

Article

A Socio-Spatial Analysis of Black School Leadership in the Canadian Prairies

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Abstract

This article situates school leadership in the Canadian Prairies within a socio-spatial context and ongoing impact of coloniality. It draws on Black geographies to position Black school leaders as occupying diasporic spaces in white settler contexts of the Prairies, exploring how spatial relations are constituted in contemporary social arrangements characterized by longstanding institutional oppression. This spatial gaze exposed four themes for deeper analysis, namely Black school leadership as spatially situated power; the production of “visible difference” in leadership space; navigating whiteness as spatial norm; and loneliness, spatial isolation, and the cost of being “the only one”. The article demonstrates how Black school leadership in the Canadian Prairies cannot be relegated to simply an individual experience nor made reducible to interpersonal discrimination but rather is constituted through historically produced spatial arrangements that regulate belonging, authority, and legitimacy.

Keywords: Black school leadership; Black school leaders; school leadership in Canada; Black geographies; Black diaspora; diasporic spaces; socio-spatiality; the Canadian Prairies; critical geography; coloniality; colonization and school leadership

1. Introduction

Current global unrests underscore the urgency of action to disrupt imperialism, ongoing impact of colonization, and perpetuation of inequities, thereby ending harmful consequences and fostering a new world wherein we all thrive. This article centers Black K-12 school leaders in a Canadian diasporic context, drawing on Black geographies to explore how space is constituted in social relations, particularly in exposing and interrogating oppressive power dynamics at play in Black school leaders’ work. The context of this gaze is the Canadian Prairies, which encompasses the western provinces of Alberta, Manitoba, and Saskatchewan.



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Author Positionality

Educational research is never value-free (Carr & Kemmis, 1986). In fact, as Goundar (2025) argues, “all research contributions are made by subjective individuals with a particular perspective on the world based on their background” (p. 2). Positionality, then, answers questions about “where the researcher is coming from” (Holmes, 2020, p. 1). I am a Black immigrant to Canada. I was raised in a large, low-income, Christian household in the Caribbean and now work as a tenured university professor in the Canadian Prairies. Now, as an educated, middle-class earning, able-bodied, heterosexual individual in a settler society where Indigenous peoples are relegated to the margins, I enjoy privileges.

More to the point of this article, I have witnessed sharp injustice in the Canadian Prairies, particularly against Black and Indigenous people and school-aged children identifying as two-spirit, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning, intersex, asexual, and of other sexual orientations and gender identities (2SLGBTQIA+). My scholarship, teaching, and service center social justice, and I mobilize critical, anti-oppressive frameworks, such as critical race theory, Black feminism, critical geography, and decolonial, postcolonial, and anti-colonial theories in my work. As a researcher, I acknowledge and attempt to manage my subjectivities through reflexivity, in explicitly situating myself in my research projects and seeking to understand my part in and influence on them (see [Cohen et al., 2011](#); [Fine, 1994](#); [Patton, 2002](#); [Schwandt, 2000](#); [Yip, 2024](#)). While some of the experiences shared by Black school leaders in the study that informs this article resonate with my own, I subjected myself to repeated self-examination in writing this article, understanding that “the ‘practical’ activities of generating and interpreting data [must be] linked in a continuous process of critical reflection” ([Schwandt, 2000](#), pp. 190–191) if the empirical results are to be rigorous and ethical.

2. Context

Indeed, coloniality underpins how we understand and practice educational leadership. Colonization established systems of power, knowledge, and culture that have endured long after the end of formal colonial rule, with these systems rendered invisible, normal, and universal ([G. Dei, 2016](#); [Dion, 2007](#); [Pirbhai-Illich et al., 2024](#); [Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017](#)). Within this overarching context, non-white perspectives, including other ways of knowing and doing, operate on the fringes ([Amjad, 2018](#); [Dion, 2007](#); [A. E. Lopez, 2021](#); [A. E. Lopez & Singh, 2024](#); [Pirbhai-Illich et al., 2024](#); [Thobani, 2007](#)). This is indefensible, particularly so in educational leadership where research has established not only the importance of school leaders in student success and school reform ([Fullan, 2025](#); [Leithwood & Seashore Louis, 2012](#)) but the important role that racialized school leaders play in racialized students’ success ([Armstrong & Mitchell, 2017](#); [G. Dei, 2017](#); [Jack & Lobovsky, 2016](#); [James, 2012](#); [Lomotey, 2019](#); [Ryan et al., 2009](#)). In fact, racialized school leaders’ value extends beyond racialized students to the wider school community ([Ahmed, 2018](#); [Arneback et al., 2021](#); [G. J. S. Dei & James, 2002](#); [James, 2010, 2012](#); [Sasakamoose et al., 2024](#)). Notwithstanding, systems of exclusion—which this paper argues are colonial in nature—continue to restrict Black school leaders’ full engagement and acceptance in school leadership.

The ways in which Black school leaders navigate systems of inclusion and exclusion in the white settler context of the Canadian Prairies and how these systems shape and reproduce institutional leadership space are therefore the focus of this article. To expose this reality for critical analysis, I draw on Black geographies. Scholars mobilizing Black geographies posit that an examination of the movement of Black peoples across a global scale must be “understood alongside local struggles and cultural practices that demonstrate migratory experiences and situated knowledges” ([McKittrick & Woods, 2007](#), p. 7). These migrations from beyond the continent of Africa to diasporic places and spaces “have resulted in the relocation and redefinition of African peoples in a range of international locations”, continue McKittrick and Woods (p. 7). Given these scholars’ premise, not only do Black school leaders in Canada belong to an African diaspora but they face and carry experiences still tied to enslavement and violence. [McKittrick \(2015\)](#) posits, “our long history of racial violence continues to inform our lives and our anticolonial and decolonial struggles” (p. 3). For instance, [McKittrick’s \(2006\)](#) scholarship positions Black women in the Caribbean, the United States, and Canada as inhabiting diasporic spaces that are marked by the legacy of slavery and violence, and her work not only illuminates how human geographies are borne of racialized connections but how these spaces that are teeming with

limitation are overlooked but in fact are sites of contestation. Within these sites, McKittrick argues, Black women are not passive recipients of their environment or circumstances, and their sense of place connects to their struggle against domination and exclusion. The ways Black school leaders in this study were shaped by and shaped racialized circumstances in their work are taken up in this article.

