

Reviewing Concentrated Poverty Literature Through an Antiblackness Lens to Reveal a Concentrated Debt

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The relationship between concentrated poverty and educational outcomes has received substantial attention in academic research over the last 3 decades. Researchers have argued that neighborhood characteristics are associated with academic achievement, educational attainment, dropout rates, college entry, cognitive abilities, attendance, and grade repetition. Given that Black students constitute a large proportion of those living in concentrated poverty, coupled with the urgency of contemporary times where state-sanctioned violence is on full display in the United States, assessing how education scholars are conceptualizing concentrated poverty is vital. Utilizing an antiblackness lens to critically review 64 recent articles addressing concentrated poverty and educational outcomes, we explicitly drew on anti-Black scholarship to expand the discourse from “concentrated poverty” to a “concentrated debt.” A concentrated debt constitutes education, racial capital, placemaking, and humanity debts. We argue that to address these debts, we must move beyond deficits, lacks, and disorganization of Black neighborhoods and toward humanizing Black students and their families by investing in their homes, schools, and communities.

Keywords: Black education; cultural analysis; equity; race; sociology; urban education

America has defaulted on this promissory note insofar as her citizens of color are concerned. Instead of honoring this sacred obligation, America has given the Negro people a bad check, a check which has come back marked insufficient funds.

—Martin Luther King, Jr. (1963)

Seeking to ensure that the United States fulfilled the promises of the Emancipation Proclamation, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and over 200,000 Americans marched to the nation’s capital in the summer of 1963 to demand payment on a check that had been marked “insufficient funds.” For King, America had reneged on its promises of freedom, citizenship, and equality for Black Americans. King (1963) argued that since slavery, America has allowed the “manacles of segregation,” “chains of discrimination,” “lonely islands of poverty,” “unspeakable horror of police brutality,” and feelings of “exile” for Black people throughout the country. King added that Black people could no longer wait for justice. In response to mounting pressure from King and other Black Americans, change did come 1 year later with Lyndon B. Johnson’s War on Poverty program. Through this program, the Office of Economic Opportunity started identifying these “lonely islands of poverty” as census tracts where 20% of

residents were living at or below federal poverty. The U.S. Census Bureau developed the term “concentrated poverty” to assist this program in distributing antipoverty resources (Herring, 2019). However, after we reviewed 64 articles that focused on concentrated poverty and educational outcomes over the last 10 years, we found that such policies and programs have been largely ineffective in eliminating segregation, discrimination, poverty, or police brutality, as Dr. King had hoped. Grounding our analysis in antiblackness scholarship (Dumas, 2016b; ross, 2020), we also argue that academic scholarship on concentrated poverty has tended to ignore the significance of antiblackness, resulting in research that insufficiently captures the distinctive experiences of poverty and other aspects of life for Black individuals and communities. Moreover, this omission inadvertently reinforces problematic narratives that depict blackness as inherently disadvantaged, subjugated, perpetually ghettoized, or ungeographic.

William Julius Wilson (1987) brought the study of concentrated poverty to academic discourse. In his book, *The Truly*

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Disadvantaged, he grappled with “conservative” and “liberal” policy analyses regarding the urban Black poor. For Wilson, racial factors could not fully explain poor Blacks’ subjugation in these neighborhoods and posited that greater attention should be paid to neighborhood conditions (e.g., crime, violence, unemployment). Breaking from the tradition of W. E. B. Du Bois, who produced the first Black urban community study and highlighted race, economic, and political factors (Hunter, 2013; Morris, 2015), Wilson and his followers spurred a paradigm shift in the academy where scholars contended that studying neighborhood effects would provide more rigorous analysis to explain life chances for poor people (Sampson et al., 2002). In response, social scientists developed concepts such as social disorganization, contagion and competition models, collective socialization, relative deprivation, and institutional models. However, these concepts are neither rooted in racial analysis nor move beyond neighborhood, institutional, and structural conditions (Johnson, 2012). Wilson and his followers provided analyses that omitted social constructions of race, place, and economic markets beyond the Black community (Gans, 2010; Imbroscio, 2021; Slater, 2013). Therefore, as the debt of insufficient funds accumulated, the scholarship on concentrated poverty often disregarded the influence of the racialization of blackness and the economic factors that maintain it.

This disregard continued with scholarship focused on the intersection of concentrated poverty and educational outcomes. Earlier studies brought attention to how concentrated poverty can influence dropout rates, cognitive abilities, absenteeism, achievement, and college attendance (Ainsworth, 2002; Bowen et al., 2002; Brooks-Gunn et al., 1993; Clark, 1992; Leventhal & Brooks-Gunn, 2004; Sampson et al., 2008). Scholars who reviewed earlier work on concentrated poverty and education have critiqued this scholarship by pointing out that the salience of race is a missing analytic consideration (Milner, 2013). While the present review highlights the disregard for blackness and the inability to incorporate how concentrated advantage impacts concentrated poverty areas, the education debt continues to grow. Ladson-Billings (2006) shifted the focus of the educational discourse by moving researchers away from framing Black education through gaps and deficiency to focusing on the education debt. Following in King’s footsteps, she detailed a debt composed of historical, economic, sociopolitical, and moral components. In our review focusing on concentrated poverty and educational outcomes, we agree there is an education debt but affirm that it is linked to an inability to acknowledge Black humanity. Whereas Ladson-Billings highlighted the debts through a critical race theory lens, we specifically address antiblackness “out of a desire to explore these ‘more detailed ways’ that blackness continues to matter” (ross, 2019, p. 1). We particularly want to understand how the inability to humanize the Black experience fosters this educational debt.

