

# Darker Planets, Darker Gazes: Critical Artistic Pedagogies of Black Aesthetics as Black World Making

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## Abstract

Informed by a critical qualitative project I conducted during the summer of 2019 using Black critical race-grounded methodology, where the methodological social location was a socially and community-engaged out-of-school space for multi-ethnic Black high school youth in New York City, I construct an empirically-informed photo essay of students' Black aesthetic productions and their assemblages of Black world creation—amid ongoing antiblackness. Through presentation and analysis of the art-based photos that embody Black youth aesthetics and/as Black world making, I further the theory development of Black Aesthetics in Education through an overarching lens of critical artistic resistance. I frame my photo essay, which takes the form of a living artistic storytelling, as an embodiment of Black Aesthetics in Education as an actionable, pedagogical framework.

**Keywords:** Black aesthetics, art-based research, antiblackness, youth

i've left Earth in search of darker planets, a solar system revolving too near a black hole...i've left Earth to find a place where my kin can be safe, where black people ain't but people the same color as the good, wet earth, until that means something, until then i bid you well, i bid you war, i bid you our lives to gamble with no more (Smith, 2017, n.p.).

I often think about leaving Earth. Arriving at this decision always stems from the same line of thought: I consider the ways Black people across time and space have been socially constructed as a problem people, who exist outside of white colonial notions of humanity. I specifically have spent a considerable amount of time thinking through the ways humanity is defined against Black people (Walcott, 2014). Moreover, I think about how Black people's suffering under the hands of white settler/colonial paradigms and structures has become part and parcel to society's functioning. In these moments of reflective thought, I question the underside of modernity that has made Blackness "naturally malignant," "naturally violent," "naturally unbelievable," "naturally less-than-human," and "naturally dysselected" (McKittrick, 2014, p. 17). As an educational researcher working with Black youth and a former teacher to Black youth, I am familiar with the ways the suffering Black children experience in the United States of America's (US) schools, is the

suffering our society acknowledges the least (Dumas, 2014). Black suffering, which is the result of the violent tools and technologies of antiblackness, becomes largely accepted as normal social practice that people expect and accept overtime.

Antiblackness is a pillar of white supremacy (Smith, 2012) and represents the endemic socio-structural regime that has constructed Black people as inferior to other humans—sustained through a myriad of oppressive systems (e.g., segregated schooling, housing discrimination, predatory financial debt systems, policing, the prison industrial complex, and healthcare inequalities). White supremacy requires Blackness to be permanently associated with absence and whiteness to be permanently associated with abundance (Farley, 2021). Such violence (and structural and ideological arrangements of violence) against Black people on settler colonial and slave marked lands functions as a face of oppression (Young, 2000); structuring the everyday social realities of Black and non-Black people. I understand settler colonialism as “a political and economic system that uses coordinated actions across state level agencies to conquer, expropriate, and occupy Indigenous lands” (Montgomery, 2022, p. 476). Understanding how earthly land, and US land in particular, limits the possibilities of Black humanity and seeks to delegitimize Black world creation, I seek to explore how the cultural aesthetics of Blackness work to counter Black dehumanization and cultivate Black worldmaking.

### **Networking Art, Aesthetics, and Consciousness for Critical Artistic Resistance**

Within teaching and learning processes in US classrooms, antiblackness is captured through the ways pedagogical actions (practices of teaching and theories/ideologies that inform such teaching) are entrenched in the marginalization of Blackness (Coles, 2016). Anti-Black pedagogical actions or inactions facilitate the traumatizing and retraumatizing of Black children (Sharpe, 2016), which seeks to invisibilize Black youth genius (Coles, 2021). I use the phrasing of Black genius as an affirmation of “black self-determination and consistently opposing imperialist, white supremacist, capitalist patriarchy” (hooks, 2000, p. 131). Grounded in a stance of (Black) desire-based research (Coles, 2023a; Tuck, 2009), I explore the ways Black youth aesthetics (as birthed through a Black, darker gaze) resist the totality of whitely (Taylor, 2016) world inhabitation through the assembling of Blackly worlds (Coles, 2023b). I see my use of aesthetics as a foundation of critical artistic resistance, which I define as leveraging art and cultural aesthetics in one’s life to live through and beyond oppressive social regimes.