2.1. Black School Leaders in Canadian Education Systems

Black school leaders represent a very slim minority in what are predominantly white education systems in Canada (Armstrong & Mitchell, 2017; G. J. S. Dei & James, 2002; A. E. Lopez, 2021; Mackey, 2024; Newton-Thompson, 2020). The charge, an apt one, is that Canada's classrooms are diverse but its teaching population does not reflect this diversity. Ryan et al.'s (2009) work highlights the disproportionate representation of racialized school leaders in Canadian K-12 systems. Further, other previous research illuminated issues relating to recruitment and retention of Black school leaders (Armstrong & Mitchell, 2017; Jack & Lobovsky, 2016). There is also documented evidence of discrimination experienced by Black school leaders in their daily work across Canada (Armstrong & Mitchell, 2017; A. E. Lopez, 2021; Newton-Thompson, 2020). Such racial inequities unfold amidst intensifying conditions of work for K-12 school leaders. The current socio-political climate of the school principalship is increasingly challenging, what with heightened surveillance and centralization of work (Lynch, 2014; Pollock & Wang, 2020; Wang & Pollock, 2020); the ongoing effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on wellbeing (Pollock, 2020; Swapp & Osmond-Johnson, 2023, 2025); and the surging volume and complexity of tasks (Darmody & Smyth, 2016; Pollock & Hauseman, 2015; Wang, 2020). Furthermore, in the last two years alone, escalated global injustice, including reprehensible wars; punitive consequences against equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) action; and shocking disparities between the rich and poor, has compounded social cohesion and muddy moral clarity. That such injustice unfolds in the context of settler colonialism—that is, on colonized, stolen Indigenous lands—in North America is especially and profoundly offensive and indefensible.

2.2. The Context(s) of Education in the Canadian Prairies

The Black school leaders who are the focus of this article live and work in Western Canada, which encompasses British Columbia and the Prairie provinces of Alberta, Manitoba, and Saskatchewan. Statistics Canada (2021) reports that this region has the largest population of Indigenous peoples based on provincial population. Treaties 4 through 8 cover large swaths of the Canadian Prairies, for instance (Government of Canada, 2023). The Prairies is indigenous to many First Nation communities, including the Dene (Chipewyan), nêhiyawak (Cree), Anihşināpēk (Saulteaux), Dakota, Lakota, and Nakoda peoples and is the homeland of the Métis/Michif Nation. Education in the Prairies therefore serves many Indigenous students and their families, including a significant number of immigrant communities (Manitoba Ministry of Education, n.d.; Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, n.d.; Tran, 2026). Yet, not unlike broader Canada, K-12 schools in the Prairies are largely served by white educators. This remains a challenging and an inadequate dynamic, as evidence indicates that many white educators are unprepared to support the needs of Indigenous and other racialized students (Ahmed, 2018; Arneback et al., 2021; Dion, 2007; Grace & Lastrapes, 2023; Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017). Socialization and lived experiences are powerful shapers of thought and action, meaning that dominant groups in society lack first-hand knowledge of marginalization (Pirbhai-Illich et al., 2024; Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017). As Sensoy and DiAngelo (2017) explain, this privilege consequently makes white educators unaware of, or resist educating themselves about, oppression. Disrupting colonial harms therefore remains urgent. This article therefore mobilizes Black geographies to

expose how Black school leaders' social identities and experiences are shaped by and shape the leadership spaces of their work in the Prairies.

3. Theoretical Framework

Critical geography is concerned with how space produces and is constituted in social relations, particularly in exposing and interrogating inequitable power dynamics (Collins & Coleman, 2008; Helfenbein, 2021; Holloway et al., 2010; Thiem, 2009). The focus of this article is on how Black school leaders understood and navigated the racialized spaces of school leadership in the dominant white settler contexts of the Canadian Prairies. To ground the spatialized dynamics of these experiences, therefore, this article draws on a particular categorization of critical geography, namely Black geographies. Black geographies posits that space is never neutral; instead, institutions, landscapes, and peoples' interactions within them are shaped by histories of racialization and related experiences of exclusion and resistance (McKittrick & Woods, 2007). This framework allows for an examination of how Black bodies, Black contributions, and Black desires exist within and against these spaces that were not designed for their inclusion. As McKittrick (2006, Introduction, paragraph 2, Kindle version) writes particularly of geographies of domination in the context of Black women's geographies,

This interplay interests me because it enables a way to think about the place of black subjects in a diasporic context that takes up spatial histories as they constitute our present geographic organization. The relationship between black populations and geography—and here I am referring to geography as space, place, and location in their physical materiality and imaginative configurations—allows us to engage with a narrative that locates and draws on black histories and black subjects in order to make visible social lives which are often displaced, rendered ungeographic.

McKittrick's (2006) work highlights how the confluence of domination and Black women's geographies is emphasized by the social production of space, actively constructed through boundaries, concealment, and the social organization of space. Black geographies as a theoretical framework therefore allows for the privileging of a social-spatial analysis that grounds the racialized experiences of Black school leaders as they respond to and shape space in the Canadian Prairies. In these ways, space is conceptualized as more than its concrete form but as relations between individuals and groups (Larsen & Beech, 2014; Soja, 1989). When applied to the school principalship as experienced by Black agents in the broader context of settler colonialism, a socio-spatial gaze within Black geographies illuminates the constitutive relationship wherein social relations, school leadership, and racialized historicities converge, intertwine, and depart.

