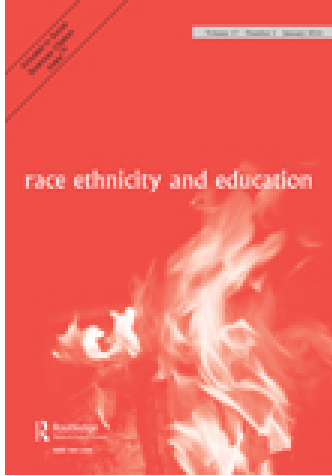


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Publisher: Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



Race Ethnicity and Education

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/cree20>

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Published online: 09 Dec 2013.

To cite this article: Michael J. Dumas (2014) ‘Losing an arm’: schooling as a site of black suffering, *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 17:1, 1-29, DOI: [10.1080/13613324.2013.850412](https://doi.org/10.1080/13613324.2013.850412)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13613324.2013.850412>

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‘Losing an arm’: schooling as a site of black suffering

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Drawing on data from a historical-ethnographic study of the cultural politics of school desegregation in Seattle, USA, the author explores suffering as a recurring theme in the narratives of four black leaders, educators and activists involved in the struggle for black educational opportunity in that city during the post-Civil Rights Era. As these black subjects reflect on the historical trajectory of racial desegregation policies and practices, they offer us a unique view of the confluence of racial melancholia, a heavy, deeply-felt awareness of the history and persistence of racial disregard and subjugation, and school malaise, a form of what Pierre Bourdieu has called *la petite misère*, or ordinary suffering. The author’s analysis of these narratives highlights how these school and community leaders reflect on the meaning of black suffering in schools, what they understand as the source of that suffering, and how they imagine that suffering might be alleviated. The article concludes with recommendations for research at the nexus of race, education and social suffering.

Keywords: black education; school desegregation; cultural politics of education

Introduction

In Octavia Butler’s 1979 novel, *Kindred*, Dana Franklin finds herself transported from her home in present-day Los Angeles to antebellum Maryland, where she must endure the horrors of slavery while ensuring her later existence by protecting Rufus Weylin, one of her accident-prone and abusive white ancestors, who summons her back in time whenever his life is in danger. Butler begins her story at the end: ‘I lost an arm on my last trip home. My left arm’ (2004, 9). Dana’s arm, we later learn, has been taken into history – for lack of a better way to say it – by Rufus, who had been holding her down and attempting to rape her as she was returned to the present.

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Butler, a renowned science fiction writer, insisted that *Kindred* is best understood not as science fiction, but as ‘a grim fantasy’ (2004, 269). In writing the novel, she wanted readers to ‘feel slavery,’ to get a sense of the ‘emotional and psychological stones that slavery threw at people’ (Snider 2004). The author immerses us in an experience that most of us have read about, and referenced casually – perhaps too casually – but have probably never thought about very deeply. How does it feel to be so despised and hated? What is it like, in Butler’s words, to ‘have all of society arrayed against you?’ (Marshall 2006).

Research on social suffering takes up these questions, situating them within an analysis of the political, economic and cultural-ideological forces that so powerfully impact human experience. Moving between the local and global, the material and discursive, historical memory and mundane everyday experience, this interdisciplinary body of inquiry aims to capture how suffering is felt in the flesh, how groups who have endured such pain make sense of their suffering as a shared phenomenon, and how suffering is represented (or not) in public discourse and popular culture (Bourdieu 1999; McNay 2008; Reid 2002; Wilkinson 2005).

I contend here that, for many black children and families in the United States, Britain and elsewhere, schooling is a site of suffering. Schooling is *not merely* a site of suffering, but I believe it is the suffering that we have been least willing or able to acknowledge or give voice to in educational scholarship, and more specifically, in educational policy analysis. To be sure, researchers have documented inequitable educational opportunities and disproportionate outcomes, and have offered incisive analyses of the relationship between educational policy and broader social and political forces (Anyon 1997, 2005; Gulson 2011; Lipman 2011). We have even elucidated the impact of policies on the lives of specific racialized populations (Nolan 2011; Scott 2011; Smith and Stovall 2008). However, even here, our work has largely focused on policy as a set of interventions, regulations and institutional and societal consequences. With an audience comprised primarily of policymakers, educational leaders and other researchers, we have been less concerned with *how policy is lived*, and too often suffered, by those who have little hand in policy formation or implementation, and more to the point, have not been invited to weigh in on how we who research policy should assess the deep impression of policy on flesh, bone and soul.

Drawing on data from my historical-ethnographic study of the cultural politics of school desegregation in Seattle, I explore suffering as a recurring theme in the narratives of four black leaders, educators and activists involved in the struggle for black educational opportunity in that city during the post-Civil Rights Era. As these black subjects reflect on the historical trajectory of racial desegregation policies and practices, from the implementation of the mandatory school busing program in the late 1970s, through

the challenges of black students in desegregating schools in the 1980s and 1990s, and then shifts in policy leading to the more recent resegregation of Seattle's schools, they offer us a unique view of what Pierre Bourdieu (1999) has called *la petite misère*.

Bourdieu is interested in schooling as a site of *la petite misère* in which poor and working-class students suffer a kind of *malaise* resulting from a growing consciousness that what they are promised as educational opportunity is unlikely to lead to greater social or educational mobility. As I explain here, for many black families, educators and activists, desegregation and subsequent racial equity policies have become sites of a specific form of school malaise, in which the possibility of educational access and opportunity seems increasingly (and even intentionally) elusive, even as the hegemonic and seemingly undeniable 'common sense' is that schooling is *the* sure pathway to improved life chances, not only for individual black subjects, but for the black collective (the 'race') as a whole. This suffering converges with, and only exacerbates a broader *racial melancholia*, that heavy, deeply-felt awareness of the history and persistence of anti-black disregard and subjugation (Eng and Han 2000; Tillet 2012). It is this confluence of school malaise and racial melancholia, then, that motivates what I offer here as a meditation on schooling as a site of black suffering. By this, I simply mean that my intention here is to give voice to that suffering, to present it as worthy of solemn reflection and remembrance; this is not the space to detail policy interventions to mitigate present or future suffering. Nor am I tempted here to either defend school desegregation or suggest it as a failed policy resulting (only) in black suffering. I simply want to create a space in which to meditate on the idea that black people suffered, and suffered dearly in the midst of our efforts to pursue a range of educational and racial reforms over the past half-century. More provocatively, I want to suggest that black suffering is a kind of constant travelling between historical memory and current predicament, that there is a psychic link between the tragedy of antebellum African bondage and post-civil rights (indeed, 'post-racial') black suffering in schools. Like Dana in Butler's *Kindred*, black educators, children and families are never quite sure when they will be taken (back) to this place of trauma, nor can they fully determine when, or if the pain will end.

During my interview with community leader Dorothy Hollingsworth, I shared with her that I was a product of the mandatory racial desegregation policy that she had helped implement as the first and only black member of the Seattle School Board in the 1970s. I was one of thousands of mostly black and Southeast Asian children who would awaken before dawn in order to board the buses that took us from our neighborhood in the Central District to schools in the predominantly white and affluent communities of Seattle's north end. Hollingsworth – now in her 80s – admitted that her own son had lamented the suffering he experienced when she enrolled him

in Seattle's Voluntary Racial Transfer Program, which predated the mandatory busing program. 'He told me, "Mom, there were some tough times in that school." I said [to him], "Yes, but you turned out alright."' She then looked me directly in the eye, and said, quite confidently, 'And so did you.' For Hollingsworth, her son's experience and my experience in desegregating Seattle Public Schools is made worthwhile by our individual successes, which were possible in part because of our opportunity to attend more highly-resourced schools. She does not deny that we suffered; rather, that the good – our own achievement and perhaps the moral and political victory – outweighs the bad. And this, I believe, characterizes most of the research on the educational and social effects of school desegregation, which has highlighted improved graduation rates and college attendance for students of color, and reduced prejudice amongst all students fostered by greater social interaction with a racially diverse group of peers (Fine et al. 2005; Orfield and Eaton 1996; Orfield and Lee 2004; Wells 1995; Wells, Duran, and White 2008). However, assessing outcomes on a certain number of measures, or even asking whether specific educational policies are beneficial for individuals or society, does not compensate for, nor diminish the significance of the suffering of those who had to endure the policies.

