

Education Review

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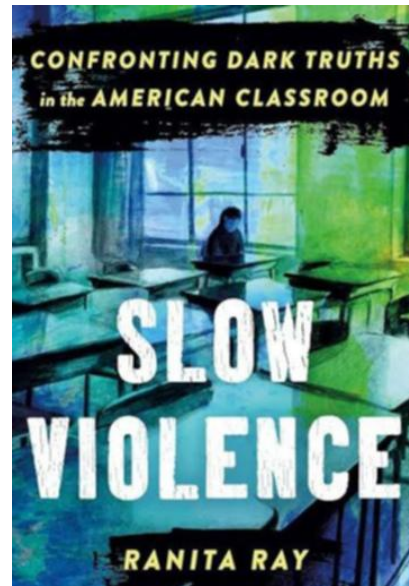
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A Necessary Read

If there be gods, may they guide Mr. B., Ms. Connell, Dr. Geertz, Ms. Jenny, Ms. Johnson, Ms. Luft, Ms. Mack, Ms. Murphy, Mr. Smith, Ms. Taylor, and Mr. Tucker to kick a toe into a metal bed frame, at the corner of a wall, or into a sturdy table leg. Fracture nothing but let the swift violence of the blow grip their bodies in the temporary vice of teeth sucking pain.

Àşę. My late grandmother would say *They need they trifling* [selves] *cussed out*. Swap “selves” with your preferred modifier. My sincere belief is that they will not receive the tongue lashing my grandmother would surely have prescribed. It’s far more likely that the sophomore book by **Ranita Ray**, *Slow Violence: Confronting Dark Truths in the American Classroom*, will motivate many teachers to close ranks of support around the teachers and administrators in the book. If I am right, no fault should be found in Ray’s research. *Slow Violence* is brilliant, but my money is on an aggressive backlash from any teacher whose professional identity maps cleanly upon the meanings of their personal identity.



At issue is an identifiable social psychological phenomenon, identity fusion (Swann, Jr., et al., 2009). The basic idea is that identities are sets of meanings by which we understand ourselves in and across social situations (Burke & Stets, 2023). There is usually some overlap between personal, group, and role identity meanings (e.g., Ray holds herself as a fair person and an ethical researcher), but the greater the congruence between personal and a group or a role identity, the more activating one means activating the other. It’s why members of the MAGA movement respond in reflexive defense of Donald Trump—why they can rewrite their values on the spot when challenged with Trump’s gutter racism, misogyny, corruption, and obvious failings. It’s one of the reasons why we almost never hear active members of law

enforcement agencies speak out against the criminal acts of their comrades—why they can marshal creative (though nonsensical) protections for deadly police violence or sit in silence while we watch videos of terrified Black voices calling for their mothers before being killed by officers. Similar degrees of identity fusion characterize military personnel; medical and court professionals. I am not, of course, saying that your average MAGA politician and Karen are no different from teachers, police officers, doctors, social workers, or whatnot. However, they are linked by the same social psychological processes.

And I am not immune from this process. I once saw a tweet from a Black woman that read something like *Black men are the white men of the Black community*. There were thousands of retweets, likes, and plenty of response posts seconding the emotion. I left Twitter when it was still Twitter, but that post stuck with me because it offends me as an African American man. Whether she meant it as a provocation or in the unqualified boldness in which it was written, I still think the post went too damned far, but did she lie? The post's engagement tells me the message spoke a truth for a lot of Black women. Similarly, and I aim this at the shepherds of children at Ribbon Grass Elementary School, Dorena Middle School, and anyone who might feel personally activated by force of Ray's analysis, let us forgo bids for pity—though *Slow Violence* sketches of a theory of it. Let us also skip the often trotted out platitudinal qualifiers that rarely extend beyond kneejerk defense. Ray covered those anyhow. Let us deal with the content of the book. And if you're an educator who is angry with the author of *Slow Violence*, answer the following: Did Professor Ray lie? Did she obfuscate? Did she minimize challenges to classroom management? Were her lines straight, or did she draw teachers and administrators askew? Does any answer to those questions justify the cruelty so elegantly covered in *Slow Violence*? Was the mocking legitimate? Was the light in Nazli's eyes deservedly extinguished? Perhaps Reggie? Before any defense of K-12 teachers and administrators, let us see that there is no reconciling what happened here.

