

# Whiteness Owns it, Blackness Defines it: Rural Reality in the Black Belt

Amy Swain, *East Carolina University*

Timberly L. Baker, *Arkansas State University*

Any examination of schools and schooling in the rural Southern Black Belt must interrogate the enduring logic of plantation politics and examine rural equity work through a racialized lens. We defined rural and identify a rural reality for life in the Black Belt South. Critical Race Theory (CRT) and antiblackness are offered as potential race-conscious theoretical frameworks to a plantation rurality, and we propose an alternative vision of rural education scholarship in the Southern Black Belt that invites space for anticolonial liberation.

**Keywords:** rurality, rural education, Black Belt, plantation logic, critical race theory

## Introduction to the Southern Black Belt

Plantations never left the South. Country highways are populated with historical attraction tourist signs directing interested visitors to these monuments of settler colonialism and antiblack commitments of our society. Historical societies and state governments maintain the buildings and grounds, planting bright new flowers every spring and working to preserve the clapboard siding of aging structures with fresh coats of paint. Schoolkids in the rural South take field trips to these plantations and are invited to enter the fields to pick cotton or paraded through cramped, sparse slave cabins to “imagine what it was like” to live without freedom. While the stolen production and industry of these fields died following the abolition of slavery, the politics and permanence of plantations remain an indelible presence in rural communities of the southern Black Belt. The Black Belt of the American South is both an agricultural region, signified by the lush fertility of Black soil and a term used to describe the 600-odd plantation counties stretching from

Virginia to Texas that are populated predominantly by Black Americans (Raper, 1936). The vestiges of slavery have an enduring legacy on the education of children who inhabit these spaces.

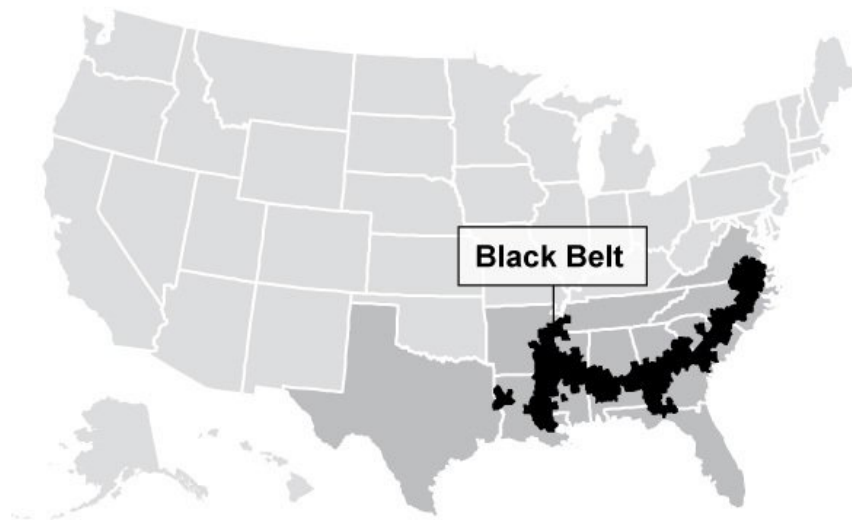
The centrality and spatiality of Black life, defined as “the spatial imaginaries, space-making practices, and senses of place rooted in Black communities” (Hawthorne, 2019, p. 5) has been ignored and displaced in educational rural research. Within critical rural conversations, like the work of Green and Letts (2007) who state, “educational space is typically seen therefore as a ‘container’ within which education simply ‘takes [its] place’” (p. 1). Educational space without racial context ignores race as a significant factor in rural education. Black inhabitants and their racialized experiences in rural schools are thus also ignored. This may be due to the perception that in the general American imagination “rural” equals “racialized white” or “white and low income.” Popular stereotypes of Southerners as white ignorant hillbillies are perpetuated by sitcoms and reality television shows

**Figure 1***Map of the region that Makes up the Black Belt*


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## America's Black Belt

Once named for the color of its fertile soil and later for the high percentage of African-American residents, more than 600 counties in 11 states make up the Black Belt region.