I specifically think with critical artistic resistance through a Black arts lens, where Black art houses black consciousness that “acts as resistance to the colonizer-white supremacy” (Awan, 2021, p. 2). I conceptualize critical artistic resistance with Black youth understanding that art created by Black people “functions to provide anti-racist discourse to denounce the dominant rhetoric of white supremacy” and antiblackness (Awan, 2021, p. 3). Muhammad and Gonzalez’s (2016) orientation to artistic resistance as a means toward “building identity, agency, and activism” is useful here (p. 443). As Muhammad and Gonzalez (2016) share: identity is multiply-constituted and is constructed through our social contexts; agency reveals itself through a re/definition of self and dismantling of structures of power; and activism represents actions toward social change, whether silent or loud. In this essay, the ways Black youth document their lives via critical artistic practices, as embodied Black aesthetics, functions as resistance to the antiblackness that works to dis/organize their social realities in schools and society.

## The Pedagogical Possibilities of Black Aesthetics: An Ethnic Studies Note

Ethnic Studies was birthed out of desire and necessity. Historically marginalized peoples and communities of color were having their histories and voices silenced and erased; warping our realities of how we all come to know the formation/s of the U.S. and the world. The communities whose lives were rendered non-impactful to the flow and development of our social milieu, decided that there would need to be a curricular intervention to disrupt the whitewashing of our past and present histories, and our future histories. I put forth Black aesthetics as an important theoretical *and* pedagogical tool that should be taken up in the field of Ethnic Studies to serve as a corrective to the anti-Black narratives that have been told in classrooms. I do not offer Black aesthetics as *the* corrective tool to disrupt anti-Black schooling practices, but I offer it as one tool that can work in tandem with other critical practices. Black aesthetics is grounded in a looking inward to Blackness to celebrate and be guided by the Black gaze—a (re)humanizing orientation that centers the rich existence of Black humanness. Working to learn from the critical artistic productions of Black youth as disruptors to denials of Black humanness,

I image Black aesthetics as a visual and sensual form of a Black cultural ideology rooted toward racial uplift...Thus, Black aesthetics is about how we leverage epistemologies of Blackness to center, cultivate, and extend a Black ethos that refuses the subjectivities of anti-Black systems and ideologies that work to delimit Blackness and the Black experience. (Coles, 2024).

As a theory to think about Black youth's worldmaking capacities, I am not simply thinking about aesthetics as a philosophy for beauty and art, but more so as "a tool, or rather an embodied state, of being and knowing and creativity that works to demonstrate a love of and for Blackness" (Coles, 2024, p. 137). When revisiting the student artistic productions that shape this text, my goal was to think about how the data individually and collectively refused antiblackness, loved Blackness, and chartered new Black futures through an explicitly darker, Black gaze. I am specifically guided by the five conceptual frames of Black aesthetics in education (Coles, 2024) that set the foundation for my pedagogical framing:

**Understanding sociopolitical racial realities and contexts:** Awareness about the historicity of national and global socio-political, racially oppressive regimes.

**Resisting anti-Black educational practices:** Struggling against white, anti-Black powers of dominance.

**Utilizing Black cultural referents in curricula:** Using educational materials that explicitly name and reference Black culture.

**Centering a Black gaze:** Centering Black culture (and Black onto-epistemologies) as a worthy lens to see and move through the world.

**Empowering students with Black joy and celebration:** Creating onto-epistemological ruptures into white supremacist logic that birth celebration.

## A Darker Pedagogy: Black Aesthetics in the Educational lives of Black Urban Youth

Informed by a multi-week, qualitative youth research project I conducted during the summer of 2019, I construct an empirically informed essay of students' Black aesthetic productions and their

assemblages of Black worldmaking. My project, Literacy Inspiring Transformation across New York City (L.I.T. City), was guided by a Black critical race-grounded methodology, which took place in an out-of-school space for multi-ethnic, Black high school youth. I organized the youth's literacy explorations around five curricular themes: *Blackness and antiblackness*; *identity and Black youth agency*; *Blackness in our schools, redaction and refusal for humanization*; and *leaning into Blackness as humanization*. Using artistic data, I network creative works of art and text developed by the participants (e.g., drawings, paintings, and photos of written text) to detail the pedagogical practices that undergirded data collection to demonstrate the utility of a Black aesthetics framework within Ethnic studies pedagogies. In the next section, I share student artifacts from several participants including: Lee, a Black (American/Cameroonian) girl; Divine, a Black (Trinidadian) girl; Tatiana, a Black (American/Puerto Rican) girl; Shayla, a Black (Bajan/Jamaican) girl; and Terrence, a Black (Trinidadian) boy.

