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Monisha Bajaj

University of San Francisco, mibajaj@usfca.edu

Susan Roberta Katz

University of San Francisco, katz@usfca.edu

Lyn-Tise Jones

lyntise@gmail.com

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Editorial Introduction: Human Rights Education & Black Liberation

By Monisha Bajaj*, Susan Roberta Katz**, and Lyn-Tise Jones***

* **Monisha Bajaj** is Professor of International and Multicultural Education at the University of San Francisco. She is also a Visiting Professor at Nelson Mandela University - Chair, Critical Studies in Higher Education Transformation in South Africa. Dr. Bajaj is the editor and author of seven books and numerous articles on issues of peace, human rights, migration, and education. She has developed curriculum and teacher training materials—particularly related to human rights, racial justice, ethnic studies, and sustainability—for non-profit and national advocacy organizations as well as inter-governmental organizations, such as UNICEF and UNESCO. In 2015, Dr. Bajaj received the Ella Baker/Septima Clark Human Rights Award (2015) from Division B of the American Educational Research Association (AERA). mibajaj@usfca.edu

** **Susan Roberta Katz** is Professor of International and Multicultural Education at the University of San Francisco, where she has taught for 25 years. In 2008, she co-founded the first graduate program in Human Rights Education in the United States. A former San Francisco middle school teacher, Dr. Katz's writings on the education of youth around the world have appeared in journals like *Teachers College Record*, *Urban Education* and *Social Justice*. Her co-edited book, *Bringing Human Rights Education to U.S. Classrooms: Exemplary Models from Elementary Grades through University*, was published in Spring 2015. katz@usfca.edu

*** **Lyn-Tise Jones** is a Human Rights Commissioner, community-based scholar, entrepreneur, and passionate activist. Lyn-Tise Jones proudly hails from her beloved community, Bayview Hunters Point, in San Francisco and is a graduate of Fisk University and St. Mary's College. She is unwaveringly dedicated to ensuring equitable outcomes in underserved communities. She has successfully executed presentations and public testimonies to elected officials at the global, national and local level, regarding the needs and services for social justice advocacy, community inclusion, system improvements, and racial equity. Through dedicated planning, organizational assessments, program alignments and the development of effective communication processes, she has successfully managed over 360 community programs per year. Lyn-Tise was recently listed as a "Talented 25" honoree in the legendary Sun-Reporter newspaper. lyntise@gmail.com

Oppressed people, whatever their level of formal education, have the ability to understand and interpret the world around them, to see the world for what it is, and move to transform it. ~ Ella Baker (as cited in Ransby, 2003, p. 7)

Situating Black activism and movement building in its historical context, this special issue of the *International Journal of Human Rights Education* features articles, essays, commentaries, and book reviews that put the longstanding call for Black lives to matter and the quest for Black liberation in conversation with human rights education as a field of scholarship and practice. In this introduction, we first review how movements for Black liberation, primarily in the United States, have drawn on human rights frameworks to seek greater justice; we then introduce the five original articles, five community-based commentaries/notes from the field pieces, and five book reviews/excerpts that comprise this special issue.

Human Rights, Education & Black Liberation: Past & Present

After the adoption of the historic Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) by the United Nations (U.N.) General Assembly and The Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (the “Genocide Convention”) in December 1948, organizations in the United States petitioned the U.N. on multiple occasions to address egregious rights violations in the United States against Black Americans. These violations included the widespread discrimination in every sector of social, economic and political life, segregation, and the brutal lynchings committed by vigilantes often with state-sanctioned support (Anderson, 2003). Organizations such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the Civil Rights Congress, and activists such as W.E.B. DuBois, William Patterson, Walter White and Paul Robeson prepared a petition to the U.N. in 1951 (titled “[We Charge Genocide](#)”) that argued that lynchings; widespread police brutality; health, educational and economic disparities; and political disenfranchisement all constituted the

legal definition of genocide as per the U.N. Genocide Convention that came into force that same year. As historian Carol Anderson (2003) notes,

Human rights, especially as articulated by the United Nations and influenced by the moral shock of the Holocaust, had the language and philosophical power to address not only the political and legal inequality that African Americans endured, but also the education, health care, housing, and employment needs that haunted the Black community. (p. 2)

Despite the demands being brought forth and the legitimacy of the arguments, the United States clamped down on critiques to its domestic rights violations in the midst of the Cold War. These charges were never taken up by the United Nations (Eleanor Roosevelt—former U.S. First Lady and the first Chair of the United Nations’ Human Rights Commission—was dismissive of these efforts despite her professed support of racial justice).

