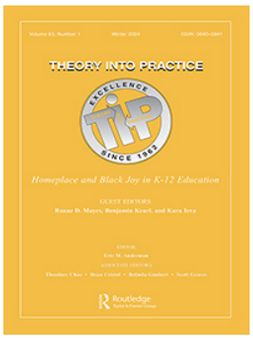

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Affirming Black Joy & homeplace: A call to action for practitioner preparation programs

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ABSTRACT

Despite growing discussions of antiracist practices and policies in PK-20 schools, education tends to critique racist structures without providing solutions that bring into the conversation the lived experiences of Black students, families, and communities. While these critiques may be helpful, we suggest these critiques omit practices and policies that attend to how education could become a homeplace that affirms Black Joy. In order to realize the affirmative possibilities of homeplace, we argue that more attention is needed toward practitioner preparation programs as training sites for building out education as a location for Black Joy. We discuss the current context of preservice teacher and counselor education training and provide tenets of Black Joy and homeplace that can serve as guideposts for more complete critical accounts of antiracism.

Education is currently replete with mentions of Black sorrow that make recognition of Black life conditional upon showing Black suffering. Repeated mentions of Black sorrow do not, however, alleviate Black suffering. Rather, they produce a negative stereotypical feedback loop, which regularly reports on the academic failings and/or special needs of Black students, the cultural deficits of Black families and communities, and the unique disciplinary threats posed by Black children. These discourses make the education of Black students contingent upon policies and practices implemented by and for the curricular souls of white children (Kearl, 2023). What results, Love (2019) argues, is an educational survival complex that trains Black students to merely survive schooling and which prepares them for lives of social exhaustion.

Against present conditions of survival, we argue that Black Joy provides a way of refusing white educational discourses while reimagining education as homeplace (hooks, 1990) where Black students can experience their full humanity. This effort proceeds in 3 sections. The 1st locates Black Joy amongst and against how education variously employs optimism and pessimism. The next section argues that the prevalence of anti-Blackness within practitioner preparation programs (PPPs) precludes expressions of Black Joy. The final section outlines 3 foundational tenets of Black Joy. These tenets address the question of how education can build affirming spaces that protect and love Black students across PK-20 education. This question is grounded in a belief that while Black Joy is necessary for Black students to thrive across schooling and society, it is also an ethical norm for *doing* practitioner education that is present in society even though this presence goes regularly ignored across social institutions like schooling.

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Black Joy optimism pessimism

Black Joy refuses to observe Black students only as sorrowful or in need of saving. Black Joy is an affirmative practice of refusal that locates within the everyday lived experiences of Black students, families, and communities forms of self-respect and self-determination that counter the hegemony of the educational survival complex. Part of this refusal is a rejection of how white educational discourses situate these lived experiences along a dialectic that confines Black lives to either tragedy or to racist enchantments of the Black minstrel (Baldwin, 1963/1998; Stewart, 2021). Building education as homeplace thus requires more future white teachers and school counselors to both recognize self-expressions of Black Joy so that these moments can be supported and loved and to understand that for Black students to thrive these future practitioners must learn to trust Blackness. Said differently: While Black Joy can benefit from the support and love of more white teachers and school counselors, it does not require it. Indeed, simply allowing Black children *to be Black* within schooling is perhaps amongst the most radically affirming things these future practitioners can do.

Black Joy exists in relation to both pessimistic observations that schooling and society continue to be inequitable and unjust and a vigilant optimism that "provides a type of nourishment that is needed to be dark and fully alive in White spaces, such as schools" (Love, 2019, p. 120). In many ways, pessimism fuels Black Joy. It helps to imagine alternative educational arrangements rather than accepting the status quo. Black Joy thus holds in tension a desire to instantiate educational conditions where Black students can experience their full humanity with a recognition that schooling has yet to become homeplace. This recognition is collective and exists across time and geography. It calls into being the rootedness of Blackness as both diasporic and localized and as simultaneously infused with current circumstances, ancestral learnings, and future yearnings still being collectively dreamt.

Imagining education otherwise does not ignore the traumas Black students experience every day; it repurposes those lived experiences toward an undoing of the status quo. In doing so, Black Joy refuses the extraction of education debt (Ladson-Billings, 2006) and confronts the present historical reality that American education was built by segregating Black children into under-resourced PK-12 schools that remain staffed by underqualified teachers and school counselors who use discipline and special education placements as a means of control (Lee, 2005; Love, 2019). Love (2019) likens these conditions to sharecropping, that is, to a pervasive belief predicated on a cruel optimism that if Black children work hard enough and behave themselves, they will succeed. Within this peonage arrangement, whenever Black students do not succeed, their failures become political grist for the neoliberal education reform mill. For example, policies like vouchers and school choice profit off extracting this education debt through claims that such reforms will improve educational attainments for Black students. Data continue to demonstrate, however, that such education reforms overwhelmingly benefit middle-class, white families who are the most likely to engage in school choice (Wilson, 2019).

