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Eradicating Anti-Black Racism in U.S. Schools: A Call-to-Action for School Leaders

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This manuscript is a theoretical treatise that examines anti-Blackness in the nation's schools and contributes to the ongoing discussion about how schools can better serve Black students. It is a three-pronged call-to-action for social justice-oriented school leaders. I urge school leaders to 1) examine anti-Black racism as a distinct form of racial discrimination, 2) imagine ways educators can fully humanize Black children in U.S. schools through a disposition characterized by Black cultural reverence, and 3) connect with existing efforts to counter anti-Black racism in schools. To accomplish these goals, I investigated the historical socio-political context that has shaped the educational experiences of Black students and analyzed how the music video for "APES**IT" by The Carters can be a metaphor for centering Black culture in schools. Also important to this paper is an appended list of some of the egregious acts of violence inflicted upon Black students in schools. Although not conclusive, this list attests to the need for urgent and strategic support for Black students.

KEYWORDS: Anti-Black racism, #Blacklivesmatterinschools, Black cultural reverence, Teaching for Black lives, spirit-murdering

*"I make no bones about the fact that I have a fierce and unrelenting love for Black people,
a love that colors everything that I do as a teacher, a scholar, a mother, a lover of justice and more."*
(Taliaferro Baszile, 2016, pp. 40-44)

Recently, school leaders in the nation's largest public-school systems, New York and Los Angeles, took important steps towards dismantling systemic racism in its institutions—reflecting the essential truth that "racism is deeply rooted in the structure of schools" (Young, 2011, p. 4). Since his appointment in 2018, New York Public Schools chancellor Richard Carranza has prioritized desegregation, with efforts to address the underrepresentation of Black[1] and Latinx[2] students in the system's elite programs (Harris, 2018). In its anti-racism efforts, Los Angeles United School District has partnered with the Race and Equity Center at the University of Southern California to recruit more teachers of color and train principals and other school leaders to eliminate systemic racial inequities in discipline and special education referrals (Superville, 2019). In a similar manner, large school districts in Texas[3]—Houston Independent School

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[1] The terms Black and African American are used interchangeably to refer to people of African descent in the U.S.
[2] Gender neutral term for Latino. Refers to people of Hispanic descent in the U.S.
[3] In each of these districts, Black and Latinx students comprise the majority of the student population, with Latinx students having the highest numbers (see The Texas Tribune, 2019a; The Texas Tribune, 2019b; The Texas Tribune, 2019c).

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District, Dallas Independent School District and Fort Worth Independent School District—have established racial equity offices to ensure parity for under-resourced and marginalized students. The implicit goal is to alleviate what Milner IV (2015) has been termed *opportunity gaps*, or the disparities in resources and supports that create documented gaps in academic outcomes between students of color and white students.

In light of this work, I have a three-fold purpose in this paper: 1) to urge school leaders spearheading racial equity work to examine anti-Black racism as a distinct form of racial discrimination, 2) to imagine ways educators can fully humanize Black children in U.S. schools through a disposition characterized by *Black cultural reverence*, and 3) to highlight existing efforts to counter anti-Black racism in schools. This manuscript is based on a disturbing belief: Black children are not well in schools (Boutte & Bryan, 2019).

Why Examine Anti-Black Racism Distinctly

While it is true that systemic racism is undergirded by a socially constructed racial hierarchy that privileges Whites above people of color (Daniel Tatum, 2017), the racist violence inflicted upon Black students, anti-Black racism, differs in important ways from the racism inflicted upon other groups of racially minoritized students. Consequently, distinguishing between the ways each population experiences systemic racism can empower school leaders to disrupt anti-Black racism. Feagin's description of systemic racism is an instructive one:

> Systemic racism involves the racialized exploitation and subordination of Americans of color by white Americans. It encompasses the racial stereotyping, prejudices, and emotions of whites, as well as the discriminatory practices and racialized institutions engineered to produce the long-term domination of African Americans and other people of color. At the heart of systemic racism are discriminatory practices that generally deny Americans of color the dignity, opportunities, and privileges available to whites individually and collectively. (Feagin, 2005, p. 1099)

Instead of conflating people of color's experiences with systemic racism, it is important to recognize "specific nuances of different types of dark oppression" (Love, 2019, p. 54). This need for microanalyses of dark oppression, or oppression among people of color, is evidenced by a shift in vocabulary used to identify non-White people. Stemming from the need to "undo Native invisibility, anti-Blackness, dismantle white supremacy and advance racial justice," some individuals and groups have begun to favor the term *Black, Indigenous, and other People of Color* (*BIPOC*) instead of the more familiar *People of Color* (The BIPOC Project, 2020, para. 1).

