

Black Life Is Not Ungeographic!

Applying a Black Geographic Lens to Rural Education Research in the Black Belt

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In this conceptual article, we posit that Black life matters in the Black Belt of the American South. We connect two current trends in rural educational research—a return to questions of place and sincere attention to race as a crucial conversation in the field—and provide readers with an introduction to Black Geography as a means to inform rural education research. By offering this theoretical lens, we hope to build capacity in the field to take on inquiries related to spatial and educational equity issues related to race in rural education. Taking our queues from McKittrick, we present four areas as lines of inquiry for rural educational research: (a) interrogating quantitative research designs, (b) creating critical topographies of local geography and history, (c) mapping education policy and implementation, and (d) collecting stories about the educational debt owed to Black students. We invite rural educational scholars to consider concepts from Black Geography and employ these lines of inquiry in order to ask better research questions, strengthen research designs, and enhance the contributions drawn from research findings. We view these lines of inquiry as holding the potential for humanizing rural educational spaces by centering Black livingness within the Black Belt.

Black life matters in the Black Belt of the American South. In this article, we connect two current trends in rural educational research—a return to questions of place and sincere attention to race as a crucial conversation in the field. We agree with Corbett (2021a) that “any place we can imagine is also a subset of multiple other places” (p. 2). In the popular American imaginary, rural is often racialized as white (Tieken, 2014),¹ more specifically white and low-

¹ In this article, we capitalize Black and write white in lowercase, following the lead of Dumas (2016). At the same time, we note the contested nature of this choice to notate “white” or White” and acknowledge Painter’s (2020) argument that the lowercase can be a way for whiteness to remain invisible. While we labored over this choice, we concluded to use “white” for consistency, yet we are undecided about our future discursive decisions about this contested space of our written work.

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income (S. M. Williams, 2017). Whiteness largely narrates rurality (Swain & Baker, 2021), while Black people are absent (Lensmire, 2017), even when Black people are the majority demographic within a space—as is the case in many small towns across the U.S. South. We assert that increasing our understanding of the rural U.S. South must include attention to the particularities of educational outcomes in the Black Belt while attending to Black livingness (McKittrick, 2006). In this article, we pull in concepts about place and race from Black Geography² to pose earnest questions about the widely accepted social construction of rural America as a racially white space, providing readers with an introduction to Black Geography as a means to inform rural education research. In so doing, we hope to build our collective capacity in the field to take on research and analysis related to the National Rural Education Association’s 2022–2027 research agenda (Hartman et al., 2022), specifically in the area of spatial and educational equity.

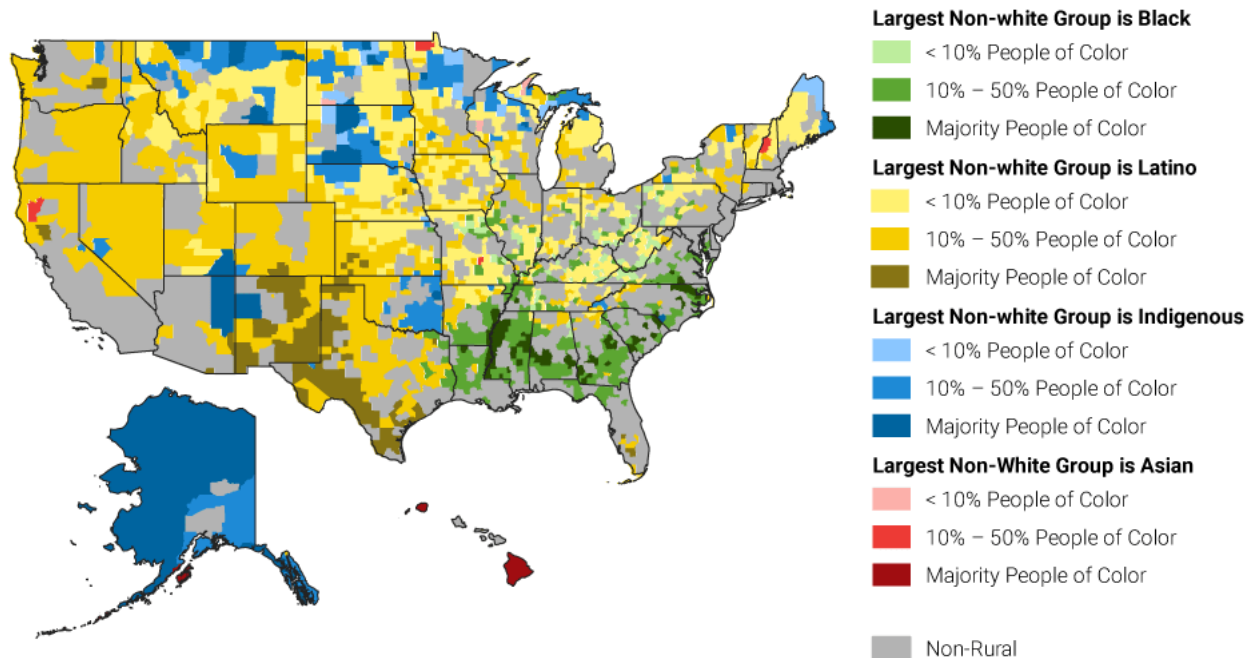
² When we discuss “Black Geography” as a field we capitalize the term, but we refer to a lowercase “black geographies” to denote geographies created by Blackness. This will be discussed further in the following sections.

For a number of reasons we intentionally contextualize this work within the The Black Belt of the American South—over 600 counties stretching from Virginia to Texas, and a region known for its fertile soil and location of plantation spaces (see Dantes, 2021). As visualized in Figure 1, Black populations in the rural South (Rowland & Love, 2021) are not just a historical holdover. The The Black Belt of the American South includes majority Black enclaves, towns, and cities. Meanwhile, the Black Belt hosts and even celebrates plantation spaces that are frequently sighted, toured, and storied by locals and tourists alike (Purifoy, 2021). On this rich soil of the plantation South, we posit that Black livingness and death occupy the space all at once. We view the plantation spaces in particular as the embodiment of an unbreakable spirit of Black livingness juxtaposed by a colonial project infinitely rooted in Black death. We aim to interrupt the notion that when human enslavement ended in the The Black Belt of the American South, so did the harm of racism.