Slow Violence is a social scientific how-to manual for K-12 teachers who want to create dispirited students. The book is organized by grade level from fourth to sixth. Ray collected data in Ribbon Grass Elementary and Dorena Middle School, both members of Nevada's Clark County School District. The heart of the book is an unwavering showing of "slow violence," and there is something for scholars across several research domains. As a study of schools, *Slow Violence* is grounded in the quotidian of student-teacher relations. Professor Ray offers social psychologists a brilliant study of affect, shame as social control, role identities, social exchange, and identity destruction. *Slow Violence* is also an examination of how institutional pressures and organizational cultures can be harmful. Researchers dedicated to the study and uprooting of racism could read *Slow Violence* as a race-forward book.

The writing is beautiful and clever. Ray's prose gave me the feeling of getting to know her, and the more I read, the more I felt like I found a member of my people in intellect, wit, and humor. Establishing an emotional connection with readers is its own skill, and it is an especially challenging because academic books demand authors teach us something—not feel something. Most researchers know that while stale writing won't quicken any hearts, it's nonetheless accepted, so there's little

pressure to work on the craft of writing. Since finishing *Slow Violence*, I have returned to it purely for the joy of Ray's writing.

I'd be interested to know where education scholars place *Slow Violence*. On my shelves, the book sits with Chana Teeger's *Distancing the Past* and Carter G. Woodson's *The Mis-Education of the Negro*. Neither of those books is *just* an "education book." The same is true of *Slow Violence*. As I noted, the book makes contributions across research disciplines, so who is this book for? I've assigned it to my introduction to sociology course this fall. I've also added *Slow Violence* to my 13-year-old's summer reading list. He's one of a small number of African American students in a massive, predominately white middle school where, among many other incidents, he has been accosted by a MAGA-hat peer, pointing to the hat as a provocation. The way I've had to go up to that school...Educators at any level will find value in *Slow Violence*.

In the remaining sections, I highlight some of what makes this a special book to me. There is an inherent difficulty to reviewing academic books that I love. I've thought a lot about what I wish someone would tell me about the book without ruining it for me.

Emotionally Grounded Research and Prose *with* Ranita Ray

Irrespective of the method, all social science has an element of *trust me bro*. Some researchers ask for more trust than others. *Slow Violence* could have been a set of abstract propositional statements that make contributions to the study of families, education, race relations, small groups, organizations, and emotions with brief and poignant case studies that illustrate the social scientific contributions being made. Had Ray organized this book thematically, it would have become a series of useful but somewhat colorless arguments—an ironically bony and fleshless study. Thankfully, *Slow Violence* is an invitation to *experience* its namesake with the children. Nearly all the "telling" is in scene setting and well-placed theoretical discussions that appear right as the mind wonders what the field has to say and disappear before you groan to get back to what happens next to the students. *Slow Violence* is a master class in showing.

Part of Ray's methodology is a kind of...longitudinal ethnography. At Ribbon, she is a participant observer of a cohort of students as they move from fourth through fifth grade. Dorena introduces students to specialist subjects, and the cohort we met at Ribbon is scattered in middle school. *Slow Violence* isn't exactly about those particular students; it's about a set of social processes, and Ray transitions our attention to those processes playing out between teachers and students at Dorena without abandoning the children we met in elementary school. Those are the data, so to speak. The methodology is a systematized marrying of research conduct, conceptual framing, and writing. These are not separate activities; they *are* Ray's methodology.

One of the problems with "slow violence" as a concept is that it is, by definition, difficult to capture. It doesn't help that researchers keep slapping "violence" as a modifier to social phenomena: structural, environmental, social, racial, gendered, ableist, silent, medical, cultural, and so on. I don't mean this dismissively. Too often researchers define and stake claims about the brand of

violence they're studying, but the strength of the analysis requires a good amount of *trust me bro* and relies heavily upon the moral suasion of Actor A contributes to the ecological conditions that harm Actor B. This formulation isn't wrong on its face, but the processual gap between what Actor A does and what Actor B experiences can be large; sometimes so large that readers are left with hefty moral outrage but relatively little social scientific footing.