To be clear, this proposition should not be read as endorsement of competition for resources or rights among sub-populations of people of color; neither should it be interpreted as a ranking of oppression among groups. I maintain, however, that there is value in examining anti-Black racism in isolation from other forms of racism. This level of analysis is needed "to more precisely identify and respond to racism" in education discourse and policy (Dumas, 2016, p. 11). In other words, when anti-Black racism is pinpointed, educators are better able to develop targeted solutions to the intended and unintended racial violence perpetrated upon African American students through school policies and practices. In the following sections, I explain why this parsing is necessary.

The Black/White Binary

> *People like me get double and triple projections, because there's the Indian and the Mexican.*
> *Blacks get it even worse, because they're so black. I mean, the darker your skin color,*
> *the more projections because you're the opposite of white."* (Anzaldua & Weiland, 2000, p. 122)

To begin, although the U.S. Census has evolved to include 63 racial categories in the 2010 census, the earliest and most consistent two categories are White and Black (Parker, Menasce Horowitz, Morin, & Lopez, 2015). This historical positioning has created an abiding binary that has become deeply entrenched in the U.S. sociopolitical landscape. Dancy II, Edwards, and Davis (2018) summarized that U.S. society operates on a social contract in which to be White is to be human and to be Black is to be nonhuman. Under this contract, White humanity is predicated on Black inhumanity. Guess, in her oft-referenced examination of racial social construction, accurately problematized this binary: "By employing blackness and whiteness as opposing dualisms in sociological discourse, we seek to explain – but in effect, allow ourselves to tacitly legitimate and/or justify – the institutional order of American 'race' relations" (2006, p. 656). I do not aim to advance this socially constructed positioning but rather to explain the acuteness of anti-Black antagonism. Howard (2020), too, pointed-out problems with the Black-White dichotomy, explaining that educational equity "cannot be fully understood in only Black and White terms" because this approach neglects the discrimination experienced by other non-White students (p. 6). While Howard's observation is an important one for scholars to recognize, I readily acknowledge that non-Black students of color experience racism that deserves addressing. This paper, however, deliberately and necessarily, hones in on anti-Black racism in schools as a singular phenomenon. Because blackness is often placed in opposition with whiteness, anti-Black racism is particularly salient (Hayes, 2017). These two terms—blackness and whiteness—necessitate further examination.

Blackness is a social construction, rather than an identity based on biological attributes. Wright (2015) acknowledged that there are problems with trying to find a one-size fits all definition of blackness. She described blackness as a political and economic creation used to justify the Atlantic Slave Trade (Wright, 2015). Blackness, according to Wright "is a collective identity that intersects with many other collective identities that in turn intersect with one another . . ." (2015, n.p.). Though it is an elusive term that resists essentializing, I define blackness as a combination of shared expressions, preferences, styles, mannerisms, histories, and struggles of Africa-descendant people. This socially constructed racial identity is used to position those who are Black (or Black-appearing) at the bottom of the socio-political hierarchy.

Whiteness, like blackness, is a socially constructed identity held by European Americans. It is explained by Dumas and ross[4] as "a form of entitlement, a birthright that be enjoyed and repeatedly cashed in" (2016, p. 421). Bonilla-Silva (2003) described it as an embodiment of racial power, a "visible uniform" that affords privilege and power. Whiteness is positioned at the top of the social hierarchy and results in White people (and people with the appearance of whiteness) being afforded opportunities and access that are denied to Black people and other people of color. Sleeter (2001, p. 102) designated whiteness as an "overwhelming presence." Seemingly innocuous, whiteness—and its inherent superiority—causes harm to people of color. With few exceptions, whiteness is how we *do* education in the United States. In other words, whiteness "dominates the classroom" (Lynch, 2018, p. 21). School curricula, communication

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[4] Lower case in the original manuscript.

preferences, notions of respect, appropriate styles of dress, and rules of conduct are based on whiteness (Lynch, 2018). While whiteness is normalized and authorized, blackness is pathologized (Rousseau, 2009) and criminalized (Kleider, Cavrak, & Knuycky, 2012).