4. Methodology

This article stems from a larger empirical study (2023–2025) casting a decolonial gaze into the work and wellbeing of Black school leaders in Canada and the Caribbean. The Canadian sites included in this larger study were British Columbia, Ontario, and the Prairie provinces—Alberta, Manitoba, and Saskatchewan. The Caribbean countries were Grenada and Jamaica. The research was qualitative (Gall et al., 2010; Punch, 2009) and interpretive (Patton, 2002; Schwandt, 2000) and utilized convenience and purposive sampling (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017; Gay et al., 2009) to recruit Black school leaders. Through one-on-one and small group conversations—more commonly termed semi-structured interviews and focus groups, respectively (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017)—and adapting a decolonial, anti-racism lens (Botha et al., 2021; G. Dei, 2016; A. E. Lopez, 2021), the research team invited Black school leaders to share their experiences navigating work and wellness, with a focus on

colonial arrangements and attendant racial inequities shaping and constraining such work. I served as principal investigator on the project and conducted data collection in Grenada and the Canadian Prairies. This article draws on interview data from the Prairie sites.

Prior to data collection, we sought and received Research Ethics Board (REB) approval from each of the three participating universities. Each participant received either an electronic or hard copy of a letter of information that detailed the study, including its procedures, duration, and steps to protect confidentiality. We informed participants that their involvement in the study was voluntary and they could withdraw their consent without consequence. We secured written consent for all in-person interviews and oral consent for Zoom and telephone conversations. Of note, though we set out to recruit approximately 30 school principals and vice (assistant) principals in English-speaking K-12 education systems across each site, Black school leaders proved particularly scarce in Western Canada. Ultimately, I secured seven participants across the Prairie provinces combined. Due to this small number, and the isolation and vulnerability that participants in the Prairies subsequently disclosed in our conversations, I took additional steps in this article to protect their identities. I do not disclose how many or which participants came from a specific province, instead combining the three provinces into one site that I refer to throughout the article as “the Canadian Prairies”, the Prairies, for short. I also refer to participants as SL1 through to SL7, with “SL” short for “School Leader”. Table 1 below describes in as broad terms as possible, participant demographics.

Table 1. Participant Demographics.

<i>School Leader (SL)</i>	<i>Demographic Details</i>
<i>SL1 (male)</i>	Secondary school principal in an affluent and majority-white community. Student population mostly white, with some Indigenous and Black students as the two main racialized demographic. Teaching staff mostly white but a handful of racialized educators. Only Black educator in his building and only Black school leader in his school district.
<i>SL2 (female)</i>	Elementary school principal in a large, middle to low-income immigrant community. Teaching staff mostly racialized. Large Southeast Asian student population. Only Black educator in her building and estimates one of about four in her district.
<i>SL3 (female)</i>	Vice principal in a mostly white, affluent secondary school with significant Indigenous students and a smaller population of Black and other racialized students. Teaching staff mostly white; only two other racialized educators. One of two Black educators in her building and one of two Black school leaders in her school district.
<i>SL4 (male)</i>	Vice principal in a secondary school in a mostly white, middle-class community. There is a small number of Indigenous and Black students, and an even smaller population of Asian students. Only Black educator in his building but a handful of other racialized educators. Not aware of any other Black school leaders in his school district.
<i>SL5 (female)</i>	Vice principal in mixed-income elementary school. Significant racialized student population but mostly white students. Teaching staff mostly white but three other racialized educators. Only Black educator in her building and only Black school administrator in her school district.
<i>SL6 (male)</i>	Vice principal in an elite secondary school. While there are some international students, most students are white. Most students (including other racialized students) come from wealthy families. Teaching staff is white. Only Black school leader in his building and only Black school leader in his school district.
<i>SL7 (female)</i>	Elementary school principal in a mixed income urban school. One of three Black educators in her building and estimates one of two Black school leaders in her district.

I conducted one semi-structured interview lasting approximately 1.5 h with each participant. To inform this article, I analyzed each of the seven transcripts using a combination of a priori and open coding approaches (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017), with Black geographies as a theoretical lens. In this way, I focused on the ways leadership was coded

as white; how racialized spatial discipline operated to subjugate and challenge Blackness; and descriptions of spatial isolation in the Prairie cases for Black school leaders, where incumbents exist without collective presence or shared space.

Several limitations of the study must be noted. The study was restricted to English-speaking participants, thereby excluding potentially rich data from Francophone perspectives across the three Prairie provinces. The sample size was also small, not capturing the perspectives of all Black school leaders working in K-12 schools, making generalizability limited. Recruitment of Black school leaders was a challenge: race data were not collected by school districts in the three provinces, so I often relied on participants' own awareness of other Black school leaders in their school districts and/or the province. Further, protecting participants' anonymity necessitated extra precautions, resulting in the omission of demographic details—such as participants' province or school district, statistics and descriptions of schools, and immigrant backgrounds of participants—that could have further contextualized the racialized spatial dynamics of school leadership across the provinces.

5. Results

Within the socio-spatial framework that underpins this article, schools are understood as racialized social spaces, produced through and producing power relations, specific historical geographies of oppression, and everyday relations and practices among the people making up these social systems. In short, the results of the study expose how Black school leaders occupy and navigate spaces historically associated with white authority and belonging. Four themes are unpacked below, namely Black school leadership as spatially situated power; the production of “visible difference” in leadership space; navigating whiteness as spatial norm; and loneliness, spatial isolation, and the cost of being “the only one”.

5.1. Black School Leadership as Spatially Situated Power

As the study revealed, Black school leaders' experiences were shaped by the racialized spatial contexts in which schools were embedded and enmeshed. In the context of the Canadian Prairies, these experiences were constituted in affluent white spaces, immigrant-dense neighborhoods, and Indigenous-settler colonial geographies.

5.1.1. Affluent White Spaces as Sites of Surveillance and Control

Three of the seven Black school leaders in the study (SL1, SL3, and SL6) worked in affluent, predominantly white school districts. These leaders worked under heightened scrutiny from parents whose professional status and social capital often translated into influence over school decisions. SL1 reflected on how parents often invoked political connections in questioning his authority:

I do wonder... whether that interaction... had to do with my race, especially when I've had meetings with, you know, the rich white people, right? You just pick up on the tone or body language: "I know the Minister of Education". What does that have to do with anything right now?