Racism persists in the Black Belt of the American South. Nevertheless, we look at Black life-making (Mustaffa, 2019) that has always existed despite every possible attempt to make Black livingness cease to exist. To quote Mustaffa (2019), “Black life-making must exist in the contradictions of the status quo to transform institutions and policies to be sure, but also ways of being for a new future” (p. 725). Therefore, our focus on the past of the Black Belt is not intended to dwell on the past alone. Rather, our look backward is for the purpose of acknowledging how the past has shaped the Black Belt in ways that are incomprehensible absent a tandem view of historical and present-day norms and practices in these rural spaces.

Present-day rural spaces that Black bodies inhabit are discussed in several different ways. For example, S. M. Williams and associates (2021) completed an analysis of rural K–12 schools in Georgia and found that Black teachers in majority-Black school districts were more likely to stay, despite overall high teacher turnover rates throughout

Figure 1
Rural Americans of Color in 2020



Note. Adapted from *Mapping Rural America’s Diversity and Demographic Change* by D. W. Rowland & Hanna Love, 2021, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/mapping-rural-americas-diversity-and-demographic-change/>. Copyright 2021 by the Brookings Institution.

Georgia. In their edited book, Hallmark and associates (2023) more broadly examined the race-rurality experience in the context of higher education. In the introduction, Means, one of the editors, stated,

I engage in scholarship by considering ways we can center the humanity and assets of rural Black communities and other rural minoritized communities, while examining and disrupting how anti-black racism, classism, and spatial inequities materialize to shape educational opportunities, experiences, and outcomes of rural youth and students. (p. 4)

While the examinations of Black bodies in the rural The Black Belt of the American South vary, we contend that Black Geography is a useful framework for our collective understanding, examinations, analyses, and theorizing about Black life-making.

Throughout this article we draw primarily from Katherine McKittrick's work in Black Geography as a framework to interrogate racialized disparities in schooling within the Black Belt of the American South region (Hudson & McKittrick, 2014; McKittrick, 2006, 2011, 2020). McKittrick's (2006) approach to Black Geography provides a means for disrupting the hegemony of rurality as white, and reconnects geography with the Black condition. We draw from this framework to engage Black intellectual traditions that live outside prevailing knowledge systems (McKittrick, 2020), and we challenge broadly accepted norms of scientific research with Black intellectualism that lives outside of prevailing knowledge systems and counters a reading of Black livingness as rebellious methodologies (see McKittrick, 2020). From this body of work we describe four lines of inquiry from Black Geography. We suggest that educational researchers can apply this framework and specifically these lines of inquiry as a means to better understanding racialized disparities and Black livingness in rural educational spaces, specifically in the plantation South, in the The Black Belt of the American South.

We begin our article by situating who we are in this work, followed by a review of literature to consider as we contextualize the usefulness of Black Geography as theory. Next, we define key terms, borrowing concepts from Black Geography, to orient the recommendations we make about rural education research in the rural Black Belt of the American South. We then apply a Black Geographic lens by connecting four heuristics from McKittrick's (2011) work with four recommended lines of inquiry in rural education research, particularly in the rural Black Belt of the American South.

Who Are We? Motherscholars in the Southern American Black Belt

We both grew up in urban spaces and have negotiated different contexts with our own children, who have attended schools in urban and rural spaces. We currently live in the Black Belt of the American South, where chattel slavery intimately informs the educational landscape in our present-day observations, conversations, and experiences. As motherscholars raising five Black school-age children in this context, this rural reality is both personal and professional. By *motherscholars* we mean a mode of intellectual and spiritual travel, epistemologically rooted in love that occurs at the intersections of personal and professional theories, research, and practices that move toward justice (Howard et al., 2023).

Joy is originally from San Diego, California. As a white college student majoring in elementary education, when I began attending college in the Black Belt of the American South, I was shocked at the distinct Black/white racial lines in neighborhoods, classrooms, and social gatherings. During college in 1998, when I began dating a Black man (now my husband of 18 years) from South Carolina, I was unprepared for the subtle and overt racism that surfaced. Anti-miscegenation, the one-drop rule, and lynching due to interracial relationships were only some of the haunting realities that have storied a public appraisal of our love. As a motherscholar who connects my research and lived experiences (Howard et al., 2021; Matias, 2022) raising three Black mixed-race boys (mostly) in the U.S. South, the pain and inhumanity of our past is unavoidable. Within this tension, for over two decades I have explored several lines of inquiry that interrogate the racial realities of our time. I experience the Black Belt as intimate, beautiful, complex, sweet, intriguing, home, complicated, foreign, familiar, terrifying, and terrorizing. At the same time, I see possibilities in re-storying rural realities.

Timberly hails from suburban St. Louis, Missouri. As an African American second-generation college graduate, I grew up with a father who was a sharecropper in rural Arkansas in his youth, a storyteller in his soul, and a teacher in his professional career. My mother, who did not learn to drive until she was 31, grew up in Arkansas as well—so poor she has a phobia of ever being poor again. From these giants, I became a teacher, researcher, and motherscholar. After graduating from an HBCU in the Southern Black Belt, I taught middle school in the Mississippi Delta of Arkansas. Presently, I home-educate my two daughters in rural Arkansas. While my scholarly work began with centering an urban context related to disproportionality in school discipline (Baker, 2012, 2019; Baker & Nelson, 2019),

upon moving to a rural regional university, I began to see how my research might fit in this new place. I found there was room to port my scholarship over to a rural context. I experience the Black Belt of the American South as rich in her/history, beautiful sunsets, burning fields, lynching trees, divisive railroad tracks, Friday night lights, familiar, safe and violent. All at once, the complexities and tension of home in the Mississippi Delta region are my rural reality and Black livingness.