SOURCE: U.S. Department of Agriculture

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(e.g., *Dukes of Hazard* [1979–1985], *Andy Griffith Show* [1960–1968], *Duck Dynasty* [2012], *Lizard Lick Towing and Recovery* [2011–2014]) and not by accurate portrayals of southern rural life. There are very few media representations of people of color in the rural southern United States, and those that exist are positioned as exceptions. We speculate this may in part be due to the historical construction of white land ownership of First Nation lands, settler colonialism, and the enslavement of Black bodies. Despite the historical fact that many white landowners were outnumbered by the number of slaves present, the economic and political power attributed to land ownership rendered the Black inhabitant as a non-entity. Yet schooling structures, economic structures, and political power have often been predicated on the ability to use, abuse, and distance whiteness from Black bodies, and the plantation is where this structure was practiced most, where whiteness owned the land and

Blackness defined and operationalized its importance.

Plantation logic has been theorized across a variety of disciplines, including education (Bristol, 2012), higher education (Dancy et al., 2018; Matias, 2015; Squire et al., 2018; Williams et al., 2021), religion (e.g., Erskine, 2014; Welch & Wilson, 2018), geography (e.g., Hawthorne, 2019; McKittrick, 2013), sports and athletics (e.g., Donnor, 2021; Hawkins, 2010; Rhoden, 2007), but there is a discernible lack of scholarship and attention to the relevance and presence of slave plantations in and to rural education. Plantation logic is the enduring racist structure that positions Black people as inhuman and inherently less valuable than white property. Plantation logic is operationalized whenever Whiteness owns a space but Blackness defines it. We connect the frames of plantation logic to rurality as a theoretical lens through which we are able to identify the afterlife of slavery in the

American South, where space, place, and power collide with the historical antecedents of settler colonialism and white supremacy. Rural educational scholars often highlight the ways that rural communities shape and impact rural schools and schooling (Bauch, 2001; Schafft, 2016; Theobald & Nachtigal, 1995), but the racial historical context and proximity of plantations to these communities in the Black Belt is not interrogated. If schools are understood as racial spaces (Blaisdell, 2016), so too are the contexts where these schools reside.

This lack of interrogation may also be rooted in the ways educational scholars understand and define a rural space. Defining rural, as we wrestle with later in this paper, is an ongoing challenge for scholars addressing rural education (Bryant, 2010; Tieken, 2014; Webster & Bowman, 2008). This is even more difficult for those scholars who are specifically focusing on racial equity work in rural education as our collective definitions and application of racial equity is often theorized and contextualized within and in relation to urban educational spaces. Understandings of rural are often predicated on perception and the presence of Black bodies is frequently coded as urban, which in and of itself distorts an already complex sociohistorical landscape of rural education. Moreover, formal definitions of rural vary by federal or state agency and by populations that inhabit rural space and place. All these factors challenge the ways rural educational scholars articulate, ignore, or address race in rural education.

We argue that any examination of schools and schooling in the rural Southern Black Belt must pick up and engage the persistent enduring logic of plantation politics, and/or examine rural equity work through a racialized lens. In what follows, we share our entry into this conversation by recounting a recent event that we believe exemplifies a challenge we call upon all of us to undertake. We then wrestle with defining rural and identifying a rural reality for life in the Black Belt South. Critical race theory and antiblackness are offered as potential race-conscious theoretical frameworks to a plantation rurality, and we end by proposing an alternative vision of rural education scholarship in the Southern Black Belt that invites space for anticolonial liberation.

### **Reframing the Question: Centering Plantation Logic**

Two contextually significant questions were posed at a historical event in eastern North Carolina: “How has North Carolina been shaped by the experience of enslaved people from or around Somerset Place and Plymouth?” and, relatedly, “What impact does the legacy of slavery continue to have in North Carolina?” We use these two questions to articulate how plantation logic operates in the everyday space of the South. Reframing these two questions allows us to be intentional about decentering whiteness in rural education research within the Southern Black Belt.