Similarly, SL3 related several incidences of decision-making that favored white, influential families, often to the detriment of poor, including Black and Indigenous, students. In relating a specific incident between several white male students who committed an assault on a neurodiverse racialized student, an incident “that went nowhere” according to this school leader, she stated, “They're protected by their parents. Parents come in hard. We're an entitled community”. The inherent contradiction of such white privilege rankled this school leader who expressed frustration that oppression and privilege in her province were playing out “in a white neighborhood on stolen Métis land”.

It was evident that the pressures of these spaces sometimes produced outcomes that Black leaders did not endorse but instead felt intimidated into compliance or acquiesced out of fear or powerlessness. As SL1 noted of a particular situation that occurred at his school in the recent past:

I really got pushed into making a decision that I did not support. . . bending over for the rich, big, white man. . . Because I felt some inequity there, because if it had been in the exact same situation, if it was a different family, the outcome would have been different. And I had to ask myself, "If I don't go along, is my career in jeopardy?" Because that has happened.

Overall, Black school leaders in the study commonly reported heightened scrutiny, parental entitlement, and implicit and sometimes overt challenges to their authority as they navigated their different school contexts. These challenges often came from socially powerful actors such as wealthy parents, professionals, and elites associated with their school communities, forcing compliance and fear as navigational spatial responses from Black school leaders.

5.1.2. Immigrant and Indigenous Contexts as Differentially Racialized Spaces

It was apparent that in immigrant-dense and Indigenous-serving schools, Black school leaders' work began from connection—shared migration journeys, recognition of linguistic labor, or simply the affirmation that 'someone like us' occupies the principal's office. This was a source of pride for school leaders, who welcomed the opportunity to leverage their Black identities to foster belonging and community for other racialized students and student families. SL1 expressed, "*We have so many immigrants. . . it's an easy way for me to connect. . . they'll use me to go to different schools and help newcomers feel at home*". SL5 added, "*I can see the faces of my [racialized] families light up when they see me in that role*". SL2, who worked in a largely Southeast Asian school context with a mostly diverse staff, described how they connected over the commonalities of their racialized experiences, including poking fun at each other over their accented pronunciations of some English words: "*We're a big, close, immigrant community here. . . I give staff permission to laugh. . . we make jokes. . . all the time*". In these ways, Black school leaders fostered belonging, inclusion, and community in their various Prairie contexts.

At the same time, these affinities existed alongside enduring colonial hierarchies, shaping how school leaders understood and moved through these spaces. For SL2, this tension manifested in colorism in her predominantly Southeast Asian community. She described outdoor field trips where "*Southeast Asian*] students. . . [came] completely like shirt down to their arms. . . long pants, hat, umbrella. . . so they did not get any darker. . . from the sun, not from skin cancer". SL2 recognized and understood this conditional acceptance of her leadership and identity from her racialized student families:

You're buying gifts for your school principal. . . you love our [Black] culture, food, music, but the underlying message is that you don't want your kid to look like me. It's about "bettering the race". And that's where the forgiveness and understanding come in, because that's an offshoot of our colonial experience, theirs and mine. . . so it [light skin] gives you an entry into the white world that makes it comfortable for people like myself with a lighter skin to live it.

SL2's experience underscored how local geographies reflected colonial histories in the Prairies, wherein Black capital and racial affinity fought for space alongside whiteness and, as depicted in SL2's case, internalized oppression compelled proximity to whiteness for some immigrant populations. SL2 further captured the complexity of racialized educational spaces in the Canadian Prairies, particularly the juxtaposition of immigrant presence in the broader context of settler colonialism:

In [names Prairie province], the space you occupy is superior to Indigenous people. . . It's getting better. . . but the view for a very long time was, 'Why can't they just pull themselves up by their bootstraps? Why can't they just overcome?' And the intersectionality of race and poverty and all that just creates a system that people feed off of. . . You have to deal with that day in day out, that feeling that you don't belong, or someone thinking that you don't belong, and you're there because of DEI, or because you get money from the government. The narratives feed how we feel about the spaces that we're in. And when you are a woman—you already know that you have that against you when you're a Black woman—then you know that it's doubled and tripled depending on the situation. . . that is the cross you bear, right?

SL2's experiences echoed other stories shared by Black school leaders of carving spaces of understanding and belonging within oppressive hierarchies and entrenched whiteness in the Prairies. As the results show, in schools serving immigrant, Indigenous, and other racialized communities, Black school leaders often experienced racial affinity and connection with and within these groups, alongside harmful, entrenched colonial legacies and attendant internalized oppression.

5.2. The Production of "Visible Difference" in Leadership Space

As the results of the study affirmed, Black school leaders' bodies are continuously (mis/re)labeled, (mis/re)interpreted, and misrecognized in school spaces, producing these leaders as hypervisible yet institutionally precarious. All Black school leaders in the study reported incidences of having their qualifications and presence checked and/or being mistaken for persons occupying 'lower' ranks in their schools. Latter instances included being mistaken for custodians, teachers, or support staff, even as these Black school leaders occupied formal leadership positions within their schools and school districts.

5.2.1. Misrecognition and Role Confusion

Across the sites, Black school leaders described being simultaneously hypervisible and misrecognized, treated as *out of place* in leadership. "I know that's connected to being the Black woman and their lack of exposure; they don't have Black people in their social circle", shared SL5, who was the only racialized leader in both her building and school district. SL1 also noted new families' reactions upon their first interaction with him: "Some have walked in and seen me mop the floor. . . they assume, 'Oh, he's one of the custodians'. Then they see me walk into my office: 'Hello, how may I help you?'" "Oh, you're the principal". He described getting this initial reaction from both white and racialized families, though noting that the reactions always changed to surprise and pleasure for the latter families but often towards hostility or suspicion for the white families. Yet a third school leader, SL2, recounted how a building contractor (mis)took a community support worker who happened to be in her office for the principal: "He started talking to her, but he meant to talk to me. . . He just assumed the only Black person in the office wasn't, couldn't be [the principal]. . . so that [other person] must be her". This school leader's recounted experiences also exposed how the dualism of hypervisibility and misrecognition extended beyond the school sphere, even in a district-level anti-racism committee. She added:

He [a white colleague] comes up to me. . . "Hey, Nancy [pseudonym]"—the only other Black woman on that committee. . . I went to the bathroom and cried. . . When I confronted him, he said, 'The moment it came out of my mouth I knew'. Huh? He knew! 'Why didn't you apologize?' So even in these spaces with people who you think understand and know who you are, you are constantly having to validate yourself or show who you are, even if people think you're a DEI hire.

