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When They Try To Erase Us

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When They Try To Erase Us

Abstract

The history of social work in the United States has been marked by both progress and paradox. While the profession prides itself on values of equity, inclusion, and social justice, its very foundation has often mirrored societal hierarchies that exclude, minimize, or erase the contributions of practitioners of color. This article explores how erasure functions within the field of school social work from the historical invisibility of Black, Indigenous, and other leaders of color to the contemporary marginalization of their voices in policy, research, and leadership narratives. Grounded in critical race theory, intersectionality, and social work ethics, this practitioner-centered analysis examines the psychological and professional toll of erasure while illuminating the resilience, innovation, and transformative leadership of those who refuse to be silenced. The article concludes with a call-to-action urging institutions, associations, and practitioners to reckon with history, restore recognition, and reimagine leadership that truly embodies social justice.

Keywords

school social work, leadership equity, racial justice, critical race theory, intersectionality, diversity and inclusion, cultural taxation, practitioner voice, educational equity

Cover Page Footnote

The author extends deep gratitude to the countless school social workers past, present, and emerging whose courage, labor, and truth-telling continue to challenge systems that once sought to silence them. Their daily acts of advocacy, often unseen and unrecognized, are the heartbeat of this profession and the foundation upon which this article stands. Profound appreciation is given to the elders, pioneers, and cultural torchbearers whose brilliance reshaped the landscape of social work despite barriers designed to exclude them. Their wisdom and resilience form the moral spine of this work, reminding us that visibility is not a privilege but a right earned through generations of resistance. The author also acknowledges her own lineage of strength and purpose, including the enduring influence of Aunt Katie Mae Rivers Tindal whose spirit of service and justice continues to guide this journey and the steadfast support of her husband, Audrey Cannon, whose belief, sacrifice, and encouragement remain a constant source of grounding. Finally, to the students, families, and communities whose stories have shaped the author's understanding of dignity, justice, and humanity: thank you. Your resilience is a testament to what is possible when dignity is honored and when presence becomes a form of protest. This article is written in honor of you, and for all who refuse to be erased.

When They Try to Erase Us

“To erase a people, you first silence their story.”

The history of social work is both a mirror and a map reflecting the nation’s highest ideals of justice and its deepest contradictions. Founded on the promise of service, advocacy, and human dignity, the profession has long proclaimed its allegiance to equity. Yet, beneath that noble rhetoric lies a more complex reality: a profession that has often mirrored the very hierarchies it seeks to dismantle (Harty, 2023). The call to serve “the least of these” has too often been carried out through lenses shaped by privilege, resulting in narratives where certain communities are pathologized while those doing the “helping” are centered as saviors.

Within the walls of our schools, agencies, and institutions, the erasure of practitioners and leaders of color has not been accidental, it has been historical, structural, and sustained. Their innovations have been absorbed without acknowledgment, their leadership questioned or diminished, and their names omitted from the textbooks that boldly proclaim social work’s inclusive mission. The architects of culturally responsive practice, Black, Indigenous, Latinx, and immigrant reformers, laid foundations that were later renamed, repackaged, and stripped of origin. This pattern of epistemic theft is more than historical oversight; it is an enduring form of injustice.

In school social work, this erasure takes on a particularly insidious form. It is embedded in how we define “expertise,” whose work we deem worthy of citation, who rises to leadership, and who is remembered in the profession’s historical canon. It influences the questions researchers choose to ask and the silence they maintain. When the knowledge of practitioners of color is relegated to “lived experience” rather than recognized as scholarly contribution, the entire field loses its moral compass. The phrase *“When They Try to Erase Us”* captures both the invisibility imposed and the resistance of practitioners and leaders who refuse to disappear. It speaks to the enduring truth that even when erased from records, we remain etched in legacy.

I write this article, not only as a practitioner and scholar, but as the first African American to serve as national president of the School Social Work Association of America (SSWAA), a distinction that carries both pride and profound reflection. Leadership, in that capacity, was not an honor bestowed; it was a platform *claimed*; a seat at a table that generations before me had been denied. It was both a privilege and a burden; an act of presence in a space not

always prepared to see me fully. I understood that to lead as “the first” was to bear witness for the many whose brilliance built the foundation, but whose names had faded from its story.

Reflections on being *the first*

On July 23rd, I stood on the steps of the State Capitol in Washington, D.C., leading school social workers from across the nation and around the world during the first-ever SSWAA Legislative Institute March “School Social Workers United: Advocating for Equity and Inclusion.” That moment was more than an event; it was a *movement*. Beneath the sweltering summer sun, voices from every region and background rose in unison, declaring what policy and history had too often denied: that school social workers are essential architects of educational equity. That day, we did not march for permission we marched for recognition. We were not merely present; we were *visible, vocal, and validated*.

