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Article

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"I was called everything but a student": Blackness and the Social Death of Student Status

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ABSTRACT

Using the conceptual tools of anti-Blackness and the Black habitus to analyze the interviews of 38 Black youth who lived and grew up in Baltimore City, this study contends that the negative associations placed on Black youth continue to dehumanize them and prevent them from the full embodiment of student status. This article explores Blackness and its relationship with the privileges and immunities of student status within America's collective consciousness. Through the voices of Black youth, this article provides evidence that Black students in Baltimore have not been fully granted the immunity of student status. Instead, Black youth participants describe harm in their schools and neighborhoods, as well as a tenuous relationship between Blackness and "studentness."

KEYWORDS: anti-blackness; student status; Black Habitus; BlackCrit, and America's collective consciousness.

> "I was called everything but a student."
>
> Tyson, 23

> "Those kids were set up, they were treated like criminals before the first brick was thrown. With police unloading buses, and with the nearby metro station shut down, there were few ways for students to clear out."
>
> Baltimore teacher, quoted in *Mother Jones*, April 28, 2015

On April 27, 2015, after the funeral of Freddie Gray—the 25-year-old Black man who was murdered while in Baltimore Police Department custody—many students left Frederick Douglass High School and other surrounding schools in West Baltimore to head home. Unaware that the transportation hub they used daily had been closed by authorities in response to rumors of Black students planning riots after school, the high schoolers were left trapped and surrounded by police in full riot gear. Emotionally distraught by the killing of a Black youth in police custody, confronted with police ready for a riot, and stranded with no transportation to get home, some students started throwing rocks and bricks at the officers. Instead of engaging in dialogue that acknowledged the social life of these students and the denial of services to support their social, emotional, and safety needs during a crisis in their city, the media captured this gathering of students and immediately labeled them "thugs" and

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"looters." Politicians, including President Obama and former Baltimore Mayor Stephanie Rawlings-Blake, called these students "thugs" on local and national television. In contrast, some teachers, students, and parents gave an alternative account of what happened—an account that humanized student experiences and illuminated the systems that did not support them (McLaughlin and Brodey 2015). As one Baltimore teacher explained in the *Mother Jones* quote above, many teachers and parents felt that students were "set up" to be viewed as criminals rather than as mourners experiencing the loss of a fellow Black youth, or as hostages in an area where their sole transportation hub was abruptly disconnected.

Recounting how Baltimore youth were perceived in the aftermath of Freddie Gray is critical to understanding how youth feel that the collective society views them. "Collective consciousness" refers to the mental patterns, conscious or unconscious, that produce social structures and cognitive sense making (Berger and Luckmann 1966; Durkheim 1933). Contemporary sociological works note how Black youth are often labeled as "thugs," "bad persons," "criminals," "welfare queens," "unruly," and "animals" (Dow 2015, 2016; Smiley and Fakunle 2016). Moreover, researchers point to the adultification of Black students. Compared to white boys, Black boys are misperceived as older, viewed as guilty of suspected crimes, and faced with police violence if accused of a crime (Goff et al. 2014). Likewise, Black girls are perceived to need less nurturing, less protection, and less support, and to know more about sex and adult topics (Epstein, Blake, and Gonzalez 2017). Building on this understanding of Black youth in society, this author asks: Do Black youth perceive that they can be granted the privileges, immunities, and eligibility of student status in the educational and mental structures within America's collective consciousness? In essence, do Black students have the opportunity to embody student status in a society that has viewed their Blackness with disdain, disgust, and disregard (Dumas 2016)?

Since the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which sanctioned the Coleman Report (Coleman et al. 1966) that aimed to create equality of educational opportunity for Black students, sociologists and policymakers alike have highlighted many arenas for change: desegregation (Orfield 1969), achievement gaps (Ferguson 2002), tracking/detracking (Oakes 1985), charter schools (Scott 2009), chronic absenteeism (Balfanz and Byrnes 2012), standards and accountability (Taubman 2009), teachers' professional development (Darling-Hammond 1990), class size (Ehrenberg et al. 2001), school choice (Renzulli and Evans 2005), and social and emotional development (Gregory and Fergus 2017). Fully aware of racial disparities in educational outcomes, scholars aim to create equity through educational reforms without thoroughly investigating the social position of Blackness and studentness. *Studentness* refers to the ability of Black youth to be perceived within educational structures as students who embody the rights, protections, resources, opportunities, and treatment of learners within society. Sociologists have long asserted that researchers have yet to grapple fully with the social/status positioning of race and how it operates within social structures (Carter 2003; Lewis and Diamond 2015; Ray et al. 2017; Ridgeway 2014). These scholars point out how race is operationalized through social capital, inequalities, disparities, and gaps. Further, some BlackCrit scholars argue that more work is needed through a conceptual frame to stress the importance of the ontological positioning of Blackness in relation to humanness within educational structures, debates, and policies (Coles 2021; Dumas 2014; Dumas and Nelson 2016; Dumas and ross 2016). I agree with these scholars that antiblackness is a conceptual tool that helps researchers understand society's inability to acknowledge Black humanity and the social position of Blackness. While prior sociological work stressed the importance of inequalities, disparities, and gaps pertaining to the social position of Black students, the purpose of this article is to grapple with the relationship between humanness and studentness among Black students. Before I address forms of capital, inequalities, and gaps, however, we must address how society views their humanity.

This study is significant in its exploration of Blackness and its relationship with the privileges and immunities of student status within America's collective consciousness. The terms *privileges* and *immunities* have long been paired in legal documents to connote the "conferred special rights," protections, and exemptions of a certain group in reference to others (Lash 2009:1254). Accordingly, those given the status of student are granted certain privileges and immunities that potentiate academic and economic success. While many take for granted young people's student

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status, especially since schooling is typically compulsory until the age of 16, more work is needed to address student status and its relationship to Blackness in our collective consciousness. BlackCrit theorists (Dumas and ross 2016) have suggested that Blackness is associated with non-human status and social death. Therefore, we are left to grapple with the incompatibility of Blackness and studentness in America's collective consciousness. This study asks: How do Black youth—through their cognitive sense making—understand their relationship with student status? In what ways do they experience and perceive their (lack of) *privileges and immunities* usually accorded those with student status?