Inspired by Ladson-Billings, King, and Du Bois, we introduce “concentrated debt” as a conceptual frame that allows us to accurately conceptualize, measure, and begin repayment on a “long-term problem” (Ladson-Billings, 2006) that Black communities (Du Bois, 1899/2015) have endured because of the inability to acknowledge Black humanity. The significance of

this work is to move the scholarship of concentrated poverty away from associating Black neighborhoods and schools with deficits, disorganization, and ineffective social networks and toward humanizing blackness through acknowledging a concentrated debt. We reviewed 64 peer-reviewed journal articles written from 2012 to 2022 that centralized concentrated poverty, neighborhood effects, and academic outcomes (see Table 1, available on the journal website). As we reviewed the literature through an antiblackness framework and identified absences, assumptions, and discourses about Black life, youth, and communities, we also identified antiblack ideologies, practices, political economies, and structures that drive Black suffering—specifically, suffering that strips Black people of their (a) humanity (Dumas, 2014), (b) tenacity to flourish economically in a plantation economy (Robinson, 1983/2005), (c) and ability to assert a sense of place (Hunter et al., 2016; McKittrick, 2011) and (d) natal connections (Patterson, 1982) within their schools, neighborhoods, and homes. In short, we uncovered a concentrated education debt that has accumulated at the hands of a racialized state, normalizing the dehumanization, disinvestment, and dis-possession of Black America.

Theorizing a Concentrated Debt

In our critical review of interdisciplinary research on concentrated poverty and educational outcomes and experiences, we draw on the work of scholars who spoke to the condition of “Black life, oppression, resistance, and radical imagination” (Hawthorne, 2019, p. 2). Rather than rely on one theoretical framework, we engaged with the writing of multiple Black scholars to grapple with both the primacy and endemic nature of antiblackness and how antiblackness and blackness are intimately connected to spatial legitimacy, economic practices, and education. Specifically, we combined Afro-pessimism (Wilderson, 2007), BlackCrit (Dumas & ross, 2016), and Black geographies (McKittrick, 2011) to conceptualize a concentrated debt. This section outlines three vital, interrelated tenets derived from engaging with Black scholarship that framed and guided our critical reading. These tenets helped us build the concept of concentrated debt, which we then used as a lens to review the literature.

Tenet 1: The Centrality of Antiblackness

Scholarship on blackness across a range of disciplines has centered the unique experience of blackness, including a deep examination of antiblackness (Coles, 2023; Dumas, 2016a; Dumas & ross, 2016; Hartman, 1997, 2007; McKittrick, 2011; Saucier & Woods, 2015; Sexton, 2010; Warren & Coles, 2020; Wilderson, 2007). “Antiblackness” refers to society’s inability to acknowledge Black humanity (Dumas & ross, 2016; ross, 2020). As Coles (2023) further elaborated, antiblackness is endemic to society and a “structural regime where Black people are imagined as less than and experience gratuitous violence” (p. 981). Scholars writing on blackness and antiblackness have been concerned with explaining the singularity of antiblackness as a process distinct from racism against Black people. Linking antiblackness to a history of chattel enslavement in the United States, Black

scholars have articulated how slavery marks the ontological position of Black people, or as ross (2020) clarified, “the relation between humanity and blackness is an antagonism, is irreconcilable.” Positioned as less than human—inhuman—the condition of blackness is also distinct from other groups racialized as non-White, non-Black. As Sexton (2010) argued, not all social suffering is created equal; analogizing Black suffering to other forms of racialized oppression creates a “people-of-color blindness.” Borrowing from the term “colorblindness,” which denotes a refusal to acknowledge a system of privileges and marginalization based on race, Sexton’s people-of-color blindness refers to oppression and a denial of systematic privileges that exist among different non-Black, non-White people of color. Thus, antiblackness is a structural reality and sedimented logic that denies the humanity, place, and presence of Black populations specifically. This central proposition in much of antiblack scholarship led us to ask: If Black communities are stripped of their humanity, then how does this resulting inhumanity shape their structural position in our society? Put another way, how have years of viewing blackness as subhuman and property (Dancy et al., 2018) shaped the concepts and questions that scholars pose about how concentrated poverty affects educational outcomes?

Tenet 2: Plantation Economy, Neoliberalism, and Antiblackness

Scholars theorizing antiblackness have also argued that antiblackness undergirds economic and political systems that pursue racial directions and profoundly exploit blackness. In other words, expressions of antiblackness remain embedded in contemporary political and economic practices. We argue that blackness is still linked to a plantation economy after slavery. According to McKittick (2011), the plantation economy is

an economized and enforced placelessness that demanded the enslaved work and thus be chained to the land—normalized black dispossession, white supremacy, and other colonial-racial geographies, while naturalizing the racist underpinnings of exploitation as accumulation and emancipation. Those without, while cultivating the plantation economy, were identical with absolute domination, natal alienation, and social death. (p. 949)

Often missing in studies about Black neighborhoods is a connection between the manifestation of a plantation economy, capitalism, and land in its various historical and global permutations. In the colonial epoch, chattel slavery effectively dehumanized Afro-descendant populations, rendering Black bodies as lifeless and Black spaces as unoccupied; a plantation economy where whiteness was associated with property and the rights to use and enjoy property while excluding others (Harris, 1993). Blackness was viewed as capital for whiteness, which normalized Black dispossession. As such, scholars contend, this aspatiality precipitated capital accumulation and a concomitant accumulation of debt owed to Black Americans. Drawing on Hartman’s (2007) concept of the “afterlife of slavery,” Black geography scholars Bledsoe and Wright (2019) further clarified the relationship between antiblackness and capitalism in contemporary times:

Anti-Blackness helps us understand how the afterlife of slavery leads to Black populations being conceptually unable to legitimately create space, thereby leaving locations associated with Blackness open to the presumably “rational” agendas of dominant spatial actors. Black populations, then, serve as the guarantor of capitalism’s need to constantly find new spaces of accumulation. (p. 12)

The connection between antiblackness and the expansion of racial capitalism has also extended to interrogating the spatial construct of the “urban”—a concept of equal concern in this review because studies of concentrated poverty often focus on neighborhoods in urban areas and the (non)people inhabiting them. Often, urban spaces are not only Black geographical spaces (although not entirely) but also sites of racial violence, dispossession, and premature death (Gilmore, 2007; Goodings-Williams, 1993; Pulido, 2000; Woods, 2005). Thus, scholars have examined the knotted relationship between antiblackness, capitalism, and urbicide (Berman, as cited in McKittrick, 2011, p. 951). Black scholars have documented how the practices of capital disinvestment, white flight, predatory mortgage lending, policing and incarceration, and other violent acts rely on a notion of capital that assumes empty, lifeless, and inhuman Black spaces (Bledsoe & Wright, 2019). When tied to antiblackness, then, urbicide “brings into sharp focus how violence functions to render specific human lives, and thus their communities as waste” (McKittrick, 2011, p. 952).

