

Reclaiming Civic Life in Schools: Lessons on Contesting Anti-Black Adulthood Through Acts of Solidarity

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Abstract

In this article, we illustrate and address how anti-Blackness and adulthood work together in an interlocking form of oppression we call anti-Black adulthood. Situated in Amina's (youth author) lived experiences of school, we offer counter-stories that show the ways that educators employed anti-Black adulthood to render Amina's civic life incompatible with the academic learning of school and imposed adult-framings of academic success on her as a way to control her in school. We then detail our shared experiences in an affinity group space and youth research project to offer the ways that anti-Black adulthood can be disrupted through acts of solidarity. We conclude with lessons for adults to trouble anti-Black adulthood to sustain intergenerational work toward racial justice in schools.

Introduction

In sixth grade, I asked my social studies teacher if we could learn about the history of Black people in Minnesota because I had relatives who were connected to organizing movements in Northside during the 60s and 70s. He told me that if I couldn't learn how to pay attention that I wouldn't make it through high school. We were learning local history and all I wanted was for my classmates to learn about my local history because I was so proud of it. This is the same teacher that looked my father in the eyes and lied about calling me an uncivilized monkey in class.

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Amina, youth author to this piece whose experience in school is depicted in this vignette, was denied her right to engage her civic life in academic learning by a white teacher who located her as a problem in his classroom. Her requests are not unusual for those of us who have worked in classroom contexts; young people yearn for their lives outside of school to exist in classes so they can see their lives and academic learning woven together. However, through the anti-Black racism and adultism present in this experience, Amina was refused her right to see her learning as more than ahistorical academic exercises. It is at this intersection of multiple oppressions, of adultism and anti-Black racism, that this piece speaks back to the dominant narratives that Black youth are positioned as deficient in school contexts (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Through the construction of counter-stories that center Amina's lived experiences we illustrate how adultism and anti-Black racism rob Black youth of their right to civically engaged learning (Perry et al., 2003). Importantly, we draw on our shared labor in an affinity group and youth participatory action research (YPAR) project to show how solidarity provides a framework to move beyond the logics of adultism and anti-Black racism.

The Problem: Adultism and Anti-Black Racism

Adultism

Youths' efforts to engage in the civic life of schools are often contextualized by the power asymmetries between adults and youth, described as adultism (LeFrançois, 2014; Liou & Literat, 2020; Rombalski, 2020; Rubin & Hayes, 2010). Adultism is situated in developmentalist theories of human growth (e.g., Piaget), which presume that adults are developed, mature, and rational beings whereas youth are not (LeFrançois, 2014). Therefore, adultist renderings of youth characterize young people as the opposites of these qualities: Undeveloped, immature, and irrational, presupposing that young people need adults to grow (Bell, 2010; Bertrand et al., 2020; Bettencourt, 2020; LeFrançois, 2014; Liou & Literat, 2020; Zeldin et al., 2013). As such, the perspectives and agentic possibilities of youth are disregarded, disenfranchising youth experiences, knowledge, and action.

Adultism manifests in several forms within schooling contexts: Ideological, relational, and structural (Bertrand et al., 2020; Bettencourt, 2020; Liou & Literat, 2020; Zeldin et al., 2013). As a form of oppression, adultism interlocks with other forms of social oppression, such as racism, sexism, classism, and homophobia, with a compounding effect on the marginalization of youth of color in low-income communities (Bertrand et al., 2017; 2020). If gone uncontested, adultism socializes youth of color to accept other forms of oppression, perpetuating the spirit murder of Black and Brown youth in schools (DeJong & Love, 2015; Gillen, 2019; Love, 2019).

Anti-Blackness

Anti-blackness in schooling has been a mainstay in U.S. society since the establishment of public schooling (Busey & Dowie-Chin, 2021; Muhammad, 2010; Watkins, 2001). As Leonardo (2013) asserted, anti-Blackness in schooling dehumanizes Black youth by categorizing them as unable to learn in schooling contexts. Thus, the purpose of schooling shifts to maintain the legacies of oppressive character education that have been imposed on Black communities since the early twentieth century (Leonardo, 2013; Watkins, 2001). The evidence of this historical continuity is readily available in data on who is punished in schools, as Black youth are disproportionately represented in referrals, suspensions, expulsions, and arrests in schools leading to what is commonly called the disciplinary gap (Dumas, 2016; Khalifa, Gooden, et al., 2016). Disconcertingly, the public nature of punishment and discipline of Black youth in schooling contexts asserts the logic that education is contingent on compliance with norms that maintain white supremacy (Dumas, 2016; Love, 2019). In fact, the logic of compliance as education has become so hegemonic that teachers' pedagogies are often evaluated as effective based on their ability to maintain a docile classroom (Casey, Lozenski, et al., 2013). It is no wonder then that Black youth routinely cite a lack of belonging in school spaces as a rationale for their ambivalence toward their schooling communities (Chhuon & Wallace, 2014; Oto & Chikkatur, 2019).