In March of 2019, personnel from the North Carolina African American Heritage Commission (NCAAHC) met with community members in rural Plymouth, North Carolina at the Vernon G. James Center to discuss the development and placement of a historic monument acknowledging the direct connection of Somerset Place Plantation to the Middle Passage. The NCAAHC was interested in building community support and involvement around the historical marker.

Somerset Plantation was built in 1785 in the swamps of Creswell, North Carolina, when the plantation’s white owner, Josiah Collins, forced 80 enslaved Black people to his plantation to clear the land. From those initial 80 people, 21 families were created, and historical records indicate that over 860 enslaved people lived and worked on Somerset land, marking it as “one of the upper South’s largest plantations” (North Carolina Historic Sites, n.d.). Once these Black families were emancipated and freed from forced labor, many moved into the neighboring land and developed homesteads (Crow et al., 2019). The nearby townships of Creswell, Roper, and Plymouth all remain predominantly (approximately 75%) Black spaces today.

The crowd gathered that spring evening at the Vernon G. James Center numbered about 70 persons. Many of the participants were elders, Black and white, from surrounding counties. Also present were a number of direct descendants of enslaved people on Somerset Plantation, including the only Black man serving as a director in the white governor of North Carolina’s office. For so many of

those present, the legacies of identity and connection to slavery are inescapable (DeGruy, 2017). To highlight the significance of the enslaved Black people living on Somerset Plantation, the NCAAHC spokesperson, a young Black woman, asked the audience, “How has North Carolina been shaped by the experience of enslaved people from or around Somerset Place and Plymouth?” and, relatedly, “What impact does the legacy of slavery continue to have in North Carolina?”

In response, community members called out some of the more obvious contributions of Black folks to the South, such as music and food. Eager to participate, others pointed to the trades and skills that many of the Black enslaved individuals possessed and passed along. The origin of the architectural design of southern porches, for instance, is attributed to the brilliance of Black enslaved tradespeople. As members from the community named the gifts of Black folks to the area, the woman from the NCAAHC hastily scribbled responses on chart paper tacked to the walls of the community center.

The questions posed that evening sought to underscore, highlight, and quantify the worth and the contributions of Black people to this region. The questions posed that evening were designed to get the community members to recognize the value of Black people to this region. However, the framing that evening asked community members, “what did Black folks bring to the area?” tacitly implied that this northeastern region of North Carolina is owned and dominated by white people while Black people have merely contributed to the greater (white) community. Thus, from such a perspective, this region of North Carolina is racialized as white. Mills (1997) explains the process by which space and place are racialized: “the norming of space is partially done in terms of the *rac-ing* of space, the depiction of space as dominated by individuals (whether persons or subpersons) of a certain race” (p. 42, emphasis in original). Blaisdell (2017) extends this racial space analysis to include the impact of white supremacy on racialized spaces whereby spaces signified as white are “superior” and non-white spaces subordinate and inferior. Because white supremacy is a “political, economic and cultural system in which whites overwhelmingly

control power and material resources” (Ansley, 1997, p. 592) and because these practices are enacted daily, we argue that plantation logic is required to fully interrupt and decenter whiteness.

The racial demographics of Washington County, where Somerset Plantation is located, is predominantly Black and has been ever since the origins of Somerset Place Plantation. Prior to Emancipation, once the enslaved people of Somerset learned of the inevitable Union victory and the promise of freedom, they took over complete control of the property and surrounding land in Washington County, taking with them livestock and other means of establishing life (Crow et al., 2019). The racial reality of life in the Black Belt means that for every victory of Black people, white supremacy always moves to reassert itself.