Certainly, a number of scholars have argued convincingly that black children and adults have been treated unjustly in desegregating schools. Derrick Bell (2004), for example, notes that black students were often 'barely tolerated guests in matters of curriculum, teacher selection, and even social activities' (113). Linda Tillman (2004) documents how black administrators were often displaced as districts closed schools in black communities, and subsequently faced rampant discrimination when seeking new placement work in predominantly white schools. Jerome Morris (2001) shares the laments of black educators who witnessed the implementation of desegregation policies which served to privilege the preferences of white families over black families, stigmatized black teachers, and failed to deliver a better education for black students.

What I am attempting to do here is open up a theoretical and empirical space to explore the meaning of 'tough times' (as Hollingsworth's son described them) in a range of sites of educational policy and practice, as we fumble about earnestly, but at times disingenuously, for ways to address persistent racial inequities. Informed by a theory of suffering, our analysis moves beyond simply acknowledging racism, or bemoaning racially imbalanced outcomes, to deeper social explanation of how racialized subjects make meaning of the confluence of school malaise and racial melancholia. Although I certainly consider implications of a theory of suffering for policy analysis and the cultural politics of education, that is not my primary interest here. The study of suffering does not necessarily offer an answer to the question, '*So what?*' It is (enough) to make empirical

and theoretical space for attention to loss, to meditate on what it means to experience disregard and lack and betrayal.

I begin here by exploring social suffering as a theoretical concept and field of social analysis. Then, after some brief methodological and historical-contextual notes about the Seattle study, I present extended narratives of four (out of approximately 30) research participants – a renowned retired principal, a current vice principal with decades of experience in the district, and two longtime community-based education activists. My analysis of these narratives highlights how these school and community leaders reflect on the meaning of black suffering in schools, what they understand as the source of that suffering, and how they imagine that suffering might be alleviated. Finally, in a postscript, I offer a memory of my own experience in a desegregating school in Seattle, with recommendations for research at the nexus of race, education and social suffering.

Understanding social suffering

The aim of social science inquiry on suffering is to understand how people experience social and cultural forces acting against them, and how those in pain maintain their humanity in the face of ‘too much pain’ (Wilkinson 2005, 45). ‘Whatever else it might be,’ Iain Wilkinson contends, ‘suffering is always most definitely *against* us’ (2005, 17). Social suffering, then, can be understood as ‘a cultural struggle to reconstitute a positive sense of meaning and purpose for self and society against the brute force of events in which these are violated and destroyed’ (Wilkinson 2005, 45). However, this is not so much a definition of suffering, but an attempt to describe how suffering moves in and through human life, and how humans individually and collectively attempt to make sense of suffering as they experience it in the present, or as they remember it days, months or even generations later.

Indeed, Wilkinson argues, our efforts to define suffering are confounded by ‘the perceived inadequacy of our categories of thought for making sense of the reality of pain in human experience’ (37). He suggests that instead of becoming fixated on the definition or boundaries of (what counts as) suffering, we ‘renounce the attempt to render this “knowable” and, instead, concentrate on making sense of the “senselessness” with which we are confronted: that is, to make it our goal to understand the great difficulty of understanding what happens “in” suffering (Wilkinson 2005, 37). Thus, the task for research on social suffering is not to somehow attempt to explain how it feels to suffer, because that is something we cannot know, and will never adequately put into words; rather, what we aim to capture is how social actors interpret and respond to that which hurts deeply, and yet makes no sense.

While suffering is certainly experienced by individuals, the key element in social suffering is a *group's* consciousness of its own pain, which inspires a collective imagination of a 'we' who suffer, a 'we' whose identity is under attack. Traumas become collective 'only if they are conceived as wounds to social identity' (Eyerman, Alexander, and Breese 2011, xii). Groups who suffer do not exist simply in material forms; rather, 'they must be imagined into being' (xii.) through a complex set of cultural and political practices. This process requires that a given group engage in sustained deliberation over the nature of the pain, and importantly, its cause(s). 'The pivotal question becomes, not "who did this to me?" but "what group did this to us?"' Intellectuals, political leaders, and cultural workers make different claims about collective identity, about the nature of the wound and what caused it, about the identity of victim and perpetrator, and about what is to be done to prevent the trauma from happening ever again' (xii).¹

While there are certainly some widely recognized forms of social suffering – abject poverty, genocides, gender-based subjugation – many manifestations of *everyday* suffering do not appear as readily apparent and often go undocumented in scholarly and popular discourse. If *grand misère*, as Bourdieu defines it, refers primarily to the direct impact of material poverty, and if trauma usually refers to the suffering of catastrophic events (cites), everyday suffering – what Bourdieu calls *la petite misère* – denotes a broader range of structural and cultural assaults that make everyday living difficult for populations living under certain conditions. Bourdieu cautions that our inattention to *la petite misère* is worse than mere neglect; it contributes to a dismissal of human suffering in its most common, most mundane forms:

This *positional suffering*, experienced from inside the microcosm, will appear, as the saying goes, 'entirely relative,' meaning completely unreal, if we take the point of view of the macrocosm and compare it to the 'real' suffering of material poverty (*la grande misère*). This is invariably the point of reference for criticism ('You really don't have anything to complain about'), as for consolation ('You could be worse off, you know'). But using material poverty as the sole measure of all suffering keeps us from seeing and understanding a whole side of the suffering characteristic of a social order which, although it has undoubtedly reduced poverty overall (though less than often claimed) has also multiplied the social spaces... and set up the conditions for an unprecedented development of all kinds of ordinary suffering (*la petite misère*). (1999, 4)

Bourdieu makes clear that we deny the meaningfulness of everyday suffering by always contrasting it with what are, admittedly, the most tragic and materially evident forms of social trauma. By comparison, *petit misère* seems unworthy as a basis for claims of social grievance, and may even be judged as (a)historical irreverence toward those who 'really' suffered. For example, to the point of this article, narratives recounting racial

microaggressions in predominantly white desegregating schools in liberal Seattle might be dismissed when viewed against the ‘grander’ aggressions of snarling white mobs spitting at schoolchildren in Little Rock or Boston. Further, insisting that only *grande misère* counts as suffering prevents us from understanding social suffering as a normalized dimension of our social order – not natural, not inevitable, but perpetrated by the social order itself in ways that have systematic, deleterious effects, every day, on specific social groups.

School malaise

For *The Weight of the World*, Bourdieu and his colleagues collected narratives in a range of poor and working-class communities, mostly in France. In two- to three-hour interviews, Bourdieu explains, participants ‘confided in us about their lives and the difficulties they have in living those lives’ (1). Bourdieu is particularly interested here in the experiences of those economically and culturally marginalized populations who were the targeted beneficiaries of education reforms in France beginning in the early 1960s. Before this time, Bourdieu and Champagne (1999) explain, schools engaged in the ‘brutal elimination’ of ‘students from culturally disadvantaged families’ (421). The victims largely accepted their fate, the authors assert, because their own elimination was ostensibly based on lack of merit. Their lack of access to educational advancement ‘contributed more than a little to convincing those who felt unsuited for school that they were unsuited for the positions that an education opens up – that is, white collar jobs and, especially, managerial positions within these occupations’ (421).