The author used two conceptual tools to uncover Black youths' relationship with student status and Blackness: *Black habitus and BlackCrit*. In-depth qualitative interview data from 38 Black youths ages 18 to 25 years old, who grew up and attended school in Baltimore, are used in this analysis, illuminating the voices of Black youth to help researchers understand their perceptions and experiences of (non) studentness. Through their interviews, Black youth reflect on past educational experiences and provide insight into how they feel society views them as students. Building on sociological and educational research that analyzes the social position of Blackness within educational settings, this article provides evidence that Black youth in Baltimore have not been fully granted the immunity of student status. Instead, Black youth participants describe harm in their schools and neighborhoods, as well as a tenuous relationship between Blackness and studentness—both consequences of a structural violence that has largely been avoided within America's collective consciousness. Further, participants describe ways in which they embody the social and cognitive structures that foster social death through antiblackness, impacting their student experience within educational structures. I posit that Black people are seen not only as inhuman but also have not been afforded social structures that support the privileges and immunities of student status within educational structures and America's collective consciousness.

THEORIZING NON-STUDENT STATUS THROUGH THE BLACK HABITUS

I have developed a theoretical framework that aims to rearticulate, connect, and build on the Black habitus (Lofton and Davis 2015) and BlackCrit (Dumas and ross 2016) to provide conceptual tools to theorize the social position of Black students and non-student status.

Many sociologists have adopted Bourdieu's (1969) concept of habitus to grapple with how social structures interact or become mental structures (Wacquant 2016). Bourdieu (1977) states that the habitus is a "system of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures" (95). For Bourdieu, the embodiment of structuration and individual actions account for habitus (King 2000; Lizardo 2004). Sociologists of education have referred to the habitus as the "unconscious expression of style and strategy that varies systematically by social position" (Harrison, Hernandez, and Stevens 2022:136). Sociologists who centralize race and racism in their analysis have often adopted the concept of habitus to bring attention to the racialized habitus (Ball 2022; Bonilla-Silva, Goar, and Embrick 2006; Perry 2012; Riel 2021; Sallaz 2010; Wallace 2020). Building on this work by exploring the distinct experiences of Black youth and family members, Lofton and Davis (2015) introduced the conceptual tool of the Black habitus, or the *structured structures* that Black students encounter in their homes, schools, and neighborhoods that obstruct youth's development of the skills necessary for academic and economic success while simultaneously allowing the production of cognitive sense making, beauty, knowledge, and culture as social agents.

Black youth are active social agents who not only interact within social structures (structuration) but are "engaging embodied instruments of cognitive construction" (Wacquant 2016:67) of their Blackness. Sociologists of education have begun using the Black habitus to explore Black and Latino educational trajectories (Carey 2016), Black boys building trust and resilience (Rhoden 2018), Black boys in the United States successfully navigating structural impediments and interpersonal challenges (Brooms 2019), Black parent involvement (Budhai and Grant 2022), and transit immobility with Black youth (Purifoye 2020). Building on the Black habitus regarding the distinct social position of Black youth, I acknowledge the social death that has occurred in the afterlife of slavery for Black youth within the Black habitus of Baltimore.

BlackCrit scholars agree with the concept of the social death of blackness and thus ineligibility for full citizenship in our current society (Dumas 2016). According to Patterson (1982), social death

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is an institutionalized process of erasing a group's identity and relationship to society to maintain domination over the enslaved. Social death is the predetermined nature of globalized antiblackness; the dehumanization, dishonor, gratuitous violence, and natal alienation of Black bodies are inherent, particularly within the collective consciousness of the United States (Hartman and Wilderson 2003; Wilderson 2020). Agreeing with Hartman (1997), Dumas (2016) contends that we are in the afterlife of slavery. In describing this afterlife, Hartman (1997) states, "Black lives are still imperiled and devalued by a racial calculus and a political arithmetic that were entrenched centuries ago" (6). In the afterlife of slavery, non-human does not equate with non-learner within the American collective consciousness. Blackness holds a unique relationship with studentness and learner (Grant 2020). While BlackCrit theorists have pointed out the ontological relationship of Blackness, humanness, and full citizenship through social death, I further contend that social death does not allow for the immunity, privileges, and eligibility of student status. Building on the conceptual tool of social death, I examine the tensions and experiences of Blackness and studentness among "Black students."

BlackCrit scholars apply the concept of social death to the field of education by exposing how antiblackness is endemic to social, economic, historical, and cultural dimensions (Dumas and ross 2016). Antiblackness is the socially constructed embodiment of suffering and resistance and calls attention to the structural violence that Black people endure (ross 2020). While antiblackness spans many disciplines, education theorists suggest that the violent educational structure that Black youth undergo forces students to encounter disdain, dishonor, and suffering (Dumas 2014). Building on the BlackCrit embodiment of suffering from structural violence, I consider antiblackness and expose the relationship of Blackness and student status. Antiblackness connects educational and sociological theories to understand the structural violence that students endure and the cognitive structural patterns that Black youth embody to help them understand their ontological relationship with student status.

Using Black habitus and BlackCrit, this theorizing explores Black youths' embodiment of the social and cognitive structures that foster social death through antiblackness and how this impacts the student experience within current educational structures. This embodiment fails to recognize Black humanity and understand Black youth as students. Therefore, educational reforms that aim to address equity must first address the privileges and immunities of student status for Black youth within the educational structures, which are linked to cognitive sense making and social agents that position Blackness as coterminous with non-student status.

Fugitive Desire and Radical Hope for Student Status

Student: scholar; learner; one who studies

Merriam-Webster (n.d.)

Both observations' honesty about the failure of American democracy speak to darkness and suffering; the ontological absence of Blacks in the glories and everydayness of "We the people" and the denial of Black people's full participation in US civil society because of the color of their skin. Although, for almost 400 years, African Americans have had to deal with social and political death and the negation of their humanity, they had maintained hope—a belief in themselves both as individuals and as a collective since 1619.

Carl A. Grant (2020:65)

The failure to recognize and protect Black people as students and learners is rooted in slavery and currently normalized in contemporary society. To better understand non-student status, one must link historical terror with an inability to acknowledge Black education within the dominant narrative, under-investment in Black schools and communities, and structural violence that is often overlooked in the collective consciousness. However, as Grant (2020) argues, the absence of Black people's full citizenship and the negation of their humanness have not prevented them from raising a radical hope to obtain student status—a hope of internal and external structures that foster them as learners, educators, and the embodiment of student status. This literature review highlights both Black people's cognitive mental patterns and social agency regarding their determination to learn educational skills, as well as America's inability to produce social structures to acknowledge and support Black people as students and learners, and the cognitive avoidance that persistently fails to provide Black students the privileges and immunities of student status.

