

## Editorial: In Pursuit of Racial Justice in Childhood and Youth Studies

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought to the forefront the extent to which systemic racism continues to impact the lives of children and youth. With devastating experiences including illness and death, hate crimes, wage loss, and systemic oppression in receipt of and access to services, BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) communities have borne the brunt of the current public health crisis around the world (Lopez, Rainie and Budiman 2020; Ruiz, Horowitz, and Tami 2020; Yaya et al. 2020). Far from putting racial injustices on pause, “COVID-19 is more starkly laying bare what Black people and people of colour have always known: our world is inequitable, unjust, and unsustainable, and those in power prioritize their economic interests over and at the expense of the livelihoods of the majority” (Okech and Essof 2021, 2).

In the Summer of 2020, the murder of George Floyd by a Minneapolis police officer was a catalyst for protest in every major US city and around the world despite ongoing pandemic lockdowns. From Rio de Janeiro to Nairobi and Barcelona to Osaka, protesters in solidarity with the struggle against police brutality in the United States uttered the names of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and too many more, alongside those of local victims of state violence like João Pedro Mattos (14) in Brazil, Yassin Moyo (13) in Kenya, and Mame Mbaye (35) in Spain. As Shereen Essof has discussed, rallying cries against the unrelenting and global criminalization of Blackness emerged in a very specific context. This was one of ongoing racial inequities, police violence, and rising white supremacy in the US, compounded by the challenges brought by the COVID-19 pandemic. It was also a context in which the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement “skillfully channeled anger into action on the back of years of consciousness raising, organising and mobilising, door-to-door, street-by-street, and community by community” (Okech and Essof 2021, 2).

BLM is a “multi-faceted, global movement predicated on the belief that Black lives matter. That Black policy matters. That Black organizing matters. And that Black joy matters” (Cullors 2020, 5). As a movement, BLM was sparked by the 2013 acquittal of a self-appointed neighborhood vigilante who attacked and killed Trayvon Martin, a 17-year-old Black teenager, as he walked home talking on the phone with a bag of skittles in hand, in Sanford, Florida. This is a movement founded and led by young, queer, Black womxn like Patrisse Cullors, Opal Tometi, and Alicia Garza, who dared to utter the simple imperative that Black lives *matter*, as they juxtaposed their own devastating lived experiences with the criminalization and mass incarceration of Black youth as a result of the US “war on drugs” to the very fact that “this white-presenting man could kill us and go home” (Khan-Cullors and Bandelete 2018, 179). From the very beginning, BLM

has implored us to pay attention to—and unapologetically address—the chronic and acute experiences of systemic oppression, violence, and harm that BIPOC children and youth experience.

This call to pay attention and act is not new. Children and youth have long been at the center of global struggles for racial justice, not just as some of the most vulnerable targets of systems of mass incarceration, police brutality, and racialized violence, but also as agents of change and leaders in efforts to imagine new possibilities and to dismantle white supremacy in schools, universities, public-serving systems, and communities (Daniel Tatum 2017; Turner and Beneke 2019). Multi-racial, multi-class, and multi-ethnic coalitions of youth like the Dream Defenders in Florida and Aliento in Arizona have long been laying the groundwork for dismantling intersecting systems of oppression and imagining more equitable, just, and joyous futures. This pursuit has been done through a multitude of mediums, from protests and boycotts, to art and performance, reminding us that—as Betina Love writes in her work on abolitionist teaching—“writing, drawing, acting, painting, composing, spittin’ rhyme, and /or dancing is love, joy, and resistance personified” (2019, 99).

### **In this Issue**

The Spring 2021 Issue of *NEOS* aims to further the call that Black lives *matter*. The lives of BIPOC communities not only matter; they are valued, respected, and vital. To this end, articles in this issue critically explore both harm, suffering, and inequities that plague the lives of children and youth of color, while also uplifting the ways young people navigate resiliency, strengths, and the creation of more equitable futures.

The issue opens with commentaries exploring themes of diaspora, empathy, and marginalization in and outside educational spaces. In “Dismantling White Supremacy: The Role of Ubuntu Epistemology and US Universities,” Hawkins-Moore probes the tenet of “communalism” within Ubuntu epistemology and its power to highlight youth resiliency in African diasporic communities through initiatives and programs at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU). Moran calls for a critical interrogation of the role of empathy among White youth engaging anti-racism efforts and their own experiences of whiteness in “On Engaging Racial Privilege: Youth, Whiteness, and the Confines of Empathy.” Finally, in her commentary “The Burden of Demonization: Muslim American Youth on the Marginalization Spectrum,” Ali discusses the consequences of ongoing criminalization and demonization for Muslim American youth in educational settings, inviting us to expand the frames we use and the actions we take.

