

**Teaching Black Lives Amidst Black Death: Reflections from a Black Visiting Professor**

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**Abstract.** In this essay the author addresses the struggles of teaching a special topics course, Black Freedom Movement Education, in the midst of a global pandemic and Donald Trump's proposed ban on anti-racist training and critical race theory. The educator framed the course under the conceptual lens of stealin' the meetin'—a Black Antebellum practice of creating otherwise literacy practices under repressive circumstances. This form of educational resistance continued beyond enslavement as Black communities used the resources available to educate each other by any means necessary (Robinson, 2020). On a smaller scale, this class carried on the resistance through critical metacognitive engagement with Black education history. The author discusses how he navigated the course when, less than halfway through the quarter, a Black man was killed and burned in a trench. Using emails, lecture notes, student evaluations, texts, and reflections, the author shares vignettes of tension, Black affinity, and communal restoration.

**Keywords:** place-making, stealin' the meetin', Black education history, Black affinity groups, anti-Blackness

I awakened that late September morning and groggily scrolled through emails on my phone. After deleting the usual scores of junk mail, I paused at the email from our school president:

*You may be aware of reports of a horrific death in our community. Credible news sources have identified the victim as Michael Williams, 44...Our hearts go out to the family and friends of Mr. Williams in this unspeakable tragedy.*

I could feel the heaviness surround my chest as my heartrate increased, but I was still unaware of the gravity of this news. I checked my missed group text notifications. A colleague who knew more of the details was even more shaken than I was. She asked if we needed anything or if we wanted to join her for a trip to town, but sadly, I looked at the time to see that I had missed her by over an hour. Never in her text did she indicate what made this death particularly harrowing.

As I walked downstairs to join my roommate, I was met with the details of the horrific reality. On Wednesday, authorities found the charred body of the victim in a trench in the next town. On Friday, reports identified the body as a Black man from our town. This burned Black body in an overwhelmingly white Midwestern region less than two months before the election was a sign. I had gotten used to the feigned kindness and awkward stares from the people of my new environment. I knew what it was like to be one of the 300 (which felt more like 30) or so Black people in this town. But this—this public lynching that arrived on the heels of a

summer of marching for Black lives, after a scholar strike just moments following Labor Day weekend, after a move from the Blackest city I had ever lived in to one of the whitest cities I had ever lived in—this felt like a declaration.

One can only imagine how much more concentrated the town death was for my students in the midst of these educational contexts. As we learned about the legacy of Black pedagogies in my Black Freedom Movement Education course, we highlighted Black women educators—paying close attention to Septima Clark, Ella Baker, Bernice Robinson, Ericka Huggins, and Gertrude Wilkes—women of the Black Freedom Movement who recognized the personal, political, and pedagogical as intertwined. In many cases, educators and students at citizenship schools, freedom schools, and early Panther political education spaces encountered extreme threats of violence from white local residents and from white law enforcement. Here I was, a Black queer historian of Black education from a working-class family in a small, white, rural town, teaching this very Black education class to a virtual classroom that was half white—making visible the Black radical imagination in a world of anti-Blackness. I wanted to call upon the strength and fortitude of the elders whose names were on our mouths every class session. That Saturday, however, as I came to terms with my own hypervisibility in a neighborhood with blue lives matter flags and Trump-Pence signs, I wondered if I could return to the course on Tuesday with my head held high. I wondered if I, too, could speak truth to power.

In this reflexive essay, I consider what it was like for me to teach through this difficult moment. Conversations include how I made space for all students in class. I specifically outline how I made targeted space for my Black students. Finally, I consider how I offered such support when I was in fear for my own safety—knowing my own hypervisibility as a Black person in a white town. Looking at the short quarter term overall, I question the following:

- What were the joys and challenges of teaching this course before, during, and after the college community struggled with the violent murder of a local Black man?
- How did historical and contemporary Black pedagogical approaches aid with and/or complicate teaching under these circumstances?

In this essay, I will briefly outline the structure of the class, the assignments, the general backgrounds of the students, and the timeline of the course. I will highlight in-class and out-of-class conversations with students and analyze correspondence with colleagues. Finally, I will discuss the strengths of the course, followed by student course reflections. Ultimately, I argue that the course material, themes, and weekly classroom practices along with the self-preservation approaches and affinity group sessions for Black faculty, staff, and students helped the instructor and the students to survive and thrive in the presence of Black death.

## Course Overview

The course I designed was a culmination of my research and praxis: a course that merged the history of resistance during the Black Freedom Movement with the pedagogical affordances of Black education that dated back to the Antebellum era. I built the course with the concept of “stealin’ the meetin’,” which was a literacy practice during enslavement. In the Federal Writers’ Project: Slave Narrative Project, an account from one woman by the name of Elizabeth Sparks outlined this practice. Sparks shared, “Nigguhs used to go way off in the quarters an’ slip an’ have meetins. They called it stealin’ the meetin’. The children used to teach me to read. Schools! Son, there warn’t no schools” for Black folks (Federal Writers’ Project, 1936, pp. 53–54). The short account of her educational history provides insight into the intergenerational dynamics of education in antebellum Black communities—a space where racial hierarchies were challenged in order to provide liberation through education.