Anti-Black Adulthood

Taken together, anti-Blackness and adulthood function together to create a carceral logic that Black youth *need* adults to control them for their own good. Anti-Black adulthood can be heard in schools through colloquialisms such as "this is for your own good" and "if you don't have consequences, you will never learn" than confine Black youths' schooling experiences within the demands of adults to sit closer to whiteness without overstepping the boundaries of adult hegemony. Hence, Black youth who attempt to play by these oppressive rules are forced to weigh their own "racial opportunity costs" (Venzant Chambers, 2022), and are forced to choose between their Black communities or abiding by rules that reify a racial caste system with the hopes of making it closer to whiteness. However, academic achievement for Black students has always been situated in the projects of racial uplift, liberation, and civil rights (Collins, 2009; Perry et al., 2003). Thus, forcing Black youth to choose between their communities and their academic achievement is a particular project of oppression that illustrates the ways anti-Black adulthood looks, feels, and sounds in schools.

To illustrate the ways that anti-Black adulthood functions in schools to rob Black youth of their right to an education that honors the relationship between academics and civic life, Amina lovingly shares her lived experiences in school. We begin by sharing more about our positionalities and then share counter-stories of

Amina's educational experiences to illustrate the functions of anti-Black adultism. Wanting to be more than a representation of a problem, we share our collective work in an affinity group space and a YPAR project to illustrate how solidarity between youth and adults can cultivate conditions to effectively disrupt racism and adultism.

Who Are We?

Our positionalities are central to our abilities to work together and craft counter-stories.

Amina

I am a Black cisgender woman and the YPAR Coordinator at Racial Justice Community School. I have been doing youth work and YPAR since graduating from College Prep Academy (CPA) in 2018. I met Ryan when I was a sophomore in high school as a social studies teacher. Even though he wasn't my teacher, we asked him to be the adult facilitator for our Black and Brown girls affinity space. As I got to know him more in that space he seemed really different than the rest of the adults I knew at CPA. He took me seriously and that was new to me. Through high school, I had a really hard time managing my depression and anxiety. At the time, it was undiagnosed and I was just struggling without many coping skills. I didn't really want to talk to anyone about the things that were going on because when I had tried to speak up to adults in the past, they broke that trust by talking to my parents before I was ready, giving me unsolicited advice that I didn't ask for, or suggesting I get tested to explore medication. I really just needed to be seen and have a space to just be during the day without pressure to "get fixed" or do my school work. Ryan provided me with that space. After our YPAR work and graduation, Ryan always kept in touch and supported me in the community YPAR work I was doing and generally in life. He would bring his students to our community research events and boost our research. He also co-created workshops with some members of our CPA YPAR team to present at national education conferences. He has grown into a mentor and friend and has always worked to amplify my voice and support the work that I continue to do.

Ryan

I am a multiracial Asian cisgender male educator. I currently work as a professor in an institution of higher education, but first met Amina working at CPA as a high school social studies teacher. While I didn't teach her until her senior year, we came to know each other through informal moments when I would pass her and her friends in the halls and say hi, ask them about music, and tell cheesy jokes. This relationship deepened when Amina and her friends asked me

to be one of the adult facilitators for their Black and Brown Girls (BBG) affinity group (more described in Part II of the counter-stories). Then during her senior year, we worked together on a YPAR project about racism in the school community. After Amina graduated and I took a new teaching job at Racial Justice Community School, I helped start a YPAR program and asked Amina to join the program as the facilitator and program coordinator. She has been in this role for the past three years and our collaborations and friendship have continued to strengthen.

Context

Amina's projects of engaging in civic life began when she was very young in her historically Black neighborhood, Northside. Her preschool and kindergarten experiences were in a predominantly Black Montessori school in Northside. As she recalled, "my teachers and peers looked like me and my school was less than a mile from home." Her earliest memory of school was being around six years old and attending a protest with her grandma, holding signs and walking on a picket line. Amina recalled vividly the importance that her grandmother impressed upon her about that moment. Hence before she even started school, Amina had already been exposed to the significance of civic life outside of school.

Amina started school at CPA when she was in first grade. Her mother had attended the school and despite not wanting her to go there because she was concerned about the teachings of the school conflicting with the values of her family, her dad viewed it as an important opportunity for Amina to avoid the negative experiences of public schools and learn important academic skills. From first grade through high school, Amina was one of only a handful of Black youth in her grade who would attend CPA.

