

# 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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