Sparks was enslaved in Virginia. At the time, teaching a Black person to read was illegal, punishable by beatings, imprisonment, or—in some cases—death. This tradition of “stealin’ the meetin’,” then, established a trajectory of resistance in Black life—a long line of bold and sometimes life-threatening engagements with education. This concept holds heuristic importance as it conveys the extreme conditions and hurdles Black communities have had to consistently overcome to establish education for themselves, their children, and future generations. This was the teleological and conceptual framework that guided our engagement with Black education history for the term.

The course was designed for a 7½ week quarter. Part of the rationale for the short timeframe was to provide students with intense focused time—fewer courses in a short time. I had 13 students in the class: five Black women, four white women, two white men, one Asian man, and one Latinx non-binary person. While I had long dreamed of a course that would combine Black history and education, I knew that the dozens of books that served as the foundation of my dissertation would be entirely too much for any undergraduate class, especially one this short. I decided on the volume *Teach Freedom: Education for Liberation in the African American Tradition* edited by Charles M. Payne and Carol Sills Strickland (2008) and Russel Rickford’s (2016) *We Are an African People: Independent Education, Black Power, and the Radical Imagination*. These readings helped us to trace the pedagogical throughline of stealin’ the meetin’. We met for two hours twice a week, discussing the texts in whole group and small group after I provided a small mini-lecture on the histories or theories we encountered in our readings. For half of the Fridays, I had students write 200- to 300-word journal entries about how they were feeling, what their learning goals were, and how they were progressing (or not) towards those goals. Early on, I told the students they would design their own final based on their individual learning goals and expected outcomes for themselves. In addition to these questions, I asked students to reflect on the readings, paying attention to the pedagogical approaches, historical particularities, and usefulness for contemporary education. The purpose was to encourage students to track their

own learning even as they analyzed the learning structures of Black liberatory organizations.

### **Stealin' the Meetin': A Brief Historiography**

#### **Conceptual Framework**

I am a Black queer man from a working-class background teaching at a predominately white/historically white institution (HWI/PWI). My primary mode of inquiry is historical, which was the undercurrent of the course and the framing of stealin' the meetin'. I am also a scholar of pedagogy, and I aim to speak to a practice of both affinity and Black-specific liberatory practice connected to the historical foundations of stealin' the meetin'. As a perpetual outsider—minoritized among the faculty, the town, and even my own classroom—I constantly felt the dearth of queer community, even as I struggled to connect to the Black campus community being that none of us were on campus. Despite these struggles, I constructed my class with a focus on otherwise opportunities: stealin' the meetin'—carving out room to dream of educational opportunities when few existed (Anderson, 1988; Federal Writers' Project, 1936; Robinson, 2020). This was especially true as my students and I developed affinity meetings.

Moving from within outward, I engage in this reflexive exercise to heal from my own struggles, to amplify historical pedagogical approaches and their relevance to the present, and to offer the affordances of Black histories, practices, and affinity spaces as sites of healing for Black academics and Black students.

#### **A Legacy of Stealin' the Meetin'**

In her aforementioned oral history, formerly enslaved Elizabeth Sparks speaks to a practice of Black folks who stole away for literacy—seeing this path of education as one congruent with liberation. She tells of a literacy community that problematizes age and gender hierarchies; children taught adults—women taught men and vice versa (Federal Writers' Project, 1936). In his study of antebellum and post-bellum literacy practices in the South, historian of education Herbert Gutman tells of many educational spaces that were created by Black folks (Gutman, 1992). Such stories disrupt this over-told narrative of white philanthropists from the good North who traveled to the bad South to enlighten the Black slave. In many of these cases, schools were established by Black women. Between Deveaux's secret school in 1835 Savannah, Miss L's secret school in Charleston, South Carolina, or Miss Milla Grandison's covert educational space in Natchez, Mississippi, Gutman elucidates a practice of Black literacy in repressive circumstances (Gutman, 1992, pp. 260–262). Scholar James Anderson also highlights this practice of stealin' the meetin', paying homage to the oral history of Elizabeth Sparks and the early Sunday schools that gave birth to meeting grounds for Black intellectual thought in education (Anderson, 1988).

While the phrase is associated with the South, the spirit of stealin' the meetin' did not solely exist in the South. In her study of literacy communities in the North,

scholar Elizabeth McHenry (2002) also tells of learning and intellectual communities with an expansive definition of literacy. Those of us who work in language arts or any language-heavy discipline are aware of the importance of modes of reading, writing, listening, and speaking—such was the case in these Black literacy communities in the North and South. In my research on the Black Freedom Movement, I uphold stealin’ the meetin’ as a heuristic for understanding how Black folks have tailored communities of resistance in the face of antiblackness.