As I looked out across that sea of educators, practitioners, and advocates, I felt both the *weight and wonder* of what it means to be “the first.” It was a reminder that representation is not arrival, it is responsibility. To be “the first” means carrying the untold stories of those who came before and holding open the door for those who will come after. It means confronting structures that were not built to see us, even as we lead them toward transformation. It means understanding that visibility is both a victory and a vigil, a constant watch against the quiet return of erasure.

As a leader, a woman of color, and a lifelong school social worker, I have witnessed both progress and persistence: moments when our profession rose courageously to its moral calling, and moments when silence or sabotage threatened to undo that progress. I have seen colleagues risk comfort for conscience and others retreat behind institutional neutrality or walk right into compliance in advance. These dualities are the heartbeat of our profession; the tension between what we profess and what we practice.

A Brief History: Foundations and Fault Lines

The Invisible Architects of Social Work

The formal story of U.S. social work often begins with the celebrated narratives of Jane Addams, founder of Hull House, and Mary Richmond, author of *Social Diagnosis*. These figures are revered as the architects of the profession’s ethical framework and methodologies. Their contributions were indeed profound, but they were not singular. Running parallel to their work, often in segregated spaces and under oppressive conditions, were the transformative efforts of African American, Indigenous, and immigrant social

reformers whose legacies were deliberately omitted from mainstream accounts.

Figures such as Lugenia Burns Hope, who founded the *Neighborhood Union* in Atlanta in 1908, organized one of the first community-based social welfare agencies led by African American women. Her work predated many white-led settlement houses and became a blueprint for culturally responsive and community-driven service models (Carlton-LaNey, 2020). E. Franklin Frazier, one of the earliest Black sociologists, integrated race-conscious analysis into social work theory and critiqued the paternalism of white charity organizations (Edwards, 1969). Thyra J. Edwards, often called “the most traveled woman in the world,” connected social work to global liberation movements, working across Europe, Mexico, and the Caribbean to advance labor and racial justice (Martin & Martin, 1995).

Yet despite their pioneering influence, these visionaries remain marginal in the collective memory of social work education. Their exclusion is not accidental; it reflects what critical race theorists call *epistemic injustice*: the systematic devaluation of knowledge produced by marginalized groups (Kidd et al., 2017). When curricula, textbooks, and training programs highlight white reformers while omitting the global, intersectional, and culturally rooted contributions of others, they perpetuate a form of academic colonialism. What is erased is not just history, it is methodology, perspective, and possibility.

Segregation Within the Profession

The social work profession’s founding coincided with an era of legalized segregation and racial terror in the United States. Unsurprisingly, the field replicated many of those divisions. In the early 20th century, Black social workers were systematically excluded from leadership positions, graduate programs, and national conferences (Wilson et al., 2023). The National Conference of Social Work did not formally integrate until 1947, decades after its establishment and even then, participation by Black practitioners was limited by cost, geography, and bias (Martin & Martin, 1995). Separate training institutions such as Atlanta University’s Department of Social Work (now Clark Atlanta University’s Whitney M. Young Jr. School of Social Work) emerged out of necessity, not choice (Gary & Gary, 1994). These programs trained generations of Black social workers who would go on to serve communities ignored by mainstream agencies, particularly in the segregated South. Their work laid the foundation for what would later be known as culturally competent or community-based practice, concepts now celebrated in the profession but originally

born out of exclusion (Carlton-LaNey, 1999, 2001; Bent-Goodley, 2005).

The formation of the National Association of Black Social Workers (NABSW) in 1968 represented a watershed moment. Emerging from the turbulence of the Civil Rights Movement, the NABSW issued a clarion call: “*We are Black men and women, proud of our Blackness, who are determined to bring about change within ourselves and within the system*” (National Association of Black Social Workers, 1968, as cited in Martin & Martin, 1995, p. 41). This declaration was not just rhetorical defiance; it was a reclamation of ownership over the profession’s moral compass. NABSW and similar affinity organizations asserted that advocacy and cultural pride were not counter to professionalism, they were its highest expression. Yet even as these movements advanced equity, the dominant professional narrative continued to label their work as “activism” rather than scholarship, reinforcing the hierarchy between “research” and “lived expertise.” (Carlton-LaNey, 1999, 2001; Bent-Goodley, 2006; Everett et al., 1991).

This historical separation was not simply organizational, it was epistemological. It signaled who was seen as a knower and who was relegated to the margins of knowledge. While white reformers were canonized as founders, Black and Brown social workers were memorialized, if at all, as community organizers. This selective memory continues to shape the present, influencing which leadership models who are rewarded, whose publications are cited, and whose voices are seen as authoritative in shaping school social work’s future.

The fault lines established during segregation have never fully healed, they have evolved. The same dynamics that once barred access now manifest as subtle exclusions: the lack of representation on editorial boards, the scarcity of diverse keynote speakers at national conferences, and the absence of practitioners of color in decision-making spaces that determine the field’s direction.