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History of Non-Student Status

Within the collective consciousness of the Antebellum South and Reconstruction era, people do not consider Black people's desire to learn (Coles 2021) and the fugitive educational experiences (Givens 2021) that challenged white supremacy. During this time, Black people were viewed as socially dead entities who did not have the ability to read, write, and perform mathematics. Black people maintained the radical hope (Grant 2020) that education would free their minds, if not their bodies.

Confronted with gratuitous violence, some Black people resisted anti-student laws and practices during slavery, teaching themselves how to read, do math, and write (Williams 2007). In response, codes were developed making it illegal to teach slaves to read or write. Anti-literacy laws gave states the right to severely punish, beat, and amputate the fingers and toes of enslaved people who were students of writing, reading, and mathematics (Grant 2020). As a result, Black people covertly developed educational skills as a way of protecting themselves from state-sanctioned violence and terror (Givens 2021; Gundaker 2007). Determined to learn, these enslaved social actors defied and resisted anti-student laws, customs, and norms with the hope of radically liberating their minds while their bodies remained enslaved (Grant 2020). Although in the collective consciousness of society Blackness is socially dead, researchers now share a counter-narrative that highlights how enslaved and freed Blacks during slavery had their own experience as students and learners.

Directly after slavery, former slaves' desire for an education persisted and flourished (Franklin and Anderson 1978). Many started their own schools in churches and developed the blueprint for state common schools in America (Anderson 1988). While white missionaries and philanthropists supported some of these schools, it was Black determination and the radical hope for freedom that led them to perceive themselves as students and learners. This internal perception of Black people as students, learners, and participants in the democratic process led to white terror for Black people. White missionaries and philanthropists wanted schools for the former slaves to perpetuate Black inferiority and maintain a racial caste system in which Black people remained common laborers (Anderson 1988). Moreover, Black people were paying a double tax to support both the white schools that their children could not attend *and* the all-Black schools that their children could attend (Franklin 2002). In encountering racial terror, double taxation, and a racial caste system, Black people were not able to build or maintain their own schoolhouses (Anderson 1988).

After Reconstruction, Black students attended separate and unequal schools that enforced a dual system fraught with Black non-student status sentiment (Harlan 1958), though many dedicated teachers and principals within the Black community remained committed to the radical hope of education (Walker 1996; Walker and Byas 2009). Early education research highlights how Black children attended segregated schools with minimal resources, broken infrastructure, a dearth of good teachers, and few benefits associated with school peers and prestige. Yet this state-sanctioned non-student status did not prevent Black people from learning and fostering meaningful relationships in their schools and communities. In fact, many Black schools became pillars of their communities (Morris 1999). Black teachers and principals who lived in these neighborhoods were concerned about their students' overall developmental needs (Tillman 2004; Walker 1996). The students were perceived as embodying student status, as active members destined to bring radical hope and change. As a result, these schools and communities produced change agents, educational leaders, and founders of schools such as Ida B. Wells, Anna Julia Cooper, Septima Poinsette Clark, Mary McLeod Bethune, and Ulysses Byas (Charron 2009; Johnson 2000; McCluskey and Smith 1999; Walker and Byas 2009). While many narratives of Black education before *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) focus on Black inferiority and the struggle for integration, those stories hide a deeper issue of Black social positioning preventing students from learning and engaging in the democratic process and the active agency within the Black community striving for radical hope and successful educational outcomes.

What We Lost with Brown

The Supreme Court ruled in *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) that "separate" was inherently unequal in education, but Black people aiming to receive student status in desegregated schools quickly discovered that this was not the promised land (Randolph 2014). The nation struggled to implement desegregation in many schools, and once it did, many whites moved to the suburbs and other predominantly white school districts. Aiming to receive student status in racially diverse schools, many Black

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students encountered angry white mobs who were bent on ensuring that their schools maintain all white students. Conjointly, many Black teachers and principals lost their jobs or were demoted (Fultz 2004; Tillman 2004). While the courts ruled in favor of desegregation, the social positioning of Blackness as non-students allowed them to continue facing violence in the hope of radical change. Moreover, the educational pipeline for Black teachers and principals providing economic stability within Black communities was subjugated by white parents, teachers, administrators, and policymakers. While the goal of integration is noble, researchers often minimize or fail to acknowledge the price that Black students, teachers, principals, and community members paid for *Brown* (Ladson-Billings 2004; Tillman 2004). This noble goal fails to realize that the social movements for equality could not change the perception of Blackness within America's collective consciousness. In other words, closer proximity to whiteness did not guarantee a just distribution of resources, opportunities, and employment. Also, the disdain, disregard, and disgust were operationalized in new ways (Dumas 2016).

Non-Student Status Continues Today

Sociologists of education point out that the educational structures remained segregated in different and new ways (Orfield and Frankenberg 2014). White parents and their children who did not leave their desegregated school continued non-student status through a racialized tracking system (Lewis and Diamond 2015; Oakes 1985; Tyson 2011) that allowed the social death to continue in the same school, with Black students not receiving the same resources, opportunities, and prestige. Research shows that most Black students in these racially diverse schools, regardless of their abilities and skills, were placed in lower-track classes and did not have the opportunity to receive the high-status knowledge required for college and career readiness (Lucas and Berends 2007; Mickelson 2001). Further, this racialized tracking was not relegated to just one generation of students; rather, since *Brown,* the continuing non-student status of Black people has allowed multiple generations to stay in lower-track placement in racially diverse schools (Lofton 2015, 2019). After decades of desegregation, Black people have moved to different schools, tracks, and neighborhoods in hopes of gaining the social position of student status, but data continue to show the social death of student status.

While researchers often point to white students and parents who embody separatist views and maintain inequalities by weaponizing their cultural capital to produce stratified educational structures (Lofton 2019; Wells and Serna 2010), the social death of student status for Black students is also state-sponsored. Embedded within state constitutions, all fifty states are obligated to provide students with a high quality public schooling option. For example, state constitutions have adopted the language of "uniform, efficient, safe, secure and high-quality" or "adequate public education" and a "thorough and efficient System of Free Public Schools" (Anyon 2005). While state constitutions use different language, it is still evident that states must provide students with high quality education. However, for far too long, Americans within their collective consciousness have produced non-student status policies that prevent some students from embracing needed resources and opportunities (Carter and Welner 2013; Ladson-Billings 2006), receiving high-quality teaching (Darling-Hammond 2007), taking honors and advanced placement courses (Oakes 1985), and experiencing educational pathways that prepare them for college and career readiness (Balfanz et al. 2016).