Counter-Stories Part I: A Life Denied

A Constant Struggle

Elementary school was a constant struggle of trying to force a square peg in a round hole and I was the square peg. My family and friends outside of school poured so much love and affirmation into me and taught me to love myself and know my history as a Black person from Northside, but when I would walk into school, I was hyper-focused on belonging that almost everything my family instilled in me went out of the window. I could always feel that my teachers treated me differently than my peers, but I wasn't able to name it until I was older. My teachers had low expectations for me and I felt that in the way that they treated me and spoke about me to my parents. My teachers all treated me like I was incapable of learning like my peers although I repeatedly demonstrated that I could.

My loud laugh, African American vernacular English, and silly personality were not issues of me being unable to learn but issues of me not acting the same

way as my peers. I could speak and write English perfectly fine, but my teachers would correct my informal language in non-learning spaces. I used “ya’ll” and “ain’t” frequently, but my teachers would consistently redirect me to say “you guys” or “I’m not”. In elementary school, adults were focused on changing the way I showed up so that I would be more like my white peers. I would beg to learn about Black music in music class, but my teacher told me it wasn’t real music. When we were asked to journal, I would write stories in my journal just like every other student but because I always told stories about my family and drew pictures it was an issue. I always completed my assignments but I was determined to tell the stories I wanted to tell. Academically, I didn’t experience challenges but my unwillingness to act how my teachers wanted me to, made them focus on my academic success less and hold lower expectations of me. Even though I wasn’t willing to completely conform to act like my peers, my family could see the ways I was changing who I was to fit in. My mom would get upset and consistently re-correct the way I spoke when she could tell I changed my voice and temperament during school. My parents had extra meetings with my teachers outside of routine conferences to get a better understanding of the inconsistencies between my teacher’s stories and my own. My teachers were constantly advocating for me to change who I was and how I showed up in school, and my family was always fighting against it.

The struggle that Amina describes in her memory of school is vital to understand the ways that adultism in the context of white supremacy, acts on Black youth as a policing mechanism of academic achievement. Amina and her family were well aware of the conflict between the normative lessons she was being taught at school and the affirming and racially uplifting framings of her intelligence she was exposed to at home in Northside, exacerbated in her early schooling experiences going from majority Black spaces that understood how Black achievement is tied to an historical struggle for freedom, racial uplift, and leadership in civic life (Perry et al., 2003), to a school that policed her cultural distinctiveness (e.g., language, disposition) through the guise of academic achievement. In doing so, adults at College Prep Academy were clear in their messages to Amina: You are an object of our schooling, act like it. Hence, advocating for culturally meaningful lessons, such as in her music class, or responding to classwork with her own understanding of the prompts, like drawing and writing about her family, became vehicles to police Amina as an object of schooling that needed to be molded to fit the culture of white achievement.

Fighting for Myself

Middle school was more of the same low expectations from my teachers. I developed a reputation among adults that I was bright when I “applied myself,” but I was also disruptive. This was the messaging at all of my parent-teacher

conferences. The reputation seemed to follow me whenever I advocated for things in class. In my 7th grade math class, my teacher told my parents that I had issues with authority and that I wouldn't succeed in the future with my attitude. In a meeting with my parents, my teacher would not admit to the ways he constantly picked on me in class and that my "issues with authority" were actually me standing up for myself when I was being micro-aggressed almost every other class period by him. He was a Canadian immigrant and would say things like "Ms. Smaller, you are what's wrong with America" as a joke when I was having a hard time focusing and would be playful with my peers. In eighth grade, I was in high school Spanish and it was the only subject that I was considered "gifted" in. One day, my teacher, who was Cuban, went on an anti-communist rant and the whole class silently allowed him to do so. When I challenged him he told me that he felt sorry that I was Black in America and told me that if I didn't learn to act like the good Black people, my life would be very challenging ahead.

By the time I got to high school, I was tired. I was tired of fighting to make the adults at my school believe that my history, my voice, and my presence was important. Surprisingly, the level of academic challenge wasn't as big of a leap as people made it seem. What made high school more challenging was that my teachers didn't take the time to truly know me and were more intense than my middle school teachers. I was focused on getting by and staying afloat and I could never fully invest in the ways I was told I needed to "succeed". Success at CPA was getting high GPA's, excelling in academics, moving onto another elite exclusive institution, and repeating the same process. Success wasn't being well, being happy, building strong meaningful relationships, or doing work that fed a bigger purpose. I would have needed to believe and truly invest in the things the adults at school were telling me to buy the dream they were selling. I would have had to ignore who I was, turn my back on my community, and fully lose myself in order to achieve success. By CPA's metrics I was on track to fail. As I moved through my first year of high school I struggled thinking that maybe my teachers were right about me. Maybe who I am is just not enough for this school.

