

9-16-2021

## Beyond Brutality: Addressing Anti-Blackness in Everyday Scenes of Teaching and Learning

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### Recommended Citation

Zaino, Karen and Bell, Jordan (2021) "Beyond Brutality: Addressing Anti-Blackness in Everyday Scenes of Teaching and Learning," *Northwest Journal of Teacher Education*: Vol. 16 : Iss. 2 , Article 3.  
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.15760/nwjte.2021.16.2.3>

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# Beyond Brutality: Addressing Anti-Blackness in Everyday Scenes of Teaching and Learning

## Abstract

While scenes of incredible and troubling violence, such as that of Black children handcuffed or brutalized by school security officers, have sometimes been leveraged to highlight the anti-Blackness endemic in schools, Saidiya Hartman's (1997) book *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* suggests that we must also attend to scenes in which terror can hardly be discerned to identify and unravel the subtle threads of anti-Blackness that pervade contemporary schooling. That is this paper's aim: to look beyond the scenes of spectacular suffering and to locate the pervasiveness of anti-Blackness in the mundane routines of teaching and learning in schools.

To do so, we bring Hartman's work to bear on recent theories of racism as an affective phenomenon, that is, as a relational and emotional phenomenon, as felt encounters with material consequences (Ahmed, 2004; Tolia and Crang, 2010; Zembylas, 2015), to consider the relationships between teachers and students in schools and how these relationships produce and are produced through anti-Blackness, relationships that, while not explicitly violent, nevertheless reinforce Black subjugation. Hartman's work locates three particular forms of technologies of affect that produce and are produced through anti-Blackness: empathic identification; paternal benevolence; and the shame-mongering of burdened individuality. We argue that these affective technologies also circulate in contemporary schools, albeit in forms that are uniquely modulated to both education and to the particularities of our officially antiracist, multicultural moment. We conclude by exploring the implications of these findings for teacher education.

## Keywords

Affect, Anti-Blackness, BlackCrit, Fungibility, Neoliberalism

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## **Beyond Brutality: Addressing Anti-Blackness in Everyday Scenes of Teaching and Learning**

### **Introduction**

In June 2020, as the George Floyd protests rocked the nation, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) released a resolution on “Confronting Racism and in Support of Black Lives.” The resolution detailed the union’s commitment to “fair and equitable treatment of people of color” and cited the long legacy of racist violence in the United States as its rationale:

Whereas, in the 1890s, journalist and civil rights activist Ida B. Wells decried the horrors of lynching and condemned the nation for its inaction... Almost 130 years later, Black men, women and children are still fighting for the right to live safely and free from harm in their homes and communities, and a new generation of young African Americans is witnessing the barbarity of lynchings and perpetual genocide in modern times.

The document goes on to name—and describe brutal murders of—Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd. “The tragic and violent loss of these Black lives,” it states, “has exposed the deep unhealed wounds of systemic racism and left many to ask if Black lives will ever matter in America.”

This resolution, released by the nation’s second largest teachers’ union, relies on the undeniable immorality of spectacular violence to make its case. This rhetorical strategy is not unique. Around the same time, in an interview with NPR, an educator and Black Lives Matter activist pointed to an incident in which an officer handcuffed a six-year-old Black girl to support his argument that police do not belong in schools (Kamenetz, 2020)—an argument that the AFT, notably, did not make, instead advocating for cultural competency training for school resource officers.

Nor is this strategy—what the Black cultural historian Saidiya Hartman (1997) has called “endless recitations of the ghastly and the terrible” (p. 4)—new. Indeed, in her book *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-making in Nineteenth-century America*, Hartman notes that tracts calling for the abolition of slavery consistently leveraged “invocations of the shocking and the terrible” (p. 4) to justify Black liberation. She suggests that this emphasis on overt violence obscures the “terror of the mundane and quotidian... the violence perpetrated under the rubric of pleasure, paternalism, and property” (p. 4); her work instead seeks “scenes in which terror can hardly be discerned” (p. 4), such as theatrical

performances and court cases. Hartman argues that it is through the daily repetitions of such scenes that anti-Black domination is normalized and sustained.