Sociologists of education also argue that policymakers and researchers have failed to acknowledge Black girls and boys as human beings who have educational desires and whose lives matter (Brooms and Wint 2021; Carey 2019; Coles 2021). Moreover, a consequence of educational reform has been the closing of many schools in Black communities; students and community members are still mourning these unjustified losses (Ewing 2018). Researchers continue to show the importance of meaningful relationship through uncovering the social and cultural capital in Black schools and communities (Carter 2003; Richards 2020), but the iconic images (Anderson 2015) of Blackness in America's collective consciousness continue to produce policies that subjugate these lived experiences and close many schools in Black communities. In other words, if one is not perceived as human, one is not able to be a student or learner who deserves meaningful relationships in the school and community.

Building on this research, I question and examine the basic assumption of Black youths' student status in hopes of radical education change and internal and external validation of the knowledge that Black students embody. This research provides a missing link by uncovering the ontological relationship of Blackness and studentness to understand the everyday positioning of Black youth in their

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homes, schools, and communities. Acknowledging that antiblackness and non-student status have manifested themselves in different ways at different times, this article contributes to the research by concluding that not only are Black people seen as inhuman, but they have not been afforded the social structures to support the privileges and immunities of student status in healthy and safe educational structures and America's collective consciousness.

METHOD: CAPTURING NON-STUDENT STATUS

This qualitative case study aims to provide innovative understandings of how Black youth experience the social death of student status. This section highlights the research study site, interviews within Black spaces, and data analysis of antiblackness through the lens of structural violence within predominantly Black neighborhoods in Baltimore and an education debt school district.

Sample: Researching the Black Butterfly

Baltimore's population is 61.6 percent Black, 29.2 percent white, and 5.6 percent Hispanic or Latino (U.S. Census Bureau 2022). While Black individuals constitute the majority of city residents, the city remains extremely racially segregated. Some researchers have referred to this phenomenon as "the Black Butterfly" to illustrate the concentration of Black residents throughout the city in contrast to the L-shaped pattern for white residents (Brown 2021). Brown (2021) refers to Black Butterfly as it "denotes not only where Black Baltimoreans are geographically clustered but also where capital is denied and structural disadvantages have accumulated due to the lack of capital access" (9). Seen with an antiblackness lens, Black butterflies are often perceived as emblematic of death and misfortune; likewise, the majority of Black neighborhoods are confronted with their own social death through high rates of poverty, disinvestment in their communities, and persistent violence (McKittrick 2011). From 2012 to 2016, areas that were less than 50 percent Black received four times the investments made to communities of more than 85 percent Black people (Theodos et al. 2020). Black communities in Baltimore also suffer from high rates of unemployment, hyper-incarceration, abandoned homes, police brutality, violence, and property crime (Baltimore Neighborhood Indicators Alliance [BNIA] 2019).

Two weeks after the funeral of Freddie Gray, I went into Black communities in Baltimore to understand how youth were making sense of the social structures and their everyday lived experiences as they confront education, housing, police brutality, violence, low-wage jobs, and unemployment. At the time, Baltimore was a city of unrest. Many Black youth had gone into the streets, protesting the brutality and injustices they were experiencing. I mainly interviewed youth who lived in West Baltimore, specifically the historically Black neighborhoods of Upton/Druid Hill, Mondawmin, Harlem Park, Coppin Heights, Walbrook, Easterwood, Rosemont, Penn-North, Reservoir Hill, and Sandtown-Winchester. Common traits of these neighborhoods outside of their Black-majority population were that they are areas of intergenerational and concentrated poverty. The majority of the youth interviewed grew up in Sandtown-Winchester, the same area where Freddie Gray grew up and within the Black Butterfly. In Sandtown-Winchester, the poverty rate is over 40 percent, the unemployment rate is 20 percent, and the earnings of those who are employed are considered overwhelmingly low-wage. Sandtown-Winchester is a portrait of economic and social disparity, with higher-than-national average rates of incarceration (3,074 per 100,000 compared to 455 per 100,000 nationally); high juvenile arrest rates (211 per 100,000, compared to 39 nationally); and a lower life expectancy (65.3 years, compared to 79 nationally) (Ponsot and Costa-Roberts 2015). In 2015, 35 percent of Baltimore youth ages 16 to 19 were also unemployed (Baltimore's Promise 2018).

Much like the communities in which the participants lived, the schools they attended are also embedded in structural violence. Researchers suggest that the Maryland State government has consistently underfunded Baltimore City Public Schools in violation of constitutional rights (Shiller 2019). The educational debt, according to one Baltimore teacher, Corey Gaber, is around $3.2 billion per year (Gaber 2017). In Baltimore City Public Schools, math proficiency, English/language arts proficiency, algebra proficiency, graduation rates, and college readiness scores are considerably lower than those of other Maryland school districts (Baltimore's Promise 2018). Therefore, Black students are not the only ones confronted with a social death; the structures that should support them are also decaying and cause harm to the quality of life and educational trajectories of all students who attend this school district.

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Interviewing the Social Position of Blackness within Black Spaces

While the social position of Blackness is perceived to be socially dead, Black youth are social actors who are making meaning of their world and producing their own spaces. I designed a qualitative research study that employed ethnographic case study methods (Creswell 2008; Merriam 2009) to uncover how youth were making sense of their social world. I conducted in-depth one-on-one interviews with Black youth, school administrators, teachers, school district leaders, city council members, and parents (n = 50). Of the total sample, 38 of the interviewees were youth (ages 18–24) (table 1).

