An Africentric School

In 2009, Philip Howard and Carl James report, "the Africentric Alternative School was established in Toronto, Canada," the "result of a 30-year struggle by members of Toronto's Black communities for a Black-focussed school as one measure to address the fact that Black students are underserved in Toronto schools."[1] While there is an extensive scholarship concerning "the quest for equitable Black schooling in Canada, especially Toronto," Howard and James allege that "it tells us little about how Black teachers in Canada today articulate and implement these transformative visions of schooling."[2] They intend to redress this absence by exploring "the visions and pedagogical approaches that Africentric Alternative School teachers deem crucial within a school that centres the educational well-being of Black children," knowledge they deem "increasingly urgent as Canadian schools continue to fail Black students despite multiple ostensibly multicultural and anti-racist interventions in education."[3]

Howard and James note that "Black life has a very particular relationship to settler colonial societies such as Canada, and indeed to civil society in 'the West,'" adding that the "global trade in African people as chattel and the attendant modes of slave-holding required the development of conceptions of, and ways of relating to, African people that would sustain the dehumanizing project of reducing African life (now recreated as Black) to (white) property."[4] They also note that "Canada also has a significant history of enslaving Indigenous people," concluding that "many of these dehumanizing modes also define Indigenous life and education in Canada." [5] (Indigenous peoples also enslaved Indigenous peoples.[6]) Slavery acknowledged, Howard and James return to their focus, e.g. "[l]egal and policy history in Canada, and the broader European philosophical tradition of defining Humanness against Blackness," all of which "make antiblackness" – rather than "subalternity or racial oppression"[7] - the relevant term here. Moreover, antiblackness remains "reproduced in essence (even as the specific instantiations differ) across time and space, such that Black life is lived in the present under conditions that qualify as slavery's afterlife."[8]

For Howard and James, "Black suffering becomes the backdrop against which white life, the settler-colonial nation, and its institutions find their coherence," meaning that Blackness constitutes a "contaminating presence that must be disposed of in order to set things in order," including "in Canada, given the histories of Blackness here," histories undermining "the image of Canada as an egalitarian multicultural state," requiring that "dominant Canadian narratives and practices erase Black people, symbolically and materially, from their place in Canada's histories and landscapes."[9] Instead, Howard and James continue, "Black people in Canada are understood as fresh arrivals who are here because of the state's benevolence, and whose challenges are

simply those of recent immigrants,"[10] not in appropriate for those of African descent who are in fact "fresh arrivals."

Howard and James move next to terminology, noting that "Black-focussed schooling" shifted "towards labels such as Afrocentric or African-centred schooling," terms that have "remained largely interchangeable in the Toronto public discourse."[11] Only "as plans for the Africentric Alternative School developed, the term Africentric eventually gained pre-eminence," the term "intended to signal the unique histories and geographies of Blackness in Canada that would require this school's approach to differ from approaches taken in Afrocentric schools in USA."[12] The Toronto Africentric Alternative School opened as an elementary school in fall 2008 with 128 students; currently it offers coursework through eighth grade. Though not excluding non-Black students, "the Africentric Alternative School has an almost entirely Black student body and staff," all of whom "hail from several diasporic and continental African backgrounds."[13] To study the school, Howard and James asked the following questions

1. What are the aspirations of parents, staff, and students for the Africentric Alternative School, and how are they shaping the school?
2. Given the unsettled definition of Africentricity in public discourse in Toronto, how are members of the school community articulating what they understand Africentric education to be?[14]

Howard and James report that "the research team participated in the life of the school, and became known to teachers, parents, guardians, students, and community members as partners in documenting the development and application of an Africentric approach." [15] In fact "our team interviewed each of the seventeen teachers and administrators at the school," as well as "conduct[ing] parent and student focus groups," and, moreover, "took field notes as we participated in and visited assemblies, classrooms, and meetings."[16] They drew "upon these additional data to triangulate teacher narratives."[17]