The Contemporary Landscape: Erasure in Plain Sight

Micro-Erasure and Professional Marginalization

In today’s educational and professional environments, the face of erasure has changed. It no longer always presents as explicit exclusion, discriminatory policy, or overt hostility. Instead, it often hides behind the polished language of diversity, equity, and inclusion, concepts that are publicly celebrated but privately undermined. The subtlety of this new form of marginalization makes it both pervasive and difficult to confront (Bonilla-Silva, 2018).

Within schools, universities, and professional associations, practitioners of color routinely report experiences of being “the only one,” the sole representative of their racial, cultural, or linguistic identity in decision-making spaces that publicly espouse inclusivity (Bell, 2021). This form of isolation carries a silent psychological burden. It demands emotional dexterity to represent one’s community with dignity while simultaneously navigating unspoken expectations of assimilation. Such duality requires practitioners to constantly modulate tone, appearance, and self-expression to remain “palatable” within predominantly white professional cultures.

The concept of micro-erasure extends beyond the framework of microaggressions. While microaggressions are verbal or behavioral slights that communicate bias, micro-erasure operates on a deeper epistemic level; it makes people, ideas, and histories disappear. It is a form of epistemic violence (Dotson, 2011), where the lived expertise of practitioners of color is disregarded, minimized, or appropriated. It happens when ideas voiced by a practitioner of color are ignored until reiterated by a white colleague; when their experiential insight is labeled as “subjective” while others’ opinions are deemed “evidence-based”; or when their presence alone is interpreted as a challenge to the status quo rather than a contribution to it.

Over time, these acts of invisibilities accumulate. They erode psychological safety, diminish professional confidence, and send a chilling message about conditional belonging: “You are welcome here, but only if you conform.” The emotional and cognitive labor required to navigate such spaces is immense. Practitioners must continuously engage in self-surveillance: anticipating reactions, managing tone, and assessing when it is “safe” to speak. As Sue et al. (2007) describe, the cumulative impact of racial microaggressions and by extension, micro-erasure creates an environment of chronic stress, hypervigilance, and emotional fatigue.

For school social workers of color, this reality manifests in multiple layers. They are often simultaneously hyper-visible and invisible. They are hyper-visible as representatives of “diversity” when institutions need to demonstrate inclusion, and invisible when real decisions about power, policy, or leadership are being made. They are frequently asked to serve as cultural translators or informal mediators for students and families of color yet denied formal recognition or decision-making authority for this labor. Their expertise is valued when it aligns with institutional comfort but dismissed when it challenges systemic inequity.

This dynamic creates what Wingfield (2019) terms racialized emotional labor; the expectation that practitioners of color will

soothe organizational discomfort about race while suppressing their own experiences of racialized harm. The result is a pattern of psychological exhaustion, professional stagnation, and in some cases, attrition from the field altogether. When an institution consistently benefits from the unpaid emotional and cultural labor of its employees of color while withholding advancement or recognition, it not only perpetuates inequity but violates the ethical foundation of social work itself.

The professional consequences of micro-erasure are far-reaching. It constrains mentorship opportunities; limits access to sponsorship and perpetuates homogeneous leadership pipelines. Those who remain must navigate professional spaces with strategic caution advocating for equity without being branded as “divisive,” addressing bias without alienating colleagues, and maintaining professionalism under the constant scrutiny of racialized expectations. The paradox is cruel: the very practitioners who embody the values of cultural responsiveness, empathy, and community trust are often those least supported by the systems that claim to uphold these same ideals.

To address this contemporary landscape of erasure, social work as a profession must confront not only individual bias but structural complicity. Institutions cannot celebrate inclusion rhetorically while allowing epistemic exclusion to persist in practice. Recognizing micro-erasure as a form of systemic harm that undermines both practitioner well-being and organizational integrity is the first step toward creating environments where authenticity is not penalized, and belonging does not require invisibility.

The Glass Cliff in Social Work Leadership

Leadership opportunities for practitioners of color are often framed as breakthroughs for diversity. Yet beneath the celebratory language lies a recurring pattern; one that research has named the “glass cliff.” Coined by Ryan and Haslam (2005), this term refers to a phenomenon in which women and people of color are most likely to be elevated to leadership during times of organizational crisis, instability, or public scrutiny. In other words, they are given opportunities to lead when the risks of failure are highest, the resources most limited, and the institutional culture is least receptive to change.

In the field of social work, and particularly within school districts, universities, and national associations, the glass cliff often masquerades as progress. When systems face demands for equity or public accountability, appointing a leader of color can serve as a symbolic gesture of reform. Yet these leaders frequently inherit entrenched dysfunctions: underfunded programs, fractured teams,

or politically charged environments resistant to transformation. When inevitable challenges arise, their leadership is scrutinized more harshly, and failure is pathologized as personal rather than structural (Fletcher et al., 2022).