Table 1. Participant Demographics

N	Name (Pseudonym)	Sex	Age	College/Work Status	West Baltimore Location
1	Myer	M	22	No College/LWJ*	Sandtown
2	Jonathan	M	23	No College/LWJ	Sandtown
3	Able	M	18	Community College	Penn-North
4	Martin	M	18	No College/LWJ	Sandtown
5	Matthew	M	19	No College/Unemployed	Coppin Heights
6	Janet	F	22	Community College	Reservoir Hill
7	Natalie	F	19	No College/LWJ	Sandtown
8	Samantha	F	18	Community College	Sandtown
9	Lisa	F	22	No College/LWJ	Harlem Park
10	Alexa	F	18	Community College	Penn-North
11	Janet	F	23	Completed 4-year univ.	Reservoir Hill
12	Shannon	F	20	No College/LWJ	Harlem Park
13	Heather	F	21	Community College	Walbrook
14	Karrow	F	18	Community College	Sandtown
15	Dotty	F	20	No College/LWJ	Sandtown
16	Tyson	M	23	No College/LWJ	Sandtown
17	Ethan	M	23	One Year Community College/LWJ	Mondawmin
18	Mark	M	21	One Year Community College/LWJ	Upton
19	Karen	F	19	Community College	Coppin Heights
20	Kathy	F	18	Community College	Penn-North
21	Lisa	F	19	No College/LWJ	Sandtown
22	Jule	M	24	No College/LWJ	Sandtown
23	Jamal	M	20	One Year Community College/LWJ	Penn-North
24	Kenny	M	22	No College/LWJ	Walbrook
25	Common	M	19	Four-Year University	Rosemont
26	Alexander	M	20	Community College	Harlem Park
27	Anthony	M	21	No College/LWJ	Sandtown
28	Jasmine	F	22	Completed 4-year univ.	Walbrook
29	Tyler	M	22	Community College	Coppin Heights
30	Latonya	F	21	No College/LWJ	Sandtown
31	Tarvis	M	18	Community College	Rosemont
32	Rudy	M	19	No College/LWJ	Sandtown
33	Camera	F	18	Community College	Upton
34	Shante	F	18	No College/LWJ	Harlem Park
35	Steve	M	22	Community College	Rosemont
36	Odis	M	24	One Year Community College/LWJ	Sandtown
37	Dylan	M	20	No College/Unemployed	Sandtown
38	Rebeca	F	21	No College/LWJ	Sandtown
	Males	**20**			
	Females	**18**			
	N=	**38**			

LWJ = Lower than Livable Wage Job

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I aimed to interview this age group to highlight how they made sense of their past K–12 educational experiences after being a few years removed, supplementing existing literature that focuses on the student status of Black school-aged youth. These in-person interviews ranged from 40 minutes to two hours and were all conducted in Baltimore City. I used purposive sampling (Small 2009) to obtain an understanding of the structuration they encountered and their cognitive sense-making regarding race, education, and student status. This population was chosen because they had recently attended Baltimore City Public Schools and lived in high levels of poverty. I used a purposive sample of these youth because they were no longer in middle or high school and could therefore reflect on their K-12 educational experiences and perceptions of the world.

From April to October 2015, I recruited, interviewed, and observed youth in their community. I asked youth to recommend other potential interviewees (Weiss 1994), and this snowball sampling increased the number of respondents (Small 2009). All interviews were in-depth and semi-structured; that is, all questions were preset, and respondents answered open-ended questions (Merriam 2009) (Figure 1).

The majority of youth interviewees were attending community college, unemployed, or working low-wage jobs. Eight youth were either attending a 4-year university or college in Baltimore or had just graduated from college. Two Black females had recently graduated from college and were becoming teachers in the Fall of 2015. I chose to interview participants in traditional Black social spaces in Baltimore all within the aforementioned "Black Butterfly," such as the Mondawmin Mall, Druid Hill Park, Baltimore City Community College Liberty Campus, Arch Social Club, Coppin State University, and Morgan State University (Figure 2).

I also obtained the voices of 22 parents, teachers, school administrators, city council members, and school district administrators to triangulate the data by supporting the student voices. Triangulation refers to using different methods or data to bring understanding to the participants' voices and experiences (Patton 1999). To triangulate the data, I collected archival data from the Baltimore-based *Afro-American* newspaper, *The New York Times*, and historical maps of Baltimore neighborhoods. I also used journal articles and historical texts to help me understand how young Black youth make sense of their social position, disinvested Black neighborhoods, and their educational experiences.

Data Analysis

After conducting all interviews, I used a professional transcription service to transcribe them. I loaded the transcripts and field notes into the Computer-Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CQDAS) Dedoose, which enabled me to code all data. While coding, I searched for and labeled

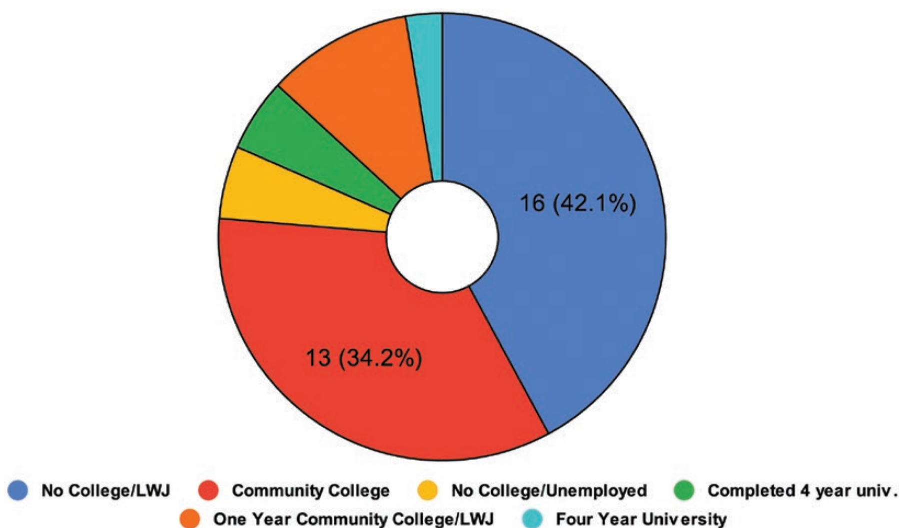

Figure 1. Count of College/Work Status by Student

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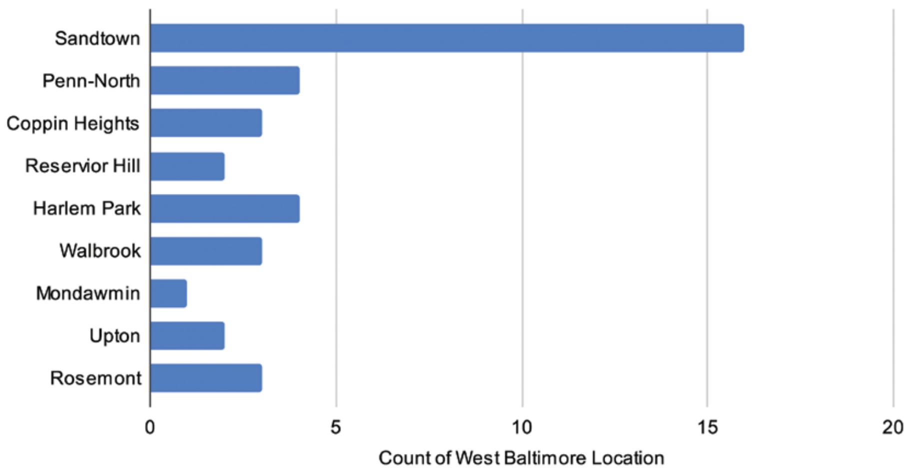