While scenes of incredible and troubling violence, such as that of Black children handcuffed or brutalized by school security officers, have sometimes been leveraged to highlight the anti-Blackness endemic in schools, Hartman's work suggests that we must *also* attend to *scenes in which terror can hardly be discerned* to identify and unravel the subtle threads of anti-Blackness that pervade contemporary schooling. That is this paper's aim: to look beyond the scenes of spectacular suffering and to locate the pervasiveness of anti-Blackness in the mundane routines of teaching and learning in schools, in, for instance, a teacher's feelings of empathy or compassion for a Black student, or in the discourses of individual responsibility that emerge from contemporary assessment policies and practices.

In our conceptual framing, we rely heavily on Hartman's work but also draw more broadly on Afropessimism (King, 2016, 2019; Sexton, 2008; Wilderson, 2010), a philosophical tradition with which Hartman has been associated and which emphasizes the specificity, intensity, and intractability of anti-Blackness. We bring Afropessimism to bear on recent theories of racism as an *affective* phenomenon, that is, as a relational and emotional phenomenon, as felt encounters with material consequences (Ahmed, 2004; Tolia & Crang, 2010; Zembylas, 2015), to consider the relationships between teachers and students in schools and how these relationships produce and are produced through anti-Blackness, relationships that, while not explicitly violent, nevertheless reinforce Black subjugation.

### **The Affective Force of Anti-Blackness**

Though rarely taken up in educational scholarship (Dumas, 2016; Dumas & ross, 2016), Afropessimism has been increasingly influential in theorizing anti-Blackness in recent years. Frank Wilderson (2020) defines Afropessimism as "a critical project that... is pessimistic about the claims theories of liberation make when these theories... analogize Black suffering with the suffering of other oppressed beings" (p. 14). When "anti-racism," for instance, is theorized as a project in which all forms of racism are commensurate, Afropessimism reveals the flaw in this logic: Blackness is positioned as ontologically antagonistic to the human, meaning that the very idea of an individual subject, a subject who has rights and can own property, is predicated on the idea of Blackness, on the idea that some subjects have *no* rights and *are* property (Wilderson, 2020). Therefore, all projects of inclusion into "the human" or "the social" become predicated on the continued re-animation of anti-Blackness, even and especially projects built

on notions of multiculturalism (*Introduction to Afropessimism*, 2017; Sexton, 2008).

In Afropessimist thought, Black enslavement is not defined by forced labor but by the characterization of Black people as property (*Introduction to Afropessimism*, 2017; Wilderson, 2020). As property, Black people are treated as *fungible* (Hartman, 1997, 2007; Spillers, 2007), where fungibility “represents the unfettered use of Black bodies for the self-actualization of the human” (King, 2019, p. 24). Hartman (1997) explores fungibility in some depth in her first book, *Scenes of Subjection*, one of the textual anchors of Afropessimist thought. Eschewing the spectacle of extreme violence, this work focuses on the quotidian and intimate encounters with Whiteness that shaped Black subjectivity before, during, and after Emancipation.

For instance, Hartman critiques the role of what she calls *empathic identification* in abolitionist discourse during the Antebellum period. She questions the rhetorical strategy of rendering the cruelty of slavery in explicit detail as a means through which to evoke sympathy and conquer indifference in readers. She finds that abolitionist writers, in their identification of with the suffering enslaved person, literally replace the enslaved Black person with their White selves. The White abolitionist John Rankin, for instance, imagined

That I myself was a slave, and with my wife and children placed under the reign of terror. I began in reality to feel for myself, my wife, and my children—the thought of being whipped at the pleasure of a morose and capricious master, aroused the strongest feelings of resentment... (as cited in Hartman, 1997, p. 18)

Rankin’s writing reaffirms the inconceivability of Black human pain or suffering by removing Blackness from the scene altogether. Empathic identification, Hartman suggests, also blurs the line between a witness and a spectator, one who recounts suffering to end it and one who recounts it for the pleasure of the remembrance. This pleasure in domination anchors Hartman’s reading of abolitionist tracts. She argues that empathy circulates not only as benevolent good will, but also as a site of displacement of Black humanity that facilitates ongoing pleasure in Black suffering. We will return to this argument about empathy in our reading of teachers and students.