In these accounts by school leaders, leadership space was coded as white; the presence of Black bodies in these spaces was therefore treated as out of place, requiring constant (re)legitimation and negotiation.

5.2.2. Tokenism, Representational Burden, and Epistemic Exploitation

Consequently, all Black school leaders in the study revealed tensions between beliefs that they were hired for diversity and consequently overperforming so that failure would not confirm racist stereotypes. These leaders wrestled with the pressure to be “exceptional”, being aware that any missteps or perceived failure might “prove” deficit framings of Blackness. SL6 shared, “You’ve got to be great. . . if you fail, that will impact the whole race. . . They will say, ‘Black administrators can’t fulfill this role’ . . . that is a weight you have in this role.” SL7 shared similarly, “When I watch the news about someone getting killed or some terrible thing happened to a white person, I, every Black person is holding their breath, ‘Please don’t let them [the perpetrator] be Black’, because we understand the burden of our Black skin.” SL2 captured this tension of representational burden in the context of Black school leadership in the Prairies:

Because they’re choosing people who are not the best and the brightest amongst us sometimes, and that is only a detriment to the rest of us. Because now we’re working with people who others are like, “Oh my God” [negative connotation]. Because unfortunately, you’d think it’s about someone’s incompetence, but then when people think someone was hired because of their race, then it becomes about the race’s incompetence.

For two other Black school leaders hired after the George Floyd incident in the United States during the COVID-19 pandemic, undertones of tokenism compounded their insecurity about the reason(s) for their hire. “Did I only get this position because I was Black. . . I used to battle it internally. . . Regardless. . . it is good that I’m here. . . even if that was what got me in the door”, shared SL4. SL5 also stated, “I know others perceive this was a reaction to George Floyd. . . never mind I have been doing the work for years. . . it feels diminishing.” In addition to self-doubt and the skepticism from others about their qualifications, several other Black school leaders reported specific experiences of others directly informing them that they were diversity hires. SL3 recalled, “Two separate occasions this white man [school district personnel] came up to me and said to me. . . ‘Our division only hires particular people to check boxes’, and then [he] listed every Black and Indigenous school leader in the district”. SL4 added, “Some people were, I don’t know if shocked is a word, but surprised. I did receive some comments of, you know, ‘You’re the first Black principal ever in the history of our school division’, and so on, right? SL3 also recalled, “When I first got here. . . a clerk said to me, unprovoked, ‘We’ve never had a Black vice principal here before. I think it’ll be okay. No, I think it’ll be good.’” In these ways, the “checkbox diversity hire” phenomenon and the strategic regulation of their Black bodies to exist within this context was one keenly experienced by Black school leaders.

In addition to tokenism and representational burden, Black school leaders in the study also navigated epistemic exploitation. Both SL1 and SL5 were the only Black educators in their buildings and school districts, compounding their sense of isolation in their role but fueling their determined stance against anti-Black racism. They recounted instances of being used in and by their school districts to lead equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) initiatives. “It is frustrating to be called to speak about all anti-racism. . . or all things EDI [equity, diversity, and inclusion]. . . I question their sincerity. . . but I welcome opportunities”, related SL5. “How much of this has to do with their lack of exposure to Black people, I don’t know, but I am happy to go out there and talk to them”, echoed SL1. Notably, all seven Black school leaders shared similar stories of epistemic exploitation in relation to equity, diversity, and inclusion work in their school districts. While accepting invitations to lead this work—school leaders felt a responsibility to educate their white peers about anti-Black racism and foster belonging among racialized students in their districts—they were clearly plagued with doubt and

frustration, struggling with the emotional labor of tokenism, representational burden, and epistemic exploitation. These accounts demonstrate how these leaders are positioned as symbolic occupants of institutional space, rather than as fully legitimate actors.

5.3. Navigating Whiteness as Spatial Norm

The results of the study demonstrated how whiteness functions as the invisible organizing principle of school leadership spaces, shaping policy interpretation, professional norms, and expectations of comportment across the Prairie sites in the study.

5.3.1. Policy as Racially Spatial and Uneven Practice

Although policies were framed as neutral across the Black school leaders' contexts, their interpretation and enactment were spatially racialized and their enforcement uneven and producing and reproducing inequities in classrooms and across schools. For example, SL5 contrasted leadership and staff reactions to enforcing a dress code policy: *"We have a no hat policy. . . A Black student walks in. . . a teacher pounces. . . A white girl wears a bandana. . . they walk right by. . . If it was the Black student wearing the bandana. . . suddenly there's gang relations"*. Further, when zero-tolerance policies met with parental involvement, the results were often detrimental to racialized students and advantageous to white families. For instance, SL3 recounted an incident when a white parent demanded policy apply as prescribed to suspend a racialized child but in another instance wanted this same policy set aside for a similar offense committed by her child. She recounted, *"That parent reported policy when it helped her kid but didn't want to hear policy when it's someone else"*. She further summed up:

What I find in this particular building is that the community we serve is very entitled and so they want policy applied when something is done to their child, but they don't want the policy applied to their child. . . if any one of those kids was Black, better believe they were going to come down hard. Because that's how the justice system is tainted.