Amina's narrative illustrates the insidious qualities of adultism in a culture of white schooling. Amina's teachers, unable to understand the cultural and political value of Amina's community outside of school, perpetuate the logics that she is an object of schooling to be shaped away from the cultural significance of her Black community. By policing her academic success through narratives of fear and compliance, Amina's teachers instilled in her the value of *their* notion of success, not hers. Significantly, Amina's resistance to these messages through her advocacy for her own educational experience signals her awareness that her own cultural and political learning remained valuable *in spite* of the adults of the institution trying to "remake" her. Bolstered by her family and her community *outside* of school, Amina's belief in her cultural and political identities led her to refuse in the face

of overt adult authority. Unfortunately, these acts of refusal and self-preservation were already framed in the logics of anti-Black discipline passed along by her teachers from earlier grades. Being labeled disruptive at the intersections of adultism and racism meant that Amina's demands to engage in civic issues relevant to her in the classroom were set up to be ignored.

Robbing Me of My Identity

The rest of high school is honestly a blur, I don't remember much of what teachers said to me, but I remember the way they made me feel: like shit. My life and the issues I cared about didn't matter in school. This was especially true when the murders of Black people by police happened and how stark my experiences were in and out of school. In middle school, I was a part of an after-school program in Northside that was grounded in responding to issues in the community. After Trayvon Martin was murdered, we went to marches and protests, and even created artwork that we sent to Trayvon's family. While we suspected that the art probably wouldn't get to them, the act of solidarity made me feel like I was a part of something bigger and that helped me deal with the loneliness that I felt at school.

But that isolation was what I kept being reminded of when I went to school. When Michael Brown was killed and I asked my history teacher if we could talk about it, she responded that "if the whole class gets their work done, then we can talk about it." It felt so shady at the time because she knew that we weren't going to finish the work we were doing in class. It felt like I really didn't matter and was being told that rather than focus on issues that I cared about, of Black people being killed by police, that it was their jobs to push me "academically." It felt like a reminder that school was the only thing that mattered, not my grief and the issues that I was processing in the world or my community outside of CPA.

The issues were already personal, but it felt different when Jamar Clark was killed by police in my neighborhood. I couldn't drive to school the normal way my family would go because the roads were blocked by protestors. As I would leave for school, I felt like I was betraying my community and then when I was at school, my peers treated me like I was a CNN war correspondent. At this point, I had lost complete trust in adults to support me and honor any requests I had to talk about issues that were happening in my literal backyard, so I just kept my head down and tried to be invisible.

The distinct differences in experience between Amina's learning in her neighborhood afterschool program and her schooling experiences at CPA illustrates the possibilities and problematic limitations of learning tied to relevant civic issues of racial justice. As the after-school program illustrated, when youth are engaged in current issues that matter to them and their livelihoods, the world can feel less imposing, and they can find solidarity with one another and broader communities of justice in the world. Likewise, when the civic lives of young people are gatekept

as “irrelevant” or beyond the topics of the classroom, the civic lives of youth are stolen from them by adults who, in Amina’s case, reify a system of white supremacy through “academics.”

Importantly, this is more than a lost opportunity in a classroom discussion, this is the maintenance of the historical disenfranchisement of Black youth as civic actors struggling for their humanity and dignity in U.S. society (Collins, 2009; Perry et al., 2003). Hence, Amina’s response to protect herself by rendering herself invisible is a rational response to the psychic and emotional harm that she was forced to navigate the disjuncture between what school was purported to be for and her own understanding of the world (Rubin & Hayes, 2010). While deeply tragic, Amina’s counternarrative about her experiences in school speak back against the dominant discourse she was confronted with that she was academically inadequate for CPA. Rather, Amina’s story illustrates the ways that adultism and racism worked together to deny her a foundational right to her civic life within the school.

Part II: Solidarity and Reclaiming Civic Life

As we crafted the counter narrative of Part I, we came to understand that her story is not one of tragedy, but of resistance. Thus, in Part II, we share the ways that adults, when they work in solidarity *with* youth, can disrupt both racism and adultism in schooling contexts. Importantly, we hope to show the political commitments and ways of being that are essential to acting in solidarity with young people, particularly Black youth whose civic lives cannot be divorced from their academic labor in schools.

The Beginning of Solidarity: BBG

Amina: Towards the middle of high school the learning I was doing was at home was through art, music, literature, and movies about Black people. I fell in love with learning, when it was on my terms which helped my confidence come back. As my confidence shifted, my social scene also shifted. I wanted to build community with the other Black and brown girls in my grade because the relationships that I had were not serving me. I would have little informal moments with these girls but we were all in different friend groups and in our grade friend group mixing wasn’t a thing until BBG made it a thing. Towards the end of our sophomore year we formed the group BBG, an affinity space for Black and Latina girls.

We would get together every Friday afternoon and just hang out. It was everything! Friday was always the best part of my week. We would have fun but sometimes it was a space where we could be emotionally transparent and discuss issues that came up in the school. In any student group it was required to have a staff advisor. The diversity dean, designated herself as our first staff advisor because she hosted a similar space for Black boys for a long time. She told us we had to

have another staff advisor because she might have meetings and things that could interfere with our time.

