

LEARNING TO LEAD,
LEADING TO LEARN

Open Access Book Series

The Center for Engaged Learning (CEL) Open Access Book Series features concise, peer-reviewed books and edited collections for a multi-disciplinary, international, higher education audience interested in research-informed engaged learning practices. CEL is committed to making these publications freely available to a global audience.

Series editors, Jessie L. Moore and Peter Felten

Select Publications

The SoTL Guide: (Re)Orienting the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning
Nancy L. Chick, Peter Felten, and Katarina Mårtensson

doi.org/10.36284/celelon.oa10

Inclusive Pedagogy in Practice:

Perspectives from Equity-Minded College Educators

Edited by Amelia Koford, Corinne Castro, and Christopher Bollinger

doi.org/10.36284/celelon.oa9

Counterstory Pedagogy: Student Letters of Resilience, Healing, and Resistance

Edited by Adriana Aldana

doi.org/10.36284/celelon.oa8

Becoming a SoTL Scholar

Edited by Janice Miller-Young and Nancy Chick

doi.org/10.36284/celelon.oa6

Writing Beyond the University: Preparing Lifelong Learners for Lifewide Writing

Edited by Julia Bleakney, Jessie L. Moore, and Paula Rosinski

doi.org/10.36284/celelon.oa5

What Teaching Looks Like: Higher Education through Photographs

Cassandra Volpe Horii and Martin Springborg

doi.org/10.36284/celelon.oa4

Learning to Lead, Leading to Learn

A Collaborative Syllabus for
Higher Education Leadership

Edited by Linda Adler-Kassner and Chris W. Gallagher

Center for Engaged Learning at Elon University
Elon, North Carolina

Parlor Press
Anderson, South Carolina



Elon University Center for Engaged Learning
Elon, North Carolina
www.CenterForEngagedLearning.org

©2026 by Linda Adler-Kassner and Chris W. Gallagher. This work is made available under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/) license. Cover art designed by [Freepik](https://www.freepik.com/).

Series editors: Jessie L. Moore and Peter Felten
Copyeditor and designer: Sophie Grabiec



The current edition is distributed and sold by Parlor Press with these ISBNs:
ISBN (PBK) 978-1-64317-592-8 ISBN (PDF) 978-1-64317-593-5

Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Adler-Kassner, Linda, editor. | Gallagher, Chris W., editor.
Title: Learning to lead, leading to learn: A collaborative syllabus for higher education leadership / edited by Linda Adler-Kassner and Chris W. Gallagher.

Description: Elon, NC: Center for Engaged Learning at Elon University, 2026. | Series: Center for Engaged Learning Open Access Book Series | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2026014134 (print) | LCCN 2026014135 (ebook) | ISBN 9781643175935 (paperback) | ISBN 9781643175942 (PDF)

Subjects: LCSH: Education, Higher—Administration. | Educational leadership.

Classification: LCC LB2341 .L38 2026 (print) | LCC LB2341 (ebook)

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2026014134>

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Preface | The Learner, The Broker, and the Giver: Leadership Journey Through the Dark Side | 1

*Chng Huang Hoon, Chua Thian Poh Community Leadership Centre,
National University of Singapore*

Introduction Course Overview | 7

Part 1: Learning from Experience | 37

Chapter 1 | A Case Study in Presidential Leadership in Perilous Times: Rhetoric, Theater Training, and Life Experience | 43

Elaine Maimon, Governors State University

Chapter 2 | Leading Like a Teacher | 57

Emily Isaacs, Montclair State University

Chapter 3 | Learning to Lead without Authority: Accreditation and Assessment Mandates | 77

Chris Blankenship, Salt Lake Community College

Chapter 4 | Academic Leadership Beyond the Academy | 95

Heidi Estrem, Idaho State Board of Education

Chapter 5 | Practice Giving as a Way of Learning Leadership | 109

Jeffrey T. Grabill, University at Buffalo, State University of New York

Chapter 6 | Lessons from a Black Feminist (Interim) Dean: Can I Bring My Authentic Self? | 121

Staci Perryman-Clark, Western Michigan University

Chapter 7 | Learning to Navigate Online Leadership: An Invitation to Collaborate for Group Project Skeptics | 141

Erin Lehman, Ivy Tech Community College

Chapter 8 | Listening as a(n Incomplete) Leader | 153

Beth Brunk, University of Texas at El Paso

Chapter 9 | Lessons Learned about Leadership | 169

Duane Roen, Arizona State University

Part 2: Theorizing Practice, Practicing Theory | 195

Chapter 10 | Learning at the Boundaries: Feminist Invitational Rhetoric and Sensemaking toward Deep Change | 201

Elizabeth Wardle, Miami University

Chapter 11 | Fugitive Learnings: An Endarkened Feminist Inquiry into Administrative Refusals and Creative Escapes | 217