### Understanding Sociopolitical Racial Realities and Contexts

In L.I.T. City while exploring the curricular theme *Redaction and Refusal for Humanization*, we read the article “*When the Media Treats White Suspects and Killers Better Than Black Victims*” (Wing, 2014). A major reality we studied in this theme was that antiblackness results in Black people experiencing an innumerable amount of violence against their personhood that results in dehumanization. Our study of anti-Black violence is connected to the Black aesthetic theoretical frame *Understanding Sociopolitical Racial Realities and Contexts*. In order to counter and disrupt anti-Black processes, Black youth have to possess an awareness of antiblackness and the ways it has and will operationalize in their lives. To bring this cycle of dehumanization to light as it plays out in our current social moment, the students and I turned to the ways unarmed Black youth who are murdered by police or vigilante citizens experience further violence after their death via the ways the story of their lives is told. It has been well documented of the ways Black victims are dehumanized through the media in attempts to make it seem that they were responsible for their own death (Smiley & Fakunle, 2016). After reading the initial article and hearing students' interest in thinking more about media portrayals of Black youth, I introduced another article (U.S. News, 2012) to the group that focused on Trayvon Martin (a Black teen who is often referred to as a major catalyst for the Black Lives Matter movement), “Trayvon Martin was suspended three times from school.” After reading the U. S. News (2012) article, I taught a mini lesson on Black redactions and Black annotations (Sharpe, 2016).

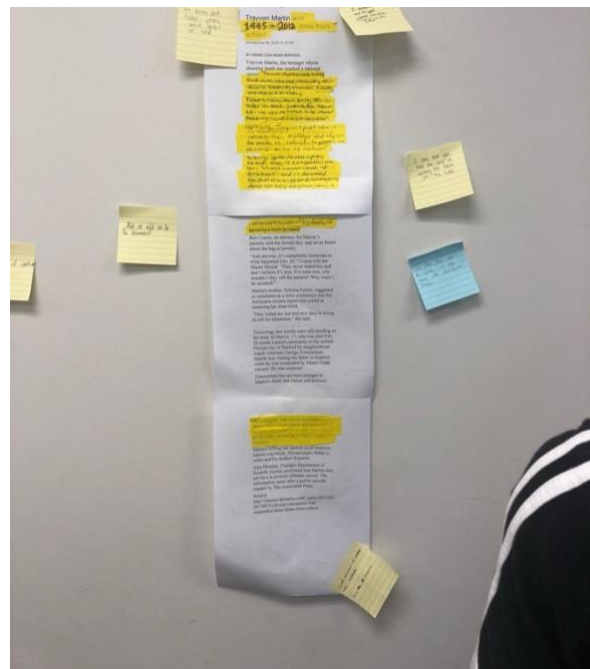


Figure 1: Trayvon Martin News Article, Lee's Annotation and Redaction Activity

The **pedagogical use** of Black redactions and annotations is that students can alter text for more humanizing aims through covering text and images that seems harmful, adding new information, and re-storying (Thomas & Stornaiuolo, 2016) or repurposing information already present. As Sharpe (2016) explains, “Black annotation and Black redaction are ways to make Black life visible, if only momentarily” (p. 123). The **pedagogical question** driving this activity was: What humanizing narratives about Blackness are revealed through acts of redaction and annotation?

In Figures 1 and 2, we see Lee’s (a Black girl participant) Black redaction and annotation to the article discussing Trayvon Martin’s school suspension record. Trayvon was murdered, and in an attempt to make the actions of the vigilante citizen who shot him justified, the media began sharing anecdotes about him that would seek to discredit his humanness or goodness—and in this case seek to discredit his right to live. In Figure 2, we can see the ways Lee engaged in Black redaction and annotation for refusal by immediately covering up the majority of the title with yellow tape (all students were given tape and pens and markers), changing it to Trayvon Martin 1995-2012. In Figure 1, we can see the ways Lee re-storied most of the article, which demonstrates a clear understanding of US sociopolitical racial realities and contexts, while also refusing such a reality to construct a more humanizing narrative for the Black subject. In order to meaningfully critique the racialized organization of society, students must have an understanding of the ways race and racism (and antiblackness in particular) function in their daily lives.