When it came time to find our other staff advisor, we felt like we didn't have any options because there were no other Black staff that we felt connected to. There were other women of color that we could have asked but we didn't think they would have been a good fit for the space. Eva and Oliva brought up Mr. Oto as an option and at first I wasn't for it because he wasn't Black and also wasn't a woman and I didn't think he would be someone I could trust. But, as I got to know him in little ways he seemed like someone I could trust. He didn't overstep and supported us in all of the different ways we showed up to that space.

Ryan: *When I was approached by Amina and Eva to serve as an advisor for BBG I was humbled and surprised. As a multiracial Asian cisgender male, I didn't check any of the boxes that I perceived as needing to adequately support an intersectional affinity space. I asked them if they wanted to pick someone else, they declined and said they wanted me, noting later that they picked me because I understood that it was their space, not mine. I had reservations about what I could do or if it would be helpful to be in that space, but the ask from young people is something I took seriously and showed up.*

Over the course of my time in their space, my role was to check in with the security guards to unlock the meeting room and ensure they had enough snacks. Throughout my time as their faculty advisor, I was consistently intentional with how I showed up in the room – ensuring that my presence was on the periphery unless they invited me into conversations. In turn, I was given an immense privilege of being invited into the room to hear these young people share their shared struggles over overt and subtle forms of racism and sexism that they faced every-day. While I knew that these young people faced racialized and gendered experiences in the school, the extent and persistence challenged my own understanding of my position as a teacher in the building. I was receiving my own political education about the ways that my preconceived notions of teaching did not align with the anti-oppressive demands they sought in their educational experiences. Consequently, I started to understand my responsibilities as an educator in ways that extended beyond the conventions of classrooms, into my own sense of self. I reflected more on the ways that I could think and act like the types of educators they yearned for in their critiques and demonstrate an ethic of care that their lives were meaningful in the wholeness they embraced when together.

As the year went on, the young people in the room grew more comfortable with me, evidenced by small moments like asking about my day and wanting to know more about my life away from school. This led to deeper and sustaining relationships, where I was then asked to help make sense of the power dynamics they encountered with teachers and administrators. Reflecting further, these small moments built up over time and I that sense of self that was changing through the political

education about racism I was gaining in the space also reflected how I was showing up relationally, grounded by the humanizing experience.

Toward the end of the year the energy in the group shifted toward an angst about what they could collectively do to address the racism of the school. They wanted their experiences to change, but previous efforts to transform the school through formal channels like student organizations, the student government association, and advocacy with the Diversity Dean had yielded no change. Their exhaustion was fueling a disenchantment with the school that led many of them at one point or another to wish that they could just graduate and be done with the school. It was in this context that I asked if they would be interested in a different approach that was youth-centered: Youth participatory action research (YPAR). A research method I had learned about earlier in the year in one of my graduate school courses, I found myself wondering how these young people might take their lived experiences to do a research project that made legible the need for change that they had advocated for.

Resisting Anti-Black Adulthood: YPAR

Ryan: *I wasn't sure how they'd take my proposal to do a YPAR project, this was the first time I had suggested something that they do in the context of their affinity space. I made clear that I would act as a facilitator, but I wouldn't do more than pick out texts that I thought aligned with their research interest. I also told them that I didn't know what we were getting into, so while I would be able to teach them research skills, we would be learning this process together. They said yes with an energy and enthusiasm that I had not expected.*

I knew that to do this work I would have to be transparent with the school's administration. In a meeting with the administrator in charge of school-based research, I explained what YPAR was and how these young people might use it as a meaningful framework for their own interests in bettering the school. While she was apprehensive, she supported it, viewing the idea of student research as a positive experience. She even noted "perhaps we'll learn what we as a school are also doing well." However, there was one significant stipulation: Only seniors could participate in the project to mitigate any chance of long-form frustration or angst toward the school that young people who weren't graduating might bring along with them. Understanding this as a means for the institution to protect itself because any dissatisfaction would leave with those young people who were graduating, I shared the condition with the group and while they didn't love the idea, anything was better than nothing. They agreed and we began setting up our calendar for our first set of meetings for the following school year.

Amina: *When Ryan approached us to do this project we were really interested in the possibility of analyzing our school's environment and understanding our experiences in a scholarly way. We began by discussing our experiences in the*

CPA community and making lists of the different types of racism and harm that we experienced. We talked about things like racial capitalism, voyeurism, and the objectification of Black and Brown bodies. Through our discussions, Ryan then helped us connect all of our personal experiences with research and theories. We were able to examine our experiences using critical language and theory that felt new. Towards the end of our first semester, we landed on exploring what racism, non-racism, and anti-racism looked like in our school so we asked the question, "What Does Non-Racism Look Like at CPA?". We decided to use recorded spectrum activities, focus groups, and participant observations as our methods. We asked questions, not only to hear the responses, but to analyze people's behavior and level of comfort in discussing conversations about race and racism in our community.