In these ways, Black school leaders moved through educational space with the awareness that schools in white settler contexts such as the Canadian Prairies functioned as racialized, carceral-like spaces, appeasing white parental anxieties, policing Black and Brown bodies, restricting Black mobility, and hindering thriving for marginalized communities. As the results reveal, policies that appeared neutral on paper were experienced unevenly in practice, mediated by and contingent on race and local power.

5.3.2. Proximity to Whiteness as Navigational Capital

Black school leaders who were born and/or raised in Canada believed that their acculturation into dominant cultural norms (as first- or second-generation immigrants) facilitated their navigation of leadership spaces. *"I grew up in a very white neighborhood. . . I understand the system. . . it's easier for me to communicate because of my [Canadian] accent. . . I very much fit for folks here"*, shared SL6, a male vice principal in an elite, mostly white secondary school. SL7 added, *"I am light skin. . . and I came here when I was [states age], so really young, and growing up, all my friends were white. So I feel like that for sure makes it [for me] easier than others."* Conversely, SL1, also a principal in an affluent neighborhood, described terse conversations with parents who espoused deficit framings of immigrant educators in trying to deflect blame for their children's poor academic performance: *"I've had to put some parents in place, with regards to my staff who are not Canadian. Sometimes, when their child is not doing well in the class, they will blame the teacher's accent and method of teaching."* Accent neutrality, familiarity with institutional language, and cultural alignment with dominant norms therefore constituted markers of whiteness in these Black school leaders' contexts. Whiteness then operated as spatial capital, enabling easier movement through institutional space.

However, cultural markers could be double-edged for these Black school leaders. *“If I were to dress every day in [names African traditional/cultural] wear. . . how would that be received? I don’t think well”*, stated SL4. SL2 added, *“I have a great relationship with my [Southeast Asian] families, but they don’t want their kids to look like me. . . on field trips, they’re all dressed up in long sleeved shirt in 30-degree weather because they. . . don’t want dark skin”*. In these respects, whiteness was the invisible baseline shaping how Black leadership operated and was received in educational spaces.

5.3.3. Strategic Self-Regulation in Racialized Spaces

The theme of navigating whiteness as spatial norm was also keenly felt in the ways Black school leaders described being hyper-aware of their tone, affect, and actions as they engaged in their work. This finding was especially keen for female school leaders. SL3 recalled:

She [white teacher] wanted me to be the disciplinarian in her class. . . I told them [white teaching staff], I need to be very judicious with how I assert power [with students]. . . and shared this example with them: I asked this kid [loitering in the hallway] to go to their classroom. . . This [white] student comes up to me and asks me if I would have told the kid to go to class if she were Black. We tell kids to go to class all the time. She mentioned whether the kid was white because I was Black.

This school leader explained that *“[she] made [her]self vulnerable, in vain”* to explain the tense and precarious dynamics of her work as a Black school leader at her mostly white school in a very affluent neighborhood. She further detailed incidences of negotiations, compromises, and silences she navigated daily because of racism at her school, among them white parents demanding she *“not speak with their children without the [white] school principal being present”*; choosing when and how she *“fight[s] for social justice because it is exhausting”*; and, resorting to blind carbon copying the administrative team (namely the other vice principal and the school principal, both white) on emails to white school staff because of previous resistance and disrespect from staff to her leadership. Overall, SL3 described her experiences as a Black female school leader as *“demoralizing and diminishing”*, disclosing some of the emotional and physical toll the work has wrought on her. Further, when she stated, *“I outwardly present well under pressure, because I can’t afford to do what everybody else is allowed”*, she was exemplifying the embodied vigilance that other Black school leaders in the study described harnessing in moving through leadership spaces in the Prairies.

As the findings revealed, self-regulation extended to dress codes for Black school leaders. Several disclosed not wanting to feed into negative stereotypes so that they adopted very strict, professional attire in their work:

Make no mistake. I dress professionally, all the time. This is part of the armor of being a Black school leader in [names province]. (SL6)

I dress to the nines. Super professional. I may dress down on Fridays, but hardly ever and never if I have to meet with families. (SL7)

. . . if I know I’m going to interact with families. . . if a parent wants to see you, there’s a level of armor that comes with the clothes, because that’s going to make them see you at a different level. Yes, because it’s not enough for them to know that you’re the principal. You have to look like you’re the principal. . . I have to look the part because looking the part unfortunately will give me a level of respect going in because of my race, and perceptions and expectations. Because I know if I don’t look good, then somehow, it’s going to be reflected on my race. (SL2)

These results reflect how racialized spatial discipline operated in the Prairie cases, wherein Black school leaders constantly managed how their bodies and emotions were allowed to exist in institutional leadership spaces.

5.4. Loneliness, Spatial Isolation, and the Cost of Being “The Only One”

It was therefore unsurprising, the accounts of spatial isolation that resounded across the data. While loneliness and isolation were compounded in cases where Black school leaders were the only Black presence in their schools and school districts, the added burden of Black representation fueled these experiences and overall shaped how school leaders navigated their presence and contributions in leadership spaces. As the results expose, organizational isolation limited opportunities for racial safety, mentorship, and solidarity for Black school leaders in the Prairies.

5.4.1. Organizational Loneliness

Standing out in white spaces that historically excluded them meant that Black school leaders were policed into isolation or the sidelines. Several shared:

The message is, I am allowed to exist in “this” way, maybe “that” way, certainly not “this” way, and only on their say so. EDI? Yes, call [states her name]. Black student discipline? Oh yes, let’s have [states her name] handle it. . . a white student? Noooo, race is involved so we can’t have [states her name]. (SL5)

I was offended at the idea that as a school leader, and with responsibility for student discipline, I am always called upon when there is an issue with a Black student. . . but my principal always tells me I have to step away when a white student is involved “to prevent a potential conflict”. . . As a school administrator, I should be able to deal with discipline issues with all students. (SL6)

When you complain, it’s a white person you’re complaining to. . . it’s a lonely feeling. (SL3)

These quotes attest to organizational exclusion and loneliness experienced by Black school leaders as they navigated tokenism, representational burden, and epistemic exploitation. White institutional norms and culture dictated how and when Black presence, Black voices, and Black representation mattered.

