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**“A Brief Moment in the Sun”:  
Mapping White Backlash in the History of K-12 Black  
Education in the United States**

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**ABSTRACT:** White backlash is the immediate, violent response of some white people to the actual and perceived racial and educational progress of oppressed groups. In this paper, we take a historical detour to map this phenomenon, specifically in the history of K-12 Black education. We demonstrate that the current state of education is not an exceptional moment, but part of a long genealogy of anti-Black educational violence and white backlash. Yet, we suggest that operating from an understanding of the inevitability and imminence of white backlash offers necessary tools in the continued fight for liberatory Black educational futures.

**KEYWORDS:** History of Black education, white backlash, mapping, educational futures, resistance

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“The slave went free; stood a brief moment in the sun;  
then moved back again toward slavery.”  
WEB DuBois (1935)

**The Contemporary Context of U.S. Education: Pandemic as Portal**

As a response to worldwide protests following the highly publicized murders of unarmed Black citizens George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, and Breonna Taylor,

and the ongoing state-sanctioned violence against people of color, various educational entities across the nation expressed a deepened commitment to making educational spaces more welcoming, inclusive, and equitable, and to address the entrenched anti-Black racism within its very structure. Administrators and school leaders in K-12 schools participated in anti-racism professional development to understand more deeply the plight of marginalized communities, and worked to transform their schools (Walker et al., 2023). Parents and teachers participated in online trainings (Buttimer et al., 2022), diversity seminars, and book clubs, plowing through reads like New York Times best-sellers *White Fragility* (DiAngelo, 2018), *How to Be an Antiracist* (Kendi, 2019), and *The New Jim Crow* (Alexander, 2020). In the wake of the devastatingly fatal Covid-19 pandemic that restricted in-person interactions, students—some as young as 7-years old—led marches and demonstrations in their neighborhoods (Cheng, 2020), while hundreds staged walk-outs from schools (Ferguson, 2020; Zaveri, 2020). Though the onset of the Covid-19 crisis initially prompted calls to leverage social disruption as a “portal” (Roy, 2020; Souto-Manning, 2021) toward new possibilities in education (Ladson-Billings, 2021), the years following essentially manifested into a retreat to normative oppressive systems of schooling, accompanied by expanded digital surveillance (DeGuerin, 2020), persistent anti-Black violence, and increased carcerality.

### **Punished for Perceived Educational Progress**

Since 2020, legislation restricting race education has manifested across the country. A total of thirty-eight states (Greene, 2022), and counting, have signed into law or proposed legislation banning or restricting the teaching of critical race theory (CRT), the academic discipline at the center of the debate. Critical race theory, mostly taught in universities and colleges, seeks to understand how racism has shaped U.S. laws and policies (Bell, 1992a, 1992b; Crenshaw, 1988, 1991; Delgado & Stefancic, 2023; Harris, 1993). It argues that racism is endemic to the foundation of the United States and provides a framework through which to examine the ways that it continues to pervade various systems across the nation. While teachers do not teach critical race theory in K-12 schools, legislators have invoked the theory as an umbrella term to refer to any critical teaching of race or white supremacy in an attempt to restrict critical discourse in the classroom. As Tichavakunda (2021) argues, “No amount of evidence can counter this belief, which, in the bad faith actor’s mind, is equivalent to fact” (p. 4).

Supporters of these bills and CRT detractors argue that the theory teaches hate, and that it is divisive, unpatriotic, and indoctrinates students with lessons on race that make people feel “discomfort” or “shame” (Alfonseca, 2022). They argue that such teachings overstate the role of racism in American society and stroke discord between people of different races (Kim, 2021). These restrictions are what PEN America (2021) calls “educational gag orders,” the statewide and federal legislative efforts to limit teaching about “prohibited” or “divisive” topics such as

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race, slavery, gender, and colonialism in K-12 schools, public universities, and workplace settings. Educators and some parents argue these bills censor teachers and students, as well as place limitations on discussions of the nation's history of oppression. Yet, these are not just intellectual or political debates over how we analyze and narrate the past. The circulating of bad faith interpretations of critical race theory (Tichavakunda, 2021); the criticism of the 1619 Project, an endeavor that explores the continued legacy of slavery on present-day America; and the growing tide of legislation aimed at policing and censoring any truthful teaching of American history and social reality have ignited conversations about the long history of erasure, silencing, and miseducation in U.S. schools, particularly as it relates to the Black community (Borter, 2021; DuBois, 1935; King, 1992, 2014).