Whereas scholar Jarvis Givens speaks to this practice of Black liberatory educational models in the face of an antiblack existence under the teleology he refers to as fugitive pedagogy (Givens, 2021), I maintain a very similar argument with added focus on Black women’s voices and a term introduced to us by a Black woman (Robinson, 2020). Black queer scholar Ashon Crawley refers to another covert Black practice of worship known as “stealing away” as a model of “otherwise possibilities” (Crawley, 2016). I argue that stealin’ the meetin’ does the same—an otherwise possibility for Black literacy, affinity, and liberation where few or none exist. Whereas the earlier practice was covert, the subsequent fights for Black liberatory education kept that same fervent energy publicly and privately: an education by any means necessary on local Black community terms (Robinson, 2020).

In the Reconstruction era, Black communities saw an increase of schools; in fact, in the early constitutional meetings, Black representatives in southern districts fought for public education for all (Du Bois, 1998). Part of this was meant to protect Black students from having to work in the fields (Anderson, 1988). In her oral history, a Virginia-born formerly enslaved woman by the name of Miss Mary Jane Wilson speaks of how she was not among those who were lucky enough to be taught during enslavement. In the Reconstruction era, however, she built a schoolhouse that educated nearly 75 students at once—carrying on the legacy of Black women who founded schools that emphasized liberatory education for Black people by any means necessary (Federal Writers’ Project, 1936).

In the periods that followed the first and second World Wars, Black educational communities thrived despite the dearth of resources. Educators refined their craft at normal schools, and the intellectual vigor we saw in Black life was cultivated in teacher preparation programs. Still, with or without formal teacher training, a number of Black artists, thinkers, and activists began their careers as teachers in Black educational spaces: Anna Julia Cooper, Richard Wright, Ida B. Wells-Barnett, W.E.B. Du Bois, and Mary Church Terrell are among the many. Within these classroom spaces, such thinkers were creating otherwise possibilities that often contributed to their intellectual and socioemotional growth in their subsequent years. While much of the philosophy centered on the prevailing concept of “racial uplift,” Black thinkers and pedagogues treated education as necessary for Black social, political, and economic growth (Bay, 2009; Grant et al., 2016; Higginbotham, 1993; Morris, 2015).

Among those who became educators in post-Reconstruction Black America was Septima Clark, the architect of the pedagogical styles that influenced multiple groups of the Black Freedom Movement. Clark was born in Charleston, South

Carolina, and she began teaching in 1916 (Lake, 2013). For years, she taught Black students across ages, focusing on the need to connect education to the immediate political realities of Black people. Much of the strength of the pedagogical framework involved in the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), and eventually the Black Panther Party were centered on this model of a co-constructed learning space that merged student experiences, political immediacy, and multiliteracies (Robinson, 2020). While Clark's approach was perfected at Highlander, which was owned and directed by white organizer Myles Horton, the craft and hand-on work were carried out in all-Black citizenship schools, freedom schools, and liberation schools. Clark and her cousin Bernice Robinson built on a tradition of loose hierarchies and education by any means necessary (Payne et al., 2008; Robinson, 2020). Between donations for pencils and narratives written on dry-cleaner bags, they saw education as a liberatory pathway—and they carved otherwise possibilities in these Black educational spaces (Lake, 2013; Payne, 2007; Robinson, 2020). While much of Clark and Robinson's methods are explained through Paulo Freire's later work, which has been coined as critical pedagogy or transformative pedagogy (Freire, 2000, 2005a, 2005b), they draw on an older tradition of Black education.

Clark and many other Black women educators and Black educational spaces in the Black Freedom Movement were the foundation of our course. Such spaces were often fostered by what we would now deem a Black radical feminist ethos of care and community beyond the structures of race, class, and gendered hierarchies. As a Black queer man with working-class roots who commits to feminist praxis, I maintain this focus, recognizing and highlighting the importance of the Black women figures of my course, affinity spaces, and colleague connections. While I may have been the facilitator of the classroom setting, it was through my engagement with colleagues and students, especially Black students, within and beyond our remote classroom that we truly created the spaces for us to think through our existence in a town and institution that were founded in anti-Blackness. How was our classroom and our separate affinity space also a practice in otherwise? How was I drawing from Black critical education foremothers to further our intellectual, social, and political liberty?

## **The Events**

### **The Weekend**

For my entire first two months in town, I spent the bulk of my time with my roommate/colleague and another colleague—two Black women who share my scholarship interests across the humanities and social sciences. As the pandemic pod, we did everything together: trips to our favorite food places, errands, lounging by the lake, in-town writing retreats, and more. When the very unexpected storm tore through town, we even split a hotel suite. It was no surprise, then, when we learned of Williams' murder, we immediately synchronized our flights. We held this grieving space together, and while I was still empowered by our meeting, I could not help but think of my students' reactions to the news.