Literature Considerations

To begin our review of literature we first contextualize our choice to focus on three rural educational journals as our source of content: *Journal of Research in Rural Education*, *The Rural Educator*, and *Theory and Practice in Rural Education*. This very intentional decision is shaped by the explicit focus of these journals on rural education, therefore leading the field in how we collectively conceptualize rural education research. Further, the focus of this review of literature was informed by the NREA's 2022–2027 research agenda (Hartman et al., 2022) in which rural education researchers call for a focus is on spatial and educational equity as represented by (a) research from intersectional perspectives, (b) attention to power within and across communities, (c) effects of remoteness/isolation, (c) effects of deficit portrayals of rural people and places, and (e) dynamics of white supremacy/identity. We argue that to attend to this research agenda, rural education researchers should consider using McKittrick's Black Geographies to foreground these conversations and see anew the landscape of rural educational scholarship related to the Black Belt of the American South and its attended geographies of race and racism. In our review of contemporary literature, we wanted to know how scholars specifically thinking about rural education have been thinking about race in the Black Belt.

In the section we offer context for literature and note scholars who have engaged in rural educational research focused on those racialized as Black and within the Black Belt of the American South. In scholarship that discussed the experiences of Black rural residents, we found research about race in rural education and, to a lesser extent, scholarship about the Black Belt. To contextualize the conversation within contemporary rural education scholarship we did not extend our search to include a comprehensive literature review including fields outside of education. We have, however, conducted a systematic review systematic review of articles from *Journal of Research in Rural Education*, *The Rural Educator*, and *Theory and Practice in Rural Education* (Baker et al., 2023). We then narrowed our review by analyzing the relevance of interests based on article abstracts. We searched articles that included the key

terms: race, racism, Black Belt, and/or rurality. Within this search, we further looked for specifically the Black Belt as context.

Scholarship in education explicitly examining the context of the Southern Black Belt is varied. Research has ebbed and flowed, especially related to where scholarship is located. To search for scholarship contextualized in the Black Belt we used the terms: Black Belt, Blackness, and Black. These terms resulted in limited results, often no results or unrelated results. A search in the two longest-running rural journals, *The Rural Educator* (Crumb & Chambers, 2022; Holley, 2013; Irvin et al., 2010; Thier et al., 2021) and *Journal of Research in Rural Education* (Hodges & Tippins, 2009; Sutherland et al., 2022), resulted in identification of six articles that specifically noted the Black Belt in some way.

Other researchers published in the rural education scholarship journals we examined have more broadly addressed the Black condition in rural education (see Crumb et al., 2021; Irvin et al., 2010; Wigle & Kostelnik, 1999). A special issue to acknowledge is the 2021 issue of *Journal of Research in Rural Education*, edited by Joubert and Lensmire and titled "Black Lives Matter and Rural Education." In this special issue, several scholars explored the Black Lives Matter movement in rural places. Furthermore, scholars such as Chambers (Chambers et al., 2019, 2021), Crumb (Crumb et al., 2021, 2023; Crumb & Chambers, 2022), Means (Hallmark et al., 2023; Means, 2019; Means et al., 2016), and S. M. Williams (S. M. Williams, 2017; S. M. Williams et al., 2021) consistently are publishing on Black education within the rural South, sometimes within and sometimes outside the Black Belt. Specifically, in their edited volume, *African American Rural Education: College Transitions and Postsecondary Experiences*, Chambers and colleagues (2021) stated:

Sparse attention is given towards an understanding of the educational challenges and collegiate trajectories of rural African Americans. Yet, nearly 20 percent (19.3%) of the US population is rural and African Americans comprise the largest racial/ethnic minority group in rural settings, about 2.6 million people. (p. xiii)

These numbers emphasize the importance of the work of scholars who are examining the Black condition within the context of rural education.

In our review (Baker et al., 2023), we noted that educational scholars are producing ongoing scholarship that takes up the Black condition in the rural United States, including the Southern Black Belt (for example, S. M. Williams, 2017). Most commonly, researchers examine the experiences of their participants within rural locales, but we

did not find examples of scholarship that sought to contribute theoretically to the nuances of race within the Black Belt. However, many of these scholars are not publishing in the two longest running rural education journals. For example, using the parameters of 2001–2023, when we entered the term “Black Belt” in the *Journal of Negro Education*, our search yielded nine published items. While outside the boundaries of our search, the following sentiment shared in a special issue of *Rural Sociology* titled “Race, Rurality and Ethnicity” seems relevant here. The authors emphasized,

the ways in which rural spaces are racially coded, how intersections with race and ethnicity exacerbate rural inequality, how the domination of people and the environment are co-constituted, and how practices of racism are embedded within contextually specific ecologies. In drawing attention to these contributions, we suggest future directions for the discipline’s engagement with rurality, race, and ethnicity, while simultaneously suggesting the ways in which our own disciplinary racial reckoning remains incomplete. (Carrillo et al., 2021, p. 419)

Similarly, while we honor and stand alongside the scholars we cited above, we assert that to prioritize the work of racial reckonings within the field of rural education research, we must consider the ways that Black Geography can contribute to our theory and methodology within the field.

In this article we focus on Black Geography as a theoretical framework to disrupt educational research norms and humanize the analysis of the Black condition within rural education. Black Geography provides concepts and tools upon which researchers can draw to disrupt the imaginary of rural as white and to attend to the needs of Black life in the Black Belt of the American South. Altogether, we found that the Black Belt was rarely explicitly named, and literature that involved both critical theories of race and rural space was limited. Given this gap in the literature, we offer suggestions for lines of inquiry and conceptual tools that draw from knowledge systems from Black Geography to help researchers grapple with rural realities in the Black Belt. As a general rule, the space of rural schooling is conceived as being predominantly white. We interrupt this image as not only counterfactual but dangerous in the residual effects of this assumption. By erasing the non-white presence in rural places and spaces, important lines of inquiry and forms of analysis remain unexplored.