### White Rage

History documents that anytime white supremacy and hegemonic structures are challenged, it riles emotional, violent, and reactionary responses. Anderson (2017) traces the history of a phenomenon she coins as *white rage*, arguing that whenever Black people have made advances towards full participation in U.S. democracy, it is met with anger, frustration, hostility, resentment, and opposition amongst white Americans. Yet, she warns that white rage works patiently and insidiously to infiltrate systems of power, writing,

... it works its way through the courts, the legislatures, and a range of government bureaucracies. It wreaks havoc subtly, almost imperceptibly. Too imperceptibly, certainly, for a nation consistently drawn to the spectacular— to what it can see. It's not the Klan. White rage doesn't have to wear sheets, burn crosses, or take to the streets. Working the halls of power, it can achieve its ends far more effectively, far more destructively. (p. ix)

Anderson (2017) poignantly documents the Jim Crow era as a reaction to the Union victory in the Civil War, implementing dehumanizing segregationist practices, policies, and laws to circumvent perceived Black progress and enfranchisement. The Southern strategy was a policy implemented by the Republican Party to gain political support among white voters in the South. In addition to the issue of segregation, the party utilized their values of religion, gun control, and anti-Black racism to appeal to white voters. This policy served as a retort to the Voting Rights Act of 1965, which prohibited racial discrimination in voting.

In modern times, we saw the phenomenon of white rage shockingly demonstrated as white supremacists stormed the U.S. capital on January 6th, 2021. This reaction was a response to the democratic presidential win, and arguably, a result of ongoing frustration with the perceived racial progress made with the presidential terms of the nation's first Black president, Barack Obama (Coates, 2017; Ott & Dickinson, 2019). We see in modern times, as Anderson

(2017) documents throughout history, that white rage is not a new phenomenon. It is the violent, white supremacist, emotional undercurrent that has been utilized to halt, thwart, and evade justice and liberation for Black people for centuries.

## White Backlash

White rage (Anderson, 2017) typically refers to a simmering, gradual, underlying, and persistent frustration among some white Americans towards advancements or policies that challenge the existing power structures. It encompasses a sustained and ongoing resistance toward racial equity and is rooted in historical injustices and systemic inequalities that have persisted over time. Yet, *white backlash* differs in its nature, scope, and timing. It connotes a more immediate, defensive, and reactionary response among some white Americans to recent events or advancements. It is the instantaneous rollback to societal shifts in racial, social, political, or economic dynamics that challenge traditional power structures (King, 1968), and is centered on the staunch maintenance of white supremacy (Coates, 2017). According to Glickman (2020), white backlash gained popularity during the U.S. Civil Rights Movement, namely the deadly and violent response after President John F. Kennedy proposed significant civil rights legislation. However, DuBois (1935), in his book *Black Reconstruction*, rewinds further back in time, stating “The slave went free; stood a brief moment in the sun; then moved back again toward slavery,” illuminating the pattern of progression and regression existent in the immediate aftermath of the abolition of slavery. Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. (1968) likewise highlighted this notion, stating,

This tragic duality [professing the principles of democracy and practicing the antithesis of democracy] has produced a strange indecisiveness and ambivalence toward the Negro, causing America to take a step backward simultaneously with every step forward on the question of racial justice... There has never been a solid unified and determined thrust to make justice a reality for Afro-Americans. The step backwards has a new name today. It is called the “white backlash.” But the white backlash is nothing new. It is the surfacing of old prejudices, hostilities and ambivalence that has always been there... The white backlash of today is rooted in the same problem that has characterized America ever since the black man landed in chains on the shores of this nation. (p. 68)

Indeed, white backlash is evident at every instance of Black socio-political advancement across time and demonstrates a gap between the promise of democracy and racial justice and the truth of racial reality (Bell, 1992b) of Black life in America.

This paper takes a historical detour to map the phenomenon of white backlash, specifically in the history of U.S. K-12 Black education. We utilize white backlash as a conceptual framework to map educational injustice in the Black community from the antebellum era to the present. In this way, we demonstrate

that the current state of education is not an exceptional or essential moment, but part of a long genealogy of anti-Black educational violence (Mustafa, 2017). We demonstrate that white backlash, as a form of white supremacist violence, has always been leveraged to subvert, misappropriate, and threaten liberatory Black education, or teaching that empowers and embraces Black humanity, genius, and joy (Boutte et al., 2017; King, 2005; Martin et al., 2019; Muhammad, 2023; Perlow et al., 2018; Warren, 2021) from manifesting in schools. Yet, we map this history with intention, not merely to document white backlash or center white supremacy, but to offer a necessary analytic tool for understanding, recognizing, and anticipating its impacts on the continued fight for liberatory Black educational futures (Warren & Coles, 2020). In what follows, we ground our work in BlackCrit theory, followed by a brief discussion of how we utilize mapping as a method in historical educational research.