One key element of the reforms of the late 1950s was mandated school attendance until age 16, and increased access to a curriculum intended as preparation for professional (and not just vocational) careers. The government heralded these reforms as opportunities for all to participate in the society, based solely on merit. In this sense, these reforms were regarded as contributing toward greater democratization of France. However, socially and economically marginalized groups slowly discovered that mere access to higher levels of secondary education did not ensure academic success, and even if one should succeed at this level, this did not necessarily translate into equal access to higher education or social mobility.

Bourdieu and Champagne (1999) characterize this as ‘education that is an end in itself’ (422), in which marginalized groups invest their hopes and their time in the pursuit of schooling, and after several years of sacrifice and engagement, ‘run the risk of ending up with a devalued degree’ (423). In most cases, young people fail to even secure the degree. They are then ‘relegated to what is undoubtedly a stigmatizing and total exclusion even more absolute than in the past. The exclusion is more disgraceful in the sense that they seem to have “had their chance” and because social identity

tends more and more to be defined by the school system' (423). To the extent that young people have faith in, and invest in the system, their sense of malaise is delayed, but then, as Bourdieu and Champaign argue, is that much more disheartening when they realize they have been deceived for years. However, as younger and younger children become aware that the system has no intention of rewarding their hard work with opportunities for social advancement, this malaise sets in much earlier, forcing them to 'drag themselves listlessly through a school career they know has no future' (425).

Marginalized groups suffer doubly in relation to schooling: First, the drudgery and futility of the school experience itself, and second, through the loss of hope for oneself individually, and for the group, collectively, in terms of improved social recognition and economic stability. Neither stage of suffering is deemed legitimate. In the first case, students are told, despite evidence to the contrary, that participating in schooling is not suffering, but an opportunity to improve one's life chances. Then, as the group continues to suffer as a result of inequitable access to social and educational opportunities, that too is deemed not a legitimate form of suffering, but the inevitable and natural result of failure – on the part of the individual *and/or the group* – to take full advantage of schooling, either as a result of laziness or lack of innate ability.

Racial melancholia

In attempting to make sense of an increase in depression among Asian American students, David Eng and Shinhee Han (2000) depathologize Freud's notion of melancholia as a way to explain how people of color and other oppressed groups manage the conflicts created by assimilation, racialization and various forms of dehumanization. In Freud's view – and I am oversimplifying a bit – melancholia represents a (pathological) failure of the individual to move past loss in order to focus energy on new aims or ideals. For Eng and Han, however, the melancholia they witness is not pathological, but a healthy means of mourning persistent racial misrecognition and disregard.

Importantly, racial melancholia is not an individual shattering of the ego, but a *collective* experience of social suffering. Eng and Han explain, using the example of Asian Americans:

Despite the fact that they may be US-born or despite however long they may have resided here, Asian Americans are continually perceived as eccentric to the nation. At other times, Asian Americans are recognized as hyper 'model minorities' – inhumanly productive – and hence pathological to the nation. In both scenarios, mainstream refusal to see Asian Americans as part and parcel of the American 'melting pot' is less an individual failure to blend in with the whole than a socially determined interdiction. (671)

Understanding melancholia in this way opens up theoretical space to interrogate the social effects of racial suffering, rather than focusing on the individual or group as damaged (Tuck, 2009). As Eng and Han note, we can move toward thinking about a repetitive ‘national melancholia, a national haunting’ (673) that is constitutive of living under conditions of racial exclusion. One cannot simply mourn and move on; melancholia becomes ‘an integral part of daily existence and survival’ (693), engaged as part of an ongoing cultural-political project in which individuals who suffer come together ‘to gain social recognition in the face of this communal loss’ (696).

Salamishah Tillet (2012) offers us insight into the specificity of black melancholia in the United States, suggesting that the lived experience of contemporary anti-black racism is always also the collective haunting, or ‘remembering’ of the long legacy of racial trauma:

Because racial exclusion has become part and parcel of African American political identity since slavery, it cannot simply be willed or wished away. This protracted experience of disillusionment, mourning, and yearning is in fact the basis of African American civic estrangement. Its lingering is not just a haunting of the past but is also a reminder of the present-day racial inequities that keep African American citizens in an indeterminate, unassimilable state as a racialized ‘Other.’ While the affect of racial melancholia was bred in the dyad of slavery and democracy, it persists because of the paradox of legal citizenship and civic estrangement. (9)

Relative to the horrors of slavery, current racial inequities seem to pale in comparison. Again, returning to Bourdieu’s discussion of *petit misère*, it might seem that black people now have little to complain about – little to call *suffering* – if the measure of suffering is what black people experienced in the antebellum period, or even during Jim Crow. However, Tillet reminds us that every act of exclusion is but a part of that same trajectory of racial trauma. Thus, for black social actors, perhaps the most healthy way to make sense of contemporary acts of racial exclusion and disregard is to accept that this albeit ordinary suffering is the continuation of the more apparently traumatic form of eras past, rather than an aberration, or a pain that will pass momentarily. In Critical Race Theory, this is termed the ‘permanence of racism,’ which Derrick Bell (1987, 2004) suggests is not debilitating if one understands that there is meaning in racial struggle – that there is, most assuredly, purposefulness in suffering. I will return to this point later, in my analysis of the narratives. What shall become clear is that black racial melancholia only exacerbates the harm of school malaise (and vice versa), in the everyday schooling experience of children and communities, and then, over and over again, as this experience is remembered, and its effects (and indeed, *affects*) felt in the years after schooling, not only in one’s own

life, but also as it impacts the social group as a whole, materially, culturally and emotionally.

However, the aim of research on social suffering, and certainly the point of identifying racial melancholia, is to understand how those who suffer interpret their experiences, and exercise resistance in the face of their own collective suffering. This is not the ‘damage-centered research’ which Eve Tuck (2009) cautions us about, in which we detail ‘historical exploitation, domination, and colonization to explain contemporary brokenness’ (413). Our interest is not in recounting woes in an effort to garner the sympathies of outsiders who might help us. Instead, our aim is to understand how social actors wrestle with and make sense of the necessary conflict between promises of educational opportunity and the experience of devastating, intransigent pain and loss.

Black suffering in schools: narratives from black leaders and educators in Seattle

On March 5, 2013, *The Seattle Times* reported that the US Department of Education had, for nearly a year, been conducting a probe of the Seattle Public Schools for their punitive treatment of black students. As black leaders and parents had long charged, black students are far more likely to be disciplined than any other racial/ethnic group, and also receive longer suspensions. In fact, black students are more than three times as likely to be suspended as white students, beginning in elementary school and continuing through high school. ‘We have a serious problem here,’ the schools superintendent acknowledged. ‘The data is clear that there is a disproportionate number of students of color being suspended and expelled’ (Ervin and O’Hagan 2013).

This recent federal investigation of Seattle schools occurs roughly 40 years after the city’s school board, fearing another federal investigation and possible court intervention, implemented a mandatory district-wide racial desegregation strategy, called the Seattle Plan for the Elimination of Racial Imbalance. The ‘racial imbalance’ in Seattle schools was created largely through residential segregation – that is, federal and local housing policies that permitted, and even encouraged white residents to discriminate against people of color. By the late 1960s, this led to a concentration of black residents in Seattle’s Central District and South end, as they were largely unable to purchase or rent homes in most other parts of the city (Dumas 2011; Taylor 1994). As was true elsewhere in the US, schools serving black students were funded less equitably than schools serving white students. These schools were less likely to have advanced academic offerings, or proper school supplies and equipment, and more likely to have overcrowded classrooms and facilities in need of repair (Dumas 2009; Fine 2002).