While Black Americans endure a plantation economy, neoliberal-multicultural imagination—in both practice and ideology—scholarship suggests that meritocracy and choice will overcome the economic positionality of blackness. Agreeing with Dumas and ross (2016), we posit that neoliberal and multicultural imagination are often positioned against the lives of Black people. Not only are they positioned against Black people, but they are fraught with meritocracy and color-evasiveness that does not racialize blackness. It mystifies the mundane terror that many Black people endure because of a plantation economy that devalues blackness. That is, neoliberal-multicultural imagination obscures the plantation economy that skews life opportunities and chances for many Black people.

Tenet 3: Life Within the Racial Quarantine

To think through antiblackness is to deal with how notions of placemaking, resistance, hope, love, and joy operate within a society where antiblack solidarity predominates (Wilderson, 2010). Agreeing with the BlackCrit notion of Black liberatory fantasy to resist grand narratives and ideologies that do not acknowledge the history of racial domination over space and place, we discuss racial quarantine. In slavery’s “afterlife,” White domination racially quarantined Black people into segregated and disinvested homes, communities, and schools. Blackness was viewed as dangerous, unhealthy, and disruptive to White property and White citizenship. For example, Baltimore was the first city to use racial ordinances to segregate neighborhoods. According to Garrett Power (1983), the sentiment of the time with many Progressives like Mayor Mahool, “agreed that poor black should be quarantined in isolated slums in order to reduce

the incidents of civil disturbance, to prevent the spread of communicable disease into the nearby white neighborhoods, and to protect property values among the white majority (p. 301).”

Baltimore was one of the first to set this precedent of segregating blackness from society and became a model for other cities. As the mayor noted, White people separated themselves from blackness because of its association with preventing public safety, threatening public health, and devaluing property values. Society has never apologized for or resolved these beliefs. Even when Civil Rights leaders pushed for desegregation, the root of the problem—the inability to acknowledge Black humanity—was never addressed. Therefore, moving Black people and students to different schools and neighborhoods never effectively changed White hearts and minds. Once Baltimore enacted the first residential segregation ordinance, other cities in Georgia, South Carolina, Virginia, North Carolina, and Kentucky followed. In 1917, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled residential segregation laws were unconstitutional but did not have the power to disassociate blackness with dehumanizing characteristics. The inability to acknowledge Black humanity led to normalizing state-sponsored redlining practices. Aiming to address racial segregation, Civil Right lawyers brought the *Brown v. Board of Education* case to the U.S. Supreme Court in 1954. The justices ruled unanimously that racial segregation in public schools was unconstitutional, but again, the heart and minds of whiteness would not see Black humanity. The ruling that segregation was unconstitutional created a mass exodus of Black educators (Tillman, 2004), an uprising in white flight, and a push for private schools (Clotfelter, 1976)—all to maintain separation from blackness. Consequently, many Black people today still live in quarantined areas and attend segregated schools. The Black middle-class who escaped high-poverty areas more likely live in adjacent neighborhoods that are undervalued (Pattillo, 2007). In fact, as far back as the 1950s, housing activist Charles Abrams (1955) conceptualized this iniquitous “truth” as the so-called “racist theory of value” (p. 158), whereas Tretter (2016) recently explained, “African American neighborhoods, households, and bodies were [seen as] simply less valuable and desirable [in market terms] than those of whites” (p. 31).

Within this racial quarantine, property taxes fund schools and often leave Black children without the resources and opportunities needed to redress the harms of an antiblack world. Moreover, the normalization of Black neighborhoods as systemically ignored, oversurveilled, and underresourced through this racial quarantine demonstrates the low value society places on blackness (Imbroscio, 2021; McKittrick, 2011). Antiblack quarantining displaces and places blackness in structural deprivation so whiteness can be protected and undisrupted. In the displacement, blackness exists only in isolation and is treated with violent and structurally depriving practices that harm communities. Racial quarantine allows society to ignore human life and normalize disinvestment, dispossession, and devaluation of blackness. Currently, racial quarantine is the burial of Black life, ignoring the voices, experiences, relationships, joys, and—ultimately—the humanity of Black people.

Despite this racial quarantine, Black people live to produce their own joy, desires, love, and agency even in these spaces. Scholars have articulated this as Black placemaking and a Black sense of place. As McKittrick (2011) described:

A black sense of place is not a steady, focused, and homogeneous way of seeing and being in place, but rather a set of changing and differential perspectives that are illustrative of, and therefore remark upon, legacies of normalized racial violence that calcify, but do not guarantee, the denigration of Black geographies and their inhabitants. (p. 950)

In their critiques of traditional geography and urban scholarship, Black geographies scholars’ accounts of the entanglements between space and blackness have, like Hawthorne (2019), seen Black communities as either victims “due to ongoing practices of displacement and spatial segregation” or as un-geographic “due to the upheaval of the trans-Atlantic slave trade.” For these scholars, then, a twin concern with antiblackness is how Black communities enact agency and produce knowledge about space(s) and place(s) to counter and resist dispossession and violence. To illustrate, they noted how Black communities craft food security in different spaces and places to resist unequal food access (Reese, 2019) or how Black communities relate with nature, pushing back against narratives linking blackness to alienation from the environment (Finney, 2014). Thus, by attending to Black sense making and place, this present review pushes against literature that treats Black space(s) as either ahistorical, natural, and innocent or as marked by oppression, violence, and deficits.