Ray invites us into the classrooms with her to meet staff and students and to witness moments of kindness as well as the downright mean-spirited actions some teachers took against students. The conceptual payoff is a closed gap between macro- and meso-level social arrangements and the culture-in-practice that makes slow violence experienceable. Slipping into an omniscient voice, Ray creates the illusion that we are meeting a teacher for the first time together. It's a bit like watching an opening movie scene in which the characters are going about a moment in their lives without dialogue, so we can see what interests them and begin to speculate where the tensions may be. When relevant, we learn of the lives they wish they led. We learn about their home life and whether they are in committed relationships. Ray gives us a sense of their general demeanor at school. None of the information is gratuitous. Each thread of information—sometimes pages of background woven into captured interactions with students—forms the fabric of what a given teacher is. We get a sense of their motives, and later this information becomes a reflection of their hypocrisies, should they dare to see themselves. When we get to those critical moments of hypocrisy, we get there *together*.¹ Ray is there with the reader discovering that her hope for a given teacher was, in some sense, misplaced, and she shares in our dismay without exaggerated writing.

I want to highlight two examples (there are plenty from which to choose). Throughout the book, teachers repeatedly cast themselves as the saviors of what they presume to be universally traumatized students. In Chapter 4, we learn that the Clark County School District is partnering with outside community organizations to issue what teachers call the “trauma scale.” Students and teachers alike qualify as being “in crisis” or suffering post-traumatic stress. Ray notes that whatever the “trauma scale” scores, the district had no interventions to support teachers. We learn all of this *with* Ray; moving through fourth and fifth and on to sixth grade, chapter after chapter, we are *with* Ray each time she is reminded that most Ribbon and Dorena teachers assume trauma is a totalizing experience for every student in their schools. So, it is particularly irksome when teachers lead with shaming rituals and speak to students with vitriol. Readers will wonder, *with* Ray, how teachers countenance mistreating 9-, 10-, and 11-year-olds who the teachers presume are already suffering the fallout of traumatic events in their young lives.

A related but more acute example of hypocrisy that pained me is the juxtaposition of Ms. Mack to a 9-year-old girl named Nazli. In Chapter 6, we learn one of the lives claimed by the 2017 “Vegas shooter” was a close friend to Ms. Mack. We are not told she was sad or depressed. Instead, for several pages, we find Ms. Mack crying or holding her head in sad exasperation. Making our way through

¹ For another variant of this style of the researcher taking readers with her, see Beliso-De Jesús (2024).

pages, we discover Ms. Mack in moments of understandable breakdown, and we see the rolling out of interpersonal, organizational, and national support for anyone touched by that mass shooting. Counted among Ms. Mack's supporters was a deeply empathetic Nazli, offering all the compassion a 9-year-old could muster for her favorite teacher. She even chastised peers who denied Ms. Mack a reprieve from typical rule breaking behaviors. Seven chapters later (note the clever symbolism giving Chapter 1 and 13 the same title), Ms. Mack had an opportunity to repay a child's kindness. Nazli's 2-month-old little brother died. He'd been born premature, and his death transformed a high-achieving, snappy-dressing, child who danced to the front of the classroom to answer questions into a sullen and embittered child. Her brother was buried in February. By April, any sympathy Ms. Mack had for Nazli was gone. "I get it. Life can be hard. But it's *grit* we need" (p. 126). It wasn't just hypocrisy but a weird bootstraps argument that an adult teacher used to indict the character of a 9-year-old who, unlike Ms. Mack, was not given space to grieve, counseling, or organizational support for a present trauma. Instead, Nazli's favorite teacher said this of the grieving child: "Nazli is trouble...violent...She's different, and she used to be someone else, and now she's just creating one problem after another" (p. 125).

Ray's narration is emotionally present. She takes us with her... demonstrating "slow violence." But—*but*—the book is not a slog; and it cannot be reduced to a registry of racist, sexist, or ableist events. Ray does not go out of her way to clean up the violence with paragraphs of hope. Her presentation of the data and analysis are crisp, and because we go *with* her, we get to experience the optimism of new teachers and classrooms. As the readers progress through the book, that optimism will become severely tempered by revelations in previous chapters. In the end, Ray's methodology does not make space for readers to confront the "dark truths" she shows us. Rather, readers are confronted by them.

As a Study of Organizations and Institutions

Slow Violence reminds us that no American institution outweighs education. None represent so direct an investment in human capital. Not religion, polity, law, economy, sport, medicine, kinship, or media—none are as immediately consequential to our daily lives. Beyond academic curriculum, there are the curricula of polite society and conflict resolution, of epistemology, of persons into social categories, and of status. Do not let the smooth taste fool you. Professor Ray's polished narrative prose can carry readers through the book without fully appreciating the sustained dialog about organizational culture and the legitimizing processes of education as an institution. So, let's sit with this for a moment.

