

January 2001

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Recommended Citation

Blaisdell, B. (2020). Cupcakes, White Rage, and the Epistemology of Antiracism. *Taboo: The Journal of Culture and Education*, 19 (1). Retrieved from <https://digitalscholarship.unlv.edu/taboo/vol19/iss1/6>

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Cupcakes, White Rage, and the Epistemology of Antiracism

Benjamin Blaisdell

Abstract

This article reveals how white rage and antiracism—often in the form of disdain for Black joy—surfaced at Pride Elementary, a racially integrated school in the urban center of a small city in the southeastern United States. Based on a 5-year ethnographic study, it analyzes the perceived threat some white teachers and parents felt by the mere presence of Black students, teachers, and administrators. It highlights the insights of the Black principal, whose experiences most clearly illustrate how school-based racism is rooted not only in white supremacy but also antiracism, thus supporting Dumas' (2016) assertion that school-based research on race must better address antiracism.

Introduction

In *White Rage* (2017), Anderson explains how white America has continuously used a “formidable array of policy assaults and legal contortions” (p. 4) to limit and dismantle the rights and successes that Black people have achieved. Anderson explains, “The trigger for white rage, inevitably, is Black advancement” (p. 3). In other words, white rage is rooted in antiracism. Antiracism is “an embodied lived experience of social suffering and resistance. . . in which the Black is a despised thing-in-itself (but not person for herself or himself) in opposition to all that is pure, human(e), and White” (Dumas & ross, 2016, p. 416-7). Therefore, I identify white rage as an emotional response by white people that is triggered when “the Black,”

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to use Dumas' framing of the term, is displayed, performed, or presented positively.¹ When Black people engage in freedom of movement, voice, or expression, it can disrupt white people's sense of blackness as something to be despised. From this disruption, white people experience feelings of disgust (Matias, 2016) and react by lashing out against blackness. This reaction of white rage may be individual but is also legitimated, carried out, and reinforced by institutional structures.

In this article, I illustrate how white rage and antiblackness surfaced at Pride Elementary, a school in a small southeastern U.S. city, where I have conducted a 5-year collaborative research project utilizing critical race theory (CRT). CRT is a scholarly tradition and framework that employs several key tenets—e.g., racial realism (Bell 1992; 2008), centering the perspectives of people of color (Dixson & Rousseau, 2005), and counterstory and revisionist narrative (Cook & Dixson, 2013)—to examine how racism is a foundational, embedded cultural system in U.S. society and institutions like schools (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Vaught & Castagno, 2008). I specifically highlight the insights from my work with the principal, Sandra, a Black woman. As part of a larger project at the school (Blaisdell, 2017, 2018a, 2018b), Sandra and I engaged collaboratively in CRT's analysis of whiteness as property (Harris, 1993; Vaught & Castagno, 2008) and the racialization of space (Calmore, 1995; Mills, 1997; Blaisdell, 2016a). These constructs helped us uncover and challenge how white supremacy surfaced in daily school practice. White supremacy is a cultural system in which, in both explicit and implicit ways, notions of superiority and inferiority are daily reproduced and employed so as to afford white people special rights and resources while simultaneously restricting rights and resources from of people of color (Allen, 2004; Ansley, 1997; Leonardo, 2004).

One benefit of focusing on white supremacy is that it has helped faculty of color and their more racially literate white colleagues feel more positive about working at the school, in part because they developed collective counternarratives to center the voices of faculty of color and to resist discourses and practices that functioned to maintain white superiority (see Blaisdell, 2018a, 2018b). However, as I have reexamined my work with Sandra, it has become apparent that an analysis of white supremacy alone is not sufficient to explain racism and white rage at Pride. Dumas (2016) argues, “a theorization of antiblackness allows one to more precisely identify and respond to racism in education discourse” (12). I similarly argue that an increased analysis of antiblackness is essential to more effectively engage in racial equity work at schools like Pride.

In the next sections, I use racial spaces analysis to explain the how white rage is rooted not only in white supremacy but also antiblackness. I offer up the concept of the epistemology of antiblackness, a framework we as whites² use to justify the hyper-surveillance and hyper-punishment (Annamma, 2017) of people of color, and in cases like Pride, of Black people in particular. I then use Sandra's insights to show how this epistemology functioned at Pride and also how antiblackness became institutionalized by the school and district, in essence empowering white rage. I

end by discussing the implications of engaging in an analysis of antiracism for school leaders and researchers who are attempting to address racism in schools. In those implications, I focus on the need for making space for Black joy, which Bettina Love (2019) describes as, “a celebration of taking back your identity as a person of color and signaling to the world that your darkness is what makes you strong and beautiful” (p. 120).

White Supremacy in Racial Spaces

Racial spaces are those in which white supremacy secures white people’s property rights, including the right to whiteness itself as a form of property (Harris, 1993; Blaisdell, 2016a). U.S. public schools become racial spaces via a variety of curricular, instructional, disciplinary, and social practices (Richards, 2017; Lewis, 2003; Lleras & Rangel, 2009; Skiba et al., 2011; Tyson, 2011). These practices invest more valuable curricular and instructional resources in white students and divest them from students of color. However, the racial aspect of these practices becomes hidden because they are normalized via the white spatial imaginary, which is way of viewing the world that “idealizes ‘pure’ and homogenous spaces, controlled environments, and predictable patterns of design and behavior” (Lipsitz, 2011, p. 39). These idealized spaces are based in white notions of superiority, but the white racial imaginary also denies those underlying white supremacist roots. In other words, the white spatial imaginary de-races space, promoting discourses of whiteness that rely on colorblindness to frame any racial disparity as an individual rather than structural issue (Allen, 2004; Bonilla-Silva, 2014). In fact, school-based practices that perpetuate racial disparity become normalized to such an extent that to imagine or enact access to curriculum and instruction in any other way is perceived of as impossible and to even violate the underlying norms of school space, norms which establish current spatial practices as sacrosanct (Lefebvre, 1991).