For school social workers ascending into administrative or national leadership roles, the glass cliff can be both an opportunity and a trap. Many reports being called upon to “clean up” crises involving racial inequity, only to face opposition when implementing systemic change. They are expected to “represent diversity” but often cautioned against “making it about race.” Their visionary leadership is welcomed when it is perceived as inspirational but resisted when perceived as disruptive.

Moreover, once these leaders stabilize organizations, they are often replaced by individuals from the dominant culture reinforcing the message that diversity is tolerable in crisis, but not sustainable in calm. This revolving door perpetuates what one practitioner aptly termed “diversity by disaster.” The symbolism of inclusion becomes a shield against deeper reform. From a practitioner’s perspective, the emotional cost of leading from the glass cliff is profound. It demands courage to lead amidst scrutiny, resilience to withstand isolation, and strategic wisdom to enact change within systems that value optics over authenticity. True equity in leadership requires more than diverse appointments; it requires structural reengineering and firm commitment to redistribute decision-making power, challenge institutional norms, and sustain leaders of color beyond moments of crisis.

Cultural Taxation and Emotional Labor

Beyond the visible struggles for recognition and leadership, practitioners of color endure an additional layer of professional inequity; the “cultural tax.” First described by Padilla (1994), this term captures the disproportionate emotional, cognitive, and relational labor that professionals of color are expected to perform within predominantly white institutions. Practitioners of color bear an additional “cultural tax” being expected to lead diversity initiatives, mentor minoritized colleagues, or translate systemic inequities into palatable language for white audiences (Franklin, 2020; Padilla, 1994). These unpaid and often unacknowledged demands lead to burnout and emotional exhaustion while perpetuating a system that extracts labor without sharing power. For school social workers, this taxation is constant and multifaceted. They are called upon to serve as cultural brokers between families and systems, to sit on every “diversity” committee, to mentor colleagues navigating racial tension, and to translate systemic inequities into language palatable to those in power. This is labor

that sustains institutions, yet it is rarely compensated, documented, or formally acknowledged.

Franklin (2020) extends the concept by describing how cultural taxation often blurs into *emotional taxation*; the internalized stress of carrying both personal and communal burdens in spaces that fail to affirm one's identity. Practitioners of color often feel pressure to embody professionalism while suppressing the very emotions that come from witnessing inequity. When a student of color is disproportionately disciplined, they must respond with clinical objectivity. When their expertise on equity is dismissed, they must educate without confrontation. This tension creates a psychological double-bind that leads to burnout, compassion fatigue, and sometimes premature exit from the profession.

The irony is striking. School social work, founded on empathy, reflection, and advocacy, becomes a site where the emotional well-being of its most culturally responsive practitioners is compromised. The cost of sustaining “diversity” is too often borne by those least supported by it. Addressing cultural taxation requires more than awareness; it demands institutional accountability. Leaders must recognize this hidden labor as legitimate work, embedded in performance evaluations, compensated equitably, and distributed across the organization rather than concentrated among staff of color. Furthermore, professional associations must integrate measures of racial equity and emotional sustainability into leadership development programs. Only then can we move beyond performative inclusion toward genuine belonging.

When Erasure Becomes Policy: The Institutional Dimension

Erasure does not only occur in interpersonal exchanges or individual experiences, but it is also codified in policy, practice frameworks, and institutional design. When social workers of color are excluded from leadership, research, and policymaking, their absence reverberates throughout the system. Decisions about student support, discipline, attendance, and even definitions of “well-being” become filtered through dominant cultural lenses. The result is an educational ecosystem that, while claiming neutrality, perpetuates inequity through the very policies intended to prevent it.

Policy as a Mirror of Power

School systems are governed by policies that determine which students are labeled “*at-risk*,” who qualifies for intervention, and what “resilience” looks like. These terms are not neutral; they are historically and culturally situated. Ortiz and Jani (2020) demonstrate that most social work policy frameworks are grounded in Eurocentric epistemologies that privilege individualism, rationality, and behavioral adjustment. Such frameworks often fail

to recognize the collective, interdependent, and spiritual dimensions of resilience common in many communities of color. For example, policies that reward “self-regulation” or “grit” as indicators of resilience may inadvertently penalize students whose expressions of strength are relational rather than individual (Duncan-Andrade, 2009; Ginwright, 2016; Masten, 2021). Similarly, “family engagement” initiatives sometimes assume Western nuclear family structures, overlooking extended kinship networks that are central to Indigenous, African American, and immigrant communities (Cross, 2003; Hill & Taylor, 2004; López et al., 2001; Stack, 1974).

When policy language embeds such assumptions, it constrains both assessment and intervention. This perpetuates what sociologist Joe Feagin calls *systemic racism in disguise*, inequity masked as professionalism (Feagin, 2006, 2013). In this way, erasure becomes institutionalized. It hides behind the language of standards, compliance, and evidence-based practice. It legitimizes certain ways of knowing and invalidates others. Over time, these frameworks calcify into policy artifacts that appear objective but encode cultural bias.