Yet, further engagement with human rights frameworks continued, often by changing the discourse used from human rights to “civil rights” as was done by many leaders and strategists in the U.S. Civil Rights Movement (Anderson, 2003). Educational researchers Carl Grant and Melissa Gibson (2013) argue that this shift led to a sacrificing of the holistic nature of human rights demands:

The language of human rights proved a powerful vehicle, both domestically and internationally, to challenge U.S. inequities and injustices. This power was the very reason that Roosevelt and the other U.S. representatives worked so hard to prevent African Americans from linking their domestic struggle with human rights. Opponents knew that doing so might open the United States to international critique. Unfortunately, the tangle of Cold War politics eventually led the NAACP and other civil rights leaders to abandon this human rights platform for the limited equality afforded by civil rights alone. (Grant & Gibson, 2013, p. 89)

Other leaders at the time deliberately took on human rights language precisely *because* of the international linkages and expansive framework it provided. In 1964, Malcolm X wrote in a [letter](#) to the *Egyptian Gazette* that "Our common goal is to obtain the human rights that America

has been denying us. We can never get civil rights in America until our human rights are first restored. We will never be recognized as citizens there until we are first recognized as humans.” [The resistance to and embrace of human rights frameworks in distinct moments by racial justice movements is discussed further in this special issue by Loretta Ross and Monisha Bajaj, as well as by Balthazar Beckett and Salimah Hankins in their articles.]

Two years later in 1966 in Oakland, California, the Black Panther Party (BPP) released its foundational [Ten-Point Program](#) that outlined a vision for economic, social, and racial justice, summarizing these demands in Point Ten “Land, Bread, Housing, Education, Clothing, Justice, and We Want Some Peace”—all of which encompass the vision of political, civil, social, and economic equal rights elaborated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The legacy of the Black Panther Party’s efforts to bridge human rights, education, and Black liberation included the Black Panther’s Oakland Community School directed by BPP leader Ericka Huggins. This pioneering school offered culturally sustaining pedagogies (Paris & Alim, 2017) for children of color and operated from 1973 to 1982. [The BPP legacy is also discussed in Brian Davis’ oral history with Candice Elder, in the essay by Linda Garrett in this special issue, and in the introduction of the Women of the Black Panther Party Activity Book included in this issue co-written by Ericka Huggins and Angela LeBlanc-Ernest].

The legacy of the BPP also informs current grassroots efforts, such as the Know Your Rights Camps (first started in 2016 and now happening across the country and even internationally), which offer a tailored form of human rights education to youth. Launched by professional football player Colin Kaepernick, the Know Your Rights Camps seek to “advance the liberation and well-being of Black and Brown communities through education, self-empowerment, mass-mobilization and the creation of new systems that elevate the next generation of change leaders.” These day-long camps offer a “10-Point System,” phrased as affirmations, that focuses on equipping youth of color with knowledge as well as a community of care to

withstand a system in which prejudice and racial violence still abound.¹ Camps include workshops and guest presentations by community leaders such as Ericka Huggins and Attallah Shabazz, the daughter of Malcolm X, and each camper is gifted with a copy of Malcolm X's autobiography along with a DNA kit for finding out more about their heritage.

Also in the contemporary period, the Movement for Black Lives' foundational principles include empathy, dignity, restorative justice, and globalism. One year after the vigilante murder of unarmed teenager Trayvon Martin in 2012, his killer was acquitted; soon after, activists Alicia Garza, Opal Tometi, and Patrisse Cullors created the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter on social media. It was widely utilized by those frustrated by the lack of accountability for racial violence. The Movement for Black Lives (M4BL) formed in 2014 as a "space for Black organizations across the country to debate and discuss the current political conditions; develop shared assessments of what political interventions were necessary in order to achieve key policy, cultural and political wins; and convene organizational leadership in order to debate and co-create a shared movement wide strategy" (from M4BL's [website](#)). M4BL has noted human rights abuses that still plague Black Americans, such as the fact that they are three times more likely to be killed at the hands of the police than White Americans even when they are more likely to be unarmed (Ojo, 2020).