In addition to documenting how education profits from creating inequitable and unjust conditions for Black students, such neoliberal reforms also invoke the larger problem of how to think about the full humanity of "human being[s] whose being human raises the question of being human at all" (Sexton, 2011, pp. 6–7). The present education moment,

which includes not only renewed interest in neoliberal reforms but also a racist revanchism of history curriculums by state legislatures (Kearl, 2023), attests to the problem American education has with Blackness. Its recurrent negation is cause for continued pessimism about how and if Black students not only get to *be* but get to *be Black* across schooling and society. PPPs remain troubled by the reality that Blackness is a problem that has yet to be adequately thought through. All too often, rather than confront the difficulty of extending to Black students their full humanity, including diverse cultural, sexual, neurological, and embodied self-expressions, many future white practitioners opt for the cruel optimism that they will love *all* students equally (Love, 2019). This problematic approach to education is critiqued below.

Disproportionality in disciplinary rates and special education placements as well as a growing crisis in Black youth mental health refute such claims (Congressional Black Caucus, 2020). Black Joy holds these and other education data in critical attention, refusing in one direction their inevitability and in the other that solutions like social and emotional learning are adequate (Drake & Oglesby, 2020; Kearl, 2022; Mayes et al., 2022). The latter is important given the propensity of whiteness to not only leverage the failings of Black students to its economic advantage but to also manufacture Blackness for its own political enjoyment. Stewart (2021) likens such moves to how neo-abolitionists reduced the interior lives of enslaved Blacks to expressions of tragedy or enchantment. The 2 halves of this dialectic split Black existence between static interpretations of enslaved Blacks as forever needing emancipation and minstrel caricatures designed to enchant white audiences. Neo-abolitionists thus either rendered Black lives recognizable only when they were suffering, which made Black life an object of pity, something that whites must save, or made enslaved Blacks appear so happy that any critique of racism seemed unwarranted. Baldwin (1963/1998) reminds education that this dialectic continues to inform the current context of PPPs.

The current context of practitioner preparation programs

While Black Joy is optimistic, there is reason to remain pessimistic given the present-historical reality of PPPs. Paraphrasing Love (2019), PPPs will not save Black students. Rather, Black Joy must save these programs from training methods that at best do not prepare practitioners to disrupt anti-Black racism and at worst reproduce this structural violence. Across PPPs, teachers and school counselors are trained in a culture steeped in white supremacy, characterized not by "the obvious and extreme fascistic posturing of small neonazi [*sic*] groups, but rather the taken-for-granted routine privileging of white interests that goes unremarked in the political mainstream" (Gillborn, 2005, p. 2). This taken-for-grantedness is important given the fact that gatekeeping policies and practices often ensure that many PPPs remain overwhelmingly white (Sleeter et al., 2014). This demographic and curricular reality means that future practitioners are trained to enter schools with unexamined beliefs about Blackness and to operationalize schools as dehumanizing spaces for Black students. In what follows, we describe how many PPPs reproduce anti-Blackness in schooling. This reproduction occurs in 3 ways: (1) decontextualized and isolated training curricula; (2) many white faculty silencing critiques of anti-Blackness; and (3) the systematic erasure of Blackness.

First, many PPPs preserve whiteness through normalizing routines that benefit white students by dispelling Blackness. For example, curricula often insert decontextualized

multicultural heroes. These heroes (of color, which is often not directly stated) typically stand-alone with little instruction to support students' comprehension of what these *heroes* were fighting for or against. Consequently, this method of instruction dispels Blackness and impedes opportunities for Black students to see themselves accurately and consistently reflected in their education, which is a prerequisite for homeplace. The use of decontextualized multicultural heroes also reproduces the above problematic tragedy/enchantment dialectic in that Black students are made to see themselves as either forever suffering or as without any cause to be upset about their current circumstances despite the wake of Atlantic chattel slavery reverberating throughout contemporary contexts (Sharpe, 2016).