Figure 2. Count of West Baltimore Location

meanings at the intersection of social position and student status (Saldaña 2009). I was able to conduct cycles of coding by reading and reflecting on the data multiple times (Saldaña 2009). I discovered that the issues Black youth expressed went beyond structural inequalities but were rooted in the social positioning of Blackness and its incongruent relationship with student status. These findings moved me away from educational reforms that fail to address the relationship of Blackness and student status. After coding and reading for three years, I discovered that these findings aligned with an antiblackness framing, as mentioned above. In conversation with the literature on antiblackness, I developed analytic thinking that allowed me to organize thoughts and categorize the data (Saldaña 2009) in ways that spoke to the social death of student status for Black people youth.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The Social Death of Being a Student (Non-Student Status)

The in-depth, semi-structured interviews captured many aspects of the everyday struggles that students encounter in their homes, schools, and communities. Coding uncovered 25 overarching themes. For this article, I explore non-student status, which sheds light on how students perceived lack of privileges and immunities of student status in America's collective consciousness and policy debates. Youth felt that non-student status blocks resources and maintains education debts. They contended that non-student status is within and beyond the institution: "It is in the air."

Everything But a Student

The Black youth who were interviewed felt they were more associated with being a criminal rather than a student. People who have been formally ascribed the label of "criminal" in society are denied various protections, rights, and privileges and are often regarded as a social hindrance to be pushed out of society both during and after incarceration. These negative labels arose in 21 of the 38 interviews. When referring to the collective consciousness of society, youth often used the terms *they* or *people*. One interviewee, Tyson, expanded on "they." While discussing his childhood, he stated that he was called everything "but a student" while in school. When I asked what he meant, he said that "they" called him "every bad name in the book." Tyson added, "They don't see our pain and they don't see our issues. They only think that we are bad." Referring to himself and other Black students, Tyson contended that being called negative names and associated with negative characteristics meant that people were unable to see the pain and complex issues Black youth. For him and many others, the aftermath of Freddie Gray's murder epitomized the negative labels placed on Black youth and the inability of media, politicians, and society in general to acknowledge that multiple systems have failed young Black people and diminished their student status.

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Tyson was not alone. Other Black youth brought these negative associations with Blackness that hindered their social position as students:

> *Tyler (age 21)*: We were thugs to them. Not students.
> *Anthony (age 21):* Teachers thought that I was crazy. They were afraid of me.
> *Dylan (age 20):* Oh yeah, they think we are angry and dumb. Arrogant. Always got a chip on our shoulder. I very well disagree, a lot of us can read and write and put forth effort. I very well disagree with how they view us.
> *Tarvis (age 18):* I'm a prison number. They already got a prison number for us. My father already had one, so they had one for me. Sad to say, I got one. So, after that, they got one for my son. I'll be damned… for both of them… I'll be damned if they fell into them numbers.
> *Jule (age 24):* You're labeled as unruly. You are labeled as not being able to communicate properly. They look at you as a criminal.

Although Tyson, Tyler, Anthony, Dylan, Tarvis, and Jule regularly attended elementary, junior high, and high school, and even graduated from the school district, they felt society did not allow them the immunity of student status because they were constantly viewed as "thugs," "crazy," "criminals," or "animals," as well as "angry," "dumb," "prison number," and "unruly." These Black youth carry the burden of a collective society who cannot see them for who they are and forces them to endure a negative social position because of their Blackness in Baltimore.

While Black male youth focused on criminality and non-human descriptors, Black female youth agreed and highlighted welfare queen stereotypes and the racist notion of angry Black women. Karrow (age 18) and Janet (age 23) make analogous points:

> *Karrow:* We're all thugs. We're all uneducated, welfare queens, all of us have fourteen, fifteen kids and get Section 8. A lot of people have told me until I open my mouth, they've made a lot of assumptions.
> *Janet:* To them, we are prostitutes. We are angry and mad. What do they call us, angry Black women? They just do not get us. They do not see us trying to better ourselves. I get so hurt because my mother works so hard and we do not have anything.

The statements of Karrow and Janet help the reader understand that social death does not allow for Black women and girls to have the privilege and immunities of student status. The issue is not only Blackness, but how the intersection of gender, class, and sexuality contributes to the nonhuman status of non-male bodies. Karrow informed us that Black womanhood is often associated with not being educated and being a "welfare queen" with many children. Karrow also noted how Black girl bodies are perceived to be not smart. Not only did Karrow attend a decaying educational structure, but she personally must carry the burden of people perceiving that she is not smart because she is Black and female. Similarly, Janet pointed to how Black women are viewed as tantamount to prostitutes and are angry and mad. In the afterlife of slavery, Janet asserted that the view of Black girls "as prostitutes" opens up room to discuss the ways Black girls are vulnerable to sexual violence and are not afforded the innocence of childness, studentness, and womanhood. While Blackness is associated with social death, the intersection of race and gender creates unique manifestations of antiblackness and misogyny. For Janet, this misrecognition within America's collective consciousness is painful because Black women like Janet and her mother work hard in society but are often not recognized, and, therefore, do not gain capital. Karrow furthered the discussion on the disassociation with student and learner:

> *Karrow:* The welfare queen that's uneducated, always on her behind doing nothing with unruly kids and promiscuous. I can go on and on. It's not good at all.
> *Researcher:* Okay, how do you cope with that yourself knowing that people may perceive you a certain way?
> *Karrow:* I didn't like it at first. Being younger, it made me shy because I would just rather not say anything. In my mind, it was just like, let them perceive whatever they want to perceive. Then I was like, if they're not being corrected, then it will continue.

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Karrow once again mentioned how society has negative views associated with Black female students. What is also interesting is how she copes with these negative associations with Black girlhood. Karrow stated that she was first shy, but then felt that if these views were not corrected, they would continue. What Karrow helps researchers understand is that Black students must not only navigate the non-student status but must also cope with and make meaning of the negative associations of Blackness they endure. Not only missing are the privileges and immunities of student status but also opportunities to be free of negative associations with Black female youth.

