Can We Write About Black Life?

Refusing the Unquenchable Thirst for Black Death in Education

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Abstract

I first describe the Black scholarly dilemma to set up the reader for how spirit murder happens subtly and the ways, I argue, centering Black life can restore our spirits. Through meditating on the existing literature, I argue that exclusion and marginalization are not the primary indicators of spirit murder in the education field or the academy. Then, I offer my theory of Black lifemaking as an analytical pathway to shift from seeking redress in sites of education to centering Black life as always generative. In conclusion, I outline a call to action for Black scholars to practice an abolitionist praxis that divests from meritocracy and clings to the margins.

Keywords: anti-Blackness, abolition, Black lifemaking, Black education, academia

Introduction

The why behind the reasons one enters scholarship and the academy is important. For me, I am a Black man, wrestling with how white heteropatriarchy and capitalism violates and implicates me and my work (hooks, 1990) that aims to contribute to the working-class Black communities I remain connected to. I came to the field of education, specifically the higher education field, because the system enrolls over 1.1 million Black people and I wanted to contribute to documenting and disrupting how an idealized system reproduced anti-Blackness. For me, it meant centering Black life, or the ways Black people create, live out,

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and sustain their human value. My approach called for a recalibration of self and research where Black life did not become valuable once joined with degrees, good jobs, or accolades (Jenkins, Tichavakunda, & Coles, 2020). Instead, my approach focused on what Black people do without and beyond those attributes. My early scholarly training and mentorship was through the Black Radical Tradition—defined as the collective political struggle and consciousness developed to uproot racial capitalism and define Black humanity in a world where Black people as collectively powerful and self-determined were non-thoughts (Robinson, 2000). Scholars, in this Tradition, have argued for an abolitionist praxis to systems that do not value Black life such as mass incarceration, housing, community development, reproductive healthcare, and capitalism (Johnson & Lubin, 2017). An abolitionist praxis refers to

> shows how relationships of un-freedom consolidate and stretch, but not for the purpose of documenting misery. Rather, the point is not only to identify contradictions—inherent vices—in regimes of dispossession, but also, urgently, to show how radical consciousness in action resolves into liberated life-ways, however provisional, present and past. (Gilmore, 2017, p. 597)

As I jointly moved through the academy and became a scholar in the field of education I realized these two sites also did not value Black life. Moreover, there was a long Black Radical Tradition that named the academy and the field of education as anti-Black from Du Bois and Woodson to Ladson-Billings and Love (Du Bois, 2001; Woodson, 2006; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Love, 2019;). Today, even education institutions make public statements declaring their commitments to "combating anti-Black racism" every time there is an uprising in response to the murders of Black people. While seemingly there is agreement about anti-Blackness, a tension has formed for me in that it is always positioned as easily solvable, progressively getting better, or simply a matter of better data and research (Bell, 2009). A rapture has happened. At the same time the study of anti-Blackness became popular in the field and the academy, it also became divorced from the Black Radical Tradition and its abolitionist praxis—destroying the systems and logics that kill and uplifting the ones that sustain Black life.

The academy and education field were accepting of anti-Blackness as a critical critique, even demanded it, as long as inclusion into these sites was still positioned as the primary or only answer to the problem. Osei-Kofi (2003) explains the traps of diversity for people and I would add knowledge:

> When previously excluded groups gain entrance into the mainstream, they are expected to prove themselves in accordance with already established standards. In doing this, what becomes valued is not

> difference, instead it is merely the toleration of that which can be made similar to the dominant as possible" (p. 490).

And in that deal and dynamic lies the spirit murder that Black scholars endure, feel, and write about. Spirit murder being "disregard for others whose lives qualitatively depend on our regard" with the 'others', in this article, being Black people, whose daily and structural assault from racism is murderous (Williams, 1991, p.73). To be an academic and critical scholar of anti-Black racism in education one is allowed to document the violence from every angle Black people experience as students and workers in education systems. As a scholar, like myself, the very documentation is spiritually damaging, but reducing solutions and imaginations beyond racism to only what is realistic to the field and the academy is what scars. I learned that my scholarship could rigorously document how Black people were being spiritually and literally murdered in nexus with sites of knowledge production, but I could not say those sites, by design, were the murderers. Many Black scholars have documented this dilemma where they are rewarded for presenting a Black wounded subject but disallowed from declaring the perpetrator—racist institutions—cannot be the savior (Nash, 2013; King, 2015).