Carmen Kynard, Texas Christian University

Chapter 12 | Language and Identity Politics in Leadership: Cultivating Comunidad | 237

Candace de León-Zepeda, Our Lady of the Lake University

Chapter 13 | An Imperative for Leadership & Institutional Transformation: Going Back to Code | 259

Jonikka Charlton, The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley

Chapter 14 | Queering the Administrative Brew: A Possible Impossibility | 279

Jonathan Alexander, University of California, Irvine

Chapter 15 | Personal and Professional Identities, Belonging, and Change: The Process of Becoming | 299

Sheila Carter-Tod, University of Denver

Conclusion Final Class | 319

Index | 325

Acknowledgements

The editors would like to thank the inspiring leaders who contributed their labor, time, and wisdom to this collection; we are forever in their debt. We are also grateful to Jessie Moore and Peter Felten for their generous feedback, for shepherding this book through the publication process, and for ensuring that books like this one are open access.

CHAPTER 11

Fugitive Learnings**An Endarkened Feminist Inquiry into Administrative Refusals and Creative Escapes**

Carmen Kynard, *Texas Christian University*

This inquiry takes its inspiration from Cynthia Dillard’s (2000) now 25-year-old treatise, “The Substance of Things Hoped for, the Evidence of Things Not Seen: Examining an Endarkened Feminist Epistemology in Educational Research and Leadership.” Dillard’s article has propelled a wide range of theory-building and other-world-making. Her work reframed and re-theorized leadership from the lived experiences and narratives of Black women and Black feminists. She flowed from a long trajectory of feminists of color who have rejected western, patriarchal norms of knowledge-making that require folx of color to disconnect from their own lived experiences and thereby ignore their most crucial site of theorizing and learning (Hurtado 1996). Dillard, like the Black feminists before her, calls for a transgression of accepted content, language registers, discursive styles, and disciplinary conventions and further defines this kind of educational praxis and scholarship as *endarkened* (Hurtado 1998). Thus, simplistic debates about quantitative versus qualitative methods, social justice pedagogies versus traditionalist paradigms, or digital literacies versus analog learning belong to false binaries that evade the necessary work of really interrogating the philosophical origins and methods of Black and Brown educational oppressions (Dumas 2016, Sandoval 2000). Endarkened feminist epistemology is thereby not merely another

“difference” to be celebrated or placed in a sea of every other paradigm. It must unlearn traditionalist schooling and point towards something else.

I offer here an “endarkened” Black feminist inquiry into the deep failures of administrative structures and processes in addressing racial harm in American universities (McClish-Boyd and Bhattacharya 2021). This very personal-as-political narrative writing is a process that unravels my own fugitive learnings, which means I must ask: What alternative models of living, thriving, and imagining in the academy are truly available to me? (Okello 2024). As a shorthand for fugitivity, I am referencing notions of creative escape or hideaway from white supremacist structures—both literally and metaphorically—in the specific histories of Black life and aesthetics traced back to enslavement. These legacies of fugitivity remain viable as a way of life in the American university, which my endarkened narrative will attempt to uncover and recover. I would even argue that endarkened narrative writing itself is fugitive. “Endarkened” purposely counters the academy’s white, bourgeois prosaic forms that date back to the European Enlightenment, most simply defined as the intellectual movement of western Europe’s seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that defined the notions of humanity—kept sacrosanct today by the academy’s founding disciplines and departments—during the exact time of racial enslavement and Indigenous removal. This notion of “endarkened” is an especially critical overture, because it seeks to stand on the outside of the Enlightenment’s liberal humanist precondition of antiblackness (Malaklou 2021). Our disciplines and language registers are deeply rooted in antiblack origins and this shows up in the ways we cast our words about Black folx in American research and scholarship. In contrast, Black feminist “endarkened” writing is a living thing that sees, thinks, breathes, and speaks back to its multiple oppressions, all while breaking Enlightenment habits, European canons, folx’s feelings, and closed white circuits. It is form, methodology, theory, and radical practice.

In this chapter, I situate myself as a race-radical Black feminist who interrogates larger university contexts from the spaces of what I will define as fugitive learning (Harney and Moten 2013; Kelley 2016; Givens 2021; Yang 2017). From my vantage point, I have continually witnessed an American academy that runs as a poorly-managed big business, holds no one accountable (especially those who are most privileged), promotes unlawful pedagogies and wider behaviors, anoints the most problematic perpetrators of harm, uses every layer of writing instruction to indoctrinate whiteness, denies the most horrific origins of its compromised and unethical histories, and shows up with as many nefarious coups and self-interest-driven alliances vying for power as HBO's eight-season series, *Game of Thrones*. I see the American university from what might be an altogether different lens from the typical liberalist humanist lens on the common good, life of the mind, and great books/great ideas (Kynard 2023). My narrative thus questions the possibilities and limitations of leading institutions still so fraught with and built upon legacies of oppression for BIPOC communities.