One critical finding of this study is that many youth must confront not only a decaying educational structure but also embodied negative associations with their Blackness that obstruct them from being perceived as students or learners. For them, politicians, the media, and Americans fixate on negative labels that perpetuate social death and keep them from obtaining full student status. The youth felt that the negative connotations did not allow Blackness to be seen in multiple ways. In their view of society, "they" could not form multiple identities from Blackness. For these students, deeply rooted in America's consciousness was the idea that Black youth could not just be students who wanted to learn or go home after school. Americans had already decided they were guilty of wrongdoing and looked for actions to satisfy or justify this preconceived view, further dehumanizing them. Regardless of the academic identities they were aiming to foster, they all had to confront their social position within America's collective consciousness. Researchers, policymakers, and politicians must not assume Black youth have student status. In fact, these youth are voicing the need to question this basic assumption. While many Black adolescents attend education debt schools daily to gain college and career readiness skills, researchers often take their student status for granted. As the students saw it, "they"—or America's collective consciousness—continue to render them as social outcasts, thugs, prison numbers, and welfare queens—all of which are additional cognitive burdens they personally endure that hinder their opportunities to learn and progress freely.

Articulating the Education Debt/Theft as a Non-Student

Without the privileges and immunities of student status, the Baltimore youth I interviewed vehemently discussed the under-resourced schools they attended. No one described their school district as a "thorough and efficient System of Free Public Schools," mandated by the Constitution of Maryland (art. VIII, § 1). As in many other states, Maryland educational agencies are required to offer students an "adequate" or "thorough and efficient" education system. However, these youth mentioned lack of adequate school infrastructure, including inadequate classroom equipment, few books, hot and cold classrooms, lack of culturally relevant pedagogy and curriculum, and insufficient school personnel. When I asked Jasmine (age 22) what came to mind about her past educational experience in the school district, she said:

> We didn't have computer labs. We didn't have enough books, desks, chairs, classrooms, teachers, to be able to teach us. Those are the resources that were basically missing.

Jasmine was not isolated in her opinion. All the interviewees mentioned a lack of resources in their previous school experiences. Like Jasmine, several of the youth discussed the consistent patterns of inexperienced teachers working in the school district. That is, researchers who study predominantly Black schools have shown how structural racism (Noguera and Alicea 2020) has allowed local property taxes to influence school funding and permit a consistent pattern of inexperienced teachers teaching Black students (Darling-Hammond 2007; Fensterwald 2018; Ladson-Billings 2006). These findings are devastating but not surprising, as they continue the historic pattern of education debt. What is new from this study, however, is the youth's articulation of these inequities and how their sense making connects lack of resources and poor teacher quality with a devaluation of Black life and student status.

The words of Shannon (age 20) allow us to understand how non-student status prevents researchers, policymakers, and politicians from valuing Black people youth as students:

> We're not financially valuing Black kids, or financially just putting money where it needs to be with Black young people. Then, of course, they're not going to have the same opportunity, the same benefits, the same just graduation rates or reading rates that other students may have.

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Shannon, who graduated from Baltimore City Public Schools and was about to start her first year of teaching, reflected on the lack of resources she encountered as a student. She contended that when the system does not financially value Black people as students, then opportunities, benefits, graduation rates, and reading rates all suffer. Shannon's articulation of her reality can lead researchers to understand that by failing to acknowledge youth as students or to financially value their schools, the collective society will continue to block successful academic outcomes.

Shannon, like the majority of youth, confirmed that lack of books, desks, chairs, toilet tissue, soap, buses, counselors, AP courses, classrooms, special education services, and high-quality teachers were the consequence of the collective consciousness and policy conversations in which they occupied a non-student status. As Shaun (age 19) stated, "They are doing this on purpose. Maryland is one of the richest states, but we do not have stuff we need in our schools." Shaun has a point: Maryland has the most millionaires per capita, but students in Baltimore often lack basic necessities.

In addition to lack of basic necessities, youth also described a schooling experience that produced an environment they felt was more militaristic than school-like. Jamal (age 20) made this point extremely clear:

> Most of the time, when you sit in a classroom in Baltimore City, I know because I've gone from K to 12, your day is filled with being treated like you're a part of a military society and not a student in the school. You're constantly yelled at. Constantly punished. Constantly hear doors slamming throughout the day. Books being thrown. Teachers just at their wit's end. It's not a positive environment to learn.

For Jamal, this non-student status produced an ineffective learning environment. Jamal helps researchers understand that this non-student status is not only related to how people view Black students, but it also structures Black youth environments and how they are treated.

A number of the youth mentioned that school police officers and teachers have physically harmed them while in school. Five youth reported times when teachers threw chairs at them or another person in the classroom. Many agreed with Jamal's assessment of the hostile environments, including yelling, throwing objects, and punishing. These youth felt they encountered these unhealthy and violent environments because of the negative labels that have been associated with them—again, blocking an understanding of their student status and a normalization of their environment. Instead, the environment aimed to control and oppress them. While the first finding suggests that the collective consciousness of Blackness has perpetuated the social death of student status, this finding demonstrates the mental pattern that is connected with state-sponsored educational structures. The disinvestment of resources, transportation, opportunities, school infrastructure, and school personnel is led by the state of Maryland. Either the state does not view youths' Blackness as connected with student status and continues social death, or they are reneging on their promises of a "thorough and efficient education system."

Non-Student Status Is Endemic

It would be misleading to suggest that this labeling happens only in Maryland or in this one school district, or that school personnel are the root cause of this non-student status. The youth gave examples of how these labels have followed them even beyond the school district and into other environments. This antiblackness blocks student status not only within places, spaces, and institutional arrangements, but also within a pervasive, omnipresent ambience that students reported was in the "environment," "atmosphere," or "the air." When I further inquired about this antiblackness, one student gave an example of being on a debate team while she was in high school. The debate team had the opportunity to debate other high school students at prestigious Yale University. Students were eager to visit Yale to debate students from across the country after navigating challenges in acquiring the resources to attend. While there, they decided to swim in the university pool before the long day of debating. These students quickly realized they were not viewed as high school students on a debate team; rather, they were accused of being thieves who stole computers from other students. Janet (age 23) made this point:

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> We were walking to the pool. It was like at the end of the block, and that's where the pool and everything was. We were walking. Five of us, like I said, were going to the pool. We had towels. We had the drawstring bags, and we were just laughing, having a good time just walking to the pool. Police stopped us and had their guns and stuff like that drawn. Here I am, a 15-year-old, 16-year-old young lady looking down the barrel of a gun. I've never experienced that a day in my life, and I will always remember it because I could have been that Trayvon Martin at that time. I could have been the Freddie Gray at [that] time, the Tamir Rice at that time, and what was I armed with? My Yale badge, a towel, armored in a bathing suit. I don't understand what that transpired to be, but they were saying, "You all fit the description of people stealing computers."