Shortly after our flight logistics planning, I reached out to the whole class:

*Hello Everyone*

*I wanted to update you about the proposal deadline for the final. I am also still processing the violent homicide of Michael Williams, particularly as a Black man living in [this town].*

*I encourage you to take the necessary time to process this weekend. Please see the president's email for counseling services if needed. Also, feel free to reach out to me if you want to talk...*

The letter was meant to acknowledge what students might be feeling and to locate my own specific fears and frustrations as the only Black man in our classroom community. Even in the space I had carved out to be our remote academic home, I felt like an outsider in this moment of heightened Black fungibility (Moten, 2008).

Early Sunday afternoon, we had a BIPOC faculty and staff meeting to connect, vent, and share our suggestions for moving forward. It was there that my colleagues shared the most brutal details of their experiences: loud Trump-Pence celebrations the night of the 2016 election, campus safety officials who wore “blue lives matter” shirts and hats, staff members with signs that read “We Back the Badge,” and the string of American flags in front of homes—to name a few. These were the perpetual threats to our safety and personhood which were protected by a certain brand of Midwestern whiteness. We saw the looming dangers, but the politics of the very anti-Black governor and half of the surrounding local town ensured that my neighbors and colleagues could post these messages without social consequence. Consequently, these were the coded assaults on our mental health that were compounded by our additional unpaid service, our pedagogical contributions, our writing demands, and our quest for academic security in spaces never intended for us.

We listed the immediate needs for faculty and staff to have access to transportation that took us away from town, the need for campus safety that was not tied to blatantly white supremacist organizations, recruitment of Black faculty and the inclusion of a Black studies program, and a plan for continued meetings and organizing moving forward. We were locating the concrete demands for our administration.

Later that evening, the president sent an email to the Black faculty and staff that named the victim and spoke directly to his identity:

*Dear colleagues,*

*This evening I want to offer some words and actions to express my commitment to you. In this white town, white college, and white state, the thousands of small and large ways that you have experienced prejudice require attention and recognition. For far too long these incidents have been*

*unacknowledged. The death of Michael Williams must be recognized in its own tragedy and for its greater impact and connection to the historic trauma of the Black community.*

*For these reasons, classes tomorrow have been cancelled. I am working to take actions in the immediate future that I hope will bring needed changes to the College through our policies and practices. Specifically:*

- *local and regional transportation and formulating a plan for shuttles within Grinnell and to Des Moines and Iowa City*
- *working with Campus Safety and creating a safety plan (e.g. reporting, escorting, resources) that addresses community safety vs. policing*
- *and moving forward with a faculty vote on the spoken use of the N-word in the classroom (Executive Council is meeting tomorrow to discuss this process).*

*...I care deeply about you. I will work with campus and community partners to act on it.*

I was at once impressed, encouraged, and frustrated by this email. An initial glance convinced me that she committed to some concrete actions. While this was heartening, especially since two of the items were on our list, I was infuriated by the third bullet. My first faculty meeting was an emergency session on “academic freedom,” called by faculty who felt threatened by the president’s critique of non-Black professors using the “N-word” in class. “Academic freedom” became the coded language of whiteness—an excuse for verbal assaults on Black life. These professors vehemently clung to their freedom to read the “N-word” aloud in class. It took the violent murder of a local Black man to end this curricular violence (Jones, 2020) against Black students. While conversations of Black studies and recruitment were in our meeting notes and in general conversation, the president made no mention of this. Committed to the Black life on campus, including my students’ experiences and the future of my own potential stay at the college, I replied to the president:

*Dear President,*

*Thank you for this letter. As a new Black term faculty member, I have cautiously navigated this very white town. On Friday, before I was made aware of the violent details of Michael Williams’ murder, I told my department chair that I am often nervous when I run at my local park. That nervousness is heightened...*

*I appreciate how you have outlined three concrete moves to increase safety inside and outside the classroom. I also hope that the college increases attention to Black studies curriculum, recruitment of Black students, and hiring of Black faculty in the coming years. While I am wary of inviting Black*

*people into very white spaces, I am simultaneously aware that there is strength in numbers and value in providing Black affirmations in the curriculum.*

*I know this to be true in my own classroom. Within the first two class sessions of the semester, one of my students thanked me for being here and added "representation matters; I appreciate you." Our perceived absence in word, deed, and physical proximity incites a real threat to our very existence. Students and staff know it and feel it, and we celebrate each other's presence, feeling a little more alive. Every time I encounter another Black person in the community or see a new Black face in a video call, my breathing eases, and my smile widens; I feel a little bit safer. I knew exactly what my student meant...*

My letter was an attempt to affirm her commitments and name the things we needed—to speak from what I knew from my experiences with students and my own interactions with the town. Naming my experience helped me to see that it is not just representation, but also critical engagement and representation that mattered, and I had to make that known to her.