Sociologically, every institution is systematized around a generalized symbolic medium of exchange (Abrutyn & Turner, 2011). In English, this translates to an organizing principle. The institution of economy is organized around money; for religion, it's piety; for medicine, it's health; and for education is learning. We can think of these organizing principles as ideologies that form the justifications by which people regulate one another's behavior and enforce what counts as legitimate discourse. Under Trump 2.0, conservative political and thought leaders push to reclaim the white supremacist soul of the nation in part, by demonizing diversity,

inclusion, and equity initiatives (DEI) as un-American and discriminatory against white folk. In response, some schools, colleges, and universities have rolled back such initiatives. In the extreme, school districts have banned books and permitted or incited racist animus to flourish. These organizational moves in educational policy and practice demonstrate how swiftly the ideological basis of an institution can be marshaled when there is sufficient political will to pull upon the emotional ligaments that connect classes of people who are aggrieved, whether real or imagined. However, the American institution of education remains more or less unchanged. Consider Table 1, an abbreviated recreation from Scott (2014, p. 60), to see why.

Table 1
Three Pillars of Institutions (Abbreviated)

	Regulative	Normative	Cultural-Cognitive
Basis of compliance	expedience	social obligation	taken-for-granted shared understanding
Basis of order	regulative rules	binding expectations	constitutive schema
Mechanisms	coercive	normative	mimetic
Affect	fear guilt/innocence	shame/honor	certainty/confusion
Basis of legitimacy	legally sanctioned	morally governed	comprehensible recognizable culturally supported

The three “pillars” are institutional features. Every institution includes mechanisms for (a) monitoring and sanctioning social action (regulative), (b) establishing and supporting values and norms to create a sense of *ought-to* among institutional actors (normative), and (c) spreading the symbolic dimension of social action such that patterns of cognitions and habit seem natural within institutional settings. The thing is ... institutions are not tangible entities. Institutional action is expressed through people inhabiting roles—most often organizational roles. If you want to know something about the institution of education, you go to the schools to examine the institutional pillars in practice.

I want to highlight an example of this that played out over several chapters. In Chapter 8, we are, of course, *with* Ray when she is summoned by a disgusted Ms. Johnson to document and confiscate an iPad from Reggie, a 10-year-old Black boy who excelled academically. Ms. Johnson claimed Reggie was looking at porn that needed to be reported to the principal. There were two pictures. One “was a picture of two white women sitting, one spooning the other and holding her breasts, both in bikini bottoms with only their bare backs visible on the screen.... The other was of two white women kissing each other” (p. 82). At this point, Ray interjected a bit of context: a white child had been viewing an unrestricted video of a birth, which

was deemed inappropriate; however, it was assumed the child landed on the video by first searching for images of characters from the film *Frozen* only to have Google run amuck and suggest the clickable birth video. There was no punishment, and to my mind, nor should there have been. That grace was not extended to Reggie.

Over the next few chapters, teachers openly referred to a child as “creepy,” “disturbing,” “dangerous,” and “dirty.” When they weren’t ignoring him, they spoke about and to Reggie with disgust. Initially, Reggie kept up a child’s sincere but abortive bids for his teachers’ approval. In return, those teachers turned Reggie into an example of broader social ills, indicting his race, his home life, and his class. Eventually, the sustained attacks on Reggie’s character hit their mark. He had gone from a lovely child who excelled academically to one who declared, “But I am not good at anything” (p. 113). He finished elementary school withdrawn from teachers and academics. His teachers noticed—even complained—that they could no longer get him to work; but in one of many momentary parallels to the history of U.S. race relations, the teachers seemed strangely unaware or unwilling to acknowledge how their mistreatment of a little boy crushed his spirit and self-confidence and all but destroyed the trust he’d had in his teachers. Teachers kept Ribbon’s principal, Dr. Geertz, current on Reggie’s decline. As if all hope was lost and a 10-year-old was beyond intervention, Dr. Geertz fatalistically expressed regret that Reggie would “fall through the cracks” (pp. 117-18).