Hartman also explores legal documents that relied on the supposed *paternal benevolence* of slave masters as a mitigating force in the ongoing legal violence of enslavement. She points out that “power relations depend on feeling, not law, to guarantee basic protections for slaves” (p. 92). So, courts ruled that enslaved Black people lacked basic protections but that the benevolence of “masters” must be appealed to in order to soften the violence of this existence:

“Feelings repudiated and corrected the violence legitimated by law... The wedding of intimacy and violent domination as regulatory norms exemplifies the logic through which violence is displaced as mutual and reciprocal desire” (p. 92). At the same time, Hartman finds in legal documents the assumption that sexual violence against Black people, and Black women in particular, was rendered unimaginable through the portrayal of Black people as hyper-sexual and thus always already consenting. Such reasoning facilitated the decriminalization of White violence and cloaked this violence as familial affection. This emphasis on supposedly loving relationships to mitigate material violence retains echoes in contemporary schooling, which we will explore in a later section.

Following Emancipation, this emphasis on paternal benevolence and familial obligation were replaced by universalist appeals to rights and responsibility; however, this shift served to retain the power relations of the Antebellum period. Hartman invokes the term *burdened individuality* to suggest the double-bind of freedom: although still embedded in a deeply racist and exploitative society, freedpeople were suddenly thrust into the labor market as ostensibly self-possessed individuals who were fully responsible for their own economic success or failure. Freedpeople were granted all of the burdens of freedom but few of its entitlements. For instance, in various textbooks, such as *Advice to Freedmen* and *Friendly Counsels for Freedmen*, freedpeople were provided with advice in order to “overcome the degradation of slavery and meet the challenges of freedom” (p. 128). These recommendations related to hygiene, proper comportment, and the development of emotional resilience—all of which, the tomes promised, would lead to upward mobility and the securing of the rights of citizenship. Freedpeople were thus burdened with navigating the ongoing violence of post-Emancipation through a series of emotional maneuvers—a belief system not unlike the contemporary emphasis on individual achievement.

Hartman’s work, published at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, anticipates what has been called the “affective turn” (Clough & Halley, 2007). The affective turn spans a range of disciplines and includes many competing definitions of affect; however, *Scenes of Subjection* resonates most directly with affect theorists who use the term *affect* synonymously with emotion and who explore the role of feeling in mediating and producing social and political worlds (Ahmed, 2004; Berlant, 2011; Cvetkovich, 2012). As the feminist scholar Sara Ahmed (2004) notes,

emotions do things, and they align individuals with communities—or bodily space with social space—through the very intensity of their attachments. Rather than seeing emotions as psychological dispositions, we need to consider how they work, in concrete and particular ways, to

mediate the relationship between the psychic and the social, and between the individual and the collective. (p. 119)

More specifically, emotions can work as “‘technologies’ that ... establish racial categorizations between bodies, binding them together or apart” (Zembylas, 2014, p. 146). As an affective technology, racism can operate at the level of feeling but has material consequences in the world. Hartman’s uptake of empathic identification, paternal benevolence, and burdened individuality in *Scenes of Subjection* demonstrate that emotions do, indeed, *do things* to facilitate the violence of enslavement and the ongoing subjugation of Black people. In the next section, after an overview of scholarship on anti-Blackness in education, we draw on Hartman’s work to find resonant *affective technologies of anti-Blackness* in contemporary schooling.

### **Approaches to Anti-Blackness and Affect in Educational Scholarship**

Scholars have increasingly documented how anti-Blackness pervades contemporary schooling, manifesting as exclusionary and excessively punitive disciplinary policies that disproportionately target Black students (Annamma, 2016; Crenshaw, 2012; Shedd, 2015; Sojoyner, 2016; Stovall, 2018; Turner & Benneke, 2020; Wun, 2015); as ableist tracking policies that disproportionately classify Black students as disabled (Annamma, 2016; Leonardo & Broderick, 2011); as curriculum and pedagogy that ignores, demeans, or punishes the cultural repertoires and sophisticated literacies of Black students (Baker-Bell, 2020; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Love, 2019; Paris & Alim, 2017; Price-Dennis, 2016; Woodson, 1933); as the continued under-resourcing of predominantly Black public schools (Rooks, 2017); and as assessment practices rooted in racist histories of standardized testing (Au, 2016).