### **Class 1**

More difficult than that email exchange was my first synchronous class on Tuesday. School had been cancelled on Monday, so students were just re-engaging in classes for the first time that week. I did not attend the vigil on campus for fear of hearing white mourning—or worse yet—of laying open my real-time grief for white audiences. On Tuesday morning, I prepped for class with the weight of my fears and grief. I wanted to open space for students to process, but I also wanted to honor the direction of the class.

We began with a check-in. Like I had done two weeks prior, I asked them to examine a dozen or so semi-personified blob cartoon images to locate their feelings and explanations in the chat. When I asked for verbal comments, only two students spoke. After, I read some of the responses aloud and asked if it were okay for us to engage in a breathing exercise. I explained to them what I had explained to the President—the need to consider the Black faces in white spaces and my fear as a Black man in town.

Shortly after, I asked the students their next moves, reminding them that it was their class as well. Students wanted to move on with the lesson for the day. I still felt the weight of their silence which spoke volumes. When they broke into small groups, I stepped out of the room to vent with my roommate.

Nearly in tears, I confessed,

"Hi, friend. That might have been the hardest class I have ever had to teach. Can I have a hug?"

“Of course. I’m sorry, buddy.”

Her embrace was the balm I needed as I stumbled through the second half of class. Students returned to share their midterm ideas in the chat. Again, one or two students shared verbally, and the heaviness persisted. Once all groups had shared their input, we tried to review the reading in small groups and then in the larger group.

As the students broke into groups again, I read the latest news on the case. Four suspects had been charged. One news source reported,

Williams was Black. All the people charged are white. But during a Tuesday news conference with the Iowa-Nebraska chapter of the NAACP, police said there was no evidence [he] had been murdered because of his race. At least one of the suspects...knew Williams, they said (Sahouri & Smith, 2020).

The response was disconcerting. The presumption that knowing someone would preclude racial motivation in the murder says much about the ignorance of the multiple layers of race and how it has operated historically. Many Black victims of lynching were everyday people in the community—known by the members in the town and the perpetrators of their demise. What would make her believe this was any different?

While the NAACP regional president’s follow-up statement was a little more fleshed out, it still did not convey the weight of racial injustice:

“Given that the current climate where racial justice is on the front burner for so many...we understand the fear this kind of incident evokes,” Andrews said, adding that it’s understandable the discovery of a Black man’s body burning in rural Iowa raised red flags.

“If there is something there, then we need to identify and address it. If there is not something there, we need to make sure that we have that clarity, as well. Any time there is a concern about the possibility of a racist act, that’s where we are” (Pratt, 2020).

How much higher did these flags need to be raised for the chapter to also strongly consider this a racially motivated case? What was going to be their response for the people who had to carry this fear? What did it mean for them to “be there”? How had we gotten through an entire school year no clarity?

When students returned from groups, sensing they were overwhelmed, I cut class short and sent them away with warm wishes. That night I kept replaying the experience over again in my mind. In this online space, we had somehow created community. In the weeks prior, we laughed together, affirmed responses, asked critical questions, and made connections. This week, we mourned together, shared our frustrations, and rested in a collective silence around the threats against Black life.

In the press conference that took place that afternoon, law enforcement shared a similar sentiment as the NAACP and with the same rationale. A special agent reported, "While it would be inappropriate to speak to a motive in this case, I can say without hesitation that no evidence has been found that show the acts against Williams were motivated by race" (Pratt, 2020). Again, "without hesitation" removes centuries' worth of violence against Black lives—ignores the insidious nature of white supremacy and the ways in which it holds us hostage, binds us, kills us, and protects itself from any real accountability. This was anti-Black white supremacy on display without systemic consequence.

The next day, the nation heard the court's verdict regarding Breonna Taylor's murderers.

## **Class 2**

I woke up earlier than usual that Thursday morning with the dual weight of Breonna Taylor case and the nearly weeklong grief of Michael Williams' murder. As if the difficult Tuesday were not enough—the national conversation compounded the threat against Black lives, and I had to share in the experience with students.

