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Blackness, Literacy, and Escapology: Imaging Beyond the Singularity of Black Suffering

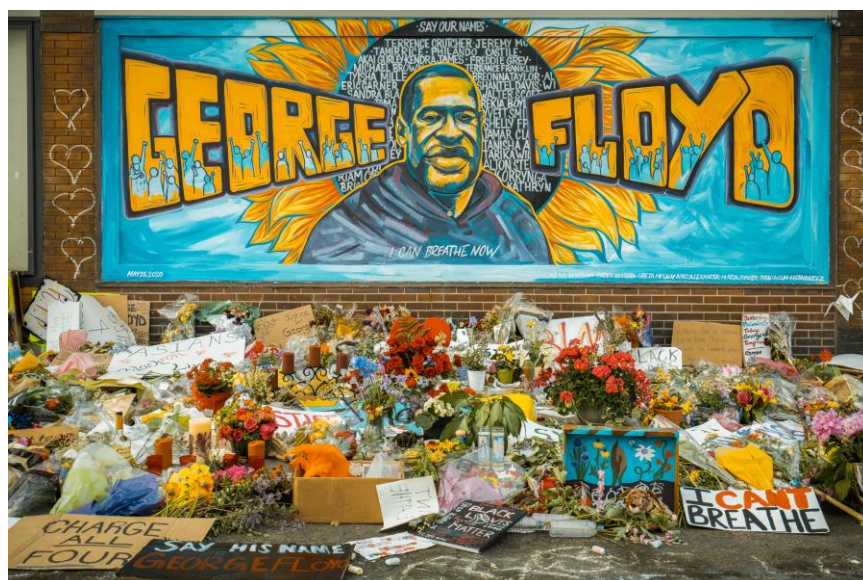
By Justin A. Coles, Fordham University Graduate School of Education

In 2014 during an OutKast (a rap duo made up of André “3000” Benjamin and Antwan “Big Boi” Patton) Reunion Tour, André 3000 wore a [jumpsuit](#), which read, “Across cultures darker people suffer the most, why?” When I first encountered André’s question seven years ago, I was not unfamiliar with the essence of the question, as it is in the vein of WEB Du Bois’ (2007) age-old rhetorical question on Black life: “How does it feel to be a problem?” Although André’s question was not remarkable, I was intrigued by his choice of the word “suffer.” Across the world, from my hometown of Philadelphia, PA to Soweto, Salvador da Bahia, Toronto, London, Port-au-Prince, and elsewhere, I have known that Black people experience a unique suffering. Being raised as a Black boy by parents who cultivated a home grounded in both a Black historical and racial literacy, I had extensive conversations on the ways Black people experienced life as informed by how Blackness has been conceptualized as less than, globally. Within the social milieu of the continental United States of America (US), I eventually came to understand this less than-ness and Black suffering as products of antiblackness.

At the very moment I write this sentence, the world is watching former Minneapolis police officer Derick Chauvin (white man) on trial for the murder of George Floyd (Black man), which was captured on multiple videos by bystander cell phones, police body cameras, and surveillance cameras from stores in the area where the murder took place. Before Derick Chauvin knelt on George Floyd’s neck for 9 minutes and 29 seconds (Bailey, 2021), George Floyd begged “Please don’t shoot me” (Bruni, 2021), which captures the ways Black people understand how violence is used as a tool of anti-Black oppression, particularly when considering police

interactions. Although not shot, George Floyd was killed by Derick Chauvin despite several bystanders urging the officer to get off of George Floyd's neck. Three other cops stood by idly watching as life left George Floyd's body: George Floyd's humanity was rendered nonexistent. Figure 1 shows a memorial for George Floyd in Minneapolis.

Figure 1: George Floyd Memorial, South Minneapolis



Note. George Floyd Memorial, South Minneapolis [Photograph], by Chad Davis, 2020, Flickr. (<https://flic.kr/p/2j7Gp9i>).

When I return to André's question on the suffering faced by darker people, my mind is indeed flooded with images and stories of how the humanity of Black life has been degraded across time and space (e.g. George Floyd). However, I must say, there is something about the word suffer that gives me pause. As a permanent and endemic regime, antiblackness *will* cause suffering in society and schools (Dumas, 2014), but when the word rolls off my tongue in relation to Blackness, it feels concerning or rather incomplete. For instance, when the images of suffering come to mind, images of the ways Black people live beautiful lives that are not in relation or in response to their oppression also come to the fore, perhaps even more so. The concern I have about single stories of Black suffering are that narratives of triumph and living beyond or outside of suffering are often obscured. My interest in rejecting the singularity of

Black suffering is informed by conceptions of escapology in the Black tradition. Barnor Hesse (2014) explained,

... escapology might be read in various twists and turns of black fugitive thought, whether excavating black radicalisms, circumventing the colonial-racial order of things, reanimating the souls of black folk, cultivating the “Black Fantastic” or augmenting our intellectual and cultural capacities to embody the meaning of freedom subversively. Always racially profiled by but never racially assimilated to Western hegemony, black fugitivity obliges radically escapist pathways (p. 308).