Focusing on the role of white supremacy in the daily reproduction of schools as racial spaces helps to examine how spatial relations are not a given but rather that space is produced (Rodriguez, 2013). This analysis can be used to uncover and then disrupt the specific discourses and practices that are complicit in the racial, spatial production process. For example, at Pride we used whiteness as property to examine how teachers allowed white students to resist teachers’ enforcement of classroom rules and how teachers gave white students more voice in the classroom (even in interactive, racially desegregated group work) and greater access to curriculum and tasks involving higher-order thinking. A focus on white supremacy also helped us counteract the white discourse that some white teachers used to disrupt our efforts to reform these practices.³ Living up to the research goals of CRT, our analysis helped us critically examine and intervene in the manifestations of white supremacy in education (Lynn & Parker, 2006).

An analysis of white supremacy alone, however, is not sufficient to tell the story

of racism as schools like *Pride* because whiteness is only one part of the construction of racialized space. White supremacy by itself does not explain how white people can be threatened by the mere presence of blackness. White supremacy alone does not answer questions about why a white teacher would want to punish a Black child for showing happiness, reprimand a Black teacher for interacting positively with Black children, or criticize a Black principal for showing friendliness to a Black teacher, all examples from *Pride*. To answer those kinds of questions, an analysis of antiblackness is needed.

White Rage and the Disdain for Blackness

powell (2000) explains, “Whiteness not only has a relationship to Blackness; this relationship is both hierarchical and oppositional” (430). That is to say, whiteness does not exist without the concept of blackness (Yancy, 2017), and therefore notions of white supremacy do not exist without the disdain for blackness. The disdain for blackness is inherently connected to slavery. Sexton (2010) explains that slavery in the U.S. subjugated Black people not just to the rule of their slave owners but to the entire country’s population. The legacy of connecting Black people to slavery persists in the white racial imaginary and has set up a racial contract in the U.S. where to be Black is to be inherently linked the status of slave and, thus, sub-person status (Mills, 1997). Under the racial contract, as the slave is ontologically not fully a person, by default Black people—who are eternally linked to slave status—are not afforded full person status. Blackness, therefore, becomes a marker of the antithesis to personhood and citizenship. As Dumas explains, “Antiblackness marks an irreconcilability between the Black and any sense of social or cultural regard” (Dumas, 2016, p. 13).

In terms of how ontological antiblackness relates to racialized space, in the white spatial imaginary blackness is the antithesis to idealized social space (Lipsitz, 2011). These spaces must be protected from Black bodies, which are perceived of as inherently criminal and thus hyper-marked (Yancy, 2017). At the same time, the oppressive nature of racialized spaces is hidden. They are constructed via processes that on the surface establish order and ease of daily operations but are actually impositions of power (Soja, 2010), and in racialized school spaces the power of white supremacy governs the laws of interaction, movement, voice, and expression (Blaisdell, 2016a). “Yet, because whiteness rarely speaks its name or admits to its advantages, it requires construction of a devalued and even demonized blackness to be credible and legitimate” (Lipsitz, 2011, p. 37). In other words, because white supremacy does not exist without antiblackness, racialized space is inherently governed as much by antiblackness. Furthermore, just as spatial discourses about order and organization hide the underlying white supremacy of spatial construction, so too they hide the underlying antiblackness that governs racialized space.

The mere presence of blackness in racialized space is a potential threat to the perceived sanctity and purity of that space. Whites may react to the violation

of that purity with disgust. Whites feel disgust and shame when our complicity in white supremacy is brought to light (Thandeka, 1999; Levine-Rasky, 2000). Blackness reminds us of that complicity. Whites feel disgust, however, not only because of our complicity in white supremacy but also because our ontological disdain for blackness. Under the racial contract, for whiteness to exist, blackness needs to exist. Specifically, for whiteness to exist as a positive, blackness needs to exist as a negative (powell, 2000; Yancy 2017). As Black bodies are already marked as criminal, Black people do not even have to do anything to be seen with disgust; the mere presence of blackness is enough of a threat. “Disgust is then radicalized and organizes social and bodily space, creating powerful boundaries between ‘us’ and ‘them’ (e.g., Whites and non-Whites); thus, disgust comes to signify the danger of proximity with *them* (non-Whites), because *they* threaten to violate *our* space and *our* purity” (Matias, 2016, p. 27). It is this disgust that can cause us to respond with white rage, an emotional response where we seek to return blackness to its sub-person status.

An Epistemology of Antiracism

To deal with the disgust that stems from the reality we have created, whites often employ an epistemology of ignorance (Mills, 1997) with which we seek to deny systemic racism despite all of the facts that show the salience of race. We use this epistemology of ignorance to sustain social structures that specifically benefit us as white people while simultaneously maintaining a positive feeling about our white identity. However, we as whites sustain and employ an epistemology that not only unconsciously upholds our own white superiority but that also actively disdains Black sub-person status/inferiority.