Future practitioners are trained to understand their professions through these methods of multicultural content integration (Banks, 2004). In counseling theory courses, for instance, course content emphasizes theoretical frameworks developed by white practitioners while excluding critiques of how these frameworks traffic in the aforementioned taken-for-granted routines of white supremacy and anti-Blackness (Sharma & Hipolito-Delgado, 2021). Even when faculty work to interrogate these routines, the white students who overwhelmingly populate these courses tend to react defensively (Matias, 2016), insisting they are not racist or claim colorblindness (Bonilla-Silva, 2006). Such reactions preclude affirming the beauty, resistance, healing, and innovation of Black Joy by (re) centering whiteness and decentering Blackness. Absent critique of how white supremacy operates, PPPs function as how-to guides for reproducing anti-Blackness. Indeed, the dislocation of such critiques to siloed "multicultural" courses, which often function as afterthoughts to official training curricula, dispels Blackness and renders Black Joy as outside the academic rigor of PPPs.

Secondly, rather than invite vulnerability and encourage critical self-reflections that might affirm Black Joy, many white faculty socialize white students by modeling their own silences, failing to substantively counter students' defensiveness, and prioritizing white students' demands for racial comfort (Love, 2019; Matias, 2016). In doing so, they preserve white supremacy, dispel Blackness, and silence opportunities to challenge white students to think critically about their racial identities and how whiteness works for their protection. Such silencing produces future practitioners who are uneasy even saying "Black students" let alone knowing how to allow these students *to be Black* in schools; to say nothing of a lack of understanding about how Blackness elevates their future practices. Too often a culture of niceness in PPPs is weaponized to silence critiques of anti-Blackness in academic spaces (Williams et al., 2021). Even when white faculty attempt such critiques, they often focus on Black sorrow and suffering to promote white students' learning. Until PPPs comprehensively address these critical elements, they remain complicit in the reproduction of anti-Blackness in schooling (Harris et al., 2021).

Finally, while acknowledging the silencing effects many white faculty can have on white students, it is also important to recognize how these effects impact students of color, particularly Black students, wishing to become teachers and school counselors. Black students are expected to excel in programs that dispel their identities or discuss them only within the problematic contexts of either tragedy or enchantment. For Black students, then, becoming a future practitioner often means erasing or minimizing their racial and cultural identities (Haddix, 2017). Inside PPPs, instruction is grounded in deficit ideologies that position Black people as "pathological" and in need of saving. A future Black practitioner cannot help but understand these ideologies as also asserting that Blackness is

somehow defective (Williams et al., 2021). Curricula, including student teaching and supervision, train future Black practitioners to adopt and implement inferiority-based pedagogical approaches and practices themselves (Baker-Bell, 2020; Jackson, 2015). For example, Black cultural and linguistic assets are frequently disparaged, and future Black practitioners are discouraged from affirming these assets in their practice. PPPs fail future Black practitioners when they do not interrogate internalized biases, deficit orientations, or how both marginalizes and harms Black students. Future Black practitioners need and deserve opportunities to experience their full humanity in PPPs.

Tenets of Black Joy

Given the aforementioned context of practitioner preparation programs, Black Joy provides love and protects Blackness against the dehumanizing effects of PK-20 schooling. In this concluding section, we outline 3 foundational tenets of Black Joy that can serve as guideposts for reimagining PPPs.

Black Joy requires Black people

There is a history of pushing Black people out of PK-20 education. This gatekeeping must be understood as antithetical to building homeplace. If PPPs aim to build homeplace that affirms Black Joy, then a marker of that success must be that Black people are present and critically engaged. This is not a call for quotas and tokens, but for creating conditions where loving and protecting Blackness are norms for doing practitioner preparation. Loving Blackness, and ultimately Black people, means paying particular attention to the personal and institutional tensions that shape the experiences of Black students in PPPs (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2011). In particular, these programs should understand and address the tensions between personal ties (e.g., cultural, familial, linguistic) and institutional policies and practices that approach training as one size fits all. Black Joy invites the personal ties that Black students bring with them and creates institutional policies and practices of belonging that affirm these ties as pedagogical assets (Gist, 2017; Williams et al., 2021). This affirmation must be reflected in changes to recruitment and retention policies and curricular practices.

The culture of PPPs must also change. The taken-for-granted routines of white supremacy and anti-Blackness can no longer be ignored. Rather PPPs must build homeplace and make Black Joy the norm for training future practitioners. This requires cultivating a critical consciousness that imagines education otherwise as a practice of liberatory mutuality that affirms Black Joy. Without these changes, Black students are forced to assimilate into the overwhelming whiteness of PPPs and suppress their full humanity. Or they simply will choose not to become teachers or school counselors. The latter has implications for who is training up the next generation of Black practitioners. Black Joy cannot be cultivated without the presence and engagement of Black faculty (Williams et al., 2021). This means investing in pathways, culturally responsive mentorships, and coaching programs that not only assist Black students in becoming faculty but also support their promotion and tenure. Simply put: Black Joy requires Black people to be present and critically engaged in all facets of PK-20 education.

