in relation to others' understanding of their encounters. Additionally, the following vignettes (offset and in italics) align with the principles of the Black Lives Matter movement (Teaching for Change, n.d.).

### **Herstory: Grace's Access to Education in the 1940s and 1950s**

Grace is the great-granddaughter of an enslaved African. She is the granddaughter of a sharecropper. She is the daughter of a biracial, Black and Indigenous, third-grade educated mother. She is a first-generation high school graduate. She is the sister of two first-generation high school educated women. She is the mother of an equity-minded, first-generation doctoral program completer, and teacher educator. She is the grandmother of a social justice advocate and high school student.

Coming of age in the Jim Crow and Civil Rights eras, Grace played an active part in local sit-ins and attended informational/planning meetings at area churches. She was a year older than Emmett Louis Till and a rising ninth grader at the time of his murder in 1955. In the same year, Rosa Parks took a seat that resulted in the Montgomery Bus Boycott.

*Day breaks. Grace and Mary, twin sisters, rise early to prepare for the school day. Aboard a bus discarded by the White community school—with tattered seats, broken windows, and barely working mechanical systems—they made the trek to school. In 1947, at seven years of age, Mary and Grace attended Shady Grove School. Light peeked through the slats of a one-room schoolhouse that was shared by students from primary to secondary levels. Frigid winds ripped through the space during winter, and droplets of rain bead down during showers. Empty pails collected the streams of rainwater in random locations throughout the room. From December to February a fire blazed in the cast-iron heater that warmed the room and the bones. Shady Grove School, housed in a rickety, dilapidated building, was where they learned to read, write, and complete basic mathematical processes.*

Schooling in Mississippi for Grace in the 1940s and 1950s was racially segregated and less than equal. Maintaining and expanding the wealth of White

Mississippians was the premise upon which schools were established. An example of this priority was demonstrated in the school's academic calendar. The academic year accommodated cotton harvesting season in late September, as many Black students were cultivators of one of Mississippi's prized industries. School, therefore, met from October through April. Black students as young as five years of age would accompany their guardians to the cotton fields for harvesting. As young children of six, Grace and Mary worked alongside their grandmother Babe in the cotton fields. They experienced the tolling work of picking cotton before they enrolled in school.

Within these oral histories, Grace most frequently expressed that her most memorable elementary school academic accomplishment was learning the multiplication table. By the end of third grade, she could recite the one through twelve multiplication facts with ease. However, it was the educators whom she held in highest esteem. Grace reminisced about educators who were kind, compassionate, and vested in her overall well-being. Deep grin lines, toothy smiles, sparkling eyes, and a higher pitched voice abounded when she shared memories of a teacher who transported a small group of children to various events in his personal vehicle. One of Grace's most memorable educational events happened when this teacher took a group of four students, including the twins, to a classmate's funeral. Indubitably, she valued her knowledge and skill development, but it was the village within Shady Grove School that was most impactful.

During most of middle school, the twins lived with their parents and brothers in Louisiana, but they returned to Heidelberg, Mississippi, during their eighth-grade year. Grace and Mary attended Husband School, which was a short walk through the woods from their house. The school, although in a state of disrepair, was warm and welcoming. They were embraced and given access to all aspects of the academic curriculum and extracurricular activities. Although enrolled for less than half the school year, Grace and Mary were given leadership roles. The next year they were promoted to high school.

Grace and Mary completed their secondary education at Southside High School. A newly constructed school with modern amenities in Heidelberg, Mississippi, Southside enrolled the Black students in East Jasper County. The school was built quickly as the call for integration loomed. In 1954, the *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling overturned the *Plessy v. Ferguson* separate but equal ruling of 1896. The officials in Heidelberg, Mississippi, White men, had not previously addressed the separate but equal ruling. Thus, they decided to build Southside High School to prevent Black students from attending Heidelberg High School. Heidelberg High School had been in existence for years but was a "Whites only" school.

Again, Grace excelled academically. A first-generation high school graduate, she successfully completed high school in 1959. While proud of her academic accomplishments, the school-community partnership was Grace's most lauded aspect of her secondary experience. Early one morning after the children had left for school, an ember ignited a blaze that consumed her family's house, leaving them homeless. The community, including the twins' high school math teacher, rallied around the family. They were given temporary housing, clothing, household items, etc., and Grace and Mary's math teacher gave them handmade quilts. Grace reflected on her teacher's generosity often. And 60 years later, she still had the quilt.

### **Herstory: Sandra's Access to Education in the 1970s and 1980s**

I am the great-great-granddaughter of an enslaved African; the great-granddaughter of a sharecropper; the granddaughter of a third-grade educated Black and Indigenous woman; the daughter of a first-generation high school graduate; the mother of a Black change agent and teenager who attended school in Mississippi; and a Mississippi public school-educated, special education teacher educator, university professor and administrator, developer of change agents, and social justice advocate. I came of age during a time when many ascertained that racism no longer existed. Overt crude crimes were being replaced with more covert institutionalized forms of racism. Systems designed for White people effectively refused equal access to Black Americans. During this time, in the *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke* (1978) decision, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that race could be used as a factor in professional schools' admissions processes, but quotas were found to be unconstitutional. A decade later, Congress passed the Civil Rights Restoration Act of 1987, which extended the effect of discrimination laws to private institutions that receive federal funding. Black feminist theory grew during this time and called for strong theoretical frameworks that included firsthand experiences (bell hooks, 1984).

I was actively engaging in circles from which Black Americans had been excluded in my local area. I learned to navigate institutions, advocate for change, and bring other Black women along with me. During my K–12 education the foundation for advocacy and developing change agents was laid.

*Shadows befall the room. Orange tones dance with the shadows. Though dim, I can see and have no idea that the setting is less than ideal. Smiles, giggles, chants, music, fragrant scents,*

*and warmth provided the light that was physically absent. At two years of age, King Star Head Start Center was where I had my first experience with formal education. Each day was an adventure. We played outside. Mud pies and hopscotch were playground staples as well as tag and ring around the rosie. Vibrant colors and sounds filled the playground. Children squealed, laughed, ran, tumbled, fell, and lived to see another day. The school was not in my neighborhood, yet I felt safe and at home. I was enough.*

*All hues and shades of Black people, my teachers were Black. My peers were Black. The cafeteria staff and custodial workers were all Black. A mantra was not needed here, we all knew that at King Star Head Start Center our Black lives mattered. Now an abandoned building on the edge of town, artifacts from a once lively place remain. It felt big and welcoming when I was a child. Now it is a relic. The setting for my early childhood education was a cinderblock building with small, high windows through which slithers of light peeked. As a child the playground felt huge, but it was small, tight, and semi-enclosed with a steel fence. All the same, it was a haven that allowed me to be just me. Standing on this soil in southern Mississippi, random thoughts zoomed through my psyche, including a sea of Black faces, love and protection, the beginning of friendships, a place to learn to respect others and to be respected, and love of community.*

*Returning to my vehicle as drenching rain fell from the sky, I also remembered that the building flooded every time it rained heavily. I am grateful for the time I spent at King Star Head Start Center, but it is evident that our resources were subpar. We were given space in an area that White men did not value. Leaving this phase of my journey I simply thought that it was not the things at King Star Head Start Center that were most impactful for me; it was the people.*

Socially and culturally Nora Davis Elementary School was an extension of King Star Head Start Center. Many of my former classmates were enrolled at Nora Davis Elementary School. Again, most of my teachers looked like me. Not only that, but they also lived in my community and knew my family, neighbors, church members ... me. It was more than an academic exercise for these educators;

it was an investment in the future. While I blossomed academically, the most memorable aspects of my time at Nora Davis Elementary School were rooted in safety, security, confidence, discipline, and excellence.

Remarkable teachers were at the helm of my academic journey, navigating the way. Ms. Henry stands out as she taught one simple, intentional lesson that I will never forget. She formally introduced the concept of “code switching” and explained the relevance of mastering these skills. Both beneficial and cruel, this lesson opened my eyes to the reality that I was a visitor in my own land.

Saddled with making White people feel comfortable as I developed, learned, and navigated my path was draining.

Furthermore, it was not only the licensed educators who made Nora Davis Elementary School a safe haven. The support staff were also invested in our wellbeing. The custodian held us accountable for our actions, took pride in her work, and taught us to respect our surroundings. We looked up to her and honored her. The crossing guard took time out of her day to hold conversations with us while ensuring that we safely crossed a major intersection. Her chats in the morning helped me start the day positively, and her afternoon conversations could change my perspective on an otherwise bad day.

Nora Davis Elementary School provided me with many opportunities. For example, I presented the colors during ceremonies, spoke before hundreds of people, and delivered an award to former Governor William Winter. I learned to navigate conflict. I established new friendships and walked away from unhealthy ones. In short, Nora Davis Elementary School was the educational setting where I became rooted and grounded in being confident in myself and found joy in being me.

Unlike Nora Davis Elementary, a school in my community, William H. Mason Elementary School was the only grade school to which I was bused out of my community to attend. It was also the only school for which I had to use GPS navigation to locate during artifact collection. Standing on the grounds of William H. Mason Elementary School, I felt rigid. Overall, I remembered it being very formal and not very nurturing. However, in third grade, Mrs. Moore was my teacher. She lived down the street from the church we attended and was a thread in the community’s fabric. We have maintained a relationship.

Additionally, my first friendships with children who did not look like me developed at William H. Mason Elementary School. We talked on the phone and played with the same kids. They were genuinely nice to me. This school introduced me to navigating paths with White people in a system built on racism.

Gardiner Junior High School was akin to William H. Mason Elementary school in culture and climate. It was not inviting or welcoming; very few authority figures looked like

me. I only recalled two educators’ names, Mrs. Hicks and Ms. Welch. Mrs. Hicks, my physical education teacher, was my one Black teacher. She exuded the same energy as my teachers at Nora Davis Elementary. Invested, encouraging, and disciplined, I knew that she had my best interest in mind. Ms. Welch was also committed to ensuring that I had access to a quality education in a nurturing environment.

During the summer before my eighth-grade year, we moved to Ellisville, Mississippi. There I attended South Jones Middle School, the highest performing school in the county at that time. For the first time, I was in the noticeable minority. In some ways, as an outsider, I was more welcomed by teachers and administrators than by my Black peers from the area. Maybe I was better prepared to navigate the system—that is, acculturate to the norms of the majority. My father preached the importance of making White people feel comfortable. Regardless of the cause, an educator at South Jones Middle School—my eighth-grade English teacher, a White woman—favored me. Because of her, I became a member of the Student Council in eighth grade, although elections had been during the spring before I arrived. I was reelected each year until I finished high school.

Door after door opened. Oftentimes, I was the only Black person at the table. In classes, I was regularly one of no more than three Black individuals in a class of more than 20 students. By my senior year, my picture was in the yearbook 22 times. I was a member of the inaugural Mayor’s Youth Council of Jones County. My first year, I was one of two Black students selected across the county. We had to submit written applications, letters of recommendation, and interview. I was the only Black student representative during my senior year. Among school-based organizations, however, I was never selected to be a member of a content-specific academic honors club, although I was a member of the junior and senior Beta Club and an honor roll student. Participation was by invitation only. My friend, a Black student, requested to be a part of the science club and was told that she could not join. She was a straight A student who completed advanced courses.

Though I am grateful for these opportunities, I often felt isolated among both my Black and White peers. Between grades 8 and 12, I had two Black teachers. It was one of the librarians, a Black female, with whom I built a relationship and on whom I relied to help me navigate this space. There were some overtly racist actions that plagued South Jones High School. Denial in elite academic clubs was merely the beginning. During my 11th-grade year, I was placed in a general English class. The class consisted of approximately 95% Black students. After several weeks passed, the school counselor found that I was in the wrong class and moved me to an advanced setting. The difference in expectations was incomparable. While the advanced students had to

complete a 10-page research paper, which required that I search for supporting documents at the local junior college and university, the general students only completed 10 note cards for the year. Underprepared, unchallenged, ridiculed, deemed unworthy or incapable, systemic racism allowed those in authority to believe that it was within reason to leave these Black students behind.

Furthermore, I remember that when a popular White football player began dating a Black female student, he was ostracized by his White peers. Sitting in a small group of Black students, almost in tears, he was supported. I supported him while suffering from being told that I was less than by those who were friends and peers. These White students carried their Bibles and quoted scriptures out of context to justify their position. He stopped dating the young lady and was welcomed back into the fold.

I was blessed with access to many outlets to which most of my Black peers were not privy, but just because I was at the table did not mean that I was a member of the party. My mother taught me that I did not have a *place to stay in* or limits on what I was able to do and that I was equivalent to my White counterparts. Therefore, I always knocked, applied, and walked through doors. *I didn't know that I couldn't, so I did.*

### **Herstory: Morgan's Access to Education in the 2010s**

Morgan is the 15-year-old great-great-great-granddaughter of an enslaved African; great-great-granddaughter of a sharecropper; great-granddaughter of a third-grade educated, biracial, Indigenous and Black, woman; granddaughter of a first-generation high school graduate; and daughter of a first-generation college graduate and first-generation doctoral program completer. She is a community activist who is actively engaged in systematic processes designed to positively effect change. Morgan has participated in social justice-oriented trainings, community service projects, and programs designed to have an immediate impact on societal injustices. Her commitments were reflections of the Black Lives Matter movement (Teaching for Change, n.d.).

*Sappy sweetness followed by "bless your heart" often filled the air, both carrying a slight hint of deception. Apathy unchanged by multiple cups of coffee hung throughout the buildings in some educators' spaces. However, shining lights, educators appearing when most needed, encouraged Morgan to walk within her truth and follow her passion. A teacher who loved music, anime, manga, and writing like Morgan and who looked like her provided safety in a new and uninviting atmosphere. Journaling,*

*drawing, singing, videoing, and editing film became Morgan's canvases. During this time, while visiting the National Memorial for Peace and Justice, she had the opportunity to interact with Dr. Angela Davis. This chance encounter crystallized the work Morgan had been doing and started a conflagration that focused on injustice and prejudice. Thus, her passion connected with her truth, and she began to thread social justice and activism throughout her art. A metamorphosis of grandiose measure produced a fierce social justice advocate with a voice that she was unafraid to share.*

Attending public school in Mississippi 29 years after her mother and 59 years after her grandmother, Morgan entered the school doors dressed for battle daily. Microaggressions filled her middle school experience. The scratching of pencils on paper, doors closing, footsteps in the hall drew her attention. Despite knowing that it was distracting to some students, the mathematics teacher played hard rock frequently. Precious time was spent on various trending topics, but little focus was given to issues that Black students faced, such as police brutality. Yet wonderful opportunities were presented as well. Arriving after selections had been made, her voice and personality earned her a spot in the Oak Grove Middle School show choir, ensembles, and multiple chorales. Bright red lips, teased hair, makeup, sequins, and satin adorned each kick, twirl, and high note as she performed with a diverse group of students on stage night after night.

Meandering through the halls, picture after picture, row after row, countless Black faces incorporated into one after another—sports teams. And in images of students who had academic honors, row after row, year after year, one Black face, two Black faces, no Black faces. Approximately 1,700 students attended Oak Grove High School, and 47% were of minority status, mostly Black Americans. Yet, the number of academically high achieving students who graced the halls was minimal. Even more, each day a minority group, Indigenous people, were reduced to a half-clothed mascot. The symbol was immortalized in tile and trampled repetitively. Here was where one of Morgan's favorite teachers, who supported the development of her creativity, also found it imperative to articulate the N-word multiple times while reading *To Kill a Mockingbird* aloud to the class. Wrestling with her emotions of genuine appreciation and disdain, Morgan navigated her feelings about this teacher.

Morgan actively engaged in designing activities and events that targeted social justice within her local community. During her time in Mississippi public schools, she participated in the BRIDGES program in Memphis, Tennessee. This program's purpose was to *bridge* youth

from different communities in the metropolitan Memphis area. This connection was intentional and provided safe space in which the participants could discuss sensitive subjects. Topics of gender, race, socioeconomic status, sexual preferences, privilege, etc., were explored, dissected, and reimagined. In a BRIDGES-sponsored fellows program Morgan was also allowed to spread her wings even more while learning the foundational principles of social justice and activism.

An avid writer, Morgan has penned many poems, short stories, scripts, and spoken word pieces. "Black by Nature, Proud by Choice" is a descriptive piece that she wrote during her freshman year at Oak Grove High School. She first performed this piece of spoken word on February 23, 2020. A portion is shared below to provide a glimpse into her thoughts as a Black female student in Mississippi who faced educator and peer induced micro- and macro-aggressions daily, as well as to show how the charge of the Black Lives Matter movement was reflected in her expression of present-day oppression, which aligns with Evans-Winters and Esposito's (2010) research.

#### *Black by Nature Proud by Choice*

*Proud by choice. My brothers and sisters, do you believe in stereotypes?*

*Black girls are too ghetto and loud. We don't know how to speak fancy. We are too emotional. One moment, we want to be loved. The next moment, "don't touch me!"*

*Black boys are gangsters and will shoot up a place anytime. We cheat and all we want is that thing. We like puffing and are definitely addicted. Black boys do not have any self-control. Coming with no self-control, means we are a threat. My brother, my mother, my dad, and I am not the stereotype, and never will be. You are not the stereotype....*

*Black by nature proud by choice. We need to add the two up. I am black by nature, and I am proud by choice. I did not have a choice of being a Black young woman that is the shortest in her household, that has popping kinks that spring when I pull on them and flow effortlessly when I straighten or blowout them. I am a young woman trying to help young women like me, and I am proud.*

*Black by nature proud by choice.*

#### **Insights**

While analyzing participants' stories, themes emerged and were reviewed, sorted, chunked, and mapped to create common themes. A total of four reoccurring themes were identified: connections, impact of cultural appreciation, inequities of segregated schools, and attempt to erase the vulgarity of slavery.

#### **Connections**

While recording memories at a school that I attended in Mississippi, I began to understand that the support and resources made available to me were more important than the formality of the educational setting. Being a part of a nurturing community, engaging with others who truly believed and invested in me, and knowing that the only limits on my life were self-inflicted gave me the courage to live outside of the box. My insights and reflections further revealed that Grace, Morgan, and I have been able to successfully navigate segregated and integrated educational spaces because of the supportive *village* that helped guide us through our studies and because of the empowering movements of the respective eras during which we came of age. This insight aligns with Dillard's (2006) concept of *homeplace*. Homeplace is a place that is affirming of oneself and where Black women have dignity and self-respect. It is a place of rejuvenation from the daily battles encountered within a White supremacist society. We had a homeplace.

Additionally, we were self-advocates who worked within and across groups to develop skills and ideals that have been passed down throughout generations. Reflective of the Black Lives Matter movement's (Teaching for Change, n.d.) principle of collective value, Morgan has worked with youth and community leaders to change the punitive treatment of students who have experienced trauma. This work focused on increasing the number of counselors and decreasing the number of police officers in schools in the city of Memphis (Bridge Builders Change, n.d.). Likewise, I have formally trained college students to be advocates and activists in their communities. Understanding the origins of their beliefs, how to interpret information, and the importance of taking a stance for themselves and others are undertakings that I have welcomed. We have continued the tradition of self-advocacy and working within and across groups to develop our personal leadership skills and ideals while uplifting the community.

#### **Impact of Cultural Appreciation**

My initial survey of the stories and their embedded connections revealed a stark difference between the cultural impacts of segregated and integrated learning

environments—schools in Mississippi. Akin to Dillard's (2006) depiction of community, Grace received elevated cultural support and resources in segregated schools. Surrounded by individuals who valued her as a Black girl, she developed educationally without concern of performing for those who did not have a deeper understanding of what it meant to be a Black female in Mississippi. This insight mirrored Dillard's (2006) research on Black feminism. This study also found context and concrete examples relative to Grace's community, home life, religious position, and relegated place in society integral elements of her homeplace. Moreover, these elements were integrated into the curriculum and design of assignments, activities, and events that my mother experienced in school.

During Grace's schooling, students and teachers spoke without hesitation, not feeling the need to consider how their statements may have been taken out of context, considered unacceptable or offensive, or be interpreted as a measure of intelligence because of the inherent language presented. Grace spoke freely and respectfully. For example, the concepts of slang and Black vernacular were absurdities. She merely communicated her thoughts and ideas among people who understood her.

Learning from those who appreciated and lived within the same cultural context as she (East Jasper County, Mississippi) proved invaluable for Grace. Similarly, researchers have advocated for providing safe spaces that allow Black girls to fully develop (Evans-Winters, 2019). Grace benefitted from the safety of being surrounded by individuals who did not pass covert or subconscious judgment based on the color of her skin, kinkiness of her hair, fullness of her lips, hard sounds incorporated in her speech patterns, relegated position, and place in the American racialized caste system. This experience was immeasurable, freeing, and appreciated. School was a homeplace for her.

This comfort of being was diminished in the educational foundations of integrated learning environments—schools that Morgan and I attended in Mississippi during the post-Civil Rights and Black Lives Matter eras. I maintain profound appreciation for having had access to culturally rich early learning experiences at King Star Head Start and my years at Nora Davis Elementary School. Developing free from unintended ridicule and racialized micro- and macro-aggressions in Mississippi was liberating. I regret that this is a freedom that Morgan did not fully experience. The principles of loving engagement and empathy that are inherent to the Black Lives Matter movement (Teaching for Change, n.d.) were difficult to push forward when influential groups in the country failed to acknowledge that slavery was heinous and evil. This seemingly impossible shift was even more challenging for rural Southern states because they had histories of covert prejudice and inconsistent stances on equality. Furthermore, the Southern rural states were among

the first to pass legislation barring the teaching of CRT and accurate accounts of American history, including slavery in pre-K through 12th-grade curricula ("Map," 2021). There was an illusion among conservative groups that ignoring or rewriting history would make it go away. On the contrary, what happened was a greater divide among the nation's citizens.

### **Inequities of Segregated School**

Limited resources were the constitutionalized aspects of segregated schools that my mother and I attended in Mississippi (during the Jim Crow era and its remnants).

Awesome, engaging, and relevant cultural opportunities abounded in our culturally rich learning environments, but the materials, equipment, and human capital were not reflective of *Whites only* or integrated schools. The level of expertise and quality of craftsmanship provided to students in segregated schools waned in comparison. For example, while standing in the park adjacent to the historic Gardiner School building, I admired the ornate design and original bricks that were beautifully preserved. Yet the land where the original schools for Black people stood had no markings of recognition. Historic jewels have faded away. A clear distinction has been made in quality and respect for White people compared to Black Americans in Mississippi history.

Schools only for Black students in Mississippi were an afterthought provided because federal laws mandated them (Jackson, 2018). Since under Jim Crow Black people were at the bottom of the American caste system, quality was deemed unnecessary. My mom read books with unrelated cultural context—the *Dick and Jane* book series, which was almost 20 years old when she was in school in the 1950s. More than 20 years later, in the late 1970s, I read the same set of books, many of which were worn to tatters. It is important that the voices of intergenerational Black people, especially women, are freely shared (Evans-Winters, 2019). There are lessons to be learned and strategies to be uncovered that will help shape the future that is emerging from these previously silenced voices.

### **Attempt to Erase the Vulgarity of Slavery**

Anti-slavery laws forbade enslaved Africans from having access to literacy. In Mississippi during most of the Jim Crow era, Black people were criminalized for learning to read and write (Cornelius, 1983). These actions plagued the rural South, whether intentional or secondary, and manifested in an effort to forget or sterilize history in order to reduce the immense damage associated with this period.

These choices have resulted in gaps in the history of Black American women's educational experiences in Mississippi. A lack of commitment to restorative justice

(Black Lives Matter, 2018) is also demonstrated through these actions. For example, each school Grace attended has closed or changed in purpose. The only school that I attended which closed is Nora Davis Elementary School, a learning environment constructed for Black American students. The history of schools for Black people prior to 1960 in rural areas is fading. Oral histories are quickly being forgotten, leaving behind no concept of the amazing work that shaped Black students' confidence, self-esteem, and belief in their abilities. The present historical records inadequately address the educational experiences especially of Black women, specifically in the rural South.

### Directions for Future Research

Recording the stories of Black women's educational experiences in rural Mississippi, which are rich in history, is necessary to have a true picture of our nation's development and survival. Voices of Black women in rural Mississippi, previously erased, invisible, and disregarded, must be given space. Those culturally relevant principles that support the academic development of Black girls in rural Mississippi must be intentionally incorporated into the curriculum and culture of schools.

Our experiences in rural learning environments in the Deep South must be told. We can learn from these stories and possibly avoid the same mistakes. The stories shared are intergenerational and align with the social justice movements of the eras in which each of us grew up. Yet possibly the most relevant connection was made to the present-day Black Lives Matter movement. Within each woman's experience was the need for restorative justice and a community bond (Teaching for Change, n.d.). The foundation of our success consisted of loving engagement within our rural educational systems, and those who were a part of this circle demonstrated belief in collective value. The most valuable nuggets provided by this circle of support were the approval to be unapologetically Black and the support given to us as Black women. This was a safe space to "just be" without fear of being labeled the "angry Black woman" or "playing the race card." All educational environments should always provide this level of safety and security to all students.

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### **Appendix: Methodology**

As a Black woman reared in Mississippi and having attended public schools, each concept, event, and idea captured in this study influenced my current state of being. The ontological foundation was my quest to give Southern Black women space to share their voices and their lived experiences. My basic assumption was that something can be learned from everyone and every encounter. I value equitable access for all individuals regardless of ability, gender, race, geographical location, social class, or educational level. It is from this position that the constructionist epistemological approach informed my research.

As participant-researcher, I used autoethnography to detail the concept of a personal, reflexive journey into my educational experiences in rural Mississippi and those disclosed to me by two generations of Black women within my family. The autoethnographic format informed my mapping approach, which allowed me to unpack and analyze the social tri-generational documentary of these Black women's educational experiences, aligned with critical race theory (CRT) rooted in Black feminist theory through the lens of race and gender. Additionally, it was used to analyze the effects of how Mississippi's legal system acted as a social structure of oppression (Bhattacharya, 2017).

### **Participant-Researcher**

I am the Black woman whose voice this study seeks to amplify. Growing up in rural Mississippi during the post-Civil Rights era and being educated in public schools, my lived experiences provided the knowledge base for this study. However, having earned a PhD in special education, being a teacher educator and change agent, and serving as an educator and administrator in institutions of higher education, I have learned how educational spaces erase stories of marginalized groups.

As a community activist, I wanted to share the voices and lived educational experiences of those who are often forgotten and counted out, specifically Black women in rural areas in the Deep South. The present study focused on the experiences of three generations of Black women who attended public school in Mississippi. As a special education teacher educator who was educated and who has served as a university professor in Mississippi, I have

considerable knowledge and skill related to this subject. For this study, I have written, analyzed, and reflected on stories composed from my memories/reflections, oral histories that were shared with me, artifacts, and notes of emotions and/or physical reactions to visits at public schools in Mississippi that I attended. My use of mapping as inductive analysis through writing as inquiry gave the stories greater meaning. The approach to analysis that I used was iterative and allowed me to move fluidly between steps.

### **Story Development**

The stories included in this study reflected 20 years across three generations of Black women's educational experiences in Mississippi public schools. The stories were conceived from oral histories gathered through conversations and shared reflections. These memories were recorded via journal entries or notes. Going through the process, I reviewed hundreds of photographs, awards, certificates, newspaper clippings, videos of television interviews, yearbooks, field artifacts, and field notes. Each item stirred emotions. Some reflected safety, acceptance, and support that caused broad smiles and warm feelings. Others opened dark, forgotten places that were piercing and painful, which at times reignited anger, sadness, and embarrassment. Multiple sources were used to develop a comprehensive understanding of the collection of stories and to validate them through the convergence of information.

During story development, I enjoyed engaging with my memories of familial oral histories. Each moment was interesting and left me wanting to know more. At times, I felt joyous, angry, sad, disappointed, proud, ambivalent, confused, hurt, and more. However, it was grappling with my own experiences that I found most difficult. At times I became paralyzed and disengaged.

### **Story Analysis**

Mapping as inductive analysis using writing as inquiry allowed me to garner a deeper meaning of the stories. The artifacts used included journal entries consisting of oral histories reshared over the past six months and written memories of oral histories acquired over the past 40 years, captured in journals, scrapbooks, and notes. The approach to story analysis was iterative as I moved in and out of several steps. The first step was reflecting upon the oral histories. Next, I began reflexive exercises relating to my personal experiences in Mississippi public schools.

As part of my reflection, I wrote about related data and made connections. As I reviewed recorded oral histories I would stop to write as similarities emerged. When thoughts reached the forefront of my consciousness based on my reading, I would ask: What has occurred? What are the

connections? How does this align with my theoretical framework? What is the connection between the stories and existing literature? Is there a connection to the research purpose? What is my truth surrounding these stories? What tensions and contradictions are surfacing for me? How do I go further? What is my instinct telling me (Bhattacharya, 2017)? I reread the oral history records and repeated the process multiple times over nine months. Each time a new connection was made I would write about it. Eventually, my writings were grouped by school level—early childhood, elementary, middle/junior high, and secondary school.

After the process of writing as inquiry reached the point of a rough draft, I matched the photographs and other artifacts (e.g., awards, certificates, newspaper clippings, and yearbook entries) that represented times, places, and events with the connections made. During this process, I reread my writings and thought about the significance of the artifacts. Written on many artifacts were dates and locations, which allowed me to further contextualize my reflections. If a doubt of accuracy arose between the documents that could not be resolved, the reference was removed from the writings. As more clarity and detail surfaced, it was added to the writing when the quality of research was enhanced.

# Black Soil in the Mississippi Delta: Thriving on the Farm Against the Odds

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From the very first in nearly all the schools some attention had been given to training in handiwork, but now was this training first raised to a dignity that brought in direct touch with the South's magnificent industrial development, and given an emphasis which reminded black folk that before the Temple of Knowledge swing the Gates of Toil.

—W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*

Quite a few years ago now Mama Queen Bogues came and stayed a summer with my family in Indiana. My brothers and I were fairly young at the time, and during that visit, school was pretty far from our minds. And though she has long since passed, I vividly remember that summer—the last extended time we had with her in spite of several subsequent visits to her farm in Camden, North Carolina—and learning from the woman who had raised my grandmother, my mother, and one of my nine aunts and uncles in spite of never having birthed any children of her own. The thought of that farm in Camden where my mother grew up under the supervision of Mama Queen still makes me smile when I reminisce about the many mornings of pumping water; getting fresh eggs every day; and the smell of cheese grits, bacon, and biscuits. And the education we received from and through her was priceless. Our family was no different from the other Black folk in Camden in that my parents formed an integral part of a rural, tight-knit, African American community.<sup>1</sup> In fact we are related

to almost everyone in town either by blood or marriage (or both).

Most of the Bogues family's land nevertheless has been sold away, with my mother and uncle each retaining about an acre of residential property. My father's family with his ten siblings were sharecroppers also originally from the same town—my parents claim they were “dating” since grammar school! And like my mother's people, the majority of the land my father's family worked now belongs to others. When some years ago my older brother introduced me to one of his friends he met through my aunt, Micheal Allen,<sup>2</sup> I could see my own roots in the histories he shared about his family and their connection to the land.<sup>3</sup> I am the African American grandchild of farm workers whose children, my parents, did not think of themselves as poor. In hindsight, they would say that they lacked many of the niceties most people would consider standard (i.e., store-bought food, toys, and/or clothes). I thought about Mama Queen when

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Brown's untimely death, my septuagenarian parents were followed and stopped by the police in Elizabeth City *on two consecutive nights*: once supposedly for failing to come to a complete stop at a stop sign and the next night for what was purportedly a random driver's license check. Though the autopsy revealed that unarmed Andrew Brown was shot in the back of the head, the officers who killed him were never indicted. Black lives matter.

<sup>1</sup> As I write these words, it is with the shadow of the execution of Andrew Brown, Jr., an unarmed Black man gunned down by police in Elizabeth City, North Carolina. Elizabeth City is the closest town to Camden, and in just the two months prior to Mr.

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<sup>2</sup> Micheal Allen owes the spelling of his name to the midwife who assisted in his home birth and who recorded it accordingly on his birth certificate. He said that it was not until his mid-teens that a teacher pointed out, much to his surprise, that the common spelling for his name is Michael.

<sup>3</sup> My own family history has its roots in Camden County, the fifth smallest of North Carolina's 100 counties. It is located on northeastern coast of the state and reminds me in many ways of the world about which I would be asked to write with the Allen family farm.

This article is part of a special issue of JRRE that explores Black Lives Matter and rural education. Click [here](#) to see the full issue.

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I heard of the Allens, Black farmers in Mississippi who accomplished something my family was unable or unwilling to do, in that not only did they keep their land but grew their property exponentially. I recognized the wealth and value of the stories their family held.

The Allens' experiences also brought to mind W. E. B. Du Bois's words when he addressed the Meaning of Progress in his landmark work *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903/1966). He spoke about his involvement in teaching in the South. He marveled at the will and resilience of the people whom he came to know and openly wondered how they would overcome the many challenges confronting them. Upon his return to where he once taught, he extrapolated on the meaning of progress in that as the town had become more modernized, some of his former students suffered economically and psychologically. Du Bois's descriptions are similar yet different to the way that Micheal Allen and his sister Mary Jean reminiscence about education in rural Mississippi. Though their story is not unique in certain ways, the Allen family farm and the experiences that arose in and around it further enrich the exemplary fabric of Black rural education.

Indeed, Black lives matter in rural America, too, and the lives associated with the Allen family farm help illustrate relevant and critical geography for understanding dominant ideologies of the state, political economy, race relations, social/racial survival, and education. Herbert Allen, Sr., and his wife Nomie Jean Dotson Allen were Black farmers living in Humphreys County, Mississippi, home of Silver City and located almost 70 miles due north of Jackson in the Delta flatlands. Their story and that of their family resembles that of many American small farmers today, except that they not only weathered economic and environmental storms but also social, political, and racial ones in maintaining the property, being successful, and ensuring the education and growth of their children. Their success could be measured by their ability to keep and grow the land in spite of daunting threats of dispossession and, secondly, because of the way the various generations used their education to better themselves and their community.

My research using archival work and via personal interviews with the Allen siblings started in 2015 and is for a book project tentatively titled *Black Soil: The Allen Family Farm Story*, which will be a more comprehensive family overview. With this current essay, I hope to provide illustrative evidence of how an African American household in the Mississippi Delta region used various types of education in their successful road to personal and professional survival, if not prosperity. Whereas Du Bois (1903/1966) in *The Souls of Black Folk* ventured to the South to understand the racial underpinnings of our nation at the turn of the 20th century, in my work I hope

to celebrate a less frequently depicted microcosm of Black lives while underscoring the collective memory of an ever-diminishing sector of our community: Black rural farmers. The Allens provide a rich, profound narrative of Black American perseverance, fortitude, and uplift—within and beyond the Veil.

Du Bois (1903/1966) employed the concept of the Veil in *The Souls of Black Folk* to describe how, in the South especially, a person of African descent sees the world and at the same time is seen through a colored lens. Thus, though translucent, the Veil distorts what that person observes while it also inhibits that same person from being seen just as they are: human. The Allens seldom portray their struggles and triumphs in starkly racial terms, but they are all keenly aware of how being Black exponentially increased the challenges the family confronted. While they may have pondered or even visited the warmth of other suns, like those described Isabel Wilkerson's 2010 work, the Allen family stayed and worked the land as they allowed the land to work for them.<sup>4</sup> Similar to what Booker T. Washington would espouse in his "Atlanta Exposition Address" (1966/1901), the Allens cast down their buckets where they were, labored unfailingly, sweat mercilessly, and created something out of next to nothing. The singlemindedness of the Allens in their undertakings in Mississippi depicts a family that, though rooted in the land, was never confined nor limited by their surroundings. We also observe how the Gates of Toil (Du Bois, 1903/1966) become a landmark rather than a destination. Black rural lives are intricately tied to the land—they survive, thrive, and achieve. And they matter.