Earlier in the week, I presented a broad timeline of the Black Freedom Movement, highlighting the deaths of several key figures. That Thursday, I knew enough to return to this timeline to recognize its aptness. My brain was overwhelmed with connections, and to make sense of it all, I wrote. In class, we opened with our usual activities. Their quick write asked "What are you going to do to protect and keep your joy this week? After they shared their heartening responses, I took a moment to read aloud my early morning meditations:

*Sadly, death catalyzes people:*

*Members of SNCC were moved to action after the death and funeral of Emmitt Till and the swiftly unjust trial of his murderers. Yesterday marked the 65th anniversary of the 67-minute deliberation and acquittal of Till's murderers. Interesting how yesterday, only one of Breonna Taylor's killers was indicted, and the charge was not murder; it was "wanton endangerment." Class D felony: 1 year at the least, 5 at most." People are understandably, justifiably angry.*

*After the death of Malcolm X, more folks began to take up nationalism in their own communities. In Rickford we read about the growing organizations' attachment to his framework. Interesting how the Watts Rebellions/The Long, Hot Summer happen(s) the summer after Malcolm X's assassination. Black folks were pushed to the brink.*

*A number of [rebellions] strike up around the country after MLK Jr's. death in 1968. BPP numbers soar after this historical moment. The death of Bobby*

*Hutton in Oakland also catalyzed Oakland youth to join the BPP and lead charges in their local high schools and colleges.*

*Death is often the precursor to new life—and in many cases, new fights. Take a minute to think about the ways you have been stirred by the large scale murders of Black life this year. What was your response then? What is your response now? What does new life look like for you? What does the fight look like for you? Which lane of resistance do you want to occupy? (Young, 2020)...*

*What personal shifts have you seen in your life overall? What organizational or institutional shifts have you seen in your lifetime?*

When I finished, I could feel the students' silence again. This time was slightly different, so I sat with it—welcomed it. I told students that they did not have to respond, that these questions were for their personal reflections—ways that they would see themselves and their responses as connected to the matrix of oppression and activism—past, present, and future.

Immediately after class, I spoke to a Black colleague about my experiences and my fears in town. Never before had I been comforted and terrified at the exact same moment. As he replayed his experiences, I internally recounted my own. He had been followed by the infamous red truck that I saw on my morning runs; he heard people speed past him and yell obscenities; he had known the dangers of having the audacity to walk in spaces reserved for oversized vehicles—show his Black skin in places preserved for whiteness. When I told him about my plans to leave the town indefinitely, he completely agreed with the idea. While the words might not have been spoken, the tone of his voice nearly pleaded with me to leave and never return.

### **Professor-Student Black Affinity Space**

I was still concerned about my Black students. For nearly a month, they engaged in readings and discussions about the history of Black education approaches during the Civil Rights Movement, and they had to experience all of the emotions of the history with seven other non-Black students. In the midst of the silence, I paid the most attention to them. I spoke with a trusted friend the next day to hear her insight. She said, "the silence could just be your perceived reaction to how they are feeling. Try asking them if they would like a space to process with you; we all know the importance of having affinity." Invigorated by her suggestion, I sent an email to the five Black students in class:

*Good evening,*

*I know I asked the class to meet with me for one-on-one conversations this week, and I still want that. I also want to see if you are interested in having a Black affinity space this week to talk about whatever you want to talk*

*about. It could be open or specific: check in, vent, ask questions, raise concerns, chill, crack jokes...you choose.*

*I know the importance of Black affinity spaces, but I also know you could very well be engaged in spaces outside the class and would prefer not to. Whatever the case, I wanted to make the opportunity available.*

Three of the students responded, and we had an affinity group meeting the following Wednesday. The first student to respond was also the first student to show up in our online meeting room. Her questions and insight in our previous office hours conversations were always welcomed, so I was heartened to see her in this session. Eventually another student joined, but the third student was not feeling well. In our time, I checked in with the students about their classes, about the college's Black history, and about life more broadly. I learned so much about their lives and the continual emotional labor they had to perform, and I also learned about the culture of the school—at once publicly committed to social justice and completely disconnected from the social struggles Black students endured. At the end of the session, we decided to meet again the following week at the same time.

In all, the affinity group met four times in the first quarter and three times in the second quarter. Each meeting we discussed a variety of things; we never had a set agenda. All three students were fourth years, so they shared about courses, job/grad school planning, national and global politics, and their involvement in campus leadership. Occasionally, they would ask me questions about tenure and the logistics of college/university bureaucracy. I spoke about the awkward routes to tenure, politics of teaching, and general responses to their questions.

In our weekly sessions, we were carving out a Black space that was uniquely ours—an unofficial remote room for discussion. I was challenged to think about my practice differently, enlightened by their reflections, and encouraged by their contributions to their respective fields. While I opened the opportunity for the affinity group to speak to their needs, I feel like I gained more from our experiences than they did. I was beginning to feel at home. To a degree, we dissolved the hierarchy of professor and student, harkening to the covert communal liberatory literacy practices in Elizabeth Sparks' account (Federal Writers' Project, 1936).

## **Finals**

The energy in class shifted in the positive direction the last two weeks of the course. We finished our readings and had in-depth conversations. On our scheduled finals day, all 13 students presented in-depth projects connected to our course topics and themes. One student created a game, another presented a documentary on the Black Panther Party's health programs. Other student projects included papers, a brochure of racially conscious medical school curriculum suggestions, a paper about the music of the time, and so on. Students used their liberty to creatively engage with the history of Black liberation and education. These assessments and evaluations were testament to the importance of teaching the

concept of stealin' the meetin', even as our affinity group was metacognitively engaging in the practice of Black placemaking.