In other words, we as whites maintain what I call an epistemology of anti-blackness, a way of pursuing knowledge in which we seek justification for viewing blackness as negative. When blackness is exhibited in a positive way—e.g., Black people freely enjoying a barbecue (Levin, 2018), waiting for a friend in a café (Miller, 2018), or taking a nap in a student lounge (Wootson, 2018)—white people can perceive a threat to what we believe is the inherent positivity of our whiteness. In terms of supremacy, these examples show how Black people existing freely in racialized space can be perceived of as a threat to our white status property—they are taking advantage of a right perceived to be reserved for white people. However, it is not just our notion of white supremacy being threatened. It is also our epistemology of antiracism. Because whiteness frames blackness as ontologically negative, when blackness is exhibited in a positive way, our white rage is triggered. There is no actual material threat to our whiteness in Black people cooking outdoors, sitting in a public place, or taking a nap. However, because we believe blackness is something that is inherently a problem (Yancy, 2017), its positive expression causes us to feel disgust. This disgust triggers white rage, or the open disdain for Black success, freedom, or joy. Black joy, in particular, is a target of white rage

because Black expression exists performatively as the antithesis of whiteness (Johnson, 2015). It is the free expression of people of color thriving in spite of the of messages of inferiority sent by white society (Love, 2019). When this expression of joy occurs in racialized space, white people can find it particularly disruptive. We then employ white rage and engage the epistemology of antiblackness—which allows us to “distort” the Black body as inferior, criminal, and dangerous (Yancy, 2017, p. 59)—to justify that rage.

Antiblackness in School Policy, Practice, and Discourse

Executing antiblackness via white rage is not just a matter of individual white people disdain blackness. It is a matter of an epistemological and ontological disdain which carries with it the power of our social structure. In fact, those individual instances of antiblackness are powerful because they have institutional reinforcement. That is no more true than in the U.S. education system. “One exemplary site through which anti-black racism organizes policies, outcomes and social relationships is the U.S. public education system, including its culture of discipline and punishment” (Wun, 2016, p. 738). Schools hyper-surveil students of color—anticipating them to be a problem and to misbehave before they actually do anything—and then hyper-punish them—enacting more frequent and stricter punishments for the same behaviors white students exhibit (Annamma, 2017). In fact, because Black bodies are seen as inherently criminal, Black students do not even have to do anything wrong to be hyper-surveilled: “...the Black body is condemned before it even acts; it has always already committed a crime” (Yancy, 2017; p. xxxv).

Analyzing antiblackness helps us better understand educational policies and practices like the disproportionate disciplining of students of color—which especially impacts Black students (Skiba et al., 2011)—because it can help us focus how those policies and practices are structured into the institution of education over time. Disproportionate discipline is often seen as the result of implicit bias. While analyzing implicit bias can be useful, it does not account for how that bias is constructed over time via racial and racist discourses, discourses that themselves continue to construct blackness as negative (Brown, 2018; Goff, Eberhardt, Williams, & Jackson, 2008; Sung & Allen-Handy, 2019). In other words, the focus on implicit bias does not necessarily account for the for the structural antiblackness that governs school spaces.

...deeply and inextricably embedded within racialized policy discourses is not merely a general and generalizable concern about disproportionality or inequality, but also, fundamentally and quite specifically, a concern with the bodies of Black people, the signification of (their) blackness, and the threat posed by the Black to the educational well-being of other students. (Dumas, 2016, p. 12)

The presence of Black people in white school spaces are seen as a threat simply for being Black. Dumas (2016) goes on to explain, “it is important for educators

to acknowledge that antiracism infects educators' work in schools, and serves as a form of (everyday) violence against Black children and their families" (p. 17). So, just as white supremacy is reified through daily, taken-for-granted school practices, so too is antiracism. Furthermore, antiracism operates as a form of violence not only against Black students but Black teachers and administrators as well (e.g., see Kohli, 2018).

This is not to say that Black people are the only targets of racism in U.S. society or schools. It means, rather, that we cannot fully understand the comprehensive, systemic nature of racism without attending to antiracism. "Black existence does not represent the total reality of the racial formation—it is not the beginning and end of the story—but it does relate to the totality; it indicates the (repressed) truth of the political and economic system" (Sexton, 2010, p. 48). Wun (2016) furthers this point: "Although anti-black racism does not account for all of the systems, studies around the state of racism cannot fully comprehend the depth and entirety of the United States without centering the relevance of anti-black racism to the world and racial formations" (p. 740).

At *Pride*, an analysis of white supremacy helped us name the whiteness of practices and discourses that upheld white racial space, but by itself it did not prepare us for how teachers and parents acted on the epistemology of antiracism or for the institutional support that epistemology would receive. Dumas and Ross (2016) argue that blackness, and thus antiracism—constructions linked to but also different from whiteness and white supremacy—must be theorized as they are important to fully understanding the key tenets of CRT, including whiteness as property. While this is not a theoretical piece, I examine how a more specific analysis of antiracism can better prepare researchers and educators to understand and respond to the racialization of school space and the power of white rage.