Black Joy is rooted

Black Joy is connected to rich histories and ways of knowing rooted in the Black diaspora. hooks (1990) locates this rootedness as constitutive to homeplace: "Black women resisted by making homes where all black people could strive to be subjects, not objects, where we could be affirmed in our minds and hearts despite poverty, hardship, and deprivation" (p. 42). Homeplace is not owned by any specific individual, but a marker of a shared, intergenerational history and a narrative through which the present is understood. Thus, while white supremacy and anti-Blackness continue to police and surveil Black life, Black people have and continue to yearn for a future yet to come. For example, the Harlem Renaissance allowed for diverse expressions of art, literature, and music that were generative toward experiencing cultural connection, pride, and Black Joy. In the 1960s, the Black Panther Party organized and built a range of social programs to uplift and support the Black community, including Afrocentric schools, legal aid offices, clothing distribution centers, local transportation networks, and healthcare clinics. Perhaps most notable are the free breakfasts they provided, which became the impetus for the 1975 Federal School Breakfast Program (King Collier, 2015). Everyday moments like Rosa Parks doing yoga or Martin Luther King Jr. sharing a meal with his family also humanize Blackness in ways that recognize the joy of *being Black*.

These histories of Black Joy continue today. For instance, in 2020, the Oakland Unified School District passed a resolution to eliminate police presence as part of PK-12 schooling (Reilly, 2020). Black Joy is present in affinity spaces like sister circles, Black student organizations, the Black Teacher Project, and even participating in Black Lives Matter at School week. We observe current iterations of Black Joy in hashtags like #BlackGirlMagic, #BlackBoyJoy, and #BlackAutisticJoy. Black Joy is also rooted in expressions of queerness like Janelle Monáe albums *Dirty Computer* and *The Age of Pleasure* and in the reclamation and restoration of natural hair. While these are only a few examples, they share commitments to conditions that collectively affirm Black Joy. These present histories are not locations of individual joy, they are collective spaces of mutual liberation and examples of how Black Joy is rooted in a shared community that is at once ancestral and present. PPPs must attend to this connection between past and present given its capacity to disrupt the problematic tragedy/enchantment dialect toward ways of being and knowing that humanize Blackness. The rootedness of Black Joy should be explored within PPPs as a way of understanding how the present has been created by people. Future practitioners should also be instructed about how the educational spaces they currently and will inhabit are still being collectively dreamt.To teach from this vantage invites students and faculty alike to see themselves agentically. It also specifically calls upon more white faculty to become coconspirators whose training methods are rooted in helping Black students interpret the world as subjects, rather than objects, of their education.

Black Joy necessitates love and trust

Black Joy is not just an essential element needed to transform education; it *is* transformative education. There are two parts of this transformation: First, educators must come to love Black people and, secondly, they must learn to trust Black Joy. Love is not merely an

emotional declaration; love is an action. Specifically, "love is an act of will—namely, both an intention and an action" (hooks, 2000, pp. 4–5). Understood as an action, love is not simply confessional, it is a "combination of care, commitment, knowledge, responsibility, respect, and trust" (hooks, 2000, p. 3). This definition of love requires PPPs to practice critique. Decontextualized and isolated curricula do not show a love for Black people. These curricula are confessional inclusions that prioritize the racial comfort of white students and faculty. James Baldwin's (1963/1998, "A Talk to Teachers," which is perhaps also a talk to school counselors, is instructive here. While Baldwin is a steadfast critic of America's present history of racism, his critique is an act of love in its radical commitment to truth-telling. It is also a willful act of refusal. Baldwin refuses to identify with how his education viewed him, he instead realizes that the lies schooling told him about himself were actually meant to comfort white students. There is joy in Baldwin's refusal but also love. The concluding sentences of this essay thus extends to America a cautious optimism that if America, and by extension future practitioners, are to change they must learn to love Black people. Baldwin's essay is also instructive because it invites curricula that are built *with* and *by* Black communities, not *for* them and because it connects Black resistance with Black Joy. This demonstrates to future practitioners that critique and love are not mutually exclusive. Indeed, a humanizing curriculum understands love and critique as mutually constitutive of homeplace.