The Black scholarly dilemma is enforced by graduate student advisors, hiring committees, course reviews, promotion processes, and editorial boards in the field of education. The dilemma becomes most insidious because it is hegemonic (Dancy, Edwards, & Davis, 2018). Its power to coerce is enforced by white scholars and Scholars of color, it becomes so normal that no one has to say "do it this way" but seeing everyone before and higher than you uphold and protect sites of power sends a clear a message that you must do the same; even, if your spiritual health is the cost (Bonner et al., 2004). I am a case in point. I came to the field of higher education with training and activism steeped in the Black Radical Tradition. Few in the field seemed to even know what I meant when I referenced this scholarly and activist tradition. Many scholars, who were before and higher than me, said your research is sound, methods are solid, and racial analysis is refreshing but they warned to proceed with caution. The warning always emphasized more than the praise. These warning still happen and come from more senior faculty across racial groups.

The first article I ever wrote aimed to connect the Black rage in the Hip-Hop refrain 'Fuck tha Police' to hip-hop lyrics that critiqued higher education—a Fuck Higher Education critique. The article centered college dropouts to highlight the knowledge they provide about how Black people create valuable lives on the margins, ones not possible to give up for inclusion into higher education. Several of my graduate professors reprimanded me rather than critiquing the article's ideas. They said, "if college worked for you, how could say it can't work for

everyone," "your romanticizing Black suffering," or "it is not realistic for poor Black people. In not to go to college." While these are all fair critiques, they were not meant to develop ideas but shut marginal ones down and the conversations that followed them often focused on me not getting hired rather than my arguments being wrong. I wanted to be a professor, at least sometimes, but I wanted to center Black people—poor and uncredentialed—whose marginality gave scholars an excuse to neglect or 'save' them.

Following the feedback, I pivoted my first two articles I published to focus on how oppressed Black people were in education sites. Nash (2013) described this approach as presenting a Black wounded subject that both makes claims to identity and a need for redress by continuously presenting the scars of oppression. Identity becomes only what scars can be made visible to the institutions that are believed to be capable of redress even if these same institutions are the ones who wound. My research documented the violence of racism as the primary story to be told (Mustaffa, 2017; Mustaffa, 2016; Mustaffa & Mayorga, 2019). The findings and arguments related to Black life as generative were snuck in. I hid Black life in the sentences in the middle of paragraphs and asides in sub-sections of articles, remembering the warning to proceed with caution. In a way, the evidence of Black life were seeds for me and others (Hartman 2019) who wanted to write about Black people creating lives and having human needs beyond the anti-Blackness of education. I knew scholarly narratives of Black pain would always be welcomed, shared like the viral videos of Black people dying at the hands of the police. I also learned that radical solutions and abolitionist approaches to the pain and the spirit murder had no place—it was the type of analysis to stay away from (McKittrick, 2006).

In this article, I situate my background story within the Black scholarly dilemma to set up the reader for how spirit murder happens subtly and the ways, I argue, centering Black life can restore our spirits. Next, I will provide a brief literature review on spirit murder and argue that exclusion and marginalization are not the primary indicators of it in the education field or the academy. Then, I offer my theory of Black lifemaking as an analytical pathway to shift from seeking redress in sites of education to centering Black life as always generative. With the theory in mind, I outline a call to action for Black scholars to practice an abolitionist praxis that divests from meritocracy and clings to the margins.

Spirit Murder

To be clear, spirit murder is not hyperbolic. Scholars are using the theory or arguing similar ideas to show how Black people are experiencing

an onslaught of violence that must be named not only when it literally kills, which it does, but also the ways it traumatizes, devalues, and abandons whole communities (Dumas, 2014). The academy and education, as a field and system, are not a haven from spirit murder, but its home. The analytical equation is not end spirit murder then Black people can be included into education and the university; the logic is end these racist sites in their current forms, the weapons of spirit murder.