So perhaps the question, “What impact does the legacy of slavery continue to have in North Carolina?” is best reframed as “What impact does the legacy of slavery *not* continue to have in North Carolina?” The prevailing presumption and perceived rural reality of Washington County is racialized as white because White people own the majority of land and businesses—but not because white people are the majority numerically. Black people hold only a fraction of the wealth of white people in this area. From this locus of economic and political control over space and place, white people have governed the land and local institutions, such as rural schools, since the fall of the plantation through continual demonstrations of repression, resistance, and domination. Power remains hierarchically distributed as a continuum from white to Black that upholds status and rank from the afterlife of slavery. Land and space remain overregulated through processes such as redlining despite the perception of equal opportunity and access. Suppression and control of Black life and Black mobility is relegated through the perpetuation of a carceral police state. Overt displays of visual terrorism (Holyfield et al., 2009), like Trump flags and flags of the failed Confederacy, serve as perpetual reminders of the myriad acts of lynching throughout generations. Even the physical presence of slave plantations remains as monuments of terrorism and white supremacy. Through the social construction of not seeing (Soo

Hoo, 2004) and the politics of forgetting (Fernandes, 2004), plantations are sanitized and stripped of the inherent brutality of human subjugation. The violence of white supremacy diverts attention away from its historical injustice and abuse. Instead, tender flowers are planted and sweeping lawns mown and maintained and children from local schools are invited on educational field trips. Plantations are perceived as an inescapable facet of rural life in the Black Belt, as necessary to life in the south as white supremacy. This is the rural reality that Black people live and work and go to school in.

Yet while whiteness owns the space of this region, it is the presence of Black people who have defined North Carolina. The NCAAHC asked, “How has North Carolina been shaped by Black people?” when the question should be, “How has North Carolina *not been shaped* by Black people?” The labor, presence, and resilience of Black people created and defined this and every other state across the southern Black Belt. The centrality and spatiality of Black life exists not in relation to white people but *in spite of* white people. Antiracism continually functions by “positioning Blackness as perpetually ‘out of place’ or as placeless” (Domish, 2017, as cited in Hawthorne, 2019). In the plantation South, Black people are positioned “elsewhere (on the margin, the underside, outside the normal)” (McKittrick & Woods, 2007, p. 4). This antiracism spatial practice of dispossession elides and obscures the creative and poetic Black life and belonging in rural spaces.

### **Wrestling with Rurality: Toward a Definition**

We understand the term rurality to signify and describe rural reality. This distinction, at least for us, centers how life, work, and play in rural spaces is situated through a sociohistorical context and creates space for us to understand the racial reality of these complex spaces. In this section, we offer the rural definitions from the federal government and discuss the urban/rural dyad that perpetually defines, right or wrong, the way rural is discussed in literature. Contextualizing rurality gives us an opportunity to move away from articulating an overly simplistic singular definition of rural reality.

An ongoing challenge to rural education research is defining rural. There are several ways that rural is defined depending on what index or which federal agency’s definition is used to understand and name the space classified as rural. The U.S. Government employs 15 different official definitions for the term rural. The majority of these federal definitions employed by the Department of Agriculture define rural in relation to population or proximity to city center, i.e., “any place with fewer than 50,000 inhabitants, and not adjacent to an urban area” or “any place with 20,000 or fewer inhabitants.” The Department of Education employs the autological and circular definition: “any place defined by a state government to be rural.” Two federal definitions are offered below, one in relationship to the Census Bureau, which many rural researchers also cite (Smith & Parvin, 1973; Tieken, 2014):

Whereas researchers often use the term rural when referring to non-metro areas, and Congressional legislation uses the term when describing different targeting definitions, the Census Bureau provides the official, statistical definition of rural, based strictly on measures of population size and density. According to the current delineation, released in 2012 and based on the 2010 decennial census, rural areas comprise open country and settlements with fewer than 2,500 residents (United States Department of Agriculture [USDA], 2019, para. 6).

Definitions based on municipal boundaries may classify as rural much of what would typically be considered suburban. Definitions that delineate the urban periphery based on counties may include extensive segments of a county that many would consider rural (USDA, Economic Research Service, *Rural definitions*, 2019).