Black scholars in educational scholarship (Coles, 2023; Dumas & ross, 2016; Grant et al., 2021; ross, 2020) have also addressed placemaking and the production of Black knowledge within educational spaces. Just as scholars have shown how educational spaces are sites where Black bodies “become marginalized, disregarded, and disdained” (Dumas & ross, 2016, p. 415), these scholars have interrogated ideas of refusal, resistance, and maintaining hope in educational spaces in the face of everyday antiblackness. Indeed, an important part of this intellectual project is conceptualizing spaces and places as liberatory educational possibilities for Black children, where Black joy, Black knowledge, and Black hope and desire are centered. This emphasis on placemaking and Black resistance within racial quarantine led us to ask how the scholarship on concentrated poverty and educational outcomes articulates place and education given that educational spaces were never meant to be spaces for Black youth in the first place (Dumas, 2016a).

The Three Tenets and the Concentrated Debt

When antiblackness, as elaborated here, is (a) conceptualized as endemic to society, as a commonsense logic transcending class, and not shared by other non-White people of color; (b) framed as undergirding our contemporary plantation economy; and (c) described as a racial quarantine that produces Black placemaking, desire, and radical hope and resistance, then the questions posed and discursive frames utilized by those who study the effects of concentrated poverty on youth become subject to critique. As such, an antiblackness framework forces us to grapple deeply with how current academic discussions on the relationship between poverty, neighborhoods, and educational outcomes locate and engage blackness specifically. As the tenets highlight, centering antiblackness points to more than just recognizing and (briefly) acknowledging that antiblack racism, discrimination, and

segregation produce urban spatial structures and concentrated poverty; it is more than grappling with a classed and racialized historical past. Rather, it is contending with the fundamental negation of Black life and humanity that has amounted to a concentrated debt due Black Americans. Thus, seriously contending with antiblackness means facing that “Blackness is always already the social and political site of a historical, colonial accumulation of structural violence” (Sexton, 2010, p. 117). It is contending with how a plantation economy continues to undergird an economic and political system pursuing racial directions and exploiting blackness. It is wrestling with how whiteness has produced racial quarantine yet cannot stop Black knowledge, desire, joy, resistance, and love. As noted earlier, “Black” is not simply a racial category among other racialized categories; it is a singular positionality without analogue and tied to a concentrated debt. As such, an antiblack framework requires leaning into those spaces of the work we reviewed to identify absences, assumptions, and discourses about Black life, youth, and communities.

Methods

To advance our critique of contemporary research examining the relationships between concentrated poverty and educational outcomes, we searched multiple databases (Google Scholar, ERIC, Academic Search Ultimate) for peer-reviewed articles focusing on neighborhood effects of concentrated poverty and their relationship to educational outcomes. Because this is a scoping review of concentrated poverty and educational outcomes through an antiblackness lens, rather than a historical review of literature (Milner, 2013), we limited article publication to the years 2010 to 2022 using these keywords: “concentrated poverty,” “neighborhood disadvantage,” “neighborhood effects,” “educational achievement,” “attainment,” “educational outcomes,” “educational debt,” “graduation outcomes,” “Black communities,” and “Black neighborhoods.” An antiblackness lens upheld our ability to examine the underlying structures and practices that dehumanize blackness and allow certain social conditions to exist rather than examining concentrated poverty and educational outcomes as community issues. Regardless of number of cites or specified theoretical framework, we chose these articles because they specifically connected neighborhoods and concentrated poverty to educational outcomes, which we sought to address. This strengthened our sense of the literature and scholarly discussions that promoted reasons for academic outcomes and their associations.

To produce a manageable analytical set of articles, we limited the scope of our search to articles focusing on academic outcomes (i.e., grades, test scores, graduation rates, college enrollment rates, attendance). These articles engaged in broader discussions about mobility-based and place-based policies for improving social and educational mobility (e.g., Moving to Opportunity), the relationship between neighborhood poverty and adult income, and other key topics. However, the manifestation of antiblack racism as it pertains to structures, policies, and social practices was not considered. Using the three tenets of BlackCrit, we reviewed the literature, asking these questions: In what ways are Black communities dehumanized and seen as absent of value? How is neoliberalism and multiculturalism

shown in neighborhood and educational outcomes? What assumptions and absences exist in the current literature that reveal a concentrated debt? and In what ways does the existing scholarship not only reify antiblackness but also contribute to sociopolitical policymaking strategies that contribute to an ever-growing debt owed to Black communities? Our fundamental goal was to analyze the conclusions posed in this scholarship and consider their political implications for an accumulated concentrated debt and how the authors conceptualized race, blackness, poverty, and educational outcomes and experiences. Thus, we organized our critical review of the literature by four broad headings reflecting critical components of the concentrated debt. Through the lenses of BlackCrit and Black geographies, we were able to lean into spaces in the literature to understand how blackness is dehumanized to connect to how social structures intentionally allow systemic and social violence against Black people every day.

Concentrated Debt: Examining Current Conceptualizations of Poverty and Neighborhoods

We now review 64 articles on concentrated poverty and education through our three tenets framing the concept of concentrated debt. Four debts were subjugated in these readings: education debt, racial capital debt, placemaking debt, and humanity debt. Following in the tradition of Foucault (1976) and Collins (1990), the term “subjugating” is used here to critique the dominant view of concentrated poverty. Subjugated knowledge refers to knowledge that has been “disqualified” or deemed “inadequate” by scholars. We question these racial dominant narratives in the literature by resurrecting these four debts that must be addressed in scholarship and public policies.