Current movements for racial justice follow earlier movements that were deeply transnational and global. Activists like Bree Newsome Bass (who brought down the confederate flag in Charleston after the massacre of nine Black worshippers by a White supremacist in 2015) cited the #RhodesMustFall movement in South Africa (which sought to bring down monuments of British colonizer and imperialist Cecil Rhodes) as inspiration

¹ The 10-point system includes: 1. You have the right to be free; 2. You have the right to be healthy; 3. You have the right to be brilliant; 4. You have the right to be safe; 5. You have the right to be loved; 6. You have the right to be courageous; 7. You have the right to be alive; 8. You have the right to be trusted; 9. You have the right to be educated; 10. You have the right to know your rights. From <https://kaepernick7.com/pages/know-your-rights-camp>

for her action. The family of Michael Brown, an unarmed teenager killed by police in Ferguson, Missouri, in 2014, and the family of George Floyd, an unarmed man choked to death by police in Minnesota in 2020, have brought these human rights violations to the United Nations and demanded international investigation into the U.S.' discriminatory policing practices (as discussed in Beckett and Hankins' article in this special issue). Like in decades past, international scrutiny is one way to 'educate' about human rights alongside various other formal, non-formal, informal, and community-based educational strategies. This special issue defines education in its broadest sense and explores the classroom, community, and public pedagogies of human rights education.

The *International Journal of Human Rights Education* decided in June 2020 amidst the global uprisings after the police murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor—and the vigilante killing of Ahmaud Arbery—to pull together an expedited special issue on the intersections of human rights education and Black liberation. As an online, open-access journal that seeks to democratize knowledge in the field of HRE, we also seek to be relevant and contribute to the ongoing conversations on education, human rights, and social justice in a timely fashion. The special issue co-editors met through our work in a shared geographic location: San Francisco. Monisha Bajaj and Susan Roberta Katz are faculty members at the University of San Francisco and lead a unique Master's program and doctoral concentration in Human Rights Education; Lyn-Tise Jones is a community activist and serves on San Francisco's Human Rights Commission, first founded in 1964 in response to demands from civil rights groups about widespread discrimination against African-Americans in the city.

In this special issue, contributors reimagine and envision Black liberation and how human rights education frameworks, methodologies, and praxis can advance it. The contributing authors put a heavy emphasis on engaged scholarship and scholar-activism that illuminates the intersection of HRE and Black liberation from a variety of perspectives. We are delighted with the scope, methodological diversity, and intellectual strength of the pieces in this special issue. A note on language: the co-editors decided along with the entire editorial team at the IJHRE from this

issue forward to adhere to the American Psychological Association’s (APA) stylistic practices to [capitalize all racial groups](#) (as the journal adheres to APA style). We understand that debates are ongoing about the appropriate way to capitalize racial groups; we agree with scholar Eve L. Ewing in [her article](#) advocating for the capitalization of all racial groups including “White” that “when we ignore the specificity and significance of Whiteness — the things that it is, the things that it does — we contribute to its seeming neutrality and thereby grant it power to maintain its invisibility” (Ewing, 2020). Where racial groups are not capitalized in citations that are directly quoted in the pieces in the special issue, we have not changed their original usage.

As with all of our issues, we have a variety of formats, including articles, notes from the field/community-based commentaries, book reviews, artwork, and, new for this issue, a poetry and multi-media piece created by special issue co-editor Lyn-Tise Jones on the themes of this issue. [Please click on the link below or scan the QR in the footnote² to view this original multi-media poem, excerpted below.]

[There Is NO side of Neutrality](#)

Written by: Lyn-Tise Jones

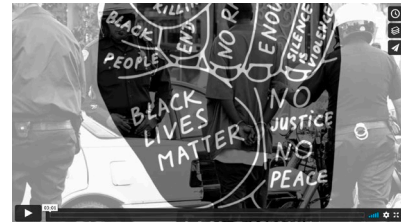
I was born into activism

My skin color declared me an activist

All of my life has been dedicated to the painful art of resistance

Activism or pessimism

There is no side of neutrality



² <https://vimeo.com/ijhre/vol5>

In Black skin, you do not have an option to choose, you can only choose to ignore, or dissolve into pessimism, or fight as an activist marching towards the ever moving target towards freedom

Tired of explaining what it's like to be in this Black skin

Crushed by the debilitating blow of never getting my brother back

The cops killed him and that's a fact because he was born a Black man with a target on his back

Our birth certificates need to be changed to being born in "A state of emergency"

When our Black babies leave the hospital, our worse fear is how will our Black baby come back

Multiple gunshots left my brother dead and now my mother is all messed up in the head

He was unarmed but harmed

Wrong color. Wrong place. Wrong time.