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The father of Herbert Allen, Sr., Nathan, acquired 40 acres of land in the 1940s, and later, under the son's ownership and with the help of his wife and nine children, the quantity of land eventually increased to 380 acres. Herbert Sr. met and married his future wife, Nomie Allen, when they were both quite young. The story goes that she was 16 and ready to head north with her family in an attempt to better her fortunes, when 19-year-old Herbert asked her parents for permission for Nomie to stay with him and marry. What they may have lacked in material possessions they more than compensated in their love of each other, their belief in their potential, and their faith in God. Neither had any formal education past the ninth grade, but they unfailingly

<sup>4</sup> I reference Isabel Wilkinson's (2010) phenomenal book, *The Warmth of Other Suns*, because, among other reasons, I envision my work as one similar to hers, vividly chronicling Black migration from the South by sharing the stories of the people who endured those treks. In contrast, the Allens conscientiously choose to stay and live with the land.

stressed the importance of learning both in school and on the farm. As Micheal would attest: “The things that they knew about the soil and animals and things of that nature, on how to react and what to do,”<sup>5</sup> still to this day amazes him:

To me, my parents, even though they had very limited formal education, they were the brightest people that I know, because they were educated in life. And that’s so important. You can’t buy that. And they knew exactly what they wanted to do. They wanted to make sure that all of their kids had an opportunity, not just to finish high school, but to go to the next level, too. And my daddy spared no expense in taking care of that.

Mary Jean agreed:

My dad and mom both had a ninth-grade education, so they wanted their children to be educated and well versed. My daddy would always quote parts of a poem that stuck with me throughout life, “Take a task great or small, do it well or not at all.” Daddy would say that his father and mother instilled strong values in him, and he made sure to pass the same values to me.

They possessed the qualities necessary to flourish as Black farmers in the South.

The siblings are quick to remind everyone that the 40 acres Nathan Allen received from the government were not a gift. “It was a loan! They loaned you the money to be able to purchase that land. They didn’t just give it to you. You had to pay it back,” Mary Jean states. Her words remind us of Du Bois (1903/1966) in *Souls*: “The keynote of the Black Belt is debt; not commercial credit, but debt in the sense of the continued inability on the part of the mass of the population to make income cover expenses” (p. 303). The Allens too faced the daily challenges of garnering a living wage with farm earnings. As Chuck Andreas, farmer-educator and writer for Midwest Organic & Sustainable Education Service, noted, many Black farmers were unable to overcome the challenges they faced:

There has been a systematic removal of Black people from agricultural land since emancipation. Emancipated slaves never received their 40 acres and a mule. Despite that, by 1900, Black farmers owned around 15% of U.S. farmland. Today, that stands at less than 2%. The reason

that number has fallen so drastically is because of violence and discrimination. In U.S. law, racial discrimination can only be prosecuted if you can prove the offender had discriminatory intent. This is intentionally an almost-impossible legal standard to meet.

Likewise, Analea Hope Hassberg (2021) contextualized the harsh reality in her introduction to *We Are Each Other’s Harvest: Celebrating African American Farmers, Land and Legacy*: “Those who remained farmers in the rural South struggled to stay viable as the number of large and corporately owned farms grew and as agricultural technology and crop production became more advanced and expensive” (p. 9). Hassberg further explained that the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), the agency charged with aiding and assisting struggling farmers, among others, systematically turned a deaf ear to complaints of discrimination and economic hardship faced by Black farmers:

Over the course of several decades, tens of thousands of Black farmers sent hundreds of complaints *per week* [emphasis added] to the USDA’s Civil Rights office until it officially closed in 1983. In 1984 and 1985, the USDA *lent* [emphasis added] \$1.3 billion to farmers to buy land. Of the roughly sixteen thousand farmers who received loans, 209 of them were Black. (p. 9)

Nathan Allen was able to become the proprietor of his land and bequeathed it to Herbert Sr. in 1955 upon his demise.

The slow, meticulous, and methodical growth of that initial 40 acres into more than 380 acres took place over the course of many years. At times, Herbert Sr. would actively seek out land to purchase. Other times, mainly Black land owners and their families would offer him the first option on a tract they hoped to rid themselves of. Clarence, the third oldest son explained:

How my dad achieved success was because people in the area knew about him. He started with his father’s 40 acres. And he started farming. We had a lot of Black people in our area that farmed. And so when they got old, their kids were getting ready to go up North. They didn’t want that land any more. They didn’t really want to sell it to people who they didn’t know. See, my father had worked their land. He was renting it from them. It was like sharecropping. And they said, “Listen, we’ll sell it to you.” And that’s how he acquired it: 40 acres at a time. Every time some land became available—either they would pass

<sup>5</sup> All quotations from the Allen family members derive from personal interviews with me that began in August 2015 and have continued intermittently to the present.

or the kids decided they wanted to sell it—they would call him first.

They grew the farm substantially, and they were also blessed to have nine children. First came the girls, three of them: Mary Jean, Charlene, and Grace, each about two years apart. They would be followed by six boys: Herbert, Albert, Clarence, Carl, Freddie, and Micheal. We say their names because their lives matter. All are currently alive and prospering, with the exception of Carl who passed in 2012 from heart failure. The siblings remain very close, calling and texting each other almost daily, and they remain connected to the land in many ways. Each of them, including Carl's son, has their own designated portion of the farm, and the land is worked primarily by Herbert, or it is rented out.

\* \* \*

The family farm constitutes more than just a place to raise a family. In discussing the dynamics of the group, the Allens all mention that the way they were raised had a lot to do with things such as their birth order, the rural setting, and being farmers. The population of Silver City has never grown beyond 2,300 people. The county seat of Humphreys County, it lies near Yazoo City, Mississippi, and for many years held only two elementary schools.

The school for the Black children was called Wormack Hodge Elementary, which fed into what was then the segregated McNair High School. Mary Jean stated, "In 1967, I was transferred to the southern part of Humphreys County to attend another school by the name of Montgomery High School due to the federal government's decision to rezone. And in 1968, I graduated from Montgomery High School." However, with nine children attending the public schools during a 20-year span, the experiences of the siblings differed greatly. The oldest—the girls—attended the Wormack Hodge Elementary. "It was just a one-building school with all the grades," Mary Jean said. "They had the older kids on one side and the younger ones on the other. And of course, it was segregated. That's just the way things were back then," she continued. Mary Jean neither waxed poetic about the experience nor did she scorn it. "It was school, and it was where we went to learn," she said. Nevertheless, for the siblings who followed, the trajectory was more crooked than straight.

Grace, the youngest of the daughters, had to deal with the winds of change in terms of desegregation. "Grace had it worst. She had to switch schools a couple times when the county decided to redistrict the schools," said Mary Jean. "The rest of us for the most part got to attend the same school the whole time, whether it was Humphreys

County or Montgomery," she stated.<sup>6</sup> The boys were able to attend the redistricted school. In their discussions with me, "redistricting" was the word they used to describe the new school situation. However, in describing what actually happened, they were quite aware of the desegregation that took place.

And in typical fashion, the Black kids and the poor White kids were those who were redistricted for the most part. The White segregationists who could afford to went to the newly opened private schools. Still, in recounting their experience, the siblings were rather matter-of-fact about the whole endeavor.

Life at the school would not detract from the responsibilities of the farm, however, and they all had a significant part to play. Hard work became a part of their daily life, and having a large family greatly benefited the demands of the farm. Mary Jean's comments provide context:

Daddy told me that we (the family) could make a greater dent in the numbers by working together. I learned how to pick cotton working beside my daddy, and at the end of the work day, my daddy would total the amount of pounds the family accumulated during the work day. Daddy would always pick 500 pounds or more, and I would pick 200 pounds or more using a 9-foot cotton sack on our backs. I had to make my daddy proud of me in every way, and I knew picking 200 pounds or more of cotton would make him proud. My mother taught me how to chop cotton, and because I was learning this skill, I was able make additional money for the family by chopping crops alone with my mother for other farmers in the area as needed.<sup>7</sup> Other farmers would pay us \$3.00 per person a day, totaling \$15.00 per person a week, working 12-hour days to aid in the financials for the family.

The reality for the older siblings differed somewhat from that of the younger ones. That same redistricting meant that the other siblings' elementary education and beyond were mostly integrated. Though as Micheal pointed out:

<sup>6</sup> Mary Jean also added: "What they did was they brought it all back to the fold. It was McNair area, but they couldn't leave it as McNair, because you brought the White school and the Black school together. So the White school didn't want to take on the Black school's name and the Black school didn't want to take on the White school's name, so they had to come up with a name that would be acceptable for all of them. That's where they got the Humphreys County School District from."

<sup>7</sup> Chopping cotton refers to pulling the weeds that tended to grow among the cotton plants.

We're talking about Mississippi, and I'm quite sure this is happening throughout all the Southern states. There was segregation throughout. The White parents or the White people in that area, they created their own schools. They called them academies. And it was a private academy. In every county you go to in the state of Mississippi, there's an academy somewhere along the line that only caters to White kids. Now, as time went on, when they started playing each other in football, they started integrating the football teams. Even when I was there, it was like a total separation between the kids that could afford to go to that school and the ones they gave scholarships to. We did have poor White people that couldn't afford the school nor scholarships that actually went to our schools, but there wasn't many of them.

The views of these academies differ somewhat in that according to Micheal: "There were no Black folks in that academy when I was in high school. Not one. And I can attest to that. When I graduated, there were no Black folks at Humphrey County Academy. None. Not even the Brown ones—the ones that were mixed [race].” He added, “We knew everybody! All the cotton pickers, all the people that came and worked for us on the farm, we knew everybody. And I don't remember [Black folks at that school].” Micheal and his siblings emphasized their awareness of racial realities of Mississippi and the unwritten—and sometimes written—rules governing separation of the Black and White people.

Grace stated, “Racism and segregation were very prevalent in the Delta. That was another thing. You had to go in with your hat off and your head bowed to get some of the things that you needed. And you were not too proud to bow your head and take off your hat because you knew your family had to survive.” The Allens' focus concerned the well-being of the family, and for the family to prosper the farm had to prosper. In fact, each of them during their school-age years would be absent for two days a week to help during harvest season. The teachers knew and understood why they would not be in class, and though they were excused, the siblings were still responsible for any work that had been assigned. Grace made it clear:

When it was time to harvest the cotton, we would miss two days out of the week from school to pick cotton. But everybody in the community did the same thing. And my dad, he hired those people to help him get his crops out, until we got a cotton picker. We didn't pick cotton after the cotton picker. We only picked the end of the row as the

machine was hard to turn around, so we picked the end the row. My mom used that extra money picking the end of the row to purchase our school supplies for the year.

Charlene and Mary Jean pointed out that even when they were away at college, they arranged their schedule so that during harvest season, they went home to help chop cotton, pick peas, or assist with whatever help needed to be done. These activities included driving the tractors and managing heavy farm equipment. Indeed, all the siblings made time to help even when they left home, as Micheal said, “As time went on and Mary Jean and them had started their families and some of us were away at college at that time, and the alarm goes off that we need to help out on the farm. I remember everybody coming home to help.” He continued,

I even had my girlfriend—my future wife—coming down to help us out. “I’m chopping cotton. You coming with me, you gotta work girl!” They had her picking peas and everything else. When I went away to train for the Army, she used to come to Charlene’s house to spend the weekend and work on the farm. And she spent a couple nights with Mary Jean and them too.

Mary Jean replied, “We were trying to train her to see whether or not she was spoiled like Micheal. But it wasn’t hard for her to learn. She was willing to take it all on to see what was going on.” Hard work and determination formed the foundation of their lives, and having a solid education undisputedly fortified that foundation.

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The educational setting described here reflects well what bell hooks (1994) depicted in *Teaching to Transgress*. The entire community was involved in the education of these young Black lives, and the very act of teaching constituted an act of transgression: “For Black folks teaching—educating—was fundamentally political because it was rooted in anti-racist struggle. Indeed, my all-Black school became the location where I experienced learning as revolution” (hooks, 1994, p. 84). The Allen children epitomized what Theresa Perry (2003) called the African American philosophy of education: “You pursued learning so you could work for the racial uplift, for the liberation of your people. You pursued education so you could prepare yourself to lead your people” (p. 11). For the Allens, the family involvement took various forms. There was constant learning that took place around that house. Every Sunday afternoon, Herbert Sr. would take some of the children for

a ride with him.<sup>8</sup> He would show them various aspects of the farm and talk to them about life, living things, important matters to keep in mind as they grew. They could ask questions and be educated about any topics on their minds.

Even their Uncle CV (Charles Van Allen, Sr.), a World War II veteran, served as the Boy Scout leader, worked in the school cafeteria, and drove the school bus. He would be very influential through his various interactions in the siblings' lives. Charlene, too, would be extremely active in the anti-racist struggle in that for 37.5 years she was a teacher in Humphreys County. She taught biology, botany-zoology, chemistry, physical science, and physics—all with a creativity and imagination that captivated her students. And she was willing to find innovative ways to ensure the students received the tools they needed when resources were scarce. For example, when faced with the choice between obtaining microscopes or frog specimens for her lab, she told the school to purchase the microscopes and had the boys go out and capture the frogs that they would later study. Additionally, Charlene occupied leadership and mentor roles in the school district such as the assistant girls' basketball coach, the 20-year sponsor of a service-learning group, Science Fair organizer, and 15-year organizer of blood drives. Charlene talked about her passion for education:

I did chemistry, biology, botany, physics, environmental science. Everything you could imagine... That's my passion. I love it. I do it right now. I farm all day, on a low scale: farming, environmental science. I taught it. All the trees around the school, I planted them... I love science. I'm the science teacher of the family.

Because of their age difference, Charlene and Mary Jean's careers as teachers coincided with Micheal's run as a student. At various points the two taught their youngest brother in grade school and secondary school. As Mary Jean pointed out, the situation presented its own unique challenges for all those involved:

This is the way it went down. Micheal always thought he could have his way. He was man-ish. He would come into school every day without his tools to work with. So, the first day—you know children are watching and paying attention to see if you give somebody some leeway. They didn't know he was my brother, because number one: my [married] name was Nutall and his name was Allen. So I told him, "Don't you come back in here

<sup>8</sup> I found out too that Herbert Sr.'s mother also taught Sunday school during her later years. I hope to learn more about her very fascinating story and her role in educating the community.

another day without your tools to work with, your pencils." Our parents would make sure that he had everything that he needed before he got home, so he didn't really have to look for anything. He'd come into the classroom because he liked these little girls, and he'd give all his tools away. So the next day that he came in like that—I said, "I'm not going to put up with this, and I'm not going to do this every day." Daddy said, "If he comes into the room and doesn't have what he needs, why don't you give me a call." And that's what I did. "Daddy, come deal with this."

She added, "I hated to do that. Daddy came up there with that long switch in his back pocket and he tightened him up. And anyway, after that, he didn't give his tools away any more."

Micheal's take on the situation was somewhat different, as he stated half-jokingly:

Her name was Mrs. Nutall through the week and Mary Jean on Sundays and Saturdays. She was my third-grade teacher and I think I saw her again at some point... But it was back with Mrs. Nutall who wanted to spank me for no reason. She tried to make an example of me. One of the girls in class needed pencils because her mama wasn't giving them to her. [Mary Jean interrupted: He thought she was pretty.] Yeah, she was. I got two spankings on the same day! ... Then I couldn't do anything at school wrong, because if not, I had a snitch at school and she would call Mama and tell her what I was doing wrong... Can you imagine. Just think about this. After a while, everybody was putting this together. "Mrs. Nutall is your sister!?" And then I'm getting all these jokes later on about Nutall, so I'm fighting every day for her and she doesn't even know it. And Mrs. [Charlene] Anderson, they think she's a mad scientist, and that she's going to burn up the place with those tubes in there. I'm fighting with them too! So, I'm fighting everybody, because I'm protecting my sisters and they don't even know it. They should be ashamed. Do you know how many times I was in the office because I was fighting to defend my sisters, especially Charlene? They'd say, "I hate her! I hate her! She's a mad, crazy lady!" Stop talking about my sister man! And then boom, boom, boom, there it is and now I'm in the office.

Micheal added that even having his uncle as the bus driver had its issues because his uncle would make sure to save the first two rows of seats for the siblings—Freddie, Carl, and

Micheal—during his route. However, Micheal explained, “what it did was make all those kids hate us so bad. They said we were getting special treatment. At the time, I thought it was great. I didn’t have to go back there and sit with anybody! I had my own seat.” And with one K–12 bus for their section of town, all the kids knew who the Allens were and formed their opinions.

After serving in the Army, Micheal would eventually join the police force where he worked for five years. He pointed out that it was a police officer and fireman who were the two professionals who came to the school for Career Day, and he knew that he did not want to fight fires.

Assessing the learning environment from today’s perspective, however, we might be further reminded of bell hooks’s (1994) words about that learning community. Though hooks talked about her own educational experience, she could just as well have been describing that of the Allens:

Teachers worked with and for us to ensure that we would fulfill our intellectual destiny and by so doing uplift the race. My teachers were on a mission. To fulfill that mission my teachers made sure that they “knew” us. They knew our parents, our economic status, where we worshiped, what our homes were like and how we were treated by our families. (p. 84)

The teachers in Humphreys County schools truly did know their students. Similar to other parts of the South, the schools would experience an identity change during integration. The board’s efforts went through a few different renditions—busing the Black kids across town to a different school, for example—before settling on a new high school and new name, Humphreys County High School, ostensibly with the idea of having a new beginning that was neither historically Black nor White. Though many Black teachers lost their jobs with integration, some of them also moved to work at the new schools, thus enabling some continuity of these learning communities.<sup>9</sup>

Furthermore, to return to hooks’s (1994) quote, another element that must be mentioned in the educational building blocks for the family was the church. Their parents instilled the importance of religion in all of them. For one period of time Charlene taught Sunday school. Micheal stated,

We would walk over a mile to get to Sunday school, and you had to get there on time, according to Uncle CV’s schedule. And sometimes he would

drive right by us. “Pick us up, man!” And let me tell you our Sundays were long. We started at 9 a.m., and we didn’t get home until something like 3 p.m. Especially on Second Sunday. It was so long.

Mary Jean replied, “Micheal needed all that he got! We were reared up in the church. The doors of the church would open, and we would be there.” To this day, church is something that Clarence encourages in the young people whom he mentors using his business: “The only rule I have is that you must go to church on Sunday morning. Now, we can party all night Saturday night. I don’t care what time we get home, but Sunday morning, we’re going to church.” He added, “And they respected that. And they still keep in touch. I had one guy call me just yesterday, ‘Hey Dad, I’m in town. I’m going to stop by and holla at ya.’ ... And every time they come home; they’re going to say something to me.”

The idea of constantly giving back and helping to uplift the community appears throughout all the siblings’ interviews and testimonies. Freddie talked about it fondly:

We had herds of cows and we had hogs, chicken, geese. The kindergartens in our community used to come to my parents’ house, and they used to think it was a zoo! The kindergartens would schedule field trips to our parents’ house. And on those days, the farm was shut down until the children left. My daddy, he would get out there. We had to move all of the equipment out of the way. We had hogs, we had pigs, we had cows, we had goats, we had geese, we had chickens, we had hens, we had guineas, we had ducks. There might be two or three school buses of kids. They would cook hotdogs for them, that Daddy would buy and little juice boxes. And the people really enjoyed it. Sometimes we would get groups or friends that would come all the way from Jackson. It was fascinating for the children to see a chicken sitting on its nest.

The generosity of giving back would also be evidenced in how they maintained and shared their crops.

During the time when the siblings lived on the farm, the family maintained a small patch of land, perhaps a quarter of an acre, in which they would grow produce for people in the area to come and harvest for free. Called a “truck patch,” the only expectation was that you only took what you and your family would consume and not sell it at market. Grace stated,

<sup>9</sup> J. B. Mayo, Jr., (2007) provided powerful examples of the sometimes devastating effects of integration on Black teachers in his article, “Quiet Warriors: Black Teachers’ Memories of Integration in Two Virginia Localities.”

We'd leave the cotton field at 7 o'clock, and then we'd go to the truck patch... It was a huge garden. We'd pick that, then we'd get home and take baths and start over the next day. And that was May to mid-August. We worked hard, but we were happy little hard workers.

The Allens maintained the truck patch, and folks in their area could come and pick what they wanted when the crops were ready. The same type of philanthropy occurred during a hog killing: All the families in the area were welcome and encouraged to take part in the festivities. The Allen parents instilled in all their children these values of generosity, compassion, and kindness, as well as a very strong work ethic and the importance of an education.

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Though Herbert Sr. and Nomie Allen only attended school through the ninth grade, as Micheal likes to say, they had master's degrees in life. All nine of their children pursued postsecondary education—primarily at historically Black colleges in Mississippi—with the majority achieving graduate degrees. And all of them were successful: Mary Jean Hawkins (1950) taught elementary education for 36.5 years in Humphreys County; Charlene Anderson (1952) taught high school sciences in Humphreys County for 37.5 years; Grace Allen Younger (1953) was a computer analyst for the Mississippi Department of Health; Herbert Allen, Jr., (1956) is a farmer and head proprietor of the Allen family farm; Albert Allen (1957) is the founder and CEO of Allen Heating and Cooling; Clarence Allen (1959) is the founder and CEO of Allen's Recycling LLC and the first African American in Mississippi to earn the state's Environmental Hero Award; Carl Allen (1961–2006) was a farmer and master welder whose creations can still be found throughout northern Mississippi; Freddie Allen (1962) had a 23-year career with the Mississippi Department of Corrections while also working on the Allen Family Farm, which he does full-time now; and Micheal Allen (1965) is a U.S. Army veteran of a foreign war (Desert Storm), was a 20-plus-year cloud engineer with Cisco Systems, and is currently teaching courses at Gwinnett Technical College.

Collectively and individually, living and growing up in rural Mississippi, the Allens were leaders in their community, and many people came to depend on and admire them for their hard work, dedication, and love. Theirs was a conscious decision to keep and even grow the land in spite of debt, racism, and systematic oppression prevalent in—though not exclusive to—the Mississippi Delta region. They were not affluent, yet they made sure that the needs of the family were always met, and the right hand of fellowship was perpetually extended. Today, the old schools no longer

exist, and if the buildings are still standing, most have been repurposed. Nevertheless, the education and the growth never stopped. The Allen family made and continues to make a difference, and each and every one of their Black lives matter. Mama Queen would have known this, as seen from the way she taught my mother, as seen by the way my mother taught me, and hopefully visible in the way I teach our children.

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# Still Separate: Black Lives Matter and the Enduring Legacy of School Segregation in Rural Georgia

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*The purpose of this article is to critically probe racial discourse around how the convergence of Black Lives Matter (BLM) and white nationalist organizations complicate the reality of segregation, education, and social change in a rural community in Central Georgia. Critical race studies ground the work, using narratives as a device to frame and examine what school transformation can look like for Black people living in rural communities. The method for this study is a critical ethnography that draws on census data, school district achievement data, and informal conversations and interviews conducted in person and through social media. The findings from this research suggests that some African Americans in this rural community are beginning to embrace forms of segregation as a reparative compromise to dealing with racism in their community. The implications of this study contribute to the literature on race and education in rural schooling and community.*

“They had ‘whites only’ signs for years but have the audacity to be offended by Black Lives Matter shirts.”  
—Local Black woman participant

The purpose of this article is to critically probe racial discourse around how the transformative work of Black Lives Matter (BLM) complicates the reality of segregation, education, and social change in a rural community in Central Georgia. The Black mother quoted in the epigraph was reflecting upon the confusion she has experienced when local whites<sup>1</sup> claim that Black Lives Matters is a racist terrorist group, when history tells us that white supremacists have terrorized Black communities for decades. Although *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) made school segregation illegal in the United States, students in Cedarville (a pseudonym), Georgia, watch films and read books that depict armed federal troops enforcing the law

against illegal opposition of white people who do not want their children to attend school with Black children from Little Rock, Arkansas, to Montgomery, Alabama (Gillen, 2014). Education and community in a rural context have embedded within their history racialized inequalities and education policies that problematize this relationship.

Social behaviors in rural schools demonstrate that marginalized groups are excluded and limited in receiving equal educational opportunities because of longstanding histories and practices of racism and inequity in rural areas (Tieken, 2014). Social exclusions tend to highlight systemic inequity rather than the people who are being marginalized by this exclusion (Mills, 2003). Historically, elite white Southern planters and white urban industrialists did not approve of an equitable universal education system for Black communities. They believed that Blacks should remain marginalized and that whatever education they received should position them to become better economic producers (Anderson, 1988). This social vision for Black people by whites demonstrated that the only value they saw in Black people were as technologies of economic growth just as they had been in slavery.

Education policies, consolidation schemes, desegregation mandates, and funding formulas problematize rural schooling. School reforms mean reforms of culture and society in rural places. The findings from this research suggests that some African Americans in this rural community are beginning to embrace forms of segregation

<sup>1</sup> I adhere to the Du Boisian tradition of capitalizing the B in Black. Please see language policy for further details.

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as a “reparative compromise” to dealing with school segregation in their community.

### Race, Rural Education in the South, and the Black Lives Matter Movement

Public schools have been charged with reducing racial achievement gaps to help mend relations between descendants of enslaved Africans and their former masters (Noguera & Wing, 2006). Guinier (2004) explained why legal recourse alone is not enough to abolish inequities and academic disparities in public schools. Rather, there must be community-based interventions that do not depend entirely on the government or law enforcement for assistance. Bell (1980) argued that *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) was not centered on a social justice framework that could move beyond calculated special interests of whiteness that preserved traditions in American history that treat Black civil rights as expendable. Southern whites and Blacks believed that it was important to educate their children. The quest to see who would control the education system led white Southerners to rally around a single ideology of white supremacy (Anderson, 1988). Leonardo (2004) explained that white supremacy involves actions and policies that whites enact to maintain dominance and privilege associated with whiteness. School contexts are places where the rights of marginalized students are subjected to a racialized hierarchy that privileges whites. White privilege does not solely refer to how whites are advantaged systemically over other racial groups, but how social ordering and power structures provide them with those advantages (Escobar, 2008; Harrison, 2019).

What do integration and equality mean when considering the kind of sociopolitical will needed to abolish systems of oppression? Fannie Lou Hamer’s definition of equality in the U.S. context and her desire to center human rights over the rhetoric of equality is a more comprehensive pathway. In 1964, a reporter at the Democratic National Convention asked her if she were seeking equality with the white man. Hamer answered, “No. What would I look like fighting for equality with the white man? I don’t want to go down that low. I want the true democracy that’ll raise me *and* the white man up … raise American up” (Harding, 2010, p. xix). Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. (1968/2010) said that many whites in America struggled to treat Black people with a degree of decency, not equality, after the march on Selma and the passing of the Voting Rights Act of 1965. The notion of equality that was prominent during the Civil Rights era was a performative rhetorical distraction that concealed human rights violations that Blacks experienced then and continue to experience now. Dr. King posited that segregationists and other white citizens had more in common with each other than with Blacks, and that withholding state-sanctioned

violence from Black people temporarily was not the same as building a brotherhood. The social pathology that exists in public education systems in the United States reflects the persistent values and commitment of structural racial oppression.

“Black lives matter” as a slogan has disrupted uncontested beliefs about the rationale of equality, justice, and human freedom in the United States and globally (Davis, 2018). The rhetoric of terrorism has been assigned to the Black Lives Matter movement to discredit its antiracist work. Hate groups like the Klu Klux Klan, Skinheads, and Proud Boys—who are agents of violence—have never been labeled as terrorist organizations by the United States. The legacy of Jim Crow segregation and displacement is still present in the U.S. South, operating through structural racism that uses violence to oppress Black people and sustain a hierarchy of white male dominance over all others (Inwood, 2011).

White dominance has produced a political imagination that distorts the way whites perceive citizenship as a pathway to institutional political power over the racial other (Hooker, 2017). White grievance appears during times when white privilege is in crisis and white dominance is perceived to be threatened. When white citizens are indifferent to the suffering of Blacks and other marginalized groups, their response to this suffering becomes a sense of white victimhood (Hooker, 2017; Mills, 2007). White privilege rests on a legacy of white supremacy, which as a political economic system is founded on white racial domination (Litwack, 1998; Mills, 2003; Von Eschen, 1997). The problem of social transformation is its focus on resistance strategies against white citizens’ investments in racial politics that are antithetical to racial and social justice.

### Reparative Compromise as a Conceptual Intervention That Rejects the Logics of the Persistence of School Segregation

Some Black scholars believe it is possible that a predominately white teacher workforce can effectively educate students from culturally and racially different backgrounds (Henfield & Washington, 2012; Ladson-Billings, 2006). However, white teachers are not adequately trained to teach students across identity and difference within multiracial classrooms because they live segregated lives, which has implications for racial achievement and opportunity (Picower, 2009). Guinier’s (1994) notion of majority tyranny illustrates how racial dominance is designed to exclude non-white groups from becoming the ruling majority group in spaces of governance in order to ensure that white dominance is permanent.

Majority tyranny explains what the logics are systemically that inform segregation. Educators in the

United States, despite discursive contradictions, have not dedicated themselves to improving education for the poor (M. L. King, 1968/2010). Black teachers and administrators are woefully underrepresented in public schools (Carter Andrews et al., 2019). Narratives around the lack of Black teachers and administrators do not consider how the interpretation and implementation of *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) pushed out many of the Black teachers and administrators who worked in the pre-*Brown* segregated school system. Black educators and leaders in the South before the *Brown* decisions were advocating for a type of school integration that would allow them to advocate, aspire, and access resources to educate Black children. However, Black educators and leaders found themselves in a predicament where what was supposed to serve and protect Black children became a mechanism to preserve the rights of white children (Heller, 2019; Siddle Walker, 2018)—what education historian Siddle Walker (2018) called “desegregation compromise.” The language of desegregation nationally was maintained while policies were designed and implemented to destroy any chance of Black educators and leaders’ receiving a fair desegregation (Heller, 2019; Siddle Walker, 2018).

Reparative compromise is an intervention that rejects the logics of school segregation that sustains Black suffering. It provides a grammar for thinking and talking about an organic process in which Black families in a rural community choose to move their children to a segregated school district in order to preserve their humanity and dignity, which allows them to achieve academically. A reparative compromise as conceptualized in this article is a sociopolitical performativity of Blackness that does not negotiate with and is not centered under the norms of whiteness. Sithole (2020) asserts that Blackness that is located outside whiteness in terms of political opposition is a threat to white liberals because white liberals desire politically to decide what Blacks can and cannot do. Black Lives Matter is a grammar and methodology for liberation in the rural community of Cedarville whereby the Black people there can heal from racial trauma in rural public schooling.

The Black Lives Matter movement has invigorated some Southern Black communities toward a kind of reparative compromise. Reparative compromise is also a grammar that allows scholars to talk about school segregation in the present tense and engage with the idea of what *separate but equal* really means. Students are taught that *Brown v. Board* (1954) made school segregation illegal in the United States while they are sitting in segregated classrooms (Gillen, 2014).

The Black Lives Matter movement is a transformative project in rural Cedarville County. It offers Black students and their families a framework for how to talk back to racial

oppression and create a transformative rural educational space that is absent of racial violence. This cultural politics of Black education creates a setting of healing from the Black suffering that some teachers and students experience through the pursuit of integration policies (Dumas, 2014). A new political imagination is required that espouses a vision for a desegregated education system that values the humanity of everyone and abandons discursive deliberations about best practices for social stratifications that leave Black children and their families struggling for basic human rights.

The injury of racial injustice produces anti-Blackness, dehumanization, and reduced social and economic opportunities for non-whites (Harrison, 2019). Segregation is a major factor in the preservation of racial inequality (Massey & Denton, 1993). Opponents to school integration resist policies that would change the current structure of public schools, which heavily advantages white students over all others. Integrationists believe that racial balance in public schools would also provide an even distribution of resources—one of the issues that the *Brown* cases hoped to remedy.

Legal scholar Lawrence (1980) said that the purpose of school segregation is to subordinate Blacks in society by providing them with inadequate resources and teaching them to feel inferior to whites. He posited that all whites benefit from segregation policies that reduce the educational opportunity of Black students. He asserted that white school officials are complicit in maintaining segregation systemically through school board policies. Lawrence believed that the *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) decision ushered in a post-racial way of thinking about race in America both within the legal system and society. The purpose of post-racial logic is to neutralize the power of systemic racism and eliminate discursive engagement concerning race-based remedies (Cho, 2009). Post-racialism is reinforced by denying that structural racism exists.

## Methods and Data

The research presented in this article is part of a larger ongoing critical ethnography. That project explores politics and cultural context of schooling in small urban and rural settings and interrogates systemic discriminatory institutional practices that harm and disadvantage students. Critical ethnography requires the ethnographer to have a certain command of theoretical knowledge that is used to comprehend, critique, and communicate what they engaged with and inhabited in the field (Madison, 2019). The researcher is a participant observer within the research site. Data reported in this study are preliminary findings in a larger longitudinal critical ethnography. The names of all participants and places are pseudonyms.

## Research Questions

The two research questions of this study are as follows.

1. Can school segregation in a rural community offer a reparative compromise to Black families and students?
2. What does BLM look like in a rural community?

## Site Description

Cedarville County is in the center of the state of Georgia; the population is 47,546 people. Cedarville County has two school districts. Cedarville County School District serves students who live in the more rural parts of the county while Cedarville City School District serves students who reside in the city of Cedarville. According to U.S. Census data from 2019, Black people make up approximately 38% of the population, and whites constitute 60%. The average annual household family income is \$37,369, and approximately 25% of people live in poverty.

Students who live in the most rural parts of Cedarville County are assigned to Cedarville County School District ( $N = 6,958$ ); approximately 63% of the student body is white and 30% is Black. Students who reside within the Cedarville city limits attend Cedarville City School District ( $N = 2,540$ ); 92% of the student body is Black and 3% is white. Most of the teachers who teach for the county school district are white, and all school board members and the superintendent are white. The city school district's teachers are predominately Black, and the school board and superintendent are Black as well. Cedarville City School District falls within the 90%–100% racial isolation rule of non-white students concentrated in a public school, which depicts serious school segregation (Mitchell & Mitchell, 2012).

The county school district's four-year graduation rate from high school is 87% while the city school district broke a record in 2020 with a four-year high school graduation rate of 92%—the highest graduation rate either school district has ever had. This achievement is important to note because academically Black and Latinx students did well on standardized tests during the 1970s and into the late 1980s, when integration efforts were at their height. During the 1990s, however, Black and Latinx students' test scores began to decline when there was a resurgence of school segregation (Anderson, 2004). Rosiek (2019) reported that Black children who attend segregated schools perform worse on standardized tests and have lower graduation rates, but the Black students who attend the segregated school district in this research study contradict that finding.

## Study Participants and Data Sources

Research participants were selected using convenience sampling. Data were collected online during the 2020 calendar year and took place strictly online due to COVID-19 pandemic restrictions. Data were drawn from U.S. Census reports, Cedarville County academic district reports for both school districts, informal interviews, local media reports, and conversations with participants on social media. Participants granted consent to participate in the study online as long as their identities remained anonymous. All participants were adults and parents in the school districts included in this study.

Social media platforms such as Facebook have become an important tool for Blacks in Cedarville to provide and receive information about community happenings. The transformative work of these kinds of digital Black publics (Squires, 2016) within the rural Black community of Cedarville allow members of the community who once lived there and those who have remained to organize and communicate with each other in the long struggle for Black equality.