Historical Characterizations of Black Citizens as Problems

The second reason for an analysis of racism that is particular to Black students is because of historical characterizations of Black culture as deficient and Black citizens as problematic. The education of Black students has been viewed as a challenge brought on by deficits in Black culture. Ascribing "biological and cultural inferiority among African Americans are as old as the nation itself" (Taylor, 2016, p. 23). In a 2015 textbook that came under fire in July 2020, the authors explained cultural deprivation theory as such: "Cultural deprivation theorists see the lack of intellectual and linguistic skills as a major cause of underachievement for many minority children. They argue that many children from low-income black families lack intellectual stimulation and enriching experiences" (White, 2020, paras 7-8). This theory has created stereotypes about Black students and does not accurately address the socio-political reasons that create cultural clashes in schools. Anderson (2013) summarized several other dangers of deficit thinking: labeling, tracking, and misplacement, among others.

In a 1917 report authorized by the United States Department of Interior-Bureau of Education—*Negro Education: A Study of the Private and Higher Education of Colored People in the United States*—the author described "Negros" as problematic to U.S. democracy. In fact, the report claimed that "No racial group in the United States offers so many problems of economic and social adjustment as the 10,000,000 Negroes" (U.S. Bureau of Education, 1917, p. 3). Similarly, in a 1927 thesis examining "Negro" schools, Lasseter Doggett entitled one of her chapters, "Fort Worth's Negro Educational Problem," in which she highlighted the challenges brought on by the influx of "Negro" students into city's segregated schools (1927, p. 1). When pointing out the disproportionate graduation rates between light-skinned "Negroes" (likely mixed-race) and the "pure African type," Lasseter Doggett asked if the latter were able to "respond to our system of education" (Lasseter Doggett, 1927, p. 114), suggesting that African American, or Black, students are expected to assimilate to the system instead of the school system being accountable for responding to Black students in culturally reverent ways—or ways that demonstrate appreciation and respect for Black culture.

More than a hundred years after the publication of *Negro Education,* some educators still see Black students as problems who need to be fixed (Howard, 2013; Howard, 2020; Milner IV, 2015) or as having deficits that prevent them from being academically successful (Anderson, 2013; Howard, 2020; Milner IV, 2015;), as reflected by an emphasis on their *failure* to produce academic results that equal their White peers. These *failures*, or *achievement gaps*, became more apparent after *The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001* required school districts to disaggregate standardized assessment data by race, socioeconomic status, ability level, and other demographics and to make these data public. Despite what standardized tests data, school completion estimates, and suspension rates might suggest, Black students and their families are not the cause of disparities in educational outcomes and should not be "held accountable for the failures of the public school system" (Love, 2019, p. 102). The root of Black underachievement in schools can be attributed to what Dumas (2016, p. 11) describe as "cultural disregard and disgust with blackness." In schools, Black expressions, traditions, and histories are marginalized,

while Black bodies are monitored, restrained, and violated. (Ample evidence of this "disregard and disgust with blackness" can be found in the Appendix A.)

The Specificity of Anti-blackness

Perhaps the most compelling reason for examinations of racism across racial groups is "the specificity of anti-blackness" (Dumas & ross, 2016, p. 416). A defining principle of anti-blackness "is the negation of Black humanity by way of violence" (Dancy II, Edwards, & Davis, 2018, p. 188). Wun declared, "One exemplary site through which anti-black racism organizes policies, outcomes and social relationships is the US public education system" (2014, p. 2). Anti-Black sentiments range from everyday microaggressions to violent assaults against Black bodies. This disdain for blackness, or anti-Blackness, fuels anti-Black racism. Dumas describes anti-Blackness in education as

> the presumed ineducability of Black children, the normalization and justification of Black suffering in schools, the need to contain and discipline Black bodies, knowledges, and desires, the "doing" of education policy on Black children and families, as one might experiment on rats or primates (2016b, p. 9).