How might we leverage Black tactics of escape to build more just educational futures? I agree with James Baldwin (1965) that the tale of how Black people suffer and triumph always must be told. However, as we strive towards creating more equitable and humanizing educational spaces for Black children, leaning into and being informed by what lies beyond Black suffering will be crucial.

As a Black scholar who is informed by the literacy lives of Black youth and communities (e.g., Coles 2019, 2020, 2021), I see Black literacies as the catalyst for the ways Black people across time and space have cultivated lives that are not wholly confined within boundaries of suffering. Black literacies, which are rooted in a radical love of Blackness (Johnson et al., 2017), are inherently critical tools for critiquing logics and methods of antiblackness that breed Black suffering while also catalyzing the capacity to dream of and create places and spaces that celebrate the full humanity of Blackness. Celebrating Black humanity is a necessity in a world that works to socially construct Black inhumanity as an indisputable fact. When I think about Black literacies as making a way through Black suffering, I think back to texts such as Heather Andrea Williams’s (2005) *Self-taught: African American Education in Slavery and Freedom* and James Anderson’s (2010) *The Education of Blacks in the South, 1860-1935*. The power and importance of literacy learning and creating in the Black community, in formal and informal settings, was in the ways it manifested a particular freedom for the benefit of the Black community amid ongoing anti-Black violence. Here, I conceptualize freedom as the ability to critique oppressive systems and structures and the ability to engage in a living guided by one’s own desires and visions.

Suffering is not definitive, rather it is one aspect of the larger lived experience of Blackness. So, while I acknowledge the necessity of theorizing suffering, I do not want to stop there. I have been working to push against narratives that only frame Black people through damage (and as damaged) (Coles, 2021), and I invite all of you to join me and others doing this work. In journeying towards a more complex and multifaceted imaging of Blackness and Black life, I am reminded of the lyrics of Lakeside's (a funk band) *Fantastic Voyage*: "Jam to the beat, don't let nothing restrain you. We just want you to feel nothing but pleasure" (Unidisc Music, 2010). All too often, anti-Black logic, which we are all impacted by (both Black and non-Black people) positions Black life as the absence of pleasure and/or not worthy or deserving of pleasure. However, the truth is that I feel my Blackness and the Blackness of others is not only a site of delight and pleasure, but that it has given me the line of sight to see, find, and create pleasure.

A major way that I have come to know and understand Blackness as pleasurable, beyond suffering, is through the art of Black escape or fugitivity. Here, I align with conceptions of escape and fugitivity defined by me and other members of the Fugitive Literacies Collective (Player et al., 2020). Fugitivity is "an orientation towards liberatory consciousness which propels a radical departure from the enduring failure of a nation (and the nation's institutions) to protect, affirm, and love racially minoritized peoples" (p. 141). Escapology becomes about abandoning nation-state structures, radically departing from spaces that treat Black existence as disposable. Living in a society where it has become necessary to utter the phrase Black Lives Matter, I think about the ways Black people have always affirmed the value of Black life and created lifeways to uphold that value. Here, I recall the legend of the flying Africans. When I was a young boy, I read Virginia Hamilton's (2004) picture book, *The People Could Fly*. The book opens as follows:

They say the people could fly. Say that long ago in Africa, some of the people knew magic. And they would walk up on the air like climbin up on a gate. And they flew like blackbirds over the fields. Black, shiny wings flappin against the blue up there (p. 1).

This tale, grounded in the story at Igbo Landing where enslaved Africans walked and sang their way into the water at Dunbar Creek, Georgia, signals a refusal to live life for or in response to others (McDaniel, 1990). Reading this story as a child, I was amazed at the thought of Black folks flying away while still wrapping my head around the conditions that would prompt this taking off.