## Researcher Positionality

I am a Black working-class woman who was born and raised in Cedarville County, Georgia. As a Black feminist scholar-activist, my interest in school racial oppression stems from my own experiences attending school in Cedarville County School District. During my sophomore year of high school, I was suspended from school for a week for “sassing” or talking back to my history teacher, who was an older white woman. She taught the class that Black people were happy as slaves until the Yankees came along and messed everything up. I disagreed with her, and she then told the class that the only reason I was intelligent was because my skin was brown and that meant that I had white blood in me. Only three Black students, including me, were in the class, and all were female. I stood and called her a liar and told her that she was unfit to teach. She sent me to the office to receive a paddling for talking back to her. Cedarville County School District is the number one school district in Georgia that uses corporal punishment. I refused to accept the paddling, and the principal called my grandmother, with whom I was living at the time, to pick me up.

When my grandmother arrived at the school, she found me waiting for her in the office. The principal told her what I had done, and she asked him about why the history teacher was allowed to talk to me like that. The principal said that because my grandmother did not have a college degree, she was in no position to question anything the teachers taught

in their classes. I was furious! My grandmother gave me the death look and told me to be quiet. When we got into the car, she told me I needed to choose my battles better, or I would be hanging from a tree for “talking hard to white folks.” I told her that I did not fear white folks. She said that it was important to live to see another day so that I could continue to fight.

Later that night, I overheard her talking to some of her friends on the phone. These ladies had all grown up during the Jim Crow era in Cedarville, and their grandparents had all been former slaves in Cedarville who were freed through the Civil War. My grandmother’s friends called her by her nickname, Zeke. One of the ladies said, “Tell us what she told that white *omen* [woman]?” My grandmother responded, “She told her *youse* a lie and *youse* unfit to teach.” The ladies burst into laughter in the sheer delight that I sassed a white woman. They keep repeating what I had said and laughing about it.

I was in the back bedroom, devastated that I had been dehumanized by teacher. Talking back is a political act of resistance that challenges systems of domination that seek to dehumanize and silence the oppressed (hooks, 2015). This study encompasses the histories of Blacks who have suffered and fought systemic oppression not only in the quest to become educated in rural formal educational settings, but to be considered full citizens of humanity.

### **Analytical Lens: Post-Racialism**

This article uses the concept of post-racialism as a discursive lens to understand what the qualitative data in this research imply. Cho (2009) posited that post-racialism eclipses the centrality of race and racism in society and is a dangerous ideology that seeks to forge a national rhetorical strategy to get the public to abandon race-based remedies on the grounds that racist eras of the past have ended. An example of this type of national rhetorical strategy came from the White House in September 2020, when former President Trump signed Executive Order 13950, banning diversity and anti-racism trainings within federal agencies and agencies funded by the federal government. In the order Trump called these trainings “divisive” and “un-American,” asserting that the ideology behind these trainings is “rooted in the pernicious and false belief that America is an irredeemably racist and sexist country.” Courses on critical race studies were specifically called out and deemed to be un-American.

The discourse of white school officials regarding a racialized incident in the Cedarville County School District is aligned with post-racial ideology. Cho (2009) asserted that post-racialism as an ideology serves to sustain unchallenged white normativity and insulate it from criticism, which

ultimately restores whiteness to its full pre-Civil Rights value. Racial remedies and conversations about race and racism are contested along with acts of collective political organizing and resistance from groups who are injured from systemic racism. Here is where a clear distinction in the debate about the categorization of white nationalist groups and the Black Lives Matter Movement emerges.

The slogan “Black lives matter” is antithetical to the purpose of segregation, which is to render Black people inferior to whites. The slogan was not designed to be inclusive of everyone because everyone is not targeted for state-sanctioned violence and death—as Black people are in the United States (Khan-Cullors & bandele, 2018). Post-racialism as a discursive analytic will provide a lens to draw inference and meaning from the qualitative data in this study and help illuminate some possible reasons why the national political will to end school segregation does not exist.

### **Language Policy**

A language policy is a means of language planning that describes the influences and context of how and why language is organized in certain ways (Johnson, 2011). Therefore, I do not capitalize the term “white” when using it to describe a racial category unless it is the first word in a sentence. Here, I follow the Du Boisian tradition of capitalizing the word Black to acknowledge and render respect on the page for African Americans. Comments by research participants were cited as written and brackets are used to for comprehension and clarity in certain places.

### **Findings**

The findings in this study suggest that the academic and social achievement of Black students is the result of the reparative compromise that is reflected in the organizing discourses of Black mothers who enact some of the core principals of Black Lives Matter to reveal how post-racial ideology of school districts harms Black students and their communities. This section provides an example of what the Black Lives Matter movement looks like in rural Cedarville County. The reparative compromise is a way for Black people to conceptualize their own political imagination for how they want to organize themselves both in society and within institutions where they can be treated and valued as equal human beings. This political imagination is not possible if the central methodology for achieving it is solely dependent upon the current racial system of exploitation and white supremacy. Black people in Cedarville are embracing the notion of separate but equal by modeling how Black segregated classrooms can be reparative against institutional racial violence.

**“Defacing a PUBLIC School Bus”**

A few days after the 2020 presidential election, a local Black mother was driving to work and saw a Cedarville County School District bus with pro-Trump and MAGA messages painted on the windows. This mother took pictures of the school bus with her cell phone and posted them (Figures 1 and 2) to Facebook with this comment:

“Wow...on my way to work and I pass a Cedarville County school bus with this Trump 2020 and MAGA Gang.”

This mother shared these images on Facebook to let others in the Black community in Cedarville know what happened. The MAGA slogan is a coded message to those who espouse beliefs about white power and identity (Demby, 2013; J. E. King, 2017), and to many non-whites it represents sentiments of anti-Blackness. After the mother posted the

**Figure 1**  
*MAGA Slogan Written on County School District Bus*



**Figure 2**  
*Pro-Trump Writing on County School District Bus*



photos on Facebook, a community conversation emerged about the racial behavior between the predominately white county school district and the mainly Black city school district. All the participants in the conversation below are Black mothers from the local community.

Meka: Idk [I don't know] who thought that defacing a PUBLIC school bus with ANY political affiliation was ok...Cedarville County Board of Education, this should be looked at EXPEDITIOUSLY!! It's bad enough the things I hear about kids being taunted, but this is a mess!!!! Smh [shaking my head]

Sheneka: The sad thing is that I can pretty much guarantee that nothing is going to be done about it. The trump [participant did not capitalize name] 2020 was painted on the front two windows & if that bus has a camera the camera doesn't pick up those seats & nobody is going to snitch on who did it. Therefore, CCBOE is only going to put out a half ass apology. What's even more sad is that the bus driver probably allowed it.

These comments suggest that public acts of racism against Blacks in Cedarville County School District are normal, and that members of the Black community do not expect that anyone will be held accountable for this kind of behavior.

Meka noted that she has heard “about [Black] kids being taunted” within the school district. It is public knowledge that Black kids in the county school district often experience racial bullying by school officials and some white students.

The conversation also suggests that Black parents do not trust school officials to protect their kids against racial violence. The discussion continued with comments from other community members.

Renee: [responding to Sheneka] the bus driver was the team’s coach and I also heard the team had a send off this morning.

Pam: The sad part is I’m sure there were some adults, including the bus driver, who saw this before they even pulled off...Completely Unacceptable because if it was the other way around...well lemme hush...I just hope this situation is handled correctly! They know better!

I tagged a county school board member on the thread, asking if he or any member of the school board had heard of the incident. The school board member messaged me privately to say that he had not heard of it. He said that he was a new member of the board and that his role would not start officially until January 2021, but he would call other board members to discuss it. Comments from other community members included the following remarks.

- Cedarville City High would never!
- If you don’t want a racist bigot allll on the bus windows COME TO CEDARVILLE CITY HIGH in Suge Knight voice.
- No one should EVER!! Idc [I don’t care] who supports who, it should NEVER be allowed to be written all over a PUBLIC school bus!! Even if all the students were Trump supporters that is not the time nor the place to display support no matter who it is!!

A Black participant stated, “Cedarville City High would never!” The reason for this response is that Cedarville City High has a predominately Black student population and school leadership team. During the pre-Brown era, Black students attended what is now Cedarville City School District. Blacks have organically segregated themselves back to the school district they once had, but now they have public resources to support educating their children. The fact that commenters emphasized the word “public” reveals that participants were aware that the school bus is public property and is funded with public money.

The final sentence quoted above underscores a sentiment that Black community members of Cedarville feel—that everyone understands that systemic racism has always been prevalent in the county and within the educational system, but boundaries should be exhibited when displaying public acts of racism within our shared social and political institutions. The public school bus is a symbol that represents the longstanding historical entanglement of racism and rural schooling. Some Black mothers posted the following comments on Facebook regarding the incident.

- Girl I saw this mess...if that’s how our taxes being spent, I want a refund...whoever did it should be fired...cause they know better!!!
- They were traveling to a cross country meet. The coach was the bus driver and aware of it all as well as the parents that were there for the send off.
- Oh wow!!! A coach did that? Does anyone know what the school has said? This isn’t called for. Children who don’t know anything about politics shouldn’t be sporting it like they do..in a school setting at that!

After the photos of the school bus were posted to Facebook, some Black community leaders got involved and asked Cedarville County High for an apology. This incident is an example of what the Black Lives Matter movement looks like in rural Cedarville: Black community members in Cedarville post information on Facebook about Black people undergoing racial duress, and the Black community collectively takes action and calls for redress.<sup>2</sup> The Cedarville County High School principal posted this statement on the high school’s Facebook page 24 hours after this incident occurred.

Today, a bus carrying [Cedarville] County High School’s cross country team members travelled down the interstate with political references written on the windows. The students decorated the bus for their ride to the state meet and did not understand the inappropriateness of displaying political statements on school property. All writings have been removed from the bus and we regret this incidence occurred. At [Cedarville] County High School, we try to maintain a positive, neutral learning environment for all our students.

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<sup>2</sup> In other situations, community members have called for boycotts of businesses that discriminate against Blacks in town, and everyone acts as one to support the boycotts.

During the time of this incident, presidential election votes were being counted, and it looked like Georgia would flip from a red state to blue. Georgia did flip to blue, and the Electoral College votes went to Joe Biden. In the ensuing months, Trump supporters have been holding rallies in support of his election fraud claims to overturn the results. The Cedarville County High School students' actions showed their support for the Trump campaign. The principal's statement revealed what the politics of rural schooling looks like through a post-racial lens. Race and racism do not exist because we have Civil Rights-era legal decisions and laws that make school segregation illegal while students who attend segregated classrooms write racist political graffiti on the public school bus declaring support of a racist presidential candidate.

### Discussion

The school-community narratives around the school bus issue reveal the racial division of rural public schooling in Cedarville. These narratives highlight how local citizens assign belonging and ownership to the schools in both districts and determine what behaviors are deemed acceptable. Rural identity is shaped in part during the schooling experience (Wilcox, 2020). As one participant said, "Cedarville City High would never!" Cedarville City High School is a Black majority school. School desegregation efforts began in Cedarville during the early 1970s, and many Black students in the county at large did not want to integrate. Cedarville County School District has had a reputation for racial bullying, while Cedarville City High and the school district as a whole belong to Blacks.

Black parents often move their kids from the county school district when racial bullying becomes too extreme. Black parents' decision to remove their children from the county school district is a reparative move to place their children in an educational setting that is not dehumanizing to them. Mette and colleagues (2016) have researched other rural school districts that struggle with similar issues of school belonging and ownership. Post-racialism discourse presents race and racism as harmless and seeks to neutralize the effects of racial injury while perpetuating activities that define equality on white terms in the name of unity (Cho, 2009).

An example of this phenomenon is found in the statement issued by Cedarville County High School's principal regarding the bus incident. The principal said that the students "did not understand the inappropriateness of displaying political statements on school property." However, the school officials and parents who were present and allowed them to do it knew better but did not stop it. One study participant said, "they were traveling to a cross country meet. The coach was the bus driver

and aware of it all as well as the oparents that were there for the send off." The principal's post-racial discourse regarding the incident insulated and neutralized the racial act from criticism by placing responsibility on the students' ignorance. The principal concluded the statement by saying that all the writings had been removed from the school bus. "At Cedarville County High School, we try to maintain a positive, neutral learning environment for all our students." Post-racial rhetoric retreats from the idea that race and racism is present systemically. There is no need for racial remedies and discourses in "neutral learning environments" because racism does not exist. It provides an illusion of a false racial universalism whereby everyone is treated equally.

### Conclusion

The discussion in this article grapples with the operationalization of racial oppression in rural schooling that creates and maintains the purpose of segregation. The underlying question of whether a sociopolitical will to improve race relations and truly integrate our public school system *still* remains. Black Lives Matter as a social movement has pronounced a declaration that Black people's lives matter and that cuts through the heart and purpose of segregation.

BLM has also provided a methodology for some Black people in rural areas like Cedarville to embrace aspects of segregation in social and public life in order to restore and sustain their humanity. History tells us that Black parents and community members have always supported the education of their children by founding schools, providing financial and other supports to existing schools, participating in school boycotts, and using lawsuits to fight for educational equity (Anderson, 1988; Siddle Walker, 2000). For race relations to improve in our society, the first steps require white people to take responsibility for their own complicity in, and benefits from, structural forms of racial inequality (Dumas, 2013). The rural Black community in Cedarville is taking a reparative approach to envisioning school transformation and a political imagination of racial remedies that position them socially and structurally in society as full human beings.

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# Activism in the Boonies for Black Lives and Educational Change: A Critical Conversation with Youth Rural Activist

## Gem Amber Sun Helper

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*In the wake of the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, Toni Cade, and many unnamed others, the movement for Black lives ignited a mass of youth voice and participation. The struggle to transform education for Black students is now at the forefront of the Black Lives Matter movement and includes demands for ethnic studies curriculum, the hiring of Black educators and counselors, accountability for racialized bullying and school violence, the abolishment of zero tolerance policies, and the removal of school police. This conversation with youth rural activist Gem Amber Sun Helper explores her organizing for Black lives in education in a rural upstate New York community.*

Across four one- to two-hour online meetings, Gem Amber Sun Helper and I (Ezekiel Joubert) discussed the importance of youth activism in rural education, the differences between urban and rural relationality, the Black Lives Matter movement in small rural school districts and communities, and what it means to learn to be Black in a rural community in the North. In collaboration, we read, selected, and revised parts of transcriptions of our meetings to create the conversation presented below.

**Ezekiel Joubert III:** Can you tell the readers a little about yourself and your journey toward organizing for Black lives in your rural community?

**Gem Amber Sun Helper:** I'm 21 years old. I'm currently a junior majoring in anthropology at SUNY Cortland. I've always been interested in organizing, but I really started getting into it this past summer. I think I was either a

freshman or a sophomore in high school when the Black Lives Matter [BLM] protests started under that name specifically. I remember wanting to be a part of it. But my dad would not let me attend because he thought it was dangerous. But I was always interested and kept up to date with their actions and activities. I was recently able to get more involved during the George Floyd protests. I actually helped organize some of the protests in my community in upstate New York. It's a really small rural town. Literally has one traffic light.

**Ezekiel:** I moved to a rural community in the Midwest when I was 12. Did you always grow up there, and what was it like to go to school there?

**Gem:** Actually, I was born in Brooklyn. When I was about two years old, we moved to Jersey City. And then when I was about six or seven, in first grade, we moved upstate to the middle of nowhere. When we moved up there, it was so small that not everyone had access to the internet, and the phone lines didn't go all the way up the mountain. In Jersey City, we were bopping to artists like Usher and Mario, which represented urban culture and Black music. Here we only had two radio stations, rock and country. In many ways they represented the music taste and culture of rural White folks. It was a culture shock to me. And since then, I've been back and forth between New York City and Upstate New York. I went to elementary and middle school upstate, and I went to high school in Brooklyn.

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**Ezekiel:** I understand. I experienced a similar feeling of culture shock and still do when I return home to the countryside. Now that you are back in upstate New York, what led you to the Black Lives Matter organizing you are doing?

**Gem:** I grew up immersed in Black history. In second grade, I was Harriet Tubman for Halloween. I grew up knowing everything about my history. When I was young, I was able to tell you all about Black historical figures, where they were born and when they died. I memorized how many people Tubman saved and how many trips North she took. I could tell you all about Frederick Douglass and Martin Luther King, too. I have always looked up to organizers and activists. I wanted to be like them. I wanted to be written down in the books next to them. I have always wanted to be engaged in the same ways they were. And so growing up, I wasn't one of those kids who thought that racism no longer existed. I was aware that there's still racism in the United States. And I was aware that it was not just interpersonal but systemic.

Additionally, I had grandparents like my great-grandma, who is 101 years old and lives where she grew up in Florida. She was a school teacher and an editor. My grandparents always told me stories about things like the Civil Rights movement and what their own parents went through. This encouraged me to grow up with that mindset; I'm here because of them. And I want the people who come after me to think the same. I want to help lead a generation forward. I want to make it easier for the youth coming after me. And so, when I saw the protests while in high school, I thought to myself, *here's my chance to participate in the next civil rights movement. I could be a part of social change.*

**Ezekiel:** To fast forward, what motivated the current organizing you are doing?

**Gem:** Going to school upstate, I had questions about rural educational experiences and systemic racism. There were kids in my class who treated me differently, and sometimes the teachers did, too. I thought that I was the only one who had these experiences growing up. I thought that I was just a weird kid. And that they were treating me that way because of something that I had done. However, I learned over time that other students of color had the same type of experience.

So, me and another young woman of color who went to the school in the area, Ariel Galvez, a young woman of Latina heritage, came together to create an organization called New York Stands Against Racism in Education. Currently, we seek to reform our small-town school system. This includes helping them develop a student of color advisory board, racial sensitivity trainings, and more.

I remember when I was in school, kids would talk about who they liked. The school was small; there were only six girls in the class. One kid told me that he liked everybody in the class except for me because I was not the same color

as him. Though I was younger and did not understand all of it, I internalized what he had said. The teacher should have said something, or somebody should have said something because there were adults present in the lunchroom who heard it. Things like this would happen all the time, and teachers wouldn't say anything. I don't know if they didn't care or just didn't know how to address it.

Also, sometimes the teachers themselves held certain prejudices. They would compliment me and say things like, "You're really well spoken" or "You're not like the others." These were racial microaggressions that might have seemed well intentioned but never felt that way.

More importantly, countywide, race and racial justice were ignored. Over the last few years, there have been certain instances of outright racial violence against students of color in the county, like kids getting dragged and pushed down the stairs, and stuff like that. Each time it was confronted, it was swept under the rug. My experience and these recent events made me decide that if I was going to start somewhere, I should start with where I grew up.

**Ezekiel:** That reminds me of the Michael Beyer poem, "How the Road Leans, to Where I'm From." What does it mean to do youth activism or to be a youth organizer for Black lives in a rural community in the Trump era?

**Gem:** Like I said, my brothers and I attended a really small school. There are about 500–600 students, pre-K through grade 12. The graduating classes are smaller than a regular city classroom. And because of this, the school is able to do unique things. For example, there is a senior lounge and a senior staircase, where only the seniors are allowed. Once there were some students who hung a Confederate flag over the railing of the staircase and posed for pictures with it. It took them quite a while to take it down. I don't even know if the students were reprimanded for hanging it. So a girl asked if she could put the Pride flag there, and the administration said no because they thought it was "too political." There have been many similar instances in this school, specifically with the Confederate flag, because the school allows it. I remember this one kid who repeatedly, and without consequences, wore a sweatshirt that said, "If the shirt offends you, then I did my job." However, the school reprimanded a boy for wearing a Black Lives Matter shirt. They were very specific as to who were allowed to express themselves politically and who weren't.

This really small rural community sometimes lives up to how people imagine it. To answer your question: What does it mean to be a youth activist during this current moment? It is to realize that a lot of the kids that I grew up with don't have the same ideals that I thought they had. Because it is a small town, you grow up knowing everybody. You're kind of friends with everybody, too, and you start to think that these kids care about you or that these kids share your ideals, just to find out that sometimes they don't.

**Ezekiel:** So in some ways, you were integrated when you were younger. But do you feel like as you grew older, something changed, especially as it relates to growing up during a Black Lives Matter moment? Do you think that there were folks who, like you said, took different points of view? Or have they always had them? I've been trying to figure this out and have been thinking about this as *rural youth relationality*. I learned that elementary students are more likely to have interracial friends, and then when we grow into adolescence our friend groups change based on race. For example, many of my White friends stopped hanging out with me or were pressured to not be associated with me by friends and family in the latter part of middle school.

**Gem:** That first part you said, I really felt that because there were kids who were my best friends in school. They sat right next to me. We would color, copy each other, and play together. One kid specifically, I would never talk to him now. I would never hang out with him. We're not friends. We do not have the same interests. Everything he does goes against my beliefs. I don't like the word betrayal, but for me it felt like a betrayal to my existence, you know. He does not have my best interest at heart at all. It makes me wonder why my parents didn't tell me when they were suspicious of some of my friends and teachers. I guess they didn't want me to be prejudiced and to make assumptions. But I get it now.

This gets to the whole of trying to recruit people to join our activism, especially because I came back to this town after high school. So, thinking about the kids who were my friends, I haven't talked to them in a second [a long time]. What are they like now? Would they join the movement? Or would they be against me and my work? It's kind of hard to reach out to people. But every time you reach out to somebody, it's always a gamble where I might have to realize a new reality. I always think, "I really hope we're still cool. I really hope that you're with me on this." However, and most striking, I am surprised by the younger generation, their parents, and their siblings who have been willing to show solidarity. Some of which are going against and pushing back on their whole family.

**Ezekiel:** Okay, so who have you organized with, and where do you all meet, given what you have said about the town?

**Gem:** It is a mix of both youth and adults, but mostly young adults who are alums and their younger siblings. We have not met in person due to the coronavirus pandemic. We use social media to organize and hold weekly meetings. Though this has put a pause on life, we have been able to initiate conversations and create plans for moving forward. Though sometimes it's been a struggle to keep it going, we do try to have meetings every week. We invite community members who are already a part of social organizations that have been reaching out to us as well.

**Ezekiel:** What are some of the challenges or limits of doing rural organizing?

**Gem:** There have been instances of people retaliating against activists. In the community, things like violent threats, shooting out windows, or putting firecrackers in mailboxes have happened to organizers and folks with BLM signs. The community, like many U.S. small towns, has racist history behind it. There was a Klu Klux Klan chapter here. I just recently learned that they used to meet up on the hill above the graveyard where I go hiking. While it did not ruin my hike, it gave me a different perspective on how they exerted their power. For example, they used to burn crosses at the top of the hill that overlooked the town for everyone to see.

Small-town politics where everybody knows everybody is a challenge. For example, when me and my brothers were younger, we were walking home from school. We were fighting in the street. We were arguing or something. We were just kids, siblings. It took us 20 minutes to walk home, and by the time we got there, our mother was waiting for us at the door asking us about our fight. This is small town life. Everyone's always keeping an eye. There is not much to do in town besides watch after what everyone else is doing.

So White people who oppose and those who support know what your family looks like and where you live exactly; they even know what cars you drive. And so to get support, we have leaned on younger youth of all races who are interested and want to help. However, I believe that there's some White children out there who want to join, but they're not as brave as those involved. Now, I don't use the word bravery a lot, but some White kids go against what their parents desire, knowing the consequences. They have been willing to disobey them and go against the history, politics, and morals of the town. For example, one of my friends was told by an adult White person in the town that their parents would be really disappointed.

**Ezekiel:** Can you say more about what your organization does to participate in the movement for Black lives at school?

**Gem:** Since the recent BLM protests, I have been able to work with a collective of small-town organizers. We have been working on many initiatives related to addressing racial violence in schools and more. It is important to note here that many of these incidents have been covered up by school administrators, and students have even had gag orders placed on them with regard to talking about their experiences. So our first duty was to create a forum where everyone can describe their experiences, and then attach this to a petition to prevent the narrative that we are just blowing hot air and to push back on the notion that we are just "city slickers" coming up here to place urban values on a rural community. I understand why they are worried about this in some ways. Because during the pandemic people

from the city have been buying homes and property; rural gentrification is real.

Schools have official policies in place for when racial violence or bullying occurs, however they often avoid going through the proper channels. For instance, if a student punches me in the face, and they say it is because I'm Black, that's two different things. The school is supposed to do what is outlined. But they refuse. Though they may send students home, at the same time, they do not want to address the reasons why the bullying occurred. They might even gaslight you, depending how old you are. They'll tell you no one's going to believe you, or no one's going to like you. They just straight up try to make you feel bad for what happened to you.

We want to document and challenge instances like this. Within the school, there are coordinators who are there to address discrimination. You're supposed to go to them, and they're supposed to support you. But some superintendents or the principals do not embrace this process or the role of the coordinators. We would like families to know that if these channels do not work there are ways to protect students. Like, there are school policies that allow you to go to the human rights department of New York State, and that the schools should not prevent you from knowing and receiving your rights. So part of the petition is gathering testimonies to prove this pattern. Our goal is to send the petition to the school board, board of directors, and the state. Also, we know that it is in the student handbook, but we think they should do more to share with the community how they deal with racial discrimination.

**Ezekiel:** Holding school officials accountable to school policies as well as ensuring the public understands them is important for school transformation. Often activists admit to burnout or that movements are hard to maintain after the protests are over. How do you hope to make the activism you are participating in sustainable?

**Gem:** A part of what we're trying to implement reflects our interests in sustainable activism. We want it to be something that we can hand off to whoever is currently at the school. We understand that this is not our last stop in life and that we're not always going to run the group or be involved in the school system. So part of creating a group is building a structure to try to make it self-sustaining. Just like the student of color advisory board, you have your bylaws, and you have everything written out, and once you graduate you pass it on to the next group of students.

We also think about activism burnout. I feel like this always happens, where, unfortunately, somebody has to die. And then there are protests. And then five years later, somebody dies, and there are protests again, and then it just dies down because people are tired. A part of what we are doing is to engage across the community in the movement for Black lives and more. We noticed that there were so

many people at our protests in town, more people than I had ever seen before. At one point there were over 300 people marching down our main street. We didn't expect that many people. However, we know that there is a slow burn, people get energized, they are well meaning and intentioned, and they just want to help, but they don't keep it up forever. We have aimed to attempt to keep interest in the community by creating a path for passing down the organization and strategies to the future generation.

**Ezekiel:** Have there been any new developments since last summer? What are some of your next steps?

**Gem:** We have been able to get the signatures needed for our petition and met with the school board. We learned that there were already steps in place addressing a lot of our concerns, but a lot of them were trauma based and seemed to exclude race. We were able to talk with them about it, and things seem to be going in the right direction.

Unfortunately, we had a recent incident happen in the school. A few kids who attend a vocational program for criminal justice posted photos making a mockery of George Floyd's death. It made its rounds on social media, eventually making the news. As heartbreaking as it was, it brought more current students to our organization.

**Ezekiel:** What are some of your next steps as a youth rural organizer?

**Gem:** This past year has been different, to say the least. As a country, we have been through many polarizing events that seem to transpire on a rolling basis. Although these issues seem to be appearing out of thin air, a lot of them have been building up before the beginning of the United States. Racism and discrimination have been revisited multiple times over the past 400 years. 2020 happens to be another big year in the fight for racial equality. Rural activism is a small sector of that fight. With my own complicated history of identity and finding myself in a town where I was not always wanted, I have been able to reflect on what it really means to fight for your right to exist. I think that we are finally getting an answer to what happens to a dream deferred. Langston Hughes was right—a dream will never stay deferred for long. It won't rot or sweeten over, and if it takes too long, it will explode and take everything with it. For me, that means dismantling the system of racism that made it necessary.

# Black Lives Matter to Latinx Students: Exploring Social Practices of Latinx Youth as Activists in the Rural Midwest

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*In June 2020, in a rural Rust Belt town in the Midwest, over 100 residents stood on the grounds of the county courthouse and publicly protested for Black Lives Matter. Once students began to arrive, the protest shifted. Latinx youth led chants, held signs, and stood in the front of the other protesters, moving the protest forward, away from the courthouse and toward the busy street of passing cars. I knew these de facto protest leaders well—they were my former students. This town is considered part of the New Latino Diaspora (NLD), a U.S. region not traditionally associated with Latinx settlement population. Here Latinx families represent almost 30% of the population and have been marginalized in community spaces and schools. Rural students are stereotyped, and Latinx students are marginalized as well, bearing layers of cultural and social inequity. This study disrupts the assumption of rural middle America as simple, homogenous, and conservative and, using geosemiotics, seeks to explore the intersectional ways in which Latinx youth position and identify themselves as activists, expanding current conceptualizations of rurality and literacy while examining how Black lives matter to Latinx youth.*

In June 2020, in a rural Rust Belt community in the Midwest, over 100 residents stood on the grounds of the county courthouse and publicly protested for Black Lives Matter. On the very front lines of the protest, students—particularly Latinx<sup>1</sup> youth—led chants and stood in the front of all the other protesters. Latinx students broke rank in protest lines and emplaced themselves farther from the courthouse building and into the intersection, leading chants, holding signs, and shouting at counter-protestors.

<sup>1</sup> Throughout this study I refer to participants as Latinx. I use the term *Latinx* in an attempt to be more inclusive of people who are not represented by binary terms of gender. When referencing other scholars' work, I reference and use the terms they use.

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I knew these de facto protest leaders well; they were my former students.

This town is considered part of the New Latino Diaspora (NLD) (Hamann, 2015; Hamann et al., 2002), a U.S. region non-traditionally associated with an increased Latinx settlement population. Here Latinx families represent almost 30% of the population and historically have been and continue to be underrepresented in community spaces and schools. As of the 2019–2020 school year, one teacher on the faculty identified as Latinx, serving as a Spanish teacher, and four support staff identified as Latinx, working across four elementary schools, one intermediate school, one middle school, and one high school. Despite constituting 30% of the population, no Latinx representatives were on city council or members of any municipal boards.

Rural students are stereotyped (Eppley, 2017), and Latinx students are marginalized as well, bearing layers of cultural and social inequity and navigating deficit discourses in institutions and policies (Nogueron-Liu et al., 2017). This study disrupts the assumption of rural middle America as simple, homogenous, and conservative and seeks to explore the intersectional ways in which Latinx youth position and identify themselves as activists. The research questions I explored include:

1. How were Latinx students protesting?
2. What did their actions and protest signs reveal about their own identities in this community?
3. How did Latinx youth affect discourses in place at this protest?

### Literature Review

This literature review focuses on the intersectionalities that Latinx youth face in rural communities throughout the United States. This review examines Latinx youth and the New Latino Diaspora, youth identity, and youth civic engagement in rural communities.

#### Latinx Youth and the (Rural) New Latino Diaspora

The term “diaspora” refers to people who have been forced to resettle away from their homeland, removed by political, religious, or economic forces (Brettell, 2006). It has become a significant concept in recent scholarship regarding migration, ethnicity, and transnationalism (Brettell, 2006; Hamann & Harklau, 2015). The term “New Latino Diaspora” was first used in the 1990s to describe the increasingly large number of Latinxs—both immigrants and those moving between U.S. states—who are settling in states that have historically not been known to be home for Latinxs, including Indiana, Illinois, Arkansas, Georgia, Maine, and North Carolina (Hamann et al., 2002; Hamann & Harklau, 2015; Murillo & Villenas, 1997). NLD members often settle in rural areas in these states because of a shift in labor market trends, as industries such as agriculture, construction, meatpacking, and manufacturing drive Latinx immigration (Kandel & Cromartie, 2004; Zúñiga & Hernández-Leon, 2005).

The NLD in Midwestern states is typically found in rural communities (Chapa et al., 2004). These communities have experienced a sudden, drastic, and unexpected influx of Latinx students, many of them hailing from Spanish-speaking homes (Hamann, 2003; Kochhar et al., 2005, as cited in Hamann & Harklau, 2015). Many communities and schools in which NLD members live, work, and study lack structural supports—teachers are not trained, institutions lack translators, and schools lack bilingual educators and policies to address the needs of many Latinx students (Bohon et al., 2005; Hamann & Harklau, 2015; McDaniel et al., 2017; Wortham et al., 2013). A common expectation among predominantly white<sup>2</sup> communities is for Latinxs to assimilate—without support—in order to obtain conditional

<sup>2</sup> Throughout this article, I intentionally do not capitalize *white*. This practice acknowledges that whiteness as an identity is not collectively in solidarity in relation to antiracism or antiracist work (Tanner, 2019).

acceptance, perpetuating stereotypes along with a deficit framing of Latinxs (Ortiz, 2016).

Stereotypes of people of color, created and perpetuated by white people, sustain racism and racial hierarchies and create purposeful oppressive barriers against interaction with one another (Delgado & Stefanic, 1997; Ellison, 1953/1995, as cited in Lensmire, 2017; Fraley, 2007). Latinxs are often criminalized in media and politics (Cervantes-Soon, 2017; Chavez, 2012; Gomez Cervantes et al., 2016). These images, along with the lack of supports in place for multilingual families and the expectation of assimilation by white communities, further cement the perception among minoritized groups that education of their children is not politically neutral (Du Bois, 1903/2007), and this notion is important to consider when exploring intersectionalities of Latinx youth identities.

Stigma and stereotyping are also seen in rural contexts, including in the Midwest. Rural stereotypes of deficiency and uneducatedness are perpetuated in the media (Eppley, 2017), and the Midwest is consistently portrayed as uncultured, simple, uneducated, and conservative (Sanchez-Jankowski, 2002). Society creates and maintains barriers for young people in rural communities, and the burden falls to young people to overcome those barriers (Terman, 2020). These multiple marginalizations and stigmatizations affect Latinx youth in the NLD, not just as Latinx adolescents but also Latinxs geographically situated in the rural Midwest.

#### Rurality and Identity

The concept of rurality is complex, dynamic, and wielded for purposes of power (Corbett, 2015). *Rural* is a term that marks a location by its physical, cultural, and social geographies, often seen as both idyllic and marginalized (Corbett, 2015; Eppley, 2017). Areas considered rural are almost always bound together by population or geographical parameters, but each locality is its own unique place, a notion that is becoming more contemporized, thanks in part to new literacy studies work on multiple literacies (Corbett, 2015). To problematize the deficits and stereotypes of rurality and instead highlight the complexities and multiliteracies involved, Edmonson (2003) originated the term “rural literacies.” Donehower and associates (2012) expanded on this definition to consider the intersectionalities of place, literacy, and identity, focusing on the complex socioeconomic and sociopolitical issues embedded in discussions and conceptualizations of rural literacies, especially in a neoliberal globalized society. Intersectionalities of ruralities and literacies are also interwoven with globalization, social justice, and issues of mobility (Corbett, 2015). Exploring how Latinx youth in the rural Midwest designed signs and emplaced their signs

and bodies in protest is one new way of expanding on the relationship between rurality and literacy.

Leyshon (2008) sought to challenge the binary constructs of rurality by showing how research on youth in rural places positions them as marginalized, presenting a new conceptual framework on identity and space in the countryside. Leyshon posited that the majority of geographical research, while focused on youth and space, does not pay attention to the role that space plays in the formation of youth identity. Looking at identities as constructed by power relations, Leyshon also maintained that youth are typically simplified and “othered”; his research challenges these social constructs. First, Leyshon’s findings support the idea that youth identities are not fixed but rather are temporal and evolving. Second, their identities are constructed and linked to a sense of place that influences their social practices and movements in space. Third, meanings attached to places change—they can be safe or confining. Fourth, youth in rural communities are between binaries, both fragmented and stable. This betweenness situates them between being included and being excluded.

Sierk (2017) also found that Latinx students who live in the NLD in middle America navigate multiple hierarchies within their schools and explored how these experiences affected their decisions after they graduated from high school. Sierk’s findings show how students articulated different types of rural, challenging the binary notion of rurality as well as considering the nuances of their particular part of the NLD within a rural community.