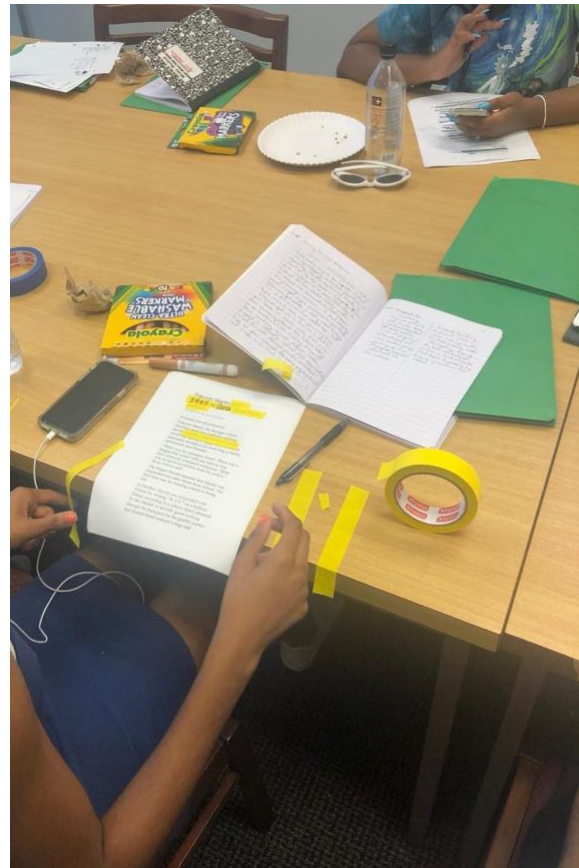


Figure 2: Trayvon Martin News Article, Lee’s Annotation and Redaction Activity Process

### Resisting anti-Black Educational Practices

While covering the curricular theme *Blackness in Our Schools*, the students and I spent a significant amount of time exploring perspectives on Black education in the U.S. In discussions and activities related to schooling, we often used the U.S. Department of Education (2016) Office for Civil Rights, 2014 Civil Rights Data Collection (CRDC) snapshots as a starting point. The CRDC data snapshots were an invaluable pedagogical resource for students to extend their knowledge about Black people’s narrative experiences in schools with numerical data, which provided students with a macro-level visual of the ways antiblackness functions across the nation’s educational landscape. On one occasion, students began to discuss the ways schooling can often feel like a trap, characterized by them never feeling like they can reach a level of success that is not unrestricted by antiblackness. To help the students further process their thoughts, I introduced Malcolm London’s (2013) TED Talk, “High School Training Ground,” which discusses the struggles and

opportunity barriers London (a Black boy from Chicago) and his peers face in an educational system that seems as if it is designed for Black students to fail. After watching the video, I posed the **pedagogical question**: How can Black students refuse antiblackness in schooling practices in ways that better cultivate Black youth success? Such a question and responses to the question are connected to the Black aesthetic theoretical frame *Resisting Anti-Black Educational Practices*. To respond to the question, I provided each student with a blank piece of paper and gave them the option to create a plan or process for uplifting Blackness in schools as a way to counter antiblackness. The **pedagogical use** of this activity is that it gave students space and time to reflect on their unique schooling experiences, while linking that experience to a history of Black schooling in the US, prompting them to assert agency over how they might create better conditions.