Indeed, straddling the tensions of hypervisibility and invisibility that characterized Black school leaders’ existence of leadership was compounded even further in situations where these leaders were the sole Black presence in these spaces. This was the case for SL1, SL4, SL5, and SL6. “There has never been a Black administrator within the division. I’m the only one in the whole division”, shared SL1. He added, “My identity as an African has more of an impact just because I’ve lived some struggles. I faced some struggles and realities that most, if not all, of my colleagues have never experienced or will never experience.” The absence of racial peers further constrained how and where this Black school leader could speak plainly. He also offered, “The biggest challenge. . . not being able to identify with somebody else who’s also Black. . . you just have to figure out by yourself.” All school leaders in the study echoed similar stories of loneliness, emotional toll, and alienation leading schools in overwhelmingly white educational spaces across their Prairie contexts. In these ways, Black school leaders navigated their leadership worlds as silent, silenced, tolerated, and conveniently included partners, often with no recourse to justice in the face of entrenched oppression. As SL3, a female vice school principal in a white, affluent school, one of two Black educators in her building and one of two Black school leaders in her district, shared:

So I complained [about racial microaggressions being experienced at work] to the superintendent and they were not happy I complained. And said to me, “Well, what do you want

us to do? Like, what were you expecting? Why did you bring this up? What were you expecting other people to do? You made them uncomfortable.” And I said, “My job is not to address your comfort level.” I said, “I have been uncomfortable.” . . . So I am tagged as a difficult Black woman.

Further, SL2, a female school principal who was the only Black educator in her building, and who estimated she was one of four Black school leaders in her district, echoed:

So much you have to overcome and continue to see the big picture and not let it tear away at you. . . having moments where you can be on an anti-racism committee with someone and they call you the name of the only other Black person on that committee, that’s how you know it’s about race, that they’re not just like mixing my name up with someone else. . . so the challenge is understanding the space you occupy, knowing that when you walk in a room, the people in the room don’t realize that you’re one of maybe seven Black people in that room. And sometimes, in lots of instances, when I go into meetings, you’re the only Black person in that room, and realizing that they don’t know that. They’re not seeing that.

Overall, it was evident that Black school leaders keenly felt the absence of Black peers in their work, representing a form of spatial isolation, wherein these school leaders exist without collective presence or shared space.

5.4.2. Desire for Affinity Spaces

Consequently, seeking out affinity spaces was a major way that Black school leaders moved through space relative to the isolation of their leadership in the Canadian Prairies. As SL6 shared, *“I don’t know any other people of color. . . there needs to be a space for [Black] administrators. . . the longer you are in this space, the more that you feel alone”*. SL5 added, *“If I’m sharing, it’s to a white person. . . no other Black [school leaders] I can unpack with”*. A third Black school leader, SL1, shared, *“There is nothing formal. . . not enough stuff for Black principals”*. In the absence of such supports, these leaders forged informal social support systems, including with other Black colleagues where they could find them but more often with close family and friends. *“There’s another Black school principal, male, that I’m close to in my district. We really unload on each other”*, said SL2. *“My family is my lifeline. That, and a handful of [Black] friends”*, shared SL3. Affinity spaces supported school leaders’ work and wellness, functioning as counter-spaces—sites of resistance, healing, and collective meaning-making—as these leaders navigated the isolating nature of Black school leadership in the Canadian Prairies.

6. Discussion

In this article, I set out to expose and interrogate, from a socio-spatial lens, the dynamics shaping the work of Black school leaders in the Canadian Prairies, a region etched in settler colonialism, where whiteness and racial inequity are dominant offshoots. Particularly, from a Black geographies perspective, the results expose how Black school leaders occupy diasporic spaces associated with white authority and belonging. The overarching racial hierarchy that historically placed white settlers as superior to Black and Indigenous peoples in the Prairies extends into contemporary educational spaces, shaping not only where and when Black school leaders have presence but also their sense of belonging and worth to and in these spaces. Holloway et al.’s (2010) assessment of the school site as “a vital sphere of social reproduction and inequality” (p. 585) was an apt one from such a Black geographies framing, as it exposed how racial restraints such as white suspicion, entitlement, and surveillance shaped Black school leaders’ navigational parameters. Within this context, Black presence was interrogated, misrecognized, mislabeled, and tokenized to appease white anxieties and needs, with Black school leaders moving through educational

spaces as bounded presence existing at the margins, called upon, rejected, or relegated as convenient by white regimes of inclusion and exclusion. McKittrick (2006) argues that the concealment, marginalization, and boundaries of Black presence in diasporic spaces are not neutral but deliberate social processes. McKittrick builds on the work of Wynter (1989), who situates the political processes of concealment and sub-humanizing against Black presence in these spaces as intentional, enacted to maintain, protect, and project a Eurocentric standard of what and *who* counts as human. As the study's results expose, the logics of superiority and subjugation established during colonization are entrenched and protected in contemporary diasporic spaces such as the Canadian Prairies and within institutional systems such as educational leadership. Within these spaces, Black school leaders are censored in how to think, feel, and act, thereby rendering Black identity and expression silent and concealed.