The present study disrupts the assumption of rural middle America as homogenous and conservative by considering the intersectionalities of Latinx youth as activists in a rural area and by challenging deficit language and beliefs. Examining how Latinx youth participated in a protest can contextualize the idea of youth identity and expand the view of youth as defined by place, deficient by place, and homogeneously rooted in place.

### Rurality and Civic Engagement

Wiederhold Wolfe and associates (2017) combined the idea of place with identities of youth in rural places. They first posited that communities are not just created through language, “but also through everyday embodied practices of living, working, playing, and participating in collective behavior in a particular place” (p. 169). Their study looked at these embodied practices as young adults engage in everyday democracy and the choices they made regarding how to engage in stigmatized places, noting that youth articulated a need for place-based identity that they could share with others to be involved and engaged in civic

and community matters. Trying to avoid being stigmatized or stereotyped, young adults in a rural town removed themselves to liminal spaces in the community, never being wholly integrated or fully an outsider and instead trying to reposition themselves in new ways.

Terman (2020) also argued that young people who become involved in their communities are part of a larger network of other people involved in activism, which can produce a collective place-based identity. Terman’s findings also suggest that young adults “with some marginalized identities seem to be particularly thoughtful about their relationship to place, which could, with institutional and symbolic support, foster elective belonging among less privileged groups” (p. 30). At the University of Wyoming, Chicano students were joined by local high school students to organize a protest march and walkout to advocate for immigrant rights, suggesting that political protests contribute in the making and remaking of oneself through social interactions and practices and “have a robust influence on our critical sense of identity and wholeness” (Zamudio et al., 2009, p. 109). Zamudio et al. (2009) highlighted the complexities of minorities living in the shadows of “decisively homogenous” public spaces in rural areas (p. 108).

Studies have suggested that predominant factors in bolstering youth civic engagement include schools, families, and digital and social media (Hoffner & Rehkoff, 2011; Wiederhold Wolfe et al., 2017; Weinstein, 2014). Such factors can predict the likelihood of youth participation in national and global sociopolitical movements (Wiederhold Wolfe et al., 2017). A recent study by Metzger and associates (2020) found that youth in rural communities saw themselves as less capable of participating in political action than youth in non-rural communities, which could be attributed to feelings of disconnect and a lack of opportunities for civic engagement.

Very few studies have been published within the last 20 years on youth and rural protesting in the United States. Rural protest movements in the United States have been less developed than in other countries (Woods, 2003), which could account for the lack of robust research on this issue. This research study, situated within the rural NLD in the Rust Belt, provides a relatively new context for exploring youth response to social justice issues.

### Theoretical Framework

Keeping in mind the fluidity of youth identity and emplacement, this study uses intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) and geosemiotics (Scollon & Scollon, 2003) as two theoretical approaches.

## Intersectionality

In the late 20th century, Black feminists and feminists of color asserted that categories like gender, class, and race “were not stable and discrete but, rather, variable and changing constellations that are interrelated, co-constitutive, and simultaneous” (Tomlinson, 2019, p. 180). Examining the mutable dynamics of sameness and difference across categories in relation to power employs a framework of intersectionality (Cho et. al, 2013; Crenshaw, 1989). “Intersectionality offers a window into thinking about the significance of ideas and social action in fostering social transformation” (Collins, 2019, p. 41). Collins (2019) identified the key constructs of intersectionality: relationality, power, social inequality, social context, complexity, and social justice (p. 45). This study draws on intersectionality to understand different perspectives and positionalities, as well as Collins’s (2019) constructs of intersectionality as a roadmap for conceptualizing power relations and for thoroughly and concretely examining the ways in which antiracism is being addressed in the context of a Black Lives Matter protest.

Intersectionality is a spatial metaphor (Collins, 2019; Crenshaw, 1989) that brings to mind a mental image of place, of relationships, of social experiences. This framework fosters a focus on interconnections and relationships of categories such as race, class, age, and geography to help understand how Latinx youth position themselves in a community protest and call for social action and accountability. While intersectionality is not an identity theory (Collins, 2019), I use intersectionality to help critically situate the intersectionalities of youths as they navigate civic engagement roles in their community.

## Geosemiotics

Geosemiotics is a theoretical and analytical framework that views humans as “bundles of histories—of language, of discourses, and experiences, of social and political performances, as juggling multiple social roles and performances, largely unconsciously” (Scollon & Scollon, 2003, p.16). Geosemiotics examines how meanings of signs are “situated in the material world and shaped by social and cultural use” (Al Zidjaly, 2014, p. 63). These situated identities encompass a multitude of performances, potentially spanning multiple discourses (Gee, 1996; Wohlwend, 2020). A geosemiotic analysis considers how social structures are used by people who are interacting with each other to produce discourses in place. In other words, geosemiotics recognizes that “our bodies take up space” (Scollon & Scollon, 2003, p. 45)—whether purposefully trying to garner attention or trying to remain unseen, people are always performing in social and cultural places.

Geosemiotics recognizes the action that signs produce and invite, decentering the language of the signs and focusing on the context in which signs and bodies are emplaced (Scollon & Scollon, 2003). Researchers examine how materials “are shaped by discourses and histories of practices that underlie our shared expectations” (Wohlwend, 2020, p. 12), expanding the idea of text to include “traces of social practice” (Rowse & Pahl, 2007, p. 388). Designers produce artifacts, such as signs, and the production process sediments their interests, histories, practices, and identities into the artifact itself (Rowse & Pahl, 2007). A geosemiotics approach reconceptualizes artifacts as identity texts that produce meaning and are read as assemblages of histories, discourses, practices, meanings, and modes (Wohlwend, 2020).

The geosemiotics framework considers how place and visual semiotics impact and index meaning of language, noting that “the cultural location or where a sign is placed is as important as the depicted meaning or what the print says” (Wohlwend, 2020, p. 170) and considering how these signs are indexed in the world. Indexicality, a primary tenet of geosemiotics, is the way in which signs make meaning based on the specific place and time in which they are presented (Scollon & Scollon, 2003), emphasizing the role of place in meaning making. Whittingham (2019) offered the example of how a stop sign means something different to a pedestrian or motorist when placed in an intersection vs. the meaning a stop sign makes when it is sitting on a truck en route to being placed at the intersection. A geosemiotic approach looks at the systems that influence the meanings that signs make in specific places and times.

Geosemiotics examines the relationships of three semiotic systems: interaction order (Goffman, 1983), visual semiotics (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006), and place semiotics (Scollon & Scollon, 2003). *Interaction order* focuses on the relationships in a given space, noting how “our bodies make and give off meaning read by others because of where they are and what they are doing in space” (Whittingham, 2019, p. 55). Interaction order considers factors such as body movement, sense of time, position, posture, and interpersonal distance within a space. Visual semiotics is concerned with how signs visibly represent various forms of social interaction. This method has traditionally employed Kress and Van Leeuwen’s (2006) work for analyzing visual representation while also analyzing the indexicality of signs to show how place influences the meaning of signs. *Visual semiotics* are culturally specific. Thus, understanding the semiotic resources at play requires ethnographic attention and visual observation and documentation (Whittingham, 2019). In this way, attention is focused on the way a sign is placed in a space as well as how the interaction order is visually represented to determine how these factors influence a sign’s meaning (Whittingham, 2019). Finally,

*place semiotics* looks at how location serves as both a semiotic resource as well as an index to other social influences. In this way, place is a sign and communicates meaning (Scollon & Scollon, 2003). These relationships are the focus of geosemiotics.

This study combines intersectionality and geosemiotic frameworks to consider how Latinx youth in this rural town protested for Black Lives Matter, analyzing not just what their protest signs said but also where they emplaced themselves and their signs, how they were socioculturally situated and contextualized, how they connected across platforms to communicate and make meaning in place, and what the signs and emplacement revealed about power relationships and social positioning.

### Research Methods

#### Site

This research took place in a small community, referred to with the pseudonym Crossroads,<sup>3</sup> in the central part of the Midwest. This community serves as the county seat for a county in which almost 70% of the population voted for Trump in the 2020 election. Among families within the Crossroads town limits, 28% live below the poverty level. Crossroads is home to members of the New Latino Diaspora. According to U.S. Census data, in 2000, 15% of the population was Latinx; in 2020, it was around 30% (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020). As of 2017, 29% of students at the local middle school resided in Spanish-speaking households.

When driving through Crossroads, it was not obvious that it hosted a significant Latinx population. Two restaurants there, both of which sit on the periphery of the downtown area, were owned by Mexican families. A small Mexican grocery store inconspicuously sat on a side street. Other than that business, there was no indication of a significant population of Latinx residents. I lived on the south side of town for more than 10 years; it was not until I worked as a teacher in the schools that I realized the realities of the disparity and marginalization of a vast number of Crossroads residents.

In the early 2010s, the community began to see an influx of migrants from Honduras, and the schools reacted to this change by implementing immersion-based programs to meet the needs of new emergent bilinguals. Within the NLD in Crossroads, a significant number of people were undocumented residents, and undocumented families

experienced a heightened fear of deportation during the Trump presidency. As a teacher, especially in the 2016–2017 school year, I had several students tearfully ask me after class if I thought Trump would send their families back to Mexico and Honduras. Trump's expansion of the role of U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement and termination of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program in 2017 alarmed local educators so much that a small group of us organized efforts to protect undocumented families.

Whiteness was apparent in the lack of representation across Crossroads; it was also embodied in the historical and geographical framework of the community. I talked to several long-term residents who spoke about this town being a sundown town, with signs posted on the outskirts of the town limits well into the 1960s. As of 2019, Black families accounted for just 1.5% of the town's population.

As a public school teacher, what struck me was the way my students of color were misrepresented and discriminated against, even by their teachers. A teacher was formally written up for using the n-word with a student. A group of Latinx students—some of whom were present at the protest—said the head coach of the high school football team publicly asked them if they were able to present green cards. If not, they would not be able to play on the high school team the following year. All of them were born in this town, and none of them went out for the team, even though they had played through middle school. I reported the incident to the principal and the district union president. The coach was never reprimanded or held accountable. Another student who was present at the protest had reported to me that a bus driver demanded she and her friends only speak using English on the bus, claiming it was suspicious that they spoke Spanish around him. I also reported this incident. Histories of racism are woven into the fields, the asphalt, the parks, the courthouse, and the school classrooms, needling histories of discrimination and oppressive power constructs into the very fabric of this community, affecting families and students.

### Positionality

The impetus of my research study came out of wanting to center youth in this rural community who were disrupting and defying stereotypes, including my own, of youth and rurality. The decision to choose my hometown as a site of engagement was intentional. I was committed to reflexively considering the ways in which my own positionality situated this research, as well as how my positionality shaped the outcomes of my research. As a researcher, educator, and activist, I have, as Zamudio et al. (2009) stated, “a theoretical understanding and a political belief rooted in experience that activism and protest is transformative”

<sup>3</sup> I use the pseudonym “Crossroads” to protect the identity of my former students, as some of them pictured are minors and undocumented, and also to highlight the intersections of geography, race, and literacy these students navigate. Geographically, this community is also at the intersection of two U.S. highways.

(p. 106). I was a participant-observer at this protest—as a former public school teacher and longtime community resident and activist.

As I had done community organizing in our town, I was asked to help co-organize this protest by providing logistical support around city policies and permit issues. I helped organize the event, but even more significant in terms of my positionality was that these teenage protesters were mostly my former students. I taught at the public middle school for several years through 2018. I knew many of these students and their stories, especially the students who led the chants and were looked to as de facto leaders. Their activism was a potential disruption to the dominant discourse on rurality and youth that must be further examined, and I was motivated to center their stories and analyze more closely the ways in which they protested and communicated with their signs and emplacement of bodies.

In this research study, I acknowledge my nuanced privileges, membership access, and geographical situatedness, all of which afforded me the opportunity to conduct this research. I recognize my own critical orientation toward this project, as well as my historical praxis of implementing culturally responsive pedagogy in classrooms with these students. My upbringing in this region—specifically, my own youth experience in this community—influenced the ways in which I experienced and observed the placemaking practices of youth protesters. In high school, I was surrounded by predominantly white neighbors and classmates. I did not realize or understand the disparities that existed socioeconomically in our community until I returned to live here as an adult.

It is important for me to share my own positionality so that I reflexively continue to position myself within this research. I commit to working to amplify and advocate for youth who are marginalized in multiple ways, including Latinx students in this specific context. I continue to question and reflect on my own positionality, my historical experiences, and the ways in which I co-construct space.

## Data Collection

In this study I analyzed publicly sourced photographs of the grassroots Black Lives Matter protest, focusing on students and their signs. These photos ranged in proximity from the entire layout of the protest at a given moment, as in Figure 1, to focusing on students' positions and signs, as seen in Figures 2, 3, and 4 (pp. 45–46).

I turned to social media, both Facebook and Instagram, and looked for photos that had tagged the Black Lives Matter Crossroads event or posted directly to that social media page. This search led me to photos from local radio and news media sites, as well as a few participants with public sites. I gathered 42 photos and began a process of

looking for images of Latinx students and their signs. Using my participation and observation at the protest as a way of checking, the photos I gathered showed multiple angles and perspectives that encompassed the range of action at the site of engagement.

I acknowledge, however, that one limitation of analyzing photographs of an event is that not all aspects of the protest were captured, as the action at the protest was constantly moving and changing. As a former teacher, I had the unique opportunity and positionality to be able to recognize most of the protestors as my former students, even with their face masks. Not all participants at the protest were my former students, but the vast majority of students in attendance either had me as a teacher or knew me from a school-related setting.

## Data Analysis

This study used a geosemiotics approach (Scollon & Scollon, 2003) for data analysis. First, I analyzed each image according to the three main systems of geosemiotics: interaction order, visual semiotics, and place semiotics. I adapted a rubric (Pierce, 2009) and used it as a guide for initial analysis each image. These analyses can be found in the article appendix.

After my first analysis, I mapped each image according to Scollon and Scollon's (2003) geosemiotic mapping process to reveal how these three systems interworked to produce a social action. The reason for the mapping of each image was to show how place is a significant factor in an action's meaning. On each image, I indicated the interaction order, visual semiotics, and place semiotics, demonstrating how these systems interacted together to co-construct a social action within a place, noting that "the full utility of a geosemiotic analysis is only achieved when interaction order, visual semiotics, and place semiotics are attended to simultaneously" (Whittingham, 2019, p. 69).

Each image included a number of social actions, as each contained multiple interactions among various social actors. Every one of these social actions could be analyzed according to a geosemiotic approach. For the purposes of this study, I specifically focused my attention on looking at the social action of Latinx youth and their signs in each image to explore and understand the complexities and intersectionalities of Latinx youth as protesters. The mappings were created using Google Drawing.

In this round of analysis, using Scollon and Scollon's (2003) geosemiotic mapping process I identified the elements to reveal the action taking place in this space. However, these mappings did not help me identify the significance of the emplacement and co-construction of space. I needed to identify and analyze the ways in which meaning was being co-constructed and also understand

**Figure 1**  
*Site of Engagement: Local Black Lives Matter Protest*



the discourses in place. To this end, I used nexus analysis (Scollon & Scollon, 2004). As Wohlwend (2020) explained, “Nexus analysis is the critical analysis of literacies that move and matter, that is, it unpacks how people enact and mobilize meanings that largely go without saying” (p. ii). It provides methods for closely examining literacies in motion in multimodal texts, including photographs.

Nexus analysis is a helpful method when one seeks to understand the literacies and power relations communicated through spaces, materials, action, and bodies (Wohlwend 2020). Informed by Bourdieu’s (1977) notion of *habitus*, nexus analysis focuses on the mediated action of social actors within a space (Scollon & Scollon, 2004). Nexus analysis offers a way of examining bodies, discourses, and the ways in which people interact in a space to reveal what embodied and historical practices are expected for belonging, as well as who is potentially included and excluded based on their actions. Nexus analysis allowed me to consider the various

discourses at play among Latinx students as they protested for Black Lives Matter in the rural Midwest.

Situated in nexus analysis, I annotated each photograph to identify the predominant signs (Whittingham, 2021). I used Google Drawing and openly coded each identified sign according to the apparent discourses in place. Every discourse is not represented in the photographs presented below, and some signs represent multiple discourses simultaneously. I used axial coding methods to make connections and validate the integrity of the emergent themes across the images. I looked across images, mapping analyses, and codings to identify emerging themes and patterns.

### Findings

Figures 2, 3, and 4 are images from the analysis. I chose to feature these images in this article, as they show several

of the discourses in place and exhibit the patterns and themes that I identified. I used Google Drawing to conceal unmasked faces in the images to protect protestors' security and safety.

### (Disruption of) Discourses in Place

From analyzing the interaction order, visual semiotics, and place semiotics across images, one resounding theme was the ways in which Latinx students complicated or disrupted discourses in place. I identified these themes as discourses of order and place and discourses of protest.

### *Discourses of Order and Place*

Importance of order and place was noted in the interaction orders visible across these images. Protesters were organized into rows. In Figures 2 and 4, most of the protesters stood in the grass, closer to the courthouse. When the students arrived, the neat, orderly lines were replaced, but a line is still recognizable. The crowd of youth stood together. This line of youth shifted from the grass and reached the edge of the sidewalk, still forming a line. As seen in Figure 3, the social distance between each person decreased, but there was still a long row of students. Once

again, youth maintained discourses in place set by the community. They were on the sidewalk, not in the street or among motorists, gathered together where they were publicly allowed to gather. Some of their feet hung over the sidewalk, but they stayed on the sidewalk, in the place where they were told they could legally gather. The sidewalk was the border that kept order, even within a protest—a border to which protesters adhered. Shifting the protest from the grass to the sidewalk was a noticeable disruption in the discourse of order in place.

The Latinx teenager foregrounded in Figure 3 further disrupted the discourses in place, moving his body in such a way that it was out in front of the others. This boy positioned himself in front of the crowd, reached out over the sidewalk, bending his body to do so. In Figure 2, three Latinx teenagers stood at the front edge of the sidewalk, close to the street. Behind them was a traffic light. From the perspective of this photograph and the noticeable interaction orders, there was considerable distance between these three boys and the rest of the protesters.

At first protesters were organized into what appeared to be neat rows, starting at the back edge of the sidewalk and working up into the grass on the courthouse lawn. As a participant-observer, I noticed this arrangement when I was in attendance. People could easily move in and out of the

**Figure 2**  
*Honk for BLM*



**Figure 3***If You're Not With Us, You're Against Us***Figure 4***Say His Name*

rows without bothering or touching people next to them. COVID-19 could have influenced the interaction order here. The salient interaction was how the three Latinx teenagers broke rank with the rest of the protesters but still stayed in a line—an impenetrable line in which they stood much closer to each other (Figure 2).

Within the crowd of protesters (Figure 3), there was not much interaction. Rather, the crowd gave the impression of a type of collective performance. In the crowd, no one seemed to be talking to each other or even looking at each other. There was a noticeable lack of social interpersonal action taking place in this image. The only indication that synchronous activity was not taking place is the protesters' gaze. They were clearly a collective body at a platform event (Goffman, 1983), standing together. Everyone was facing forward; some participants looked straight ahead, others looked off to something happening on the side, and some looked to the three boys and the photographer. The three boys emplaced themselves in the intersection, away from the other protesters, disrupting the discourse of order in place, but again maintaining order by forming a new line. In Figure 4, rows were visible, and the Latinx student emplaced himself on the sidewalk, in front of the other protesters.

The observed expectation of the Black Lives Matter protest in Crossroads was to organize neatly in rows, away from the street and closer to the courthouse. These rows suggested parameters of belonging. Though the three Latinx boys broke rank, they still followed certain community rules and community discourses in place. Each of these protesters stayed on the sidewalk. They did not go up to cars or walk into the street. They were at the intersection but did not interfere with the flow of traffic. However, these teenagers began a shift, purposefully designing signs and emplacing themselves closest to the road in an intersection to communicate and solicit interaction with vehicle drivers. Although the spatial organization of the protest was predetermined by adults, Latinx youth movement was "autonomous of adult influence" (Whittingham, 2019, p. 68), therefore disrupting these discourses in place.

### ***Discourses of Protest***

The design of these Latinx students' signs and the emplacement of their signs and bodies out in front and at the intersection—even if it meant being separated from the rest of the protesters—suggested an agential purpose in their protest. One consideration was how they were the farthest away from the county courthouse, with their backs toward it. The courthouse is a place that serves as a symbol of the institutional and systemic racism that affects people of color in this community, yet the protesters' attention was

not toward the institutions. Their signs were all written in English, and not one was in Spanish, despite the fact that almost 30% of Latinx students here hail from Spanish-speaking families. The three boys emplaced themselves as close to the intersection as they could without being in the street. Their intent and reach were not seemingly directed at bureaucrats and policymakers, nor at all residents of Crossroads. Their emplacement and sign designs suggested that their calls for action and solidarity were for white non-protesting residents. These students seemed to demand a response from passing white drivers to act in solidarity and identify themselves as either antiracist or, if they failed to honk, racist.

The emplacement of these signs and bodies reinforced how "objects in place contribute to the production of space" (Whittingham, 2019, p. 68). The design of these signs was with the place in mind and for a specific purpose—not just to stand and declare themselves in solidarity with Black Lives Matter, but to solicit a reaction from their community and call residents to antiracist action. The emplacement and design of signs also worked together to make meaning of the intended audience. Protesters faced approaching traffic—traffic of community members who were not protesting—and held their signs at eye level of passing drivers. These signs, while suggesting solidarity with Black Lives Matter, were designed to interact with people who would not be protesting alongside them. With messages such as "Honk for BLM" and "Honk if you're not racist," they called drivers to antiracist action. Although they did not emplace their bodies directly into the street, the protesters designed signs that forced drivers to make a decision: either drivers honked to show their solidarity, or they did not honk. Figure 3's sign focused drivers' attention by changing the color of the words *with* and *against*. These signs suggested a rigid dichotomy between being racist and antiracist without leaving any room to be in between, and these messages seemed to be for white residents. This approach disrupted the discourse in place of solidarity by extending the purpose of gathering to garner action and response from passing motorists.

### ***Protest Literacies and Social Practice***

I want to state that I proceed with caution in this section, as my analysis of social and cultural practices of these youth activists is based on my observations. A follow-up focus group session with these students is planned but has been perpetually delayed due to COVID-19. There is no way of knowing the full depth and intentionality of students' design choices without talking to them. However, not mentioning the observed literacies that youth protesters practiced in this space would seem to be a disservice

when considering students' intersectionalities and depth of knowledge conveyed in their acts of protest and sign design in this space.

Noticing students' design choices and emplacement creates opportunities for understanding how students use semiotic resources to demonstrate knowledge and critical understanding of issues like racism and social justice (Siegel, 2012). Thus, to highlight their complexities and how they communicate antiracism through community protest, I provide an initial analysis, mentioning themes of social and cultural practices that emerged in this space situated in my own observation using nexus analysis.

### ***Cultural and Historical Knowledge of Racism***

Hashtagged words, phrases, and acronyms were typically found on social media posts related to the protest. In Figures 2 and 4, #BLM referred to an online social knowledge which, when emplaced at a protest supported by and formed in part by a social media movement, showed a discourse in place (Gee, 1996; Scollon & Scollon, 2003; Wohlwend, 2020). Not only were the protesters indicating a social media presence, but they were also using the hashtag to show support and solidarity with the Black Lives Matter movement. Figure 4's sign included both "Black lives MATTER" and "#BLM." This text further delineated the usage of #BLM as a social media signifier in support of the Black Lives Matter movement while also declaring that Black lives matter.

Figure 4 situated this protester's solidarity with several causes that pointed to the protester's deeper knowledge of anti-Black racism. The first phrase on his sign was "Fuck12," an anti-police reference made popular by Atlanta-based hip hop artists such as Gucci Mane and Migos starting as early as 2015 (Sargent, 2020). This student used hip hop discourse to situate the murder of George Floyd and the Black Lives Matter protest. "NO Justice, NO Peace" can be understood as a reference to riots in the 1980s in New York, after which it became a ubiquitous protest movement slogan (Zimmer, 2013). It was unclear to what historical depth this protesting student situated this phrase, but its use suggested that his solidarity and protest moved beyond the murder of George Floyd and was a protest of anti-Black racism. "I can't breath[e]" was associated with George Floyd's murder but has been uttered by many other victims of police brutality, perhaps most often previously attributed to Eric Garner upon his death in 2014 (Wedell et al., 2020). In Figure 4, George Floyd's name was in the center, surrounded by the statements he made to police while he was held down. The largest words on the sign were "SAY HIS NAME!"—written in all capital letters and centered on the bottom of the sign. While this sign communicated a protest for George

Floyd, it also pointed to greater cultural understandings about anti-Black racism and police brutality.

In Figure 3, the phrase "If you're not with us, you're against us" suggested layers and histories of cultural meaning. It draws from Biblical texts (the book of Matthew). This polarizing phraseology has also been used in politics, stated in recent years by George W. Bush at the launch of his anti-terrorism campaign (Voice of America, 2009). It has been used in pop culture and in song lyrics (Rossdale, 2008). While analysis cannot determine the historical and contextual knowledge the protester means by holding this sign, this phrase indexed sociocultural relevance outside of the Black Lives Matter protest.

The red and black words on white background on this foregrounded sign chosen by the designer conveyed an intensity and boldness (Figure 3). The words "with" and "against" were the only words in black, and the sign included no hashtags or slogans specifically indexing it to the Black Lives Matter movement. This Latinx boy positioned himself in front of the crowd of protesters and faced dozens of passing motorists. His face mask was pulled down. The use of "us" indicates that this protest was an expression of solidarity, but it also suggests a personal identity. "Us" included at least himself. Because of the emplacement of the sign and protester, this sign indexed a social history of marginalization in this community.

### ***Religious Knowledge***

In Figure 2, the framing of words on the sign on the left suggests that this protesting youth situated Black Lives Matter as a moral and spiritual issue. In visual semiotics, sometimes frames connect and disconnect elements or indicate belonging in certain cultural contexts (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006). The sign here included a scripture reference, Matthew 18:10–14, and the text inside the framed box stated, "Jesus left the herd to keep one safe! Why can't you?" "Why can't you?" appears to be a message directed as passing motorists. #BLM and the scripture reference were outside the frame and joined together. Based on this sign's design, analysis suggested that this protester used faith and religion to argue the moral imperative of Black Lives Matter and to situate his question of solidarity to the larger community.

### ***School-Related Practices***

Latinx youth indexed school-related practices in a few ways at this protest. In Figure 2, two signs actively solicited responses from drivers: "Honk for BLM" and "Honk if you're not racist." "Honk for BLM" was a message specifically for passing drivers, and it also served as a rally

cry among protesters. “Honk for BLM” elicited responses in the form of car horns, which drivers often honked for the duration of the protest. Student protesters erupted into a symphony of cheers every time a vehicle honked. As a participant-observer, it reminded me of a pep rally or a football game: eliciting a response from the crowd in support of a team or group and cheering when they received a response.

There was a direct intent to target these signs toward passing drivers—these student protesters designed the signs to provoke responses from non-protesting residents. Not included in images provided for this article, another image showed one of these same students holding a small, white megaphone, the same kind used by cheerleaders and at pep rallies at the local high school. These protest practices indexed school-related practices of garnering support and collectively gathering to rally in support of their cause or team.

### Discussion

Through analysis and diagramming, geosemiotics focused on the interconnectedness of visual semiotics, place semiotics, and interaction order of Latinx youth and how all three worked to produce social action. Social action refers to social change (Scollon & Scollon, 2003). When examining youth involvement in a rural Black Lives Matter protest in the New Latino Diaspora in the Midwest, geosemiotics was helpful in focusing on the social action and noticing how place, relationships, and text worked together to make meaning. Nexus analysis was helpful in identifying discourses in place and paying attention to the ways in which Latinx youth disrupted expectations in this place of protest. This approach can be a resource to future researchers who seek to understand the complexities and intricacies of Latinx youth activism.

Analyzing how Latinx youth placed themselves at this protest demonstrates the need for researchers to consider the importance of place, not just from a rurality standpoint but as a semiotic system that dictates and shapes meaning. Latinx youth were agents of their own activism, breaking rank and moving into the intersection to be seen and heard, even if meant disrupting discourses in place. The social action in this place calls into mind bell hooks (2014), who wrote, “What is new is our visibility, our speaking out without change, our solidarity” (p. 122). Latinx youth communicated social, cultural, and historical practices through the choices of their signs, the emplacement of their signs and their bodies, and how they interacted with others. Their commitment to Black Lives Matter in this way elucidated the importance of studying rural activism and the numerous ways in which students resist in their towns.

Students’ intersectionalities were visible in several ways at this protest. These Latinx teens separated themselves from the other protesters, inserting themselves into places of greater visibility and holding signs that called for action and called out inaction. These teenagers situated their own identities into their protesting by bringing in their religious beliefs and situating racism as a “for us or against us” issue. They seemed to use knowledge of school practices, as well as hip hop knowledge and social media literacies, to increase support for Black Lives Matter. These intersections of youth, race, religion, school, culture, social media, and activism are just some of the ways local youth navigate space in this rural community.

As a former teacher watching some of my former students protest and then closely examining their activism in new ways, I was aware of the multiple marginalizations Latinx youth navigated in Crossroads. These teenagers were from Spanish-speaking households in areas of higher poverty within the community. I thought back to the day after Trump was elected president in 2016. As a teacher, I observed white kids waving Trump flags and shouting things at Latinx students like “Build the wall!” in the cafeteria. The racist rhetoric was egregious. I canceled my lesson plans, and we spent the time in circle talks and critically engaged in texts and projects focused on issues of race, inclusivity, empathy, and citizenship for the rest of the year.

Racism toward Brown and Black people in this rural community is not just on the margins—it is made hyper-visible as immigration policies keep kids and families on the borders in cages, and politicians intentionally use criminalizing and dangerous rhetoric when publicly speaking about immigrants (Rizzo, 2019). This discourse is felt both nationally and locally. The public activism of these Latinx teenagers can be seen and felt as a challenge to a discourse that threatens to delegitimize their value, citizenship, and cultural equity. Holding the sign, “Honk if you’re not racist,” the protester challenged the dominant views of racism by asking white community drivers to honk if they are not. These signs seem to remove the supposed middle ground—the ability to be colorblind or to turn away from facing the realities of racism in this community, fueled by local and national rhetoric and discrimination. These Latinx youth exercised both individual and collective agency in their protests.

Through their practice of what I refer to as *protest literacies*—a culmination of social, cultural, textual, and historical knowledge used to challenge dominant power structures—Latinx students as activists disrupted multiple discourses on both local and national levels. Their activism defied assumptions of rural middle America as homogenous and conservative. It challenged the ways in which Latinx youth in rural places were culturally stereotyped. These

disruptions of discourse and protest literacies can be reframed as strengths and assets to this rural town. Latinx youth knew how to behave, displaying cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986); knowing the rules well enough to break them in powerful ways shifted the protest and resulted in their obtaining positions of power, enabling them to renegotiate the power structures within the community and the protest itself (Wohlwend, 2020). When students exercised agency during the protest and shifted attention from the grass to the intersection, they complicated but did not completely disrupt discourses of order. They still contained themselves inside the geographical boundaries of the protest. They still somewhat formed lines. Analyzing the spatial practices of Latinx youth at this protest is one area that deserves further attention.

While a geosemiotics approach afforded an opportunity to identify social action in a place, geosemiotics and social semiotics in general have limitations. This research focused in part on the ways in which protest signs could index meaning, and geosemiotics was helpful in identifying ways in which interaction of bodies and emplacement influenced a sign's meaning. However, identifying social action was not enough to understand the multiple intersectionalities of Latinx youth and the ways in which they were disrupting discourse. Combining geosemiotics and nexus analysis was one way to bridge the microanalysis and macroanalysis, identifying here-and-now mediated action while also recognizing that action and texts could be pointing to greater meaning. The use of geosemiotics here was an initial response at viewing Latinx youth who were protesting for Black Lives Matter in the rural Midwest.

Corbett (2015) argued that understanding new, fluid forms of rurality and literacy and the relationship between them is essential. Researching rural literacies is still in developing stages and exists in small circles across the globe, including in the United States (Corbett & Donehower, 2017). Corbett and Donehower (2017) highlighted how rural literacies research that focuses on material engagements is relatively new and needed in future scholarship. This study analyzed youth, rurality, and activism and pushed the boundaries of the conceptualizations of literacy and rurality, drawing on students' historical, cultural, and social practices and observing how they use this knowledge to make meaning in a space of protest.

A significant gap exists in education research on resistance of youth in rural places (Woods, 2003). Studies involving Latinx youth as protesters in a rural, Rust Belt town in the Midwest, part of the New Latino Diaspora, are rare. Greater attention is needed to places like the New Latino Diaspora in the Midwest to understand cultural, historical, and social trajectories of antiracist action in support of Black lives beyond this time and place, and to consider how historically marginalized youth are responding, changing,

and leading the action in rural places. Further research on youth in these communities will continue to challenge and expand our understanding of race, rurality, and youth.

## Conclusion

This study calls attention not just to rural students, but specifically to rural Latinx youth to disrupt cultural assumptions—a relevant and timely issue as education researchers focus on dismantling systemic hierarchies that perpetuate racism in our institutions and communities. As long as deficit language and assumptions about youth regarding race, gender, class, and geography remain, education research must continue to find ways to uncover new meanings and findings that help reframe the way equity is perceived and power is wielded. Latinx youth in this rural Rust Belt Midwestern town protested for Black lives. Their participation—their protest sign design choices, where they emplaced themselves, and to whom they communicated— influenced and shifted an entire community protest. Findings suggest that Latinx youth used cultural knowledge and social and historical practices to make meaning in this place of protest, calling white community residents to antiracist action. Examining teens as activists in public rural spaces can add to our understanding of literacy, rurality, and the intersectionalities of youth as they resist racism and call for action.

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## Appendix

**Table 1**  
*Geosemiotic Analysis Rubric*

Geosemiotic analysis factors	Descriptors
Interaction order	Body gloss; embodiment; movement mapping; markers; personal fronts; civil inattention; monochronism/polychronism; people processing and gatekeeping encounters; types of activity involvement; platform events; and singles/withs.
Visual semiotics	Eye/body vectors; body movement; information/ material modality; information salience and placement; material indexicality, inscription, and information code preference
Place semiotics	Discourse in time/space; code preference; inscription; emplacement; use of body, items, perceptual spaces, and personal distance to create social performances and personal fronts; item indexicality; item placement issues.

*Note.* Adapted from Pierce (2009).