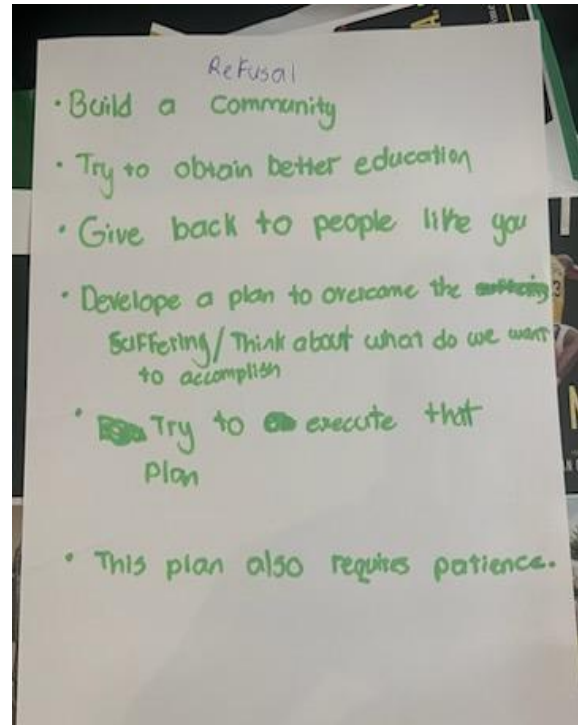


Figure 3: Refusing Black Suffering Activity 1

In Figure 3, we see Divine's bullet point list about the various ways she believes Black youth can engage in resisting anti-Black educational practices. Even more compelling in this list is the ways it goes beyond schooling, to think about how Black youth can engage in resisting in broader terms. Divine demonstrates her knowing that she cannot separate her life in terms of school and society, but that her resistance in one sector has to also be carried in all sectors of her life. For instance, Divine names getting a better education as essential for countering the violence miseducation can enact on Black students, but she also discusses community building and reflecting on future accomplishments. Through Divine, we can come to understand that resisting antiblackness in schools is a matter of resisting antiblackness everywhere.

### Utilizing Black Cultural Referents in Curricula

Under the curricular theme *Blackness in Our Schools*, I also had the students read Michael Dumas'(2016) article, "*Things Are Gonna Get Easier: Refusing Schooling as a Site of Black Suffering.*" In addition to learning about the myriad ways Black people engage in resistance to antiblackness in schools and society throughout time and space, I wanted to ensure that students were aware of the ways Black education is more than an experience of resisting violence. The goal was not to erase anti-Black violence, but rather to give students space to think of the ways Black people have and continue to create educational lives that sustain and nurture their Blackness despite external oppressive regimes. To help us think about Black culture through asset-based frames, I engaged the students in a mini-lesson around culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995) and culturally sustaining pedagogies (Paris, 2012). Additionally, I had the students discuss schooling and classroom conditions they have experienced that made them feel affirmed and uplifted as it

relates to their Black identity. To bring their reflections to life, in conjunction with their dreams and desires of Black-centric classroom space, I had each student visualize their ideal school or classroom. The **pedagogical use** of this activity was that it cultivated student agency and it allowed them to take inventory of their current schooling conditions (that may or may not be culturally relevant or sustaining) and create their ideal educational space. The **pedagogical question** I posed to each student was: What does a school or classroom look like that values Black life?

In Figure 4, we see Tatiana's depiction of a classroom that values Black life, from her perspective. The pedagogical connection in this activity is directly related to the Black aesthetic theoretical frame of *Utilizing Black Cultural Referents in Curriculum*. Throughout history, Black people have been policed for their hairstyles. Most recently, Darryl George, a Black boy who is a student at Barbers Hill High School in Mont Belvieu, Texas (Duster, 2023) was suspended for his hairstyle (locs). Darryl and his mother filed a federal lawsuit, which claims "Darryl's protections under the federal Civil Rights Act are being violated because the dress code policy disproportionately affects Black male students" (Holpuch, 2023). Darryl's suspension demonstrates the ways Black bodies are literally removed from school spaces when they do not adhere to aesthetic standards rooted in whiteness, which are anti-Black by design. Thus, Tatiana drawing Black kids with varying textured hairstyles as the central image in her classroom reveals the ways that cultural referents are not simply curricular materials (e.g., textbooks), but also the ways we make room for Black people to show up physically unrestricted in Black cultural styles. In the top right corner of Tatiana's drawing, there is a quote from Nelson Mandela, which reads: Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world." Along the top and bottom of the chalkboard, there are individual posters spelling out the alphabet. Some letter and word combinations in the drawing include: A for Afro, C for Cabral (Almícar), J for Jazz, and U for Us. Tatiana's Black aesthetic production shines light into the possibilities of what a classroom that values Black knowledge and Black people may look and feel like.