While the federal language provides a nod to the complexity of these spaces, this language is also overly simplified. For example, “all other areas not classified as urban are considered to be rural” is offered by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA, 2021, para. 4). Federal definitions define rural through a negation of what rural is not – *urban* – rather than a positive



descriptor of the characteristics and components of rural life. Because rural is so often the absence of urban or the absence of population the nuances of the space of rural reality are not addressed. More problematic than the vague and antonymic federal definitions of rural is the glaring omission of race. Rural is positioned as colorblind. Each federal definition serves a varied purpose, and none of them are predicated specifically on the race of the individuals who inhabit the space, yet the outcomes and implications of the indexes, expressly the economic indexes, describe a racialized impact. The number of individuals in rural areas is quantified, but the realities of people within rural spaces are ignored. Milner (2020) reminds us it is imperative that we move away from colorblindness and toward race-consciousness. As much as this is true in urban education, it is significantly true in rural spaces, especially across the Black Belt, where historically Black bodies have been counted, but Black people were never invited to be “welcome, safe, and treated equally” (Williams & Tuitt, 2021, p. 2).

In response to these definitions and the subtle or glaring distinctions of a locale, we offer Milner's (2012) assertion about urban areas that can be applied to rural areas wherein urban is more nuanced, the specifics of a city, its his/herstories, community members, and past and present are all unique characteristics of the urban space that are lost in translation when context of the place is not also included in our defining of a space. These same assertions are true for rural, as rural is more than the indexing definitions that dilute rural down to the absence of urban or metro areas. Context is necessary when attempting to understand the characteristics of a place and space.

The rural/urban dyad or binary is an ongoing formulation of how rural is defined. In 1973, Smith and Parvin defined rural as “the most commonly used definition of rural is that of the Bureau of the Census wherein every place that is not defined to be urban is considered rural” (p. 110). Defining rural only relative to urban is what also supports more contemporary definitions of rural. This ongoing debate is also inclusive of work that articulates a definition of rural that exemplifies the character of the space. Waldorf (2007) posits, “rurality is a vague

concept. Being rural as opposed to urban is an attribute that people easily attach to a place based on their own perceptions, which may include low population density, abundance of farmland or remoteness from urban areas” (para.1). Furthermore, the federal definitions do “a poor job in capturing a county's rural character” (Waldorf, 2007, para. 2). The character of a place may be one articulation of rurality, yet we offer that descriptions of character must include race consciousness to any analysis of the space.

A more nuanced definition of rural is by Tieken (2014). Tieken's work also wrestles with defining rural and comes with definitions that are aligned with what we offer and wrestle with here. Ultimately, she defines rural as a matter of the commonplace interactions and events that constitute the rural “lifeworld,” a value mostly overlooked by the media and academia and a significance impossible to quantify. This understanding, shared by many of the residents of rural communities, is tied to place; it provides a geography-dependent sense of belonging. Rural, in this conception, is not simply a matter of boundaries. It constitutes one's identity, it shapes one's perspectives and understandings, and it gives meaning to one's daily experiences. This identity, this shared and place-dependent sense of rural belonging, gives rural its significance (p. 5).

Tieken's (2014) definition is where we pick up, and we name rurality as rural reality. Ultimately, we treat the term rurality as describing, understanding, explaining, living, and experiencing the space of rural reality. Situating rurality within a discrete context, an actual setting such as the Southern Black Belt, allows us as rural scholars to interrogate the extra-local relations of power relative to race, class, and gender dynamics (Nespor, 2008). The place-dependent identity of Tieken's (2014) definition invites a disruption to superficial, generalized depictions of rural reality that elide the way racial politics is experienced in southern rural contexts. Racism cannot be ignored. Within conversations of rurality, there must be a race-conscious approach to research specifically research on, with and about schooling in rural spaces. With this interpretation and distinction in mind, we go forward to examine theoretical

frameworks that could be used to approach equity work through a race-conscious lens and analyze racial equity in rural spaces, with the intention of contributing to understanding rurality.