**Table 2**  
*Geosemiotics Analysis for Figure 2*

Geosemiotic analysis factors	Descriptors
Interaction order	<p>Protesters are organized into lines.</p> <p>3 Latinx boys together but separated from the rest of the protest crowd, still in a line.</p> <p>Arms and signs overlapping each other.</p> <p>Standing in a line across the sidewalk.</p> <p>The next row of protesters is at the back of the large sidewalk, a considerable distance apart and to the right, more in front of the courthouse than the intersection.</p> <p>The other protesters file behind in the grass.</p> <p>Rows organized neatly.</p> <p>No social interpersonal action happening in the frame, but 2 boys engage with the photographer.</p> <p>All bodies facing forward.</p>
Visual semiotics	<p>Two of the boys' eyes gaze straight into the camera.</p> <p>The boy to the right is facing to the side and smiling.</p> <p>The other two boys wear masks.</p> <p>Behind them, bodies face forward but gazes are in several directions: forward, to the boys/photographer, and to the side.</p> <p>Honk for BLM in the center of the image.</p> <p>#BLM sign: cardboard and black marker.</p> <p>Salient points are #BLM and the question mark.</p> <p>Framing separates the statement from #BLM and the Bible passage. Honk for BLM: No hashtag.</p> <p>Saturation of neon and black.</p> <p>Materiality again typical of protests: black permanent marker on thick cardstock paper.</p> <p>Salience is M.</p> <p>BLM is indented, almost centered.</p> <p>Third sign: Honk if you're not racist.</p> <p>Written in single strokes with black permanent marker on white poster board.</p> <p>All three signs are held at eye level of a vehicle driver.</p> <p>Boys are situated in front of the traffic pole that signals an intersection on the second busiest street in the city.</p>
Place semiotics	<p>Boys standing out in front of crowd, a considerable distance away, closest to the road.</p> <p>Traffic pole shows they are at the intersection.</p> <p>They stand together, but the boy holding the neon sign is in front.</p> <p>The two boys grip their signs with both hands, hunched over.</p> <p>Their proximity is closer to the road and further from the courthouse.</p> <p>Middle of the day on a Friday.</p> <p>Hashtags, Bible verses, acronyms.</p> <p>Situated semiotics.</p>

**Table 3**  
*Geosemiotics Analysis for Figure 3*

Geosemiotic analysis factors	Descriptors
Interaction order	<p>Performing as part of a collective.</p> <p>Gaze is focused, indicating involvement.</p> <p>Mask is pulled down of boy in center, as are several other participants in this shot.</p> <p>Students all grouped together.</p> <p>Vast majority of students looking in the same direction. Noticeable exception is boy with his head down (civic inattention?).</p> <p>Lack of social verbal interaction, with the exception of the participant turned toward a distant protester with his mask down. Signholder is not meeting eye contact but rather looking off toward the side, as are most of the other participants.</p> <p>Latinx boy is in front, leaning forward with his body.</p>
Visual semiotics	<p>Materiality is smaller posterboard and red and black permanent marker.</p> <p>High saturation.</p> <p>High tonal contrast.</p> <p>Capital letters.</p> <p>Thick, single stroke lines. No punctuation.</p> <p>“If you’re not with us you’re against us.”</p> <p>“With” and “against” are only words in black.</p> <p>Gaze is past the camera.</p> <p>Arm is taut and firmly holds sign on the side.</p> <p>Other hand does not appear as firmly grasping the side of the poster.</p> <p>Equal spacing among words.</p> <p>Words take up majority of space on the poster.</p>
Place semiotics	<p>Appears to be all youth standing together.</p> <p>Standing in somewhat of a line.</p> <p>Standing now on the front edge of the sidewalk.</p> <p>Emplaced on the front line of protesters.</p> <p>Boy positions body so as to lean forward—body leans forward into the road.</p> <p>Holds sign at eye level of passing cars.</p> <p>Boy looking down holds sign above his head, away from his body. He faces the ground, a sign of civil inattention.</p> <p>Capital letters on sign.</p> <p>Freshness of sign.</p> <p>Situated semiotics.</p>

**Table 4**  
*Geosemiotics Analysis for Figure 4*

Geosemiotic analysis factors	Descriptors
Interaction order	Latinx teen out in front of other protesters. “With” as a platform event; within platform event, unable to determine. Two protesters in front gazing out into the street in front of them All gazes, all bodies are looking in the same direction of all protesters with the notable exception of the two in the center background. Those in front focused on what is in front, not on the photographer.
Visual semiotics	Noticeable size of the sign; takes up not just personal space but significant space on either side of the body of the protester. Materiality: thin, large cardboard. Ripped on the sides. Black permanent marker. Written from left to right but also diagonally and clustered. Most salient: “Say HiS NAME!”—all capital letters and font size. Capital “NO” Justice, “NO” Peace George Floyd is in the center of the layout of the sign. Sign uses several slogans associated with Black Lives Matter movement. Sign uses both Black Lives Matter and #BLM. Sign intersperses quotations, names, hashtags, and phrases of solidarity.
Place semiotics	Sign indexes social media usage. Sign indexes social media--sociopolitical campaigns and movements. Latinx teen stands in front of a hydrant. Sidewalk is visible. Standing on the sidewalk near the intersection. From photograph’s perspective, considerable distance between the Latinx teen, the white girl, and the rest of the protesters. Place shows social acceptability of moving around during protest.

# The Threat of Visibility and State-Sanctioned Violence for Rural Black Lives Matter Youth Activists

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*Less than 24 hours after police murdered George Floyd, Black Lives Matter protesters organized in several cities to demand that their elected officials defund their police and redirect this funding to better healthcare, schools, public transportation, affordable housing, and food security. Eventually, these protesters came together in rural communities and towns to push for similar demands. Journalists documented these protests, highlighting both the similarities and differences in these places and protests. This article directly addresses the oversights and stereotypes that many of these articles promoted through a careful analysis of the experiences of two rural youth—a Black, Puerto Rican young woman and a Black, Dominican young man—as the Black Lives Matter protests unfolded in their predominantly white small town. In doing so, this study illustrates the threat of visibility that rural youth experience and how this threat shaped their decision to participate or not participate in the protests.*

The police executions of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor sparked national outcry and protests under the auspices of the Black Lives Matter movement. The movement represents an ideological and political intervention in a society where Black lives are under constant threat at the hands of state-sanctioned violence. The movement is also an affirmation of the humanity, contributions, and resiliency of Black people in the face of deadly injustice and oppression. Founded in 2013 by Patrisse Cullors, Alicia Garza, and Opal Tometi in response to the acquittal of Trayvon Martin's murderer, George Zimmerman, the Black Lives Matter movement built upon centuries of Black activism. The Black Lives Matter movement, like other movements before it, recognizes the central role that disabled, women, formerly incarcerated, queer, transgender, and undocumented individuals play in movements to create a more equitable, just, and safe world (Garza, 2017; Hillstrom, 2018; Jones, 2020; Ransby, 2018).

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Less than 24 hours after Floyd's death, protesters organized in a half-dozen cities, demanding that their communities defund their police and redirect this funding to better healthcare, more teachers, public transportation, affordable housing, and food security. Within a few weeks, the protests spread across the United States to more than 2,000 communities that included large cities, such as New York, Los Angeles, and Philadelphia, and small towns, such as Bryan, Texas; Great Falls, Montana; and Montrose, Georgia. These individuals, who included people from every age, ethnicity, gender, and race, refused to be silent despite the threats posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, a reckless president, armed police, and white supremacist opposition (Burch et al., 2020).<sup>1</sup>

Journalists documented these events as they unfolded, first focusing on the protests in major metropolitan cities and eventually in small towns in the United States and cities around the globe. While rural communities might have welcomed this attention in the mainstream press, many of the articles about rural Black Lives Matter protests often promoted deficit narratives about rural America as well as long-standing and widely held stereotypes about race and racism in rural spaces. Several articles juxtaposed the Black

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<sup>1</sup> We have chosen to capitalize "Black" to highlight the shared experiences that most Black residents have had and continue to have with structural racism and white supremacy. We have chosen not to capitalize "white" because white individuals do not have this shared experience.

Lives Matter movement against the backdrop of a long history of white supremacy in rural towns (Carlton, 2020). Other articles about rural Black Lives Matter protests centered white rural activism and downplayed or completely ignored the role that Black activists played in organizing and sustaining this moment (Mohdin & Campbell, 2020).

White supremacy clearly exists in rural communities, but the fact that journalists often highlighted the history of rural white supremacy while downplaying its effects in urban spaces advanced the idea that white supremacy is a rural construct that does not exist in urban communities. Moreover, many journalists decided to center white activism in these predominantly white rural communities, which effectively erased Black rural activism and resistance, suggesting that people of color do not live in rural communities. Currently, about one in five rural residents across the United States is nonwhite (Parker et al., 2018). In some rural counties, particularly in the South, people of color have been and continue to be the majority of residents and activists (Ajilore & Willingham, 2019; Hale, 2016; Kelly, 2015).

Youth activists have played and continue to play a critical role in leading and sustaining global protests, including the Black Lives Matter movement that occurred this past spring and summer (Hale, 2016; Payne, 2007; Ransby, 2005). However, the accounts of rural Black Lives Matter protests often downplayed, ignored, and misrepresented youth leadership and participation. While some articles about urban protests centered youth activism as one of the main drivers of this moment, this oversight was particularly salient in the coverage about rural protests (Kamenetz et al., 2020). In the rare cases in which communities acknowledged the roles that rural youth played, the coverage, once again, misrepresented the activists' work. Much of the media coverage about rural protests focused on white allies and downplayed the role that rural BIPOC youth played (Carlton, 2020; Mohdin & Campbell, 2020; Putnam et al., 2020; Robertson, 2020; Simpson, 2020). This article directly addresses the oversights and stereotypes that many of these news reports promoted through a careful analysis of the experiences of two rural youth—a Black, Puerto Rican young woman and a Black, Dominican young man—as the Black Lives Matter protests unfolded in their predominantly white small town.

### **Black Lives Matter in Heaton, PA**

This study is part of a larger study that seeks to understand the perspectives that youth have about poverty, inequality, and opportunity in three Pennsylvania counties. While the Black Lives Matter movement was not a central focus of the initial study, the fact that these protests occurred in the three counties under examination pushed us

to consider the role that youth played and continue to play in public protest and dissent about police brutality, mass incarceration, and racial inequity.

The research presented in this article took place in Heaton, Pennsylvania, a small town of about 20,000 people, known throughout the region for its small family-owned farms, its location at the crossroads of major interstates, and its low real estate and business tax rates.<sup>2</sup> Heaton is located in the state's predominately white, strongly Christian, and solidly Republican center. The town consists of two ZIP codes, one that includes the town's borough and another that includes Heaton's many townships. The ZIP codes exemplify the town's distinct racial and class demographics (see Figure 1). In the town center, about 23% of children under the age of 18 live below the federal poverty line compared to about 16% in the town's outlying communities (Saha, 2019).

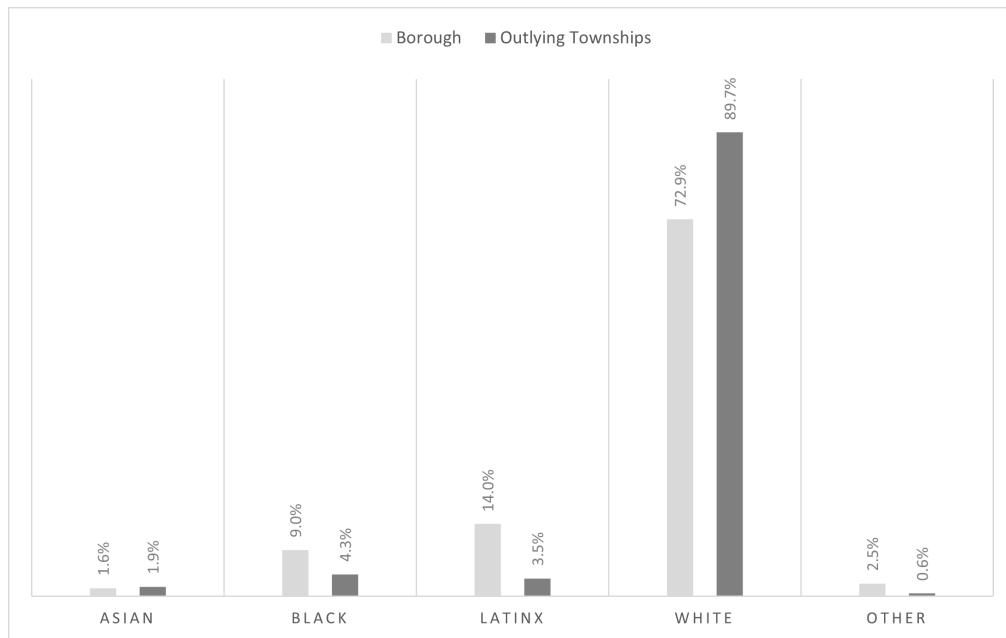
Like many of the Black Lives Matter protests that took place in the spring and summer of 2020, the protests in Heaton started when one individual and her mother stood on the town square to show their support for the Black Lives Matter protests. Within a week, the protests included more than a dozen individuals from a variety of backgrounds who shared a commitment to racial equity and justice and demanded an end to police brutality and state-sanctioned violence. Over time, the protests expanded to include hundreds of individuals, families, youth, and residents, who came together to show their support for the movement. Many of these individuals had never participated in a protest before, but for weeks they stood on the town square holding signs condemning police brutality, mass incarceration, and racial injustice. While the protests remained peaceful, local residents who opposed these measures organized corollary All Lives Matter protests. The All Lives Matter protesters stood on the same square and same street brandishing automatic weapons and taunting their neighbors who were waving their Black Lives Matter signs.

### **Methodology and Researcher Positionality**

From the spring of 2017 to the spring of 2020, I (Erika) visited the public high school regularly, spending about one day a month inside the school building to conduct classroom observations and interview high school youth. In addition, I worked closely with several community organizations and local residents to learn more about the ways in which poverty and inequality shape opportunities for Heaton youth and their families. I obtained permission to conduct this research from Heaton's superintendent of schools, with whom I met regularly as the research unfolded. I worked closely with the high school principal, who helped me recruit

<sup>2</sup> The name of the town and the names of individuals in this article are pseudonyms.

**Figure 1**  
*Racial Demographics, Heaton*



*Note.* Demographic data for Heaton were drawn from [Statistical Atlas](#) and [American Community Survey](#).

participants and on a regular basis shared his perspectives about the nature of poverty and inequality. I have spent about 150 hours inside the school and have conducted about 50 interviews with high school youth, high school teachers, and local residents. I recorded the interviews and transcribed them verbatim. The research team double blind coded the interviews shared in this article to identify themes that emerged from the data (Emerson et al., 1995; Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995). This article examines the divergent roles that Black youth played in Heaton's Black Lives Matter movement and what their participation might help us learn about the factors that influenced the decisions that Heaton youth made about their engagement with these protests and the Black Lives Matter movement.

I (Erika) am a first-generation college student and white researcher whose immigrant mother and white father moved to a town outside Heaton when I was four years old. Even though I spent most of my childhood there I have always felt like an outsider because I was not born there. I attended Catholic and then public schools and, like many rural youth, contributed to the rural "brain drain" when I left to attend college outside Boston (Carr & Kefalas, 2010). For the past two decades, I have lived in urban communities—Boston, New York, and Philadelphia. Since my departure from the area, Heaton has changed significantly. Heaton is a larger, poorer, and more racially diverse community than when I lived there. Large franchises, such as Target, Starbucks, and

Chick-Fil-A, and sprawling warehouses, such as Amazon, Target, and Ulta, have replaced Heaton's open farmlands and locally owned businesses. And yet, the fact that I grew up and maintained close connections in the area gave me unique access to conduct this work.

In the spring of 2020, I hired a team of seven undergraduate research assistants from Barnard College, Columbia University, and Princeton University. These students assisted me with the research design, data collection, and data analysis. The interviews in this article were blind coded by two of these research assistants and me, based on emergent themes from the data. Elizabeth Burton, who has served as a research assistant on this project since May 2020, came to the project with deep knowledge of and interests in the relationship that education inequality has to issues of race, region, and class. These interests are informed by her own upbringing and educational experiences as a Black student and child of educators in Augusta, Georgia. In this project, she has collaborated with me on a variety of tasks: secondary research, interview protocols, data collection, data analysis, and now this publication. The authors shared responsibilities for writing and editing the introduction, researcher positions, and conclusion; I wrote the description of Black Lives Matter in Heaton, the methodology section, and the analysis of Kia; Elizabeth wrote the analysis of Kyle. I revised the article based on the reviewers' comments and feedback. In the sections that follow, the personal pronoun

*I* refers to Erika, who conducted Kia's interview, while the pronoun *we* refers to Erika and Elizabeth, who conducted Kyle's interview.

### Different Trajectories and Experiences of Heaton's BIPOC Youth: Kia and Kyle

At the time of her interview, Kia Houston was a 16-year-old young woman who identified as "racially mixed: I'm white, Black, and Puerto Rican." Kia said that her mixed-race identity is difficult to navigate in her community and school. In her interview, she shared that "people don't believe that I am Black, they don't see me as Black ... I get hated on because I'm a mixed kid, 'cause I'm not fully white, and I'm not fully Black. It's just hard." In school, she often hears student react to "how I talk, people are like, 'Oh, she's acting Black.' And sometimes when I'm around my friend, I hold myself as if I'm white or like I am all that and people get really upset about it."

When he was interviewed, Kyle was an 18-year-old Black, Dominican young man who struggled academically in his junior and senior year due to housing insecurity and state-sanctioned violence, which we describe in detail later in the article. In his interview, Kyle referred to "We Dominicans out here," and while he explicitly distinguished his experience from African Americans, he identified as Black. He also described how his racial identity as a Black teenager shaped his teachers' perception that he was a "failing student." Kyle said that being a "failing student" was difficult, but being "being Black" made "it worse, because ... I'm a kid who wears a hoodie with headphones all day." Kyle felt that his teachers did not support him in the same way that they would have if he were white. To graduate, he said, "I've had to give of myself. I've had to emotionally drain myself, and give in to myself, just to be able to make sure I have a good relationship with my teachers." The racism in the public schools made it difficult, if not impossible, for Kia and Kyle to thrive (Love, 2019; Nieto, 2010).

Kia and Kyle grew up in Heaton's town center, "the borough" as locals call it, which is home to most of the community's Black and Latinx residents. As a child, Kia recalled that her Puerto Rican mother, who was on her own raising her two young children, struggled financially. Even from a young age, Kia said, her mother has always been open with her two daughters about her financial challenges. Kia remembered asking her mother for new toys or clothes as a child. Her mother would often tell her that they did not "have enough money for that right now." Even though her mother was working multiple jobs, her family still had to rely on food stamps and other welfare programs to provide essential supports to her family. She understood that her mother was trying as best as she could, and she understood

that the "system wasn't built for me." Kia learned at home, not at school, about the ways that the U.S. economy often left women of color like her mother behind in low-wage jobs with little promise of advancement (Branch & Hanley, 2014; Crocker, 2019; McLafferty & Preston, 2019).

When Kia's mother married her Black stepfather, her family purchased a single-family home in one of Heaton's predominately white communities in one of the surrounding townships. Kia recognized that this move meant that her family had achieved a level of financial security that they did not have in the past. When I asked her how she felt about the move, she said, "I think we're doing pretty good. We used to live in a townhouse, but now we live in a single-family home." When I asked about the differences between her childhood home in Heaton's borough and her new home in a predominately white community, she said that her childhood home was in a community with homes that felt like they "were smooshed together." There was not much space between the houses, "so it was kind of hard to not hear noises from the other houses. Sometimes the neighbors would be very loud, and sometimes the people in the neighborhood were very rude and stuff." Her new neighborhood is quiet, and "most of my neighbors are old." When I pushed her to say more about the similarities and differences between these two communities, she said that the community in the center of town where she spent most of her early childhood is much more diverse, racially and ethnically, than the community outside of town where she currently lives. She described her new community as a "more Republican place" with sprawling yards, picket fences, and mostly white residents.

Even though they both consider themselves lower-middle-class youth, Kyle's family never achieved the level of financial security that Kia's family enjoyed. Kyle's mother has a chronic, life-threatening illness, which according to Kyle, means that she is not "physically capable of manual labor" in Heaton's warehouses and other industries where she would most likely find employment. As a result, she relies on disability benefits to support her family. His father had difficulty finding secure and steady employment because, as Kyle said in his interview, "he doesn't really speak English, and he's Black, I guess." The intersection of xenophobia and racism in the local labor market barred his father from most jobs (Golash-Boza, 2018). However, for a brief time, Kyle's father had a job in a local warehouse as a forklift driver during which Kyle recalled, "we were getting some big bucks." That ended, and eventually, his father was incarcerated for three years. According to Kyle, "he got caught, and a lot of these different things were pinned on him that weren't necessarily true, but he got it anyways. So, he's going to be in there for maybe a year or more? Something like that. He just got his sentence, he was waiting in there three years without a sentence,

which is kind of crazy.” Kyle’s life intersected with twin pillars of American society: inadequate welfare and mass incarceration (Goffman, 2014; Golash-Boza, 2018; Hinton, 2015; Shedd, 2015).

When we asked Kyle to describe Heaton, he said,

It’s one of them pit stop cities I would say. It’s a little bit bigger than a pit stop city. We’re right on [a major interstate], so if you come here, and you kind of like what you see, I guess. It’s a place where you can settle down in, and feel safe and feel all right, generally. We do have spurts of violence and this and that, but nothing to major that’s crazy.

He continued saying that Heaton is “real chill, real laid back.... So, it’s not a hustle and bustle area. It’s a small area where I have walked from one end of it to the other in two hours.” The description that Kyle offered does not seem to reflect the experiences he has had with police brutality and state-sanctioned violence, but rather seems to reflect the ideas of what Heaton can be and often is for white residents who have chosen to live and stay in the area.

Moments later in the interview, Kyle hinted at the anonymity and segregation that exist in this “small, small town.” Kyle asserted that the town promotes the idea that everyone knows everyone, but that in his experience, Heaton is a place where “not everybody knows everybody.” Kyle said that Heaton is an increasingly diverse community, but it remains a deeply segregated place where white residents hold political and social power. In his interview, he said, “we do have a lot of Hispanics and ethnics, too, but primarily I would see power in positions of, either in the bank or in town ... the local law places in here. A lot of those people are Caucasian. So, I’m not sure what that’s about.” Kyle works and lives in the area near these white-owned law firms. When he walks in the area, he “sees a lot of business people ... primarily Caucasian, which is fine,” but he often finds himself asking, “where do they [these white lawyers] live?” Kyle explained that he never sees white residents in the area where he lives in Heaton, and due to unwritten but clearly enforced racial codes and inadequate public transportation in the area, he has never been to one of the many predominately white communities in Heaton where Kia now lives. Like many rural communities and schools, Heaton is and always has been a deeply segregated community with regard to race (Lichter et al., 2018a, 2018b).

Throughout his childhood and young adulthood, Kyle lived in public housing and homeless shelters with his family—his mother, his father or stepfather, and siblings. In the rare moment when his family found housing on the private market, Kyle recalled that his landlord called

the police because his family had “too much trash on the sidewalks.” When the police showed up, they “busted in [to the apartment]. And that was a whole scene, so they busted in, they broke in. They took my dad, left the house a mess. And then we were cleaning it up for a couple of days. And then I think word got around to the landlord and the people around us.” Eventually the landlord evicted Kyle’s family and used “the excuse of trash being misplaced to evict us when obviously it was, I don’t want these like, you know, cop-attracting people around.”

While the exact details of Kyle’s father’s situation are not entirely clear, Kyle told us that U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement officials deported Kyle’s father to the Dominican Republic, leaving his mother to fend on her own in a town with limited economic opportunities for women of color with children (Golash-Boza, 2018; Schueths, 2019). The effects of his father’s deportation affected Kyle at home and in school (Dreby, 2012). Kyle missed several weeks of school as he tried to support his family following his father’s incarceration. By the time his home situation and mental health improved toward the end of high school, Kyle struggled to reintegrate into the social and academic life at his school and often relied on white adults whom he met through Focus, a local Christian organization that runs afterschool programs from Black and Latinx in the borough.

Kyle participated in Focus programs in high school and now has a full-time position working there as a youth leader with middle school youth who attend Focus’s afterschool programs. Kyle described his position as “more than a job. It’s more of an opportunity.” He explained that Focus seemed like a refuge for him as a young kid, and now he feels fortunate to have a position working with “awesome people” providing other BIPOC youth with afterschool activities that he received from this organization when he was younger. He works three afternoons a week but said that he “usually goes [to Focus] like every day, just to chill out. Because it’s more than a job.” Kyle noted that the staff at Focus, most of whom are white, have been a constant source of support when he needed it. He said, “Focus is a really good outlet for the people, the staff there, they’re the people, yo, they have helped me.” The staff at Focus gave Kyle a job when he needed one to help his family, and after high school, he moved in with one of the staff members and works part-time for him. At the time of the interview, Kyle was completely dependent on the all-white staff at Focus for his housing and employment.

### **Kia and Kyle’s Response to Heaton’s Black Lives Matter Protests**

When I asked Kia if racism existed in her school and community, she immediately responded with a brief, sharp, “Yes.” I then asked her to describe what racism looked or

felt like in her community. She paused for a moment, as if to reflect about what she wanted to say, and then took a breath and said, “people crossing the street, people not wanting to go in somewhere [like a restaurant or store] because there is a Black person in there.” She paused again, looked at me, and said, “These things sound like they are from the ‘60s, but it still happens, and it’s awful.” She continued, explaining that the racism in the community feels more overt than the racism that occurs in school, at least in her classrooms. In school, she said, racism happens in a “more low-key way, like everyone won’t talk to everyone.” Black youth talk to Black youth; white youth talk to white youth. Students self-segregate in the school classrooms, corridors, and cafeterias according to their racial identity (Tatum, 2003). Kia, as a mixed-race student, often feels isolated and alone as she tries to navigate the multiple spaces where she could belong but does not always feel welcomed.

Kia said that the racism in the community and school collided when she joined the high school cheerleading team. She is the only non-white student on the team. She said that when the team poses for their team photograph, she knows that she stands out as someone who looks different, someone whom her peers do not always embrace as a full-fledged member of the team. During Friday night football games, she notices that families in the stands are eager to cheer for the team when they come out on the field but then look away when they see her, a mixed-race young woman on the team. When she looks out to the spectators sitting on the football stand bleachers, she “sees a lot [of] people focusing on the other girls” rather than her. They often look away when they see Kia’s caramel skin.

Outside of school, Kia works two jobs in the community—one job as a waitress at a locally owned Italian restaurant and another job at a locally owned hoagie (sub) shop. At work, she often hears local residents express homophobic and racist views as well as their unwavering support of Donald Trump. In her community, she often sees Confederate flags waving in her neighbors’ yards. In her school, she routinely sees them on her classmates’ trucks, t-shirts, and belt buckles (Rogers, 2017; Rogers et al., 2019; Southern Poverty Law Center, 2016). Kia shared that this constant exposure to white supremacy in its myriad forms makes it hard for her to go to school and work. She feels that her peers often refuse to acknowledge racial inequities, particularly in Heaton, which, according to her, many of her white peers and co-workers regard as a small, perfect place. Kia told me, “I’ve talked to my friends about it, they understand. I’ve had to get rid of some friends though because they don’t understand the problems in America.”

Even though she acknowledges the challenges that she has faced as a mixed-race young woman in her majority-white, rural community, Kia also believes that her mixed-race identity, and perhaps her gender, makes it easier for her

to survive in white spaces throughout the community. She has come to this belief because she has witnessed the virulent racism that Black men, specifically her Black stepfather, have endured in Heaton. In her interview, she recalled a time when her stepfather took her to get ice cream at a local farm stand near their home. The cashier told her stepfather how much he owed and asked him to put the money for the two ice creams that he had just purchased on the counter. Her stepfather realized that the women did not want to touch his Black hand. When I asked Kia if she had ever experienced something like this, she said she has experienced racism in Heaton, “but it wouldn’t be that bad.” At the very end of her interview, I asked her if there was anything that she wanted to share that I had not asked her, and she paused and quietly said, “The cops are scary.” When I asked her to explain her statement further, Kia recalled a time when the police pulled her stepfather over for speeding near their home. As the police approached the car, Kia recalled that her stepfather told her, “He told me to put my hands on the dash, and not make eye contact. It was terrifying.” Kia thought that the police pulled her father over because he was a Black man driving in the almost exclusively white outlying areas of Heaton. When police brutally murdered George Floyd, she thought, “that could have been my [step]dad.”

A few days after George Floyd’s murder, Kia and her peers brainstormed what they might do to show their support for the Black Lives Matter movement. After about a week of discussions, they decided to make flyers about the Black Lives Matter protests that residents had organized in Heaton’s town square. Kia and her peers distributed the flyers on Snapchat, Instagram, and Facebook to encourage others to participate in the protests. They also solicited local businesses to post these flyers in their windows. Many of the businesses they visited agreed. Kia and her mother discussed the events over dinner and decided to make t-shirts to show their support. The t-shirts had raised fists with the words Black Lives Matter on them. Kia donated the proceeds from sales of these shirts to the Black Lives Matter organization. When we asked Kia what motivated her to engage, she said, without hesitation, “I’ve been treated differently because of the color of my skin a lot, and I don’t want to be treated like that anymore.” Moreover, she remembered when the police pulled her stepfather over, how terrified they both were, how her stepdad could have been George Floyd. She understood the risks she was taking by marching and standing on the square, but she refused to be silent. It was her time to act, with her mother and friends by her side.

In his interview, Kyle shared his own experiences with racism and classism. Kyle spoke at length about his experience being racially profiled while walking down Heaton’s Main Street near its square. Like any teenaged boy, Kyle often wears sweatpants, hoodies, and headphones. These clothes might not elicit any response if Kyle were

white, but he knows that his Blackness, in sweatpants, hoodies, and headphones, created fear and anxiety among Heaton's white residents who work in the law firms and local banks in the borough and then retreat to their majority-white communities in Heaton's outlying districts after work. In his interview, he explained that he notices that white residents often look scared or fearful when he approaches them on the street. He said this experience happens frequently on Main Street; Heaton's main commercial corridors are one of the rare places where interracial mixing and mingling happens in the community. Moreover, he can recognize the strategies that he has implemented to react to their fear. Kyle "activates acting mode," which was his articulation of code switching and adhering to respectability politics (Higginbotham, 1993).

For Kyle, code switching is a means of survival (Harris, 2019). He made conscious efforts to appear friendly by smiling, waving, and behaving in ways that he knows actively contradict racist perceptions about Black men's aggression and violence (Hackman, 2016). When we directly asked him if he thought white residents who feared him were racist, he dismissed us, arguing that he does not believe that they are "racist," but rather that these individuals possess an "unfair stigma" against BIPOC youth like him. These experiences not only influenced his physical behavior and mannerisms, but they have forced him to confront his own internalization of racism, specifically toward other Black men. He found himself crossing the street to avoid other Black men, which he said seemed "ironic" since he was acting in the exact same way as the white people with whom he was frustrated. Kyle said, "somehow, some way, that [unfair stigma] had been programmed into [him]," citing white friends or the media as possible causes for his own internalized fear and anti-Blackness (Donnella, 2018).

This internalized fear and anti-Blackness spilled over into other aspects of Kyle's life. In his interview he explained that his mother often relied on him to translate for her because she did not feel confident speaking English, particularly with authority figures such as the police, lawyers, and judges. After she was evicted, she had to testify against her landlord in court. In his interview, Kyle remembered his mother pleaded with him to translate her words from Spanish to English verbatim. She felt that Kyle often downplayed racism in his own community, and she wanted him to "make sure you tell them they are being racist right now because that's discrimination that's what they are doing." Kyle said that he often told his mom, "I don't think that's what it is, like, whatever." And then, she would urge him, perhaps stronger than the first time, "you tell them exactly what I tell you." She wanted her son to translate her words verbatim, but he refused, often telling her, "chill, chill, chill." Ultimately, Kyle refused to translate his mother's words verbatim in court. Later in the interview,

Kyle said that he refuses to label "prejudice and bias" that his mother described as racism because he feels "like it's not always a race thing ... you can't jump on that right away until you know for sure." Unlike Kia, he is much less willing to label these moments or behaviors as racist even though his mother pleaded with him to represent her words accurately in court and name what she experienced as racism.

Kyle lives a few blocks away from the square and learned about the protests from peers from high school and work. A few days after the Black Lives Matter protests started, Kyle walked to the square to observe the Black Lives Matter protests in his hometown. When we showed him an image of Heaton's Black Lives Matter protests and asked for his reaction to the image, Kyle expressed his support for the movement saying,

I see that frustration coming to life, or at least becoming real to me that people are becoming increasingly frustrated because people aren't opening the door and letting us in and letting us have some of that food and some of that equality people talk about, and some of that love for all type situations.

He continued, looking at the image, and said,

when I look at this picture, and what I see here ... are initial reactions to injustice. Right? People cope and deal with pain in a lot of different ways, but, you know, what I see here are people dealing with that, and searching for that, are dealing with that anger and dealing with that pain and that hurt, by standing out, being outright, going outside and being direct, getting other people to go outside too. And holding up signs and speaking to sacrifice their health, their safety, their life, their time, their money. To say, "Yo, this is not right. This is still not right. Why is this still not right? Fix this. We need to fix this."

In this moment, Kyle recognized why individuals might have chosen to stand on the square in Heaton to protest police brutality and racial injustice.

But after he made this remark, he turned and said, "And some people, you know, don't go out in the streets, some people make music, some people donate, some people pray, some people silently have conversations with other people ... some people ask questions." Kyle is one of the people who did not "go out in the streets." When the Black Lives Matter protests took place on the square, unlike Kia, he stood on the sidelines and observed the activity from a distance. He could have walked over and joined the white

Christians who stood on the town square in solidarity with Black residents, but he did not. He could have joined his Black friends from high school whom he saw standing on the square, but he did not. He saw them from a distance. In his interview, Kyle acknowledged that it was “eye opening” to witness this moment in his hometown, but he said, “it was a situation where I didn’t feel like I was taking part of it. But more observing this part of history, this part of the world that was going on right in front of me.”

### The Threat of Visibility and State-Sanctioned Violence

The experiences that these youth shared with us reveal the possibilities and limitations of protest and the Black Lives Matter movement in rural America. The experiences that Kia and her peers had reveal the critical, and often overlooked, role that Black youth played in creating, mobilizing, and sustaining the Black Lives Matter protests in their rural communities. Kia participated because she recognizes the myriad ways that racism manifests itself in Heaton and the effects that this racism has on her and her family. Kia has witnessed customers in her workplace talk openly about their support for a white supremacist president, students in her school dismiss the racist foundation that the Confederate flag rests on, and police in her community target her family on the basis of their race. These events, coupled with her family and peers’ support, pushed her to act, to make t-shirts, to distribute flyers, to persuade local businesses, and to stand in solidarity with others on the town square holding signs to assert that Black Lives Matter.

When looking closely at the identities and roles of activists, it becomes clear that gender plays a significant role in youth engagement with Black Lives Matter protests. For generations, Black women have led the way in writing radical literature, organizing mutual aid, and leading global protests to end white supremacy. Black women created, organized, and sustained these protests even when they did not necessarily center Black women, including Breonna Taylor and Toyin Salau, who were murdered in 2020 (Cooper, 2018; Kendall, 2020; Moraga & Anzaldúa, 2015; Ransby, 2005; Ruiz & DuBois, 2007; Traister, 2019). Kia and her mother built on the legacy of the work of millions of Black women. They risked their lives and employment security to march in a small predominantly white town where many people opposed the message that Black Lives Matter.

Even though Kyle has experienced the racism that the Black Lives Matter movement seeks to dismantle, Kyle never participated in the Black Lives Matter protests. Instead, he stood on the sidelines watching others, including Kia and her mother, standing in the square. Kia and Kyle have vastly different personal life histories and lived experiences that influenced their decisions about whether to participate in or

to watch the activism that took place over the past eight months in Heaton. The *threat of visibility*, which we define as the threat that rural youth face due to the fact that most people in the community know the names and families of the individuals who protested on the square, might generate a different level of risk for the youth who participate in rural Black Lives Matter protests than their urban counterparts. Kia is not standing and marching with tens of thousands of activists like the youth of color in Philadelphia. She is standing on a square with several hundred people spread out across several blocks. People in this rural town can see her as they drive by the town square, standing with her Black Lives Matter sign next to her mom and her friends. They also probably know her and her family. Kia recognizes the risks that she took when she stood on the square with her mother and her peers. She knows that her employers, or a customer who had expressed opposition to the Black Lives Matter movement, might have seen her protesting on the square. Kia could have lost her job or faced retaliation from a customer for participating in these events. But as she said in her interview, she also knows from her own experiences that her stepfather could have been George Floyd. She decided to participate because the threat of state-sanctioned violence, particularly against her stepfather, outweighed the threat of visibility in her hometown.