As a field, we have avoided a painful and largely inexplicable past by silencing the stories of Black rural residents past and present. Black scholars such as Du Bois (1903/1999) have been drawing our attention to the central role that rural schools have played in Black struggle

and development (Joubert & Lensmire, 2021), but as a field, we have yet to unpack the wisdom of this assertion. Scholars from across the country have repeated a call to consider how race and rurality shapes student access to and experiences of education (Cain, 2021; Chambers & Crumb, 2022; Mann & Rogers, 2021). Notably, the National Rural Postsecondary Research Agenda Working Group (2021) has suggested that researchers “critically think about systemic racism perpetuates educational disparities in rural areas” (p. 75). We align with this call for a critical turn toward educational equity in rural educational research. As a means of interrogating racialized disparities, we introduce these lines of inquiry based on a lens of analysis borrowed from Black Geography to bridge a sociohistorical gap in how the Black Belt of the American South is understood.

Key Terms

Black Belt (The Black Belt of the American South)

The Black Belt is a compilation of counties across the U.S. South (Dantes, 2021). These counties are historically counties where Africans were enslaved on plantations. Falk and Rankin (1992) explained:

The “physical environment” and “spatial structure” of the Black Belt are rooted deeply in the agricultural heritage of the region, particularly in cotton production (see Hilliard 1979). What we call the “Black Belt” has often been called by others the “cotton counties” or “plantation counties” (see Mann 1990; Odum 1936; Vance 1932). In addition to their cotton and plantation heritages, the counties are unique in that they have historically had very large black populations. (p. 300)

These counties are plagued with poverty (Hoppe, 1985), economic disempowerment, legacies of Jim Crow, and overt and covert racism (Dantes, 2021). The Black Belt is also characterized by its rich fertile black soil and her/histories of resilience. It includes 623 rural counties connected across eleven states: Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, and Mississippi to North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and Virginia (Dantes, 2021). The Black Belt is the historical location of southern plantations and dispossession. The Black Belt is home to many majority-Black towns and cities that have survived and thrived since chattel slavery.

These communities are not only historical locales of Black livingness but also possess rich her/histories of Blackness in the U.S. South. In addition to Black towns, another significant archetype of this region is its plantations,

which presently function as both historical sites and functional revenue-generating spaces. Plantations remain sites of violence, museums, and standards of a bygone era of a particular version of Southern greatness. The Black Belt encompasses a complex story of the Black struggle for education, the pursuit of humanity, and the freedom to love and live. In short, the Black Belt of the American South is a complicated rural story of Black life.

Rurality (Rural Reality)

We stand alongside critical race scholars who have called for a spatial examination of structural and institutional factors (Annamma et al., 2013; Huber, 2008; Tieken & Wright, 2021; Vélez et al., 2007). Further, these scholars challenge us to explicitly examine “how structural and institutional factors divide, constrict, and construct space to impact the educational experiences and opportunities available to students based on race” (Pacheco & Vélez, 2009, p. 293). Moreover, we align with calls to deepen the theoretical framework to grapple with place-conscious education (Corbett, 2021a). Joubert and Lensmire (2021) have reminded us that race-conscious education issues have been raised by scholars for decades, yet the theoretical and practical displacement of Black bodies outside of a rural education imaginary remains.

Important in our contribution to the academic conversation is our understanding of rurality as “rural reality” (Swain & Baker, 2021), signifying “rurality as describing, understanding, explaining, living, and experiencing the space of rural reality” (p. 20). Too often rural places are perceived as demographically white places which is not necessarily the reality of rural education (Tieken, 2014), yet we treat rurality as if whiteness is the assumed reality of rural contexts. This hegemonic narrative of rural as white is so prevalent that it frequently masks the facts of racial demographics (such as majority-Black rural towns)—data collection and analyses are designed around the premise of minority when rurality would argue Blackness as majority. From our systematic review of research (Baker et al., 2023), we know that the majority of rural scholarship comes from scholars in Midwestern states, where populations of rural places are in fact majority white. Yet this is not the reality of all rural places. Taking care to recognize rurality as rural reality is important as we aim to elucidate the Black condition within the educational context of the Black Belt of the American South.

Black Geography

We draw from the field of Black Geography (Hawthorne, 2019; McKittrick, 2011, 2020; Summers, 2019; Woods, 2017), which offers conceptual tools that

assist us in theorizing and developing our understanding of Black livingness. Whereas traditional geography is interested in physical and material geographies measured in geometric terms through cartographic measurements, Black Geography operates both within and outside the mainframe of geography (Black Feminisms, 2019). To theorize Black life and consider the Black intellectual perspective on the Black Belt of the American South, we turn to Black Geography (McKittrick, 2020).

It is important to consider McKittrick’s (2006) explanation, “We produce space, we produce its meanings, and we work very hard to make geography what it is” (p. xi). In other words, what we observe in the natural world as well as the constructed structures in which we live and work are all influenced by people’s ideas, policies, intentions, priorities, needs, and desires. Somewhat outside of the norm in her field, McKittrick (2006) argued that geography includes three-dimensional spaces and places, physical landscapes and infrastructures, geographic imaginations, the practice of mapping, exploring and seeing, and social relations in and across space. More recently, McKittrick (2020) has called for methodologies as a means to “undo discipline” by using intellectual tools that interrogate the academic systems that discipline Blackness (p. 41). As an effort toward humanizing science, in her 2020 book *Dear Science and Other Stories*, McKittrick demonstrated how the use of various forms of knowledge production (footnotes, citations, songs, dances, photographs, and storytelling) can be used to interrogate what and how we know and how knowledge is represented in academic inquiry. While the larger concept from *Dear Science* is beyond the scope of this article, it is important to note that as we move toward different ways of knowing and asking questions in the field of rural education, the methodologies and representations of our work must evolve as well.