In December of our senior year one of the more inflammatory republican students, Mitchell, posted a letter on our community discussion board titled "Conservative Lives Matter". This letter interrupted our research preparation because our anger drove our team to take action. At this point in our project I felt a shift in the person I was becoming. My natural response to this kind of situation would have been combating this ignorance with anger and lashing out. While warranted, the support of the YPAR team and Ryan moved me to want to take action in a different way. I was excited to process with a group and come up with a collective and strategic response to the ignorance that was bubbling up in our community. We decided to take action by writing a letter to our community. Although the letter was prompted by the "conservative lives matter" post, the contents of the letter were things that we wanted to say for a very long time. We posted this letter on the opinion board and received tons of support from our peers in addition to the thoughtless responses from students who supported Mitchell's ideas. We also hand delivered copies of the letter to every teacher in the high school.

Teachers responded to this letter with words even though we called them to action, and students echoed their support on the physical post. As I reflect on that letter and the impact it had, it was great timing because we unintentionally primed the folks we were asking to participate in our research. After this letter explained very clearly how we felt about our community, people were moved to accept our invitations to join our research. Unexpectedly, a group of a few white students stepped up to support our research. They let us interrupt their meetings with administrators after being denied meetings to clear our research, they facilitated spectrum activities with white teachers and students, and even tried to leverage their monetary power and resources against administrators to support our work. When our project was complete we were invited to present our work at an education conference at the University of Minnesota and again in a class on education at Carleton college. We presented our three main findings. The first focused on our concept of "the script", a dialogue that our white peers learned and practiced that help them appear to seem anti-racist but actually keep our racial dialogue

circular and unproductive. The second was an understanding of how critically conscious and anti-racist educators benefit all students, not just BIPOC students. Our final finding expressed how our school's lack of urgency around racial topics and language around neutrality maintained their non-racist identity. Our work was so well-received and we were celebrated and highly praised in those spaces. It was such a life giving experience to be seen as a writer and researcher after years of being denied and pushed out of academic spaces. As we got closer to the end of the school year we were told that we would not be able to present our work to the teachers, even after being reassured throughout the course of our project that we would be.

Ryan: *I remain convinced that being an adult facilitator for this YPAR project was the most enriching teaching experience I have ever done in my career as an educator. I was forced to challenge my own adultist assumptions about what youth were capable of and what change was supposed to look like in schools. By investing my intellectual and emotional energy into the project of supporting their work logistically and conceptually, I found myself in deep community with this group of young people. They pushed me to see their work as more than an extra activity they did after school, but as a model of what community change can look, feel, and sound like. They demanded more from me than to just be a teacher, or advisor, or facilitator: They demanded my full humanity.*

As a result, my sense of self was shifting and being shaped by my political commitment to their intellectual work and supporting the project that they designed from beginning to end. While I was strategizing with the group of youth researchers about how to transparently approach administrators with their research methods and approaches, I was also advocating for their project to be seen as valid knowledge production with those same administrators and teachers behind the scenes, planting seeds in their minds to trouble their anti-Black adultist interpretations of these young people. While I can't say whether that project was successful, my commitment to the labor of the YPAR project was something I would not have ever done prior to building these deep relationships with young people and divesting from my own oppressive adultist logics. In this way, my interpretations about Black youth in schools transformed dramatically from objects of schooling to human beings whose experiences in school needed to validate their humanity and brilliance.

Unfortunately, troubling adultism in myself was not the same as disrupting institutional anti-Black adultism. The group's goal was to present to their teachers in the school, but in the final weeks of the project, administrators refused this public presentation because they felt it was wrong to label the school racist despite the evidence that the youth researchers had gathered. Moreover, they expressed sincere skepticism that these young people had the intellectual abilities to conduct this research, implying in a number of meetings that I had "unfairly influenced"

the project because of the nuance and depth of their analysis. To “salvage my career” at CPA, I was informed by administrators that I needed to convince the young people to end the project. In the moments between that conversation and returning to my classroom where the youth researchers were meeting, the political education I received from these Black and Brown young people made the decision clear, though it was one that I never imagined myself making: I was prepared to give up my job. I told the young people everything I was told, which would later be used as evidence for my lack of professionalism in follow-up disciplinary conversations. To be clear, I do not see myself as a martyr for a cause, rather I made a decision commensurate with my values as an adult in solidarity with Black and Brown youth. While the weight of the institution bearing down was traumatizing in many ways, I do not regret my decision. I had been given the opportunity to shed my anti-Black adultist understanding of young people at CPA and that was something that I continue to learn and grow from.