### **Researching a Racialized Rural Reality of Education**

We specifically locate ourselves as educational scholars within the context of southern rurality and plantation legacies of the Southern Black Belt. The foundations of chattel slavery narrate the educational landscape of the rural South, and this rurality ignores the preponderance of Black bodies. The enduring logic of plantations celebrates neoliberal individualism and obscures how community and family function across these. Black spaces in the rural South are and have been present since chattel slavery, the rural South is beholden to Black bodies for what it is and has become, yet educational systems continue to work toward the promotion of a white landscape and moving away from Blackness. Despite Black bodies inhabiting the very halls of the school, policies and practices continue to distance themselves from Blackness while simultaneously vaunting the Black athlete, the Black teacher, the Black administrator as exceptional models of Black excellence (Bell, 2000). Underneath Black excellence is the underlying notion that the sheer presence of Black bodies in a school is unattractive to white students or families. Through this complex lens of rural reality and race consciousness, we offer frames to apply to racial equity work in the rural south.

### ***Understanding Plantation Logic in Partnership with Critical Race Theory***

As we move through articulating our understanding of rurality, specifically in the Black Belt, we consider critical race theory as a possible lens through which to analyze rural racial equity work that decenters whiteness within rural schools. Critical race theory (CRT), with its ever-evolving tenets and articulations, uses theory to both understand the current and ongoing plight of racialized bodies and to disrupt and move away from white supremacy—as a theoretical frame and as a methodology. CRT provides several ways to examine racial equity work in rural spaces. For the purpose of this paper, we focus on three tenets:

racial realism, whiteness as property, and interest convergence. Although antiblackness is not explicitly rooted in critical race theory, the framework remains a critical race approach to examining rural education in the Black Belt and is thus included below.

This section is offered as the brainstorming of possible engagements to take up to examine our ongoing work. We acknowledge that any racial work in the United States is fraught with racialized white comparisons, whiteness as endemic, and white supremacy—all constructs of how we understand race in and of itself. It is incumbent upon us as racial equity researchers to move beyond a racial reality that focuses predominantly on racism, violence, and death (Woods, 2002). We pause here to admit the difficulty of decentering whiteness (Hayes et al., 2021) while offering theoretical frameworks that may center whiteness in order to understand the focus of our research. We acknowledge that decentering whiteness is the ultimate goal, and we are not there yet. However, our goal is rooted in hope and possibility for future research.

**Racial realism.** Racial realism is likely the most explicit way to understand racial equity work in rural schools. Racial realism is defined by Delgado & Stefancic (2001) as the “view that racial progress is sporadic and that people of color are doomed to experience only infrequent peaks followed by regression” (p. 154). Despite this unfortunate truth, racial realism may be most realistic and practical. This theoretical framework locates the actions of African Americans in the historical and continual struggle against racial oppression while understanding that liberalism and white supremacy only permits incremental change followed by periods of regression. This ideal is evidenced in the 1960’s civil rights movement where incremental change through court cases, non-violent protests, and advocacy work was central to the work of the movement. While the enduring reality of racism continues, movements of resistance continually demonstrate that African Americans refuse to accept oppression. As Bell (2005a) states, “continued struggle can bring about unexpected benefits and gains that in themselves justify continued endeavor. The fight in itself has meaning and should give us hope for the future” (p. 76).

Located within the historical paradigm of plantation logic, resistance is evidenced in the self-liberated maroonage of Black individuals. At no time in American history did an idyllic slave community ever exist (Lockley & Doddington, 2012) as slave plantations were sites of constant subversion, struggle, and resistance. Racial realism provides a framework that seeks justice and hope, ever striving for emancipation, in a bid to dismantle oppression and the machine of white supremacy while simultaneously recognizing that “[B]lack lives are still imperiled and devalued by a racial calculus and political arithmetic that were entrenched centuries ago” (Hartman, 2007, p. 6). Plantation logic and racial realism provide a way to both understand and organize equity work within an oppressive system while also galvanizing hope and remaining pragmatic about what change is possible and at what pace.