Data, Metrics, and the Myth of Objectivity

Data is often regarded as neutral tools for decision-making; however, data themselves is social constructs, reflecting the priorities of those who collect and interpret them (Zuberi & Bonilla-Silva, 2008). When social workers of color are absent from research and policy interpretation, their perspectives and the realities of the communities they serve remain invisible. Metrics used to assess student progress, mental health, or family engagement frequently fail to capture the nuanced experiences of racially and culturally diverse populations. For instance, chronic absenteeism data rarely contextualize the structural causes rooted in poverty, housing insecurity, or cultural obligations. Behavioral incident reports may pathologize cultural expressions of communication or emotion. Similarly, graduation rates and standardized assessments often reinforce deficit narratives about students of color without interrogating systemic barriers within the institutions themselves. As critical race theorists remind us, “the numbers are not innocent” (López, 2003). When quantitative data dominates decision-making over qualitative counter-narratives, erasure masquerades as evidence.

School social workers, particularly those from marginalized communities, possess intimate, context-rich knowledge that can humanize data and reveal patterns otherwise overlooked. Yet when their voices are missing from data interpretation teams, dashboards and reports, risking the perpetuation of stereotypes instead of dismantling them. Thus, representation in data governance is not

optional; it is essential to ensure that school policy aligns with social justice principles.

Institutional Gatekeeping and Structural Inertia

The pipeline to leadership within school systems and professional associations often reinforces exclusion through a complex web of credentialing, mentorship, and informal networks. Structural barriers, such as inequitable access to professional development funds, opaque nomination processes, and the dominance of majority cultural norms in communication create a form of *institutional gatekeeping*. Practitioners of color frequently find themselves qualified yet overlooked, endorsed yet unsupported.

When these barriers persist, they perpetuate what Ahmed (2012) describes as *diversity fatigue*: institutions celebrate symbolic inclusion while resisting substantive change. Committees are formed, task forces convened, and equity statements published, yet the fundamental hierarchies of voice and power remain intact. Representation without redistribution of authority becomes performance, not transformation. Even well-intentioned initiatives can reproduce erasure when they fail to address power asymmetries. Token appointments, for instance, place practitioners of color in leadership roles without resources or influence, leading to burnout and disillusionment. In contrast, genuine inclusion requires not only inviting diverse leaders to the table but also redesigning the table itself creating structures of shared decision-making, transparent accountability, and equitable access to leadership pipelines.

Professional Associations: Progress and Paradox

Organizations such as the School Social Work Association of America (SSWAA), the National Association of Social Workers (NASW), and the National Association of Black Social Workers (NABSW) have each contributed significantly to advancing equity and inclusion. SSWAA's recent equity-centered initiatives such as the updated National Model (Tan & SSWAA, 2024) and the Culturally Informed Response to Grief and Loss Certificate (Villarreal Sosa, 2025) demonstrate a growing commitment to dismantling systemic bias within the profession. However, as with many national bodies, representation alone does not guarantee transformation. True equity work requires dual consciousness: celebrating the progress of representation while remaining vigilant about the persistence of structural inequity and efforts to retreat to what is known and comfortable (i.e. white supremacy). The question is no longer whether social workers of color have a seat at the table but whether their presence changes the menu. Are their perspectives shaping professional standards, accreditation requirements, and

policy priorities? Are they equitably represented in the authorship of position papers, keynote invitations, and editorial boards?

Without structural change, representation risks becoming what Crenshaw (2019) calls “*visibility without voice*.” Practitioners of color may be featured in promotional materials but excluded from strategic planning. Their stories may be highlighted for inspiration but not integrated into decision-making. When this occurs, institutions reproduce the very erasure they claim to combat; symbolically inclusive but substantively unchanged.

Reimagining Institutional Accountability

To dismantle erasure at the policy level, school social work must embrace transformative accountability, a process that moves beyond diversity checklists toward measurable structural reform. This includes revising policy frameworks to ensure cultural validity, diversifying research leadership, and embedding equity indicators into accreditation and evaluation systems. Accountability also requires courage. Institutions must be willing to interrogate the origins of their standards, the homogeneity of their leadership, and the implicit values embedded in their policies. This means asking uncomfortable questions: Whose comfort is being protected? Whose stories are missing from our archives? Who benefits from our definitions of “professionalism”?

As practitioners and leaders, we must advocate for systems where equity is not a supplemental goal but a structural expectation. When policies are co-created with those historically marginalized by them, trust is restored, practice is enriched, and the profession moves closer to its founding promise of justice for all.

Resisting Erasure: Praxis, Presence, and Power

If erasure is an act of silence, then resistance is an act of remembering, and remembering itself becomes a radical, restorative practice. For school social workers of color, resistance is not merely a reaction to exclusion; it is a deliberate, creative, and visionary process of re-authoring what it means to belong, to lead, and to know. It is the daily work of transforming pain into purpose and invisibility into illumination.