Special Issue Contents

The first article of this special issue, after this editorial introduction, entitled "My Life's Work is to End White Supremacy': Perspectives of a Black Feminist Human Rights Educator," features one of the founders and leaders of the field of human rights and reproductive justice in the United States, Loretta J. Ross. An activist, scholar, and leader in human rights *and* human rights education (as the former director of the National Center for Human Rights Education based in Atlanta), Loretta Ross—through an interview with the *International Journal of Human Rights Education's* Editor-in-Chief Monisha Bajaj—discusses her upbringing, human rights work, and contributions to "bringing human rights home" to the United States, as well as advancing reproductive justice (a term she helped coin some four decades ago) locally and globally. Loretta Ross was also a

founding member of one of the leading human rights organizations in the United States: the US Human Rights Network.

In the next article of this special issue, “Until We Are First Recognized as Humans: The Killing of George Floyd and the Case for Black Life at the United Nations,” Balthazar Beckett from the American University of Cairo and Salimah Hankins, Executive Director of the US Human Rights Network (USHRN), discuss the history of the USHRN, which was officially launched in 2003 and is comprised of some 300 member organizations. The authors detail how the organization draws on the internationalist legacy of leaders such as Malcolm X and brings issues of racial violence in the United States to international justice mechanisms. Examples of this work include facilitating the testimony of the family of Michael Brown, Jr. before the U.N. Committee Against Torture and, more recently, garnering international attention to the 2020 police killing of George Floyd, and other instances of disproportionate state violence towards people of African descent to demand accountability and justice.

In the wake of the death of unarmed teenager Michael Brown, Jr. at the hands of police in August 2014 and subsequent lack of justice, an organization grew out of the organizing and protests in Ferguson, Missouri. Scholar and activist, David Ragland, in his article entitled “Truth-Telling as Decolonial Human Rights Education in the Movement for Black Liberation,” discusses the antecedents and formation of the Truth Telling Project of Ferguson (TTP), which he co-founded with others,³ to engage brutal histories of racial violence through community-centered storytelling. Initially intended to be a South-African inspired “truth and reconciliation” process, the group eventually decided to focus on truth-telling and historical reckoning due to the historical amnesia around racial violence, as discussed in the article. Drawing from the fields of peace and human rights education, Ragland discusses how the central principle of human dignity informs the TTP’s work and larger vision.

³ Another of the founders of the TTP was Cori Bush who in 2020 was elected to the U.S. House of Representatives, the first Black woman from Missouri to serve in the U.S. Congress.

Like in Ferguson, Candice Elder also responded to injustices in her community of Oakland, California, by creating an organization to address them: the East Oakland Collective (EOC). Drawing on the history of the Black Panther Party in Oakland, the EOC seeks to address racially disparate poverty and an increasing unhoused population. In this oral history with Candice Elder conducted by emerging human rights education scholar Brian Davis, entitled “Housing as a Human Right: Black Epistemologies in Deep East Oakland,” an insightful and rich conversation ensues that sheds light on economic and social rights enshrined in the U.N.’s Universal Declaration of Human Rights. These include the right to food and the right to housing, and what happens when the government fails to ensure these rights. As Davis details through this interview with Elder, organizations such as EOC are stepping in to fill this gap and—at the same time—are bringing international attention to these violations. For example, EOC co-hosted the U.N.’s Special Rapporteur on Adequate Housing in 2018 to tour homeless encampments in Oakland and San Francisco, which were subsequently found by the U.N. to be “cruel and inhuman treatment and a violation of multiple human rights” (United Nations, 2018, p. 12).

From the community to the classroom, scholar and community activist Stacey Ault discusses in her article entitled “Critical Post-Traumatic Growth among Black Femme High School Students within the School to Prison Pipeline: A Focus on Healing,” a participatory action research project with young Black women in Sacramento, California, that speaks back to the school-to-prison pipeline, or the disproportionate criminalization of youth of color in educational institutions. Through the Queens Speak project, Ault highlights the voices of the participants and elaborates a framework she created for “Critical Post Traumatic Growth.” The author explains the tenets of this framework through the research process and the findings collectively generated with her co-researchers/participants in the study. Combining explorations of identity, exercising creativity (participants collectively wrote and recorded songs), and fostering agency, Queens Speak was a transformative intervention that heightened critical consciousness for the Black youth and educators involved.