Setting: "The Black School"

I have worked with *Pride Elementary* since the Fall of 2013. *Pride* is a school of about 500 students in the urban center of a small city in the southeastern United States. Despite white people being the largest group of both students (45%) and faculty (60%), *Pride* was sometimes referred to by personnel and families in the district as "the Black school." There were a few reasons this label was used. First, *Pride* was located in the traditionally Black neighborhood of the city. The school was named after that neighborhood and students participated in an annual project learning about the neighborhood's history. Second, the percentage of teachers of color was about 40%, the largest number being Black. Though still less than the number of white teachers, this was much higher than at any other school in the district, and by year three of the study both the principal and assistant principal were also Black. Third, the school's equity work, which I describe more in the next section, deliberately focused on foregrounding the voices of teachers of color.

Methods

As stated earlier, this piece draws on a larger ethnographic study at Pride, where I worked with not only the principal, Sandra, but also several grade level teams, individual teachers, and the school's race committee—a group of 8-15 teachers and administrators (depending on the year) who led the school's racial equity efforts. In that study, I utilized a collaborative form of research and professional development called equity coaching (Blaisdell, 2017, 2018a, 2018b). Equity coaching draws on a dialogic performance (Conquergood, 1985) approach of co-analysis and intervention that specifically uses concepts from CRT—e.g., whiteness as property, racial realism, racialization of space—to foster critical race praxis. Critical race praxis involves translating CRT into specific “operational ideas and language for anti-subordination practice” (Yamamoto, 1997, p. 597). I worked most intensively with Sandra and the race committee. As a group, we met at least monthly, specifically using CRT to discuss, analyze, and develop responses to the daily manifestations of white supremacy.

In this article, I focus on my ongoing work with Sandra. Sandra became principal of the school at the beginning of the third year of the study and had served as an administrator, lead teacher, classroom teacher, and intervention specialist in the district since 2003. In that time, she earned a reputation, both in the district and broader region, as a racial equity advocate and an expert on culturally relevant pedagogy for students of color. At Pride, she worked very closely with the race committee to lead the school's racial equity efforts, especially with regard equity coaching.

I focus on my work with Sandra for several reasons. One, her critical insights on race moved and directed the project at least as much as mine did. As equity coaching is dialogical, researchers and participants can shift in and out of the coaching role, and Sandra often served as an equity coach to me and other faculty members. Two, as a Black woman, she had an epistemological awareness that helped her catch instances of complicity in racism I missed as a white man.⁴ Three, the examples she shared most directly illustrate the existence and functioning of antiblackness at Pride.

Between group and individual interviews, meetings, and phone conversations, I have met with Sandra over 40 times totaling more than 100 hours. I audio recorded almost all our face-to-face meetings and took fieldnotes at the others and during our phone conversations. I then transcribed all audio recordings and fieldnotes to make further research notes. To analyze the data, I used critical race ethnography (CRE), which:

...follows the lead indicated by proponents of CRT to take the words of people of colour seriously and, instead of stopping there, to allow these voices to inform how we approach our examination of the material conditions that are basic to and inextricably a part of lived experience. In other words, a critical race ethnography seeks to engage the multiple ontological categories that give meaning to lived experience. (Duncan 2005, p. 106)

As I reviewed all of Sandra's accounts of race, racism, and whiteness, I focused on

those recurring stories that revealed a cohesive narrative about her lived experiences at Pride. I also cross-checked those accounts against the similar stories I recorded from both the race committee and individual teachers of color. Furthermore, while I was the primary person conducting the analysis of the field and research notes, Sandra and I together discussed the recurrent types of stories that arose from the data. It was from these ongoing analytical conversations where I developed the focus on antiracism for this article. In the first few years of our work, we both believed that white supremacy was the primary impediment to racial equity at the school, so much of our analysis centered on the racialization of space and whiteness as property. As we progressed in our conversations over the last couple of years, we realized there were instances of racism that our focus on white supremacy could not fully explain, and we started to more frequently discuss the concept of antiracism.

In the sections that follow, I share several key examples of white rage from my conversations with Sandra. “One strategy for achieving the objectives of CRE is to present ethnographic data in ways that reveal the ‘values and practices that normalize racism in society’ (Duncan, 2002, p. 131)” (Woodson, 2019, p. 29). To show how racism was normalized at Pride, I show how white supremacy existed in each example but specifically highlight the role that antiracism played, especially as it pertains to the disdain for Black joy. My objective is to illustrate that an analysis of antiracism gives a fuller picture of how school space becomes racialized. My intent is not to claim that Black students and faculty were the only people to face racism at Pride or to claim that other systems of oppression like settler colonialism or sexism should not also be analyzed. Rather my intent is to extend Sexton’s (2010) argument that, while it is not the only story of racism, an understanding of antiracism is necessary to understanding the permanence of racism in U.S. society broadly and the racialization of school space specifically. Also, my intent is not to implicate all of Pride’s white teachers or parents in intentional antiracism. There was a small but vocal minority of white people who exhibited white rage, but as I will explain, their efforts were undergirded by a broader epistemology of antiracism and by institutional power, especially at the district level.

Antiracism at Pride Elementary

As I share Sandra’s accounts of white rage, I illustrate how an analysis of antiracism gives a fuller picture of how racism manifested itself in daily practice, and how this racism became institutionalized by the school and district. I start with the example that involves Sandra giving a teacher a cupcake, as this story particularly highlights the theme of the disdain for blackness some white teachers and parents expressed towards not only Sandra but also other Black faculty and students.