Black Geography critiques traditional forms of geography that perpetuate discourses that equates Blackness with subordination, as ungeographic, and as metaphor. Instead, Black Geography pulls from multiple fields to interrogate the erasure of Blackness in spatial stories and to intentionally imagine spaces where Black livingness is possible (McKittrick, 2006). McKittrick (2020) has utilized an interdisciplinary approach—Black studies, including literature, education, philosophy, sociology, feminism, and psychology—to critique what she refers to as “traditional geography” and forwards “black geographies” as “subaltern or alternative geographic patterns that work alongside and beyond traditional geographies and site a terrain of struggle” (McKittrick, 2006, p. 7). Black Geography then pulls on the work of Black scholars such as W. E. B. Du Bois, Franz Fanon, bell hooks, Sylvia Wynter, Toni Morrison, and other influential thinkers to interrupt traditional geographers and the assumptions that are made about space and place. Black

Geography complicates spatial theorizing by acknowledging the agency and epistemological perspectives of Black intellectuals, and Black women in particular (see McKittrick, 2006). In this way, spatial theorizing has always been a part of Black intellectual and experiential knowledge, although the labor and academic contributions have most often been framed as projects outside of the discipline of geography (such as philosophy and education).

According to McKittrick (2017), Black Geography defines space as “relational to praxis of black human life, black geographies are therefore not nouns but rather are verbs that are ongoing and never resolved” (p. 99). Its function is to understand and explicate the livingness of a people and the places they inhabit. As we seek to understand the world in new ways, tools to do so provide the means for better analyses and more accurate understandings of rurality, which is especially critical in the context of rural educational scholarship. Because “Black Geographies draws heavily upon modes of critical geographic thought developed within the field of Black/African diaspora studies” (Hawthorne, 2019, p.6), this landscape of knowledge offers a different starting place than most rural educational scholarship. One important distinction is that Black Geography insists that we center Black livingness and refuse to limit Blackness to a single story of dispossession—including the ways in which we represent knowledge and produce knowledge (McKittrick, 2020). While thus far we have been discussing the field of Black Geography (capitalized), we now turn to a conceptual discussion of the geographies, or spaces, that we will denote here as black geographies (lowercase).

black geographies

We align with McKittrick (2006, 2007, 2017) to denote the use of *black geographies* as lowercase in its written form and as descriptive of the overlapping multilayered, multifaceted geographies that are created by Blackness. McKittrick calls for recognition of black geographies as imagined, contested, rooted, technological, resistant, and storied. One such example is the well-known geographic project of the Underground Railroad (which runs throughout time and space, across the historical and contemporary places of the Southern Black Belt) as a psychic and material map that signified secret knowledge and secret knowledge sharing. As McKittrick (2006) described, it was “a covert operation, which was developed through human networks rather than scientific or cartographic writings, the Underground Railroad illustrates how historical black geographies are developed alongside clandestine geographic-knowledge practices” (p. 18). Based on this example alone, it is undeniable that Black people living in and traversing the Black Belt of the American South have always been theorizing and challenging geography.

We actively seek out counterstories, including Black cartographies, topographies, maps, architecture, and technologies, that represent more than Black death—we seek Black life. In other words, a Black Geographic lens helps us in mapping and identifying not only oppression but also thriving Black educational spaces made to pass knowledge from one generation to the next.³ Malone and Nxumalo (2021) explained,

Black geographies consider how place and space are central to Black life as sites from which to understand the spatialization of anti-Blackness. A Black geographic lens refuses the erasure of Black people’s complex historical and contemporary relations to land, place and space within ongoing conditions of anti-Blackness. (p. 122)

The plural use of black geographies is intentional due to the multiplicity of the ways that Blackness creates and occupies space, place, and imagined geographies. Relatedly, a Black Geographic lens provides a way to understand present-day rural realities by connecting to the historical context of the plantation South. McKittrick’s (2011) explained “the plantation as a very meaningful geographic prototype that not only housed and normalized (vis-à-vis enforced placelessness) racial violence in the Americas but also naturalized a plantation logic” (p. 951). A plantation logic perpetuates power dynamics that mimic the plantation owner-plantation inhabitant relationship. This mimicry is not only historical; it reveals itself in present-day institutions which includes rural educational institutions. To resist plantation logic, we work toward an imagination of the Black Belt of the American South outside plantation logic to unapologetically ask questions about Black life. Is there space for Black life to be, to grow, and to connect to land and community without denial or subjugation?

Applying a Black Geographic Lens to Rural Education Research

Rural education as an area of study emphasizes geography in its signification of “rural” as a location, rural as an adjective, and perhaps rural as a way of knowing and reading the world. Both the fields of Black Geography

³ For example, the Rural Studies Institute (RSI) at Georgia College, located in the Black Belt of the American South, is informed by rural influencers and experts to help address the ongoing struggles of Small Town USA. The RSI aims to identify resources, including educational opportunities, for the success of rural communities (see, for example, the [Black Farmers Network](#)). Its mission is to establish best practices and solutions that help strengthen rural communities for the future (RSI, n.d.).

(e.g., Hawthorne, 2019; McKittrick, 2011; Summers, 2019; Woods, 2017) and rural education (e.g., Coladarsi, 2007; Grant-Panting, 2021) include the study of place, space, location, home, maps, politically defined boundaries, stories of place-specific experiences, travel, and direction—to name a few major themes. The complexity of spatial relations in rural education cannot be overstated, yet for years a number of scholars have called our attention to the field’s undertheorization of place (see Corbett, 2021a; Greenwood, 2009; Nesper, 2008). To address this need, we turn to a field in which place and space are the focus of study, geography. To be clear, our project is neither contradictory nor synonymous with Corbett’s recent work to unpack rural education’s preoccupation with place (see Corbett, 2021a, 2021b). We agree with Corbett’s (2021a) critique of the tendency in rural education research to omit or avoid questions around diversity within and among “communities defined as rural” (p. 2). We enter this project at the intersection of place and race to reconceptualize and interject theory in the ways that we think and write about (or omit explicit discussion of) the Black Belt of the American South in rural education scholarship.