Subjugating the Education Debt

One persistent and central assumption across the articles related to the idea of meritocracy in the educational system and that this system will work for Black students specifically. As the authors theorized about and empirically investigated the relationship between concentrated poverty and education, they assumed that if Black students work hard and attend college, they will obtain their academic and career goals. Ultimately, these authors contended that concentrated poverty is hindering Black students from successfully entering presumably an educational system based on meritocracy. Therefore, the authors recommended uncovering all the significant barriers hindering students in their communities and schools to improve their ability to participate successfully in U.S. educational systems and, thus, improve their social mobility outcomes. For example, some of the researchers made the empirical claim that concentrated poverty is associated with obstacles in preschoolers’ cognitive skill development (Coley et al., 2019) and lower math and reading scores in kindergarten (Morrissey & Vinopal, 2018a, 2018b). Concentrated poverty is also associated with higher rates of violence and crime, which the authors argued impact cognitive abilities (Sharkey & Elwert, 2011), academic growth (Burdick-Will, 2016), vocabulary and reading (Sharkey, 2010), and absenteeism (Burdick-Will et al.,

2019). The authors also attempted to demonstrate how sustained exposure to these disadvantaged areas has a severe impact on high school graduation rates (Bradley & Renzulli, 2011; Crowder & South, 2011; Wodtke et al., 2011). Moreover, students living in these high-poverty areas encounter additional community barriers that impede their math and reading achievement (Anderson et al., 2014; Greenman et al., 2011; Pearman, 2019), high school completion (Galster et al., 2016), and attendance in and graduation from college (Berg et al., 2013; Chetty et al., 2016; Harding, 2011; Levy, 2018).

Yet, an antiblackness reading of this literature generates serious schisms in empirical claims based on unspoken assumptions about the role that the U.S. educational system plays in the lives of youth—specifically Black youth—living in neighborhoods of concentrated poverty. In particular, with an antiblackness lens, we can interrogate how an educational debt that has accumulated from consistent societal disregard for Black life is linked not only to concentrated poverty but also to a less than meritocratic educational system. Ladson-Billings (2006) encouraged researchers to attribute achievement gaps to an educational debt. We connected her argument specifically with antiblackness scholarship that conceives this debt as having particular weight in Black communities. We see a persistent trend in the literature of erasing this educational debt entirely from the academic social imaginary. After reviewing the aforementioned literature, we discovered that these authors did not place thoughtful consideration on disinvestment in these schools. Although state constitutions have an educational cause that promises “adequate,” “thorough,” and “efficient” school systems, this scholarship focused more on assumed norms, behaviors, and conditions within Black neighborhoods. Thus, the omission was on poor school infrastructure; unequipped and culturally insensitive teachers, administrators, and staff members; lack of necessary courses for college and career such as AP/Honor courses; healthy school meals; and culturally trained school counselors. When noted, their mention was brief and not linked to education debt in schools. Moreover, by subjugating this knowledge about educational debt, the current scholarship reifies colorblind, merit-based conceptualizations of education that erase the positioning of Black youth as racialized students who often lack resources in a racial quarantine.

An Education Debt That Leads to Suffering

This inability to recognize educational debt was also evident in the scholarship exploring the relationship between violence, neighborhood poverty, and educational outcomes (e.g., Burdick-Will, 2013, 2017, 2018; Patton & Johnson, 2010; Sharkey 2010; Sharkey et al., 2012). Despite this renewed attention to local violent crimes often associated with high levels of neighborhood poverty that impact the educational outcomes of youth living in these spaces, we argue that such analyses subjugate or erase critical knowledge about violence as related to the educational experiences of Black youth. The researchers do aptly capture how most often Black youth are overexposed to violence and appear to be most impacted by neighborhood violence in relation to both educational and social outcomes (Sharkey, 2010). In fact, neighborhoods predominantly populated by

Black people are those most often associated with higher levels of violent crime (Burdick-Will, 2017, 2018). Yet these descriptions fail to acknowledge the historical, economic, and sociopolitical contexts that have tied blackness to spaces described as “high-poverty” and “high-violence.”

We must raise questions about how the structural violence that blackness endures is tied to direct violence. Structural violence “occurs in the context of domination where poor Black children are marginalized and isolated, vulnerable to lifelong subordination across many domains” (Clark, 1992, p. 499). Researchers have suggested that structural violence leads to interpersonal violence (Galtung, 1969; Winter & Leighton, 2001). However, the omission in this scholarship of how structural violence is connected to interpersonal violence does a disservice. It reifies the association of blackness with violence without thoroughly investigating the structural arrangements that harm students and foster racial quarantines that marginalize, isolate, and dominate poor Black students. In other words, while Black students endure violence across multiple domains, the structural violence that positions them in harm’s way is erased, unquestioned, and normalized.

Indeed, Black scholars and activists examining the carceral state and how surveillance, policing, and incarceration work in the U.S. context have demonstrated how antiblackness has shaped and continues to shape notions of violent crime and who becomes incarcerated for nonviolent and violent criminal activity (Cacho, 2012; Claire, 2020; Claire & Woog, 2021; Gilmore, 2007; Jefferson, 2017; Kaba, 2021). For example, in writing about abolitionist organizing, Kaba (2021) called for an interrogation of how antiblackness and gender intersect in the criminalization of Black women. For many Black women, self-defense against racialized and gendered violence is intimately linked to their criminalized status and to terms like “aggravated assault.” As Kaba wrote, “while self-defense laws are interpreted generously when applied to white men who feel threatened by men of color, they are applied very narrowly” (p. 50) to Black women. The critical point Kaba makes is that statistics on crime and violent crime often mask how antiblackness and criminalization interrelate to create high-poverty, high-violence neighborhoods often overrepresented by Black people. These spaces and places are then conceptualized in the literature as having a “spillover” or “contagion” effect on youth who live nearby or are exposed to youth who experience local violence.

In addition, as Black scholars remind us, examining local violence cannot be divorced from the ways schools are complicit in the (re)production of violence (Annamma, 2016; Meiners, 2013; Shange, 2019). Scholars examining blackness and antiblackness have strongly argued that public schools have been and continue to be sites of suffering and violent crime *toward* Black youth (Dumas, 2016a, 2016b). From anti-literacy laws during enslavement punishable by acts of horrific violence to racialized attacks from White students, teachers, parents, and mobs during school desegregation (Ladson-Billings, 2006), educational spaces have been constructed to exclude Black children. This trend continues today through the current surveillance of youth in schools, which have never really been meant for Black youth. As scholars have demonstrated, schools have funneled many African American students into juvenile and criminal justice systems (Dancy, 2014;

Winn, 2018). Wacquant (2002) even argued this is the current functional surrogate of slavery. Even if Black youth escape the criminal justice system and move from high school to college, institutional violence prevails in many higher education institutions given that Black bodies are viewed as property (Dancy et al., 2018).