The Seattle Plan, which went into effect in fall of 1978, mandated a complex busing plan in which students in predominantly non-white areas were bused to schools in the overwhelmingly white neighborhoods in the North end, and students from the North end were bused to schools in the more racially diverse Central District and South end. Although the Seattle Plan was a hard-fought victory for civil rights activists, it soon became apparent that desegregated schools did not necessarily mean improved educational opportunities for black children and other children of color. White administrators and teachers were ill-prepared to address the racial climate in their schools, and often failed to recognize or nurture the academic abilities of black children. Also, as more white residents fled the city, or enrolled their children in private schools, it became increasingly difficult to achieve racial balance, particularly in the South end. Due to mounting political opposition to busing, and waning support within communities of color, the busing plan was largely dismantled in the mid-1990s, and schools began to re-segregate by race, and also, to some extent, by class (Kohn 1996).

In 2006 and 2007, I conducted ethnographic interviews with 30 black leaders, educators and activists who had participated in the struggle for school desegregation, and more broadly, in the ongoing effort to expand educational opportunities for black children in the city. My study occurred before the June 2007 US Supreme Court ruling in *Parents Involved in Community Schools v. Seattle School District No. 1*; here, the highest court of the United States determined that the constitutional rights of white parents had been violated by school district policies that sought to maintain racial diversity in the most selective high schools. In essence, *Parents Involved* made it illegal for school officials to use race as a variable in school assignment, effectively removing this one last mechanism to counter the housing desegregation that locked many poor and working class students of color out of the city's most highly-resourced high schools, most of which are located in the neighborhoods in the North end and in the quickly gentrifying Central District.

The primary aim of my project was to capture how they imagined the trajectory of school desegregation struggle in the post-Civil Rights Era, from the implementation of the Seattle Plan in the 1970s to the present. Most of the interviews took the form of conversations, in which I asked them to share their stories and perspectives on school desegregation, Seattle's schools, black political engagement, the needs of black children, and the struggle for educational justice. Although I began the study with the intention of primarily offering an analysis of the past, it soon became clear that my participants viewed the past as so connected to the present and future fate of black children and communities that they would move effortlessly from recounting events that occurred decades before to experiences from earlier in the same week. Most poignantly, and without any

prompting from me, nearly every participant reflected on what Seattle's black children and communities had suffered during the past 30–40 years, how black people had been undermined and exploited economically and politically, and where a collective 'we' had fallen short or misplaced 'our' trust. Because I am also black, and because I was bused from the Central District to the North end in the early 1980s as part of the Seattle Plan, participants invited me – expected me, in fact – to share my story with them, and also to share in *feeling* and *theorizing* with them about what this suffering meant in the past, what it means now, and how to engage it going forward.²

Louise McKinney: 'Black people began the fight too late'

Mrs McKinney, age 76 at the time of our conversation, was one of the first black administrators in the Seattle Public Schools, and served as principal of Whitworth Elementary School in the mid-1970s. Here, McKinney addresses racial discrimination in Horizon, one of the district's gifted and talented programs at the time.

'At Whitworth,' McKinney tells me, 'We had the Horizon program, and it was all White! And I said, this isn't going to work. One of the things I saw was that the regular classes had 36, 37, 38 kids. The gifted classes had 20!' She laughs bitterly. 'I needed an explanation. They said, "Well, that's just the way it is."

But while they were explaining it to me, an African American mother came in and wanted to talk to me, and I took the time, and she said, "I want my child in the Horizon program here."

And I said, has your daughter taken the test? And she said, "yes!" And I said, "Well, she must not have passed it."

"She did, she's on the waiting list."

"What waiting list?"

She said, "There's a long waiting list of kids waiting to get in."

And I said to the secretary, "Is there a waiting list for gifted kids?" She took it out. Every kid on that list was African American, Asian or Native American!' McKinney pauses, and takes a breath. 'And I said, "Where are these children?" They were at the school! Every one of them was at Whitworth School! They were the reason the other classrooms – the non-Horizon classes – had so many students.

I said, this solves my problem. I worked with those class lists, and I sent a letter out to teachers saying there was going to be reassignment of students. And you need to know that I don't really believe in the pure gifted classroom. I think that all children should be taught as if they're gifted. My emphasis is on instructional strategies – the strategies that deliver learning

to everybody, okay? So, anyway, I told them that all of the gifted kids on the waiting list were going into gifted classrooms.

Well, the regular classroom teachers were thrilled, because they were going to have some room in their classrooms. The gifted teachers were not pleased at all. Parents of color were thrilled: This black lady is on the move, getting my kid into the gifted program! Pretty soon, the gifted teachers were coming to me, saying [and here McKinney adopts the high-pitched nasal voice that many black people often use when imitating Whites believed to be racially clueless or condescending], “Well, Louise, the gifted kids are working out well, but I think John [a black student] is, uh, shouldn’t be in the program,” and this one doesn’t need to be in and that one.

Okay. Why?

[The nasal voice again] “Well, he does this and he does that and the other.”

McKinney looks over at me, one eyebrow raised. ‘Now, one of my strengths as an instructional leader is that I went into every classroom every day. I knew every kid in the school. So when they told me everything John was doing, I said, I know John. Sure. Okay, we can de-certify him. That means you’ll want to decertify Charles – Charles is White, okay?’

“Oh, why?” [imitating the White teacher again]

“Well,” I said, “Charles does the very same things John does.”

“Oh!” they would say.

“I never had to decertify a kid,” McKinney says sharply. ‘I *never* had to decertify a kid.’ And eventually, they started coming to me, saying, “Louise you really did the right thing.”

This experience at Whitworth, and more in the years to come, lead McKinney to this bitter conclusion: ‘There are a lot of White people who *love* the Seattle Public Schools, they really do. And they should, because the school system works well for them. White parents come together, organize in large, large groups, and their advocacy is for *their* children. And we – we don’t have large communities of us, we really don’t. And I think we began, black people began the fight too late – we were fighting for integration and forgot about education, thinking they were one and the same, that if our kids got into schools with the White kids, that it was gonna be alright...’

Annette Burfect: ‘I’ve got two sons, and I’m trying to get them grown’

Sitting on the hardwood floor of Mrs Bunny Wilburn’s living room one afternoon, I talk with Wilburn and three other women – Annette Burfect, Edith Giles and Zakiyah Stewart – about their years of activism leading the work of the Seattle chapter of the Black Child Development Institute, an

organization with a long history of education advocacy for black youth and parents. One by one, they introduce themselves. Wilburn, the eldest, speaks first. A retired nurse, she describes how she made the choice to send her daughter, who had attended parochial schools since kindergarten, to Roosevelt High School in the north end in the 1960s during the years of the Voluntary Racial Transfer Program. ‘I wanted her to get a sense of the real world,’ Wilburn explains. Also, black leaders were encouraging members of the community to send their children to North end schools. ‘I like to see myself as someone who was down for the cause,’ she says proudly.

Psychologist Zakiyah Stewart went next. ‘I have to say that Bunny nurtured me and Edith radicalized me,’ she says, laughing.

Sitting next to her on the sofa, Edith Giles laughs. ‘I ain’t radicalized nobody,’ she says playfully.