The five notes from the field/community-based commentary pieces similarly speak to the creativity and agency of individuals doing the work in community to resist the forces of domination and oppression.

Inspired by James Baldwin's *My Dungeon Shook: A Letter to My Nephew* (1963), Linda Garrett penned "It Is Well with My Soul" to share the creation story of the Black Panther Party with her own nephew Jay, as well as with a new generation of Black youth. Garrett poignantly writes of how the essence of the Party's Ten Point Party Platform is as resonant and relevant today as it was in the 1960s-1970s. She urges young people facing all forms of anti-Black racism today to reject the media distortions of the Black Panther Party and to heed their call to take action and, most importantly, to serve the people through building relationships with local communities under siege. What is particularly beautiful and poetic is the way that Garrett interweaves the story of the Party's founders, Huey Newton and Bobby Seale, with the life story of her beloved nephew—a charismatic student athlete with much potential as a grassroots organizer.

In their commentary piece, written amidst the California wildfires, the Covid-19 pandemic, and ongoing systemic anti-Black violence, Aaminah Norris and Babalwa Kwanele discuss "complex grief as an interconnected web." Elaborating on this interconnected web in their article entitled "(Un)Hidden Grief and Loss Inform the Movement for Black Lives," the authors identify 11 subsets of complex grief including structural and overt racism, dehumanization, and the intergenerational transmission of trauma, among others that the authors delineate. Weaving together poetry, analysis of the factors that cause complex grief, and "upstream solutions," Norris and Kwanele offer insights for educators, social workers, and members of all communities seeking to counter and dismantle anti-Blackness.

Brandie Bowen, Ellen Sebastian Chang, and Yvette Aldama, in their piece entitled "House/Full of Blackwomen: The Insistence Movement," discuss this "site-specific ritual performance project that strikes back by building a bridge that links the promises of universal human rights to direct realities of Black people," conceived by Amara Tabor Smith and co-director Ellen Sebastian Chang. The transformative art produced by the House/Full of Blackwomen interrogates and critically analyzes issues facing Black

women in the Northern California Bay Area, such as gentrification and displacement, sex trafficking, and racism. Through their narrative, woven together with images and links to videos of their performances, this commentary piece shines light on the House/Full of Blackwomen as a “portal to the world as it should be,” a “world honors human rights as a living guide to our collective liberation.”

Emma Fuentes and Colette Cann, professors of International & Multicultural Education at the University of San Francisco, describe how they recently initiated and developed a new doctoral concentration in Racial Justice and Education. This concentration, officially launched in Fall 2020, builds upon their department’s early foundation in Freirean critical pedagogy since the 1970s as well as the pioneering graduate program in Human Rights Education that began in 2008. It responds not only to the growing interest and commitment of doctoral students, like Gertrude Jenkins and Eghosa Hamilton (authors included in this special issue), in targeting anti-Black racism in their research and praxis, but also to the urgent need of the current moment in dismantling White supremacy.

In their piece entitled “Making Us Matter and the Work of Spirit Revival,” Eghosa Obaizamomwan Hamilton and T. Gertrude Jenkins, students in the Racial Justice in Education concentration discussed by Fuentes and Cann in the previous piece, share their experiences with marginalization as Black educators in schooling contexts that have not historically served Black students well. Seeking to “re-spirit” their communities, Hamilton and Jenkins co-founded Making Us Matter, a weekend online educational program in which students of color can “experience full humanization and visibility.” The program also enlists Black educators and offers them the opportunity to create culturally-informed, social justice curricula. Drawing on Critical Race Theory, the program seeks to connect Black students and educators from across the United States and with a goal of international linkages in the future. In this commentary piece, student and educator voices are presented to demonstrate the power of this liberatory educational model created by the authors.

The four book reviews and one book excerpt in this special issue highlight ground-breaking publications by activist-scholars whose critical

analysis of anti-Black violence and creative visions for racial justice and social transformation have far-reaching implications for education at all levels. Written by four doctoral candidates at the University of San Francisco whose own public scholarship focuses on Black liberation, the book reviews all address the multiple ways in which Black lives in the United States have always been vulnerable to exploitation and aggression from pervasive White supremacy and, at the same time, have inspired and led the most important social movements in U.S. history, from Abolition to Black Lives Matter.