Resistance in this context is not confined to protest; it is embedded in praxis. It is the fusion of theory, reflection, and action that defines authentic social work. Resistance calls practitioners to reclaim authorship of professional history, to write themselves back into narratives that have long excluded them, and to redefine what excellence and expertise look like through a culturally grounded lens. In doing so, they turn the very mechanisms of erasure, silence,

marginalization, and omission into spaces of creation, innovation, and truth-telling.

This form of resistance is also deeply restorative. It does not seek revenge against systems that excluded, but healing for a profession that lost part of its moral center when it silenced its own diversity. Resistance recognizes that liberation is not only external but internal requiring practitioners, educators, and institutions alike to confront their complicity, to unlearn inherited hierarchies, and to cultivate the courage to engage in acts of recognition and repair.

Erasure may distort the narrative, but it cannot erase the evidence of presence. Across generations, the footprints of practitioners of color are imprinted in the very foundations of school social work: in every culturally responsive intervention, every equity-driven reform, every mentorship circle that nurtures new leaders. These traces remind us of social work's moral arc, though bent by bias, still holds the potential to realign toward justice. To resist erasure is to affirm existence to declare that our stories, our scholarship, and our service are not ancillary to the field but essential to its survival. Resistance, then, is both remembrance and rebirth: a process through which the profession reclaims its integrity, renews its humanity, and re-commits to the justice it professes to uphold.

Reclaiming Narrative Power

To reclaim narrative power is to reclaim existence. For decades, school social workers of color have challenged erasure by writing, mentoring, teaching, and leading in ways that insist on being seen not for validation, but for liberation. Their stories are not appendices to the profession's history; they *are* the profession's history. Storytelling, as both praxis and pedagogy, functions as a form of resistance and truth-telling. Bell (2021) describes how practitioners use counter-narratives to expose the gap between social work's professed values and its practices of exclusion. These narratives re-center lived experience as legitimate knowledge, challenging epistemic hierarchies that privilege academic authority over community wisdom.

Contemporary projects such as Black Social Work History initiatives, oral history archives, and affinity-based leadership programs provide critical spaces where these stories are preserved and amplified. They document the contributions of practitioners whose work shaped local and national reforms but were historically omitted from professional canons. Williams (2023) argues that such archival projects "move social work from commemoration to confrontation," from celebrating diversity to interrogating why it was ever absent.

Beyond documentation, reclaiming narrative power also transforms pedagogy. When school social work curricula incorporate first-person accounts of practitioners of color, students engage with social work as a living discipline rooted in community struggle and resilience. Such inclusion broadens conceptualizations of professionalism, reminding future practitioners that expertise does not only emerge from theory, but from the lived wisdom of navigating oppression and sustaining hope.

For practitioners in the field, narrative reclamation is also deeply personal. It means refusing to minimize one's identity to fit dominant frameworks of "neutrality." It means speaking from, rather than around, lived truth. In doing so, practitioners affirm that their presence itself is a pedagogical act, a lesson in courage for students, colleagues, and institutions alike.

Critical Reflexivity as an Ethical Imperative

Erasure persists not only through external exclusion but also through internal avoidance. When educators and practitioners fail to examine how privilege, positionality, and institutional complicity shape their practice, they unwittingly sustain the systems they claim to oppose. Reflexivity, the ongoing process of self-examination in relation to power, is therefore not ancillary to social work; it is central to its ethical foundation. The National Association of Social Workers (NASW, 2021) Code of Ethics explicitly charges practitioners to challenge oppression and seek social justice. Yet ethical commitment requires self-interrogation: *How am I positioned within structures of race, class, and power? Whose pain am I willing to see, and whose comfort am I protecting?*

Critical reflexivity moves practitioners beyond surface-level awareness toward transformative insight. It demands that we question not only what we do but how and why we do it. As hooks (1994) reminds us, education can be the practice of freedom or the maintenance of domination. For school social workers, this means interrogating how institutional routines such as attendance enforcement, behavioral interventions, or family engagement models may reinforce racialized control rather than liberation.

Practitioners of color often carry dual consciousness: simultaneously navigating systemic oppression while working within those same systems to dismantle it. This double vision, while emotionally taxing, can become a site of wisdom. It cultivates what Delgado-Bernal (2002) terms "*cultural intuition*," a deep, experiential knowing that bridges the gap between lived reality and professional practice. Recognizing this intuition as expertise challenges the deficit framing that often accompanies diversity

discourse and instead positions practitioners of color as epistemic authorities within the field.

In practical terms, fostering reflexivity requires structural support. Institutions should embed reflexive inquiry into supervision, professional development, and evaluation processes. Reflective practice groups, affinity supervision spaces, and critical pedagogy seminars can transform reflexivity from an individual burden into a collective responsibility. Only when institutions themselves become reflexive can the profession move from rhetoric to repair.