Geography, materially and conceptually, is racialized by our colonial histories and present-day technologies which map anti-Blackness onto cities, neighborhoods, schools, and plantations (Hawthorne, 2019). Unfortunately, definitions of rurality tend to ignore the preponderance of Black bodies. Black spaces in the rural South are and have been present since chattel slavery. The rural South is beholden to Black bodies for what it was and what it has become, yet educational systems continue to work toward the promotion of a white landscape and move away from Blackness. Despite the presence of Black bodies that are integral within school communities in the U.S Southern Black Belt as students, teachers, and families; policies and practices continue to dissociate themselves from Blackness while simultaneously bragging about the Black athlete, tokenizing and loathing the Black teacher and Black administrators (Andrews, 1996; Caldera, 2020). To recontextualize a conversation about rurality through a lens that honors the Blackness of the Black Belt of the American South, we have organized a framework that employs concepts from Black Geography that re-story the ways in which we have erased race from educational research within the Black Belt of the American South.

In conceptualizing rurality within the Black Belt of the American South, we take together the physical places (such as farm fields, plantations, schools named after Confederate leaders), spaces (for example, home, southern, country, sacred), and the reality that rural spaces and places include Black mourning and Black livingness all at once. Aligned with our position on rurality, McKittrick (2006) called for analysis beyond merely acknowledging context

or describing the landscape. She asserted that we must acknowledge that “the individual, the community, the land are inextricable in the process of creating history” (p. xxii). Relative to our focus on the Black Belt, it is important that Black life, whether individual experiences or Black communities, are not merely the objects of research. Instead, to engage in race-conscious research in the Black Belt, the past, present, and future of the space of the Black Belt itself must be considered in tandem with the educational experiences of Black students.

Together with McKittrick (2006), we reject the notion that “black populations and their attendant geographies as ‘ungeographic’ and/or philosophically undeveloped” (p. xiii). Instead, we work to understand the complicated ways in which Black agency and Black intellectualism are entangled in the spaces and places of the Black Belt of the American South.⁴ We forward the following lines of inquiry for data collection and analysis based on McKittrick’s heuristics. As a means of collecting data that speaks to Black matters as spatialized, McKittrick (2011) included memories, writings (narratives, poetry, and recollections), theories (both formal and informal), and geographies (such as cartographic, topographical) that tell the stories of Black space (p. xvii). By using nontraditional data in the field of geography to spatialize Blackness in ways that reject geographies of domination, McKittrick (2011) stated that “sites/citations of struggle indicate that traditional geographies, and their attendant hierarchical categories of humanness, cannot do the emancipatory work some subjects demand ... in the struggle for social justice” (p. xix). Likewise, we invite rural educational research scholars to employ memories, writings, theories, and geographies that tell the stories of Black educational spaces as places of Black livingness and not dispossession. Simultaneously we implore rural educational researchers to carefully consider their unique positionality and the ethical issues that accompany unpublished, unspoken, and sacred data (see McKittrick, 2006, 2020). When our sites and citations inform a disruption and interruption of plantation logics of schooling then scholarship can support the struggle for social justice.

Lines of Inquiry for Rural Education Research in the Black Belt of the American South

As a whole, disregarding the past and present Black influence in narratives of the Black Belt of the American South are akin to what Sibley (1995) called “geographies of exclusion” or social spaces where some groups are deemed not to belong. The result of rurality as an assumed

⁴ See for example [Sankofa Farm](#) in Efland, NC, or the [Rural Teacher Leader Network](#) in Eastern North Carolina.

white space in rural education research is not only factually misleading, it makes room for the pervasiveness of color-evasiveness, the trend of avoiding the topic of race as a willful avoidance or refusal to talk about race or racism (Annamma et al., 2017).

In recent years, our lives and scholarly inquiries began to take us in the direction of rural education, and we immediately noticed a trend in scholarship to avoid race in favor of assuming a white-dominant rural narrative. We recognized our need to lean into theory to disrupt this tendency, and we turned to Black Geography as a means for helping us understand the intersection of Black livingness and space. In what follows, we introduce McKittrick's (2011) four heuristics and the connected four lines of inquiry we suggest for rural education scholars to consider. These lines of inquiry are a culmination of thought work that we have done individually and as writing partners for close to a decade. The lines of inquiry we suggest borrow from our respective research agendas, our motherscholar standpoints (Matias, 2022), and our lived experiences, which coalesce to affirm that Black is geographic.

To assist us in spatializing Blackness in rural educational scholarship, McKittrick (2011) provides an analytical anchoring that we have organized into four key heuristics for thinking about Blackness in place: (a) naming the analytical and conceptual struggles, (b) asking key questions about a Black sense of place, (c) posing questions to unsettle the coloniality of race, violence, and place (plantation logic), and (d) examining historical precedents that create our antiblack present geographical organization. We build on these heuristics in our approach to rural educational scholarship about and from within the Black Belt of the American South. In connection with these heuristics, we offer four specific lines of inquiry exclusive to rural educational research in the rural South: (a) interrogating quantitative research designs, (b) creating critical topographies of local geography and history, (c) mapping education policy and implementation, and (d) collecting stories about the educational debt owed to Black students.