We interpret Kyle’s reluctance to name acts and experiences as racist as also stemming, at least in part, from the threat of visibility and state-sanctioned violence that he has experienced and witnessed. As an adolescent, Kyle watched police put his father in handcuffs and remove him from his home. He knew that they deported him to the Dominican Republic. State-sanctioned violence is not an abstract idea for him. Kyle remained with his mother for several more years, but ultimately, he moved in with the white staff who ran the Focus programs that he attended in high school and now support with a part-time job. Most of the people who stood on the square know Kyle; he knows them. But the threat of visibility in his rural hometown coupled with the threat of state-sanctioned violence against him, as a Black boy, prevented him from participating in Heaton’s Black Lives Matter protests. Even though he recognized the many reasons why his peers and supervisors stood on the square last summer, he stood on the sidelines, taking the moment in, as a way to protect himself from the state-sanctioned violence that the protesters on Heaton’s town square aimed to end on his behalf.

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# And the Band Played On: Student Activism and the Black Lives Movement at a Rural Regional Public University

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*The emotional labor of organizing, leading, or participating in campus protests may affect Black students' involvement in social justice activism at rural, predominantly White, higher education institutions. In this study, we examined the experiences and reflections of three Black students who engaged in a Black Lives Matter-inspired protest at a rural, public, historically White regional university in the South. We used a narrative design approach and critical race counter-storytelling methods to present an account of a peaceful protest organized by the students. The counter-stories we present demonstrate both the courage and costs of activism engagement for Black students at a historically White, rural university. We conclude with providing ways in which university personnel and stakeholders in rural communities can stand in solidarity with students to heighten their voices and desires to render societal change.*

In reflection upon student activism in the mid-2010s, Cole and Heinecke (2018) asserted that student protestors “show an optimistic, creative imagination that could serve educators well as we grapple with our first steps down a new road” (p. 1). While Cole and Heinecke pointed to a nirvana of inclusive and supportive college campuses that can foster social justice, the post-neoliberal culture of U.S. campuses obscures the onerous experiences of brave rural students who organized a campus protest in response to the killings of unarmed Black Americans.

In the present study, we examined the experiences and reflections of three of the Black band students who engaged in a Black Lives Matter (BLM)-inspired protest at a rural, public, historically White regional university in the South, which here we refer to by the pseudonym Southern State University (SSU). We used a narrative

design approach (Riessman, 2007) and counter-storytelling methods (Solórzano & Yosso, 2001) to present an account of a peaceful protest by marching band students at SSU. We call this account *The Event* because this clash between Black students and the community, including alumni, and the SSU leadership's response still resonate campus wide. Using Schlossberg's (1989) theory of mattering and marginality, we found that students strategically organized and took calculated risks to engage in protest activities and, from their perceptions, were subjected to ostracization as well as threats to their safety both on and off campus. The counter-stories of the students we present demonstrate both the courage and costs of activism engagement for Black students at a historically White, rural university. In contrast to Cole and Heinecke's (2018) suggestion, the physical risks, in addition to the emotional labor of organizing, leading, or participating in campus protests, may outweigh the benefits accrued to education systems at the expense of Black students (Chambers, 2016). As such we underscore the need for institutional leadership to advance equity and justice proactively, rather than reactively silencing student voices (Harper, 2017; Williams et al., 2021).

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We begin by presenting a historical contextualization of student activism. From there, we discuss our research design, drawing from critical race counter-storytelling methods, and proceed to a presentation of thematic findings and a discussion. We conclude with recommendations for

staff, faculty, administrators, and other stakeholders in rural communities, imploring their enlightened self-interest in supporting students in their quest for social change.

### **Black Student Activism in the South: A Historical Contextualization**

Student activism is a thread in the history of Western higher education (Lipset, 1971/1993; Perkin, 2007). In the 1940s and 1950s, Black undergraduates, with the backing of the courts, pried open the doors to historically White institutions (HWIs) in the American (U.S.) South. The University of Arkansas claims to be the first Southern public institution to desegregate in 1948, with flagship institutions in Virginia and North Carolina enrolling their first Black undergraduates in 1955. In resistance, students, community members, and even some administrators and faculty used harassment and isolation tactics to derail Black student enrollments (Chambers, 2016).

Some rural Southern communities met Black student activists with violent resistance. For example, in 1956, stones and glass bottles were thrown at Autherine Lucy's car when she attempted to attend class at the University of Alabama. A mob chased and shouted, "Kill her" (Sayre, 1995, p. 163). Moreover, *she* was expelled for safety reasons. Five years later, Charlene Hunter-Gault faced bricks and fire as a mob rioted outside her University of Georgia dormitory (Hunter-Gault, 1992).

By 1960, 72% of public HWIs were nominally desegregated, with Black enrollments ranging from fewer than five to over 400 students. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, Black student enrollments at HWIs grew. On average, these institutions had student bodies that were 2% Black (Johnson, 1964). As Black student numbers grew, so did their demands for holistic academic and social support—demands for Black instructors, Black studies and other cultural programs, financial aid, increased recruitment of Black students and athletes, anti-racism on campus, and more (Willie & McCord, 1972). Additional student movements of this Civil Rights era included feminism's second wave, the free speech movement, the emergence of LGBTQ rights, and Vietnam War protests (Chambers, 2016).

The 2010s brought a global wave of student activism, including the SlutWalks and their influence on third-wave feminism (Nguyen, 2013), the Yes Means Yes campaigns and #MeToo movements (Kananovich, 2019) as well as the Occupy movements and BLM (Ransby, 2018). Through its foraying of intersected identities and oft times intersectional advocacy strategies, BLM is all encompassing, confronting racial, class, gender, religion, ability, and sexuality privileges (Ransby, 2018).

### **BLM at Public Regional Colleges and Universities**

A global network rather than an organization per se, BLM is a political movement centered on anti-Black racism. As defined by Ransby (2018), it is a "Black-led mass struggle" that "contextualizes the oppression, exploitation, and liberation of Black poor and working-class people within the simple understanding, at least in the US context, that 'once all Black people are free, all people will be free'" (p. 3). With BLM's emergence, rural communities, including students at rural public universities, ceased their silence (Simpson, 2020). This development is significant because while urban Black students are more likely to assert respect and acceptance of their whole selves, rural Black students are more likely to seek peaceable assimilation (Yull, 2014).

Yull (2014) observed that Black rural students want to distance themselves from racial dissent. Given the Southernization of U.S. culture (Applebome, 1997) and general indifference to racism (Cole, 2020), when rural students at public universities take a stance against racial injustice and police brutality, they incur great risks (Cabrera, 2014; Hardie & Tyson, 2013). BLM movements at rural, regional, public universities in the southeastern United States seem to have escaped national attention (White, 2016) beyond intermittent events (Jaschick, 2016). As a microcosm of rural society, regional public institutions are more likely to serve racially/ethnically diverse student bodies with high percentages of first-generation college students and Pell-eligible students (Gray, 2013). With declining funding to public higher education (Webber, 2017), regional public institutions are at a competitive disadvantage for alternative outlets for state funding. This financial precarity may motivate leaders at regional public institutions to react in favor of donors in ways that perceptibly ignore BIPOC students' needs and concerns (White, 2016).

### **Context of This Study**

This study is situated at SSU, a regional public institution in the South, serving approximately 30,000 students with a historic mission of serving rural first-generation college students. In 2016, Black band students decided to conduct a BLM-inspired protest. Black members of the Mighty Swashbucklers, SSU's marching band, were concerned about racial violence nationally and with everyday interactions between Black people and police locally. In that year, there were 258 documented police-involved shootings of African Americans in the United States (Craven, 2016). To raise awareness of this issue, former San Francisco 49ers quarterback Colin Kaepernick sat during the National Anthem in the preseason. Subsequently, rather than sit, Kaepernick took a knee in consideration

of respect for the military and veterans. Nevertheless, his actions were interpreted to be anti-military and unpatriotic (Martin & McHendry, 2016), despite contrary evidence (Bretherton, 2017). Kaepernick's actions were emulated by other professional teams and students in secondary and postsecondary arenas, including the SSU Swashbucklers. SSU's service region includes three military bases, one each for the Marines, Army, and Air Force. With its military-friendly designation, academic partnerships with the military, and a robust Reserve Officers' Training Corps (ROTC) program, misinterpretations of the protests, unfortunately, dominated the media and public discourse. Essentially, it was in these national and local contexts that Black members of the Mighty Swashbucklers organized and executed their protest.

### Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework we employed in this study was Schlossberg's (1989) theory of mattering and marginality. This framework describes the connections that students have with peers, faculty, and staff as well as how those connections foster their personal worth. These connections are also associated with increased student involvement and retention (Schlossberg, 1989). Concepts of mattering and marginality are derived from Park's (1928) conception of "the marginal man"—a person who has experiences incongruent with their peers within a given environment. The marginal man is akin to Ellison's (1953/2016) *Invisible Man* and the concept of Black double consciousness advanced by Du Bois (1903/1999) and, as such, helps explain Black students' campus experiences (Gossett et al., 1996).

Strayhorn (2018) posited belonging as an outcome of mattering, advancing belonging as foundational to student success. Students who have a sense of belonging are more likely to be involved and engaged in campus life, whereas students who feel marginal are more likely to be isolated and are more likely to develop psychological distress (Crumb et al., 2020). Validating students assuages feelings of marginality, which supports mattering and belonging (Linares & Muñoz, 2011; Réndon, 1994). Here we use the mattering and marginality framework, with the supports of belonging and validation theory, to situate Black students' campus connections after a campus protest.

### Researcher Positionality

Researcher positionality involves reflecting on how the researcher, participants, and phenomenon of interest interact and influence each other (Laverty, 2003). Our (lead authors Crystal Chambers and Loni Crumb) lived experiences of

navigating through HWIs as Black females prompted our interests in exploring how students of color find solidarity among their peers and support from university personnel in what are often deemed as "chilly" environments (New, 2015). Moreover, as Black faculty of color, we are vested in using our social capital to advance equity in education and liberation for students from historically marginalized groups. Providing a counter-story of the students' experiences in this study is an act of solidarity and student empowerment.

### Research Design

The human subjects review board at the authors' institution certified the study as exempt secondary data analysis. The research question guiding this study was: What were the experiences and reflections of Black students who engaged in a BLM-inspired protest at a rural, public regional university in the South? We refer to this BLM-inspired protest as The Event and in the sections below detail it narratively from student experiences. Here, we use the term *experiences* to denote students' recounts of The Event. The term *reflections* refers to the meaning students made of The Event and its aftermath, which we interpreted using Schlossberg's theory of mattering and marginality (1989).

We used a combination of a narrative design informed by critical race counter-story methods and general qualitative interpretative design to conduct a secondary data analysis of interviews with three band students who participated in The Event. This protest achieved the level of an event as it was "a thing that happens, especially one

of importance" (Lexico, 2021). Various campus groups staged several protests, but not one of them was as public or received as much attention regionally and nationally. In the original data collection, students who protested in The Event were solicited to participate in an undergraduate class project and were interviewed by a student co-researcher.

Given the perceived suppression of speech about the event as described below, there was a reluctance among student protesters to discuss The Event with anyone outside the band. Nevertheless, Jordan, Nia, and Haven (pseudonyms) agreed to an interview. Jordan was a junior political science major with a public administration minor. Nia was a junior music education major. Haven was a senior communications major with a concentration in public relations and a minor in sociology. She was also a band section leader. The Event occurred in the year before the interviews. Participants were asked about their recollection of The Event, its planning, support from the university, perspectives on BLM, the military, and whether they would do it again (see appendix for interview protocol).

To examine our research question, we first constructed a collective narrative of The Event using interview data from the participants (Riessman, 2007). Second, we analyzed the transcribed interview data and coded the data using the constant comparative method (Miles et al., 2014). The faculty researchers coded data separately and then compared codes for reliability purposes and trustworthiness.

Results are presented in two parts. First, drawing from critical race counter-story methods, we narrate, using the students' words, the planning and execution of The Event. Counter-story is a critical race theory (CRT) method for telling the stories of marginalized people (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002), challenging inequitable power and privilege distributions across social, political, and economic systems (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; McCoy & Rodricks, 2015) based on five major tenets: first, the centrality and intersectionality of race and racism; second, challenge to dominant ideology; third, the commitment to social justice; fourth, the importance of experiential knowledge; and fifth, the use of interdisciplinary perspectives. Whereas majoritarian stories mask minoritized experiential knowledge, critical race counter-storytelling exposes and recasts majoritarian stories of racial privilege, centering minoritized voices.

In the second part, we identify four themes that capture students' overall experiences after the event, analyzed through the lens of the noted frameworks using students' quotes: (a) "All I wanted was to raise awareness," (b) "Care about your students' values and feelings," (c) "I feel like they were thinking this wouldn't happen," and (d) "We accomplished something."

### The Event

#### **"Let's Do Something Together"**

You know, social media and just the news in general. We have seen ... certain protests around the country. There were certain flares of activism with the Black Lives Matter movement, things like that on campus. So, we decided, because we were unable to attend a lot of the events, because of our rehearsals, because of school, because of classes... We were like, okay, let's do something together. - Jordan

Organizing for The Event grew from a desire of some Black band members to create space for collective solidarity. They first created a group-text chat. As the deaths of unarmed Black men and women gained visibility, these students desired activist participation but could not partake because of their band obligations. The solution they came to was that they would do something within the band. "Let's do

something together," was the general sentiment, according to Jordan. Drawing support from this circle, Haven recalled, "we had a blackout at one of our practices where everybody wore black, or everybody who wanted to wear black wore black, just in solidarity with the oppression that was going on in the Black community." Several students wanted to do more. Jordan shared, "About a week prior to the event..., we basically came together like, 'Hey, my sister, let's just take a day. Let's just do it.'"

The plan was for Black band members to take a knee and refrain from playing the anthem as the band took the field. As each band instrument has a unique part, there would be instrumentation gaps where Black band members' notes would be missed. Reframed, the finished product was the sound rendered when only White instruments were given voice, metaphorically demonstrating the value of Black voices and Black lives. Student groups held similar protests at Temple University, the University of Michigan, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and the University of Nebraska Lincoln, although those protests were largely uneventful (Jaschick, 2016). SSU student organizers had similar expectations.

As the date of The Event drew near, Jordan reflected, "There were more people attempting to garner support throughout the band and keep it less of a surprise." As a section leader, Haven had a direct connection with the band director:

He actually called me... He said, "I know you guys have been talking about doing something like protesting. So, are you guys still planning on doing that?" I was like, "Yes, we're planning on kneeling." And he said, "Well, I just want to make sure it's going to be uniform." ... So, to us, there was no problem. There was no problem with us wanting to protest because our band director came to us and was like, "It's fine. Just do it the same."

Jordan and Nia corroborated the band director's considerations for band unity—and safety.

At a band practice before The Event, academic and student affairs leaders met with students. Haven shared:

They brought out the president and the provost, and they were to address pretty much the band. They were like, "I don't know if you guys are aware, but some of your bandmates want to protest."

Jordan provided his recollection of one student affairs leader, stating:

"Hey, like if you guys do this, just know that the university has ways for you to have your voice heard, you know? And if you would like for your voice to be heard the university has ways to do that. Come to us so we can help you." It wasn't really a, like, don't do it or do it kind of thing. It was more like a "Hey, if you decide to do this, we have things that we can do to support you in the future." But then also at that same saying flip of the coin, uh, "If you do this, we don't know what kind of consequences there will be," you know?

Through that conversation, Haven said she felt "attacked." Frustrated but nevertheless resolved, she asserted, "I'm still gonna kneel." As students expected, the university's president prepared a statement supportive of free speech for release at halftime.

On the day of The Event, when the band played the National Anthem, Jordan shared, "Some of us took a knee, some of us prayed, some of us were just sitting there and just looking around, just kind of taking in everything, understanding how much the moment was." Students engaging in the protest constituted 10% of band membership but were dispersed throughout the band. Nia explained, "You've got people in the drumline, you got people everywhere, like across the field."

Soon Nia noticed the crowd's screams: "BOOOO," "Respect the flag," and the like. According to Haven,

it was incredible to me, the response. And I don't mean that in a good way ... after our performance, people followed us, throwing beer cans at us, spitting on us, throwing umbrellas at us, throwing so many things at us, trying to hit us, punch us.

Nia did not notice the police escort covering band members as they left the field, whereas peers on the side of the field closer to the general public were more exposed to violent encounters. The emotional impact was immediate. Nia expressed exasperation: "I definitely cried. Definitely. It was, it wasn't a cry for like they're being mean. It's like a, wow, they really don't get it type of cry. Like, 'Are they ever going get it?'"

Public reactions were strong. SSU's president received hundreds of emails, many containing threats to cancel institutional support. In response, the SSU president issued a second statement asserting the right of the university to regulate student time, place, and manner of speech for safety reasons. He also, at this time, asserted the institution's deep military connections. Students were directed to sign new band contracts, prohibiting protest while in band uniform.

Not signing meant discontinuing participation with the Marching Swashbucklers, which constituted a threat to scholarships, a key source of financial aid for some students.

### **Students' Counter-Stories**

#### **"All I Wanted Was to Raise Awareness"**

Students varied in their reasons for organizing and participating in The Event. In uncovering "the whys," a quote from Jordan began the narrative above with an expressed need for deeper connections among Black band members and connections to contemporary social movements. Reflecting on her brothers and their fear for her safety, Nia asserted, "When females started getting involved [referencing Sandra Bland] it got scarier. It's just a whole lot, Black in America." Poignantly, Haven stated, "All I wanted was to raise awareness."

A week after The Event, the band met. "A lot of us tried to explain, but now they were mostly upset because of what happened," Haven shared. Speaking retrospectively, she said,

A lot of the band members were like, this was not the time, the place for you to do this. And we were trying to get them to understand there is never a right time and a place to protest.

Haven described one interaction with a White woman bandmate:

She said, "It's just not fair because I was walking down. We had rocks thrown at us. People were saying derogatory things, that those people didn't care about, our safety and our lives." And I stood up and I said, "I am so sorry that that happened because it happened to me too.... But this is how Black people feel every day when they just leave their houses.... Like we get this unfair treatment all the time and you got to feel it for 10 minutes, and you didn't even get hit or spit on. Actually, another Black player who wasn't involved in it did."

Here, Haven was referring to an incident in which a Black band member who did not participate in the protest was accosted in the stadium bathroom. Conveying perspectives espoused by others, she continued, "They're getting so caught up in being attacked and you know, 'I'm not racist.' It's like, okay. But that person next to you is, you know. And you're not acknowledging that."

### **“Care About Your Students’ Values and Feelings”**

#### ***Courage***

Student fear was palpable from the planning stages, but so too was the resolve among the students who were interviewed. Several students declined to participate in The Event in the wake of conversations with the university’s administration. The students discussed backlash in the rural community. Nia seemingly normalized the sociocultural dynamics in the community: “I was like, look at where we are. I mean, do you guys not expect for something to happen?” Despite the community resistance and administrative guidance, several students remained dedicated to protesting.

#### ***Fear, Precarity, and Student Support***

Community, donor, and alumni vitriol continued the next several days. The SSU president issued a second press release. As described by Haven, the first statement

pretty much was like, we support our students and their right to express themselves... It was pretty much saying that they appreciated what we did and stood behind it, even though they might not have agreed with it, it was our right.

Jordan shared, “That initial response was very much ... in support and it felt like we had gotten, you know, a small victory.” By contrast, to Haven, the second statement “definitely negated and took away from the original statement.... Like ... we don’t stand behind what the students did. That won’t ever happen again.”

Students perceived this shift in institutional support as hurtful and personal. Haven shared:

if you have put this statement [the second one] out first, I would have been hurt, but like that would have been it. I wouldn’t have, nobody would have been upset.... It wouldn’t have been as big as a deal as it was, especially to me.

The students perceived that the academic and student affairs leadership were aligning with the president’s statement. Concomitantly, the band director issued a directive. However, as observed by Nia:

That letter that was sent out by [the director] was not sent out by [the director]. Now, I don’t have a hundred percent proof of that, but I firmly believe that *they* [emphasis added] wrote that and said, sign it, like, you know.... And he was put in a tough position.

As an untenured faculty member, his position was precarious. Nia explained, “There were people that got scared because they didn’t want for [the director] to get fired because of this.... He really cared for us.” Jordan and Haven also spoke to his care. Jordan believed that this care ethic emanated from the director’s Latinx heritage.

Regarding the broader institutional leadership, the thought among the band members was that donors mattered more than students. Nia shared, “You got people pulling money saying they’re not going to pay any more money to the school.... I feel like if it was their fairytale world, we would have been dealt with.” Students shared that donors wished to strike their scholarships or subject them to disciplinary action. From Haven’s view,

the money that you received from these donors and the alumni, the support and everything is more important than the actual students who are attending.... I felt unappreciated and I didn’t feel like I was wanted on this campus.

Students felt betrayed. Haven shared, “there are significantly less people in the marching band and it was last year..., and I do, I feel like the school’s response is what hurt us a lot because [there are] people who are really passionate about music.” Two of the three students interviewed discontinued with the band. Haven reflected, “As soon as I felt disrespected doing something that I loved, I didn’t feel like I could do it here anymore.... I really haven’t even been in the School of Music since.”

#### ***Black Leaders, Faculty, and Staff Matter***

Beyond the band director, the students perceived other university support as limited. The underrepresentation of Black faculty at the university, including the fact that there was only one Black faculty member in the School of Music, contributed to students’ feelings of isolation. However, Haven noted support from three Black women, a tenured faculty member, a student affairs leader, and a staff member, in whom she could confide:

at one point I did get very emotional ... because I was like crying.... And one of the counselors ... she was also an African American woman ... she was pretty much like, “I understand you, and I understand everything you were going through.” She was like, “because I have gone through some of this as well.”

Haven felt that the care of these women and the band director were validating.

### **"I Feel Like They Were Thinking This Wouldn't Happen"**

#### ***Consequences of Neoliberalism***

Black students who engage in the BLM movement in the rural Southern United States face the consequences of neoliberal ideologies on their campuses. As framed by Jordan,

I thought the reaction here was so big mainly because of the demographics surrounding the area of the university ... just predominantly White and predominantly what a lot of people see as conservative.... Personally speaking..., I feel like they're actually more libertarian. They just don't believe that there should be too much involvement with the government in general. They like things where they are cause things aren't broken, so there's no need to fix it. So, with this protest, I feel like they kind of took that idea of things aren't broken. So, there's no need to fix it.

Students felt that the community questioned the interjection of BLM awareness into their comfortable neoliberal setting. Haven stated,

I feel like they were thinking ... this wouldn't happen here. This wouldn't happen at my home. This wouldn't happen, you know, where I'm from. So ... it like not just ruined their way of thinking but ruined what they thought this town was.

She saw the approach of alumni and donors as, "Me, me, me.... This isn't pleasing me. So I'm going to take my money, take my donations."

#### ***Dispelling Myths: Black Patriotism***

The students rejected the mis-association of kneeling during the National Anthem and disrespect to the flag or military. Jordan reflected:

they took it personally, in a way of saying that there was an attack on that and anti-patriotism.... I have people in my family who have fought in and injured in war and yes, the American flag and national anthem had to mean something.

Part of this deflection connects to the marginalization of Black military personnel and veterans within dominant narratives of who serves in the U.S. Armed Forces. Each student spoke of a close veteran relative. Nia spoke to

dispelling myths about Blacks in the military and shared a common Black perspective on the purpose of service:

It kills me: "People like you have no respect for veterans and stuff."... And I was like, "What? You don't think Black people served in the military?!" I mean, yes. I have respect for the military because the military is fighting for us to be able to exercise these rights.... Like, what do you think they're fighting for?

Jordan further explained the difference between disrespect and reverence:

especially those of us in [this region] should understand that when you kneel down to something, that it's like when you're praying, it's sort of reverence to something.... Kneeling as something that is in reverence to something that brings you lower, humbles you, and kind of brings light to something else.

#### ***Silencing***

The students were challenged to describe their experiences as racist. As they shared their perceptions of the community, there were long pauses associated with attempts to frame issues, so they did not implicate Whiteness. Nia was perhaps the most strained:

I feel like the, [long pause] I don't know, I don't want to get rude. So, I'm just going to like, say, I'm just going to stick with you. [Interviewer: I mean, you know you can say how you feel]. Well, [pause, huge sigh] I love my school, OK. But like we got, we got a wide variety.... I don't know. This is really difficult to put into words.

In some settings, people are taught that if you cannot say something nice about someone, you should say nothing. The result is intergenerational silencing and the suppression of minoritized voices.

Students also received instruction not to talk to the press. Students shared that transgressions were sanctionable by practice bans. Missing practice meant not being able to play on game day and implicated grades because marching band is an academic class.

To control the narrative, the director designated two students to speak: The students holding the flag. Haven shared,

there was a television interview with two people from the band, and they were in opposition to the

kneeling, open opposition. They were the ones carrying the flag. Right. And it's so funny because a lot of people like to talk about them. They're like, upon a broken band, they were trying to just reunite them ... that above all else, America is one ... And I'm like, yes, I agree with that.... But I'm like this, their flag was the most important thing.

This vision of contrived unity was the lasting media impression that SSU desired.

### **"I Felt Like We Accomplished Something"**

#### ***No Regrets***

When asked whether, in hindsight, they would do it again, each student answered affirmatively. When asked why, Nia pointed to campus conversations: "The conversation that was started on this campus afterward was necessary. It may not have lasted super long, but it got people talking." For Jordan, "it was more of a shell breaking moment within myself." His commitment to social justice was reinforced: "If I see something that I feel I can personally affect I try to personally affect it. So, yes, looking back, I would absolutely do it again."

### **Discussion**

As mentioned in their examination of student activism, Cole and Heinke (2018) looked toward a post-neoliberal academy, a postsecondary education system driven less by academic capitalism (Cantwell & Kauppinen, 2014) and more by equity, social justice, and human advancement. In this study, we found that students displayed a commitment to social justice and challenged dominant ideology through their activism and counter-stories. Despite the many risks they faced, these students persisted in their protest efforts and were extended varying levels of university support which they perceived was somewhat rescinded after The Event. Their physical safety was jeopardized, as was the case of student activists in the 1950s and 1960s (Chambers, 2016), and their emotionality surfaced as publicly displayed tears (Walker-Barnes, 2009). Despite their labors, the dominant story of The Event, as articulated by Haven, was that it was "completely wrong and disrespectful" for Black band members to protest. The perception was, "They have no right to do that because these people have gone and died and fight for their right to be on that field and play the National Anthem." This student's perception was seemingly solidified by the initial conferral and hasty withdrawal of support. Haven's perception of The Event was also shaped by the silencing of students that resulted in their feeling

marginalized and as if they did not matter (Schlossberg, 1989).

However, the counter-story was not shared publicly as students were discouraged from speaking to the press, including the student media. Haven observed, "It was crazy to me because you're upset now, just because of the way everything turned out [regarding The Event], but you're not upset about what is happening in the community of people, of color and Black people." CRT asserts the importance of providing counter-narratives to relay the lived experiences of individuals who are minoritized and often silenced. Three areas of discussion gleaned from the counter-stories are student motivations, courage, and resolve; institutional precarity and the support of Black students; and students' mattering and marginality.

### **Student Motivations, Courage, and Resolve**

Black college students may experience secondary stressors stemming from the unjust killings of Black men and women (Goodman et al., 2012). Students in this study, among others at SSU and other institutions, stood in solidarity with BLM to raise awareness. These findings mirror other studies (Jones & Reddick, 2017; Leath & Chavous, 2017) that show how Black students at HWIs partake in civic engagement on college campuses to find solidarity with their college peers (Brooms & Davis, 2017) and echo the demands for recognition, respect, and support issued by Black students generations ago (Chambers, 2016; Ndemanu, 2017; Willie & McCord, 1972). This type of activism is a personal strategic attempt for students to collectively confront institutionalized racism (Williams et al., 2021), representing a commitment to social justice as indicated in CRT (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). Each student emphatically expressed that they would do it again, identifying personal growth and collective campus learning as byproducts of their activism. Thus, like other scholarship (Hope et al., 2016; Jones & Reddick, 2017; Leath & Chavous, 2017), we found that involvement in activism plays a vital role in Black students' personal growth, identity formation, and civic engagement at HWIs.

### **Institutional Precarity and the Support of Black Students**

Twenty-first-century public higher education is marked by financial precarity, especially at regional institutions. As fiscal support for public higher education declines, public institutions seek to replace some state dollars through fundraising. Regional public institutions are newer to institutional advancement. Hence, they may be more sensitive to donors as they typically have fewer

tools to manage alumni and donor perceptions (McClure & Eppenstein Anderson, 2020; McClure & Fryar, 2020), which is detrimental to BIPOC students (White, 2016; Williams et al., 2021). At SSU, some people perceived the protest as contradistinctive to patriotism and military friendliness, thereby jeopardizing institutional backing from alumni and donors. Here, students experienced the same distortion of purpose Kaepernick received (Bretherton, 2017; Martin & McHendry, 2016) and were silenced without regard for their personal connections to and appreciation for the military or consideration of dissent as patriotism (Curren & Dorn, 2018; King, 1967). This suppression of student voice led to student feelings of increased marginality (Schlossberg, 1989) and lack of belonging (Strayhorn, 2018).

Given demographic browning in the United States (Grawe, 2018), it behooves institutions to reexamine racially indifferent leadership approaches (Cole, 2020; Harper, 2017), especially the use of suppression techniques to force alignment between student interests and perceived institutional goals (Williams, et al., 2018). Instead, as the leaders of academic institutions, presidents and other administrators should cultivate dialogue while intentionally educating the community on racial inequities and directly addressing student concerns (Harper, 2017).

### **Students' Mattering and Marginality**

In this study, students emphasized mattering, both individually and collectively, as Black students at a rural, public HWI. They also articulated feelings of marginality. According to Schlossberg's theory (1989), mattering and marginality are a spectrum upon which students can map their institutional connections. That mapping can help us understand their desire to have their ideas and feelings validated as important, punctuated with appreciation, underscoring the dependence of these young emergent adults on university faculty, staff, and administration (Schlossberg, 1989; see also Rendón, 1984; Linares & Muñoz, 2011). Mattering was evident as students expressed that staff and faculty at their institution (i.e., band director, counselor, academic and student affairs leaders) engaged in authentic conversations regarding The Event and discussed possible ramifications and how to navigate the social and emotional outcomes. The students identified specific university personnel who cared about "what they want, think, and do and [were] concerned about their fate" (Schlossberg, 1989, p. 10). The presence of African American women and their support was poignant for two students, which underscores the need for increased diversity in university faculty, staff, and leadership (Crumb et al., 2020; Overstreet et al., 2021).

Students anticipated adverse reactions from some community members and alumni. However, the conflicting statements released from the president and others caused

confusion regarding how much the students' values and efforts mattered to institutional leadership, especially given the condemnation they experienced. Upon experiencing this marginalization, students disengaged from an activity they "loved" because they felt "disrespected."

### **Implications**

The counter-stories shared here highlight the importance of validating students' sociopolitical beliefs and the benefits of student organizing and civic engagement at a rural, regional university in the South. The following implications outline how student affairs personnel, faculty, and rural community stakeholders can better support Black student activism at rural HWIs.

#### **Safety First**

University personnel must ensure students' safety in all forms (i.e., physical, emotional, psychological) but even more so following contentious events. Regarding physical safety, campus safety officers should be involved and trained on keeping all students safe. Peaceful Black student protesters should not be deemed as criminal provocateurs of violence (Reinka & Leach, 2017). Furthermore, before and after planned protests, university leaders should enlist college mental health counseling services to attend to students' emotional and psychological well-being. Counselors can extend empathy and help students to healthily process their emotions. Counselors can also help counter students' adverse reactions and prevent them from withdrawing from university activities (Crumb & Haskins, 2017).

#### **Racially Responsive Leadership**

Each participant desired support from faculty, staff, and university leaders. Given racism tolerance, the scarcity of BIPOC faculty (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020), and the concentration of those faculty in the professions as opposed to the disciplines where they can teach BIPOC undergraduates, it may be more challenging for Black students to connect with allies in advocacy. Consequently, activism efforts may be more difficult at rural HWIs. Students want university administration, staff, and faculty to help shape their voices and ideas for advancing social justice. They also appreciate openly discussing the ramifications of such events with trusted professionals.

Preparing in the absence of crisis will allow for careful consideration of institutional mission, values, and constituencies when students lead social justice activism. If institutionally led, the burden is lifted from students (Harper, 2017; Leath & Chavous, 2017) and leadership can

shape the time, place, and manner of action, leading students as educators rather than following them as reactionaries (Harper, 2017). Institutions should consider racially responsive leadership approaches given the demographic imperative.

### The Demographic Imperative

Demographically, 18- to 24-year-old college students are increasingly BIPOC. In the face of declining traditional enrollments (Grawe, 2018), it is in the enlightened interest of HWIs and their stakeholders, including donors and alumni, to abandon racially narcissistic approaches and build and support a diverse, equitable, and inclusive campus, as many state funding formulas include enrollments in their metrics. Black students matter to the institution's bottom line. If HWIs want to recruit and retain BIPOC students, campuses must feel—and be—safe, welcoming, and inclusive.

### Conclusion

The Event was a unique experience in activism for students on SSU's campus as well as for people in the surrounding rural community. The outcomes of The Event included fostering Black student solidarity, education of White peers, and illuminating the physical and emotional costs of protesting racism in the 21st century. Several years later, The Event lives in the minds and occasional discourse of faculty, staff, and graduate students at SSU. It was a defining moment in institutional history. The impacts of The Event resonate in quiet corners among the faculty and staff who remain long after students graduate.

Trends show that students at rural universities and in communities across the United States are fervently working to support the BLM movement (Kelley, 2016; Simpson, 2020; Williams et al., 2021). With this notice, leadership at rural public universities can prepare for when, not if, a racialized event will happen. Institutional actions toward change shift that burden (Harper, 2017). It is our hope that this article encourages rural public institutional leadership to move from racial indifference and tacit oppression (Case & Joubert, 2020) to becoming allies who hold safe spaces for Black students to take a stand for social justice.

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**Appendix: Interview Protocol**

1. What's your year?
2. Academic major?
3. What is your stance on Black Lives Matter?
4. In your own words, what happened?
5. Was the administration aware beforehand? What was their stance before the protest? After? What was your reaction?
6. Did you continue to play as you knelt?
7. Knowing what you do now, would you choose to protest again? Why or why not? What would you change?
8. Other schools in [the state] have had students participate in similar protests with few academic repercussions. Why do you think that this one provoked such a strong reaction from school administrators?
9. How do you think the administration should have handled the reaction to the protest?
10. Why did you choose to protest? Why did you not continue?
11. Were there any members of the band that were strongly opposed to your protest?

# Social Justice Leaders Serving Students of Color in Southwest Texas Rural Schools

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*The purpose of this study was to explore how social unrest in the United States, specifically the COVID-19 pandemic and the tragic deaths of Black people at the hands of police, have transformed the leadership and pedagogy of school leaders in three rural school districts in southwest Texas. The strategies used to collect data for this study included semi-structured Zoom interviews, reflective journals, and class reflections. Findings from this study highlight how COVID-19 and racial unrest in the United States have centered the commitment of the participants to embrace a pedagogy that is more responsive to the students they serve. Additionally, current events have sensitized educators to be more empathetic toward the community they serve as educators. Implications of this study include that educators and leaders should become social justice advocates and strive to become allies against systemic oppression.*

While in the decades since *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) the United States has experienced many strides toward equality in schools, many issues still challenge schools across the nation. Historically, the U.S. educational system has been plagued by injustices and inequities masked by policies. From the beginning, racism has been engraved into the foundation of the United States. Racism has plagued school policies and established a “separate but equal” school system that has been superficially remedied to serve all students. Our nation is facing a dual pandemic—COVID-19 and racism—which has called on every educator to revisit their values, belief systems, and pedagogy to commit to a future very distinct from the past. The purpose

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of this study was to explore how the COVID-19 pandemic and the tragic killings of Black people at the hands of police have transformed the leadership and pedagogy of educators in three rural school districts in southwest Texas.