Both of Stewart’s children are adults now, but much younger than Wilburn’s. She speaks about benefiting from that earlier generation’s experience in integrated schools. As she asked around in the community in the mid-1980s, the assessment was bleak: ‘The academic performance piece was missing,’ she explains, ‘and it seemed as if you put them on the bus, that meant they were going to be suspended at one point or another during that school year. I made a *conscious* decision not to send my children there.’

Edith Giles, who was a teacher in the Seattle Schools for many years, is also retired. I had met with her a few weeks before at the local senior center, and she had helped arrange this day’s discussion. She had made her perspective very clear at our first meeting: ‘One of the things we as a people don’t understand is that even among the majority [White] population, even those who support us, they’re only going to go so far. They have an agenda – that’s just how White folks are, and black folks don’t seem to understand that.... The buck is gonna stop there, and it’s gonna’ stop on their side of the fence...’ Even though there may be broad support for reforms such as school desegregation, she said, ‘there’s a whole ’nother agenda, and maybe they’re not even conscious of it, but it’s there.... We need to figure out what *we* need to do for us, making our own decisions, without being dependent on anybody else.’

Since Giles and I had already had an initial conversation, we all turn our attention to Annette Burfect, who until this moment, has been sitting quietly, listening.

Now, she puts her head down and begins to weep. Someone offers her a box of tissues. After a few moments, she looks up. ‘I’m sitting here listening to them,’ she says slowly, ‘and we’re all different. They have husbands. I’m a single mother, with *two* sons that have been through the Seattle school district. And the big picture, the *big* picture for the United States, America, they, whoever it is – they have a plan, *we* have a plan. I want my

kids to be able to read, write, do math, get a job, take care of their children, hold a decent conversation.

But they feel because I'm a single parent, my kids are less, I'm not interested in my kids, and because I'm a single parent [their father] is either a pimp or a drug dealer or some wonderful thing, and I'm sleeping with anything and everything out in the street and I don't care about my children. I don't know where they get this from. I care as much about my kids as they do. But I have a fight all the way from day one until' – she pauses, searching for the words – 'they're in the box.' She begins to cry again. 'I feel that they work very hard on black males from the very first day that they go into school.'

The other women nod and say, 'Mmmhmmm.'

'I've worked in the school district,' she says, noting her many years as a cafeteria worker. 'I'm retired and I'm working *back* in the school district, and I'm seeing the same plan there as when my kids were there, but it's more out there, and they don't care...'

Burfert remembers the day her youngest son was suspended from Eckstein Middle School, a desegregated school in the city's predominantly white north end, which I was also bused to around the same time. 'What was the story about this?' she says, sighing. 'Okay, him and a little White boy were out on the gym floor. My son had the ball and the White boy wanted the ball and said, "Give me that ball, nigger." And my son done the way he was trained – he whipped his ass good. And he better! Cause that's how I trained him. He better not go to school and *start* no fight, but if it starts, he better end it.'

I laugh, knowingly. 'Yes,' I tell her, nodding, '*my* mom told me that, too.'

'That's just the way I am,' she says. 'They suspended my son for three days and didn't even tell me.' She took her son to the school the next day to confront the principal. 'I asked him, "What happened to the other child?" He said, "I had to take him home and explain to his parents why he had a bloody nose."

But nobody came to *my* house? Nobody called me. Nobody said a word! So anyway, I looked at my son and I looked at the principal and I said, "Yes, he did exactly what I told him: If anybody ever calls you a nigger in life, you better whip his ass, and whip his ass good, 'cause if you don't, I'm gonna whip yours when you get home." And the principal did not understand that. But I said, he's not gonna lay down and let someone walk all over him. He better not!

I got a bad attitude,' she says, laughing bitterly. 'But I've got two sons, and I'm trying to get them grown, without them going wherever it is *we* go, to jail or wherever it is.'

Elnora Hookfin: 'It's ugly, but it's real'

Seattle Schools recruited Elnora Hookfin from historically-black Grambling State in the mid- to late-1970s. My former home economics teacher at Eckstein Middle School in the early years of the busing program, she spent much of her career working in the affluent and mostly white north end of the city. I found Mrs Hookfin deep in the south end, beginning her third year as vice-principal at Rainier Beach High School.

'I have worked in the north end forever,' she tells me as we sit in her office, 'and I wanted to see what was going on, and this is one of the schools that was struggling.... I could have retired yesterday. I don't have to be here – I *want* to be here.' She tells a story about how, during her first year, she noticed that one teacher would allow large groups of students to sit at the back of the class braiding each other's hair. 'I had to put a *stop* to that.'

I am reminded that a few days before our interview, I had stumbled across quotes from Rainier Beach students posted on an online website (greatschools.org, 2003/2013). Most had been posted a few years ago, around the time students had staged a protest over the lack of textbooks and other supplies. I share this one with with Mrs Hookfin:

Nobody listens to Rainier Beach, they think we are only good for our sports. If we had things to let us work better academically, like books, computers, and better teachers and tutors, then we would be an above average school. I work hard at my school, and nobody recognizes that because they are too busy recognizing how much better other schools are. Just because we are a primarily black school doesn't mean we can't learn. Teach us. I don't want to leave high school knowing almost nothing! ... Please give us some things to make us learn. Why get up so early to be treated stupid? I hope someone reads this.

'Let me address that,' Mrs Hookfin says, suddenly sounding stern, 'because the kids are so right on with that.... They were working with ancient computers up until two or three years ago. They've been updated. We do need a stronger curriculum. We don't have that.'

However, she notes, black students and other students of color are still marginalized throughout the district, not just at Rainier Beach. 'This is still goin' on. We talk about closing the achievement gap, but we have to take a look at what we're doing to our kids. And if you go to a school – say a Roosevelt High School – Roosevelt [an affluent public school in the north end] is going to take care of the honors kids, but the other kids, they're probably going to place them on one wing, or a floor all by themselves and let them tear it up. Garfield [another high-ranked city school] is guilty of that. Although they have the largest AP program, they also have the largest group of misbehaving students, because they plop them together, and give

them the worst teachers, who cannot gain control, who are not motivated, who are not educated. So...' Her voice trails off.

'We never really desegregated,' Mrs Hookfin says. 'We remain a sophisticated, segregated system. How did we do that? We came up with something called the honors program. So kids were bused, but they were not placed in honors. And kids were bused and placed with some of the worst teachers we had in the building. So desegregation had its advantages and its disadvantages. It helped the big picture. At least you were able to sit on the bus wherever you wanted to sit, and go anywhere you wanted to go, that kind of thing. But as far as education, it was not fixed, because teachers are still teaching in a segregated way. Remember how we were talking about the kids allowed to sit at the back of the room and do what they wanted to do? That's all part of that. Until we fix that kind of teaching, we're still in a segregated system.'

Students at schools such as Rainier Beach, she insists, 'are not going to have the same educational advantages that, say, Roosevelt has, because we don't have the money.'

So the kids that have the money backing are going to get the best. So we're right back – I think we're worse than we were before we desegregated. It's ugly, but it's real.'

'How do we fix the ugly?' I ask.

She laughs. 'If I knew that I'd be rich.' She then becomes serious. 'The only way we do that is to have equal educational facilities throughout the district.'

'How do you get that?'

'I don't know,' she responds slowly. 'I know we don't have the rich alum like some schools have; since the other schools have all the rich alum, the district could pump money into the schools that need it the most. They don't need to pump a lot of money into the rich schools; they're going to get it anyway. But that's what they do. That's exactly what they do.'