**Whiteness as property.** Succinctly, “Whiteness as property is a concept that reflects the conflation of whiteness with the exclusive rights to freedom, to the enjoyment of certain privileges, and to the ability to draw advantage from these rights” (Vaught & Castagno, 2008, p. 96). Harris (1993) eloquently addresses the construction of whiteness as property noting, “Slavery as a system of property facilitated the merger of white identity and property. Because the system of slavery was contingent on and conflated with racial identity, it became crucial to be ‘white,’ to be identified as white, to have the property of being white. Whiteness was the characteristic, the attribute, the property of free human beings” (p. 1721). This property of being a free human being in the context of America historically and presently undergirds how all property—including the right to public education—has been allocated. Understanding whiteness as property, especially in the Black Belt, intensely instructs an understanding of how racial equity is ascribed in rural schools. Not only is property, the physical land itself, literally deeded and kept from Black bodies as property owners, it is the property of economic and political power. Bell (1993) expressly denotes that “an unspoken but no less certain property right in their whiteness. This right is recognized and upheld by courts and the society like all property rights under a government created

and sustained primarily for that purpose” (p. 72). Examining rural racial equity work through a whiteness as property lens may provide a holistic and historic examination of how schools have been operated or who physically owns the land on which the school is located. Entrenched attachments to whiteness and white supremacy trouble how schools are populated and valued as institutions that are sufficient to educate *all* children of a county. This may include the examination of the white Christian private segregation academies (Tieken, 2014) that provide a separate schooling experience for whites and more economically affluent Blacks. Investigating how these private academies impact public education and the types and quality of education provided within a rural community may also include examining the ways that land ownership continues to disenfranchise Black residents due to lack of millage increases for educational improvements as well as the political power associated with land ownership.

**Interest convergence.** Interest convergence presents a salient lens to examine racial equity in rural schools, yet it does not provide the desired divestment from whiteness. Instead, interest convergence exposes how the white elite’s interest must connect with the interest of Blacks in order to create change of conditions. According to Milner (2008), “Interest convergence stresses that racial equality and equity for people of color will be pursued and advanced when they converge with the interests, needs, expectations, and ideologies of Whites” (p.333). As defined by Bell (2000), “the majority group [white elite] tolerates advances for racial justices only when it suits its interest to do so” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, p. 149). More specifically, the gains made benefit the white elite materially and the middle class physically, meaning that there is little incentive to change how interest convergence operates within a space and place. However, interest convergence as a framework does provide an opportunity to expose the way that material determinism is propelling change rather than racial equity. Per this definition, examining racial equity work in rural education would be viewed through changes in education as a convergence of racial progress and majority group tolerance. This may be particularly cogent in



relationship to school consolidation, which often closes Black schools and moves Black students into districts with greater white populations, therefore physically inconveniencing Blacks while providing more economic resources, per pupil dollars, to schools with more white students. School discipline practices are another intersection that disproportionately detach Black bodies from schools through suspension and expulsion while still collecting the per pupil dollars for student enrollment.

**Antiblackness.** Antiblackness provides another way to wrestle with rurality in the plantation South. Dumas's (2016) theorization of antiblackness constructs the usefulness of examining school policy and discourse in order to shift the construction of the treatment of Black children and families within school communities to one that articulates a through-line of contemporary trauma from examination of historical trends and patterns. Furthermore, Dumas explicitly names the "aim of theorizing antiblackness is not to offer solutions to racial inequality, but to come to a deeper understanding of the Black condition within a context of utter contempt for, and acceptance of violence against the Black" (p. 13). Moreover, antiblackness calls us to shift our construction of what is happening to students in schools and communities in dealing with the schools as "necessary to begin thinking about strategies to combat the failure of public schools to effectively educate Black children and their success is reproducing dominant racial ideologies and the repression of the Black body" (p. 435). Therefore, antiblackness as a theoretical framework applies a race-conscious approach to examining racial equity work in rural schools that provides a way to understand the rural reality of the Black condition in the plantation South. How Black bodies have—and do—survive through violent systems can support constructing ways to combat the failure of rural public schools to address the reproduction of dangerous racial ideologies and repression of the Black body.