### **Theoretical Framework: BlackCrit Theory**

Black critical theory (BlackCrit) provides the theoretical framework for the analysis of white backlash. While critical race theory (CRT) is a theorization of race and racism, BlackCrit “confronts the specificity of antiblackness, as a social construction, as an embodied lived experience of social suffering and resistance, and perhaps most importantly, as an antagonism, in which the Black is a despised thing-in-itself” (Dumas & ross, 2016, p. 416). Antiblackness, then, signifies how Black is not the inverse of whiteness, but the “antithesis of what it means to be human” (Wallace, 2022, p. 377; Wilderson, 2010, 2020). BlackCrit posits that antiblackness is both foundational and systemic. Hartman’s (1997) theorization of the “afterlife of slavery” adds to this estimation and provides understanding of the ways in which Black people remain tethered to and impacted by chattel slavery, wherein “life in the contemporary context is a continuation of enslavement even in post-emancipation”, post-racial, and post-abolition times (Wallace, 2022, p. 377). Hence, Dumas asserts (2016) “even as slavery is no longer official state policy and practice, the slave endures in the social imagination, and also in the everyday suffering experienced by Black people” (p. 14). BlackCrit refuses the absolution of antiblackness from the physical, systemic, institutional, and psychic violence it has inflicted, and continues to inflict, upon Black people.

### **BlackCrit Theory in Education**

In education, BlackCrit theory helps us analyze how social and educational practices, programs, and policies are informed by antiblackness and facilitate Black suffering (Dumas & ross, 2016; ross & Givens, 2023). BlackCrit theory in education is supported by four broad framing ideas, the first of which is that antiblackness is endemic to society and foundational to how we make sense of the social, historical, cultural, and other aspects of human life. BlackCrit helps us to

untangle antiblackness from racism and white supremacy in our effort to map white backlash across Black educational history. The second framing of BlackCrit posits that blackness exists in tension with the neoliberal multicultural imagination (Dumas & ross, 2016). This frame supports the current work in that it refuses to be seduced by pronouncements of racial progress, and instead examines perceived progress with a surgical and cynical lens, and with anticipation of white backlash in its aftermath. The third framing idea in BlackCrit is that it refuses a revisionist history that upholds “dangerous majoritarian narratives that disappear Whites” from a history of racial violence (Dumas & ross, 2016, p. 431). This frame refuses to allow Black educational histories to be mired with narratives of white saviors and empathetic whites in Black people’s agentic strivings (Dillard, 2006; DuBois, 1903) toward educational, racial, and social justice. The final framing of BlackCrit creates space for Black liberatory fantasies of the worlds we want to inhabit (ross, 2019), elucidating connections between Black pasts, presents, and futures (Toliver, 2023), and in the case of this paper, Black educational futures. BlackCrit is useful as an analytic framework (Coles & Powell, 2020) for examining white backlash, and is the soil in which the seeds of anti-Black educational violence germinate (Guetlein, 2023; Mustaffa, 2017)

### **Mapping as Method in Historical Educational Research**

This paper uses mapping as a critical qualitative research method (Denzin, 2017) to chart critical connections between historical and contemporary issues in education. Marx (2023) conceptualized mapping as an approach that

(1) centres participant experiences and perceptions, understanding them as meaningful knowledge; (2) involves participants illustrating a journey or process and then describing the illustration in an interview, conversation, or other format; (3) relies on the creativity of illustration as an accessible entry into research; and (4) is contextualized within a critical theoretical and/or methodological framework. (pp. 286-287)

Indeed, mapping has been marshaled in a wide range of educational research studies, sometimes as a process, as a method of data generation or analysis, and as a methodology (Marx, 2023). These include the use of hand-drawn maps as a social justice tool to draw out the unrecognized and unacknowledged stories that affect teachers’ understanding of power structures, social hierarchies, and cultures, both inside and outside of schools (Nolte-Yupari, 2020); educational journey maps to investigate the social and spatial processes of the school-to-prison pipeline (Annamma, 2016), particularly for girls of color (Annamma, 2018), and for first year engineering students (Kopparla et al., 2022). Mapping has also been used to examine the sense-making processes that young, academically successful Black males go through in constructing their identities in school settings (Flennaugh, 2016). Indeed, mapping as both method and methodology has been used in a number of ways and across various educational arenas. However,



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educational scholarship has yet to leverage the methodological flexibility and possibility in historical educational research.

Necessarily, we take up mapping as a critical qualitative research method in historical educational research that places historically oppressed people, underrepresented experiences, and marginalized voices at the center of our inquiry and analysis. While more traditional mapping methods in historical research have used geographic information systems (da Silveira, 2014; Gregory et al., 2001), mapping in this context moves beyond spatial analysis. Mapping here involves the creation of a through-line between the past, present, and future to illustrate how educational practices, policies, institutions, figures, moments, and movements have evolved or remained the same over time. In this way, mapping helps us understand the sequence of events and ideological shifts, as well as their interconnectedness within the educational landscape and across time. To provide rich insights into historical educational phenomena, we use qualitative data gathered from archival repositories, historical documents, newspapers, popular media, and literature reviews.