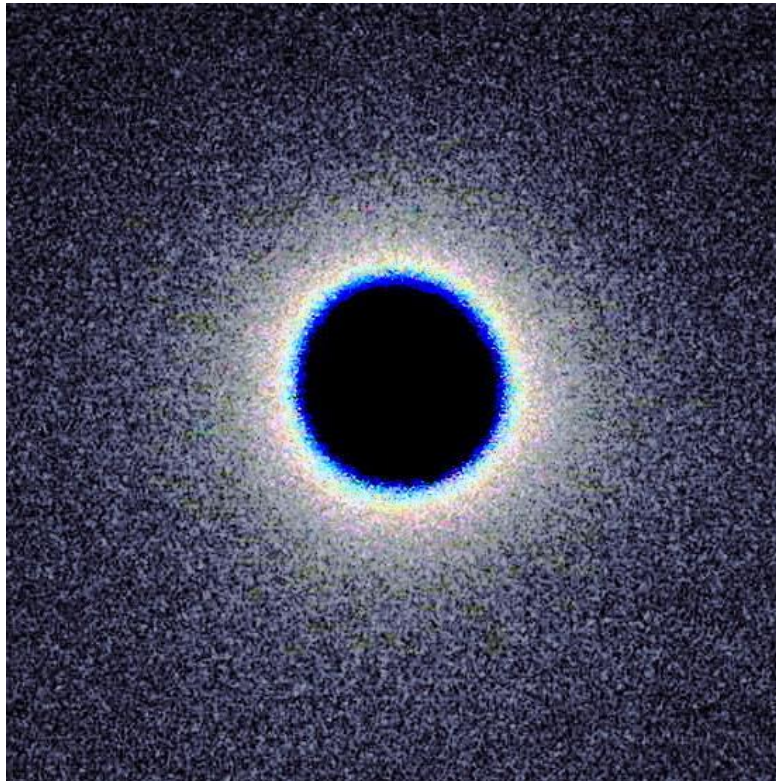
In recently revisiting variations of the flying Africans folktale, I began to understand these tales as symbolizing the ways Black people claim ownership over their lives, creating the context and conditions that allows one to live fully by refusing the singularity of suffering. Lines from Poet Danez Smith's (2017) "Dear White America" have been punctual for my thinking on the worlds of Blackness that exist and those yet to be created. Smith (2017) writes,

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. i've left Earth & i am touching everything you beg your telescopes to show you. i'm giving the stars their right names. & this life, this new story & history you cannot steal or sell or cast overboard or hang or beat or drown or own or redline or shackle or silence or cheat or choke or cover up or jail or shoot or jail or shoot or jail or shoot or ruin

this, if only this one, is ours.

Smith's (2017) imaging of leaving earth in search of darker planets caused me to think of the darker planets that exist on Earth already and how we might leverage those. How might educators lean into the ways Black youth and communities already have bid war against a society that refuses to see them by creating their own space/s? Rather than positioning such Black enclaves as deficient or marginal, what might it mean to see such space as a marker of humanity and thus a marker of how we might create better more humanizing schools and classrooms? Figure 2 is an image of a full moon rising, representing a scene I imagine I would encounter if I were to indeed search for darker planets in the imaginative galactic realm Smith's poem is situated.

Figure 2: Black Hole Sun



Note. Black Hole Sun [Photograph], by Steve Jurvetson, 2007, Flickr. (<https://www.flickr.com/photos/jurvetson/958035425>)

In her article, “The History of White Investment in Black Suffering,” Stacie McCormick noted: society is “conditioned to see Blackness in a certain way and this certain way aligns with how a significant number of people in the American public *need* to see Blackness – as objectified, disfigured, derided.” Given this social context, Black people have long searched for darker planets, and created them too; and not always in response to oppressive social contexts. In the spaces of creation that are birthed through Black escape, Black people are “no longer the aliens whose planet is terraformed without [their] consent, no longer the aliens whose genocide is the goal of the protagonists. No, [they] are the explorers. [They] pilot the spaceship” (Onyenbuchi, 2018). This piloting of spaceships has been present in every realm of Black life imaginable. In my reflections on the ways Blackness disrupts systems and worlds being created without their input and enactments of agency, I think about the Great (Black) Migration, which commenced in 1916, and the grounded optimism (Player et al., 2020)

all those Black people possessed to leave the South with hope; knowing the North would not be an oasis free of antiblackness, but still taking flight nonetheless. Figure 3 is an image of a Black family that left the South for Chicago in 1920.

Figure 3: Great Migration



Note. African American family from the rural South arriving in Chicago, 1920 [Photograph], by, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Jean Blackwell Hutson Research and Reference Division, The New York Public Library, 2020, Britannica.

(<https://www.britannica.com/event/Great-Migration>).

I also think about Black church choirs and hymnal lyrics like “weeping may endure for a night, keep the faith, it will be alright.” The aforementioned hymnal immediately makes me think of Kendrick Lamar’s (2015) song “We Gon Be Alright,” and the repetition of his lyrics “do you hear me, do you feel me? We gon be alright.” Lastly, I often think of the fictional film *Black Panther*, where the true beauty of Wakanda (a darker planet) was hidden in plain sight and the warriors did everything in their power to fiercely protect the nation and their humanity, while rejecting “the hegemony of whiteness” (White, 2018, p. 421). In all of these instances of Black escape, Black suffering as the dominant and all-encompassing narrative was refused. To solely conceptualize Blackness through narratives of suffering is to deny the joy and beauty of Black life that has and will always exist.



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