Consequently, Black school leaders in the study were positioned as symbolic occupants of institutional space, rather than as fully legitimate actors. As the results unpacked, they were exploited to lead EDI initiatives, address Black student discipline, and meet diversity quota but excluded from shaping and enforcing school policy, deciding outcomes relative to white student discipline, and impacting organizational structures. Further, their decisions were questioned and regulated by white superiors, parents, and teachers in ways their white peers did not experience. Smith (2024) describes this phenomenon as “the white gaze paradigm”, wherein Black school leaders face scrutiny and questions from white stakeholders about—and must defend or yield—their “right to lead” (p. 10). This injustice is steeped in coloniality, which legitimizes Eurocentric and Western knowledge systems at the same time it subjugates other ways of knowing and doing (Annamma et al., 2016; G. Dei, 2016, 2017; Dion, 2007; A. Lopez & Roofe, 2023; Pirbhai-Illich et al., 2024). In turn, then, this hegemonic view of education not only determines what counts as good education and the processes to secure this ideal, but who leads and what are markers of such success or failure (Smith, 2024). In other words, Black school leaders in the study were treated as *out of place* in school leadership, compelling them to constantly (re)negotiate and (re)validate their presence. Burman (2007) frames this precarity of, particularly, female Black presence in the diaspora as “spaces of removal. . .not as removed but as removable insiders” (p. 10). Lending Burman's analytical frame to the study, Black female school leaders were desired, needed even, as a stabilizing force within racially oppressive regimes and cultures but denied power to structurally shape institutional leadership. Tuck and Yang (2012) and McKittrick and Woods (2007) situate this tokenistic and patronizing reality of Black diasporic presence as *elsewhere*, the latter scholars highlighting “the ways in which essentialism situates black subjects and their geopolitical concerns as being elsewhere (on the margin, the underside, outside the normal), a spatial practice that conveniently props up the mythical norm and erases or obscures the daily struggles of particular communities” (p. 3). Black geographies counters essentialism, then, to allow for these communities to be centered. A socio-spatial reckoning of Black school leadership in the Prairies retrieves Black presence from the margins, allowing for an examination of “how places and spaces of Blackness are employed to uncover otherwise concealed or expendable human geographies. . . unsettling seemingly predetermined stabilities, fixed and settled infrastructures” (McKittrick, 2006, Introduction, paragraph 5, Kindle version).

A Black geographies analysis also exposed how Black school leaders in the study constantly managed how their bodies, emotions, and contributions were allowed to exist in institutional leadership spaces. This dynamic forced these leaders to—as put by a female vice principal in the study—“present well under pressure, because [they] couldn't afford to do what everybody else was allowed.” Consequently, Black school leaders in the study engaged in strategic self-regulation in navigating the racialized spaces of their work,

wherein whiteness operated as the invisible organizing principle of school leadership space. McKittrick's (2006) analogy of the slave ship helps illuminate this silence, concealment, and liminality experienced by Black school leaders occupying these spaces: school leadership, "as a materiality, contains and regulates; it hides black humanity because it "just is" and because those inside, bound to the walls, are neither seeable nor liberated subjects" (McKittrick, 2006, Introduction, paragraph 3, Kindle version). This materiality of school leadership—that is, the building, its structure and overt rules—in part, disguises what McKittrick continues is "human terror", thereby obscuring what Wynter (1989) refers to as "the imperative of a "perspective of struggle"" (p. 640). Pushing Wynter's framing in the current context of the study, the imperative of a perspective of Black school leaders' struggle in the Canadian Prairies—that is, an active, epistemological and ontological rejection of the neutrality or fixedness of those experiences and an attendant gaze on the marginalization of these subjects, which necessitates interrogation of the ways systemic oppression is built into the very spaces these leaders inhabit—is undermined by the social processes and material dimensions that constitute contemporary geographies of enslavement and containment in these white settler contexts. In these ways, what a focus on Black geographies exposes is how the organized principle of racialized spatial discipline in the context(s) of the Prairies disproves the notion of school leadership as race-neutral, instead confirming "a view of organizations as constituting and constituted by racial processes" (Ray, 2019, p. 27).

Along these lines, Allen and Liou (2019) therefore contend that "the development of school leadership should begin with the idea that white supremacy is a hidden curriculum entrenched within schools. . . as well as a societal context in which schools operate" (p. 678). McKittrick and Woods (2007) concur that Black geographies provides a framework for us to better understand the racialization that has long underpinned the production of space, wherein forms of resistance are also captured and unpacked, along with those of struggle. In the former regard, the study revealed that Black school leaders negotiated and pushed against expectations to surrender to and in white institutional spaces. They leveraged relationships with white peers and superiors, educating about oppression and advocating for diversity and racialized communities. They pushed back against privilege and entitlement, standing by their racialized staff in the face of white parental judgement and exposing the ways school policy penalized and/or otherwise disadvantaged racialized and poor students and families. Black school leaders in the study also reshaped white spaces by expanding culturally responsive practices, recruiting and helping to recruit diverse staff, supporting inclusive policy and curricula, creating spaces of belonging for racialized students and staff in their buildings and districts, and forging counter-spaces within white districts such as affinity networks for and with Black school administrators. In these ways, these school leaders resisted and disrupted what Dion (2007), speaking to the Indigenous context, terms "molded images" (p. 329)—in this case molded images of essentialized Blackness. Instead, Black school leaders in the study led with conviction, compassion, bravery, strong knowledge acumen, and keen political savvy of the institutional space of school leadership in the Canadian Prairies and their place—historically dictated and contemporarily negotiated—within it. Black geographies provided a framework to foreground this analysis, making possible "an interdisciplinary understanding of space and place-making that enmeshes, rather than separates, different theoretical trajectories and spatial concerns" (McKittrick & Woods, 2007, p. 7).

7. Conclusions

This article drew on Black geographies to expose how school leadership in the Canadian Prairies was socially produced and reproduced through racialized relations of power, with Black school leaders constantly compelled to negotiate their presence in spaces that

were not designed with them in mind. This analytical framing exposes how race and space jointly structure school leadership experiences, opportunities, and constraints. As the study showed, Black school leaders in predominantly white school districts in the Prairies occupy racialized educational spaces shaped by historical and contemporary geographies of colonial logics. Their leadership hinges on navigating surveillance, negotiating belonging, and exercising authority within institutions not historically designed for Black leadership. Overall, these school leaders engage in place-making practices that challenge dominant spatial arrangements and move us closer to creating more equitable educational landscapes. Overall, Black geographies allowed for a critical framing and analysis of Black presence in diasporic spaces against broader colonial and institutional geographies. The article therefore confirms that Black school leadership in the Canadian Prairies cannot be relegated to simply an individual experience nor made reducible to interpersonal discrimination but rather is constituted through historically produced spatial arrangements that regulate belonging, authority, and legitimacy.

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