In early spring 2020, people across the globe faced the unprecedented crisis of COVID-19. This crisis had a magnitude like nothing people had encountered before, and no leader had prior experience to address this health crisis. Educational leaders across the globe found themselves in uncharted territory as they led their organizations through the pandemic. Specifically, the educational system had to pivot almost instantly and change how teaching and learning took place. Educational leaders had to develop practices and protocols which would allow learning to continue while simultaneously keeping everyone safe from the potential deadly harm of COVID-19.

As the COVID-19 pandemic spread across the United States, racism was brought out of the shadows as crimes against people of color generated more interest in America. Antiracists, such as the activists of the Underground Railroad, Malcolm X, and Charlemae Hill Rollins, have fought racial oppression since the early days of the United States. In 2020, social unrest in response to racism in the police accountability system escalated. Breonna Taylor was killed on March 13, 2020, when police used a no-knock warrant to enter her home while she was sleeping and shot her eight times. On April 22, 2020, Vanessa Guillén, a 20-year-old U.S. Army soldier, was murdered by a fellow

**Table 1**  
*Texas Student Demographics, 2018–2019*

	Number of students	Percentage of total (%)	Change from 2018 enrollment (%)
<b>Race/ethnicity</b>			
African American	685,775	12.6	0.7
American Indian	20,414	0.4	-0.8
Asian	242,657	4.5	3.0
Hispanic	2,854,590	52.6	0.9
Pacific Islander	8,271	0.2	3.1
White	1,490,299	27.4	-0.9
Two or more races	129,904	2.4	6.1
<b>Total</b>	<b>5,431,910</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>0.6</b>
<b>SES and ELL status</b>			
Economically disadvantaged	3,289,468	60.6	3.8
English learners	1,055,172	19.4	3.9

*Note.* Data from the Public Education Information Management System Information System (TEA, 2020).

soldier inside Fort Hood, Texas. On May 25, 2020, America saw a Black man, George Floyd, die while being arrested. Floyd's murder presented another case in which police actions illustrated a lack of accountability for police officers in violent acts against people of color,<sup>1</sup> leaving room for racism to prevail over the safety and well-being of people of color. This lack of accountability reminds many observers that all lives will not matter until Black lives matter. People of color in the United States worry about their safety from COVID-19. In tandem, they fear finding themselves in the wrong place at the wrong time, at the hands of a racist police officer who is tasked with protecting and serving but can kill American citizens of color without consequence.

Communities of color have experienced higher rates of exposure to COVID-19 (Price-Haywood et al., 2020; Wilder, 2021). When combined with the constant reminder that American people of color are not safe from police violence, 2020–2021 became another time for solidarity against racial oppression and a critical moment in history to acknowledge the urgent need for change. The school districts included in this study serve marginalized populations, predominantly Latina/o/x<sup>2</sup> communities with high poverty rates and a low number of Black students. Interestingly, since Texas

requires a subgroup to constitute a minimum of 10% of the population for accountability purposes, the leaders of each school in this study are left to serve students as they see fit. In this study, the Black student population falls below the 10% threshold, which offers flexibility for school districts in how they serve students. Unfortunately, this policy does not require interventions and support for students who identify with racial/ethnic groups with low populations.

## Context

### Texas Landscape

About 12.4 million children in the United States are enrolled in rural public schools (Schafft, 2016). Although one-fourth of public schools are labeled as rural, one-third of all schools and almost 60% of school districts are considered rural (Schafft, 2016). Texas hosts over 1,200 school districts and charter school systems (Texas Education Agency [TEA], 2020). While Texas is responsible for educating more rural students than any other state in the country, not much attention is given to adequately serving these students. According to TEA, out of the 1,200 districts, only 55 districts have populations of over 25,000 students. Most districts are smaller and in rural communities. Table 1 illustrates recent student demographics in Texas.

Because of limited opportunities and underdevelopment, many rural areas have struggled with aging populations, poverty, outmigration, and contracting economies (Schafft, 2016; Woodrum, 2004). Despite these struggles, the school-

<sup>1</sup> Derek Chauvin has been sentenced to 22.5 years for the murder of George Floyd. We assert that the criminal sentencing for second degree homicide (intentionally or unintentionally killing another human being) is incommensurate with the harm caused by George Floyd's tragic death.

<sup>2</sup> Embracing an inclusive approach, "Latina/o/x" is used to highlight the spectrum of gender and sexual identity.

community relationship seems to remain strong and intact. Parents are more likely to attend school events and volunteer in school activities, and teachers report higher levels of job satisfaction and fewer behavioral problems than their urban counterparts (Schafft, 2016).

However, studies have shown that racial issues and racism within schools have prevented many Black parents from fully participating in their children's schooling experiences (Archer-Banks & Behar-Horenstein, 2008; Myers, 2015). In addition, family support at home and in communities that differ from those of teachers (especially Black families and communities) is often unrecognized or unappreciated because educators do not accept or value it (López-Robertson et al., 2010; Myers, 2015; Sleeter, 2012). Educators must seek ways to understand the parents of their students better. Educators must recognize their biases, regardless of their race (Myers, 2015).

During the dual pandemic in which the United States has found itself, rural communities have experienced many challenges. For example, students had limited access to schools due to a lack of bus transportation, weak internet connections for online instruction, and limited access to healthcare (Bacher-Hicks et al., 2021; Tai et al., 2021; Tremmel et al., 2020; Varela & Fedynich, 2020). These and other conditions call for increased attention to rural and smaller school districts to better understand how America can equitably serve and educate all its children. This study focused on this matter within three rural areas in Texas.

### Social Justice Leadership

Texas schools have experienced rapid demographic shifts that have altered school populations' cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic makeup. During the COVID-19 pandemic, school leaders have faced new challenges in which the increasing diversity of school communities has become more complex and distinct. New threats to social justice have emerged due to this growing diversity, and historical issues of inequality continue to impede student learning, participation, and development (Chiu & Walker, 2007). Amid this revolution, many school leaders in these rapidly transitioning schools have implemented different leadership practices to address social justice issues.

U.S. Census data have revealed that the country's demographics are shifting. Specifically, Latina/o/x Americans, African Americans, Asian Americans, and Americans of two or more races now comprise over 40% of the U.S. population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021a). Census data also have indicated a 8.6% decline in the White American population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021b). While students in U.S. public schools are becoming increasingly diverse, the teaching and administrative staff does not

reflect this diversity and remains predominantly White (Bireda & Chait, 2011). The gap between the racial/ethnic identities of public-school educators and students represents a critical issue in U.S. education. As a result of the changes in the demographic profiles of school students, principals and teachers have faced unique challenges in the delivery of instruction, the language used with parents or community members, and methods of building an environment of authentic caring (Nieto, 2006; Valenzuela, 1999). These rapidly changing demographics mean that school leaders need to prepare all educators to function effectively in a highly diverse environment. As Theoharis (2008) stated:

Leaders espousing social justice ideals advocate, lead, and keep at the center of their practice and vision issues of race, class, gender, disability, sexual orientation, and other historically and currently marginalizing conditions. (p. 5)

Social justice leaders can promote equity and justice for all students by establishing school climates where discrimination is challenged and negated (Jayavant, 2016). American schools are continuously evolving in a complex social context of policies and mandates where marginalized groups are traditionally less successful. Consequently, students from high-risk backgrounds achieve minimal success in today's schools, where their self-esteem and confidence can be irrevocably damaged (Larson, 2010). Adams and associates (2007) wrote,

The goal of social justice education is to enable people to develop the critical analytical tools necessary to understand oppression and their own socialization within oppressive systems, and to develop a sense of agency and capacity to interrupt and change oppressive patterns and behaviors in themselves and in the institutions and communities of which they are a part. (p. 2)

Magdaleno (2016) suggested that school leaders need to be culturally responsive to diverse student needs to embed a culture of social justice and equity in schools. This literature shows how school leaders play an essential role in creating a safe and accepting school environment that guides the education of diverse student populations.

Embracing an equity lens for leadership preparation, Theoharis (2009) developed a seven-point framework for social justice leaders that specifically describes leadership in action. At the center of the framework is the social justice leader, who has two key tasks: acquire broad, reconceptualized consciousness/knowledge/skill base and possess core leadership traits (p. 13). The next level of the framework discusses how social justice leaders

challenge inequalities: by advancing inclusion, access, and opportunity; improving the core learning context (teaching and the curriculum); creating a climate of belonging; and raising student achievement (p. 14). The outermost layer of the framework is the resiliency the leaders develop to sustain themselves professionally and personally (p. 16).

Although the term *social justice* frequently appears in the education literature, it is often used as a “catchphrase without offering an explanation of its social, cultural, economic, and political significance” (North, 2006, p. 507). Several scholars have suggested that social justice is an “elusive construct” (Jean-Marie et al., 2009, p. 3) and is not easy to define (Marshall & Oliva, 2006; Theoharis, 2009). Shoho et al. (2005) noted that there is no agreement on the “definition of social justice with respect to educational administration” (p. 47).

Marshall and Oliva (2006) suggested that capacity building for social justice leaders requires a blending of theory, research, reflections on practice, tools for teaching and other interventions, strategies for engaging passion and emotion, and realistic engagement with the challenges in real-world policy and practice. Social justice advocacy has always been crucial in leadership preparation (Marshall & Oliva, 2010; Merchant et al., 2020; Niño & Alemán, 2019; Prieto & Niño, 2016). Moreover, with support in the current climate to change from a racist system to an antiracist policy-making system, building a better world beyond COVID-19 requires educational leaders to imagine new ways of thinking about education. As such, this study focused on how social justice leadership preparation for aspiring leaders influences their practice as educators during the current sociopolitical climate during the COVID-19 pandemic.

### Methods for Investigation

This inductive qualitative study explored the practices of educators from rural school districts in southwest Texas who are in a leadership development graduate program. As authors of this piece, we used a social justice lens (Theoharis, 2008) to help us answer our guiding research question: How did the phenomena of the COVID-19 pandemic and the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement influence educators?

Although we do not identify as Black, we see the value in and need to embrace diversity and responsibility to create social justice and equity-oriented school leaders. For this reason, we invited 25 educators to share their insights from what they were living and experiencing in their current contexts. All 25 participants agreed to be part of this reflective experience. The participants were diverse. The majority of participants identified as female; 10 participants identified as male. Most participants identified as Latina/o/x; three women identified as White and two identified as Black, and two men identified as White and two as Black.

While some of the educators served as classroom teachers, department chairs, instructional coaches, and athletic coaches, all were leaders in the movement for social justice in their schools. Table 2 provides participants’ profiles. To establish confidentiality, we assigned pseudonyms to our participants and were careful not to provide too much identifying information. We grounded this study following Theoharis’s (2008) approach to better understand how the COVID-19 pandemic and the tragic deaths of Blacks in the hands of police in America have influenced their thinking and practice as educators.

We began this study when participants were enrolled in our spring 2020 class. During this time, COVID-19 lockdowns began. We gathered data from participants from March 2020 through spring 2021. We collected data from all our participants using semi-structured Zoom discussions, reflections, and journal entries during the year-long journey. Most data were collected while participants were students in the graduate program, but we continued gathering data after graduation to avoid any conflicts and help them process the ongoing events in their lives after completing their graduate degrees.

### Districts

Although we did not focus on particular practices of the districts in which participants worked, we share their districts’ demographic information to describe the environments in which our participants were working and the students they were serving at the time of our study. Like many districts in southwest Texas, these three districts share similarities in terms of the students and communities they serve. While much focus has been given to urban school districts, the districts in this piece are among Texas’s smaller and rural districts, which constitute the vast majority of school districts in the state (TEA, 2020).

District A has a population of 10,166 students. The student body is 97.2% Latina/o/x, 1.4% African American, 0.6% White, and 0.6% Asian American. District B has a population of 14,000 students, who are 97.8% Latina/o/x, 0.4% African American, and 1.5% White, with 0.1% students identifying as two or more races. District C serves 13,733 students. Its student population is 90.4% Latina/o/x, 3.5% African American, and 5.5% White. According to National Center for Education Statistics data (TEA, 2020), District A and B are considered rural distant, and District C is rural-fringe.

### Positionality

We have collaborated with the participants as their instructors in their graduate program. During the two years of their studies, we have developed a unique and

**Table 2**  
*Participant Profiles*

Pseudonym	Identity	Race/ethnicity	Profession title
Bennie	Female	Latina	Instructional coach
Bobby	Male	Latino	Elementary teacher
Brandon	Male	Black	Secondary teacher/coach
Cindy	Female	Latinx	Elementary teacher
Dess	Female	Black	Secondary teacher
Dina	Female	White	Instructional Coach
Gracie	Female	Latina	Elementary teacher
Jackie	Female	Latina	Elementary teacher
Jesse	Male	Latinx	Secondary teacher
John	Male	White	Secondary teacher/coach
Leslie	Female	Latina	Elementary teacher
Luke	Male	Latinx	Secondary teacher
Maritzta	Female	Latina	Elementary teacher
Mary	Female	White	Department chair
Mike	Male	Latino	Secondary teacher
Nancy	Female	White	Elementary teacher
Roger	Male	Latinx	Elementary teacher
Ronnie	Male	Latino	Secondary teacher
Rudy	Male	White	Elementary teacher
Sky	Female	Black	Elementary teacher
Sofia	Female	Latina	Elementary teacher
Sonya	Female	Latina	Secondary teacher
Suzie	Female	Latina	Elementary teacher
Tim	Male	Black	Athletic coach
Vicky	Female	Latina	Elementary teacher

authentic relationship with the participants in this study as facilitators during classes, but also as advisors, mentors, teachers, and learners. Embracing a reciprocal approach in the teaching and learning process, our collective approach of critical reflection invites our participants to interrogate the literature, practice, culture, and the system as opportunity for self-identity and liberation. Following Freire's (1970/1993) pedagogy, we dismantle the tradition hierarchy of knowledge where the instructors serve as master explicators and value the knowledge and space as belonging to everyone. Thus, part of the students' graduate program experience is to present their collective research at national academic conferences (Garza, 2020; Merchant et al., 2020; Merchant & Garza, 2015).

Our classes focus on preparing aspiring school leaders using a different approach to leadership development—a social justice advocacy curriculum. Through this curriculum, we attempt to create awareness of the many inequities found in U.S. school systems; racial tensions that occur in communities; and, most importantly, the responsibility of educators to nurture and embrace diversity. Our approach is centered on the notion that “activism for social justice is an attitude shaped by values, beliefs, and lived experiences. Social justice is about providing children with opportunities to become social justice advocates themselves” (Garza, 2020, p. 3). As a result, educators realize that most of the challenges we face in society are mere constructions of those who contribute to and perpetuate those ideologies. We

contend that future educational leaders must be prepared in a more equitable and critical approach to facilitate a process for change. In the same spirit, we gather as a collective for educators to see themselves in the children they serve.

### Findings

In this space, we co-construct meaning from the data we collected and share the perspectives of our participants. We have organized the findings by themes, including *commitment to equity, inclusive pedagogy, and empathy for diversity*. These three themes are meaningful ways in which we share our relationship with the social unrest that our society faces within the dual pandemic of racism and COVID-19. We highlight the voices of our participants to generate vivid representation of the themes we identified through our data analysis.

### Commitment to Equity

Our current social climate has brought about the need for educators to stop, slow down, and reflect on the values of society and the actions they should embrace to engage in an inclusive approach to education. Conditions during the COVID-19 pandemic have compelled educational leaders to analyze how they serve students and the community. Educators have realized it is not enough to teach students subject matter content, and they feel called to reevaluate their stance on the role of education to influence society.

Bobby shared how COVID-19 and recent tragic events have influenced his professional and personal outlook. He reflected in his journal,

I believe there is no better time to reinvent educational leadership than the current pandemic era we are living through. If any good has come from these uncertain times it is the fact that we now know the world can change around us in an instant and that we as human beings and educators need each's collaboration to survive, adapt and prosper.

Similarly, Roger shared his new awakening, but he also recognized limitations within their reach as educators.

I know my colleagues and I are capable and practice critical thinking and critical self-reflection. However, I feel we lack critical action. As teachers we are bound by the strict protocols of the system, and as bad as I would like to think outside the box, sometimes those efforts are thwarted by the administration due to the

structured deliverables that make up a student's accountability.

Mike echoed the systemic challenges with which educators contend:

The paradigms educators continue to live by can be changed, but it must happen in phases. Abrupt change is something the system is not built for and as fragile as the system is now due to the pandemic, we must tread lightly.

In a discussion, Suzie shared the factors that have contributed to her transformational process and solidified her grounding on social justice.

Transformation occurs when people are placed in difficult situations, under extreme pressures, opposing forces, and internal and external struggles that ultimately result in the creation of something not new but evolved. This is how my evolution occurred in the journey of self-discovery, reflective dialogue, examination of pedagogy, and critical analysis of my core beliefs.

Luke acknowledged how his critical lens has surfaced as a result of the coursework and recent events in society. He said,

I have chosen to be more vocal and to display signs of support in my classroom. There have been some subtle but noticeable reactions from some of the adults when they come into my classroom. The students have been more supportive and encouraging.

Luke's commitment to social justice in his classroom has been acknowledged by his students, but he also described how many of his colleagues find it difficult to participate in the discussions:

I still see a reluctance for most educators on my campus to engage in meaningful discussions regarding race and social change. I push for it anyway. Students on the other hand seem to be more open to discussing and confronting injustices that they see.

Leslie shared her approach to calling her colleagues to action and becoming more collaborative. In her journal, she explained, “[I use] a more sensitive approach with my colleagues, I will be more mindful of creating opportunities

for discourse and collaboration.” Jesse described using a similar strategy, engaging with recent events and the pandemic to share and inform others in his circle about the inequities some communities face. He stated,

[I am] trying to come to terms and help friends and family come to terms with the woefully inadequate progress we have made as a society in even observing our basic Constitutional norms to be observed and enjoyed by all. And that's just step one.

Participant comments highlighted how recent events can serve as an opportunity to invite others to be part of the fight to end injustice in schools and communities. While trying to address needed changes, they have experienced how resistant adults can be in this process. In many instances, participants spoke of colleagues’ resistance to acknowledging the need to embrace social movements in their classrooms. Many educators do not see the value as they are clouded by the accountability movement. However, centering on recent experiences refocuses the attention on those that have oftentimes been silenced and the stories that have been invalidated.

### Inclusive Pedagogy

In response to the BLM movement and the disparities their students faced in instructional opportunities during the pandemic, many study participants indicated that they shifted their pedagogy to be more responsive to meet the needs of their students. For example, by understanding the power dynamics of educators as they recenter voice and agency, Mary shared in a reflection how recent events have influenced her positionality as an educator:

As leaders of social justice, we must consider changing our ways of thinking about education. Some traditions we have are not helping us to develop and deliver better lessons and taking into consideration the vast diversity we have in our classrooms. We must learn how to incorporate the silenced voices and contributions of our people. I am always looking for new things to do online.

For Mary, education is not just about transmitting information to students based on old practices. Her commitment to equity invites her to become a learner herself and search for innovative ways to introduce new concepts to her students.

In a similar vein, Sky discussed how COVID-19 and recent events have influenced her teaching: “Current times are helping us transform into better leaders for social justice, because right now we are all working well together.” In the

spirit of working together, Ronnie’s pedagogy has also been influenced by recent tragedies in our country. In a discussion he shared,

The readings, reflections and discussions have removed the blinders and allowed me to see the real issues in social justice through eyes of my peers and professors. The summer events have changed who I am as a teacher. I am more opened minded, a better listener, and less judgmental of current issues.

Gracie described an inclusive teaching practice that welcomes the learning process using all approaches. She shared, “I like to make connections with my students’ lives and ask them to share their personal experiences, and I am OK with them speaking in Spanish or verbalizing their responses.” Using a common language to communicate effectively, she embraced students’ native languages and incorporated them into her lessons.

Embracing technology has been a survival tool for educators during the COVID-19 pandemic. Vicky modified and adapted her pedagogy to support students from different cultural backgrounds that textbooks and curricula did not acknowledge. She shared in a discussion,

I let them turn in TikTok videos explaining and expressing what they know, and it was an interesting story. The students add their own pictures, music, and/or participation from their family members. I think too often we go into the school year with deficit thinking because we are constantly reminded of what our kids don’t have instead of celebrating what they can bring into the classroom.

Another participant, Brandon, shared his experience of moving from Africa to the United States at a young age. He explained, “Although adjusting to life here in America was a piece of cake compared to the life I left behind in Africa, I was subjected to oppression, racism, and culture shocks.” Brandon described using his experience of familiarizing himself with this country in working with students who come with international backgrounds. However, as a Black male in a predominately Latina/o/x community, he has experienced some professional doubts. He recalled the moment George Floyd was killed and reflected in his journal:

The recent murder of unarmed Black man George Floyd became the tipping point that finally sparks weeks of protests not only in America but all the world. Yes, it is true that Americans finally had

enough by taking the law into their hands to demand justice and equity, but the real frustration that compels these protests and lootings that you see in the streets throughout America emanating from the Black community and disenfranchised communities is that proverbial glass ceiling and the fact that it breeds a level of frustration that we can't even put into words.

Brandon continued,

Time and time again in the past, I stood in front of my classroom door to pondering on what I have to do to prove that I belong to the teaching profession in the first place. How in the world am I always overlooked for promotion or recognition? How come it always happens for a certain race and somebody else whose skin color is different from mine. Why is it that as a Black man, I must work twice harder than anyone else or be twice as good to everyone else just to get half as much they get? Why is it that no matter what I do and how hard I work and how I go through the process in the terrain of everything somehow someway there's another excuse to ignore that criteria and instead bypassed it and make an exception to the rule for someone other than me? The rhetorical questions were endless.

For Brandon, recent events were constant reminders of the struggle men of color face in society and in the professional world as they try to advance. The tragic killings noted above and the subsequent social movement are evidence that people of color need to be recognized and heard. If not, they will take collective approaches in an attempt for transformation.

Dess shared the same concern as a Black woman. She described how she has become more proactive in reminding her colleagues at work to talk about issues of equity. She said, "I used to stay quiet so I wouldn't offend any of my White colleagues, but now I have allies in my Brown colleagues. They understand the experiences we face daily." Dess mentioned the importance of her allies' assistance in the fight against inequities.

Dina, a White woman, shared how she joined the protest over the summer as a sign of solidarity. She reflected on how the experience gave her a different perspective to better understand her brothers and sisters who were hurting.

I have privileges that I will never be able to suspend because of how I look. I want for others

to know that we are a community, we have experienced hate crimes in our backyards. We must do something to change it before it's too late.

Cindy reflected on her past experience and how the current climate influenced her professional role as an educator. She recalled that she was raised "to really care for all people," and that her parents "taught us to see others as our equals and that all people must to be treated the same way." This reflection has led her to pursue a career in education, where she can make a difference in the lives of children. She has adapted this mindset to better understand her students of color who do not look like her. The childhood sacrifices she has experienced in her life have influenced her empathy toward her Black students.

The current social unrest in the United States resulted in Rudy's recollection of a time when he almost died during a military exercise. As he was leading his troops through a swamp on a U.S. Army base, he was shot and had to be rushed to the hospital. "After that incident I realized that we could be taken at any time in our lives and to appreciate the time that we have with our families." Experiencing what a gunshot feels like and the thoughts that ran through his mind after being shot have influenced his approach to reaching his students. He remarked in a reflection, "I feel I have a responsibility to share my story with my students, especially the males of color given the shootings of people." He indicated that some administrators have asked him to refrain from bringing his field experiences into the classroom, but given recent events in the United States, he feels it is his obligation. Rudy shared how his experience of being shot brought awareness of recent deaths of Black citizens. It should be uncommon for a citizen to get shot by a police officer in a neighborhood. A soldier understands the challenges of war zones, but neighborhoods should be safe places where citizens find comfort.

### **Empathy for Diversity**

Educators in this study shared how events during the pandemic have influenced their identity as educators. While most participants have seen themselves become more vocal and active in embracing social justice in their classroom, most have seen limited action in their schools. The participants called for critical conversations that will lead to transformation practices in their schools and communities they serve.

Sofia shared how the recent deaths of African Americans by police have had a huge impact on her profession but have done little to influence change in her school. She shared in a discussion,

[The] BLM movement has challenged me to be a better advocate for myself. I began looking for ways to incorporate or include the matters of people of color in my practice to raise awareness and educate others. In my school district, I have seen administrative leadership take steps to address the movement. However, I have not seen much groundwork take place.

Tim, a Black man, described his frustration with society at large. He shared in class that every time he leaves his school to travel home, he is always fearful of being pulled over and thinking of the unimaginable. He shared how he has to talk with his own boys about how to behave so as not to create fear because they are Black. He also explained how he has become more vocal and visible in his school and community despite the pandemic. For example, he has reminded his school leaders to celebrate the contributions that people of color make to the community. He got emotional as he shared, “Being a Black male and seeing the struggle of other students who look like you is hard as well.”

Sharing struggles and recognizing privileges have also influenced the teaching strategies of some participants in this study. For example, John reflected on his identity:

If there is truly any good to come from the pandemic, it has to be the awakening of a new social and racial justice movement. I believe it has put in the spotlight the plight of those not to have been born in the same reference as many, being “White.” I know these classes have made me stop and consider the privileges that my skin color has given to me, realized or not. While in no way believe that I should apologize for being born White, I have to acknowledge it. I have to use it as a transformative leader to push a new narrative. A narrative that for too long has been held down by many. If there is guilt for me, it is in not acknowledging that sooner. Simply being silent because it doesn’t apply to me, is just wrong. Now, I voice and challenge the system with schooling practices.

Maritza also reflected on the difficulty of embracing new ways of practice:

Our current events have forced us to have uncomfortable conversation, understand other perspectives and learn how the system is not equal for all. These are real-life experiences that will help us develop into transformative leaders for social and racial justice, and it starts

in our classrooms and schools. I encounter some resistance, but I continue.

Using a similar approach, Jackie shared her thoughts on how much her school district is doing to bring current events to the educational environment. She said, “I feel that race continues to be ignored or colorblindness is still at the forefront. However, social change has allowed important conversation to take place that my have not otherwise.” Her reflection addresses the idea that not much has changed, other than the discussions from classes where educators bring the issue of diversity to the forefront.

## Discussion

Freire (1970/1993) stated, “Within history in concrete, objective contexts, both humanization and dehumanization are possibilities for a person as an uncompleted being conscious of their incompleteness” (p. 5). For many of our participants, building relationships served as a survival tool for themselves and provided a sense of human connection during COVID-19 and the BLM movement. Our findings suggest that “humans do not respond to the same stimuli in the same way across relationship contexts; indeed, the meaning of stimuli to the individual may change dramatically with changes in relationship context” (Reis et al., 2000, p. 844). The educators in this study have critically reflected on the need to engage with action beyond rhetoric. They have shared the call for transforming schools into communities for all students to create inclusive environments. Garza (2020) reminds us,

Social justice is about much more than closing the achievement gap between White and Black, Latino, and other underserved children. Social justice is not about sympathy, feeling sorry, or shedding tears; it is not about lowering standards or expectations. Social justice is not only about facilitating access and knowledge; it is more about providing equitable opportunities for the children and families that have been historically underserved and marginalized. (p. 3)

Findings from this study advance Garza’s (2020) notion of social justice, as participants shared that their commitment to equity was influenced by a desire to help the students in their school accomplish more than test scores. Participants articulated social justice pedagogy by welcoming all students’ learning styles and becoming responsive to their language and emotional needs. Furthermore, because of limited resources in their communities, participants used all resources to commit themselves to embracing diversity within their schools and engaging in conversations and

practices that will continue to move toward a more equitable schooling experience for all students.

The COVID-19 pandemic and its effects have brought more urgency to understanding transformative thought for social and racial justice. The racial justice aspect has brought about something that we have all have felt before. Police brutality has always been an issue in our society. It has recently been a popular media topic due to the highly publicized killings of Black Americans at the hands of police officers who had a total disregard for human life. Through these tragedies, we have seen a rise in media support for the point that all lives will not matter until Black lives matter.

Using Theoharis's (2008) lens, we found that our participants could lead in education, the world faced COVID-19, with a practice and vision centered on race, class, and gender as to deeply affect historically marginalized communities. Participants in this study spoke about their commitment to equity, inclusive pedagogy, and empathy for diversity. Using an equity lens, participants in this study were able to center their practice on being critical of the system, which was not responding to the social needs of students. In their approach to enact social justice, many shared how they became more vocal to support their classroom. For example, Roger wrote in his reflection that he invited his colleagues to "think outside the box" for innovation. Similarly, Leslie shared how she used her social justice lens to collaborate with her colleagues to remove the lens of compliance for accountability metrics.

One of the driving forces in a social justice advocacy curriculum centers on Ladson-Billings's (1995) conceptual framework of culturally relevant pedagogy. Ladson-Billings (1995) identified academic success, cultural competence, and critical consciousness as the three criteria necessary to accomplish the humanizing of schooling. Nearly 20 years later, as she revisited her work, the need to emphasize the malleability of culture continues to be present, especially as we face neoliberal policies which have established approaches to education that engage in culturally relevant practices in superficial ways (Sleeter, 2012). Participants in this study aligned their practice to the tenets of an inclusive pedagogy. Centering on social justice, participants reflected on how many changed their pedagogy in their environment. As Mary shared, "education is not just about banking information to students based on old practices." Rather, she included current events in her practice to incorporate ideas and voices unheard before. Gracie also described her inclusive practice of making connections with her students regardless of the language. Equally important, Brandon shared how recent events have given him motivation to speak about himself and others who look like him: "[I have] incorporated these conversations within staff meetings, evaluating policies and procedures currently in place, to

implement trainings that are needed around diversity and inclusion."

The need is strong for educators to continue addressing social justice issues in today's complex society. An educator cannot simply identify as a social justice advocate but must be willing to fulfill this role through actions. A desire has been ignited within the participants in this study to shift from awareness to action as antiracist educators. Dess, for example, acknowledged how she has become more proactive in reminding her colleagues at work to talk about issues of equity. She shared, "As a Black woman, it has made me more confident to claim my space professionally and interject my opinion and leadership outside my program." In their school environments and small communities, traditional and conservative values are respected, which often impedes change and transformation. As Sofia remarked,

I began looking for ways to incorporate or include the matters of people of color in my practice to raise awareness and educate others. In my school district, I have seen administrative leadership take steps to address the movement. However, I have not seen much groundwork take place.

Similarly, Jackie acknowledged the attempt her school district has made to bring current events to the educational environment: "I feel that race continues to be ignored or colorblindness is still at the forefront. However, social change has allowed important conversations to take place."

The voices of these educators remind school leaders not to blindly accept the norms and standards of practice as the only guiding framework. Scholars have suggested that such an approach of normalizing practice to standards is what hinders schools from moving forward (Sarason, 1982). As John reflected on his identity as a White man, "If there is truly any good to come from the pandemic, it has to be the awakening of a new social and racial justice movement."

Social justice leaders create inclusive environments within a school campus by taking action steps toward building community. Working toward allyship is how antiracist leaders can begin to dismantle supremacy in schools and make space for the whole community to feel safe within the school system. Antiracists are people who believe "White people have a responsibility to work with people of color to dismantle White supremacy and address historic inequities" (Mulholland, 2019). Antiracism begins with building self-awareness and education of White fragility, systemic racism, and the experiences of marginalized humans, intending to redistribute power from the hands of White folks to people of color (Williams, 2019). There are many actions that White people can take to grow from being advocates to working toward allyship.

Study participants shared how they attempt to embrace the challenges our nation faces in the midst of a pandemic. If we are not leading and acting with a critical consciousness mindset, we are not changing anything. Instead, we become the oppressors.

### Conclusion

If the year 2020 taught us nothing else, we must take away that temporal and geographic context is everything. Whether that context means attending school as a youth of color during a global pandemic while having to navigate a racialized society that thrives on media depictions of dominant racial logics (Hancock, 2008; Mayorga-Gallo, 2019) or trying to make sense of the general criminalization of Blackness (Leonard & King, 2010), Americans have been faced with many challenges that have drawn attention to the pervasive systemic inequities that exist in our country.

In addition, the role public schools play in the delicate balance of infrastructures demonstrated unequal access to resources. Social movements received attention (#BLM), and racism, microaggressions, and many forms of discrimination were called out. People have actively chosen to speak out against injustices during these tense movements, while others have ignored them. For as long as the American public education system has existed, it has perpetuated cultural and racial hierarchies and racial microaggressions, creating a violent education space for our youth of color (Kohli & Solórzano, 2012). However, staying silent in times of injustice is a privilege, which often translates as siding with the oppressor. The silence intensifies in smaller rural communities where diversity might be minimal. As such, this study reminds educators committed to social justice that not acting or speaking adds to the systemic oppression that people of color have endured they were first involuntarily brought to America in 1619. This movement calls for educators to enact with passion and conviction the transformation of environments for students who might not look like them. In doing so, they might disrupt comfort levels that have benefited the dominant racial or ethnic group, but deciding not to speak or act limits the possibilities for change in rural communities.

Now more than ever, sociopolitical consciousness among our youth is elevated, and educators must capitalize on their funds of knowledge (Golden, 2017; Subero et al., 2015) to provide a pathway for our youth to assert agency over their own education (Mayorga & Rosales, 2019; Shaw, 2016). This work begins with engaging in culturally sustaining pedagogical practices (Paris, 2012) that include introducing culturally relevant curriculum to all student populations, regardless of the racial/ethnic majority within student body. Education brings awareness, and educators play a pivotal role in infusing diversity in rural

communities. These times have brought together people fighting against injustice and shined the light on those who want to maintain our system of White supremacy. In rural communities, educators, and social justice advocates have a responsibility to create a society shaped by the power of education. The humanistic approach of celebrating diversity in small and rural communities can facilitate recognizing and understanding diversity in our country.

In Texas, after a nearly six-year battle, in fall 2018, the State Board of Education (SBOE) approved the Mexican American Studies (MAS) elective course for high school credit. In fall 2019, following the review, approval, and adoption of the MAS course, the SBOE took up for consideration a second ethnic studies course for high school credit—an African American Studies (AAS) course. As a result of the foundation laid during the development of the MAS course, the AAS course was reviewed, approved, and adopted unanimously by the SBOE within six months. The introduction of ethnic studies courses represents a curriculum that pushes against Eurocentrism and racial hierarchies instead of focusing on historically marginalized and minoritized communities through historical context, contributions, and experiences. “Students will be able to have constructive discussions about equity and disparities, and find viable solutions to the malaise of the traditionally disempowered and minoritized in America” (Scott & Perez-Diaz, 2021, p. 226). While these courses serve only as electives, educational leaders need to commit to offering these courses as an issue of equity and access. Social justice leadership is not just for people of color.

Social justice leaders who do not identify as people of color can strive toward allyship to dismantle supremacist systems of oppression in schools. As educators and social justice leaders, we must be willing to advance, support, and promote the inclusion of all members of our communities. We can no longer rely on tokenism for advancing the issues of diversity and minorities. “True solidarity is found only in the plenitude of this act of love, in its existentiality, in its praxis. To affirm that men and women are persons and as persons should be free, and yet to do nothing tangible to make this affirmation a reality, is a farce” (Freire, 1970/1993, p. 50). As well-informed and equitable leaders, embracing the MAS and AAS curricula in all schools and classrooms should be a priority for all educational leaders to know about the contributions that communities of color have added to our society. Furthermore, critical consciousness guides the thinking and leadership of educators as they cannot escape the realities of recognizing oppressive systems in schools and communities. This awakening encourages them to continue and expand the necessary changes for a more just society as they teach a class, lead a department meeting, or have conversations with parents in the community. The MAS and AAS curricula can facilitate opportunities to

recognize the many ways of knowing that students bring from their homes to their schools.