Before discussing their "findings," Howard and James "first elaborate on the fact that the teachers understand the school as providing community primarily for Black students, but also for Black teachers and parents," a goal that "is accomplished through the teachers' shared commitment to students, their collaborations with each other and their collaborations with parents."[18] They report "that, hand-in-hand with providing a sense of community for Black students, many teachers felt that their role necessarily included affirming students' lives as Black people," something Howard and James "survey."[19] But they seem as interested in "challeng[ing] the antiblackness of dominant multicultural approaches to the extent that they disallow this kind of Black affirming practice."[20] They do attend "to some of the contentions and challenges that teachers faced in working with students and parents," and so "highlight the ways in which the teachers worked to avoid the antiblack ways of addressing these contentions often found in other schools, to ensure that everyone's humanity and dignity is preserved."[21] They assert that this "approach not only rightly contests antiblackness by

making Black humanity non-negotiable, but it also understands that many of these contentions are, themselves, a product of a long legacy of antiblackness in educational systems."[22]

During interviews, "several teachers repeatedly referred to the school as having a climate of family and community," testifying that "they had a concerted focus on developing quality, respectful relationships with each other, students, and parents," implying, Howard and James suggest, "that Black people generally do not experience this unconditional belonging in other schools."[23] For example, "Althea likens the school environment to that which one might find at a family gathering where family members are excited about being with, and supporting, each other," a likeness that "produces in her a protective commitment to her students so that she is willing to work with them even during her contractually provided lesson-preparation ('prep') time."[24] Althea worries that for Black students, the lack of a protective/familial sense of commitment to them in other schools results in a rush to label them as requiring special education services," a concern consistent with research that "Black students in other Toronto schools are disproportionately placed in these special education programs— even from their earliest years in school," a fate from which the Africentric Alternative School protects students, as it "provides a family-type environment that resists pathologizing Black children, but instead draws out their potential through an ethic of care."[25]

From Althea Howard and James move to Paul, who experiences in the school "an African value of community," one "he tries to develop."[26] at the Africentric Alternative School. Paul believes "that good teaching requires that teachers not 'other' their students, but see them as being like their own family and community, and treating them accordingly," a view that Howard and James characterize as "a radical view of how teachers should approach their work."[27] For Paul, they continue, "the quality of teachers' professional relationships with students defines the teacher's efficacy, and this heightened regard for one's students allows them to realize their full potential,"[28] a view he shares with many educators, not only in Canada but worldwide. This "climate of community at the Africentric Alternative School extends to relationships among the educators," as teachers find "that providing a nurturing environment for students requires a high degree of collaboration."[29] Patience reports that "the contributions of individual teachers are valued," and that "more experienced teachers welcome the fresh ideas that younger teachers like herself bring to the school, while newer teachers appreciate the more experienced teachers' wisdom,"[30] a utopic situation indeed.

Howard and James report that the teachers do indeed find their "sense of collaborative community … [to be] extraordinary," something they think is "inspired by their high expectations of students and their desire to provide challenging, relevant learning experiences for them." [31] Howard and James "sense[d] that they find community and a feeling of unified purpose as they adapt curriculum to include critical perspectives."[32] That sense of solidary they share with their students' parents, "who are

seen as partners in the education of their children, and who play an important role in championing the school ethos," indeed who exhibit "extremely high levels of parent involvement at the Africentric Alternative School."[33] Parents become "involved in the School Council, the snack program, fundraising initiatives, extra-curricular activities, and as guest speakers," and Howard and James report "that on any given day in the school, a number of parents could be found in the hallways, classrooms, and in the office supporting the day-to-day functioning of the school as integral members of the school community." [34] They conclude that "parent-teacher partnerships, teacher collaboration, and commitment to students are foundational to the work teachers do at the school," and comprise a "large part of what makes the school Africentric."[35] They contrast "this environment is vital to … other schools in the Toronto area which they feel typically exclude Black children. As we have seen, the exclusion of Black people from community is a feature of antiblackness,"[36] a claim I'm guessing that educators working in other Toronto-area schools would contest.