Similarly, Hines and Wilmot (2018) defined anti-Black aggression as "conscious and subconscious forms of anti-Blackness and anti-Black racism that are expressed through verbal, nonverbal, interpersonal, and environmental violence directed at Black individuals to degrade, dehumanize, or/or create racially toxic conditions for Black persons" (pp. 65-66).

Anti-Blackness, then, is a distinct form of antagonism aimed or directed at people who are read as Black. It is the enactment of informal and formal policies and practices that stem from feelings of disgust for and the desire to control Black bodies. Boutte and Bryan (2019) categorized five types of anti-Black violence Black children experience in schools as physical, symbolic, linguistic, curricular and pedagogical, and systemic, all of which result in their dehumanization. Dumas and ross (2016) listed several examples of what this dehumanization looks like in schools: deprivation of educational resources, absence of culturally relevant pedagogies, and *maladministration* of school discipline. It also looks like creating school failure to justify corporate takeover of public education (Saltman, 2007), culturally biased assessments (Erwin & Worrell, 2011), and the absence of Black children in advanced coursework (Havis, 2015). When blackness intersects with other cultural identities, certain student groups experience distinct forms of anti-Black marginalization. As examples, Black girls are subjected to gendered racism (Caldera, 2018; Wun, 2014) and speakers of Black English experience *Anti-Black Linguistic Racism*[5]—the devaluation of Black language spoken by some Black students (Baker-Bell, 2020; Caldera & Babino, 2020). Baldwin (1963) rightly judged this mistreatment as criminal. Expressing similar sentiments, Love (2016) called this anti-Black state violence *spirit murdering*. Spirit murdering, according to Love, is the "intangible violence toward Black children [that] is less visceral and seemingly less tragic than the physical acts of murder" (Love, 2016, p. 1). Spirit murdering includes the physical violence Black students suffer at the hands of school resource officers (Love, 2019), causing advocates for Black students to demand a reduction in police officers in schools (Black lives matter at school, 2020).

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[5] Capitalized in original.

Summarily, education leaders must attend to and seek to dismantle the distinct form of racism to which Black students are subjected—anti-Black racism—for the reasons explicated above: 1. the socially constructed Black/White binary, 2.the historical mischaracterization of Black citizens as problems, and 3. the distinct hostility against Black students (anti-Blackness). Importantly, too, education leaders' attitude must exhibit *Black cultural reverence.*

Black Cultural Reverence

According to Boutte and Bryan (2019), revolutionary love is needed to interrupt the violence inflicted upon Black children. "Revolutionary love" gives birth to *Black cultural reverence.* I draw upon a non-academic reference—a music video—as reification of this idea. On June 19, 2018, The Carters, the music duo comprised of mega-stars Beyoncé and her husband Jay-Z, released a video for the lead single from their surprise album, *Everything is Love*. Although frenzied clamor routinely surrounds the individual and collective unveiling of their work, the response to the video[6] for "APES**IT" was far more than just excitement or fervor. The six-minute video answered a question that is integral to resisting anti-Black racism: *What might it look like to revere Black culture in white dominated spaces*?

The setting for "APES**IT" is the Louvre, the world's largest art museum and holder of some of the most iconic art in the world. With its European location (Paris), mostly Western art, and the possession-by-theft of African, South American, and Asian cultural antiquities, the Louvre is, by some estimations, a symbol of European colonialism, cultural power, and whiteness. Against this backdrop, The Carters centered Black bodies doing Black things. For example, one scene shows a young Black woman participating in the Black art of braiding a young Black man's afro using a tool that is a decades-old symbol of Black culture, a hair pick. This unremarkable Black act is remarkable because it is juxtaposed with a symbol of white supremacy—the Louvre. In this way, the six-minute video created space for what Dumas and ross (2016, p. 431) call "Black liberatory fantasy."