The Slow Burn: Sustaining Solidarity

Amina: *The YPAR process made me more eager to learn about the education system. This was the kind of learning I had been begging for, and it took eleven years for me to get it. Although the project didn’t end the way we wanted it to, the political education we received was very transformative. The work helped me carve out what I wanted my future to look and feel like after years of being told that it couldn’t happen. The people I met and the lessons I learned put me back on track to be a community educator which is what I wanted to be. This work also taught me how important it is to build interracial and intergenerational coalitions because in my eyes it is the foundation for healing communities and true learning. For a long time I was resisting through my behavior and for the most part it wasn’t intentional. The refusal of CPA’s teachings were subconscious until our YPAR work taught me how to make that refusal conscious, strategic, and intentional.*

In a journal entry my senior year, I wrote that I wanted to be an educator without having to go to college, looking at the work that I had done with YPAR. But so many people told me that I couldn’t do that because I needed a degree, that I needed to be good at content, and that I would have to be more academically driven than what I was in school. Looking back five years later, I am proud to say that I work in a school and I do the work I am passionate about despite not following the path that those adults told me I had to. I am an educator in many ways, even if I’m not a classroom teacher and I have more confidence that becoming a classroom teacher is something I could do and would be great at. I was already confident in who I was as a strong Black woman, things I gained from my family, and my academic confidence was gained through YPAR. Ryan instilled in me that my lived experiences counted as knowledge and through our deep relationship building, I

know that I can be a teacher, even though I was told by teachers throughout my time at CPA that I couldn't.

I learned the model of how to be with young people in school from Ryan and now I feel more comfortable pulling those lessons from my elders like my grandma. She was the one who told me what it meant to be in an intergenerational space. While many adults tell "only speak when spoken to" or "don't talk back to your elders", my grandma was never like that. Standing on her shoulders, I continue the legacy she and others taught me how to treat young people to build solidarity. Being a YPAR facilitator, seeing the impact I was having on young people, I can see the ways that the work that I care about is the same as what my grandma and what Ryan were about. That's why I'm committed to educational justice and why the work I do is about more than me, it's about building networks of solidarity across age and place.

Implications

In Part I, the stories illustrate how Amina was denied her right to an education at CPA that validated her civic life. The underlying logics of anti-Black adultism provided teachers with the conceptual framework to render Amina as underperforming in her academics in spite of the fact that CPA was the only school she knew. While research shows that Black youth, specifically Black girls, are routinely pushed out of schools through expulsions, suspensions, or moving to different schools (Morris, 2016), at CPA Amina's confinement was the forcible divorce of her civic life from what educators viewed as academic learning. Yet, Amina refused to pay the racial opportunity cost the institution demanded and persevered through her own labor of solidarity with other Black and Brown peers who were navigating similar experiences and through her willingness to cultivate an intergenerational relationship with Ryan. Consequently, she was able to reclaim her civic life and while that moment was brief in the totality of her schooling experiences, it was no less significant.

Importantly, Ryan's experiences as an adult facilitator of the YPAR project along with his role as a faculty advisor for BBG pushed him to embrace the political lessons that Black and Brown youth were teaching him. As his relationality grew deeper and stronger with these young people, he started to critically reflect on the ways being a teacher required him to invest in anti-Black adultism to be seen as professional and good at teaching by other adults and administrators in the building. Revealing those harmful investments afforded him space to question the institution and divest from the fear of losing a job, which in turn freed him from the carceral logics of anti-Black adultism.

Taken together, our stories illustrate several critical lessons about the ways that anti-Black adultism can be disrupted. We offer these insights with love, knowing that all schooling spaces are different, and that this labor begins, and continues, with critical reflection.

Lesson One:
Bind Academic Learning With Civic Life

For adults, solidarity with youth is a political act that demands adults change both their actions and their senses of self. Gaztambide-Fernández (2012) referred to this as relational solidarity. This process of unlearning and remaking while also acting in ways that demonstrates deep relational commitments to young people is a process of unlearning anti-Black adultism that hinders the abilities of adults to recognize their own humanity. Through this process, the act of teaching becomes intimately linked to the civic lives of youth both in and outside of school. For example, in a different school I worked in after leaving CPA, I (Ryan), was teaching a high school social studies class when the young people in the room shared their frustrations with gun violence in schools. As I listened to their anger and exhaustion, I proposed to change the unit of the class to center the issue of gun violence. While they were excited, what struck me was how surprised they were that I would change the course. “You really listened to us,” a native youth shared, “that doesn’t ever really happen—it’s usually like ‘oh that’s real, but we need to get back on [the existing curriculum]’”. While I appreciated the compliment, solidarity as a framework to think about my teaching made it clear that the civic issue at-hand, gun violence in schools, needed to be brought into the classroom. Thus, my curricular and pedagogical decision-making were tied to the issues that mattered to young people. To be clear, that work was complicated, messy, and didn’t go as I intended at a number of points. Nevertheless, it exemplified the ways that my teaching changed to disrupt the hegemony of anti-Black adultism in my teaching by *embracing* the civic lives of youth as central to academic learning.