As a whole, then, although the articles we reviewed shed light on how poverty (and associated violence and crime) is related to educational outcomes, the authors have reified antiblackness in their framing of education, their definition of terms, and their unspoken and unexamined assumptions about who fills the spaces and places that purportedly contribute “above and beyond individual factors” to inequality across race and class. The active, often violent expulsion of Black youth from educational systems and the overcriminalization of Black communities have contributed to this educational debt and an even broader concentrated debt that, if more fully investigated, may provide nuanced insights about the existence of racial quarantine that is fraught with violence in the United States.

Subjugating the Racial Capital Debt

Another central theme consistent throughout our analysis related to researchers’ inability to grapple with the relationship between antiblackness, concentrated poverty, and plantation economic practices that deprive and dispossess Black Americans of wealth, suitable living spaces, protection, and educational opportunities. In his book, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*, Robinson (1983/2005) argued that racism and capitalism are mutually constitutive entanglements. Racism is the structuring logic that holds capitalism in place. Racial capitalism uncovers racialized and colonial exploitation within the process of capital production. Key to the concept of racial capitalism is that markets devalue and exclude others to accumulate profits. In the United States, “colonialization, primitive accumulation, slavery, and imperialism” (Pulido, 2017, p. 526) all excluded, exploited, and caused suffering to dark bodies while whiteness accumulated wealth from these practices. Indeed, drawing on the work of Robinson and other Black urban and race scholars (Taylor, 2019), Imbroscio (2021) critiqued existing scholarly accounts of the effects of racism on housing and related practices in the United States, arguing that even these scholars failed to “fully comprehend and properly conceptualize how profoundly fundamental racism is to the very nature of America’s institutions” (p. 30). His central contention is that existing scholarship touching on racialized housing practices and spatial practices from the mid-20th century fails to understand how antiblack beliefs undergird market rationality. Imbroscio added that understanding the relationship between race, capitalism, housing, and related practices suggests that conventional approaches to addressing poverty, segregation, and discrimination first requires “the scourge of anti-Black racism” to be “vanquished, or at least significantly abated” (p. 42). In other words, simply tackling discriminatory housing and spatial practices is only part of the broader solution to addressing the racial capital debt that is linked to concentrated poverty.

These critiques are important to our review of existing research on concentrated poverty and education. Some articles,

particularly within the tradition of sociology, actively link a discussion on concentrated poverty to segregation and discriminatory housing practices in their introductions and conclusions. For example, the authors discussed the role of “historical and current discriminatory policies and patterns that have resulted in higher poverty neighborhoods that Black children live in being relatively more disadvantaged compared to their non-Black peers” (Vinopal & Morrissey, 2020). Or, in providing background for an empirical investigation of the relationship between local violent crime, neighborhood disadvantage, and school choice in urban cities (Burdick-Will, 2017), residential and school choice decisions are rightly described as constrained by “economic resources and discrimination” (p. 39). Also, in terms of racial segregation and social networks, “in a highly racialized society (Bonilla-Silva, 2009), social networks are more likely to form within racial groups” (Ainsworth, 2010).

Yet these discussions are limited to brief descriptions of these terms without explicitly tying them to race and antiblackness. As an antiblackness lens suggests, these researchers do not unpack how concentrated poverty is related to both structural and material violence that have been socially constructed through plantation economies. Moreover, they overlook how a racial capital debt, accumulated through socially constructed and racist housing markets—that rationalized such practices as racial covenants, redlining, racial steering, disinvestment, group terrorism, block-busting, and predatory lending practices—is key to the persistence of concentrated poverty that overwhelmingly affects Black communities (Baradaran, 2017; Mendenhall, 2010; Taylor, 2019).

Missing from these articles is the recognition of how these acts were and are normalized in society as whiteness profited from this racial violence and developed affluent schools and communities (Shapiro, 2017). Only Loyd and Bond (2018) seemed to address racial capital, but scholarship focused on socioeconomic status (Anderson et al., 2014; Coley et al., 2019; Crowder & Smith, 2011) did not acknowledge this racial capital debt. Without accounting for the accumulation of a racial capital debt and overlooking the educational debt, contemporary scholarship on concentrated poverty and education eclipses the fundamentally structural role that antiblackness plays in our current social world. Furthermore, as we elaborate in the following, such analyses lead to policy remedies and implications that pivot on the erasure of Black spaces and knowledge.

Subjugated Placemaking Debt

Another pattern we found in our literature review was scholars’ deficit conceptualization of placemaking in Black communities. Across the articles, the researchers discursively linked neighborhood “disadvantage,” “dysfunction,” “disorganization,” or “non-normative behavior” to blackness and engaged in rhetorical maneuvers that often obfuscated how both the “subjects” inhabiting these neighborhoods and the “subjects” of analyses were, in fact, Black. For example, after introducing questions about the relationship between neighborhood quality, cognitive skills, and subsequent educational attainment and then providing a broad overview about why “neighborhood quality” matters to and can impact children and adolescents, Aughinbaugh and Rothstein

(2015) gave examples of interventions that have tried to “help children overcome the disadvantages of poor neighborhoods” (p. 84). The interventions were the often-cited Moving to Opportunity (MTO) and Harlem’s Children’s Zone (HCZ)—both of which, incidentally, acted primarily on Black bodies and Black children (Aughinbaugh & Rothstein, 2015; Levy, 2018; Ludwig et al., 2013; Wodtke et al., 2011). The juxtaposition of race-neutral language that situates the authors’ empirical questions about whether cognitive test scores (a proxy for early childhood investments) mediate the impact of neighborhood effects on youth alongside the inclusion of the explicitly racialized interventions of MTO and HCZ strongly signals that those “needing interventions” are Black bodies because their spaces and places are empty vessels mired in “social and physical disorder” and increased “crime” and “delinquency.”

