

# **Moment, Momentum, or Movement? Forging Paths Toward Racial Justice for Black Students**

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## **Abstract**

This introduction to the *Race and Pedagogy Journal*'s special issue on race and higher education provides an overview of recent scholarship and activism centered around anti-Black racism in schools.

## **Keywords**

scholarship, critical race theory, anti-Black racism, Black students

Critical race scholars in education and related disciplines have long produced scholarship illuminating the ways Black students' experiences are distinctly shaped by racist school policies and practices (see Irvine, 1990; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Banks, 1995, Tate, 1995, Daniel Tatum, 1997; and Howard, 2001). Their work, and that of others before them, laid the foundation for recent scholarship and activism around anti-Black racism in education. The last five years has given rise to substantial scholarship and activism centered around anti-Black racism in schools, mainly as a result of the culmination of what Love (2016) refers to as “anti-Black state violence” in schools. The next section is an overview of this moment.

Arriving at a theory that attends to the “specificity of anti-Blackness,” Dumas and ross (2016) proposed a theoretical orientation distinctly for examining anti-Black racism in education—*Black Critical Theory*, or *BlackCrit* as an alternative to *Critical Race Theory*. Important, too, in 2016, the Curriculum Studies division of the American Educational Research Association (AERA), the largest educational research organization in the world, published a *Black Lives Matter* newsletter with eight articles written by leading scholars in anti-racist education (Wozolek, 2016). In the same year, the *Black Lives Matter in Schools Week* movement began, and in 2020, the corresponding book, *Black Lives Matter at Schools: An Uprising for Educational Justice* was published (Hagopian & Jones, 2020). Preceding this book, *Teaching for Black Lives*, was published in 2018 (Watson, Hagopian & Au, 2018). Moreover, my 2020 article, “Eradicating Anti-Black Racism: A Call-to-Action for School Leaders,” in which I invite school leaders to imagine Black cultural reverence, is among the most popular articles on the journal’s website (Caldera, 2021). The most recent book-length treatment of anti-Black racism in education evolved from Wozolek’s 2016 newsletter. *Black Lives Matter in U.S. Schools: Race, Education, and Resistance* is scheduled for a late 2021 publication (Wozolek, in press).

The aforementioned recent research and other published scholarship have shown that Black students in public schools continue to be marginalized because of their hair, language practices, dress, behavior, and more. This spirit-murdering of Black students (Love, 2016) makes work against anti-Black racism, paradoxically, both urgent and routine, both scholarship and activism, both theory and practice. As is evidenced by the work in this special issue, there is still more work to be done.

The murder of George Floyd on May 25, 2020 catapulted racial justice for African Americans to the forefront of the nation’s consciousness, giving momentum to the work of anti-Black racism scholars. In the immediate aftermath of Mr. Floyd’s murder, many primarily white institutions of higher education offered statements and made pledges in support of Black lives and in rejection of anti-Black racism. Some institutions even launched anti-Black racist task forces to eradicate present-day racism against Black students, while others formed reconciliation committees to make visible their institutions’ connections to a racist past. These efforts were undoubtedly influenced by the organizing of Black college and university students and allies demanding racial equity (Kolodner, 2020). Black students at primarily white institutions (PWIs) are often racially profiled on campus, subjected to stereotypical representations, and forced to endure racist traditions (Mills, 2020). These experiences support Dancy II, Edwards and Davis’s (2018) assertion that anti-Blackness on college/university campuses is predicated on plantation politics that position Black students as non-human.

Black college/university students made (and continue to make) demands for increased Black representation among the faculty, funding to close opportunity gaps between economically disadvantaged students and their better-situated peers, thorough investigations into charges of anti-Black racism, and diverse curricula that reflect people of color. Some institutions are listening and responding. For example, the California State University System, the nation's largest university system, has made ethnic studies a requirement (Dil, 2020). Many institutions do not want to be on the wrong side of history, at least rhetorically.

The work to uproot anti-Black racism continues to be necessary because it “is deeply embedded in institutions, policies, and practices, and shapes thinking and action” (Lopez & Jean-Marie, 2021, p. 50). Gillborn (2018) describes anti-Black racism as “fluid and relentless”. He captures its duplexity as both individually inflicted and systemically imposed (Gillborn, 2018).

As a teacher educator and activist-scholar, the goal of my work is to develop teachers' capacity to implement anti-racist pedagogy and to develop culturally sustaining curricula. As such, racial justice in education is the central theme of my work. When I went through a mid-tenure review at my prior institution, a tenured white woman colleague in my department who had reviewed my portfolio put forth a subtle critique of my work as she sat next to me in a department faculty meeting. “Altheria, I enjoyed reviewing your portfolio, but I do want to ask you a question. Is education *really* all about race?”

This microaggression, hidden behind a collegial smile, represents one of the challenges that anti-racist scholars face: we must expend time and energy convincing the academy that race matters. Unfortunately, the opposition to centering race, interrogating the impact of racism, and demanding racial equity is only strengthening as states across the U.S. aim to muzzle teachers and to establish curricula that mute the racialized experiences of people of color. Although this legislation mainly imposes limits on public education, institutions of higher education are impacted as well. As an example, in the spring of 2021, Boise State University suspended, but later re-instated, mandatory diversity courses that include race as a topic (Goldberg, 2021).

As Lopez and Jean-Marie (2021, p. 50) succinctly noted, “Anti-Black racism is not new.” The dehumanization of Black students has been documented for decades. Until Black students are free from racist violence and the resulting racial trauma, anti-Black racism will always be a critical issue. Consequently, it is important to remember that this work must not devolve into a fad or trending topic. It must not be rhetorical grandstanding or performative gestures. To the contrary, when institutions' statements and resolutions against anti-Black racism have begun to collect dust, we must hold true to our commitment to the liberation of Black students, many of whom are multiply marginalized. We must do this work until there is a real racial reckoning birthed from authentic accountability and radical responsibility. This is how we move from “spirit-murdering to spirit-healing” (Hines & Wilmot, 2018), forging paths toward racial justice movements for Black students.

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