Lesson Two:
Trust Is Earned

Too often, we find ourselves lamenting the reality that adults presume that their positions *as* adults means they must be listened to by young people. We have each heard this in a number of ways, from teachers who are frustrated that young people won’t listen to them, to the ways that adult guests (e.g., substitute teachers) speak about young people as “terrible,” “rude,” and “what’s wrong with this country.” We have deep concern over these sentiments because we know that adults use their positional status of authority in schools to deny meaningful learning experiences to young people, particularly Black youth and what scholars refer to as the opportunity gap (Levinson, 2010). Defending their actions, the common refrain we hear from adults is that “these kids don’t deserve” a field trip, guest speakers, or service-learning experiences because “they haven’t earned it” by listening to adults. Such compliance-contingent education is a direct violation of the right that all humans have to quality education. Moreover, research shows that Black youth are also funneled into disciplinary processes that label Black

youth as troublemakers and delinquents, leading to disproportionate suspensions, expulsions, and in-school arrests than any other peer group (Dumas, 2016; Khalifa, Gooden, et al., 2016). These material harms are everyday occurrences, and they must stop.

Thus, we ask that adults in schools (e.g., teachers, administrators, support staff, custodians, bus drivers, and guests) to get back to a basic truth: Trust is earned. Adults who presume to have young peoples' trust denies the realities that schools have been sites of violence for Black youth at the hands of a predominantly white teaching force (Love, 2019; 2023). Moreover, acting like trust already exists between adults and youth reflects arrogance and ignorance to the histories that many Black youth carry in their bodies. While the request may seem obvious to some, it is clear from our shared experiences in schools that this is not something adults are acting on. We know that this may be a major shift for many adults, so start small. As adrienne maree brown (2017) reminded us, small is not insignificant. Ask young people what they want and need to be themselves around you, listen to them and follow through on commitments. Importantly, be consistent with these acts. We hear adults proclaim with deep conviction that "kids crave structure," but it seems like those structures are more for adults given that adults are the ones who make them. Build those routines and habits together. These are the ways we have seen, felt, and heard trust being built.

Lesson Three:
Young People Have Politically Meaningful Lives

In adultist framings of youth in schools, young people are objects of schooling that need to be adults to become citizens and fully human. However, as critical scholars have argued, young people are already living lives that matter in civically relevant forms (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002; Gillen, 2019; Oto, 2023; Woodson & Love, 2019). Devaluing youths' lives as unimportant in the context of schools reinforces the anti-Black adultist logics that perpetuate harm. Thus, adults in schools, along with teacher-educators, *and* scholars must take seriously the issues that young people face in schools, regardless of perceived significance. Whether it is advocating for better lunches, not being policed in the halls by school resource officers, or spending so much time on standardized tests, the responsibility of taking these issues seriously is something that adults must do. While we do not have answers for *how* this might take shape across various school communities, listening, validating, and following-up on issues with youth is a place to start because it aligns adults *with* youth in the labor of educational justice. We are confident that through the fostering of these relationships of solidarity that generative thinking and action will occur.

Lesson Four:***Scholarship Is Not More Important Than Youths' Material Needs***

This lesson is specifically for researchers and scholars. First, we acknowledge that the work of scholars is important because generating knowledge that is grounded in the material lives of youth remains deeply needed as we work toward educational justice in schools. At the same time, we are reminded from our shared experiences that this labor cannot be seen as more important than the material work that must happen on the ground to support young people advocating for their civic lives in schools. To honor this fact, we encourage scholars who are doing work in schools with young people or thinking about doing work with young people to demonstrate the reciprocity of ethical research and scholarship by showing up on the ground and supporting the explicitly stated needs of youth. That might mean using your research funds to pay youth, bring snacks, organize transportation, or talk to adults who have questions. These forms of solidarity are needed because they honor the lives of youth and show that adults care in ways that matter to young people.

Conclusion

To end our piece, we wanted to speak directly to any young people who might come across this piece. We want to encourage you to hold onto your truths and your values in spite of the pressures you might feel to give them up to fit into school in ways adults want. Through our experiences, we are confident that staying true to your commitments for justice and solidarity will help you find people that can hold you up without having to sacrifice the things that are important to you. I (Amina) am reminded of starting BBG and the YPAR project. Everyone had days that were stressful and busy because of school and life that made going to BBG or doing YPAR one more thing on our plates. But we still showed up to be with each other and to do the work we cared about. That brought us together even more and we were able to accomplish things that many people didn't expect us to. It took intention and work to build and sustain those communities, but it was worth it. You can too.

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