In his article on anti-Black violence in the history of higher education, Mustafa (2017) uses mapping as a method to trace three eras of oppression: the colonial era (1780-1832), the post-Civil War era (1860-1910), and the academic revolution (1940-1975). Through this method, he illustrates a history of “education violence” (p. 711) to describe how systems of higher education have been rooted and grounded in anti-Black oppression, with severe consequences both inside and outside of these formal settings. He suggests that this conceptualization of racialized education violence moves beyond merely detailing forms of interpersonal intimidation, verbal threats, or personal injury in higher education settings across time. Instead, mapping allows readers to visualize how education violence operates across ideological, cultural, and structural levels.

Similarly, in this paper, we utilize mapping as a method not merely to archive white supremacist and anti-Black violence, but to re-member. As King and Swartz (2014) suggest, re-membering is “a process for recovering history by putting back together the multiple and shared knowledge bases and experiences that shaped the past” (p. xiii). We map as a way to critically unmask the material consequences of staunch white backlash in the efforts of Black people to gain knowledge, and to chart Black people’s incessant educational strivings and resistance within and across time, space, and contexts. It is through mapping that we trace a genealogy of cultural strength, perseverance, and refusal in the history of Black education. This paper simultaneously demonstrates the utility of mapping as a method while also providing a map of white backlash from the past, present, and future. This paper, as a map itself, serves as a cultural-historical artifact to help us remember these histories while simultaneously pointing us to strategies that can inform current educational theory and practice and promote educational equity and justice in the future.

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## Mapping White Backlash in the History of K-12 Black Education

Although it is impossible to fully capture white backlash in the history of Black education, we remember (King & Swartz, 2014) with specificity, carefulness, and intentionality. We recall the monstrosity of educational violence toward Black people not for shock value or to reproduce Black pain. Instead, we map the history of white backlash to contextualize the forces of evil that Black people were constantly up against, and illustrate their/our ceaseless determination toward racial, social, and educational justice.

### Antebellum Era (1815-1860)

It is well documented that during the era of enslavement, Black people faced extreme prohibitions on education. Slave owners often denied enslaved people the right to learn how to read and write, except for religious instruction, as they feared education would lead to resistance and incite rebellion, great threats to the financially lucrative slave system (Anderson, 1988; Williams, 2006). Strict laws and policies, known as slave codes, were enacted in various states to enforce illiteracy among the enslaved. These laws prohibited enslaved people from learning to read or write and made it a crime for others to teach them (Neal & Dunn, 2020; Rasmussen, 2010). In South Carolina, for instance, the Negro Act of 1740 prohibited enslaved individuals from assembling in groups, learning to write, or possessing any reading material (Span & Anderson, 2005). Anti-literacy laws worked to reinforce the inhumanity and fungibility of Black people as mere chattel to be commodified (Hartman, 1997).

Literacy was eventually made illegal for *all* Black people, enslaved and free, in many Southern states following a deadly insurrection led by literate slave preacher, Nat Turner. On Sunday, August 21<sup>st</sup>, 1831, in Southampton County, Virginia, Nat Turner led one of the bloodiest slave rebellions in United States History, killing between 55 and 65 people, the majority of whom were white (Greenberg, 2003). Turner always understood his revolt in religious terms and, when captured, compared himself to some of the Old Testament prophets in the Bible (Lampley, 2013; Scully, 2008). Turner embodied a radical Christianity, considering himself a modern-day prophet and instrument of vengeance, elected by God to free enslaved people from the yoke of slavery by any means necessary (Turner & Gray, 2011).

The bloody revolt immediately created a climate of fear, anxiety, and panic, particularly among white slaveholders (Aptheker, 1993), causing legislative bodies across the nation to discuss the future of slavery. While some proposed the abolition of slavery, others outright refused and instead put forth even harsher restrictions. Public blame for the rebellion typically fell on three entities: Black preachers, abolitionist literature, and Black literacy (Baptist, 2016; Hillman, 2005; Sharples, 2020). As backlash for the insurrection, on March 25<sup>th</sup>, 1832, the Virginia



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State Legislature passed a bill to limit the assembly of large groups of Black people, control the agency and teaching of Black preachers, and restrict the literacy efforts of the enslaved.

These legislative responses were rooted in the deep fear of literate slaves spreading abolitionist materials, furthering slave insurrections, and forging freedom papers and other writings (Albanese, 1976). Yet, restrictive anti-literacy laws and policies were used not only as tools to restrict literacy but also to restrict access to the very idea of freedom and to prevent other liberatory ideologies from being spread among both the enslaved and free Black population (Baptist, 2016). The literate slave was thus treated like a fugitive slave, effectively criminalizing literacy, and making it a highly punishable and deadly offense (Givens, 2021). Still, Black educational history is wrought with narratives of anti-Black violence and educational exclusion, as well as fierce engagement in emancipatory, self-determined, fugitive education (Givens, 2021; Webber, 1978; Williams, 2006), even in slavery's afterlives (Hartman, 2007).