In his article in a special issue of the *Journal for Popular Music Studies*, dedicated to the study of the "APE**IT" music video, Chapman (2018) apprised, "black lives are shown to matter" in a site that is the embodiment of Western imperialism. Gaunt (2018) observed that the music video shows a disruption of white domination. Similarly, King (2018) deduced that the Carters' video critiques racial exclusion. Essentially, these characteristics embody the spirit of *Black cultural reverence* in schools: 1) showing that Black students' lives matter, 2) disrupting white domination, and 3) critiquing racial exclusion.

Like the Louvre, U.S. schools are sites of European colonialism and white domination. They are institutions that sustain and perpetuate anti-Blackness through violence, erasure, silence, and invisibility. *Black cultural reverence* demands that educators place Black bodies, Black expressions, and Black ideals in white-dominated learning spaces in ways that show regard for Black humanity. Hale (1986) described *Black cultural reverence* when she called for an educational system that recognizes Black children's strengths, abilities, and culture. When teachers handle blackness with this level of respect, students of all backgrounds learn to interact with Black people in more humane ways.

It should be noted that *Black cultural reverence* is not a pedagogical approach like culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995) and culturally responsive pedagogy (Gay, 2018).

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[6] The "APES**IT" video was nominated for Video of the Year at the 2018 MTV Video Music Awards and received a Grammy nomination for Best Music Video.

Instead, it describes a disposition that embodies deep respect, love, and value for Black students and their cultures. Black cultural relevance is marked by authenticity and does not lead to commodification (Njee, 2016) or appropriation (Broady, Todd, & Darity, Jr., 2018; Baker-Bell, 2020). Educators who revere Black culture do not see blackness as a limitation that prevents student success; rather they see it as a tool integral to student learning. In outlining practices teachers of Black student should employ, Carothers (2014) included several practices that demonstrate Black cultural reverence:

1. Know about your [Black] students
2. Care about your [Black] students
3. Have high expectations of your [Black] students
4. Involve the parents of your [Black] students
5. Enjoy teaching [Black] students

Administrators are integral in creating an environment characterized by *Black cultural reverence.* In 2015, the National Policy Board for Educational Administration (NPBEA), an alliance for advancing school leadership, adopted new professional standards for educational leaders at all levels—the Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (PSEL). Appendix B illustrates how Standard 3, Equity and Cultural Responsiveness, can be revised to demonstrate *Black cultural reverence*. These revised standards are intended to be a resource for school leaders who are committed to developing learning environments in which Black students can thrive.

In sum, *Black cultural reverence* does not result in fetishizing or objectifying in attempts to "celebrate" blackness (see McCray, 2018). Importantly, too, Black cultural reverence does not lead educators to treat blackness as a "master status" that supersedes Black citizens' "identities as ordinary law-abiding citizens" (Anderson, 2015, p. 12). Educators must not see Black students *only* as racialized others, especially when race has been used as a tool of subjugation. Black students should be seen as citizens first—deserving of all the rights of citizens.

Recent Efforts

School leaders can learn from four recent efforts that suggest a commitment to resisting and countering anti-Black racism in schools. First in 2016, Division B of the American Education Research Association (AERA), one of the largest education research organizations in the world, published a special edition newsletter entitled, *Black Lives Matter.* In this newsletter, scholars explored the marginalization of Black children in schools and proposed ways to address racial inequities. Second, educators across the U.S. observed the third "National Black Lives Matter Week of Action in Our Schools Week" in February 2020 to pursue educational equity for Black students. The week's activities focused on four demands:

1. End "zero tolerance" discipline, and implement restorative justice
2. Hire more Black teachers
3. Mandate Black history and ethnic studies in K-12 curriculum
4. Fund counselors, not cops (Black lives matter at school, 2020)

A third display of commitment to equity for Black students was the 2018 release of *Teaching for Black Lives* and supplementary teaching materials designed to fight back against the attack on the bodies and minds of Black students (Watson, Hagopian, & Au, 2018). According to the editors, it is handbook for educators who are committed to the survival of Black students. (Though *Teaching for Black Lives* represents a meaningful intervention in the education of Black

children, it is important to recognize earlier scholarship with similar goals. As examples, Hale's (1986) monograph, *Black Children: Their Roots, Culture, and Learning Styles,* and her 2011 book, *Learning While Black: Creating Educational Excellence for African American Children,* offer critical insights about educating Black students.)