Restorative Recognition

Restorative recognition is more than acknowledgment, it is accountability. It involves actively identifying, naming, and repairing historical and contemporary acts of erasure. Recognition without restoration risks becoming what Sara Ahmed (2012) calls “*non-performative diversity statements*” (p. 143) gestures that proclaim inclusion while leaving structures intact. True restoration demands deliberate, sustained action. In the context of school social work, restorative recognition can take multiple forms:

- **Curricular Revision:** Incorporating the contributions of historically marginalized practitioners and communities into coursework, professional training, and certification standards.
- **Institutional Naming and Commemoration:** Renaming buildings, awards, or fellowships to honor social work leaders of color who have shaped the profession. Recognition is symbolic but also pedagogical, it signals to students and practitioners that the profession acknowledges its debts and is committed to truth-telling.
- **Structural Reform:** Embedding racial justice metrics within accreditation, hiring, and promotion processes ensures that diversity is not optional but institutionalized. Evaluation frameworks should measure equity outcomes as indicators of excellence, not as peripheral initiatives.
- **Resource Redistribution:** Restorative recognition also requires material commitment. Funding must be allocated to support scholarship, leadership development, and community-engaged research led by practitioners of color. Representation without resourcing is an empty promise.

The spirit of restorative recognition aligns with what restorative justice theorists describe as the “three Rs”: repair, responsibility, and

relationship (Braithwaite, 2002; Pranis, 2015; Zehr, 2002). Repairing the past requires acknowledging harm; taking responsibility means committing to structural change; and relationship calls for sustained collaboration between those historically excluded and the institutions seeking to make amends.

For school social work, restorative recognition is not just institutional reform it is moral reparation. It reclaims the profession's integrity by aligning its practices with its principles. When the field honors the fullness of its history and the plurality of its practitioners, it moves closer to realizing its own ethical mandate: to affirm human dignity, promote justice, and ensure that every voice, every legacy, and every life counts.

Call to Action and Awareness

Erasure thrives in silence and is perpetuated through inaction. To resist it, the profession of school social work must move beyond acknowledgment toward transformation. Silence, even when unintentional, is complicity. The absence of deliberate, equity-centered action allows the same systems that historically excluded practitioners of color to continue doing so under the guise of “neutral policy” or “professional standards.”

This is a call for courage, not comfort. It requires dismantling the structural hierarchies that privilege certain voices and narratives, while cultivating institutional practices that elevate those historically silenced. True transformation will not occur through symbolic gestures but through sustained, measurable change. Each of the following actions represents a tangible pathway to collective accountability an invitation for individuals, organizations, and institutions to convert awareness into structural reform.

1. **Reclaim History.** Social work education and professional development must integrate the scholarship, methodologies, and lived experiences of practitioners of color across every level from introductory coursework to doctoral curricula, from field education to continuing education seminars. Too often, these contributions are presented as “special topics” or elective content rather than core knowledge. Reclaiming history is not an act of nostalgia; it is an act of truth-telling. It demands that educators and professional organizations examine their syllabi, archives, and libraries to identify whose voices have been omitted. Courses should intentionally include the work of scholars such as Iris Carlton-LaNey, Lugenia Burns Hope, E. Franklin Frazier, Thyra J. Edwards, and others who's intellectual and community leadership built the foundation of culturally responsive social work (Carlton-LaNey, 2020). By

embedding these perspectives in the canon, the profession communicates a powerful message: that the knowledge of practitioners of color is not supplementary, it is *foundational*.

2. **Audit Representation.** Accountability begins with transparency. A profession cannot claim equity without clear data on representation in its ranks. National organizations such as the School Social Work Association of America (SSWAA), National Association of Social Workers (NASW), and accreditation bodies must conduct periodic equity audits to examine who holds leadership roles, who authors journal publications, who receives national awards, and whose perspectives shaped policy positions. Recent analyses of professional associations across helping fields show a persistent racial gap in leadership: fewer than 15% of national board positions are held by Black, Indigenous, or Latinx professionals, despite their disproportionate representation among frontline practitioners (Franklin, 2020). This dissonance reveals an equity paradox diverse labor, homogeneous leadership. Moreover, equity audits should not end with data collection; they must include public reporting and accountability mechanisms that commit organizations to measurable benchmarks for change. Representation is not symbolic, it is strategic. It determines which priorities are funded, which problems are researched, and whose solutions are legitimized.
3. **Mentor and Sponsor.** Mentorship is essential, but it is not sufficient. The difference between mentorship and sponsorship lies in the transfer of power. Mentorship offers advice; sponsorship opens doors. Practitioners of color need both guidance and advocacy from leaders who are willing to use their credibility to create access. Sponsorship in school social work might include nominating emerging leaders of color for national committees, recommending them for keynote speaking engagements, or co-authoring research that amplifies their expertise. As Rosette and Livingston (2012) note, visibility without validation can become a trap; sponsorship ensures that visibility is accompanied by institutional endorsement and material opportunity. Organizations should formalize sponsorship pipelines by pairing seasoned leaders with early-career practitioners of color in structured, goal-oriented partnerships. When sponsorship becomes an expectation rather than an exception, representation evolves from tokenism to transformation.