### **Civil War / Reconstruction (1861-1877)**

After the emancipation of slavery and in the ashes of a deadly Civil War, rooted in the maintenance of Black subjugation and white dominance, nearly 4 million formerly enslaved people were freed. One of the first ways that the formerly enslaved people leveraged their freedom was in their vigorous search for education (Anderson, 1988; Williams, 2006). Even with limited means, the newly emancipated Black community compiled their collective resources to create, build, and maintain schools that reflected their cultural values and future aspirations (Anderson, 1988; Givens, 2021).

Though schools for whites were in existence for decades (Williams, 2006), the very presence of schools exclusively catering to Black students incited resentment, aggression, and hostility (Neal-Stanley, 2023b). The audacity of Black people to both teach and learn often meant devastating consequences. In an 1868 issue of the *Cincinnati Daily Gazette*, for example, the implications and impacts of the existence of a Black school in Wartrace, Tennessee are detailed. It reads,

Rev. Dr. Burt writes to Gen. Carlin that the house was undoubtedly set on fire by certain white men who had been heard to swear recently that the negroes should not have a school and get ahead of the white children. The house was an excellent one, and well furnished. A number of the colored people wept bitterly when they saw their school house in flames. (*Cincinnati Daily Gazette*, February 15, 1868)

Paramilitary and extrajudicial terrorist organizations such as the Ku Klux Klan, Knights of the White Camelia, and the White League consistently employed violence with the aim of expelling Black teachers and students from educational institutions (Butchart, 2013; Neal-Stanley, 2023b; Williams, 2006). Utilizing a range of tactics, these groups disseminated hate through newspapers targeting

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Republican Party officials, incited riots, and physically assaulted Black individuals attempting to participate in civil society.

Yet, the white backlash against Black education during this era was not exclusive to Black adults, but also extended to Black children. In an interview with Colonel Douglass Wilson, he poignantly describes the sociopolitical issues that remained after the Civil War, referring to the year 1866, as a "perfect reign of terror" (Albert, 1891, p. 138), stating,

The children at school were also the object of the same murderous spirit. When we sent our children to school in the morning we had no idea that we should see them return home alive in the evening. Big white boys and half-grown men used to pelt them with stones and run them down with open knives, both to and from school. Sometimes they came home bruised, stabbed, beaten half to death, and sometimes quite dead. My own son himself was often thus beaten. He has on his forehead to-day a scar over his right eye which sadly tells the story of his trying experience in those days in his efforts to get an education. I was wounded in the war, trying to get my freedom, and he over the eye, trying to get an education. So we both call our scars marks of honor. (Albert, 1891, pp. 139-140)

Though emancipated, white supremacists regularly enacted violence and assorted acts of terror against formerly enslaved people of all ages, specifically for their efforts to gain an education. To teach and learn was an act of Black freedom and was to face death (Butchart, 2013; Williams, 2006).

### **Jim Crow Era (1878-1950)**

The period following Reconstruction began with a bleak outlook, as the progress that formerly enslaved people made toward a public system that would educate all Black children was all but erased. The Supreme Court's decision in *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) legalized racial segregation under the "separate but equal" clause. Once again, antiblackness had been codified into law. The ruling led to the establishment of segregated and unequal educational provisions, where Black schools received fewer resources, facilities, opportunities, and funding (DuBois, 1935). The disparities proved taxing for African Americans, many of whom were devastatingly impoverished economically and educationally due to centuries of denial and confinement, perpetuating a vicious cycle of educational inequity. Anderson (1988) posits that, in 1900, just over a third (36%) of Black children ages 5-14 attended school, and most of them received fewer than six months of instruction each year. Far fewer students attended high school, with just 2.8% of Black children ages 15-19 attending high school; and several southern states, including Georgia, Mississippi, South Carolina, and North Carolina, having no public high schools for Black students at all in the early twentieth century (Anderson, 1988).

This regression, however, did not mean that the will of Black communities to educate their children went away. Black teachers, for instance, mobilized through professional and community organizations to advocate for improved facilities, longer school terms, and better salaries (Loder-Jackson, 2011; Walker, 2005). Additionally, with the help of the Rosenwald Fund, sponsored by Julius Rosenwald, a Jewish benefactor and philanthropist, Black communities across the South built schools for their children to attend (Aaronson & Mazumder, 2011). The Rosenwald Fund typically provided matching funds to Black communities, with the stipulation that the local community would contribute financially and through in-kind labor. As such, Black community members donated their own money, time, resources, and labor to build these schools (Hanchett, 1988). And because they also paid taxes, which were supposed to fund their children's education, Black communities endured double taxation. Yet, through their own determination and primarily using their own resources, Black communities were able to build Rosenwald schools throughout the South and, by 1940, two-thirds of Black children were enrolled in elementary school and nearly one quarter of Black teenagers attended high school (Anderson, 1988).