The Cupcake

One of the most flagrant examples of antiracism that Sandra related to me

occurred in the third year of the project (Sandra's first as principal) and it involved a cupcake. Sandra:

There was a [white] teacher last year, when I was named as the next principal, who came and said that I favored this other teacher, Ms. Elliot, because Ms. Elliot was African American. So, she made the comment again this year that I favor the teachers of color. This particular time was because I gave Ms. Elliot a cupcake.

I asked her, "Have you ever considered me giving it to Ms. Elliot could be anything other than because she is Black?"

She said, "No, because you gave Kara [another Black teacher] one, too."

I said, "Well, you don't know that I gave Jennifer a cupcake and Kelly a cupcake. They're not Black."

Another time, I said to her, "Well, I noticed you thought that I favored this particular Black teacher. Tell me more about what made you think I favored them." And her response was, "You smile at them in the hall."

Everyone who knew Sandra knew she liked food. She loved having food at meetings, she loved to see and ask about what people were eating, and she loved to share. It would not be uncommon to see her sharing snacks with anyone who happened to be in the front office at the time, and she offered me food on several occasions. So, her having cupcakes and sharing them with teachers would not be out of the ordinary. Without interviewing her directly, it is hard to fully know what the white teacher in this example was thinking and what her motivations were in pointing out Sandra's sharing of a cupcake. Regardless, she felt the entitlement and need to express her views about Sandra. In terms of white supremacy, perhaps this teacher felt her own sense of superiority was threatened as she did not stand out as special. White people will defend white status property of whiteness when that status comes under threat (Harris, 1993). In the cupcake example, however, that perceived threat only comes because of the presence of blackness, and particularly of Black comradery and joy. She witnessed Black people getting along and having fun—they were smiling at each other—and responded with white rage, i.e., the emotional need to curtail blackness expressed as positive.

There were other examples of white teachers saying that Sandra favored Black teachers. Sandra talked about this in terms of racial microaggressions Black school personnel have to face. Sandra:

I said to the previous principal [a white woman], "Why aren't people saying that you favor the white staff? These are the kind of things that people of color have to deal with on a regular basis that white people don't have to experience."

Sandra pointed out that these comments were problematic, in part, because they did not recognize the close relationships she had with white faculty members. Sandra:

Mandy and I talk all the time. And Katie and I are very close. She is up in the office every day asking my advice or just talking about whatever.

Sandra was not the only faculty member of color who expressed experiencing these

kinds of microaggressions. Several Black teachers mentioned that white teachers questioned them on why they spent more time with other Black faculty. Those kinds of comments racialized the behaviors of Black faculty while simultaneously de-racializing the behaviors of white teachers. As Sandra explained, “the Black faculty aren’t saying that the white teachers are only friends with each other.” This rhetorical move by white teachers was part of a daily production of racial space that is rooted in antiracism. Whiteness as property afforded white teachers the freedom to associate with each other without question of their racial intent and denied Black teachers the same right. Antiracism, however, was the trigger for white teachers’ need to intervene. When Black faculty associated with each other, they were asserting the same rights as white faculty, thus disrupting the perceived purity of racialized space. Some white teachers responded to this disruption with disdain (e.g., complaining about it to each other) and even rage (e.g., complaining to the principal and even the district in attempts to curtail the behavior).

A More Visible Divide

Discussing the cupcake example and similar stories of white disdain for blackness helped us discuss other ways that antiracism existed more broadly at Pride. Sandra:

We have a critical mass of Black faculty, something a lot of white folks aren’t used to. I don’t know if “opposition” is the word I’m looking for, but there’s this divide. It feels like a more visible divide because there are more Black people in this building than most white people are accustomed to working with. If there are only three Black people in a building, you don’t really feel that same divide.

On several occasions, Sandra talked about the “undercurrent” at Pride as being distinctly different from schools where she had worked previously. In part, Sandra attributed the more apparent divide between white faculty and Black faculty at Pride simply to the increased presence of Black faculty. However, she also pointed out that white teachers did not just feel a divide because of the increased visibility of teachers of color but also because Black teachers were more vocal, which some white teachers framed as problematic. Sandra:

Now it’s not just the one Black teacher on the grade level that is expressing themselves. Before it didn’t feel like a problem because there was maybe just the one. And the one generally doesn’t speak up enough or push back enough to cause discomfort.

Sandra and I talked about how white teachers responded to that perceived problem in de-racialized terms. They had talked about how “teachers are feeling uncomfortable” or “a lot of us feel this way” or “we feel attacked” without naming that it was the specifically white teachers who felt uneasy in their communication with Black faculty. In doing so, those white teachers were normalizing their perspectives on

the faculty climate, thus normalizing whiteness itself. Those teachers therefore also positioned blackness as a problem without using overtly racial language, tapping into a key characteristic of racialized space—advocating for white interests without seeming to implicate race (Lipsitz, 2011; Yancy, 2017).