To explain how we arrived at these four lines of inquiry, we will describe our process. In 2021, we both were living in the Black Belt of the American South, and we had a number of questions, both academic and personal, related to education in the plantation South. We did what any good scholar does: We started a book club. Together with scholar friends from across the United States, we read McKittrick's 2006 book, *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle*. Alongside this intentional book study, we were working on several projects of our own and realized that some of the answers we would expect to find in scholarship were either missing or errant. In a series of

research meetings, we collected examples and stuck points that we organized into the four lines of inquiry listed above. We offer an example of how each emerged for one of us as a means to illustrate how we arrived at these directions.

Timberly came to the first line of inquiry, interrogating quantitative research designs for projects in the Black Belt of the American South, by grappling with the common practice of using white as the omitted group in statistical analysis, thereby creating them as the comparison group. Doing so, while common practice, is problematic when one considers the historical and ongoing dominant population of Black students within Black Belt schools. Ultimately, analyses using white as a comparison group are not applicable in predominantly Black schools, yet there are states in which this approach is used anyway. Doing so within the rural context is not an accurate representation of what is happening within those spaces, often distorting or making worse the way in which outcomes for predominantly Black schools are perpetuated as negative.

For the second line of inquiry, creating critical topographies of local geography and history relative to education in the Black Belt of the American South, Joy was homeschooling two of her children, and as part of the curriculum, we visited several present-day farms. One farm visit included a tour by a white farmer who owned hundreds of acres where they produce peanuts, soy beans, and cotton. The farmer described the current challenges of farming, such as the expense of farm equipment (such as tractors that cost several hundred thousand dollars), the need for a large land mass to rotate crops (which basically had to be inherited in order to stay competitive in today's market), and the necessity of having social capital with policy makers at the state and national levels. A topography that includes land use, ownership, and occupancy over time would tell important stories about the past, present, and future perspectives on the seen and unseen stories of the places where we go to school and issues impacting the sustainability of our ways of living.

For the third line of inquiry, mapping education policy and implementation in the Black Belt of the American South, Joy's husband was in the movie *Separate But Equal* (Stevens & Margulies, 1991) as a child. The movie focused on the *Briggs v. Elliott* case in Summerton, South Carolina, one of the five foundational cases leading to the Supreme Court case of *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954. Despite the public narrative, schools never fully racially integrated (Bell, 2000). The truth of this statement is illustrated in present-day South Carolina schools in the Black Belt along the I-95 corridor, the Corridor of Shame (Bowers, 2021). Still today, schools in this region are highly segregated and remain underfunded. Over 50 years after desegregation was legally mandated, the realities of integration remain a fantasy.

The fourth line of inquiry, collecting stories about the educational debt owed to Black students particularly in the Black Belt of the American South, is illustrated by the outcry about the underfunding of HBCUs. K. L. Williams and Davis (2019) discussed the federal government's withdrawal of funds from HBCUs between 2003–2015 (p. 2). Furthermore, a study by the United Negro College Fund (Murray et al., 2022) demonstrated that more is needed to understand and provide her/hisstories related to how this educational debt impacts Black life-making. We offer these illustrations of our scholarly projects, motherscholaring experiences, personal connections, and examples from our Black scholarly community to demonstrate samples of the collection of stories and stuck points that inform the ways that we articulate the connection from McKittrick's (2011) heuristics to rural education research.

These four areas of inquiry are where we invite rural educational scholars to consider black geographies and employ a Black Geographic lens. We believe that beginning with McKittick's (2011) heuristics will expand our collective ability to examine Black livingness within the Black Belt of the American South. In the next section we elaborate on these lines of inquiry and offer suggestions for material and conceptual themes to explore.

Interrogating Quantitative Research Designs in the Black Belt of the American South

Quantitative research designs are traditionally informed by positivist approaches, yet these positivist approaches uphold racialism. The use of quantitative data and its resulting statistical analyses within Black Belt scholarship are not analyzed through an acceptance of the basic premise that “measurement has always been racialism” (Dixon-Román, 2021). *Racialism* is defined as policy and practices based on racial considerations and interpretation of events (American Heritage, 2022), which includes the belief or practice of the doctrine of racism—that some races are superior to others. Dixon-Román (2021) posits quantitative analysis as racialism, yet when data are not understood as racialism, the results of the analysis are ignored. Therefore, when we complete data analysis and the necessary interrogation of the results without disruption, we must understand that the doctrine of racism is being upheld. If disruption is not done, we flatten our understanding of Black livingness.

Furthermore, as we employ McKittrick's (2011) heuristics we align this interrogation of quantitative analysis with the naming of the analytical and conceptual struggles. We do not offer this approach as simple to undertake; it may require a struggle to rethink our approaches and interpretation of quantitative research designs, analysis,

and results. For example, when regression analyses are constructed, a choice has to be made about how variables will be constructed—commonly through a 0/1 binary, assigning groups to 0 = white and 1 = non-white. The collapsing of all other groups as non-white flattens our understanding of all the groups who are in the regression model. As a result, we offer that there is productive and necessary struggle to decide how to not flatten the model and center white as the comparison group that gets to be named. Another approach is to include models for each racial group and report those findings. While there are limitations to this model, racialism is perpetuated in the 0 = white and 1 = non-white. Furthermore, a full embracing of disrupting and dismantling racialism would require the building of brand-new forms of analysis. A Black Geographic lens provides tools to move toward quantitative designs that name the analytical and conceptual struggles to the audience of the analysis.

In considering this interruption to quantitative inquiries, we join Dixon-Román (2021) in asking critical questions about the statistics we have long accepted in educational research. Specific to our focus we borrow prompts from Dixon-Román to ask:

- What would it look like to consider Blackness as infinite variability in our analyses of data in the Black Belt?
- How would we need to reconceptualize our ontological approach to data in order to consider Blackness as always imbued with nondenumerable mattering?