However, fewer educational scholars have drawn explicitly on Afropessimism and its attention to the fungible Black body. Michael Dumas’ (2016) article “Against the Dark: Anti-Blackness in Educational Policy and Discourse” stands out in this regard. While Hartman explored fungibility in the Antebellum and Reconstruction periods, Dumas draws on Jodi Melamed (2012) to argue that our current moment is one of “official anti-racism,” where “blatantly racist laws and government practices have been declared illegal, and the market embraces outreach to a wide multicultural range of consumers” (p. 15). Melamed (2012) names this *neoliberal multiculturalism*. While neoliberalism is traditionally an economic theory that emphasizes individual freedom to participate in the market, Melamed defines neoliberal multiculturalism as that which

encompasses the entire complex of social, political, and cultural norms and knowledges that organize contemporary regimes of rule and becomes a name for the differentiated experience of citizenship that ensures that governments protect those that are valuable to capital, whether formally citizens or not, and render vulnerable those that are not valuable to circuits of capital, whether formally citizens or not. (p. xxi)

This iteration of official antiracism thus racializes certain subjects as worthy multicultural individuals and others as deficient, deviant, or otherwise unworthy. This division of worthiness and unworthiness naturalizes unequal circumstances in capitalism, categories that are actually produced through ongoing violence, situating them squarely as the responsibility of the individual. Dumas (2016) suggests that neoliberal multiculturalism relies on the fungible Black body and critiques desegregation scholarship that functions to perpetuate anti-Blackness. He suggests that this work “[emphasizes] the educational benefits of cross-cultural interaction and the importance of providing more equitable allocation of educational resources” (p. 16) rather than interrogating the anti-Black policies that led to segregation in the first place. The fetishization of diversity, in turn, is predicated on the erasure of Blackness into a coalition of more acceptable racialized but non-Black bodies (Dumas, 2016).

Similarly, Dumas and ross (2016) propose BlackCrit as a corrective to Critical Race Theory, which, despite its historical foundation in Black scholarship, focuses on a critique of racism, White supremacy, and liberal multiculturalism, rather than anti-Blackness specifically. They propose three framing ideas for BlackCrit: first, they posit that anti-Blackness “is endemic to, and is central to how all of us make sense of the social, economic, historical, and cultural dimensions of human life” (p. 429); second, they suggest that Blackness is antithetical to the “neoliberal multicultural imagination” (p. 430), which is predicated on the notion that the state is officially antiracist and the market equally open to all consumers, regardless of race; and finally, they argue that BlackCrit must retain space for Black imaginative and liberatory possibilities. Ultimately, they suggest that BlackCrit is an important framework for understanding segregation and school discipline policies, both of which are specifically anti-Black phenomena.

Thus, recent approaches that have centered anti-Blackness in schools have focused on segregation and school discipline policies. However, we suggest that for teachers, in particular, attention to the role of *affect* in producing and sustaining anti-Blackness in schools is important, as teachers have the opportunity to reproduce—or interrupt—anti-Blackness at the relational level as they work with students. As such, it is useful to consider the educational scholarship that takes up affect, as well.



The earliest instances of explicit reference to emotion in educational scholarship begin in the early 1990s in White feminist and psychoanalytic approaches to educational theory (Boler, 1999; Britzman, 1991, 1998, 2000; Pitt & Britzman, 2003; Britzman & Pitt, 2004). This work emphasized the emotional challenges of engaging students in critical pedagogy, which often asks students to confront difficult or traumatic knowledge about the world and its injustices. This scholarship has inspired explorations of particular affective registers, such as shock (Simon, 2011), mourning (Lather, 2003), hope (Farley, 2009), discomfort (Boler & Zembylas, 2003), empathy (Zembylas, 2012), anger (Zembylas, 2007), and compassion (Zembylas, 2013).