Howard and James report a reciprocal relationship between faculty "fostering a collaborative, familial environment," and the "affirm[ation] [of] the students' Black/African identities,"[37] affirmation meaning more that "valuing students' ethnic practices and African heritage, as it also includes affirming Blackness as political identity to resist antiblackness."[38] Howard and James recall that "Christina seeks to nurture Black identity," determined that "her students to know that their Blackness was welcomed and promoted."[39] When "making specific historical reference to the Black Panther Party and Garvey's United Negro Improvement Association, Christina aligns her practice with the explicit and unapologetic pro-Blackness that characterized those movements."[40] Again emphasizing the School's distinctiveness, Howard and James assert: "In contrast to other schools, then, the Africentric Alternative School affirms students' heritage and political identities, fostering pride, and self-confidence, which lead students to have positive feelings towards their schooling."[41] They speculate that "the Black-affirming environment that teachers work to ensure at the Africentric Alternative School reminds students of their own significance as individuals and as Black people" and "motivates them to apply themselves academically," something "that cannot happen in spaces where Blackness is silenced."[42]

Howard and James then turn to Courtney, whose "account indicates the ways in which failure to expose these elementary-aged students to culturally and politically appropriate referents is antiblack, resulting in their misrepresenting themselves as white," evidently a consequence of colourblindness, operating under the guise of neutrality, is actually a hegemonic negation of Blackness—a form of epistemic antiblack violence—that promotes whiteness as norm."[43] They continue: "In schools where this kind of Black-affirming knowledge is unavailable to Black students, a vacuum is created, only to be filled by the negative constructs of Blackness that abound in popular culture and media."[44] Howard and James then reference Rosa who, they report, "asserts that affirming Blackness does not mean suspending critical analysis of behaviour that

some Black people might engage in," that "an important aspect of affirming Blackness is to foster introspection and self-critique; to promote acceptance of the multiple ways in which Blackness is lived among members of the school community and beyond."[45] They are quick to qualify that statement, again citing Rosa, who "notes, this kind of critical, self-reflexivity cannot be achieved where Blackness is routinely under attack," but only in a "Black-affirming climate that pushes back against antiblackness for students to develop a level of awareness of intersectional Black identities and the politics of solidarity."[46]

Focused on "Black identities and the politics of solidarity," that concept of intersectionality does not extend to intersecting with other cultures, as Howard and James report that "affirming Blackness at the Africentric Alternative School rejects mainstream, antiblack conceptions of multicultural education."[47] They reference both Crystal and Novelette, who "indicate that climates that promote strong Black identity are often considered to be in tension with the interests of a multicultural student body."[48] Given that "Black-affirming curriculum is integral to promoting Black students' academic well-being and exists where there is a clear commitment to Black students' success," Crystal and Novelette concur with "what their colleagues have observed, [that] in most schools, issues of relevance to Black students are ignored in the ostensible interest of the collective multicultural student body."[49] Howard and James report that "these teachers are identifying a fundamental antagonism that exists in mainstream educational discourse in Toronto between professed multiculturalism and Black people's interests," as "they witness the mobilization of multiculturalist discourse in education in ways that are antiblack to the extent that what is in the best interest of 'all' students requires conditions under which Black students cannot thrive."[50] They allege that "Black students … [are] excluded from the collective 'all'."[51]

Howard and James then recall "Wesley's response [that] gives insight into how parents' prior experiences of marginalization in other schools, as well as the historically negative relationships between Black communities and educational institutions— inform the distrust that parents and students might have of educators, and that they might bring to their relationships with staff at the Africentric Alternative School."[52] In fact "parents … may be more outspoken, perhaps even confrontational in order to protect themselves and their children from the marginalization they have come to expect from schools."[53] In some cases that marginalization evidently took the form of children being assigned to special education classes, as Howard and James report "contentions among teachers and parents at the Africentric Alternative School," as faculty "found they had to navigate the historical distrust of parents when proposing instructional modifications to support the learning of students who appeared to have learning exceptionalities."[54]

Howard and James conclude from this phenomenon that "a school that hopes to equitably educate Black students cannot regard the Black community's distrust of educational institutions as unwarranted or misplaced," but instead the school "must

take into account this historically informed distrust of education systems and take seriously Black people's well-founded apprehensions about how their children will be treated."[55] They continue: "Since schools are a microcosm of the broader societies within which they are found, all schools are implicated in antiblackness, and must be ready to speak in specific terms about the measures they take to resist reproducing these structurally determined patterns,"[56] a sweeping statement that would seem to include the Africentric School itself. They continue: "The contentious relationships that result from historical distrust of educational systems, then, cannot be seen as something that individual Black people somehow bring with them into otherwise harmonious educational spaces, but rather as a dynamic that is structurally produced by the extant antiblackness of Canadian educational institutions,"[57] although it's not obvious why such a "dynamic" would not be at work in – necessarily expressed by - "individual Black people." They conclude that: "True commitment to the education of Black students means recognizing this, working through these difficult relationships, and exercising a critical institutional self-reflexivity that seeks to end antiblack practices,"[58] again ignoring that institutions are inhabited by individuals. "Institutional self-reflexivity" is undertaken and enacted by the specific educators and administrators, specific as the names Howard and James invoke in their article.