Creating Critical Topographies of Local Geography and History in the Black Belt of the American South

The usefulness of black geographies and the Black Geographic lens are employed when we create critical topographies by aligning McKittrick's (2011) heuristic of asking key questions about a Black sense of place. These key questions help us to consider a different way of looking at the present-day spaces and places within the Black Belt (such as plantations, parks, historical buildings, waterways, farmlands, ranches, town names, land deeds, marshes, forested areas). Through a different lens of analysis we ask:

- What are alternative ways of researching and storying place-based knowledge that calls out the Blackness of the spaces?
- What are the missing her/histories of Black country spaces and places in the Black Belt?
- What happens when we reject a color-evasive lens and choose to acknowledge Black stories of space?

Some topics that we suggest for future research could center an exploration of the following topics or her/histories in the Black Belt.

- Black cowboys
- Land dispossession
- BIPOC alliances
- Marronage
- Black mixed-race families and identities from a historical and contemporary perspectives
- Modern-day terrorizing symbols used as symbolic threats

Creating critical topographies that demand a perspective of Black livingness within the space will ensure that Black matters as spatialized matters are seen, storied, theorized, and memorialized, and that the tendency to position Black bodies as ungeographic is disrupted. The use of black geographies provides means of collecting data and creating from that data ways that reject geographies of domination and can disrupt and interrupt the whiteness of rural and move more toward rurality as rural reality (Swain & Baker, 2021).

Mapping Education Policy and Implementation in the Black Belt

When McKittrick's (2011) heuristic of posing questions to unsettle the coloniality of race violence, and place (plantation logic) is applied, mapping educational policy and implementation becomes a series of questions.

- How do school boards make their decisions about what is best for students in their district/corporatizon, and how are school board elections configured?
- Who creates attendance zone maps? Why do they look the way they do? What would an understanding of black geographies add to these maps and the map-making process?
- Where do students ride buses to/from (and what are transportation issues relative to access)?
- How will policy decisions and implementation impact different demographic groups?

When we map these education policies, we begin to map based on the bodies that are physically located in the place, recognizing that the plantation in the Southern Black Belt often had more Black bodies than white bodies on it. While the policies and laws were made to uphold whiteness as property (Bell, 2000), when we attend to this mapping present-day we interrupt the traditional decisions that

perpetuate Black dispossession. Instead, we can use this mapping to unsettle the coloniality of race violence and place and move toward a more equitable understanding of policy and its implementation.

Collecting Stories About the Educational Debt Owed to Black Students in the Black Belt of the American South

Use of McKittrick's (2011) heuristic of examining historical precedents that create our antiblack present geographical organization provides us with opportunities to collect the stories that explicate how we might reconceptualize the unique opportunity gaps (Ladson-Billings, 2013) that plague Black students in the Black Belt of the American South. These African American students live in rural spaces in which their ancestors, their families for generations literally built the infrastructure, including many school buildings in those spaces. It is important to collect data and ask better questions about the unique nature of this debt, especially since educational debt is often discussed as an urban issue, as there is an assumption of Black (and brown) as "urban" and rural as "white." We therefore suggest the following lines of inquiry specific to educational research in the Black Belt of the American South.

- What does school consolidation mean for Black students in the Black Belt (for example, forced integration, resegregation, and historical trauma)?
- What are issues specific (but maybe not exclusive) to the Black Belt around technological access, use, and desire (such as the cost, logistics, and ethical considerations of internet access in rural spaces)?
- What are education programs and practices specific to Black rural youth in the Black Belt? (For example, what does hip-hop education look like in the Black Belt?)
- In what ways has funding for HBCUs been a continuation of financial racism, while the HBCU has been a space of racial uplift?
- In what ways must we think about STEAM education as relevant to Black youth, especially when agricultural histories are complicated by chattel slavery (such as the invention of the cotton gin)?
- How do we think critically about inclusive and equitable educational programs and practices in the Black Belt (for example, in spaces where Civil War reenactments and plantations are operational as revenue-generating businesses today)?

Conclusion

Black people have been living in and traversing the Black Belt of the American South for centuries in ways that challenge geography and disrupt traditional theories of place. We stand alongside historical and contemporary scholars who have forwarded long-standing questions about Black life in the Black Belt (Du Bois, 1903/1999; McKittrick, 2006; Woodson, 1933/2007). Garnering strength and insight from this intellectual tradition, we join a collective voice to call for rural educational researchers to advance race-conscious research in ways that disrupt historical and present-day master narratives that would erase Blackness from rurality. We posit that looking to Black Geography (Gilmore, 2007; Hawthorne, 2019; McKittrick, 2006; Woods, 2017) for conceptual and research tools will help to explain the ways in which rural places and spaces are racialized. Specifically, we see a clear connection with NREA's call for rural education researchers to "Research from intersectional perspectives," pay "Attention to power within and across communities," consider the "Effects of remoteness/isolation" and "Effects of deficit portrayals of rural people and places," and grapple with the "Dynamics of white supremacy/identity" (Hartman et al., 2022, p. 61). In building this connection and taking up a Black Geographic framework, rural education researchers must be cautious about the ways in which it is applied. For example, Black Geography is not unilaterally applicable, as we have described it in the Black Belt, to spaces such as rural Nebraska or New Mexico. Furthermore, Black Geography cannot be applied to individual people (such as a Black rancher in rural Montana) as if a Black body in a rural place constitutes Black Geography in the ways we have taken it up here. In short, Black Geography is more than Black bodies in rural places; it is a framework that helps explain the particularities of how Black bodies are inextricably linked to place, spacemaking, and land.

We take the position that with a Black Geographic lens, rural educational scholarship will be better equipped to take up the complex convergence of race and space, ask more nuanced research questions, strengthen our research designs, and enhance the contributions we make with our findings. In sum, we posit that by engaging with these four lines of inquiry specific to educational research in the Black Belt—(a) interrogating quantitative research designs, (b) creating critical topographies of local geography and history, (c) mapping education policy and implementation, (d) collecting stories about the educational debt owed to Black students—we can strengthen our approaches to rural educational research. These lines of inquiry hold the potential for humanizing rural educational spaces by centering Black livingness within the Black Belt of the American South.

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