Figure 4: Black Dream School Drawing

### Centering a Black Gaze

*Identity and Black Youth Agency* was a theme that really allowed the students to see themselves more clearly throughout L.I.T. City as a lot of discussions and activities under this theme started with reflections of self. A core **pedagogical question** I asked students was: How do you see your Black self in the world currently and what do you imagine for your Black self in the future? Particularly given the focus on youth agency, I wanted to provide space in the curriculum for students to think through ways they can enact disruption to antiblackness on an individual level, without waiting for large scale structural changes to occur. To spark discussion around agency, I introduced an online article to student's written by Hannah L. Drake, "Do Not Move Off The

*Sidewalk Challenge: Holding Your Space in A White World.* Drake (2018) uses the article to document instances where Black people, herself included, have prioritized white interests over theirs by accommodating white people in terms of space access (e.g., a Black person moving off a sidewalk if a white person is coming in their direction). The overall premise is for Black people to become “cognizant of how they navigate throughout spaces making accommodations for white people and white people having an expectation that Black people or people of color must navigate their bodies to allow White people access in spaces” (Drake, 2018, n.p.). After we read the article out-loud together, I gave students a moment to write down any thoughts or questions the article raised for them, making sure they link these jottings to the larger concepts we were exploring throughout the project. After a group discussion, I then gave the students a variety of art supplies and prompted them to develop an artistic creation that embodied their response to the article along lines of Black agency. The **pedagogical use** of this activity is that it made students confront the ways they may be complicit in antiblackness or be deferential to antiblackness by the ways they navigate space, including their schools. Moreover, it allowed them to engage in a new visioning of self that was rooted in them holding and demanding space in an anti-Black social context.

In Shayla’s painting, which was in response to our Black youth agency activity, we see a Black girl (herself) with flowy natural hair, a multi-colored stripe shirt that reads “New Black,” and jeans. The components of the painting that stand out to me the most are the blindfold covering the face of the girl and the two fingers being held up in a peace sign formation. Much of the project consisted of students learning how antiblackness is erected and sustained through countless racialized, anti-Black stock stories and anecdotes that have shaped the ways all people engage Blackness as inferior (including the ways Black people can internalize antiblackness). While blindfolds often represent not being able to see, I interpret Shayla’s use of a



Figure 5: New Black Painting (Front)

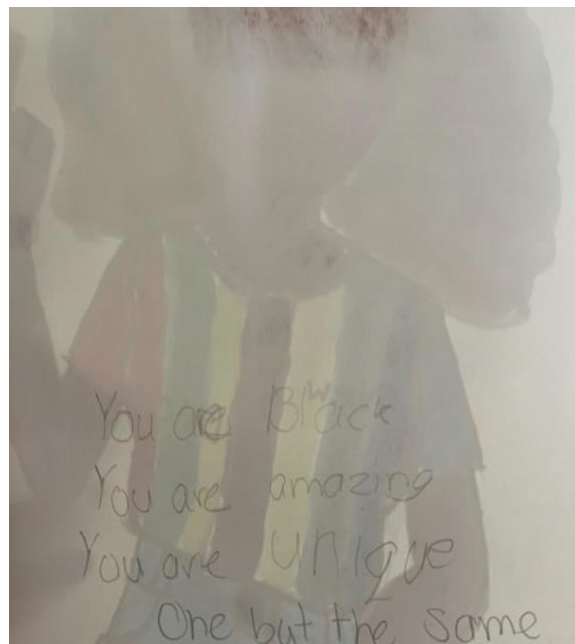


Figure 6: New Black Painting (Back)



blindfold as a refusal to see the world from exterior, anti-Black gazes and a turning inward to her own knowledge about herself and the world that represent her agency to create life on her own terms. This activity and Shayla's work is connected to the Black aesthetic theoretical frame *Centering a Black Gaze*. This becomes even more evident in Figure 6 (the back of the Figure 5 drawing), due to being able to see Shayla's written words: You are Black / You are amazing / You are unique / one but the same. Through these words, Shayla expresses her agency by providing herself and those who view this piece with an affirmation about the beauty of Blackness. The peace sign in Figure 5, which is used colloquially to represent a leaving or turning away from something, further signals the ways Shayla might be abandoning or turning her back on external gazes of whiteness and antiblackness. Shayla leverages her Black gaze to navigate the world around her.