The term spirit murder traces back to Patricia Williams (1987) who argued, "one of the reasons that I fear what I call spirit-murder, or disregard for others whose lives qualitatively depend on our regard, is that its product is a system of formalized distortions of thought" (p. 151) The formalized system of thought allows Black people to be viewed in whatever distortions necessary to justify our everyday devaluement and patterned murder. Spirit-murder aims to capture the assault through the laws, logics, myths, and everyday tropes that are as violent as physical actions and no less structural or systemic (Mustaffa, 2017). While some may not use spirit murder to describe these types of anti-Black assaults, many Black scholars have documented racism's spiritual impact. Hartman (2007) in "How to Lose Your Mother" described the spiritual murder of Black people through the lens of slavery: "Seized from home, sold in the market, and severed from kin, the slave was for all intents and purposes dead, no less so than had he been killed in combat. No less so than had she never belonged to the world" (p. 67) Here, death is expanded beyond the physical to capture how society and its institutions treat Black people—as if we are already dead or never alive in the first place. For the academy, Patricia Hill Collins (1986) described the process of dehumanization that Black women academics face:

> Afro-American female scholars are repeatedly struck by their own invisibility, both as full human subjects included in sociological facts and observations, and as practitioners in the discipline itself. It should come as no surprise that much of Black feminist thought aims to counter this invisibility by presenting sociological analyses of Black women as fully human subjects. (p. s28)

The dilemma in being rendered invisible as both full human subjects and academic practitioners reflects intersecting power dynamics that seek to control both Black people's humanity and ability to produce knowledge. Poet and scholar Alexis Pauline Gumbs (2012) summed up the irreconcilability between the university and Black life:

> The university was not created to save my life. The university is not about the preservation of a bright brown body. The university will use me alive and use me dead. The university does not intend to love me.

> The university does not know how to love me. The university in fact, does not love me. But the universe does. (p. 4)

Education scholars expanded the spirit murder and similar analysis to the field of education. Love argues "it is thus fundamental to call attention to the fact that our education system, built on White supremacy and enforced by physical violence, is invested in murdering the souls of Black children, even if they are not physically taken" (Love, 2016, p. 3). Love also makes clear that spirit murder through the education system is operated by school leaders of all races. Several scholars have focused on spirit murder in K-12 and higher education for Black students and faculty (Love, 2016; Hines & Wilmot, 2018; Johnson & Bryan, 2017; Young & Hines, 2018; Garcia, 2020). The goal has been to name the violence of schools from K-12 to higher education and make clear that schooling is the weapon for spirit murder. Much of this scholarship concludes with how to reform schools so Black children can be included better. In contrast, Stovall (2018) uses the evidence of anti-Black spirit murder to call for school abolition. He theorizes an abolition praxis to include school abolition and asks the question: "given the constraints and foundations of state-sanctioned violence as 'schooling,' can education happen in the institution commonly known as 'school'? (Stovall, 2018, p. 53).

While Stovall organizes the paper to separate schools as the spirit murderer and education as the resistance to state-sanctioned violence, I argue his analysis shows that both can be weapons. The above quote questions if education, as a freedom project, within schools is possible at the same time society insist that this type of education is exactly what schools already do. Perhaps, the school-driven way education happens makes the term education too far gone to be reclaimed (Shange, 2019). Schooling is the tool that inflicts the harm on Black people as both students and practitioners and education, through its various notions of meritocracy, is the justification (Warikoo, 2016; Sondel, Kretchmar, Dunn, 2019; Warren, 2021). Schooling is the institutionalized racial hierarchy that people must navigate to learn and be credentialed, and education is the arguments, logics, and myths that normalize the former. Education ensures that no matter how racist schools are and how violent the sorting process of college continues to be, schooling is always seen as necessary and as Love (2019) argues one is just expected to survive. If education and schooling are the weapons of spirit murder or what Dumas (2014) calls sites of Black suffering, then inclusion, while perhaps an individual strategy, is not a collective solution. Spirit murder happens when Black people are structurally included—spirits chipped away as we contort our sense of self to be a part of the education system and academy—and when we are excluded—spirits whose organized abandonment (Gilmore, 2008) is described as self-inflicted and personal failures. Spirit murder

provides a lens to understand racism as a violent assault not just in the times it physically harms, but in every time and form. In other words, for education's liberatory potential to be pursued what we mean by education must always be qualified; so much so, that imagining another name or site where it takes place could be useful (Coles, 2020).