As Black communities endured double taxation to ensure that their children were properly educated (Walsh, 2018), white backlash to this perceived progress involved funding for these schools. While Black student enrollment grew exponentially, so did the disparity in funding for Black students and white students in public schools. During the Jim Crow era, state governments began to increase their funding for white schools significantly. For example, between 1914 and 1932, North Carolina increased its funding for white students from \$2.77 per student to \$3.11 per student. During the same time period, however, expenditures for Black students remained at \$1 per student (Hanchett, 1988). While Black communities and the Rosenwald Fund built schools for Black students, the state spent exponentially more funding to build schools for white students at a rapid pace, widening the disparities in educational access between Black and white students.

### **Civil Rights Era (1954-1969)**

The *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, handed down on May 17, 1954, is considered the biggest victory for Black education in the history of the United States. Led by *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* (Kansas), this U.S. Supreme Court decision also included *Briggs v. Elliott* (South Carolina), *Davis v. County School Board of Prince Edward County, Virginia*, and *Gebhart v. Belton* (Delaware) (Kluger, 2004). In a unanimous decision, the U.S. Supreme Court justices rendered legally-mandated school segregation unconstitutional, overturning the "separate but equal" doctrine established with the *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision of 1896. In the Court's decision, Chief Justice Earl Warren wrote that state-sanctioned racial segregation was a violation of the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment's equal protection clause (*Brown v. Board*, 1954). Just over a year

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later, in the *Brown II* decision, the justices noted that school desegregation should proceed “with all deliberate speed” (*Brown v. Board*, 1955, n.p.).

As the landmark decision represented unparalleled educational progress for Black Americans, the white backlash to this perceived social and political advancement was explosive and prompt. White parents and community members, school district personnel, and government officials resisted desegregation in a myriad of both bold and underhanded ways. Because they were no longer backed by an anti-Black U.S. Supreme Court decision, whites had to find new ways to promote antiblackness. Some states implemented strategies to delay or avoid the desegregation of schools, leading to prolonged disparities in educational opportunities and access for Black students (Kluger, 2004). Other strategies of resistance ranged from opening private religious schools, or segregation academies, for white children so that they could avoid desegregated schools altogether (Edmonds, 2020; Neal-Stanley, 2023a) to passing legislation that allowed white students to receive state-funded tuition vouchers to attend private and parochial schools (Bly, 1998; Venzant Chambers, 2019). Additionally, as schools desegregated, Black teachers and administrators lost their jobs en masse (Anderson, 1988; Fairclough, 2004; Horsford, 2010; Williams, 2006), leaving Black students to figure out the landscape of white schooling largely on their own.

Another strategy of white backlash to school desegregation is known as white flight, wherein white families chose to move out of urban areas and physically relocate to suburban areas (Giles, 1978; Wilson, 1987). This phenomenon led to the maintenance of segregated schools, urban school districts with fewer resources, and an inequitable school funding formula based on the value of the homes in the school community. Yet, perhaps the most egregious form of white backlash that those in power used to resist desegregation came in the form of closing entire school systems. In Virginia, Governor J. Lindsay Almond closed the six white schools that 17 Black students were to desegregate, leaving the schools closed for months (Bly, 1998). In Arkansas, Governor Orval Faubus closed all high schools in Little Rock for an entire year, instead of complying with desegregation orders (Gordy, 2009). In Prince Edward County, Virginia, a defendant in one of the *Brown* cases, the resistance was unparalleled. While white students attended private schools with state-funded tuition vouchers and county tax vouchers, Black students were left without schools to attend for 5 years (Bonastia, 2012), effectively denying Black students the civil and human right of education, resegregating schools, and maintaining separate educational systems. As a result, state and local education policy reproduced antiblackness.

### **Post-Civil Rights (1970-2000)**

By the late 1970's, the repercussion to *Brown v. Board* was mounting. Although one-term President Jimmy Carter established the Department of Education in 1979, by the time his successor, Ronald Reagan, took office in 1981, the Republican Party was cutting federal spending on education. They threatened

to abolish the Department of Education, and advocated for school vouchers so that public dollars could be spent at private schools (Love, 2023a; Ravitch, 2020). Many on the far-right believed that the federal government overreached its power and threatened states' rights with the desegregation of schools (Love, 2023b). Indeed, these anti-Black school reforms were the direct result of school desegregation legislation, the Civil Rights Movement, and the continued efforts toward full integration of Black students in U.S. schools and, more broadly, the full integration of Black people into the U.S. democratic structure. The same anti-Black orthodoxies that propagated the enslavement of millions of African descendent people continued to facilitate their educational exclusion, marginalization, and dehumanization.

On the heels of Black students integrating previously inaccessible educational institutions and narrowing the achievement gap in record numbers, in 1983, the Reagan administration released a 36-page report, *A Nation at Risk*, which would change the face of U.S. education as we know it. This document was full of misleading data and half-truths used to merge education with the attack on Black lives (Love, 2023b; Ravitch, 2020). The report promoted a false "failing schools" narrative, warning Americans about the rise of mediocrity, which threatened the safety of the nation. The reality, however, was that schools were not failing; in fact, students across racial and ethnic backgrounds were showing steady improvement. The fearmongering and narrative of failing schools can only be attributed to the increased academic achievement of Black students, which threatened the anti-Black ideology of Black intellectual inferiority.