And so I travel back to the first year of college, to the place that I call my teaching home: the college composition classroom. It's where I have learned and unlearned everything about the violence of the western academy.

**“On the Crime Side, the New York Times Side”²:
When White Supremacist Curriculum Criminalizes
Minoritized Students and Protects White Interests**

In one auspicious year in a first-year writing classroom in the heart of New York City, the most populous city in the United States, a group of students came to talk with me during office hours. I assumed their concerns would be related to the course, but instead they wanted to discuss issues about a different class and professor. I was still relatively new to the college, so I had no real context or background information on who they were describing. Brown and Black students often seek my

² Lyrics from the song “C.R.E.A.M.” by Wu Tang Clan.

advice on ways to navigate the university, especially when it comes to writing, but these conversations far surpass what we often limitedly call mentoring. Instead, students and I are engaging in a way of co-learning and challenging the absurd and harmful processes of white supremacist schooling.

The students who visited me that day were interested in issues of justice and drug addiction in Brown and Black communities. They were enrolled in a course that examined these politics as well as policy and rehabilitation practices that support folx experiencing addiction. One particular assignment got them real twisted: an interview with a “crackhead,” the pejorative and ableist term used to describe someone who is addicted to crack cocaine (a highly addictive drug that is produced by dissolving powdered cocaine, boiling it until a solid, drying it, and then breaking it off into chunks/rocks). This term, “crackhead,” has been intentionally wielded against poor communities of color since the 1980s Ronald Reagan administration, when industries left the US's largest cities populated by mostly Black and Brown communities. More impoverished than before, these communities turned to underground drug economies, which then led to their being targeted as national enemies in the US War on Drugs (Alexander 2010; Hinton 2016). When these students asked the professor what made him assume they had such ready access to centers of crack-cocaine addiction, he simply told them to take a subway train up to the Bronx, the poorest borough of New York City, and interview “crackheads out in the streets.” The students were incensed and initiated a lengthy conversation about the dangers of getting “shanked” (i.e., stabbed) for the kind of thing he was asking them to do with folx they didn't know. None of these students were familiar with IRB/human subjects requirements or qualitative research ethics, but they seemingly cared more for such issues than the actual professor who was “trained” in these practices and yet presented “crackheads” and the “Bronx streets” as a free-for-all playground for university data extraction. It was not lost on the students, either, that the professor located drug addiction solely in poor, Black and Brown communities and not in the wealthy white suburbs of nearby New

Jersey, Connecticut, Long Island, or Manhattan. At the time, those white enclaves were experiencing catastrophic loss and devastation in relation to the methamphetamine and opioid drug crises (and before that, large powder-cocaine consumption, the drug of choice for wealthy whites that was never similarly criminalized) (Jalal et al. 2018, Kim, Morgan, and Nyhan 2020). No, the professor only targeted the Bronx.

I was livid. I fully expected that students would campaign against this professor, his assignment, and his whole vibe. Instead, the students contended that this professor was very privileged at the school and in his discipline, and that it wasn't safe or wise for them to complain to the administration. Given this tangle of misfortunes, these students had a special request for me: given my age (which is always the beginning of a truly humbling conversation with young people), what were the best 1980s and 1990s movies that featured "crackheads"? Their plan was to use quotations from such movies in their papers for the required interview aspect of the assignment, make sure no two students used the same words, and simply submit this work to the professor. They insisted he would not know the difference. We sat in my office and looked up multiple movies on my computer for quite some time, mostly because I just couldn't stop laughing (maybe even laughing to keep from crying). There may have even been a moment (I plead the Fifth here) where the students were provided with a full-bodied demonstration of Samuel L. Jackson's iconic "Gator Dance" from Spike Lee's movie *Jungle Fever*.

They all passed the assignment.

I found these students' counternarratives quite radical in exactly the ways that Aja Martinez (2020) describes the impact of counterstories: narratives based on the "experiential knowledge" and "lived reality" of BIPOC in white institutions produce their own unique rhetorical and theoretical exigency. Their professor asked for problematic, racist stereotypes and they gave them to him—and no one got "shanked" in the process. However, no one learned anything transformative or even accurate about race, urban struggles, antiblackness, mental health, and addiction from his lower-division writing-intensive class. Instead, they had first-row seats to the saliency of racism in preventing wellness

for BIPOC even in the professional spaces where their wellness was purportedly the focus.