A Note on Spirit Murder and (Self) Co-optation

Understanding meritocracy, from inclusion to exclusion, as a cornerstone of anti-Blackness will help Black scholars resist the ways spirit murder will be co-opted by others and by us. That is to say, spirit murder happens when Black people are denied advancement in the education field and the academy but also when Black people do advance one cannot assume spirit murder is not in play. The meritocracy of education and the university is designed not to create a set of criteria in which people compete but to create a set of justifications to normalize the criteria that ensure Black people repeatedly lose (Mustaffa, 2017). It would be a mistake to meditate and write about spirit murder only when we are denied jobs, tenure, and publications—Black professional class desires—but not also document the violent process that unfolds when we achieve these milestones. The issue here is less that Black people are not advancing in these sites, but more that the process of advancement is designed to be experienced by the few through the abandonment of the many (Bonilla-Silva, 1997). The many refers to Black people whose oppression is seen as a little better because a few Black people advance; Black advancement is inspiring, but it is not justice. Spirit murder demands a focus on what Du Bois described as "the structures and traditions that safeguard power and privilege, just as much as taking down those that visibly punish and oppress" (Du Bois in Meiners & Winn, 2010, p. 273; Stovall, 2018).

While many critical scholars will agree with my critiques of meritocracy, we still hold it on a pedestal. We still idealize the academy and education as sites where Black people can achieve if the right reforms are implemented. Four reviews of critical scholarship in education showed that scholars often document the oppression students and professionals of color experience but minimize or fail to theorize power as racially structured, context-specific, or simply racist (Cabrera, 2018; Harper, 2012; Ladson-Billings, 2013; Núñez, 2014). Instead, many of these articles, including my own, will name the ills of racism or misogynoir but not name the radical steps necessary to dismantle power. For example, many scholars use the tenet from critical race theory of "racism is permanent" (Bell, 1993) in their scholarship, but then in their conclusion they suggest or state that inclusion is possible if some changes occur (Cabrera, 2018). The shift to inclusion does not deal with the guiding theory that racism,

therefore its violent consequences, are permanent. I argue that most Black scholars know they are setting up a contradictory argument, but they do so anyway because meritocracy, as in our own advancement, requires it (King, 2015). This is the often unspoken requirement to be a critical Black scholar.

Again, as Black scholars, we know we can present a wounded subject, the oppressed Black student or professor, but we cannot call for an abolitionist or radical movement to end that oppression. These limits are specific to the field of education that proactively traps radical analysis with status quo-protecting demands of "implications for practice" or "being an applied field". Furthermore, radicalism is often marginalized because our very positions in the field and the academy are precarious. Black people make up about 6 percent of full-time faculty (tenure/non-tenure track) at the same time the professoriate is imploding with the majority of jobs being adjunct labor below a living wage (Kelly, 2017; McMillan Cottom, 2014). There are increased calls for a Black scholar to do the work of a tenured professor before they ever are hired; one must have multiple journal publications, secured external funding, design and teach various courses, and be able to articulate how they can be diverse but not disruptive (Bonner et al., 2004). Spirit murder is the silence to both your own labor exploitation and the Black radical imagination needed to materialize justice beyond schools/education and the academy. To be sure, there are Black scholars who are unapologetic about their Black radical imagination and tenured but again the few in the field can distract us from the many barely still here or gone (Harney & Moten, 2013).

I use myself as an example. I recall several senior professors telling me they agree with my argument and analysis, but I will need to provide something tangible, practical, or understandable "if you want to get a job." Again, those before me and higher than me emphasized caution over imagination. As a graduate student, I conducted a dissertation project that traced the nearly 100 year history of a Black community that had been underdeveloped but always integrated into an affluent white suburban school district. I used tax records, oral histories, interviews, school data, and city planning documents to show that the idealized school district distracted many from considering the lack of opportunity Black people were experiencing in the school or the suburb. I also documented the work Black community members did to sustain and value themselves and their neighborhood and most of it had nothing to do with achieving in school or college—not that they did not fight or desire education opportunity, but their freedom struggle was broader by necessity. Simply, I showed the school district and nearby higher education institutions were not a haven from anti-Blackness but masked and reproduced it

across generations. Still, I was told repeatedly to make sure my findings are translatable for hiring committees.