The report was released a year after President Reagan, following in the footsteps of Richard Nixon, declared a War on Drugs, which scholars have considered a War on Black People (Love, 2023b). The War on Drugs and *A Nation at Risk* worked in concert to erode Black communities, mislabeling and misrepresenting thriving Black children as crack babies, thugs, and super predators. The legislative changes during this era laid the foundation for punitive education reforms and crime reforms that merged to overtake inner city schools across the nation (Weisman, 1983). According to Love (2023a),

Reforms allowed the disposal of Black children without a pang of conscience, and ushered in the emergence of high-stakes standardized testing that pushes students out of school, the D.A.R.E program that functions as the education arm of the War on Drugs, charter schools like KIPP where the strict discipline of 'no excuses' functions like zero tolerance, broken window theories of criminology, metal detectors, police patrolling school buildings and arresting and assaulting students, and truancy laws that fine parents and in some cases put them behind bars. (para. 6)

*A Nation at Risk* laid the foundation for No Child Left Behind (NCLB), the most punitive educational bill to date (Love, 2023b), authorizing school closings, funding cuts, and the firing of teachers and school administrators. Its impact is still being felt in the present.



As backlash to the social, political, and educational advancement of Black people during this era, whites aimed to distort the U.S. imagination through crisis making, without empirical evidence but based in bad faith (Tichavakunda, 2021) and antiblackness. The consequences of the Nation at Risk report are that it corroded public support for public education, drained resources from Black communities and schools, and effectively advanced the neoliberal education era (Hursh, 2007; Rury, 2012; Symcox, 2009). The push for increased competition, private and charter schools, free markets, local control, and standardized curriculum resulted in the public retreat from social justice programs (Symcox, 2009). It also neglected the historical and cultural relevance of education for Black communities, effectively marginalizing and demonizing Black ways of being and knowing in schools. Yet, it was during this era that these same Black youth created the global juggernaut called Hip Hop, which has spent the last 50 years showing the world how to party, dance, and educate youth on social justice issues such as police brutality, educational inequity, and global antiblackness (Akom, 2009; Petchauer, 2009).

### **Millennial Education (2000-2020)**

The educational landscape begun during the millennial era continues to evolve, shift, and respond to global and societal changes and technological advancements. Educational progress made during this era included increased high school graduation rates among Black students, heightened social-political awareness, efforts to address the opportunity gap and educational debt created in decades prior (Ladson-Billings, 2006), and the heightened rhetoric of inclusion, diversity, and equity in schools. It was also during this time that education researchers, policy makers and leaders began implementing culturally relevant (Ladson-Billings, 1995), responsive (Hammond, 2014) and sustaining (Paris & Alim, 2017) pedagogies, policies, and programs, in recognition of the importance of students' cultural backgrounds and experiences. Educators worked to foster a more inclusive, welcoming, and engaging learning environment for all students.

It was also during this era that student activism and advocacy swelled as a direct response to the forms of oppression happening in the streets and in schools. Students participated in local marches nationwide as part of the global Black Lives Matter movement, a social and political movement to highlight the continued discrimination, racism, inhumanity, and inequity experienced by Black people in America and across the globe (Cullors & bande, 2018). Empowered by this movement, student activists moved their efforts from the streets to their classrooms, bringing attention to the systemic inequalities that they faced in schools, advocating for greater curricular representation, diverse teachers, equitable discipline procedures, and liberatory pedagogies (Coles, 2019; Cumberbatch & Trujillo-Pagán, 2016; Jones, et al., 2020; Player et al., 2020). The millennial era was also marked by efforts of teacher education spaces to engage in self-reflection and self-examination regarding implicit bias against Black students (Whitford et al.,



2019), recognizing that Black students were often more likely to be punished, surveilled, and disciplined more often and more harshly than their white peers for similar behaviors.

While it would seem that schools were making progressive efforts toward educational justice, schools instead reverted back to, or propagated, anti-Black educational structures through their continued marginalization and punishment of Black students, even in their pronouncements, and sometimes sincere pursuits, of multiracial uplift and solidarity (Shange, 2019). In June 2020, for example, after a class discussion on race, racism, and police brutality, a Milton, Massachusetts school district placed sixth-grade English teacher Zakia Jarrett, a Black woman, on administrative leave after she was “accused of presenting inaccurate or inappropriate material about racial prejudice” (Young & Raphelson, 2020). The next month, Michigan judge, Mary Ellen Brennan, jailed a 15-year old Black girl after she failed to complete class assignments after the school switched to remote learning during the COVID-19 outbreak (Cohen, 2020). In Los Angeles, while expressing deep care for the safety and well-being of students and teachers, Councilman Giuseppe Buscaino announced plans to use public funds to sue the public school districts to force teachers and students to return to chronically underfunded, marginalized, and unsafe school buildings. In a study of responses to racial violence, Bridgeforth (2021) found that schools and school leaders regularly responded by prioritizing the reputation of the school and/or district, positioned racialized incidences as isolated and unrepresentative of the larger community, and refused to acknowledge the structural roots of antiblackness within their school and communities. Indeed, in this modern, “new spirit of capitalism” (Fraser, 2017), progressive sociopolitical movements in schools exude an aura of liberation, seem forward thinking, emancipatory, and morally advanced, but remain a racial dystopia for Black people, with neoliberal ends.

