Integrity Despite Moral Nonrecognition: Why Black Teachers Are Called to Teach

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I am a Black woman and former high school English teacher who struggled to maintain what bell hooks called an "integrity of being,"—or being truthful to my sense of self in a system designed to silence and assimilate that self.[1] I write this response in the California sunshine at Stanford University, instead of my old cozy classroom of high school juniors huddled together to read between the lines of *Native Son*. I haven't left teaching per se, but I've instead shifted from one intervention—directly battling antiblackness through educating high school students—to another: researching Black-affirming teacher spaces that support Black teachers in navigating their roles in combating antiblackness. I also haven't stopped teaching, as I am an instructor in the teacher education program at my university. I therefore position myself as someone who can speak to the impact of recruiting racially minoritized teachers both from a personal and research lens.

As my work is on Blackness in education, I am going to focus on Black teachers in this response to Doris Santoro's article. However, many racially minoritized teachers may empathize with the range of Black teacher experiences due to what Liu and Shange call *thick solidarity*, "or the radical belief in the inherent value of each other's lives despite never being able to fully understand or fully share in the experience of those lives."[2] Centering Black teachers allows for what Wynter calls the "specificity of the Black," and because in my work it's important not to center whiteness, I'll draw on Dumas and ross' framing of BlackCrit to use terms like antiblackness instead of white supremacy.[3]

It is with this orientation to research that I respond to Santoro's piece on the integrity of recruiting racially minoritized teachers. Santoro poses an urgent ethical problem: "How can we induct more educators of color in a profession that we know may impede their ability to flourish?"[4] Indeed, schools are

"sites of Black suffering."[5] It is important to question the integrity of recruiting Black teachers when they will face a totalizing climate of antiblackness.[6] Black teachers often have to take on additional, emotionally taxing responsibilities, like organizing co-curricular activities for Black and Brown students, serving on district equity initiatives, mentoring struggling racially minoritized students, and supporting new Black teachers in their districts, all while suffering daily anti-Black aggressions. Santoro provides an accurate picture of high turnover schools with poor leadership in which many Black teachers struggle. I marvel at the fact that these teachers do all this work despite enduring, as Santoro argues, "moral nonrecognition" (that is while "not being recognized as knowledgeable and moral subjects").

However, I'd like to offer a few extensions and points of departure from Santoro's argument. First, implicit in this question about the integrity of recruiting racially minoritized teachers is the idea that they might be surprised to encounter racism, antiblackness, and spirit murdering in schools, or what Santoro calls the "bad character" of schools. To contextualize Chris Lebron's framing of bad character, we must continue to name the anti-Black foundations in which bad character currently manifests. For, as Santoro suggests, to be born into the United States with Black skin means to be born into systems created to suppress their success and thriving. Dumas and ross assert that antiblackness "is endemic to, and is central to how all of us make sense of the social, economic, historical, and cultural dimensions of human life."[7] Schools are not the first contact zones for Black teachers: they do not go through their lives free of antiblackness and suddenly experience it when they receive their teaching credentials. Instead, they have years of compounded experiences of anti-Black racism. While I share Santoro's interest in the characterization of schools, antiblackness functions ideologically as a social structure that is not unique to schools. Yet schools are particularly damaging to Black and Brown people because of how, as Santoro argues, they reinforce and reproduce systemic harms.

Secondly, Santoro asks if it is irresponsible to recruit racially minoritized teachers due to the bad character of schools, which I maintain has its founda-tions in settler colonialism, chattel slavery, American exceptionalism, capitalist

logics, and "educational carcerality."[8] Black teachers have never had a choice regarding the system they were born into, and yet, they have always chosen to carve out education for the support of the Black community.[9] Black teachers have been integral to the Black community from the time of enslavement, and they have always done so with great personal risk. From teaching other enslaved people to read, to teaching in freedom schools, to making a way in underfunded segregated schools, to facing antiblackness in the present day, Black teachers have built a legacy of teaching regardless of the potential harm that may fall upon their loved ones, their communities, and themselves.[10]

In my research, teachers emphasize that they teach because of a higher calling, not exclusively because they "view working in schools as an avenue for professional flourishing" as Santoro suggests.[11] Santoro defines demoralization as "consistent and persistent frustrations in accessing the moral rewards of teaching." And yet, most of the Black teachers I've interviewed this year stated that when their classroom door is closed, they experience many rewards of teaching. Instead, it is when they leave the classroom to attend professional development, meetings with leadership, or even the lunch table with other teachers, that they most often encounter antiblackness. Even though they might not have a choice of teaching within this anti-Black climate, they still choose to teach due to their freedom dreams of a better tomorrow. In short, even if we formally stop recruiting Black teachers, they are still going to show up to be a part of something larger.

Lastly, I question where the onus for change lies. In Santoro's framing of moral nonrecognition, the subject is often invisible. Black and Brown teachers are not being recognized *by whom*? She writes that "One lesson we learn may enable White educators to fail to recognize our colleagues of color as moral subjects while retaining a sense of our intrinsic goodness." And this, I think, should be the focus of the argument: white people morally nonrecognize Black and Brown people, and this is a specific harm within this climate of antiblackness. We can then steer away from whether we can recruit Black teachers into the field with integrity and instead focus on how we can get institutions and individual agents to take responsibility while they recruit. Taking responsibility

involves amending institutional policies and practices while simultaneously equipping white educators to be what Love calls *co-conspirators*, leading them to be better colleagues and educators.[12]

With these considerations in mind, I am strongly compelled by Santoro's assertion that "years of exposure to the bad character of schools has enabled those of us who are White to learn that Black and Brown bodies are of little moral consequence." The solutions to this problem will require the action and reflection of the entire community, particularly white people, policies, and structural arrangements that give rise to this so-called "bad character." Ladson-Billings would call this the *moral debt* we must pay, where "personal responsibility must be coupled with social responsibility."[13] What if we shift our gaze from focusing on the problematic nature of recruiting racially minoritized teachers because of a "demographic imbalance," to focusing on the harm that is the one-two punch of the normalized miseducation of white folks and the social reproduction of white teacher racism? ross offers thoughts on educational reparations, musing that until redress occurs, we can create spaces that allow Black folk to "confront, navigate, refuse, and resist anti-Black violence and anti-Black racism in the larger society and in their schools."[14] Thus, I offer that it's a both/and: (1) we must prioritize the design of spaces that create the conditions in the here-and-now for Black teacher wellbeing, and (2) white folks must bravely confront the anti-Black foundation that strips the recognition of Black and Brown teachers as moral subjects. Both components are part of the promise of futurity that includes Black and Brown teacher thriving.

The concern around recruiting Black and Brown teachers stems from the discourse that their sole presence will fix problems with inequities in school, placing undue pressure on these teachers. However, if we focus on this recruitment as part of a larger project of racial justice—accounting for the totalizing climate of antiblackness within and beyond schools—then we can recruit not only because Black and Brown teachers deserve to be there, but also because they are connected to a broader strategy to interrupt structures that harm Black and Brown people. As none of our nation's major institutions reflect "good character" for Black and Brown people, we ought to focus on the ways in which

supporting them in carrying out their calling to teach is one part of institutional and societal transformation.

Acknowledgements

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14 kihana miraya ross, "Anti-Blackness in Education and the Possibilities of Redress: Toward Educational Reparations," *Amerikastudien/American Studies* 66, no. 1 (2021): 232.