Recent research has taken up the affective dimensions of the racial and cultural mismatch between the predominantly White teaching force and Black and Brown students. This work includes studies on emotional investments in Whiteness (Leonardo and Zembylas, 2013; Matias & Zembylas, 2014) as well as the discomfort and trauma experienced by Black and Brown teachers and students in schools (Leonardo & Porter, 2010; Matias, 2016). Scholarship in teacher education has increasingly noted the importance of attending to affect, given that racism and social justice can be emotionally challenging topics that elicit resistance in teachers (Airton, 2020; Deckman & Ohito, 2020; Franklin-Phipps, 2020; Franklin-Phipps & Rath, 2019; Ohito, 2016). We seek to expand this literature by bringing scholarly attention to the *affective technologies of anti-Blackness in schools*. Following Hartman (1997), we suggest that affect propels much of the quotidian violence that circulates through educational discourse, policy, and practice.

### **Empathic Identification, Paternal Benevolence, and Burdened Individuality in Contemporary Schooling**

Hartman's work locates three particular forms of technologies of affect that produce and are produced through anti-Blackness: empathic identification; paternal benevolence; and the shame-mongering of burdened individuality. We argue that these affective technologies also circulate in contemporary schools, albeit in forms that are uniquely modulated to both education and to the particularities of our officially antiracist, multicultural moment.

Specifically, empathic identification and paternal benevolence circulate via the discourses of multiculturalism, diversity, and cultural pluralism. Empathy in particular is a cornerstone of multicultural and, increasingly, anti-racist discourse. Many scholars have pointed out that members of the predominantly White teaching force, for instance, have difficulty developing empathy for their students of color (Berlak, 2004; Winans, 2010; Zembylas & Papamichael, 2017).

Empathy is thus positioned as an important corrective to racism. For instance, an educational article about practicing empathy encourages teachers to:

Think of a student with whom you have trouble connecting. Then, make a list of all of the things you have in common with this student. Maybe you both have dogs for pets, or both like reading graphic novels, or both care for family members at home. When you're finished with your list, look it over and consider all the ways in which you're connected. Cultivating an empathic mindset requires challenging the preconceptions we have about others and searching for the commonalities we share, as opposed to the differences. (Flynn, 2016)

The article notes that when teachers examine shared identities in this way, their students are less likely to be suspended, which is an important move toward ending excessively punitive disciplinary practices. But this empathic exercise is predicated on the student's similarity to the teacher, a rhetorical move that Hartman (1997) critiques as a mechanism by which the feeler "begins to feel for himself rather than for those whom this exercise in imagination presumably is designed to reach" (p. 19). The teacher, in this exercise, imagines herself caring for a family member, or walking her dog, and it is through this replacement of the student with her own experience and identity that the student becomes imbued with a sense of dignity. The student is only able to be *felt for*, that is, rendered legible as deserving as rights, when the teacher has already replaced it as the subject so deserving. Thus, this ostensible corrective to racism asks teachers to find commonalities and connections with their students, or to put themselves "in their shoes"—in ways that erase the particularities of Black experience.

Meanwhile, the paternal benevolence that Hartman cites as endemic to the violence of enslavement is likewise perpetuated by in contemporary schools. Hartman describes how the paternal benevolence of slaveholders was positioned as a corrective to the excessive violence of enslavement. However, in schools, the violence of anti-Blackness—manifested in punitive accountability and disciplinary systems—is repudiated through the deployment of affect related to discourses of respect and affirmation. Savannah Shange (2019) provides a particularly poignant example of this in her recent book *Progressive Dystopia: Abolition, Anti-Blackness, and Schooling in San Francisco*. In this anthropological ethnography of a progressive public school, Shange highlights the gap between the school's stated mission of equity and justice—centered in its mission statement, articulated by the predominantly White school staff, adorned across school walls, and implicit in a diverse curriculum—and its continued devaluation, exclusion, and punishment of Black students.