An analysis of these comments as a form of white supremacy can illuminate how white teachers' white status property (Harris, 1993) might have been threatened by the increased vocality of Black teachers, that perhaps their own white voices did not maintain special status. The context of *Pride*, however, helps show that the status property of whiteness only becomes visible with the presence of blackness. White teachers made these complaints even in the first two years of the study when the principal was white (Sandra, who had been assistant principal, became principal the third year) and even though white teachers were the majority (60% of the faculty). There was nothing preventing white teachers from expressing their own views in meetings. Rather, it was the mere expression of Black viewpoints that immediately resonated as negative to these white teachers. By examining these comments via antiblackness, we can reframe them as expressions of disgust with the visible and vocal presence of blackness, a disgust caused by the disruption of *Pride* being seen as a racialized space that should function to uphold white notions of superiority (even if not overtly named as such). These white teachers responded to that disruption via the epistemology of antiblackness, searching for a reason for their disgust, failing to acknowledge the role of race in how they themselves felt, and then locating the problem in the Black without claiming to.

Kings of the Roost

White teachers did not only use the epistemology of antiblackness to respond to the Black principal or teachers. They also used it to respond to expressions of joy from Black students. For instance, Sandra relayed the following discussion with a white teacher about two Black students. Sandra:

Yesterday, a teacher told me, "These two students just get to do whatever they want, like there are the kings of the roost."

I said, "Really? You honestly think these kids just get to do whatever they want to? Tell me what makes you think that."

She said, "Every morning, they walk in their class, they come back out, and they go downstairs and get breakfast."

I said, "To me, that doesn't sound like king of the roost. That sounds like kids who've recognized that there's a little loophole here. They think, 'I don't really want to be in class yet anyway, so let me figure out something else to do.'"

This morning, I was still thinking about it, so I asked the teacher to tell me more. I kept asking her until she finally said she wanted one of the students suspended, which was what I thought she wanted anyway.

Wun (2016) notes that one of the main ways that antiblackness occurs in schools is through the punishment of Black students. The white teacher in this example not

only wanted to punish the students; she also wanted one of the students—a Black boy—to be suspended. In my time at Pride, I saw a lot of students take advantage of loopholes in school rules. It was not uncommon to see students—both white students and students of color—walking in the halls with a bathroom or hall pass but then also taking a little extra time to talk to their friends or take the long route back to class. Most of the time, teachers would redirect the students back to their classrooms without any other intervention. At the same time, discipline data showed that students of color—and especially Black students—were referred to the office significantly more often for behaviors such as being out of class.

In terms of white supremacy, the above teacher's comments can be read as engaging in institutional whiteness as property that denied Black students the right to use and enjoy the privileges of whiteness, such as the freedom to bend rules a bit. Her desire for suspension, however, is more accurately read as a deeper disdain for blackness. The teacher was not just troubled by the Black student bending a school rule. She was troubled because, in her view, he was enjoying his freedom—to her, he was acting like he was “king of the roost”—and that expression of freedom triggered her white rage. The discipline data revealed that Pride had a broader issue of giving Black students less freedom, not more. Despite this evidence, this teacher drew on the epistemology of antiracism to not only try and further limit this boy's freedom but to also push him out of school space completely.

The Kids in the Walk Zone

It was not only white teachers who wanted to disproportionately punish blackness. White parents expressed a similar desire. Sandra:

The perception of the white families is Black students have no consequences, that they just get to do what they want to. Each time [a white parent has complained to me], it has been about an interaction between Black student and a white student. My brain keeps trying to figure out “What is it you think should happen to these students, and what would that even look like?”

On several occasions Sandra talked to me about how white parents clearly wanted Black students punished, often meaning they wanted those students removed from the classroom. During this time, the school and district were also trying to move away from more punitive forms of addressing behavior disputes and to establish restorative practices, approaches that seek to prevent or repair harm to student-to-teacher or student-to-student relationships rather than to punish students for misbehavior (Lustick, 2017; McCluskey et al., 2008). These practices usually involved using restorative circles, where all parties involved in an incident meet and come to consensus on how to move forward (Kline, 2016). While restorative practice was becoming more common in the district and the district lauded progress in this area, white parents at “the Black school” were not always fully on board. Sandra:

In one instance with another parent, I suggested a restorative circle, and he wasn't interested in the circle...being part of the process.

This parent—whose white child had an altercation with a Black child—refused restorative practice as it did not satisfy his underlying need to for the Black child to be punished. Employing restorative practice over punishment would not match his conception of what idealized school space should be. In the white spatial imaginary, blackness needs to exist as negative; therefore, Black students need to be punished. While this example is only of one parent, it highlights an underlying discomfort that some white parents had for the visible presence of Black students and faculty in the school, a discomfort they expressed to the principal and to district level administration.

White parents did not always need an incident between students to happen for their white rage to be triggered. Some white parents complained to district administrators because of examples like above but others complained more generally about the preferential treatment they thought Sandra showed Black students. Sandra:

The assistant superintendent said that... parents had expressed that I only care about “the kids in the walk zone.”

The term “the kids in the walk zone”—which was used by both white parents and teachers—was a de-raced way to refer to Black students. Pride was located in the traditionally Black neighborhood of the city. By referring to space—the walk zone, i.e., the area close enough for kids to walk to school—these parents could clearly indicate race without doing so overtly, thus letting them claim their intentions were not racial. Again, there was no evidence that Sandra or the school favored Black students. They were still referred to the office substantially more than white students and were underrepresented in programs like gifted education. White students' advantaged position was never in jeopardy. The most common forms of evidence given by white parents were comments about how much Sandra talked to Black families and how friendly she was to them. Again, the mere presence of Black joy seemed to trigger white rage and for some white parents to seek institutional support for their epistemology of antiblackness.