4. **Fund Equity Research.** To dismantle erasure, we must study it. Equity cannot be achieved without evidence, and evidence cannot exist without research. Yet studies examining racialized experiences within school social work remain limited and underfunded. A 2021 analysis of research grants from major educational and social work foundations found that less than 8% were awarded to projects explicitly addressing race or structural inequity in practice (Bell, 2021). Funding bodies including state education agencies, foundations, and universities should designate grants and fellowships specifically for scholars and practitioners researching racial equity, cultural humility, and leadership inclusion. Such funding not only advances scholarships but also signals a collective commitment to knowledge justice the principle that all communities have the right to define and disseminate knowledge about their own experiences (Collins, 2019). Moreover, journals like the *International Journal of School Social Work* play a crucial role by prioritizing and publishing this research. When editorial boards elevate studies led by practitioners of color, they help redefine what counts as scholarly contribution, broadening the profession's epistemic landscape.

5. **Name and Disrupt Erasure.** Erasure cannot be undone unless it is named. This act is simple yet radical requires moral courage. When silencing, exclusion, or co-optation occurs, practitioners must be willing to call it out, even when doing so disrupts professional decorum. The discomfort of truth is the birthplace of progress. Disruption can take many forms: citing underrepresented scholars in one's writing, acknowledging omitted histories in presentations, or directly challenging biased decision-making processes in committees. It can also mean advocating for equitable recognition when colleagues' ideas are minimized or uncredited. As social work educator Kathy Obear (2016) writes, "If you have power and you remain silent, your silence is a form of endorsement." The ethical code of social work compels practitioners not only to intervene in client-level injustice but also to confront institutional inequities that harm colleagues and communities alike. Each act of naming is a small revolution against invisibility.

6. **Build Coalitions.** Erasure is systemic and so must be our response. Isolated initiatives cannot dismantle entrenched inequities. Sustainable change requires cross-institutional collaboration among organizations like NABSW, NASW,

SSWAA, CSWE, LSWO, and university-based programs. Coalition-building creates a shared infrastructure for equity pooling resources, aligning advocacy efforts, and developing unified accountability frameworks. Such coalitions must move beyond performative partnerships toward co-governance. Joint task forces can be established to evaluate racial equity in certification standards, funding allocation, and professional recognition. Collaborative conferences and research projects can elevate intersectional perspectives, bridging generational and geographical divides.

The goal is not merely cooperation, but collective re-imagination, a profession that no longer treats diversity as an initiative but as its operational DNA. Coalition work embodies the African proverb that reminds us: *“If you want to go fast, go alone; if you want to go far, go together.”*

Presence as Protest

When they try to erase us, we respond not with silence but with story, scholarship, and steadfast presence. The profession of social work must look unflinchingly at its own complicity in erasure and commit to transformation that is structural, sustained, and soul deep. Justice cannot live in rhetoric alone; it must be practiced in policy, leadership, and legacy. As I reflect on my journey from school hallways to leading a national organization, I understand now that leadership has never been about title; it has always been about testimony. On July 23rd, as the first African American national president of the School Social Work Association of America (SSWAA), I led the first-ever Legislative Institute March at the State Capitol in Washington, D.C. Surrounded by practitioners from across the United States and around the world, we did not march for recognition alone we marched for *restoration*: for a profession that honors every voice, every culture, and every contribution. That day, our footsteps echoed through history. They carried the names and legacies of those who had been silent, reminding us that visibility is more than symbolism, it is survival. Our presence was protest. Our unity was resistant.

Our march was the living embodiment of what this article proclaims: *We will not be erased*. For me, leadership has always been more than positional; it has been a protest, a promise, and a prayer.

A protest against the systems that doubted our worth.

A promise to those who will come after us that they will never have to be the first alone.

And a prayer for a profession that finally lives up to its creed of justice.

Every meeting where I was the only one, every decision where I fought to make invisible voices heard, every young social worker of color who saw themselves reflected in my presence; all of it was sacred work. It was the labor of visibility, the ministry of representation, and the moral obligation to lead louder. To lead, in such moments, is to transform pain into purpose, and erasure into endurance. It is to mentor those who follow so they rise not as exceptions, but as expectations. It is to stand as both witness and bridge, ensuring that those whose stories were ignored are now inscribed into the very fabric of this profession.

As school social workers, our charge is not merely to advocate for students it is to *embody* the justice we teach. We are the heirs of legacies nearly lost to history, and the architects of futures that will not be forgotten.

We are here. We have always been here. And we refuse to be erased.

In our memory, we reclaim.

In our leading, we liberate.

And in our presence still marching, still rising we make history visible again.

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