Earlier I listed some curricula we learn in school. Ray deals squarely with these matters, and the pillars that make institutions so stubborn. The whole enterprise of “classroom management” is an expression of the regulative functions of education, and that management is filtered through perceptions and meanings attached gender and race and, of course, sexuality. (I am purposely leaving out some information about this incident because I want you to read the book.) Ray didn’t lower her analysis to name calling or *tell* us the teachers subscribed to white supremacy. Instead, Ray placed how teachers discussed and responded to Reggie next to the nonresponse to the white child watching an inappropriate video next to teachers’ restorative approaches when their own children got into trouble at school next to teachers ascribing to Reggie predatory motives next to headlines about rampant child sexual abuse in the school district. The upshot of these juxtapositions is multiplicative: white students learn school is a safe place to explore natural curiosities without being punished into numbness; Black students learn shame, dishonor, and suspicion are educational responses to their curiosities—that they can expect to be made an example of and reconstituted as a *kind* of thing (Garfinkel, 1956); the race-class-gender intersectional dimension of classroom management needn’t be called to the front of the class but it will be affirmed and expressed in taken-for-granted ways. That the barriers to teaching are so low that people who despise the students can enter the profession is both an indictment of education and sadly symbolic.

A parting thought lingers with me in Ray’s analysis of school organizational culture: No amount of academic achievement saved the students or their parents from a teacher’s degradation. Let *Slow Violence* drive the final nail in the coffin to bury the ridiculous idea that the lives of racial minorities would be safe among white folk if we would just stop resisting and comply, behave in class, whiten our accents,

dress like white folk, cut our hair, study hard, work hard, lower the volume of our music, and stop complaining. Enough is enough of this. From Rosewood to Wilmington to Tulsa to Ribbon and Dorena, let it be clear that there is no placating white supremacy. Scholars of American history and race relations will appreciate how Professor Ray shows the futility of trying to meet a supremacist's standards of racial minorities.

Towards a Unified Theory of Racism and Pity

At different points in my reading of *Slow Violence*, I referred to dictionary definitions of “pity” because Ray identified “pity love” as a running theme among staff at Ribbon and Dorena. I’d like to read a follow up from Professor Ray about the relationships between pity, racism, heroism, power-dependence, and role identities. Where one might expect pity to be an actionable emotion to ameliorate someone else’s situation, Ribbon and Dorena teachers expressed pity in a self-serving way. Time and again, pity was an end unto itself. I kept thinking: If the teachers thought all the students were traumatized, why mistreat them? If teachers pitied students, why was their compassion so short? If teachers truly believed most students suffered in their homes, why demonize them? How could a teacher hit Miguel over the head with a sock, robbing him of his dignity? Every time Ray identified pity love, I felt frustrated with the teachers—and to some extent, with a missing formal explanation of what “pity love” was all about.

Halfway through *Slow Violence*, I settled on it being impossible or perhaps unnecessary to formalize a relationship between pity and any theory of racism. Racism is, after all, nonsensical, irrational, fear-based, contradictory, and in the United States, a kind of quiet admission that the racist would lose if made to compete fairly for resources that institutional arrangements ensure the durability of racial inequalities (Tilly 1999). Ribbon and Dorena teachers remind me of Cash’s ([1941] 1991, pp. 428-29) reflections at the end of his examination of southern white culture:

Violence, intolerance, aversion and suspicion toward new ideas, an incapacity for analysis, an inclination to act from feeling than from thought, an exaggerated individualism and too narrow concept of social responsibility, attachment to fictions and false values, above all too great attachment to racial values and a tendency to justify cruelty and injustice in the name of those values, sentimentality and a lack of realism—these have been its characteristic vices in the past. And, despite changes for the better, they remain its characteristic vices today.

That is a summary about a mindset that has escaped the South and propagated among people who revel in ignorance and cartoonish measures of confirmation bias...today.

As I write this review, I am unsatisfied with where Professor Ray stopped with “pity love.” Her discussion of racism and race relations is perfectly adequate. She rightly identifies the operation of Bonilla-Silva’s frames of colorblind racism, and

race scholars will appreciate that she insists that race and racism cannot be understood or properly studied without attending to asymmetrical power dynamics. No book is ever comprehensive, but still...I want more.