As a result, I wrote a conclusion chapter for my dissertation that did just that. I ignored that there was little evidence from my research that the white surrounding city and school district would value Black people or that education opportunity would ever be equal. Instead, I offered a series of implications for practice that could make the K-12 and higher education pathways better for Black people or in other words, survival a little easier. But I did not write about the need to end the joint oppression of underdevelopment and meritocracy as both decide life chances for Black people (Gilmore, 2008). I wrote about the school engaging the community, the parents, the students and the need for the state to increase funding for public higher education institutions. These are not bad reforms, but they do little to name let alone acknowledge the political power that surrounds and erodes each of these reforms and evolves constantly to sustain anti-Blackness. Yet, I passed my defense with the highest distinction and advanced.

The stories of achievement often make evident the process of spirit murder. The stories also make clear that scholars, even when Black, are suspect because our scholarship is under constant regulation by an academy that demands wounds and refuses justice. Moten and Harney (2013) remind the critical scholar to always implicate themselves because while the university may not be home, we cling to it:

> To be a critical academic in the university is to be against the university, and to be against the university is always to recognize it and be recognized by it… And this act of being against always already excludes the unrecognized modes of politics, the beyond of politics already in motion. (p. 105)

Black Lifemaking

To recall, the scholarly dilemma is that Black scholars can write about racial oppression as long as the narrative presents Black people as the wounded subjects in need of saving by schools and colleges (Nash, 2013, McKittrick, 2006). Our careers demand that we perform our diversity by criticizing the university as outsiders-within, but also that we end it there—never condemn the academy and education as the oppressors incapable of reform. As follows, I provide a theory of Black lifemaking that aims to start our analysis with what Black people need not what they can get and how we live not how we die.

In previous work, I defined Black lifemaking as the creative spaces of possibility and freedom that Black people produce when practicing self-definition, self-care, and resistance (Mustaffa, 2017). Simply, if sites of education and society are anti-Black as in not engaging Black

people with human value then lifemaking is what Black people think, do, and create to value their own lives, to define their own humanity. I follow others who call for an understanding of Black humanity as praxis (McKittrick, 2015). In my study of the neighborhood, referenced above, I documented Black lifemaking in the ways of being and doing that allowed the Black community to build a place of their own and sustain it for nearly a century. In other work on student activism, I traced how Black students created coalitional spaces for their activism that served as models on what it means to value Blackness on campus; the model being more important than moments of direct actions (Mustaffa & Mayorga, 2019). For example, one Black student activists described the following in an interview:

> I looked to Black [student] organizations that would lead shit against injustice, right? So, the first community I looked to was the AAm [Afro-American Society]. We couldn't have a voice in that community because the community unfortunately answered to the Black elite [upper-middle-class students]. Because all these Black organizations that [are] supposed to push against [the college] and fight for the Black people . . . wasn't doing shit . . . we can't be attached to the institution because this institution is not helping us. (Mustaffa & Mayorga, 2019, p. 191)

The activist was arguing for Black lifemaking not solely defined by a shared race, but a way of being that centers what helps us over institutionalized norms and attachments. Black lifemaking is not essentializing community or organizations, even when Black-led; it is a focus on spaces and ways that allow Black people to be more whole and have fluidly different experiences (King, 2015). All of these examples were not primarily defined by oppression or resistance to it but were reflections of how Black people create their own human value and imagine their own futures. Black lifemaking aims to document the life work of creating Black human value and sustaining Black futures. The theory works through two analytical tensions in the field of education and abolitionist praxis.

For the field, it provides an alternative focal point than traditional questions focused on Black people's under- or hyper- achievement and instead centers on what Black people—students, parents, and community members—do to value their lives. Black lifemaking takes seriously that schools and colleges or the academy and the professoriate are sites of Black suffering and rather than ask what Black people do in reaction to that reality—it calls for a focus on what they do in the meantime, in parallel to anti-Blackness (Dumas, 2014). How do Black people create value in and beyond schools? How do our spaces center and celebrate Black life? How do Black people's life work imagine beyond meritocracy—designed to be anti-Black? Black lifemaking is an answer to Stovall's (2018) above question of what is possible for Black life in sites of ant-Blackness.