Figure 1

**Evaluation Comments**

<b>Please comment on: Work completed with and/or discussions with other students in this course helped me to understand the subject matter of the course.</b>
Working in small groups went well, and was structured so that it was useful. The midterm discussions were well set up.
I enjoyed breakout rooms.
The readings were well chosen and worked with class
At times the breakout groups were not as productive as they could've been, but that is mostly due to the small size of the class.
I enjoyed talking in our small groups because everyone always has such interesting ideas.
The breakout sessions were great, and the large group discussions were awesome. Also the guest speakers in this class were off the chart. 10/10 on discussions here.
<b>Please comment on: The oral and written work, tests, and/or other assignments helped me to understand the subject matter of the course.</b>
In this course I did reading and writing and created a final project that I want to take with me for the future.
The assignments Prof [redacted] gave were helpful- particularly the final project idea. I also appreciated his weekly checking which are geared towards checking in with us as ppl (especially important in pandemic!) and checking in about course content.
The assignments were creative and helpful, especially the midterm blog posts.
Besides the readings I mostly learned from our class discussions and when I needed to look things up for clarity.
I really enjoyed our midterm, learning from other student's essay answers, and I think we could have incorporated it more throughout the class.
<b>Please comment on: Required readings or other course materials helped me to understand the subject matter of the course.</b>
The readings and book recommendations were excellent.
All of the readings were very good and informative.
The readings could be dense at times and sometimes I would have to re read something to fully understand it, which I expected.
Though the readings could be dense, they were supremely interesting and I wish this course was longer so I could have read more.
<b>Please comment on: I learned a lot in this course.</b>
I thoroughly enjoyed this course. This class has got to be my favorite course at [redacted] College. Thank you for liberatory educational experience!
[redacted] is in the top three professors I've ever had, and I think this 2 credit course will be a highlight of my college time.
I wish I'd had more than 7 weeks for it! I did learn a lot, and Prof [redacted] did a great job teaching us during these 7 weeks, it was just tough to get that much info in such a brief time. Overall learned lots!
I had a very mediocre understanding of the CRM and no understanding of BP and freedom schools before taking this class. Thank you for being such a knowledgeable and engaging professor!
Aside from how personally invested I was in the material, the way this class was taught was incredibly effective in my learning.

Note: This evaluation was completed anonymously by 8 of the 13 students

Figure 2

**Evaluation Question Response Summary**



## Discussion

### **In a Sea of Whiteness: Black Faces in White Spaces**

The immediate culture shock of being part of the 3.5% Black population in this town had not subsided before I experienced the murder of Michael Williams. In the wake of the experience, I could not help but feel hypervisible. On one end, my department chair strategically boosted my public presence for the job market, and on the other, I was the face for the school's commitment to support Black lives.

In our Black and BIPOC faculty and staff meetings, talks with students, student affinity groups, and conversations with colleagues, we were engaged in Black placemaking (Tichavakunda, 2020). Tichavakunda (2020) asserts, "Black placemaking can be used to study different groups in different higher education contexts...one might employ this approach to examine how Black faculty, graduate students, and student affairs professionals create places for themselves and in conjunction with each other" (p. 23). In this overwhelmingly white campus in an even whiter town, Black folks were both invisible in prominent meetings, independent research projects, and other parts of campus life. Even in our Black-focused course, less than half of the students were Black. This meant that in a course dedicated to Black political and intellectual history in education, Black students were hyper-aware of their non-Black peers and thus more mindful of how their commentary could be received. In town, we were hypervisible: existing only to the extent that we were a Duboisian problem (1903) or completely fungible entity (Moten, 2008). In other words, we were seen as a threat to the town because of our phenotypic and cultural distance from whiteness, or we were rendered completely invisible (or irrelevant) due to our distance from whiteness. Because of this paradox, Black students, faculty, and staff had to strategically build remote space for ourselves. Sadly, as with most Black tragedies, the local murder in a year of public Black deaths ushered in a series of platitudes and low-level commitments. Opening spaces to grieve together, provide advice, and support each other was important. It was through my experiences with Black colleagues and friends that I knew enough to create affinity spaces with my students, which opened the opportunity to hear and be heard by each other.

### **Course Evaluations**

The course evaluations provide insight into how the students received the instruction. Regardless of the struggles of the moment, we established opportunities to explore the power of the Black radical imagination in education through our sessions. By centering Black historical practices regardless of the perpetual threat on Black life, I helped students to learn. At least two students explicitly noted how the final project they built in relation to the course themes—based completely on their learning goals—was a key contributor to their learning process. Students' responses on evaluations also indicate that the course methods, opportunities to share, and structure were useful for them.