Manipulation of Black Bodies and Space

This is clearly not an isolated rhetorical event limited to these authors; rather, it is a common pattern whereby scholars are unable to engage directly with how blackness is tied to spatialized concentrated poverty. In addition, they cannot connect with why the interventions that may alleviate concentrated poverty and remedy its effects often disproportionately involve the manipulation of Black bodies and spaces. Researchers have developed arguments by building on faulty foundations about Black placemaking, including concepts like social disorganization (Berg et al., 2013), collective efficacy (Levy et al., 2019), social isolation (Harding, 2011), and oppositional culture (Bradley & Renzulli, 2011), often failing to acknowledge the social ties, relationships, and institutional connections that African American students have to schools and communities. These theories about the mechanisms of concentrated poverty also overlook how Black communities mourn the death of these vibrant places, which, as Black scholars argue, have often been violently stripped from these communities because of neoliberal reforms (Ewing, 2018). Very few researchers acknowledge the social capital/cultural wealth (Carter, 2005; Patton & Johnson, 2010; Yosso, 2005) within these communities or the placemaking produced by African Americans that illuminate their humanity, endurance, love, spirituality, knowledge, insight, relationships, joys, beauty, languages, desires, habitus, and property (Hunter et al., 2016; McKittrick, 2011; Young, 2004). Much of this research ignores or devalues placemaking just as home values and properties in Black communities are devalued (Perry, 2019; Taylor, 2019). These scholars only focus on “severely distressed neighborhoods” (Ainsworth, 2010; Ludwig et al., 2013) or “social disorganization” within communities (Levy et al., 2019), “disadvantaged family background” (McDonnell & Hunt, 2014), and violence and crime (Sharkey, 2010). Despite an antiblack solidarity (Wilderson, 2010) in the scholarship on concentrated poverty, Black communities’ attempts to create place have been persistently erased. This in conjunction with an inability to grasp how antiblack housing and lending practices have stripped Black communities’ ability to sustain placemaking have generated a placemaking debt.

Without a recognition of this debt, policy recommendations that focus on improving such spaces and places and the (Black)

bodies residing within inevitably orient toward erasure. For example, the research we reviewed posed several different implications and policy recommendations—ranging from providing counselor and mentoring programs (Johnson, 2012) to intervening in poor parents’ educational practices at home (Greenman et al., 2011) to increasing the number of high-quality early childcare programs (Coley et al., 2019) to providing college incentives (Levy, 2018); the recommendation receiving the most traction hinged on moving low-income families to low-poverty communities. Chicago’s often-cited Gautreaux program and the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development MTO residential mobility experiment were often implicated in recommendations. Although researchers have mixed reviews of these “experiments” (e.g., DeLuca et al., 2010; Ludwig et al., 2008; Wodtke et al., 2011), many have concluded that moving low-income Black students to low-poverty neighborhoods can improve health, increase college enrollment, and contribute to higher educational attainment and earnings (Chetty et al., 2016; Ludwig et al., 2012). Despite the cited gains that researchers say can be derived from this move, we contend that an antiblackness critique highlights erroneous assumptions embedded in mobility-based approaches. Researchers who support moving low-income Black communities out of their neighborhoods have not fully grappled with the position of blackness in society. Moving does not disconnect Black people from perceptions of being subhuman or less than White; rather, moving licenses the development of new mechanisms that exclude and marginalize Black communities. Although there may be slight academic gains associated with moves, we are still unaware of the cost of these so-called gains. Black children must understand that they do not need to be associated with whiteness to gain the resources and opportunities that should be present and enjoyed in their own schools and communities. Countering these small messages that Black students internalize every day will help them humanize their blackness in an antiblack world.

Subjugating the Humanity Debt

Our argument thus far poses a clear dichotomy: Researchers continue to address inequalities and barriers confronting individuals in concentrated poverty, but they also implicitly humanize whiteness while positioning blackness as subhuman (Dancy et al., 2018). Crucially, then, scholars home their object of inquiry not on “individuals” or “humans” but on the erasure of the humanity of Black communities and youth. Research questions are clear evidence of this skewed perspective that has been published over the last 12 years in relation to concentrated poverty and educational outcomes. These questions assume that Black spaces and bodies are socially dead, particularly in terms of culture, desires, resiliency, social networks, and institutional ties (Lofton & Davis, 2015). As some critical urban and race scholars have elaborated, questions on the role of neighborhood poverty, above and beyond individual- and family-level factors, miss key structural insights into why people choose to live where they do. For instance, in his literature critique, Slater (2013) applied a Marxist analysis and argued that questions about neighborhood effects on a range of outcomes would benefit from an inversion of the thesis “your life chances affect where you live.”

Such an inversion would mean “understanding life changes via a theory of capital accumulation and class struggle in cities” (p. 369). Such insights are important for education scholars because they shift the frame of analysis and insist that rather than taking for granted where people live and asking about how their geographic location impacts educational and social outcomes, we center questions about why people live where they do. Indeed, Slater argued that “if where any given individual lives affects their life chance as deeply as neighborhoods effects proponents believe, it seems crucial to understand why that individual is living there in the first place” (p. 37). This asks us to place a structural lens on questions about a concentrated debt.

Although we applied the same critique to this literature on the relationship between concentrated poverty and educational outcomes, we argue that an antiblackness lens demands more. Not only must we invert the question but also ask how capital accumulation, class struggle, and antiblackness help us understand how “your life chances affect where you live.” We are not only proposing a structural argument but are also acknowledging how antiblackness is endemic to how people think of the social, cultural, and economic factors that produce structural arrangements that dehumanize blackness.