Don Alexander: 'We will be treated as slaves as long as we act like it'

Don Alexander must be in his 70s now, but continues to participate in community forums and keep up on education politics. The co-founder of Save our Southend Schools, Alexander grew up in Chicago and Los Angeles; his parents were prominent labor and racial justice activists. Sitting in his small house in the south end, he leans forward on his cane to offer a searing critique of conciliatory black politics and its effect on black youth. While his words may not seem directly related to school desegregation, he offered them in the context of his larger discussion of desegregation, and specifically, black leaders' failure to stand more firmly against inequitable

school-funding policies, which he views, at least in part, as black middle-class disdain for black poor people.

‘If this community does not allow itself to be seen as human beings,’ Don Alexander says to me, ‘as people, as men and women, we will not be treated as such. We will be treated as slaves as long as we act like it. If we want to protect our children, keep ’em out of fuckin’ Monroe and Walla Walla [state prisons] and get ’em in the [prestigious] University of Washington, we’ve got to make sure they get an education at Rainier Beach. If we don’t do that, if we don’t – we’re gonna lose another generation. We’ve lost this one. These kids are gone. You can’t help these muthafuckers. These kids are – how you gonna help a child, 17-years-old, for whatever false reason he might contrive, he know muthafuckin’ well he can make more money selling dope than he can workin’ at McDonald’s? However false security that is, however long he can get it, rather than go to jail or get shot, he can make more selling that dope on that bicycle than he can at McDonald’s. How the fuck I’m gonna tell you to work at McDonald’s, that that’s honorable and sellin’ dope isn’t? You think I’m stupid? I can’t count? How am I gonna respect you, you telling me some shit like that? We’ve lost that generation because we won’t take control, and we’re gonna lose another one if we keep doin’ the same thing.’

‘Let me ask you a question,’ Alexander continues, taking a long pause. ‘If you had a factory, and you had total control of that factory – the hiring, the firing. And you had an opening for 10 people, and someone said to you, well, we’re watching you, we’re gonna see how biased you are in your hiring. You White. And you had some janitors to hire, some engineers to hire, some scientists. You had to hire some people to dig some ditches. Who would you hire to do what? I know muthafuckin well, if I was White, I’d hire White folks. It’d be some black muthafucker cleaning out that ditch, only because I had to hire him, just to look like I was bein’ fair. Someone who looks less like me would be doin’ that menial task. The person who looks more like me will get the better job. And I don’t care what anyone says, that’s what the muthafucker’s gonna do!’

Well, what am I gonna do [as a black person]? I’m gonna walk up to this White man, and say [here Alexander changes to a soft, pleading voice, the one black folks sometimes use to effect the tone of those black people perceived as overly docile] ‘Sir, sir, don’t do me like this. As a janitor, a ditch digger, a shit-hole cleaner, you’re only gonna give me five dollars an hour. This engineer is getting \$80 an hour. Why don’t you give me eight dollars an hour?’ White man gonna say, ‘You’re right. I’m gonna give you eight dollars an hour.’ He ain’t said a goddamn thing about giving you an engineer job!’

Both of us start laughing at that one. Then Alexander is serious again. ‘Now see, from his point of view, from his racist ass, whatever, why is he

wrong? As compared to [if the black man said to him:] “Muthafucka, if you gonna be here, I’m gonna be here. ‘Cause goddammit, this job ain’t gonna go on unless someone who look like me gonna be doin’ this work. Otherwise, this job won’t go on. It just won’t happen. And I don’t care what you think this means, you can call it a threat, a promise, a strike, a boycott, or whatever.”

‘I’ll tell you what it means,’ Alexander says, his eyes narrowing sharply. ‘It means you are not going to come into *my* community and make your people rich and my people poor. And not my children standing off watching you do this to me and me accept it. How in the hell can my child have respect for me if he sees me allowing this? And for me to say to that child, you do what I say do? *Fuck* you! What the hell have you done? What have you brought to the table to be able to have the audacity to tell me I’ve got to do a certain thing in order to get along in this country? So if we treat our children like we treat ‘em, and expect someone else to treat ‘em better – what the fuck are we? A bunch of stupid – what are we?’

Analysis of the narratives

Taken together, these narratives capture the confluence of school malaise and racial melancholia in the everyday experiences and historical memories of black leaders, educators and activists. Their reflections on schooling and education policy become all that more poignant, because, as in Bourdieu’s France, the past 40 years in the US have witnessed the implementation of innumerable state efforts promising greater democratization in education and more equitable educational access for children of color. Although I never framed my study as one about suffering, it was clear that participants wanted to talk about schooling as a site of persistent problems for black students. Even in repeatedly praising me as someone who had ‘made it,’ participants referenced the myriad barriers that prevent so many others from doing so. Thus, suffering as a reality of black life in schools was never in question. Our interviews *began* with the premise that something had gone wrong, that ‘we’ as black people had experienced disappointment and betrayal.

I want to highlight four themes that emerge in the narratives, themes that help us to more clearly understand the nature of schooling as a site of black suffering. First, the narratives reveal the materiality and mundanity of everyday struggle. McKinney speaks about the physical concentration of bodies of color in overcrowded regular-track classrooms, while White students enjoyed small classes with engaging curricula. Burflect explains the misery she experiences as a working-class single black mother trying to protect her sons against the assaults they face on playgrounds, on the streets, in the principal’s office, lamenting her inability to anticipate or prevent the next

one. In Hookfin's account, black students sit at the back of a classroom, combing and braiding hair, while a teacher ignores them. One can almost imagine the casualness and everydayness of this scene – a teacher in front rambling about fractions or sentence diagramming while students in the back of the room attempt to pass the time by turning loose hair into neat corn rows. For Alexander, what is most troublesome is the frustration of black youth who are told, even by their black elders, to invest in a system of schooling that only seems to lead to low-wage work or unemployment. While normative and even critical accounts of policy and practice in education acknowledge inequities, foregrounding suffering allows us to consider more deeply how racialized bodies endure suffering in the spaces of schools, and how their suffering appears almost normal – unfortunate perhaps, but not fully realized as the tragedy that leaves Alexander in enraged disbelief, sputtering expletives.

Second, my research participants mourn the *longue durée* of black suffering in schools, that *permanence* of structural racism which Salamishah Tillet reminds us psychically connects current travails to a history of racial degradation. For Hookfin, we are still living under a form of segregation; Alexander sees education policies and practices as complicit with, and reproducing historical patterns of black economic exploitation. In Bunny Wilburn's living room, we hear from black women who have had children in the city's schools across several decades, with each new generation facing new disappointments, new fears, new horrors – new, to be sure, but painfully familiar. Racial melancholia, as Eng and Han (2000) insist, is a response to 'a national haunting' (63), ghosts of legacies of suffering that continue to visit us and perhaps never left. Here, everyday experiences in and with schools raise questions about whether there is ever truly an end to racial trauma. For these participants, the rational conclusion is that racism is permanent, which then motivates their resolve to persist in their work even though, as Hookfin reminds us, she 'could have retired yesterday.' This is the purposefulness of suffering I mentioned earlier, and is in part, what distinguishes racial melancholia from a 'damaging' emotional inertia; as subjects acknowledge the permanence of racism, they are able to develop an understanding of the individual self and the *we* that is agential, and welcomes suffering as a necessary dimension of life as a person of color in a white supremacist world.