Research articles in this issue robustly grapple with theoretical and practical questions tied to racial justice. Bullon-Cassis, reflecting on fieldwork at a United Nations Summit in Madrid, Spain, investigates the ways “youth” as an identifier holds preferential status over other identifiers such as “Indigenous” or “BIPOC” via concepts like “generationalism” and

“adultification.” In an analysis of the through lines of policing and the instability of childhood in Rochester, New York and Cairo, Egypt, Sweis asks us to consider how police-child interactions and state violence expose the limits of childhood. In further probing narratives of idealized childhoods, Nguyen explores how notions of childhood innocence prevent curriculum-centered dialogue about racism in a Kindergarten classroom in the US Northeast. Nguyen asks us to consider the extent to which performative statements regarding diversity and inclusion following the murder of George Floyd made by school districts across the US did not necessarily lead to curriculum-centered changes, but rather, remained words without action. In her article on transitional justice in Canada, Kim centers the experiences of Indigenous youth and their perceptions of transitional justice responses to Indian Residential Schools. Her article interrogates how Indigenous youth have been impacted by and reconcile with the lasting impacts of prior human rights violations, calling on practitioners to recognize that historical violence is intertwined with youth identities and contemporary experiences of structural and physical violence. Finally, through the implementation of an arts-based afterschool program in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, Binte-Farid explores how Black Muslim youth experience racialized and religious identities at school, illuminating the ways in which such programs—often framed as a path to divert “at-risk” youth—can be a means for empowerment, self-expression, joy, and healing when approached through an asset-based framework.

We hope this issue entices readers to more thoughtfully and critically consider our role in promoting just and equitable futures for children and youth, as scholars, educators, professionals, practitioners, policy makers, and academics—all of whom hold some influence in the very spaces where young people are demanding to be heard (Daniel Tatum 2017). We hope this issue also allows us to consider our diverse identities on personal and professional levels, and the type of responsibility, privilege, and power that we bring to the table as we navigate our research and applied efforts with children and youth. Finally, we hope scholarship in this issue also lays bare that performative public claims of solidarity with racial justice movements are fraught and woefully inadequate (Okech and Essof 2021) when they are not accompanied by sustained efforts to dismantle white supremacy and advance anti-racism work. These efforts must be done not only within the academy and disciplines like Anthropology, but on the ground in the spaces and places that children and youth live, grow, and navigate. From police militarization and school-to-prison pipelines, to the child welfare system and ongoing state violence, we must act on every level if we are to *eliminate* the unnecessary, unjust, and devastating deaths of not only Black and Brown adults, but also children and youth like Adam Toledo (13), Ma’Khia Bryant (16), and Daunte Wright (20). These realities confront us time again with an understanding of racism—as “the state-sanctioned or extralegal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death” (Gilmore 2007, 28)—that cannot be wished away and rather requires intentional and unapologetic action.

## In Closing

At *NEOS*, we consider these questions fundamental and take seriously our responsibility as an open-access publication to facilitate critical conversations and actions that contribute to deeper understandings of systemic oppression and of our roles as educators, researchers, professionals, and practitioners in the pursuit of racial, economic, and social justice for young people, their families, and their communities. This issue serves as a catalyst for an ongoing commitment of *NEOS*. As of the Fall 2021 issue, every issue of *NEOS* will invite articles for a standing column devoted to anti-racism and equity in the lives of children and youth. Additionally, the Fall 2021 issue is dedicated to further exploring how inequity shows up globally through a focus on South-North conversations in childhood and youth studies. Through these standing and dedicated spaces, we invite contributions that interrogate universalist conceptions of childhood and youth and deploy analytical frameworks like intersectionality to understand how childhoods are “constituted by the particular dynamics of gender, race, disability, sexuality, class and geography” (Konstantoni and Emejulu 2017, 11). In doing so, we hope to foster interdisciplinary and “cross-world” dialogue (Punch 2016) about the practices, policies, and research needed at all levels to build and sustain futures in which the lives of children and youth like Adam Toledo, Ma’Khia Bryant, and João Pedro Mattos are not only valued and possible, but nurtured to their fullest extent.

*In shared commitment to thriving children and youth,*

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