Prefabricated Negroes

We want to clarify this is not solely a critique of quantitative scholarship but of all scholarship engaging with questions related to inequality, disadvantage, and poverty. All analyses must increasingly contend with what we call a “humanity debt” by humanizing the experiences of Black communities and acknowledging that antiblack experiences have produced social positioning that caricatures images of Black life. Wacquant (1997) concluded that stereotypical, cardboard-type, folk images of urban Black—what Ellison (1952) aptly called “prefabricated Negroes” (p. 348)—continues to dominate the literature. In our review, we discovered questions that pointed out “prefabricated Negroes” need for White saviors instead of investing and vesting in their own humanity. Such questions centered on the lack of parental skills (Greenman et al., 2011) and cognitive skills (Sharkey & Elwert, 2011; Vinopal & Morrissey, 2020) and the need for affluent neighbors during early childhood (Anderson et al., 2014), mentors from other communities (Ainsworth, 2010; Crowder & South, 2011), peers to influence college-going (Bradley & Renzulli, 2011; Wodtke et al., 2011), and movement out of communities to achieve better educational outcomes (Anderson et al., 2014; Levy et al., 2019; Morrissey & Vinopal, 2018a; Pearman, 2019). Again, missing from these studies is the humanization of blackness and acknowledgment that neither Black people nor their communities are problems; rather, an antiblack state has generated a concentrated debt owed to Black communities.

In the scholarship, researchers must fully grapple with humanizing Black students by illuminating their Black culture and social life while dismantling their suffering in communities plagued by concentrated debt. To move the agenda forward, Dumas (2016b) clearly stated the need to “acknowledge Black people as Human, and worthy of regard, recognition, and resources” (p. 8). In a racial quarantine filled by dominant narratives, Black people are still finding love, joy, and knowledge to

humanize and value themselves. Capturing these experiences and outcomes allows us to transcend and erase Black stereotypes. Only a few articles in our review actually deeply exposed and questioned stereotypes of Black life (Johnson, 2013, 2018) and heightened awareness of social networks (Patton & Johnson, 2010). More researchers must acknowledge that blackness is worthy and matters (Carey, 2019).

Discussion and Conclusion: Moving Forward With Concentrated Debt

Researchers have contended that those who live in concentrated poverty encounter durable neighborhood effects; they cite that three out of four African American households living in concentrated poverty today are the same families confronted with similar poverty during the Civil Rights Movement (Sampson, 2009; Sharkey, 2013). However, we must think back to Dr. King’s (1963) “I Have a Dream” speech, in which he alluded to a bad check that has bounced for “insufficient funds,” which have since become a concentrated debt that threads through education, racial capital, placemaking, and images of humanity. Black people in the 1960s and today face continued levels of poverty in their communities. An antiblackness critique suggests that America has betrayed its promises because its collective consciousness still attaches blackness to slaveness (Sexton, 2010; Wilderson, 2010). In Patterson’s (1982) words, “the permanent, violent domination of natively alienated and generally dishonored persons” (p. 13) perpetuates the never-ending battle going on in communities and schools.

Our review of the literature has demonstrated that most research on concentrated poverty and educational outcomes overlooks the concentrated debt. Although we agree with many scholars who highlight antiblackness and education, we still believe in the radical hopes (Grant et al., 2021), desires (Coles, 2023), and fugitive possibilities (Givens, 2021) of Black students, families, and communities. We do not offer researchers and policymakers merely a critique but, rather, more importantly, a blueprint to move the dominant discourse away from “plantation politics” (Dancy et al., 2018) to a paradigm that highlights Black life, Black education, and Black possibilities. As such, we close by offering two key propositions that invite scholars to pause and tarry within the concentrated debt as they embark on future inquiries that ask about the contexts and lives of Black urban youth.

1. We urge researchers and policymakers to shift the discourse from deficits to debts. Debts are the totals that the U.S. government owes to cover deficits (Ladson-Billings, 2006). Just as we must think radically about how this debt can be repaid through policy, we must also ask how this might be paid through humanizing scholarship that confronts more than 400 years of racial domination. What would it mean, for example, to center questions that explore how we might develop, build, and invest in Black schools, Black neighborhoods, Black employment, and Black Love? Scholarship must not center whiteness as the savior. Also, scholarship must respect Black spatial legitimacy to form their own

schools, neighborhoods, and institutions that allow them to thrive.

2. As we demonstrated, extant scholarship on the relationship between concentrated poverty and educational outcomes continues to ignore four different debts—humanity, racial capital, placemaking, and education—that have accumulated into an onerous concentrated debt. We encourage scholars who study working-class and poor Black communities and their educational experiences to continually identify these debts and their impact. For example, researchers might ask questions about how economic markets cause suffering in Black communities and saddle Black youth with education debt. Other questions might probe existing and future methods for investing in Black homes, schools, and communities that are rooted in Black knowledge and Black spaces. For example, how do Black-centered community organizations, churches, and sororities/fraternities create spaces for imagining future realities and alternative economic arrangements? Alternatively, questions can explore how resilience, agency, and belonging in Black communities counter mechanisms that generate concentrated poverty. What are the effects of economic and social investments in neighborhoods with high concentrated debt? What are the characteristics of effective grassroots neighborhood organizations in places of concentrated debt? What preparations are needed to address this debt? As we have demonstrated, part of dreaming up, imagining, and answering these questions that grapple with the concentrated debt requires educational scholars to move outside traditional boundaries and increasingly draw on antiblackness scholarship situated within Black studies.

Engaging with these propositions will move us closer to breaking down the racial quarantine by reinforcing/elevating the humanity and value of all Black students, families, educators, and communities. We are in agreement with Ross (2021), who, when redressing the debt, stated,

More immediate redress would necessarily encompass providing Black students and educators with anything they need or desire to ameliorate their current reality. This may include anything from access to material resources, advanced course, or curricular content that does not misrepresent or erase; to protection from systems of standardized testing, discipline, and punishment, as well as from the explicit and implicit biases of teachers. (p. 232)

Reparations must be paid—not only through economic resources and opportunities but also by producing social and political structures that value the humanity, desire, hope, and love that exist within blackness. Only when society views blackness as human will there be a flow of resources and opportunities to Black communities. Therefore, the scholarship must move away from associating blackness and concentrated poverty with dehumanization, deficits, and disorganization; rather, it should acknowledge the concentrated debt that permeates systems of education, racial capital, placemaking, and humanity.

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