Fourth is the Texas State Board of Education's recent approval (Mendez, 2020) of an African American Studies course that will offer "a broad overview of history and culture of African Americans and covers topics such as history, citizenship, culture, economics, science, technology, geography, and politics" (Texas Education Agency, 2020, para 6). When this course was approved in April 2020, Texas became the fifth U.S. state to approve a state-level African American studies course (Texas Education Agency, 2020). These existing efforts affirm the importance of educators committing to counter anti-Black racism.

Conclusion

". . . the question of education in the black community is not a theoretical or intellectual question. On the contrary, it is a matter of life and death . . ." (Bennett, Jr., 1972, p. 228).

Leaders of the school systems mentioned in the introduction to this paper have taken important steps to redress systemic racism, exhibiting what Theoharis (2007) termed social justice leadership. Specifically, they "make issues of race . . . and other historically and currently marginalizing conditions in the United States central to their advocacy, leadership practice, and vision" (Theoharis, 2007, p. 223). However, they and other school leaders must also 1) recognize the distinct form of racism—anti-Black racism—experienced by Black children, 2) reject anti-Black sentiment by encouraging *Black cultural reverence*, and 3) connect with current work aimed at eradicating anti-Black racism. These actions must be undergirded by a love of Black students and their culture. As Taliaferro Baszile (2016) declared, loving blackness is political resistance. This paper, then, is a call to school leaders to stand on the frontlines of this resistance. If anti-Blackness results in "day-to-day microaggressions, assaults, exclusions, and dehumanization of Black people's dreams, hopes, aspirations, and educational experiences" (Howard, 2020, p. 11), *Black cultural reverence* results in the consistent affirmation, humanization, nurturing, and inclusion of Black students' dreams, hopes, aspirations, and educational experiences. Only educators who hold this disposition can be entrusted with Black students' lives.

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Appendix A

This list is a sample of racist incidents involving Black students over the last five years. It is not inclusive of all the everyday experiences of Black students who suffer from racialized violence through blatant discrimination and microaggressions.

Surveillance videos show police office allegedly abusing high school students
Black student charged with assault for playing dodgeball
Video shows 6-year old forced to go to mental health facility asking officer, "Am I going to jail?"
Texas teen banned by high school from attending graduation after refusing to cut dreadlocks
Texas backs school that expelled girl over pledge of allegiance
N.J. schoolgirl sent home for wearing Nigerian headwrap during Black history month
Black girl sent home from school over hair extensions
Florida 6-year-old arrested, handcuffed for elementary school tantrum
Video shows cop body-slamming high school girl in S.C. classroom
N.J. wrestler forced to cut dreadlocks still targeted over hair, lawyer says
School suspended Black student for insubordination after wearing braids
Black Malden charter students punished for braided extensions
Ohio high school student suspended for allegedly smelling like marijuana despite passing two drug tests
Teenage football players kicked off team for kneeling during anthem
Minnesota teacher placed on leave after calling her Black students the n-word
Parent recorded assistant principal of Denton High School saying n-word
Virginia school district plans for bias training after Black History Month slavery 'game'
Teacher accused of ripping 11-year-old girls braids from her head
'KKK, KKK, let's kill all the blacks,' HS students sing racist rendition of 'Jingle Bells' for class project
A Black teen was jailed for failing to finish her online schoolwork

Appendix B

The eight <u>PSEL standards</u> can be adapted by school leaders to reflect Black cultural relevance.

    a) Ensure that Black students are treated with an understanding of and respect for Black culture.

    b) Recognize the strengths of Black culture and see Black culture as an asset.

    c) Guarantee that Black students have effective teachers, support, and other resources.

    d) Develop policies with behavior expectations that do not penalize Black students for Black cultural expressions.

    e) Demonstrate high expectations of Black students and provide support to help them reach these expectations.

    f) Promote the development of critical consciousness in Black students to that they will be able to critically examine their own realities.

    g) Hold Black culture in high regard and respond to Black students with awareness and sensitivity.

    h) Eradicate any inequitable, biased, or discriminatory practices and policies that causes the spirit-murder of Black students.