The other two themes I want to highlight here relate to the *we* and *they* of black suffering in schools – the (black) social imagination of: (1) the black *we* who suffer; and (2) the white *they* who are the cause of that suffering. Notions of black collective identity are necessarily fraught with tensions, uncertainties and contradictions (Dawson 2011; Dumas 2010; Hall 1992). Black is, as Stuart Hall (1992) would insist, a shifting signifier, meaning different things for different people in different cultural-political contexts. And, as Michael Dawson (2001, 2011) and Cathy Cohen (1999)

have shown, who is included in, or excluded from black political discourse is subject to ongoing deliberation within black (counter)public spaces, where differently privileged black subjects wrestle over the meaning of blackness and in some cases exercise their relative power to police the boundaries of black communality. So we do not want to be romantic about a black *we*, even here. However, we can advocate a *critical* black cultural politics, in which ‘we discover and play with the identifications of ourselves’ (Hall 1992, 32) in ways that embrace the complexity and diversity of black experience; the *we* is less predetermined or fixed here, but is still meaningful, even crucial. In education, the black *we* becomes particularly important in asserting black humanity – that is, in insisting on the intellectual and creative abilities of black people, and in demanding rights to educational resources (Dumas 2010).

If, then, the cultural politics of black education, is about securing humanity, black suffering in schools signifies the loss or cultural devaluation of that humanity, and the loss of the material resources that allow black subjects to be regarded (and educated) as human beings. In these narratives, my participants lament, first of all, a black *we* which has suffered great loss. For McKinney, the former principal, the black *we* lost our focus on education in our pursuit of integration policies. When Alexander contends that we’ve lost this generation ‘because we won’t take control,’ he isn’t speaking of the need for a more punitive approach to child-rearing, but of the loss of a black *we* that is necessarily insurgent. His argument is that rather than engaging in combative discursive deliberation, middle-class black leaders have largely adopted the language and ideology – and perhaps the political imagination – of those least interested in the well-being of black children, including those in desegregating schools. Burfect cries because, unlike her more middle-class peers, she sees herself as unable to protect her sons from the schools’ assault on their humanity. For this school cafeteria worker, what she observes every day is black children losing their own sense of hope, identity, and will.

Consistent across all the narratives is the rhetorical question: Who, but *us*, will stand up and save *our people* from suffering? In their view, a black *we* must mobilize against cultural misrecognition and unfair distribution of educational resources. This black *we*, as imagined here, stands in opposition to a white *them* on the other side of suffering. ‘They’re only going to go so far [toward equality],’ warns Edith Giles. ‘That’s just how white folks are.’ In Burfect’s summation, ‘They don’t care.’ McKinney concurs, suggesting that white families are uniquely selfish: ‘Their advocacy is for *their* children.’ For Alexander, it is whites who ‘come into *my* community’ to make themselves rich while leaving black people even poorer than before. While Hookfin speaks primarily in terms of economics rather than race, it is clear that when she makes the distinction between resources at Rainier Beach and Roosevelt high schools, and connects these schools’ student

body composition to the legacy of racial segregation, she means to indicate that it is white people who inevitably benefit from the unneeded money sent to the ‘rich schools.’

Most of my participants make distinctions between individual whites, who might be allies, and whites as a social group acting in their own racial interests. We might say they are acknowledging the difference between white people, as human beings who can choose their attitudes and actions, and the *practice of whiteness*, which is inherently suspect. As Zeus Leonardo (2002) maintains ‘the assertion of a white racial identity has had a violent career’ in which whiteness has proven – and he cites David Roediger here – ‘nothing but oppressive and false’ (13). These black leaders and community activists readily identify ‘white people’ (i.e. the cultural politics of white collective identity, not white *persons per se*) as complicit in the suffering of black children; they even ‘perform’ whiteness in these narratives, taking on an exaggerated, high-pitched nasal tone when recounting their interactions with whites whom they understand as invested in whiteness – which is to say, invested in ‘oppressive and false’ violence against black people and other people of color. This tonality, high-pitched and nasal as it is, is not intended to convey a kind of gruff or overt violence. That is the whiteness of another time, another place. This is a whiteness that may drip with a bit of condescension, but ultimately claims for itself an innocence, even a benevolence in matters of race. For example, recall McKinney’s use of this tone in explaining how some white teachers expressed concern about her inclusion of children of color in higher-track classrooms. As she reenacts these moments in her narrative, McKinney performs these teachers with a sad face, as if to mock their expressions of regret that certain children of color are not good fits for the gifted program. In calling into question these teachers’ hypocrisy in ignoring similarly ‘disqualifying’ behavior among white students, McKinney identifies how whiteness functions in this more innocent but equally oppressive way, as a ‘technology of affect’ which uses emotion (here, sadness and regret) to secure for whiteness an ‘alibi’ against racism (Leonardo and Zembylas 2013). As Leonardo and Zembylas (2013) explain, ‘whiteness and emotion intersect in everyday school life’ (161); the governance (i.e. the social organization and management) of racial discourse allows whiteness to escape scrutiny, even as black students, families and educators endure various forms of racial exclusion. In most of the narratives, as in McKinney’s, whites seem to be unaware that they are agents of black suffering. However, these black leaders suggest, it could be ignorance *or* it could all be an act; in either case, black people had better be vigilant.

This, then, is what happens at the nexus of school malaise and racial melancholia: black children, black families and even black educators and activists *suffer*. And it is not enough to simply say they experience ‘tough times,’ as Dorothy Hollingsworth’s son described it. More than this, we

must attend to how prolonged, targeted cultural devaluation of black children and blatant maldistribution of educational resources along racial (and class) lines affect how black subjects make meaning of schooling, their racialized bodies in relation to schooling, and the role of education and educational institutions in assuring the collective linked fate (Cohen 1999; Dawson 2001, 2011) of an entire people.³ Bourdieu's notion of *la petite misère* shifts our gaze from the most egregious and recognized forms of suffering to take into account the heaviness and drudgery of experiencing everyday assaults, from a black parent futilely attempting to enroll her child in a gifted classroom filled with white children to black high school students logging on to a website to plead for more resources and more respect for their peers: *'Why get up so early to be treated stupid? I hope someone reads this.'* What my research participants confirm is that, over a number of decades, black students (and parents and teachers) have been 'treated stupid.' But what does it mean to have to 'get up so early,' often in the dark, five mornings a week, to be treated so miserably? The alarm rings, one wipes sleep away, remembers it is a Monday or Tuesday or... not yet the weekend. Heart sinks, shoulders fall. But one goes on.

Nothing I wanted: a moment at the end of the bus ride and the beginning of middle school

Here, I share my own memory of schooling in Seattle as a gentle and respectful response to Mrs Dorothy Hollingsworth, as a way to join her son in attempting to explain the 'tough times' for black children in desegregating schools. I am convinced that we lack a language to talk about and honor the truth of everyday racial suffering in the post-Civil Rights era. Further, there is a tendency to dismiss the suffering of children, because it is assumed that children's own assessments cannot be trusted, or at very least, if they do experience some trauma, it is for their own good and will be forgotten well before adulthood. What would it mean to remember? To meditate on the meaning of even these rather mundane forms of everyday suffering experienced by children and youth in schools? I also include this narrative here as a way to affirm the narratives of the black leaders and activists who spoke with me as part of this research project. Even as I endured suffering in schools, even as that needs to be given voice and recognized, I am certain that my suffering was mitigated as a result of their commitment to us, their dreams for us. Still, there is mourning, for the suffering we carry with us, and for those who continue to suffer in schools every day.

'For your first essay, I want you to write about *anything* you want!' It was still morning on the first day of 6th grade and the first day of middle school, and I was already excited. The school day had begun with

homeroom and history, but this was the class I had been waiting for: language arts. And now, *anything*. I can write about anything! Not quite believing my ears, I raised my hand. Our teacher for honors language arts was Mrs King, a short, perky white woman who kind of reminded me of the mother on the television sitcom, *The Brady Bunch*. And much like that mom, she was smiling and laughing cheerfully as she called on us one by one.