Even as the school prided itself on its social justice mission, Shange notes, “with a population of 24 percent Black students and 80 percent of suspensions being for Black students, [the school] *had the most disproportionate suspensions of Black students in the city*” (p. 84, emphasis in original). She provides a specific example of a fight between two Black and two Latinx students. While all four students are initially expelled, a White administrator eventually talks privately to the Latinx students, explaining to them that they can petition to return to the school—which they successfully do. The Black students, who never receive this advice, remain expelled.

Shange’s work demonstrates how “the same institution can provide both culturally affirming and racially exclusionary experiences” (p. 48)—culturally affirming for those whose multiculturalism is deemed non-threatening by White administrators, and racially exclusionary for Black students. Similar to how a sense of familial obligation would ostensibly temper the violence of the slaveholder (Hartman, 1997), the broad affirmation of cultural pluralism is leveraged to obscure the carceral logic of schooling (Shange, 2020). This has also been documented by Turner & Beneke (2020) in their recent exploration of a school district’s interest in “softening” of school resource officers (SROs). They note that in spite of stakeholders stated objections to the school-to-prison pipeline, SROs came to be discursively constructed as “a solution to the ‘undesirable’ behavior of youth of color who were experiencing trauma, mental health problems, and insecurity in food, transportation, and housing—and thus as a form of anti-racism” (p. 234). The people whose very roles are predicated on carceral anti-Blackness have become positioned as caretakers.

Finally, the burdened individuality that Hartman (1997) traced as emerging during Reconstruction—which burdened newly freedpeople with responsibilities within the social and economic spheres but denied them the entitlements generally associated with those spheres—continues to haunt contemporary neoliberal through what has been called the “responsibilized individual” (Davies & Bansel, 2007). Burdened or responsibilized individuality does not acknowledge the histories which continue to activate anti-Black legacies today, instead serving to “actively obscure” social, political, historical, and economic contexts (Duggan, 2004, p. 3), presenting “bodies as if they were autonomous from history, freed from political or social constraints, marinating in circumstances of their own making” (Fine, 2016, p. 351).

Burdened with individuality and cut off from the histories that have accumulated to create one’s social context, the responsibilized individual in schools is buttressed by the ideology of meritocracy (Au, 2016), which posits that individuals are equally positioned to achieve success in society—and thus, solely to blame for any failures on their part. In schools, this means that students become individually responsible for their grades, test scores, disciplinary consequences,

and any other metric employed by the school. This manifests, for example, in a popular meme that resurfaces every few years on social media: teachers post pictures of their classroom bulletin board with the words “Meet the person most responsible for your choices, grades, success, words, [and] actions.” Beneath the statement is a mirror. The message is clear: *you* are solely responsible for your educational outcomes. Given the continued proliferation of exclusionary disciplinary policies that target Black students and the use of high-stakes testing based in racist eugenics (Au, 2016), such ideology disproportionately and undeservedly delegates blame to Black students and pride to White students.

### Implications for Teacher Education

We offer teachers and teacher educators several suggestions for addressing issues of anti-Blackness in schools. First, given the troubling history of empathic identification as a mode Black erasure—in Hartman’s word, “obliteration” (p. 19)—we propose that teachers consider Édouard Glissant’s (1997) call for *the right to opacity*. Glissant points out that the empathic search for commonalities inevitably reduces another person to that which we can identify and understand. Drawing on Glissant, as teachers, we can accept that we do not need to “understand” our students—we do not need them to name their struggles and pain, nor the commonalities they share with us—in order to treat them with dignity and respect. In particular, teachers who identify as non-Black can respect the specificity and uniqueness of their Black students’ lives.

Teachers can instead explore their *own* positioning within an unjust, anti-Black society. This includes an exploration of our “identities related to race, ethnicity, family structure, sexuality, class, abilities, and religion,” which, “taken side by side with a critical analysis of racism, sexism, White supremacy, and Whiteness” can support teachers to “think about your own educational experiences and resources in relation to the issues your students and their communities face” (Love, 2019, p. 118). Teachers can interrogate the notions of excellence and achievement on which their own standards for their students might be based, standards often rooted in White supremacist, anti-Black, and individualist ideas about language and culture (Lysicott, 2019). Indeed, the very idea of individual achievement is based on what Ruben Gaztambide-Fernández calls a “mythology of me” which is, itself, “the result of unequal circumstances and injustice” (p. 52-53). This exploration of one’s *position*, rather than one’s *identity*, necessarily includes the historical conditions that created and perpetuate one’s social location. In this way, an understanding of positionality can combat notions of meritocracy and its accompanying discourse of burdened individuality.