As social justice educators and leaders, we find ourselves in a privileged role to influence the political and social change we want. Considering the consequences, we contemplate the current pandemic and the deaths of people of color as a critical and pivotal moment in the story of our nation. Educators can build an understanding in our students by capitalizing on the richness of traditions, languages, and cultures that they bring to the learning environment every day. Educators and leaders need to emphasize the malleability of culture to be more present, especially as neoliberal policies have established new approaches to education. The passion for change heavily influences the advocacy for social justice in rural communities, and working together with school administrators and community leaders, we can begin the transformation. We can no longer stay silent. We must celebrate space and race.

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# **“We’re Not Done Yet”: Public Intellectuals, Rural Communities, and Racial Equity Organizing**

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*8 minutes and 46 seconds. This was the amount of time it took me to watch George Floyd, an unarmed Black man be murdered at the hands of the police. While George Floyd’s death was not the first Black murder to happen while in police custody or in 2020, his death served as a catalyst that reignited something in me, millions of around the globe, and the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement. While the nation focused on the impact of BLM movement in urban communities, the impact in rural communities was left from the conversation. Rural communities have a complex history of systemic racial, social, educational, and economic inequality, and because of these histories they are uniquely situated to respond to racial inequality in meaningful and authentic ways. Even so, as a Black woman, trained sociologist, and educator situated in a rural, conservative, predominately White community in Texas, organizing and engaging the public in racial justice work has challenges. However, through coordinated and specific efforts it is possible to mobilize the community for change. This essay reflects on those efforts. Drawing on public pedagogy frameworks that explore public educational sites, W. E. B. Du Bois’s public sociology, scholar-activist “liberation capital” theory, I try to make sense of applying these perspectives as a tool for engaging my rural town in the BLM movement. Through my observations, reflections, and analysis, I hope to provide practical methods and tools for scholars, researchers, and rural community members that center on how to engage each other and ultimately create capacity for impactful organizing on racial equity in rural communities.*

## **Prologue: Who I Am Matters**

*My personal experiences steer my life choices and my research, academic training, and public work. I am a Black, middle-class, cisgender, heterosexual, married, nondisabled female. I am a mother. I am educated. I am a sociologist. I am an activist. I am a feminist. I have lived through hunger, fear, hatred. I am the woman who has been called a “nigger.” I have been the only person of color in a room, forced to claim my space at the table. Through my voice and educational practice, I have reflected on these experiences and have learned to demand that people understand me. In reflection, I wrote the following poem.*

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*My name matters  
Who I am matters  
How I show up matters  
My experiences matter  
My existence matters  
Life was breathed into me so that I can breathe it into others.  
My body creates life. Sustains life.  
I am powerful because of my voice, my drive, my work, because I am me.  
Because I exist.*

*The fight for Black liberation and demanding that Black lives matter summon the provocative spirit it takes to be Black, a woman, and an educator living in America in 2020. When the ball dropped at midnight on January 1, 2020, I did not expect 2020 to push me into similar paths as other Black liberation activists, sociologists, and educators like Anna Julia Cooper or W. E. B. Du Bois, but nevertheless, it did. As an educator, a disseminator, and a cultivator of knowledge, I can transform thinking in radical ways by challenging anti-Blackness thinking and practice. But where is this education meant to happen?*

*Who is responsible for “educating” people on how to be antiracist? Whose responsibility is it to take up the work? How do we engage our local communities—mainly rural communities—in this work?*

## Introduction

The year 2020 felt as though every other minute a Black person was murdered at the hands of the police or some random vigilante in the name of justice or self-defense. The murder of George Floyd in May 2020 only exacerbated this feeling. Being a Black educator during this time has added another layer of complexity. Teaching sociology courses about current social problems or race and ethnic groups in America to full classes of students who all have different backgrounds, perspectives, and experiences with policing really pushes you to critically reflect on how to transform thinking about racial injustice. Engaging in this work in rural communities comes with its own unique set of considerations.

Urban communities and the organizing that happens within them make national news every day. However, rural communities have been consistently erased and disconnected from the conversation around racial justice work, making the need for community organizing vital. Public organizing is not new to rural communities. Some argue that the Civil Rights movement was rooted in Southern rural communities (Janken, 2001). Rural communities face numerous challenges from shrinking government funding, natural disasters, growing poverty levels, and so on. While rural communities are not strangers to urban communities' social and economic problems, they are also not immune to the effects of racism and the Black and White divide. For many members of rural communities, their lives are intricately intertwined (Changa, 2020). This deep interconnectedness had drawn many non-Black and Brown people to show up for their fellow community members at Black Lives Matter (BLM) demonstrations (Simpson, 2020) and raise fundamental questions about the state of racism in their communities.

Engaging in public intellectualism is of importance to us public sociologists. As Scott (2005) noted, public sociology “is seen as the autonomous and reflexive engagement with external audiences in which the preferences of the sociologist him or herself are made clear and those audiences are spoken to as equals” (p. 406). The goal of this article is to reflexively engage with my experience as a public intellectual through the lens of public sociology. This piece is not intended to embrace the traditional style of academic writing. Rather it is intended to be read as an autoethnography and/or narrative account of my experience as a public intellectual who is organizing and engaging in a racial justice project as a Black woman in a predominately

White rural community. I begin with a discussion of my journey to becoming a public intellectual, followed by an overview of the situational context that served as the catalyst for my engagement in the BLM movement. Next is a brief discussion of the theoretical frameworks and an overview of the “main event” that I organized in my small rural town. I then summarize key lessons I learned from this experience: the importance of coalition building, understanding the dynamics of racial relationships in rural communities compared to urban, storytelling, and incorporating youth voices. Through these lessons learned, I also consider the connection to scholar-activism. Finally, I reflect on how to move forward and keep this work going in rural communities.

## My Journey to Becoming a Public Intellectual

Have you ever been followed in a store? Have you ever seen a police officer and been consumed by an all-encompassing sense of fear? I have. My life has been checkered with blatant experiences of racism. I grew up with parents whose childhood experiences in the 1950s and 1960s were rooted in the Jim Crow laws’ last remnants. I grew up in a family whose parents taught the importance of not only saying “Black Power” but actively encouraging us to learn what that meant and represented to our Black community. I grew up in a family that stressed the importance of knowledge and education. While each of these experiences exposed me to marginalization and the experience of disadvantage, they have also become a source of power and privilege. My background, upbringing, and educational training afford me a unique knowledge and understanding of minority experiences and communities. These experiences and lessons represent the core of my beliefs and practice as an activist and Black feminist intellectual. They also serve as the historical context of my life as a public intellectual and the source of understanding my involvement in the Black Lives Matter movement.

While this piece is not primarily concerned with reflecting on these intersecting identities, it does serve as a guiding point to how I pursued public intellectualism through engagement within the Black Lives Matter movement in rural communities. This article is concerned with providing context to how academics, scholars, or intellectuals can embrace the Duboisian notion of public scholarship. Situated within the context of “the community meeting,” I use personal narratives and reflections that highlight the events that led up to the meeting. I address how I engage my professional academic training as a sociologist and womanist/Black feminist to employ liberation capital theory to organize and engage rural communities in the Black Lives Matter movement outside of the traditional classroom.

### **Engaging the Intellectual with the Rural Public and Black Lives Matter**

#### **The Catalyst**

I don't know if I was bored or just taking a break from classes, but either way, I found myself scrolling through my social media account. My feed was full of [#GeorgeFloyd](#) posts. Then I saw a link to the video. I told myself that I needed to watch. I needed to know exactly what happened to make decisions about how to respond that were based on having all the knowledge and facts. Eight minutes and 46 seconds. This was the amount of time it took me to watch George Floyd, an unarmed Black man, be murdered at the hands of the police.

The next few days were full of reading Facebook posts and repeatedly watching the video. I remember having a conversation with some of my Black men friends about how they felt. The one thing we all could agree on was that we were tired. We were tired of watching people who look like us die for just living. For walking. For running. For watching television in our homes. Listening to George Floyd say, "I can't breathe" while watching a White man kneel on his neck brought back memories of stories I heard in my childhood. I was terrified and felt I needed to do something. What that was, I wasn't sure of. But I found myself getting angry. I found myself obsessively following posts on social media and commenting on everything. While George Floyd's death was not the first Black murder to happen in police custody or in 2020, his death served as a catalyst that reignited something in me, millions around the globe, and the Black Lives Matter movement. In the middle of a pandemic that has negatively affected Black people and communities of color at unprecedented rates compared to White people, millions of people across the globe took to the streets to protest for Black lives. What was I going to do? Sit and watch? For the time being, yes. It was not my time yet.

#### **Theoretical Frameworks**

My analysis is situated within womanist/feminist theory (Maparayan, 2012). It draws heavily on public intellectualism and subsequent public pedagogy frameworks that explore public educational sites, through the lens of Du Bois's public sociology, and scholar-activist liberation capital theory (Morris, 2015). I draw upon these perspectives because each approach is concerned with engaging with nonformal knowledge production and knowledge dissemination in a public community sphere. In other words, they inform intellectuals on how to engage academic knowledge and the community, or as I like to

say, "take the schooling to the streets." Additionally, they help me to theorize my role as a scholar-activist and rural community member.

Womanist theory allows me to ground my lived experience within academic situations and context. It gives reasons for my public scholarship choices. Lastly, it embodies the community-first perspective that is at the core of public intellectualism. As Black feminist scholar and poet Audre Lorde (1984/2007) said, "It is in the knowledge of the genuine conditions of our lives that we must draw our strength to live and our reasons for acting" (p. 113). Lorde (1984/2007) urged us

to reach down into that deep place of knowledge inside herself and touch that terror and loathing of any difference that lives there. See whose face it wears. Then the personal as the political can begin to illuminate all our choices. (p. 113)

I saw public engagement as an opportunity to embody womanism through building bridges—bridges between communities with different belief systems and perspectives about the world, including human beings on all levels, from diverse ethnic backgrounds, gender identities, religious/spiritual beliefs, class, and so on.

This idea of building bridges ties directly to my belief that scholar-activism must be transformative, which aligns with the womanist and Black feminist theoretical approach. Womanists place and acknowledge the everyday experiences of women of color in their work. We seek to understand how interlocking systems of oppression like classism, sexism, and racism are imposed on women of color (Ogunyemi, 1985, p. 68). This approach does not disregard men. Instead, it seeks to bridge women's experiences with issues that affect all humanity (Collins, 1996). I borrow from Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherrie Moraga (1981), who said,

Con este puente ... hemos comenzado a salir de las sombras; hemos comenzado a reventar rutina y costumbres opresivas y a aventar los tabúes.... Caminante, no hay puentes, se hace puentes al andar;

With This Bridge ... we have begun to come out of the shadows; we have begun to break with routines and oppressive customs and to discard taboos.... Voyager, there are no bridges, one builds them as one walks.

In Anzaldúa and Moraga's letter, I find a feminist/womanist call to action: demand for building bridges of change and transformation. Since my childhood and being raised in

minority communities, I have placed community change at the forefront of my life mission. In this way, I embrace transforming my personal experiences into political experiences incorporating the feminist/womanist saying, “The personal is political” (Lorde, 1984/2007; Taylor, 2017). This perspective applies to why I choose to engage in scholar-activism work and liberation work and pursue the specific topics of my teaching and research, like rural inequity.

Since I am passionate about uplifting poor communities and building bridges, I need to understand my home community and communities that are different from my own. I cannot be afraid to engage with someone different from me. Therefore, if I want to understand racism and/or classism, it is vital to explore what it means and looks like in various communities—low-income White communities, Indigenous, rural, Black, Brown, and rural communities. I need to understand what each community believes and values to identify what we have in common and hopefully build a bridge that creates unity and, importantly, social change.

As a womanist, I intentionally seek to bridge the academic world with the worlds of everyday women outside of academia. It is an approach that combines the spiritual, social, and ecological aspects of life. Its core seeks to be practiced at the grassroots level (Collins, 1996; Harris, 2017; Hudson-Weems, 2000; Maparayan, 2012). First, it is essential to outline some general beliefs about what constitutes public intellectuals. They help to articulate the perspectives of people who don’t have the skills to do so. In some cases, they help create ideas to address problems in the community. Lastly, public intellectuals are not stuck behind the lectern in the classroom. There are many definitions of a public intellectual, my experience closely aligns with the models of Black intellectuals like Anna Julia Cooper and W. E. B. Du Bois (Morris, 2017). For the purposes of my analysis, public intellectuals are educators as organizers. I embraced this role throughout the process of organizing as an educator in my rural community. We use public spaces as educational sites. A public space can be formal like a town hall meeting or community meeting, or it can be informal like social media groups or coffee shop talks. In my case, it took place at a community meeting in a local historical park.

Du Bois’s work has been at the heart of many contemporary public intellectual conversations. In sociology, much of his work is referred to as *public sociology*. I use both terms, public sociology and public intellectualism, interchangeably throughout the discussion. Scholars argue that Du Bois always practiced as a public intellectual and note evidence throughout his work. Most notably, in his career he integrated the Black freedom struggle and sociology that ultimately pioneered modern-day Black studies (Morris,

2017). Aldon Morris (2017) noted that Du Bois insisted that the purpose of academics was to “produce valid knowledge useful to liberation struggles” (p. 11). Du Bois learned that people have to do more than just get angry. They have to organize communities and turn their anger into projects of transformation. With that, Du Bois, like Cooper and other Black intellectuals, worked with community members and activists to lay the groundwork for their time’s civil rights movement. Du Bois’s work walked the middle ground of scholar and activist, so much so that Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., said, “It is never possible to know where the scholar Du Bois ended and the organizer Du Bois began” (Morris, 2017, p. 12). He showed intellectuals how to be “public” and how to engage communities for transformation, leading to liberation.

Liberation capital theory is a scholar-activist theory rooted in the work of Du Bois. Coined by Morris (2015), *liberation capital* is defined as “a form of capital used by oppressed and resource-starved scholars to initiate and sustain the research program of a nonhegemonic scientific school” (p. 188). The laborers in this group are typically either volunteers or minimally paid members of oppressed groups. They work toward new methodologies that facilitate research on the conditions of the oppressed group or “programmatic innovations” that will be used as “weapons of liberation” (Morris, 2015, p. 188). Morris argued that liberation capital is what helped Du Bois become a formidable public intellectual. As Du Bois mobilized Black public intellectuals’ liberation capital, so do I engage in racial justice work in rural communities by drawing on local teachers, coaches, pastors, and students in the community.

While I draw heavily on these paradigms, I find myself most frequently embracing a critical feminist/womanist theoretical framework. As this analysis is primarily a critical reflection, it is essential to acknowledge that it is mainly situated within a feminist perspective of womanism and Black feminist thought. Embodying womanism is crucial to understanding my academic and personal drive to embrace public intellectualism. This perspective is essential for understanding the interconnectedness between my personal self and my academic self and, ultimately, how it transforms into my public intellectual self.

### Setting the Context: Historical Background of Itasca and Hill County

Situated 45 miles south of the cities of Fort Worth and Dallas, Itasca is located in Hill County, Texas. According to the most recent U.S. Census Bureau (2019) data, the population of Hill County in 2019 was 35,689, with a total of 12,992 households. Itasca’s population is 1,392. The poverty rate is 15.3%. Only 7% of the community has a

bachelor's degree or higher. The community is 74% White, 20% Hispanic/Latino,<sup>1</sup> 14.3 % Black/African American, and 8.2% some other race. Geographically, Itasca covers 1.5 square miles. Hill County and Itasca are known historically for cotton farming. Notably, community members have shared many stories regarding the history of slavery and lynching in the county.

### May 2020—The Blue Paint

The main source for local news in our community is the local public Facebook group. This group has its own history of controversy and spurring public disagreements. When I logged in to see what was happening around town, scrolling through the page, I came across a post that a local community member added. The post had a link to an article about Chinese police officers spraying protesters with blue-dye water cannons to mark them for arrest later, and it explained how this should happen to BLM protestors in America. Community members immediately began to respond with comments in support like, "Come to our town our shotguns are ready." As I read these comments, I was transported back to images and videos of civil rights activists' being lynched by White mobs. I got angry, and I responded:

Just the fact that the admins approved posting this here and allowed these comments tells me exactly how my community feels about Black people.

I asked the poster and the group moderator to remove the post. However, it seemed that my reply only made them angrier. People responded to me, asking if I would go and riot. They told me that they had a shotgun waiting for "us" to arrive. They posted images of their shotguns in their cars with them.

It was a threat. It was a blatant threat to my life. Essentially, community members were telling me that if I were to bring an organized protest—which they described as "riots"—to their town, I should be prepared to die by their guns. I did not take this threat lightly. I responded, saying:

I never said that I condone rioting. However, I will not attack people for rioting after watching our people continuously get murdered at the hands of the police and vigilantes just for existing. If you want to understand where I am coming from, you can come see me in person.

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<sup>1</sup>This estimate is based on the most recent [U.S. Census data](#).

### Making the Decision to Organize

My response was a blatant call out of local community members who I felt were perpetuating violent behavior and rhetoric toward communities of color that were organizing for racial equity. Over the next few days and weeks following George Floyd's murder, I became immersed in the BLM protests and uprisings. Below is public documentation of my response and move to action through a public forum and with transparency.

*May 29, 2020*

So I have been quiet. I had to watch the video. I had to see what happened. As I was in the middle of watching, my 4-year-old sat on my lap. I said this ain't for you. She said, is that a police officer. I said yes and turned the video off. By that point, it was too late; she heard [#GeorgeFloyd](#) pleading.

Her response:

"Mommy if we see a police officer do that, we have to tell him to get off him. He can't breathe you can hear him cry; they are not supposed to do that."

Sad, even a 4-year-old knows that was wrong.

*June 2, 2020*

Anyone in my community willing to help me host a community dialogue and planning meeting regarding racial issues in our community? After reading the comments on the community page, we are way past due! It's time for Hill County and Itasca. Who's down?

*June 3, 2020*

Join us! It's an opportunity for open community dialogue.

Also, I will be wearing a face mask. I ask out of respect for the vulnerable populations I come in contact with that you do as well. I will also make hand sanitizer, disinfect wipes available. If anyone wants to contribute facemask, it would be greatly appreciated!

After a few passing conversations with family members and others in the community, there was hardly any pushback discussed on the public forums. I met with city officials to discuss the use of space and meeting restrictions due to the COVID-19 pandemic. They were equally supportive. However, as I reached out to various groups, I received no immediate response to my invitation.

*June 3, 2020*

I can already tell which community groups will be supportive of this community meeting. Posted on the Police Department page, I think it was deleted. Posted in neighborhood news, has yet to be approved. It's a small town I doubt they are getting thousands or even hundreds of requests.

The community event had to be organized in less than 10 days. I had no financial support. We had no physical meeting space due to COVID-19 restrictions. To add to the stress, I had only been a member of the community for less than three years, so my connections and network was limited. I struggled to find organizers and speakers. I received several messages of support from various community members. Some reached out and informed me that they were organizing a prayer circle. Others solely expressed interest. In the end, I pulled on my in-laws to help organize and move the event forward.

*June 3, 2020*

Looking for a couple more people to join the panel. If you are under the age of 18 and are interested, or if you know someone under the age of 18 that would be good on the panel please PM me!

*June 4, 2020*

Another update: if we have more than 25\* people we cannot use the community center would love ideas and suggestions. Please feel free to PM me.

They just updated me. It's now 25 not 10 people allowed.

*June 6, 2020*

Yall I LOVE my family From the DMV to Florida to the Midwest. But I need to give a special shout out to my in-laws! They are always showing up, coming through for me, and supporting me

beyond what I could ever wish or hope for! So lucky and blessed to have them!

[#UnitedWeWin #BlackLivesMatter](#)  
[#EducateYourself #StillIRise](#)

*June 8, 2020*

\*\*\*\*\*LOCATION CHANGE\*\*\*\* We are moving this party outside to accommodate as many people as possible. The only request is that we continue to practice social distancing and wear face mask when appropriate.

Please bring your own chairs, bug spray, or whatever else you need to be outside for at least an hour and half.

*June 11, 2020*

Judge Justin W. Lewis just called and said he will not be able to make this one tonight. I wish I would have invited him sooner. He thanked us for having the conversations and wished us the best.

Let's make sure to invite him to Part 2.

*June 11, 2020*

Wheels are turning! Movement is happening. Can't wait to see everyone tonight at the community meeting on race! I will be facilitating and hopefully we will have some very impactful conversations! Thanks to everyone who is helping to make this all come together! It takes a village!

### **The Event: Itasca Forum on Race and Racial Issues**

*June 11, 2020*

That was an amazing turnout! Thank you to everyone who Showed up, Spoke up! Woke Up!

The actual event was an open community gathering that included a panel of local community members. These community members were White, Black, Hispanic/Latino, and Indigenous. They mostly represented low-to middle-income populations in the community; some were teachers, coaches, college students, retired military, and private industry workers. The planning committee—which consisted of my in-laws and a couple of community members—did not want to host a walk or protest but wanted

to provide a space where everyone could come together, learn, and have an opportunity to express their feelings. The idea was to give space for community members to share stories of their experiences, voice their feelings regarding the current state of policing of Black people and racism, and define the meaning of the Black Lives Matter movement. The panelists and committee were also concerned about maintaining community unity. There was a fear that if we marched or protested that their generational ties of friends and family members would feel angered and create more division. There were repeated conversations about how ties went back generations, and they did not want to break those ties because it is a small community, and they considered everyone family regardless of their views on the BLM movement and policing. In other words, there was a high level of concern for the impact on community sentiment and unity.

The event took place on a Thursday evening in a local historical park, known to locals as the “Black park.” Over 75 people were in attendance—younger community members, older community members, White, Black, Hispanic/Latino, and Indigenous. Democratic U.S. House of Representatives candidate Julie Oliver was in attendance as well as the chairman of the local Republican party. Officers from the local police department also attended. It publicly streamed on three different accounts and was made available for anyone to view after the event. Over 500 people streamed it online.

We began by identifying ground rules for the meeting. Next, my husband hosted an opening 15-minute activity to get people thinking about their experiences with racism and privilege. Once the activity ended, we reconvened in our communal space in the park and introduced a panel of six local community members—a teacher at the local elementary school, a local community sports coach, a school board member and church leader, a military veteran, a local college student, and third-generation local business owner. The conversation was guided with discussion questions addressed to the panelists, but attendees were also able to speak at the microphone and voice their perspectives.

The process of organizing this event raised many questions for the organizing committee regarding what would be most important for our small rural town to get out of a community public forum. Was it most important for the Black community to show up in force and protest the murder of George Floyd and countless others to bring awareness about the policing of Black people in 2020? Was it more important for Black people to show their anger, or was it more important to explain the purpose of saying, “Black Lives Matter”? Attempting to define a concrete goal for this meeting was the most contentious aspect of planning the event. Even so, everyone agreed that the most important goal was creating unity in the community.

## **Lessons Learned**

Engaging in public intellectualism is not an easy feat. There were many lessons learned from crossing into public intellectualism, particularly in a rural community. As an educator dedicated to empowerment and transformation, I would be remiss if I did not discuss the lessons learned. Here are my key takeaways:

1. Coalition building is key.
2. Racial relationships in rural communities are more interwoven than I have experienced in the city.
3. Storytelling is important.
4. Youth voice is needed.

## **Coalition Building and What That Looks Like**

After the event ended, I had every intention of carrying on the conversation. The theme for our meeting was, “We’re not done yet, there is more work to be done.” However, as a Black woman who has experienced racial trauma, engaging in this work was emotionally and mentally hard. The amount of labor it took was also taxing, and I must admit, in the months since, while we did have a group meeting, we have not had another community-wide meeting. Additionally, as I was the main organizer behind the event, I lacked the financial resources, time, and physical capacity to do it alone. To build a coalition, it is important to embrace the techniques of those who came before me and acknowledge that for a movement to be successful one person cannot be the engine driving it. One person cannot do it alone because of the energy, time, and collaboration that are needed to be successful and transformative.

While I had organized events before in cities and urban contexts, this event was my first in a rural community. I assumed that there would be more resources and people available to help. I also assumed that there would be an experienced community in this small town. Neither was the case. As public intellectuals, it is essential to connect with individuals in your community who are known leaders. As I mentioned previously, my in-laws played a major role in this event coming together. Since their family has been in this town for over four generations, they each had clout and connections. They were able to connect me with the mayor, city council, school board, local pastors, and every person who was on the panel. If I were trying to organize on my own as an outsider, I would not have had the same social capital or connections needed to pull together this event.

It was all organized through my in-laws’ word of mouth—the most important aspect of my familial coalition. They also took some of the organizing labor from my shoulders. This event was also an opportunity for them to

learn how to organize a community meeting. While they looked to me as the expert and facilitator because of my professional training, they still felt ownership of the event. This ownership has kept many of them engaged in the BLM movement and inspired them to participate in a rally in the next town over the following week.

### The Relationship Between Black and White People in Rural Communities

While urban communities are dealing with reverse housing segregation due to racist housing policies (Taylor, 2019), rural communities do not face this same challenge, and various racial groups intermingle frequently. Many of the families in our town are descendants of families who established this town, and others have been here for over five generations. As a result, many families are mixed race and multiethnic. Due to the long-shared history of the people in the community, it was easy for them to come together and have this conversation. While not everyone agreed, they respected their differences. Racial tension was openly discussed. Racist experiences were openly shared. In short, racial tension was not as high as I expected.

While the conversations flowed easily and stories of personal experiences were accepted with no resistance, I do not remember experiencing this same level of camaraderie in the urban areas I was used to. Everyone knew everyone, which made it easier for them to “hear” each other. This sense of camaraderie made me feel hopeful and motivated to continue these conversations.

### The Importance of Storytelling

The event attendees had the opportunity to share, what we called “open mic,” how the death of George Floyd had affected their lives. They had an opportunity to express what BLM meant to them. Many of the attendees shared personal stories to connect their feelings about his death and the nation’s response. Recently a *New York Times* columnist asked, “What if there were no George Floyd video?” (Kristof, 2020). The columnist, Nicholas Kristof, asked readers to imagine that no one had documented the eight minutes and 46 seconds that lead to George Floyd’s death. Kristof (2020) observed, “there is no viral video to galvanize us about other racial inequities.” This statement highlights the importance of documenting and sharing injustices through conversation, storytelling, and knowledge sharing to galvanize movements and social change.

Sharing knowledge of experiences to incite change is not a new concept. In African culture, there is a proverb called “Sankofa.” Its rough translation means “go back and fetch it,” “return to your past,” or “it is not taboo to go back and retrieve what you have forgotten or lost” (Temple, 2010,

p. 127). It is used to stress the importance of gaining the wisdom of those who have come before and reconnecting (Deterville, 2016) with lost histories that inform the present. Adeeba Deterville (2016) noted that this concept is valuable because it speaks “to the whole person in relationship to community and a living world” (p. 118). It is a form of historical recovery and, in this way, innately womanist, feminist, and labor of liberation. Additionally, storytelling served as a key component in engaging community members from all perspectives, as well as an opportunity to assess and interpret the challenges and needs of our community. Lastly, the sharing of these narratives also created a new level of trust within the BLM movement in our community.

### Youth Voices—Their Importance and Absence

All people have situated knowledge that shapes the way we see and experience the world, including young people. This means, like Rafiki so eloquently sings in *The Lion King*, “Everybody is somebody, even a nobody.” Historically speaking, young people have played crucial roles in social movements globally. Consider student involvement in the creation of powerful civil rights organizations, first in 1930s with the creation of the Southern Negro Youth Congress (Franklin, 2014), and then in the 1960s, when students not only created innovative tactics like the Freedom Rides but also built powerful organizations like the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (Costanza-Chock, 2012). The creation of the Chicano Movement out of East Los Angeles in 1968 also started with thousands of students walking out of their high schools (Muñoz, 2007). More recently, we see young people like Greta Thunberg dominating the environmental movement in the fight against climate change. From this perspective, young people have a vital role in community organizing.

While young people have inevitably experienced the effects of racial injustice in America, this rural community stood steadfast in excluding the voices of young people from the conversation. For example, in the planning meeting I requested to have youth representation on the discussion panel, and everyone on the planning committee was against it. Additionally, while the community meeting was happening, kids were around, but parents told them to go play and not partake in the meeting.

While I have many theories as to why youth were not invited to this event, it was difficult for me to grapple with intentionally excluding young people. As a feminist and public intellectual who closely aligns with the teachings of Cooper and Du Bois, I strongly argue that all marginalized voices should be at the table. Not only do they have valid and valuable experiences worth sharing, but they are also the ones who will carry the movement forward. Research has shown that youth involvement can produce major

impacts at the community level (Christens & Dolan, 2010), but all involved in the process must move beyond the hierarchical perspective of adult-dominated narratives and decenter themselves from the picture. Such change is true transformation.

### Reflecting

During 2020, I learned a lot about myself. Since I began writing this piece, over a year has passed since our event and George Floyd's death. Has my town, my community, experienced transformation and liberation? I can only say that it is an ongoing process. While we did bring attention to the current feelings of Black people in our community and established a list of willing and committed allies, much work is still to be done. A week after our event I was invited to speak at a BLM rally in a neighboring small town. Hundreds of people were in attendance. We held voter registration drives and gave people an opportunity to meet and talk with the police chief. Many other small neighboring towns held events of their own. Shortly after the Itasca event a local political figure posted some racist remarks on social media. I was contacted immediately by the local head of their political party to discuss how it was being addressed and handled. They chose to hold him accountable, and he was asked to resign. To me, this response was progress, but it reiterated how much more work needs to be done.

Nevertheless, the event and subsequent reflections have taught me that regardless of what race you are, what ethnic group you belong to, whether you grow up in the city of concrete or in the backcountry on dirt roads, we are all human beings just trying to live our best lives. I have also learned that, as an intellectual, a Black woman, a feminist, and an activist, I must not shy away from what is hard or hide in the ivory tower of academia. Like Ida B. Wells, Anna Julia Cooper, W. E. B. Du Bois, and Carter G. Woodson, I believe that we must expose, address, and challenge where, how, and what it means to share knowledge. People and communities must learn to educate themselves as well as think and act for themselves. Woodson (1933) stated, "The mere imparting of information is not education. Above all things, the effort must result in making a man think and do for himself" (p. xii). His words instill the need to always seek truth and look at things from the perspective of the community that I am working in and seek to change. But we must also respect the privilege and power we have as intellectuals. All my learning, self-education, and experiences were valuable not only to me but also to my rural community, which previously had had no public conversation or forum like the event we organized after George Floyd's murder. In this way, any project I embark on as a public intellectual is a source of power.

As I approach my research and work, I must recognize this power and what it means. My identity encompasses multiple interlocking identities—Black, woman, Black-woman, mother, poor, educated, and so on. These identities allow me to possess powers, depending on the situation and the community I am in. However, to put it in the context of power relations in my public intellectual work first, I consider more words from Audre Lorde (1984/2007): "for the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us to temporarily beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change" (p. 112). To enable change in a community, it must come from within that community. I must also understand the historical context of the communities where I implement my theory as practice for liberation.

In other words, privileged academics like myself will often try to "give" voice to marginalized groups. In this way, we reinforce their marginalized status. Rather, we should let them speak for themselves. Otherwise, the knowledge produced is only produced in the interest of the intellectuals (researchers). This approach changes the power dynamics of my projects. It allows my participants to have more power. Employing this perspective, always remembering whom this is for and why I am doing this work, also gives me more freedom and power to approach this work from an authentic place. This approach is womanism, public intellectualism, and ultimately liberatory practice at its best.

One other point I must note is the experience of organizing as a scholar-activist engaged in the movement for Black lives in rural communities. It is a lonely task. By this I mean, there are not a lot of us. I have not found a network of scholar-activists with whom to share ideas, stories, or strategies. I was able to connect with two organizations that are engaging in similar work, one about an hour away and another in Oregon. But I have not found an academic community to connect with. Much of my time is spent making the case for why rural communities need to be included in the overall BLM movement narrative and in conversation both within and outside academia. It is as if the rural community is forgotten about and maybe even erased. I was not expecting to have to fight this battle.

### "We're Not Done Yet"

The consistent theme acknowledged at our event was that there is more work to be done, and it is just as important to address here what still needs to be done. However, when considering what is next, to be honest, I do not know. When I first began reflecting on George Floyd's murder, former police officer Derek Chauvin had not been charged. However, since then he has been charged, faced trial, found guilty, and convicted on all counts in George Floyd's death.

Although he now faces up to 75 years in prison, he is still fighting his conviction in the hope of only serving probation and never spending another day behind bars. While the verdict brought a sigh of relief and joy when considering it as a first step in police accountability for a lot of Black Americans like myself, it was bittersweet. For us, we won one case but still cannot get back the life lost. Nevertheless, the hope it ignites is something that I hold dear as I continue to fight as a scholar-activist for racial justice and police reform.

As a result of George Floyd's death and Derek Chauvin's conviction, on the national level Democratic party leaders within the U.S. Congress have not only pushed police reform to the top of the priority list but introduced a bill called the George Floyd Justice in Policing Act (2020). Unfortunately, the bill only passed in the U.S. House of Representatives and not the U.S. Senate. Even so, more than 50 states have introduced a combined total of over 3,000 new legislative bills that address concerns such as general police reform, policing of ethnic groups, transparency, oversight, and use of force (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2021). While this legislative activity seems like a step in the right direction, some states have introduced bills that make it harder to hold police accountable, harder to restrict police funding, and harder to have general police reform.

The unfortunate reality for racial equity organizers is that police reform at the national level has not been sufficient. Furthermore, police reform at the local level has been inconsistent. Moreover, in rural communities, more specifically my rural community, not much has changed. Unfortunately, our town has faced challenges around the policing of Brown and Black people. Since we have such a small police department, reform and change often come in the form of firing someone who could potentially be your neighbor, kin, or a long-time family friend. This situation has created almost a silent tension throughout the community. Nevertheless, conversations around racial equity in our small rural community are not as scarce as they once were. Community members have even gathered to organize and hold our first-ever Juneteenth event in commemoration of the emancipation of enslaved Africans in Texas in 1865.

Another important note concerns education and the role of educators in the movement for racial equity. As mentioned earlier, state legislators have introduced thousands of bills to address policing. Simultaneously, here in the state of Texas, lawmakers—like lawmakers in nearly a dozen other states—have introduced and/or passed bills to remove or ban the teaching of critical race theory in K–12 public schools. Researchers have shown that educators can play a vital role in dismantling racism (Ruiz & Cantú, 2013). They can respond in a way that provides fundamental transformation that influences not just education institutions but the policies and practices that affect the communities they serve. We see

this phenomenon through organizing within teacher unions and in my case within a small rural community in a park. As an educator I can use my pedagogical training and skills to help rural communities to name racial inequities, identify ways to critically address those issues, and create policies for change. However, if federal, state, and local legislatures continue to create policies to suppress critical conversations around racial inequity in K–12 classrooms, educators will need to embrace public intellectualism by engaging in educating in the public sphere. This need will become increasingly important.

Even though we did not solve the problem of over policing of Black people and racial inequity, we have demonstrated that our community members have the power to address it in our small rural town. Change and progress are slow and take persistent work. There is so much to be done in this "big little town" of mine. However, I do know that I will continue to mobilize with other small rural activist groups, have conversations with community members, show up to town hall and council meetings, and be available if called on again.

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