### **Mapping Connections Across Time and Space**

The history of Black education in the United States has been marked by various challenges and obstacles, from the era of slavery to the civil rights movement and beyond. Yet, Black people have continuously struggled for physical, psychological, legal, and educational freedom. When enslaving legislators made literacy illegal for enslaved people (and later all Black people), Black folks formed clandestine schools, teaching each other to read in the dark of night (Williams, 2006). And when state officials refused to provide the same resources for Black schools that they provided for white schools, Black parents, teachers, and community members pooled their resources and solicited help from non-profit organizations, churches, and white philanthropists to build their own communally bonded schools (Morris, 2002). We created and taught in Sabbath schools, freedom schools, and independent schools, developing an alternative curriculum with Black interest in mind. Yet, at every appearance of perceived or actual educational advancement, Black folks have been met with fierce white

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backlash, often in combination with systemic discrimination and violent resistance by whites who refuse to recognize Black humanity.

White backlash is a phenomenon that consists of institutionalized and interpersonal practices, plans, programs, and policies that halt, thwart, obscure, delay, or expel liberatory Black education from taking place. It is the manifestation of deeply rooted antiblackness and is evidenced through assorted acts of white rage, violence, and resistance. The legacy of limited educational opportunities and systemic barriers created during slavery and concretized during slavery's afterlives (Hartman, 2007) had and continues to have long-lasting effects on Black education in the United States through technologies of enclosure, captivity, social death (Patterson, 1982), and Black suffering that continuously unfold into the present (Dumas & ross, 2016). The struggle for equal access to education continues, as efforts are made to redress these historical injustices and promote educational equity for all students. As we continue to fight for schools that are equitable and just, it is also important to not only recognize but anticipate white backlash.

An understanding of white backlash troubles how we conceive of educational progress and exposes the imminence and inevitability of white backlash in the continued strivings toward educational justice. While the efforts and tactics have evolved across time, it can be expected that any effort toward educational equity, justice, and liberation in the future will be met with fierce resistance amongst whites whose power, dominance, and supremacy are threatened. Yet, it is the fear of white backlash that often obstructs educational stakeholders from engaging in radical, abolitionist, and anti-racist praxes toward educational freedom, which represents not only the crystallization of whiteness but the cementing of antiblackness in schools. Nonetheless, operating from a place of awareness and understanding of the pendulum movement of progression-regression helps us create the necessary tools to continue in the struggle for liberatory Black educational futures (Okello, 2022; Souto-Manning, 2021; Warren & Coles, 2020; Winn, 2022). It also provides timely and necessary lessons for contemporary educators committed to promoting equity in education.

An understanding of white backlash also helps us map the ways that this contemporary moment, in which states are passing laws against discussing race in K-12 classrooms in critical ways, is not new. Groups like Moms for Liberty, that seek to cease racially inclusive curricula, are no different than the Mothers' League that Governor Orval Faubus worked with as he sought to prevent school desegregation in Arkansas (Cope, 1998). Similarly, contemporary banning of books by Black authors like Toni Morrison, Maya Angelou, and James Baldwin resemble the literacy bans that Black people faced during the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Yet, even as we map the history of white backlash in the history of Black education, we simultaneously map what Mustaffa (2017) has coined as Black life-making, "the creative spaces of possibility and freedom Black people produce when practicing self-definition, self-care, and resistance" (p. 712), revealing a fierce cultural ethos of staunch persistence in our educational strivings.

Admittedly, mapping the history of white backlash in the history of Black education was a lofty task, and it is necessary to acknowledge that it is impossible

to fully survey this phenomenon, as it is ever evolving and unfolding in real time. It is our hope, though, that current and future works will continue with a deeper and more nuanced examination of white backlash as it continues to unravel. Yet, more than merely mapping white backlash to Black education, this paper aimed to provide a map of the past for our present times, as well as to offer a forecast of Black educational futures. We see Black people continue to fight for equitable education for Black children and youth, and by extension, all students, with implications for the future. As Black feminist and Afrofuturist writer Octavia Butler prophetically reminds us, “there is nothing new under the sun, but there are new suns” (as cited in Benjamin, 2017), imploring us to simultaneously face our racial realities (Bell, 1992b), while leaving room to radically imagine otherwise alternatives for liberatory educational futures for all.

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