In my scholarship, Black lifemaking materialized in clear examples. In my school-focused research, lifemaking looked like Black students laughing at the lunch table, creating step dance teams, and leading affirming student groups. These spaces often had little to do with meritocracy and focused on allowing Blackness to be unapologetic. In my community research, Black people maintained mutual aid networks that allowed for the sharing of food, transportation, childcare and money but as important it allowed for community to be built, challenged, and fluid. Black people's material condition often is shaped by metrics of achievement in education, but Black lifemaking often disrupts the determinism of schooling with a collective approach to living and self-actualizing Blackness as valuable and as human. Across my scholarship, I found the Black neighborhoods, often thought of as places one needs to escape from, as the infrastructure of lifemaking. These sites sustain and hold the networks, activism, mutual aid, and social organizations that Black people create as alternatives models of being. As these examples show, Black lifemaking redirects our focus to what Black people do, think, and create about their livelihoods and treats lifework as a body of knowledge.

For the analytical tension in an abolitionist praxis, Gilmore (2017) and Davis (2011) calls for abolitionists to focus not solely on what we are against, but also what we want to create. Many take this call to action to imagine Black futures based on what Black people need. Scholars and activists collectively call for reparations, stronger welfare benefits, defunding the police, universal healthcare and income, and community control (Taylor, 2016). Black lifemaking also aims to answer this call but through showing how Black futures are lived in the everyday life work of Black people. I argue we do not need to come up with definitions or models on how to value Black people, how to document Black knowledge, or how to get free. These models are being formed in the everyday lifemaking of Black people who create, hold, and protect their spaces and those with the least create it most urgently and disruptively (Gilmore, 2008). As Robinson (2000) argued, the Black radical thinkers did not create Black radicalism, but more came to recognize it in the masses and movements of Black people. When the Black student refuses a school leaders authority, a Black parent violates the school district boundaries, the Black student activists takes over a building, and Black protestors set a building a blaze—Black futures are not just being imagined but lived. Abolition is not a leap from present to future but scaling up the futuristic ways Black life is always recreating environments, policies, power, and places to be more livable (McKittrick, 2015). In encounters with anti-Blackness—often narrowly documented—more can be known about how Black people navigate the world than the abuse and the abusers. More importantly, too much scholarly attention even among the

most critical scholars settles back on reforming the abuse rather than the ways Black people create more workable relations and spaces. Black lifemaking makes clear that abolition is not about creating something new as much as it is about scaling what exists—the Black-led, Black-created, Black-desired spaces and practices that already value Blackness and center human needs.

To do this work as scholars who study the field of education but also are implicated in the violence of the university/academy, we have to abolish anti-Black logics in our analysis so we can do so also in our actions. There is not a simple way or set of steps that one can take to have an abolitionist praxis because it is a practice and way of being. Yet, I argue that a focus on Black lifemaking provides more workable relations and spaces to develop this abolitionist way of being because it is inherently a focus on the margins. bell hooks (1990) celebrated rather than disowned the margins with the following description:

> Marginality [is] much more than a site of deprivation; in fact … it is also the site of radical possibility, a space of resistance … a central location for the production of a counter-hegemonic discourse that is not found just in words but in habits of being and the way one lives. As such, I was not speaking of a marginality one wishes to lose, to give up, or surrender as part of moving into the center, but rather of a site one stays in, clings to even, because it nourishes one's capacity to resist. It offers to one the possibility of a radical perspective from which to see and create, to imagine alternatives, new worlds. (p. 149)

Like marginality in hooks's description, Black lifemaking nourishes one's capacity to resist because it roots one in a sense of self and place where Blackness is always already valuable without the need for achievement or evidence. This refuses the academic call to idealize promotions, tenure, grants, and book deals—does not foreclose them, but insists that there is something about clinging to the margins not as sites of exclusion and abandonment but sites of Black creativity and futures. What if the same ground where Black scholars fail, and experience spirit murder also is the fertile ground for connecting with what Black people need? As Halberstam and Halberstam (2011) argue in their work on queer studies:

> We can also recognize failure as a way of refusing to acquiesce to dominant logics of power and discipline and as a form of critique. As a practice, failure recognizes that alternatives are embedded already in the dominant and that power is never total or consistent; indeed failure can exploit the unpredictability of ideology and its indeterminate qualities. (p. 88)