### Empowering Students with Black Joy and Celebration

At the end of each week with the students, I made sure that we revisited the theme *Leaning into Blackness as Humanization*. The goal in making this the theme a weekly ending point was to always ground students in the reality that Black people's humanity matters, despite the various ways we read and discussed how antiblackness works to render Black humanity as an impossibility. In discussing the Black experience in the US and the world under racialized regimes, the goal is not to only focus on suffering or only focus on joy. To truly capture the complexity of Black life means that all facets of Black life must be studied, because in tandem they both work to propel Black people into future methods of possibility. To orient students to the multiple dynamics of Black life, we listened to *Lift Every Voice and Sing*, also known as the Black National Anthem. After we collectively listened to the song, I had the students read the song independently and engage in an analysis of the lyrics; keeping the concept of Black humanization in mind. The **pedagogical use** of analyzing a Black text (which is an embodiment of a Black aesthetic) such as this was to allow students space to grasp the violent realities enacted upon Black people while also understanding how such violence is not totalizing. Black people continue to live full joyous lives in the face of wanton and gratuitous anti-Black oppression.

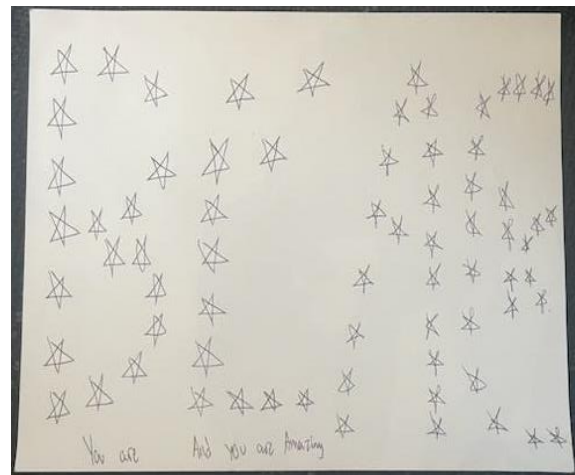


Figure 7: BLACK written in Stars – You are BLACK and You are Amazing

When we were done analyzing the song and discussing our various thoughts, I asked the students to create a response using whatever art medium they desired. Specifically, I asked them to create something that represents the way they think of Black joy amid ongoing Black suffering. In Figure 7, we see Terrence's drawing, which uses stars to spell out the word Black (the K being in the C). The stars seem very fitting given that the students just read the Black National Anthem, a Black-specific rendering of the US National Anthem—which discusses the stars and stripes in the US flags. In a way, Terrence's stars represent a spectacular celebration of Blackness. I view the stars as a sort of fireworks celebration, where with each boom the fireworks move into formation to

spell out Black. At the bottom of the image Terrence has written the words: You are [Black] / And You are Amazing. This activity connects to the Black aesthetic theoretical frame *Empowering Students with Black Joy and Celebration* through the ways it orients students to see the joy present in Black life, while still being aware of the oppressive realities that seek to destroy Black joy and celebration.

## Conclusion

Like Danez Smith (2017) shares in his poem, *dear white america*, excerpted in the epigraph I use to open this essay, I want to inhabit a world where Black people “ain’t but people,” which is counter to a world where Black people are seen as nonhuman or superhuman (Coles, 2023c). A new physical earth would be ideal: A darker planet that orbited in a completely new solar system and cosmic plane where there was no language for words like settler, antiblackness, or white supremacy. However, while I imagine a new physical atmosphere, what do Black people do in the “meantime in between time” (ross, 2019)? That is, how do Black people work to mitigate Black suffering in the present, while still strategizing for more liberatory future tenses and grammars of life and worldmaking? My use of Black cultural aesthetics as a method to leave Earth, both imaginatively and practically via pedagogy in classrooms, is driven by the need to disrupt anti-Black processes that dehumanize Black people, specifically (antiblackness). All people are dehumanized by existing in a social context where antiblackness is endemic. I offer Black aesthetics as a critical pedagogical tool to counter antiblackness violence as it manifests in our nation’s schools and society.

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