Aiming to relax before demonstrating their hard-earned skills at debating, Janet and four of her fellow debaters were violently stopped by campus police officers. As a teenager, Janet had to confront armed police officers who could see them as only criminals because of their appearance. Janet articulated the stunning realization that much like other unarmed youth or students who have died because of police brutality, she too could have been an innocent victim of unjustified violence because of a misperception and an assumption.

Janet and others shared another key theme: Being viewed as a criminal not only impacts one's environment but has a psychological toll. Several interviewees cited the deaths of unarmed Black youth because of police brutality. Shannon, for example, stated:

> If you look at the Samuel DuBose case, not forget it, but get past the fact that the man was killed over not having a license plate on the front of his car, get past that. The police lied to cover up and people backed him on his report, said a total opposite thing. That's not an isolated incident. That happens every day in these areas. I am fearful that something can happen to me.

Shannon was just one youth who did not have the privileges and immunities of student status. Black youth reflected on these deaths as the culmination of antiblackness and negative labels that misperceived the victims as less than human. Moreover, the spillover effects of gratuitous violence witnessed on innocent Black bodies has caused vicarious trauma (Bor et al. 2018; Brooms and Perry 2016) that these students carry with them. While they confront non-student status, negative, such as criminals, according to the youth, have led to "anxiety," "fear," "loss of concentration in school," and "just plain-out sadness." The vicarious trauma from witnessing the suffering of Black people is another emotional burden Black youth must confront that hinders the quality of life for students and continues the social death of student status.

The immunity of student status is ever-present in both school settings and communities. Despite being students, the youth felt that while growing up, they were not given the opportunity to live fully. When I asked Kenny (age 22) about his community, he brought up poverty and the impact it had on his life:

> You can't even be 13 and a Black male without having the thought or the fear of being killed by one of your own or by one of the so-called authorities that took an oath to serve and protect your community. Yeah, lack of just opportunity to live.

Kenny's insights help researchers to understand how poverty impacts students' lives. Black students in poverty often do not have favorable opportunities in education and cannot grow forward. He spoke like many other youth of the fear they have for their very lives while in their community. Kenny simply could not be a 13-year-old student; he was haunted by the fear of being killed. Janet and Kenny, among others, mentioned this ever-present lack of protection, which kept them concentrated not on learning, but on survival. While sociologists point out that students living in high-homicide areas test lower than students in low-homicide areas (Burdick-Will 2016; Sharkey 2010), this research shows that students are well aware they are living in the face of gratuitous violence, without any privileged chance to study with security and motivation. This finding connects with BlackCrit's first tenet that antiblackness is endemic. The Black youth in this study furthered this argument by suggesting that it is "in the air."

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DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Perhaps the biggest assumption this study challenges is that, through our collective consciousness and policy, society has granted Black youth the privileges and immunities of student status in our public schools. State constitutions require that students receive an "adequate" education or that their schools be part of a "thorough and efficient educational system." However, the youth interviewed in this study did not hesitate to ask researchers and policymakers to question this basic assumption thoroughly. Just as Thomas Jefferson said that all are entitled to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness while he owned six hundred slaves, policymakers today are claiming to provide equal educational opportunities to Black students, especially in Baltimore, while the state-sponsored school district cannot or will not provide them with a "thorough and efficient educational system" and, beyond that, labels them "everything but a student." This, in short, ensures the social death of student status.

I agree with sociologists and education scholars who suggest that antiblackness as a theoretical concept allows researchers to grapple with the way Blackness is often viewed as outside human realms (Coles and Powell 2019; Dancy, Edwards, and Davis 2018; Jenkins 2021; Ray et al. 2017), a concept which contributes to the social death of student status. This study confirmed how the negative associations placed on Black bodies continue to dehumanize them and prevent the full embodiment of student status. Only those perceived, acknowledged, and validated as humans have the ability to be students. Only those perceived as students are part of "thorough and efficient" educational systems. Gloria Ladson-Billings (2000) argues that "people of African descent were not thought educable" (207) in the nineteenth century. Black youth today suggest that our collective consciousness still does not view them as "educable." Therefore, the educational reforms that sociologists, researchers, and policymakers could be seeking are changes in the social position of Blackness within the educational structures and society's embodied collective consciousness. Without changes in this social position, are we as researchers wasting our time when it comes to immunities, privileges, and eligibility of student status for Black students? Educational researchers, sociologists, and policymakers have the opportunity to grapple with our scholarship and policy recommendations by understanding how desegregation, school choice, tracking/detracking, charter schools, standards, and accountability as reforms address the social death of student status. Moreover, policymakers must connect with practitioners, parents, and community members when it comes to the non-student status that Black students are receiving. The voices and experiences of practitioners, parents, and community members must be acknowledged and empowered to develop schools that meet the educational and human needs of Black children. The erasure of Black history, life, culture, community, and spatial legitimacy in schooling must stop. Instead, learning must be rooted in humanistic practices that protect and nurture Black history, life, culture, community, and spatial legitimacy.

These youth from poor Black communities in Baltimore contended that the negative association of Blackness goes beyond systems—it pervades society, invalidating and denying their right to be full students. Their status as non-students serves only to justify and legitimize rampant gratuitous violence, oppressive control, and punishment in their homes, schools, and communities. I stand on the shoulders of Black education historians and BlackCrit scholars in education (Dumas and ross 2016) who have pointed out that throughout Black American history, while Black people have never had the immunities and privileges of student status, they have always had faith (Randolph 2014), hope (Grant 2020), covert spaces (Givens 2021), and instructional strategies to rehumanize and honor their Black lives. We must continue to produce space for what Dumas and ross (2016) refer to as "Black liberatory fantasy." This place reimagines glimpses of Black freedom by disrupting the distorted truths, false narratives, and negative associations that maintain and produce educational structures which unapologetically and mercilessly prolong the suffering of Black youth. By contrast, sociologists, educational researchers, and policymakers who contend we cannot change America's collective consciousness must make sure that we are transparent with Black students and acknowledge the multiple burdens they bear because of social death and decaying educational structures. Educational practitioners can humanize students' experiences by acknowledging their everyday struggles and meeting them through love, care, and support. They can produce environments in their schools that help students identify sites of suffering and dismantle them through clear dialogue and strategic practices. In complement, school district leaders can work with policymakers, advocates, and researchers by

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putting pressure on their state leaders to fulfill their state educational constitution that establishes through law a "thorough and efficient education system" or an "adequate" education. Sociologists, practitioners, and educational researchers can support these endeavors by focusing on education debt and directly producing strategies and social-emotional supports that address the negative labeling of Blackness and educational structures.

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