Student responses were in the “Strongly Agree” and “Moderately Agree” category for every question, which indicates that the students believed the course was informative, well-organized, and engaging. In their comments, students noted that some of the readings were dense, but they simultaneously shared how they learned from the course through readings, discussions, small groups, and final projects. Three categories garnered 100%: my ability to help them understand subject matter, my course’s ability to help them in remote circumstances, and their willingness to take a course from me in the future. This speaks to an older phrasing from Gloria Ladson-Billings (1995) about the work of culturally relevant pedagogy—that when we create opportunities for students to engage criticality and develop cultural competence, we are just practicing good teaching.

### **Recommendations for Stealin’ the Meetin’ and Black Placemaking in Higher Ed**

What happens when a remote and in-person campus community presents one level of danger, and the neighborhood in which we live poses another? The mechanisms we use to connect remotely have to then be the spaces in which we establish and/or maintain community. The challenge moving forward is to translate Black affinity spaces within classes at HWI/PWI institutions to better support Black student and faculty social, intellectual, and mental health. Our back Black channel of affinity within this course provided an outlet to dig more deeply into conversations from the text and our lived experiences. More research should be conducted into the usefulness of student-faculty intra-class affinity spaces for the potential to build sustainability for Black faculty, students, and staff. Placemaking happens on an institutional level largely through the labor of Black students and faculty members (Tichavakunda, 2020, p. 22). I suggest institutions take up the financial and personnel commitment to Black affinity, so that Black students and faculty can carve out this potential separate space—Black education spaces (BES)—whether remotely or (as schools reopen) in person (Warren & Coles, 2020).

While our affinity group was the placemaking needed to steal away, our virtual classroom was also the space to find connections to the Black radical imagination in education. We discussed the liberatory affordances of Black Freedom Movement organizations as we encountered the real-time threats to Black life. Education scholars should also create critically engaged spaces of otherwise in readings of Black scholarship, small groups, whole class discussions, mini-lectures, and journals. Just as one would in the physical classroom, educators should leave space in the virtual room to critique interlocking systems of domination, share frustrations, name connections to home, and celebrate a range of joys.

Additionally, educators should prioritize socioemotional space, celebration of Black people and Black traditions, student-driven projects, and metacognition. Scholar Gholdy Muhammad’s Historically Responsive Literacy Framework encourages educators to ground pedagogy in identity, intellectual pursuits, criticality, and skills. Unaware of the details of this framework at the time of teaching my Black Freedom Movements course, I employed all four—grounding our work in the practice of Black intellectual societies and of Black enslaved folks who were stealin’ the meetin’ prior to the Civil War (Muhammad, 2020; Robinson, 2020). I encourage educators to

veer away from predominately white traditional notions of school and schooling, to imagine what education could be, and to invite students to create projects that allow them to build something new. More research and practice should examine how Muhammad's framework operates in higher education.

### **Conclusion: More Work**

Through my interactions outside of class, I was able to create and sustain liberatory practices within class. Outside of class, Black colleagues, students, and I were building otherwise opportunities for Black love, self and collective care, and intergenerational dialogue—we were stealin' the meetin', creating alternative spaces of dreaming through our Black educational community (Robinson, 2020). We navigated the pandemic, cultivated speaking spaces, and planned for our own future safety all within the small group. Black faculty and staff committed to stay at the college, in the town, even if we had to temporarily leave for our sanity. Our connection and commitment was a practice rooted in otherwise possibilities (Crowley, 2017, pp. 8–9; Robinson, 2020, p. 61) that helped us to sustain our personhood and Black intellectual connections under the threat of violence. While our engagements were not illegal and did not operate in direct opposition to the college or community, they did create otherwise opportunities to dream of a school community that was in direct opposition to anti-Blackness. In both colleague and student affinity spaces, we encouraged, affirmed, and informed each other in order to maintain our presence in the face of the threat of violence. Moreover, we worked to build a Black community in a space where communal engagement was stifled by the pandemic.

In the classroom, I carried the generative energy from Black affinity spaces into praxis. BIPOC students and white students learned the power of stealin' the meetin' within the classroom, and Black students and I engaged in a deep practice of it separate from the class. This critical reflection, then, is an account of that practice, leveraging a precursor to Black feminist educational practice. In her famous essay "Engaged Pedagogy," cultural critic bell hooks speaks of the importance of vulnerability, healing, criticality, and love in teaching (hooks, 1994). Our work was embedded in this practice, and this account is a metacognitive home-building that connects the pedagogical, personal, and political for the future stealin' the meetin' in higher education.

### **Conflicts of Interest**

Notions of conflicts of interest rest upon an objectivity of the research and subject. As a reflexive essay this work necessarily positions the researcher as one of the subjects. Mindful of this, the author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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