Again, failure cannot be simply equated to spirit murder because not only does this type of approach idealize success but it also mis-remembers failure as non-productive. Failure is a reminder that the

terms of inclusions are not for us and power is not absolute—denial forces alternatives to be recognized and to be lived. Central to abolishing the anti-Black logics in our mind is decentering success in meritocracy as having any role in justice. That is if justice is to be about imagining Black futures based on what Black people need. Black human needs cannot be a matter of earning degrees, jobs, and income in order to live because both those who successfully do it and those who by design fail in the capitalist racial hierarchy experience spirit murder (Love, 2019). Yet, it is denial that the Black Radical Tradition in the academy has sustained on and the education field has been transformed by.

Now, I return to critical race theory, overwhelmingly used as the race framework of choice in education, as a case in point on failure as fertile ground for Black lifemaking. Kimberlé Crenshaw (2010) described how critical race theory came to be:

> there was a pre-workshop formation that often gathered in hotel rooms and in other offline spaces before, during and after professional conferences…These speakeasy spaces were organized by word-of-mouth invitations to CLS-leaning people of color and were places where the group could discuss and sometimes vent about the politics and the dialogues taking place on the public stage. News about developments in the law school world generated intense conversation, particularly when the topic turned to the sometimes lonely circumstances of many people of color who were the only nonwhite faculty in their law schools. People attracted to this space began to gain familiarity with each other and looked forward to finding opportunities to connect. Equally important, these informal gatherings provided a mirror from which to see that our viewpoints were not singular, but were, in important ways, shared. These informal exchanges hinted that there was a "there" there-something more than a simple repertoire of oppositionalist positions that we occupied within a variety of liberal and critical debates about race. With this recognition, it was only a matter of time before the "speakeasy" format would give way to an organized strategy to help define our emerging sensibilities. (p. 1298)

Critical race theory was not founded in formal academic channels or through achieving in the academy. It was not even founded in the speakeasy space that brought these critical legal scholars of color together. Critical race theory already existed in the life work these legal scholars of color who were in their "lonely circumstances" or marginality within their respective academic spaces. The analytical approach already existed in their venting about "politics and the dialogues taking place on the public stage". The failure of these scholars of color and their "oppositionalist positions" to be included, advanced, or reward in the meritocracy of the academy became the same ground for the lifework already present to be recognized, exchanged, and organized into a strategy that is today

the movement and framework we call critical race theory. (Although, as Moten and Harney (2013) explain scholars' critical critiques often come to rely on the university's recognition therefore are too limited.) Black lifemaking aims to cling to that speakeasy space, the "there", that both sites a location for Black futures and cites the knowledge being generated (McKittrick, 2006). The "there" before it has a name, recognition, or rewards. From these spaces, fluid and temporal, scholars can better remember abolition. Remember it as a call to abolish anti-Blackness and its capitalists systems through documenting violence and imagining the future but more importantly clinging to the lifework that creates answers out of necessity and in the present (Dache, 2019).

Conclusion

Spirit murder is a part of the story, but alone it can narrate Black lives only as dead and dying and mis-remember that even in our spiritual and physical deaths there was a before and after where we did live-on. Our living may not be measurable by meritocracy but how we live in our own self-defined measures must be known (Sharpe, 2016). Black lifemaking captures how Black people live-on and the need for our scholarly analysis to capture that lifework and for our abolitionist praxis to target systems, even schools and colleges, that devalue Blackness. There is an abundance of Black places, knowledges, desires, and refusals that show what it means to value Black humanity and struggle for Black futures. Black lifemaking calls us to remember that there is a "there" in our anti-Black world that is always already creating more free and livable conditions. To be clear, the "there" is not the system of K-12 schools and higher education, but it may be the intimate spaces of Blackness within these systems that Black people create—out of sight and recognition. These spaces are the margins that model what abolition and justice look like in concrete, lived, and material terms. Perhaps our role as scholars is to document what Hartman (2019) calls the black ordinary: "to recognize the obvious, but that which is reluctantly ceded: the beauty of black ordinary, the beauty that resides in and animates the determination to live free, the beauty that propels the experiments in living otherwise" (Hartman, 2019). Spirit murder can never tell the whole story that Black life narrates.

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