This is my sincere request. Sketch a theory of racism that includes pity love. In *Slow Violence*, racist pity love is tangled with heroism and self-aggrandizement. Racist pity love surely has a gendered sibling expressed in patriarchal sympathy. There is a cousin in abled-disabled social relations. In this family of pity love, we are sure to find plenty of commonalities with which to sketch the outline of a general theory, and where the family members differ, so exist opportunities to theorize about that specific member.

A Few Personal Notes

In most cases, the second book is never better than the first. That's most cases but make your own comparisons in this case. Writing a first book is a bit like being a first-time parent. There can be hourly inspections of every inch of the new addition; no errand can be run until the parents are prepared for everything from a runny nose to nuclear fallout. Ray's first book, *The Making of a Teenage Service Class*, demonstrates that level of care and preparedness in theory and method. Things change for subsequent children. Those same parents don't jump at every grunt or cry; they leave the house with little more than water and a hat for child number two—let alone three and counting. *Slow Violence* violates that trend. Professor Ray is as careful and conscientious with this book as she was with her first. The second baby got the first baby treatment.

If you are reading this review before the book, pay attention to how Ray organizes paragraphs and sentences to end with punches that stick with you. Peep the insightful connections between the organizational congruities of police and teachers. Copy and cite how she was "there" and "not there"—how her writing is explanatory and emotional without being pedantic or melodramatic. Take note of how skillful she is with introducing participants; none of them are wooden in her writing. And be on the lookout for the sneaky unspooling of hero narratives.

I am grateful for *Slow Violence*. It offers me a corrective and confirmation. In an email exchange, Howie Becker explained to me that he didn't try to write stylistic theories. He compared himself to a carpenter, constructing robust chairs in which future scholars could sit with confidence. Somehow, my mind translated that imagery into unseasoned but perfectly cooked chicken. (I know the metaphors are mixed.) *Slow Violence* is as sturdy as her first *chair*—deeply flavored like jerk chicken marinated overnight. In separate conversations, a close friend counseled that my work should be transformative or what the hell was the point. That's a high bar, but *Slow Violence* confirms for me that method and analysis are not the only means for delivering transformative research. There is beautiful prose, emotional grounding, and in the hands of a skilled researcher, there is a way of holding a mirror to readers. As a Black father, I see myself in this text. Don't get it twisted; I'm no Ms. Mack, but I will be evermore watchful of criticisms, tone, and moments of exasperation. I hope those charged with the care of our children refuse to go numb in their 10,000th interaction because the next one could transform the joy of dancing legs and wide smiles into withdrawal.

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About the Reviewer

Michael L. Walker earned his PhD in 2014 from the University of California-Riverside and joined the Department of Sociology at the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities in 2017, where he is the Beverly and Richard Fink Professor in Liberal Arts. His research focuses on social psychological patterns in organizations—especially with respect to race, ethnicity, identities, emotions, social exchange, and time as an organizing principle. In trying to understand social life from the viewpoint of others and explaining patterns of social behavior, he mixes ethnography with interviewing and observation to produce research that is theory



forward and unironically emotional. He is the author of *Indefinite: Doing Time in Jail*, which examines the organizational pressures and socioemotional landscape of jail time from the viewpoint of penal residents. *Indefinite* won the 2022 C. Wright Mills Award and the 2022 Charles Horton Cooley Award. His current book project weaves memoir into interviews and participant observation with members of a large midwestern law enforcement agency to examine the emotional landscape of policing, how organizational cloistering can shape nightmares, the problem of police-public trust, and politically charged perceptions of race relations in police work.

About the Author

Ranita Ray earned her PhD in sociology at the University of Connecticut (2013). She is the Baca Zinn Professor of Sociology at the University of New Mexico. For 15 years, her research program has centered on youth, education, and gender and racial injustice. Ray is a 2019 National Academy of Education/Spencer fellow, as well as a 2018 Racial Democracy and Criminal Justice Network fellow. Her research has been funded by the National Science Foundation several times, including in 2018 when her team was awarded a large grant to study urban inequalities in Las Vegas. *Slate*, *The Atlantic*, *The New York Times*, *the Las Vegas Review Journal*, *Las Vegas Sun*, and the *Las Vegas Weekly* have featured Ray's research and original writing. She is author of *The Making of a Teenage Service Class*, which won four prizes and is widely adopted for classroom use. In addition, Ray's TED talk is often used by educators. *Slow Violence* was shortlisted for the 2024 Lukas Work-in-Progress Prize.



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