There's a Lot of Diversity Here

White parents' disdain Black joy was also expressed via other forms of de-racing discourse, such as appealing to the rights of “all students.” Sandra:

So, there was a white parent who had called. She kind of complained about the school not being for all students.

I said, “Well give me an example,” because that's my thing when people are saying this. Where's the example?

She wasn't able to at that time. Then she comments, “There's a lot of diversity here.”

So, I find out that she's upset because there are these two student groups that

she feels like her son can't be a part of. They're both Black people who are leading those groups, and they are attracting a lot of students of color... But they are not affinity groups. Anyone can join.

Then I hear the issue gets to the PTA, because some parents are concerned that these two groups received PTA money, like \$300.

That two Black faculty were leading clubs—one a dance and music troupe and one a club for boys to learn about etiquette—and that a large number of students of color participated in them was viewed as a problem by some white parents. Perhaps these parents again believed that there was no inherent privilege for the status property of whiteness. As Sandra pointed out, white students were allowed to be in the clubs, so there was no actual material threat to whiteness. Instead, the fact that Black people and other people of color were enjoying freedom of expression in school space triggered white parents' epistemology of antiracism. Even without a material threat to their children, these parents had to find a problem with the expression of Black freedom and joy. So, they invoked the language of the white spatial imaginary, expressing racial views without trying to overtly name race.

The language about the rights of "all students" was echoed by other white parents and teachers throughout my time with Pride. As a clear form of white discourse (Hyten & Warren, 2003), it was often used as a way to deflect faculty trainings and guided conversations we designed to address white supremacy. However, in the case above and similar instances, the phrase was an expression of disdain for the expression of blackness as positive within racialized space.

The Institutional Power of Antiracism

It would be easy to interpret the above examples as exceptions, as only the intentional racism of a few resistant white people. As I mentioned earlier, however, these examples highlighted a broader and deeper antiracism at Pride, one buoyed by both the epistemology of antiracism at the school and institutional weight at the district level. For instance, the more visible divide that Sandra mentioned was often used by even more racially literate white faculty to unwittingly engage in the epistemology of antiracism. These white teachers often worked on racial equity efforts and tried to advance analyses that exposed white supremacy, but when they heard complaints from their white colleagues, they switched their discourse. For instance, one racially literate white teacher expressed to Sandra and me that "Teachers are feeling criticized." Another said that it was the equity work that was creating "a divide among the faculty." Sandra's analysis of these comments exposes how they are rooted in both whiteness and antiracism. Sandra:

What I said to the one teacher was, "What does 'criticize' look like?" Just because someone doesn't agree with you? Because that has been my experience. The minute that someone shares a different opinion, you become upset as if you have a right to your opinion, but the other person doesn't have a right to theirs.

Sandra was pointing out that Black faculty did not have the white property status that afforded them the right to express their own opinions without rebuke, thus upholding a system of white supremacy. Her comments also showed that these white teachers were engaging in the discourse of the white spatial imaginary. Even though they were using the passive voice or generalized “teachers,” they were clearly implicating Black faculty. The fact that more racially literate white teachers immediately thought their white colleagues were right and supported rooting the problem in expressions of blackness shows the systemic power the epistemology of antiblackness had at Pride.

This epistemology also affected how district administration responded to complaints from white parents and teachers. On several occasions, Sandra shared examples of district personnel meeting with her to tell her what “parents” were saying. They too used the de-raced language—e.g., “some parents have been complaining”—even though in each instance the parent was white. At times, the district administrators, to their credit, would intervene in the parents’ language and back up Sandra’s actions and leadership. At other times, however, they used the complaints to try and convince Sandra—at times subtly and other times not so subtly—that she needed to change a behavior or practice or the way she spoke with white parents. When doing so, these administrators often used the same language of the white spatial imaginary that the parents used, e.g., “We need to make sure we are representing all students.”

At other times, the district response carried more severe consequences. The biggest example of this was when another Black administrator at Pride, Bradley, was moved to another school. This occurred after a few white parents and teachers complained that “white students were not being represented at Pride.” At first, the district’s explanations for the move echoed white parents’ critiques that they needed to “increase representation for all students” and ensure that “all students’ needs are being met,” implying that Black leaders could not represent white students’ interests or needs. Over time, the district tried to obscure its racial reasoning. The language eventually shifted to, “We want to spread your skills around” and “You two are too similar.” For those who knew them, Sandra and Bradley were not similar at all. Sandra was a middle-aged woman while Bradley was a younger man. Sandra was a veteran administrator while Bradley was in his first year. Sandra was a commanding presence and Bradley much more reserved. Also, while Bradley had a certain degree of racial literacy, he did not yet have the extensive experience as an equity leader as Sandra, who was known in the community for her leadership on antiracism. There was of course one thing similar about Sandra and Bradley; they were both Black.

In the Bradley decision and the other cases where the district communicated to Sandra, the numbers of parents and teacher complaining was actually quite small. The power of their white discourse, however, swayed district administrators—even administrators of color—to intervene in how Blackness was expressed at Pride and to support white racial interests.