In the case of the Africentric School, specific educators and administrators apparently took parents' "raw concerns" in stride; parents had no "fear that staff will exert the abusive kinds of power they face in other settings."[59] Somehow "relationships are strengthened, and norms for respectful negotiation are established as parents, staff, and students become assured that each intends to genuinely work in the best interests of Black children, and Black communities generally."[60] One would think that, however rarely, a parent might overstep and an educator might push back, but Howard and James report otherwise: "Unwilling to reproduce the antiblack attitude of Black disposability evident elsewhere in the disproportionate expulsions of Black students and dismissive relationships with Black parents, Africentric Alternative School teachers do the difficult work of remaining engaged with all members of the school community."[61] Howard and James evidently suspect these assertions strain readers' credulity, so they add that:

> It is quite striking how frequently the teachers (with students and parents) describe their work in contradistinction to the conditions they know Black students and parents routinely face in other Toronto area schools—conditions which we have argued throughout are manifestations of antiblackness. So it is against this background that these teachers' work makes sense in relief. It sketches out what a regard for Black life in schools might look like. Where student potential has been unrecognized, these teachers nurture it. Where Blackness has been negated, these teachers supplant antiblackness with pro-Blackness. Where Black students' academic needs have been subordinated to the needs of others, these teachers centre them. Where it has been unsafe to be

Black, these teachers strive to make it safe. Where Black students and parents have routinely experienced the violence of disposability, these teachers counter with a climate of family that persists, even amid contention. And, where there has been no space to reflect critically and constructively on Black life, these teachers offer that space. Thus, while they do not specifically name antiblackness, in describing their work the teachers clearly position it as a response to antiblackness.[62]

I think this is called "doubling down."[63]

Apparently Howard and James "are often asked what the implications of our research are for the education of Black students in mainstream schools in Toronto," queries to which they "respond cautiously to avoid its potential antiblack traps."[64] They return to praising the "achievements at the Africentric Alternative School," especially "in terms of innovative pedagogy and parent engagement," but primarily by contrasting these "from how school is dominantly conceived in Canada (as demonstrated in the long Black struggle and contentious debates that led to the school's creation)."[65] They position the "Africentric Alternative School" as a model for "the radical restructuring and reordering required if our objective is to truly eradicate antiblackness."[66]

In his commentary, the research assistant – Anton Birioukov-Brant - reported that he quoted "this article at length for two reasons," the first having to do with growing up in Toronto, and the second as a scholar with "an interest in equitable alternative schooling." Dr. Birioukov-Brant also has a "pragmatic interest in the *how* of equitable education." He notes that "one of the criticisms that can be levied against critical theory, anti-racist education, and anti-oppressive education is its critical and abstract nature; where current practices are criticized and possibilities hypothesized, but without any tangible evidence of *how* to do so." He considers this defect corrected in this article, as "it explicitly highlights *how* to carry out equitable anti-racist education." He continues: "As I was reading this article, I kept thinking 'why cannot all schools do this?'" He answers his question by referencing Howard and James' skepticism concerning "the difficulties of implementing these initiatives in a diverse school, where multiple identities are almost seen as competing for attention and recognition," which "leaves the question of whether racially (and perhaps sexually, gender, class) separate schools are the only option for equitable schooling." Birioukov-Brant notes that "the authors appear to lean towards the former option, but at what cost? Must we become reductive, as to separate students based on identity-markers? How do we navigate the intersectionality of identity? These are lofty questions in need of consideration." Indeed.

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ENDNOTES

1 2019, 314.

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid.

4 2019, 316.