As well, this self-excitation (Sealey-Ruiz, 2020) can be turned not only to our positionalities but to our *feelings* (Boler, 1999) and particularly the histories

of “goodness” that permeate our understanding of teaching (Matias & Zembylas, 2014). As Franklin-Phipps and Rath (2019) note:

Because pre-service teacher training is often grounded, even unconsciously, in historical narratives of White missionary work towards salvific futures—White women have been recruited to minister to Black children in the South, poor children in the West, and Indigenous children in boarding schools—it is a feel-good enterprise. (p. 268)

They encourage teacher educators to ask their students to engage with the “difficult knowledges, unresolvable problems, contradictory ideas, fundamental uncertainties” on which education is founded (p. 270). Matias (2016) suggests that White people in particular need to “relearn the hurt in racism” and develop the “strategy of burdening one’s self to... continually understand their students in order to be effective teachers” (Matias, 2016, p. 69). This openness to racial trauma involves upsetting epistemologies of ignorance and facing uncomfortable feelings about one’s own complicity in racism. Teachers may be uncomfortable sitting with histories and recognizing the patterns that constitute anti-Blackness, but as Leigh Patel (2015) notes, one of the most important moves we can make toward dismantling unjust systems is “to sit still long enough to see clearly what we need to reach beyond” (p. 88)—in this case, the paternal benevolence that has undergirded much of educational history.

An emphasis on Black student opacity, a deconstruction of individualism, and an examination of the “good feelings” that animate the teaching profession might allow teachers to develop new forms of relationality with their students, relations not predicated on anti-Blackness. Instead, teachers might consider how to act in *solidarity* with students (Gaztambide-Fernández, 2012; Love, 2019). Solidarity requires relationships based on “difference and interdependency, rather than similarity” (Gaztambide-Fernández, 2012, p. 49); it is a practice, not a “onetime conversation” (Love, 2019, p. 119); it is the continual “recasting of our day-to-day relations and encounters with difference” (Gaztambide-Fernández, 2012, p. 42).

## Conclusion

Hartman’s work reminds us that an emphasis on the spectacle of overt violence can distract us from the daily injustices experienced by Black people before and after Emancipation. In turn, scenes of violence, such as those of Black children being handcuffed or brutalized by school security officers, have sometimes been leveraged to highlight the anti-Blackness endemic in schools. Attention to Hartman’s work suggests that we might also attend to affect—to discourses and

feelings of empathic identification, paternal benevolence, and burdened individuality—to identify and unravel the subtle threads of anti-Blackness that pervade contemporary schooling. We cannot only attend to scenes of explicit brutality when addressing anti-Blackness: we must, as abolitionist geographer Ruth Wilson Gilmore (forthcoming) reminds us, *change everything*.

### Notes On Contributors

**Karen Zaino** is a doctoral candidate in Urban Education at The Graduate Center, CUNY and a lecturer in English Education at Queens College, CUNY. Prior to graduate study, she was a high school English teacher for 12 years in Philadelphia, PA and Covington, KY. Karen is interested in the legacies that circulate as affective registers in schools, structuring what feels “good” and “possible” in educational practice, and her research leverages affect theory and critical literacy to re-conceptualize teacher education.

**Jordan Bell** is an instructor of English at Dutchess Community College where he teaches [English](#) and [Philosophy](#) courses through a critical lens, and he is pursuing his Ph.D. in Urban Education at the CUNY Graduate Center with research interests that center around Critical Race Theory, BlackCrit, Culturally Responsive and Sustaining Education (CRSE), and Racial Literacy, amongst other things. Moreover, Jordan serves as the Chair of the State University of New York (SUNY) Black Faculty and Staff Collective (SBFSC) where the collective works to support Black Bodies at SUNY and beyond, and as an editor for New York University’s (NYU) *Voices in Urban Education* (VUE) Journal

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