Wrestling with articulating and understanding racial equity work in rural schools through any one of these theoretical lenses does not absolve the fact that as researchers we must commit to decenter

whiteness. This work is nuanced as whiteness functions as a vestige of a bygone era of explicitly white supremacist decisions about schooling and access to education. Additionally, more presently it is also operating as white opportunism constructing Black bodies as necessary for athletics and diversity initiatives (Bell, 2000) while not addressing how the preponderance of Black bodies is not attractive to white families—or potential landowners. Through any of these theories, we challenge ourselves and others that wrestle with and contend with rural reality in the Black Belt to not ignore a race-conscious approach to equity work in rural spaces, even when one considers the equity work to be economically focused. An analysis of any equity work within rural schools that does not address a race-conscious approach ignores a major historical and current factor of researching systems and peoples that inhabit the Black Belt of the United States. Rurality is not fully understood without including a contextualized and sociohistorical analysis of race.

### **Moving Forward into Rural Educational Research**

In the American South, it is insufficient to simply name race or the racialized experience of southern living. Plantations are our rurality. As McKittrick (2013) writes, "the legacy of slavery and the labor of the unfree both shape and are part of the environment we presently inhabit" (p. 2). These are the racial realities where our children attend school. Naming the place-based rural identity of the Black Belt and examining the rurality of plantation logic allows us to "fashion a philosophy that matches the unique dangers that we face, and [it] enables us to recognize in those dangers opportunities for committed living and humane service" (Bell, 1993). Similar to the work of Squire et al. (2020) in higher education, locating rural education in the Black Belt through the theoretical frame of plantation logic allows us to identify how white supremacy is operationalized, "how it operates, how it views us, which entities act as barriers to equity and justice, what we need to tear down, and how we might build something new" (para. 5).

Ultimately, we leave the reader with a challenge to examine rural education and rurality through a

racialized lens, by intensely and intentionally examining race as a consistent sociohistorical factor in understanding the research context. Within what is offered above, we hope to provide educational scholars with both a race-conscious approach and an actual racialized theoretical framework. Rural reality, especially in the Black Belt, is too often racialized as white unless the operating logic and proximity of plantations are interrogated. We invite other rural scholars to join us in a collective “ownership of one’s responsibility in the continuing fight for equity and justice” (Williams & Tuitt, 2021, p. 2) that changes the historical landscape of the South from one of dispossession to belonging. Just as it is possible to understand rurality as whole—full of character and nuance—and separate from urbanicity, so too is it possible to understand Blackness as complete and total and full of radical imagination, creation, and humanity. Our hope is that this discussion opens new discursive spaces for envisioning rurality and anticolonial liberation.

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### About the Authors

**Timberly L. Baker** is an associate professor of educational leadership at Arkansas State University. She received her BSE in secondary education social studies and her MSE in educational theory and practice. She has published in *Journal on Transforming Professional Practice*, *The Journal of Culture and Education*, *The Journal of Negro Education*, and *School Community Journal*. The focus and purpose of Dr. Baker's scholarly pursuits and accomplishments are centered on the improvement of educational outcomes for African American students P-16, through examinations of disproportionality in school discipline, disproportionality in special education, representation in the curriculum, and preparation of teachers and administrators. Her work utilizes critical race theory—microaggression, interest convergence and colorblindness—to critique policy, practices, and praxis. Overall her work seeks to improve educational outcomes for African American students.

**Amy Swain, PhD**, is a teaching assistant professor in the Department of Special Education, Foundations and Research at East Carolina University, where she teaches courses in the social foundations and diversity. She has worked in and with public schools for the last seventeen years in North Carolina and has taught at every level of education from elementary school to university. Her research and practice focuses on social and racial justice, rural education, racial equity, and transformative justice. She is a native of eastern North Carolina and lives in Martin County, North Carolina. Her work has been published in *Educational Studies*, *Qualitative Inquiry*, and *The Urban Review*.