Recalling that sometimes simply allowing Black students *to be Black* within schooling is amongst the most radically affirming things many white practitioners can do, trust involves getting out of the way of Black Joy. Given the propensity of white educational discourses to be overly concerned with reporting upon the experiences of Black students, getting out of the way is a more radical action than it might first appear. For instance, Stewart (2021) recounts how the problematic tragedy/enchantment dialectic was predicated on a neo-abolitionist obsession with the interior lives of enslaved Blacks. Many whites wanted to intimately feel their suffering and minstrelized happiness to deflect their own responsibility in perpetuating regimes of racist oppression and to report as evidence which whites already presumed about Black life. This "(imperialist) nosiness of whites" (Stewart, 2021, p. 117) finds affinity with Baldwin's (1963/1998) refusal to be known only through white educational discourses. Within Baldwin's refusal, then, education becomes a joyful relation of trust, both to himself and toward Black people. This new relation is what makes his refusal joyful: "Joy foregrounds a flourishing relation of the self to the self (or, in the case of Black Joy, how Black folks relate to each other)" (Stewart, 2021, p. 9).

Education impedes this relation whenever its desire to know the interior lives of Black students and faculty outstrips its responsibility to love Black people and trust Black Joy. For this reason, more white students and faculty must develop political clarity about their identities relative to systems of power like white supremacy. For example, Baldwin (1963/1998) reminds future practitioners that not only was his identity invented by white educational discourses but so too were the identities of many white students who must unlearn the lies they were taught about their role in American history. At the level of education policy, it is important for PPPs to be critically aware of the education debt they extract from Black students and faculty. Extractive logics include decontextualized and isolated curricula that trade in Black sorrow, tokenized recruitment practices, and hollow claims of diversity, equity, and inclusion (Baker-Bell, 2020; Jackson, 2015). While Black Joy requires Black people, it also insists that Black students and faculty must be trusted to *be Black* in education

spaces. In practice, more white students and faculty must become co-conspirators who work to preserve Black Joy by recognizing that they are not entitled to share homeplace with Black students and faculty whenever they desire, regardless of how they conceptualize their friendships. While some white students and faculty may be invited to share in the collective experiences of Black Joy, this is not an invitation to confess their sins or to act defensively about their racial identities. In centering whiteness, these moves negate, rather than affirm, Black Joy. Simply put: They are unloving violations of trust.

Conclusion

Each of these tenets is an invitation to reflect on how Black joy can guide current and future PPPs. These reflections invite future practitioners to dialogue with their respective faculty about how to build homeplace. These dialogs must resist the urge for a rulebook. Checking boxes only (re)centers the racial comfort of white students and faculty. PPPs must embrace Black Joy as experiential, vulnerable, and relational, which means that any exact definition is fleeting. PPPs might ask how and if they allow Black students and faculty to *be Black*. This question invites discussion of if and how white educational discourses employ a cruel optimism that extracts an education debt from Black students and faculty. Ultimately, imagining education otherwise requires a joyful pessimism that at once refuses the inevitability of the status quo and collectively dreams of a future still to come.

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We recognize and acknowledge the labor upon which our country, state, and institution are built. We remember that our country was built on the labor of enslaved people who were kidnapped and brought to the United States from the African continent and recognize the continued contribution of their survivors. We also acknowledge all immigrant and indigenous labor, including voluntary, involuntary, trafficked, forced, and undocumented peoples who contributed to the building of the country and continue to serve within our labor force. We recognize that our country is continuously defined, supported, and built upon by oppressed communities and peoples. We acknowledge labor inequities and the shared responsibility for combatting oppressive systems in our daily work.

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Additional resources

Given that Black Joy in education is still being dreamt, the following resources invite readers to explore outside connections to bring back to education.

1. Sojoyner D. M. (2022). Joy and pain: A story of Black life and liberation in five albums. University of California Press.

This book offers a multifaceted understanding of Blackness which is impacted by the carceral state while also possessing a collective joyful resistance. This book is creatively presented in 5 albums which detail freedom dreams through the story of a young man named Marley.

2. Cooper, C. (2023). *Better living through birding: Notes from a Black man in the natural world*. Random House.

This memoir details the life of Christian Cooper, a Black, gay birder whose confrontation with a white woman, Amy Cooper (no relation), walking her dog in Central Park went viral in 2020. Christian not only recounts this violent incident but also the joys of being Black, gay, a birder, and a Marvel Comic Book nerd. In doing so, Christian shares his process of learning to be and how he has defended this space of being for himself and others.

3. Solomon, R. (2019) *The deep*. Simon & Schuster.

This Afrofuturistic novel was developed from a song bearing the same name by Clipping, an experimental hip-hop band. Solomon engages in the radical imagination of a underwater society of descendants of pregnant enslaved African women who were thrown overboard during the trans-Atlantic slave trade.