Finally, it was my turn. ‘Yes, I was wondering, can I write a story in my grandmother’s accent?’ I recalled reading *Tom Sawyer* and *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* the year before, at my old school, and was intrigued with the authors’ ability to capture the ways Southerners speak – their *dialects*, although I didn’t know this word at the time. My own grandparents, who moved from Pine Bluff, Arkansas to Seattle in the 1940s, said things like, ‘Boy, I done told you to shut dat do’[door] and ‘Alright, y’all come in here and eat yuh breakfast.’ If I could write *anything*, that is what I wanted to write. So, ‘can I?’, I asked eagerly, looking her in the eye with anticipation. The smile faded from Mrs King’s face as she looked at me, without quite looking at me.

‘No.’ That is all she said. *No*. And she looked away, turning her attention to another student. Her face brightened again, and she smiled, as she called on the next student. The next student, and the next and the next were all White. Looking around the room, I noticed that I was the only black child in the room. And they all seemed to be dressed alike: brightly-colored polo shirts with little alligators on the left chest, Levi’s, and name-brand sneakers or shiny leather loafers with pennies in them. And they all seemed to have braces.

On this first day, the alarm had gone off at 5:30 a.m. By 6:30, I had left out the back door, only to remember my shortcut through the alley might put me directly in the path of a growling stray dog who sometimes ran loose back there. So I took the long way, down the hill past the park where I often played, and then up another steep hill, where a crowd of black kids were joined by a few immigrant Cambodian and Laotian kids. Together, we waited for the chartered bus that would take us to the north end. In days to come, I might forget to set the alarm, or take too long eating breakfast. On those days, I would be running up that hill, my heavy backpack sliding off my narrow shoulders, only to see the bus pull away. Then, I had to take public transit to school. First, the 48 bus north, through the Central District and into Montlake, where I would get off just before the Montlake Bridge to wait on an often windy freeway overpass for the 75 to the white, affluent Wedgewood neighborhood where my short legs would endure yet another hill, to get to the school building at the top. Late. Normally, the school buses from the Central District pulled in at around 7:30 or 7:35, giving us only a few minutes to rush to our 7:45 homeroom. Most of the white kids had already arrived, dropped off by their parents, and in time to hang out at

their lockers and talk about fashion and music and crushes, or finish homework, or chat casually with teachers, who would ask them questions like, why don't you try out for band, or get involved in French Club? Even on these days, when we arrived on time, we were already too late.

In weeks to come, I would be kicked out of Mrs King's language arts class, and out of Mrs Arkebauer's math class, usually for mouthing off. I would skip the classes of teachers who, even once, gave me that look that refused to see me. Fights would come. I would be suspended, again and again. I would be threatened with having to repeat the seventh grade. I would fail classes, and be given last chances. And ultimately, I survived. But for the next three years, I would never be as happy about school, or in school, as I was in the moment I was told I could write anything, anything I wanted.

Losing something: recognizing and naming social suffering in research on race and education

In a 1998 appearance at Marcus Books, a black bookstore in Oakland, CA, Octavia Butler was asked about the fate of Dana Franklin in *Kindred*. 'Why did she have to lose an arm?' asked a woman in the audience. In her characteristically deliberate and slow way, Butler responded. 'There is no way we could have survived slavery,' she offered, 'and not have lost something' (personal communication, December 5, 1998). The audience sat there, quietly. Butler said no more on the subject. There would be no comforting words, only this one simple, tragic lament: Dana lost her arm. I conclude this article with a similar claim: there is no way for black people to have survived education policy and practice in the past several decades and not have lost something.

Research on education policy and school reform traditionally assesses effectiveness and success based on quantifiably measurable outcomes such as improved test scores or graduation rates, or matriculation to higher education. Critical policy researchers go further, to ask questions about who benefits and who is hurt by specific interventions, and whose interests and values are reflected in the common sense about schooling and in decisions made about allocation of resources. More specifically, critical race scholars contend that racism is permanent, and that race informs education policy in ways that maintain white supremacy at the expense of people of color. We can situate inquiry on black social suffering in schools within a critical approach, although the focus of our work here is less on identifying the structuration of racial advantage and subjugation, and more on capturing how those who suffer education reform imagine their own everyday experiences of enduring these policies. Our guiding question, inspired by Butler, is: 'How do these subjects make meaning of their survival (at the confluence of school malaise and racial melancholia), and how do they understand what they have suffered and lost in the process of education reform?'

We begin our inquiry assured *that there is no way* black subjects have not lost something. Our work is imbued with an epistemology of mourning: How do subjects understand their own loss? In what ways might they still be grasping to articulate it? How do we as researchers, know this loss in our bodies and express it in our words? Following from this, it becomes important for us to create research designs that allow space for participants to reflect on and reveal their own suffering, in ways that are safe, and in ways that allow them to remain the protagonists of their own narratives, survivors rather than damaged victims (Tuck 2009).

Finally, as we move to further develop a theory of black suffering in sites of education, it is important that this theorizing never be far removed from the body. That is, there is little use for scholarship on suffering in schools that is not disturbed, that is not heartbroken, that does not detail the material impact. In Butler's *Kindred*, Dana loses her arm. In a wall, as she travels through history. Each reader must imagine the horror of what this must look like, how it must feel. The sound. Yet, when asked about what appears an extreme outcome, Butler calmly suggests that what has happened to Dana is to be so expected that she can reveal the outcome at the beginning of the novel. We need to pursue a similar project in education research – scholarship that vividly reveals the nature of racial suffering in schools and incisively analyzes the infliction of power on racialized bodies, yet insists that this is hardly a surprise ending to generations of racial assault.

Notes

1. I do not mean to suggest that there is a singular interpretation of suffering within a given social group. Thus, I reject essentialist notions of a unified black 'we' which speaks in one voice about black suffering. To be sure, there is contention within black counterpublic contexts about what counts as valid sites of black struggle, how racial progress should be measured, and about what kinds of political-cultural identities and performances of blackness should be propagated (Dawson 2001, 2011; Dumas 2010). However, collective narratives of social suffering are not so indeterminate or relative that we cannot speak of a collective understanding of the source of suffering (the *who* which did *this* to *us*), or the conditions of suffering; although understandings of identity and suffering are socially constructed, certain imaginations do come to hold sway at specific historical moments.
2. To be sure, we cannot generalize from these narratives to make claims about the schooling experiences of all black people in Seattle. Nor, as I have said before, do I mean to suggest that schooling, or even more specifically, school desegregation, is *only* suffering. Indeed, Amy Stuart Wells and her colleagues (2008) found that graduates of desegregated schools in Seattle valued the extent to which racially diverse schools created opportunities for them to interact with a broader range of peers, and credit these experiences with opening up social and educational opportunities for them beyond high school and well into adulthood. Even so, their sample was no more representative than my own: researchers recruited participants from alumni email lists, which would almost

inevitably skew the sample in favor of those with internet access, and who regard their high school experiences positively, and wish to relive those memories with their peers even some 20 years later. Also, it is not clear if there was space, or if participants would have felt there was space to speak about school-related suffering or trauma during the 45-minutes telephone interview that served as the primary method for this study.

3. I believe I have adequately problematized the concept of racial identity throughout this article, so I need not qualify my use of the term ‘entire people’ here as a signifier for the collectivity of those racially marked as black. Although notions of a black *we* may indeed be fictive, they are no less meaningful or consequential than other powerful fictive notions, like ‘love’ and ‘family,’ which are the source of very real emotional and material outcomes, as we all so painfully (and joyously) know.

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