First, Heather Streets depicts how award-winning author Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor in *Black Lives Matter to Black Liberation* (2016) skillfully uses a historical lens to trace the roots of racist violence against Black bodies and to examine how and why it has persisted, even during the administration of the country's first Black president. Although written in 2016, Streets notes that Taylor's arguments are extremely relevant today: "Armed with the tools of a historical framework provided by Taylor, it is our responsibility to figure out the 'how,' which is to build a nation where Black lives truly matter."

In the second book review, Robert Alexander looks at Bettina Love's highly regarded book, *We Want To Do More than Just Survive*, and how she calls for "abolitionist teaching" that aims to get to the very root of what is wrong with U.S. schooling rather than simply managing inequalities through gradual reforms. A long-time educator himself, Alexander finds deep inspiration in Love's "freedom dreaming" to imagine a world free of oppression: "Abolitionist teachers are visionaries who fight for their students' freedom, for justice, for the end of gun violence, for the end of the prison industrial complex, and even for students they've never met."

Similarly inspired by Charlotte Carruthers' 2018 book, *Unapologetic: A Black Queer and Feminist Mandate for Radical Movements*, Bay Area school leader Whitneé Garrett-Walker describes this book as a "love letter, and a field notebook for all of us to follow." Garrett-Walker highlights the powerful healing message of Black queer feminism that Carruthers delivers in this book—so essential at a time when images of Black death overpower our daily lives via the media: "Given this beautiful work, what will we decide

to do with the new world that is on the horizon? Will we continue down a path that seeks to reify all forms and systems of oppression, or will we seek to reimagine new possibilities of a new world in which all who *live* are seen as whole and equal participants of the new world?”

In his review, Joseph Ruben Adams covers the Rethinking Schools’ anthology, *Teaching for Black Lives*, which aims to bring principles of Black liberation into the daily lives of teachers and students in public classrooms. This collection of writings is intended to be a handbook for humanizing education and a guide for transforming multiple dimensions of schooling—from the curriculum to discipline policies—that kill the spirit of Black children. As Adams succinctly describes, “*Teaching for Black Lives* editors, Dyan Watson, Jesse Hagopian and Wayne Au, structurally designed the book to illustrate to educators how they should make their classrooms and schools a site of resistance to White Supremacy and anti-Blackness. Fundamentally, this book serves to make classrooms and schools a place of hope and beauty as educators explore Blackness.”

Artist and long-time West Oakland resident, Jichristina Vest, is unveiling a mural devoted to women of the Black Panther Party (BPP) on the outside wall of her home on February 14, 2021. This mural commemorates the indomitable women who were the bedrock of the BPP—educating children at the Oakland Community School, registering voters, serving breakfast in communities across the country—and doing so much more in the spirit of leading hearts and minds. To accompany the mural, Jilchristina and James Shields created the *Women of the Black Panther Party Activity Book*, designed to teach young people of all ages about the powerful work that continues to inspire grassroots organizing to this day. Two of these BPP women leaders, Ericka Huggins and Angela LeBlanc-Ernest, were advisors for this activity/coloring book and authored the Introduction reprinted here. They remind us: “Members of the Black Panther Party (BPP) were young, ambitious, and filled with love for all people, committed to change locally and internationally. The fight for human rights was the goal.”

Through these individual contributions, and the collective impact of their insights and perspectives, this special issue of the *International Journal of Human Rights Education* illumines the multiple intersections of human

rights education and Black liberation for scholars, practitioners, activists, and students. Human rights educators argue that effective HRE practice includes addressing the cognitive, affective, and action-oriented dimensions of learning. As such, we hope that readers gain new knowledge and insights from this special issue; feel deeply the simultaneous grief, resistance, and hope contained in these pages; and are inspired into action towards greater racial justice and collective liberation.

We express our deep gratitude to the IJHRE editorial team for their dedication and hard work in producing this expedited special issue [Maria Autrey, Ria DasGupta, Jazzmin Gota, Michiko Kealoha, Lina Lenberg, and David Tow, along with Monisha Bajaj and Susan Katz who also serve on the IJHRE team]; our reviewers for this issue; and to Jilchristina Vest for securing permission to use the images of the Black Panther Party (by Stephen Shames) and the mural of the Women of the Black Panther Party on the front and back cover of the issue respectively.

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