Conclusions

With the above examples, I attempt to provide further empirical evidence for why increased analysis of antiblackness is needed in schools like Pride. Dumas (2016) argues, “any incisive analyses of racial(ized) discourse and policy processes in education must grapple with cultural disregard for and disgust with blackness” (p. 12). Because of the ongoing psychic and psychological (not to mention physical) harm that antiblackness has on Black people and other people of color (Yancy, 2017), I believe this need is urgent. I mentioned earlier how the analytical language on white supremacy helped us understand and intervene in some of the discourse and practices used at Pride. As Sandra’s accounts show, however, our focus on white supremacy did not help us sufficiently respond to the attempts to control Sandra as a Black leader or to the cultural disregard that some white people showed toward blackness. The categorical language that comes from the literature on white supremacy did not adequately prepare us for the underlying disdain for Black leadership, freedom, and joy.

Implications: Creating Space for Black Joy

An analysis of antiblackness would help refocus critical and engaged scholarship on race at schools like Pride, starting with the kind of the questions being asked. Those we did ask were rooted in racial spatial analysis of whiteness. Some of the driving questions of our work were: “What makes Pride a racial space, one where white students have increased resources, mobility, and voice?” and “How are we sustaining white supremacy in daily practice?” While these were effective on some ways, they did not help us uncover the underlying disdain for blackness that justified school discourse and practices. A focus only on whiteness did not help us answer the simple question, “How is disdain shown for blackness?” To move to a racial spatial analysis that includes an examination of antiblackness, potential questions moving forward might be: “How is antiblackness embedded in policy and practice?” “How are we sustaining a hidden curriculum of antiblackness?” and “How is the school a space that silences Black joy?”

To answer these kinds of questions, I suggest several possible areas for further research in teaching, teacher education, and educational leadership. One is research that develops analytical language on the types of antiblack discourse. Research has codified white discourse in many ways (e.g. Bonilla-Silva, 2014; Hytten & Warren, 2003; Leonardo, 2002), and those categories are useful in working with school personnel on identifying and addressing how white discourse contributes to racial inequity. Similar work in antiblack discourse would help school personnel develop more fluency in analyses of antiblackness. Two is research that extends into K-12 contexts the existing work in higher education on how white emotionality contributes to the perpetuation of white supremacy and the disgust for blackness (e.g. Cabrera, 2014; Matias, 2016; Matias, Montoya, & Nishi, 2016). Three—as

critical race research has uncovered specific ways to disrupt the control white supremacy and discourses have in K-12 schools (Blaisdell, 2017, 2018a, 2018b; Howard, 2018a, 2018b)—is further CRT research on effective ways to disrupt antiblackness and antiblack discourses in schools.

Towards that end, I also offer two recommendations that could help both researchers and school personnel conduct critical race praxes that address the disdain for blackness. First, critical and collaborative analyses of race in schools must name antiblackness. Dumas (2016) states, “Teachers, administrators, and district leaders should create opportunities to engage in honest and very specific conversations about Black bodies, blackness, and Black historical memories in and of the school and local community” (17). At *Pride*, we were able to create a school where we engaged in honest conversations to name whiteness—i.e., where we named when teacher speech and actions adhered to white supremacy. Similarly, school-based critical inquiry into racism must openly and consistently name the specific ways that speech, actions, and policies exhibit antiblackness.

Second, critical inquiry into racism in schools must be used to purposefully create space for Black joy. Johnson (2015) defines Black joy as “the black love, laughter, hugs, and smiles that for a moment offer us glimpses of radical democracy, freedom, and utopia” (p. 181). He explains that, for Black people, Black joy “allows us the space to stretch our imaginations beyond what we previously thought possible and allows us to theorize a world in which white supremacy does not dictate our everyday lives” (p. 180). White school personnel and researchers like myself can make a commitment to embrace and honor Black joy, which means “loving seeing dark people win, thrive, honor their history, and be fully human” (Love, 2019, p. 120). For whites, honoring Black joy involves stepping aside, silencing ourselves, and even making sure that people of color have things (resources, money, positions) that we do not. Furthermore, to make space for Black joy in racialized space, we will have to develop dispositions that are “un-sutured” (Yancy, 2017, p. 14) from the white spatial imaginary and epistemology of antiblackness. For that to happen, the leadership of racially literate faculty of color will be especially important because their perspectives and racial knowledge are informed by “intersubjectively shared experiences” (Yancy, 2017, p. 24) that give them more accurate vantage points from which to analyze racism, whiteness, and antiblackness. School personnel can engage in collaborative professional development and research methodologies and projects that purposefully support Black faculty and other faculty of color in leading racial equity efforts. Researchers can support these efforts by working with schools to develop context-based analyses rooted in Black joy and then use those analyses to implement specific plans of action to better ensure that administrators, teachers, and students of color can fully express themselves without the disciplinary hand of whiteness getting in the way.

Notes

¹ I follow Dumas' (2016) lead in capitalizing Black when referring to Black people, institutions, and culture and in using blackness, antiracism, white, and whiteness in lower-case form. Quotations use capitalization according to the source material.

² As much as possible, I try to use the first person to discuss white people. I maintain the third person when quoting or paraphrasing.

³ I report on these findings in other publications (Blaisdell, 2018a, 2018b).

⁴ I talk about the cautions and commitments necessary for white researchers engaging in CRT research with teachers and administrators of color in other pieces (Blaisdell, 2016b, 2018a).

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