5 Ibid. Fierlbeck (2006, 113) confirms that "the issue of race in political thought became prominent only when intellectuals outside western democracies began to examine the legacy of colonialism. The dearth of theoretical literature did not mean that the politics of race was either unimportant or non-existent in Canada. First Nations groups, in particular, gained a much higher profile in Canada than in the U.S."

6 https://www.dorchesterreview.ca/blogs/news/first-nations-their-slaves

7 2019, 316. Howard and James explain: "This is because antiblackness is not simply subjugation of the Black human subject, but rather it is an antagonism that places the Black outside of the Western construction of the Human altogether, as its

antithesis" (Ibid.). Certainly that was the case historically; the extent to which it is the case now – in Canada specifically – is debatable.

8 Ibid.

9 2019, 316-317.

10 2019, 317.

11 2019, 319.

12 Ibid.

13 Ibid.

14 2019, 320.

15 2019, 321.

16 Ibid.

17 Ibid. Doesn't "triangulation" of "teacher narratives" risk de-emphasizing dissent (should it exist) and, more generally, individual educators' intellectual independence?

18 Ibid. One would think "community" would also be formed among the students themselves.

19 Ibid.

20 Ibid.

21 Ibid.

22 Ibid.

23 2019, 322. I was unaware that non-Black students felt "unconditional belonging" in their schools.

24 Ibid.

25 2019, 322-323. Concerning "care" see Jung 2016.

26 2019, 323.

27 Ibid. It's not obvious how "radical" a view this is. For example, Mercer (1994, 167) points out that "certain aspects of black masculinity seem to be based on an unconscious identification with the hegemonic white master model, in which the acquisition of a masculine identity always appears to depend on the 'othering' of someone else's."

28 Ibid.

29 Ibid.

30 Ibid.

31 2019, 324.

32 Ibid.

33 Ibid.

34 Ibid.

35 2019, 325.

36 Ibid.

37 Ibid.

38 2019, 326. The same is true of queer politics – "I'm here, I'm queer, get used to it" (see Jagose 1996) – and recalls the 1920s Harlem Renaissance (Pinar 2019, 37-53), the négritude movement of the 1930s in France (Mercer 1994, 297), to the 1960s Black Is Beautiful movement in the United States (Mercer 1994, 302).

39 Ibid.

40 Ibid. Referencing historian Barbara Bair, Donna Franklin (2000, 96), reports that "Garvey's movement was the personification of independent manhood and symbolized the ideas of force and dominance. Although women were technically

granted an equal share of power, the organizational structure of the UNIA was not 'separate and equal' but 'separate and hierarchical'." Franklin (2000, 98) adds: "Ironically, when Garvey was convicted of mail fraud and jailed from 1925 to 1927, his second wife, Amy Jacques Garvey, a feminist, became his representative and spokesperson." Franklin (2000, 99) continues: "Amy Jacques Garvey fulfilled the multiple roles of wife, legal adviser, fund-raiser, secretary, and writer/propagandist until the birth of her children in 1930 and 1933. The children were born during a period when she received little if any support from Garvey because of his extensive travel schedule and financial difficulties. When Jacques Garvey would later review her life with Garvey she bitterly noted, 'What did he ever give in return? The value of a wife to him was like a gold coin – expendable to get what he wanted, and hard enough to withstand rough usage in the process'."

[41] 2019, 327.

[42] Ibid.

[43] 2019, 327-328.

[44] 2019, 328. Unless they are recoding – say – Beyoncé's representation in media, Howard and James are overstating their case - and not for the first time.

[45] Ibid.

[46] Ibid.

[47] Ibid.

[48] 2019, 329.

[49] Ibid.

[50] Ibid.

[51] Ibid.

[52] 2019, 330.

[53] Ibid.

[54] Ibid.

[55] 2019, 331.

[56] Ibid.

[57] Ibid.

[58] 2019, 331.

[59] 2019, 332.

[60] Ibid.

[61] Ibid.

[62] Ibid.

[63] https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/double-down-on While promoters of all stripes – especially, it seems, right-wing politicians - resort to this strategy, I'm unsure it's suitable for scholars. Even the clergy aren't this patient, and they, presumably, have God on their side.

[64] 2019, 333.

[65] Ibid. I am reminded of the identity-by-negation strategy certain Canadians have employed, e.g. Canadian as being not American: Pinar 2015, 47-63.

[66] Ibid.