This story is absolutely absurd, but white supremacy is never logical, veiled, or intelligible. The sheer lunacy of the event is matched in kind by the unwavering conviction of the majority of faculty and administration that they were providing students with a progressive, rigorous, and justice-based college education and not a set of curricular and instructional ideologies rooted solely in white supremacy.

It is neither a subtle or covert racism that insists the Bronx is the haven of crack addiction in the 2010s. The Bronx has historically had the highest unemployment and poverty rates in all of New York state and, in some years, in all the United States. Today, it is still New York state's most impoverished and unemployed county with young people of color feeling the biggest impact post-COVID-19 (Sequeira 2022). Thus, the exploitation and neglect that the Bronx has continually faced was mirrored in the curriculum that these young people of color received in college. Fewer than a dozen faculty (most of whom were BIPOC) that I personally talked with agreed with me that this curriculum was racist and especially harmful to students of color. Even fewer folks were willing to admit that this specific, beloved white male faculty member sponsored racist methods and content. True to form, I ran my mouth everywhere and anywhere: at the holiday parties, at the committee meetings, at the lunches, at the mailboxes, at the dining hall. If there was an opening, I took it. More often than not, I received a "whitesplained" story of the importance of this professor and this curriculum to the college.

I would go so far as to say that a sympathetic reader/listener to my story here arrives at a critique of this curricular event because they are traveling via my endarkened feminist learnings. If you were traveling instead via the learnings of the university, if you were just another majoritarian professor at this college, you would likely disagree with my analysis of the curriculum since most of folks who I spoke with and reported to certainly did not share my alarm or outrage. As a poor, Black child of the 1980s, I know from lived reality that the nation did

not care about the crises of addiction and poverty facing Brown and Black masses in this post-Civil Rights era and responded with brutal policies and racist backlash that deliberately criminalized us more: Black women were targeted as unfit “crackmothers” delivering only “crackbabies”; Black men were targeted by what would become the beginning of the mass prison industrial complex (Davis 2003; Roberts 2000). I can never forget the specific historical context of Reagan’s War on Drugs since I lived it and know it well. Contemporary white users of methamphetamine and opioid drugs have never been similarly targeted; instead, treatment, empathy, medical research, and rehabilitation have been a national priority. The curriculum that my students received further criminalized them and protected these kinds of white interests.

**“You Might Win Some But You Just Lost One”³:
When the White Supremacist University Ignores
Racial Harm and Black Feminist Outcry**

My indictment of the university’s ethos of ignoring racist curricular harm is not exaggerated. The fact of the matter is this: had one of those students actually been hurt because a professor required them to go out and interview random “crackheads” on the street, we would have all been implicated. Quite frankly, if I were on the streets and saw some college kids taking notes on my neighborhood as a “crackhead” haven, and then trying to interview the folk beside me as part of their assignment, it wouldn’t go well for them or their professor. I ain’t saying I would “shank” them, but I would certainly want to. As far as I was concerned, it was only a matter of time before something bad went down. And the university, including me, would be liable.

Those students had expressed collective outrage in their classrooms about that assignment. They even spoke with many older students at the college who described similar issues and who had made more formal complaints in previous semesters. And most importantly, they came and talked with a university professor—me—about their concerns. I ain’t

no fool. I know a compliance issue when I see and hear one, and I ain’t never getting hauled into court because I co-signed or ignored some white supremacist mess. Never happened. Never will. In these instances, I always “report up” according to the university hierarchy established by higher education attorneys and keep good “receipts” of my reportage. Those particular college leaders and administrators, all up and down the ladder, were informed of the risks of this curriculum and the kind of support I provided to students in their revision of the assignment (after all, I co-signed what the university handbook would call “intellectual dishonesty”). None seemed concerned; none acted on our behalf. I do not know for sure how my reporting was handled, only that the course and the “crackhead” interview assignment continued business as usual during my time at the college.

University compliance culture in the United States is certainly rooted in corporate logics, but it is sometimes all that marginalized communities have as even a small modicum of protection in hostile environments. Folx at universities don’t always imagine themselves beholden to compliance regulations, though, because they consider the university a second home and second family (versus a job), which, of course, can represent all of the attending problematic and dysfunctional white family metaphors (with Brown and Black bodies as the usual domestic laborers). The “compliance university,” to borrow from Jonathan Alger (2012), is as regulated at local, state, and federal levels as any other entity when it comes to discrimination, health, safety, privacy, or conflict of interest. You don’t get to just do whatever you want, and if you discriminate, cause harm, and transgress boundaries all willy-nilly, that only lasts until you get caught.

There has never been a semester where I have not “reported up” a serious violation of compliance, and this instance of the required “crackhead” interview was no exception. I am often stunned that even when I frame something as explicitly “a compliance issue that I feel required to report” (my students know I do this), most administrators have understood my points of discussion as merely collegial or friendly

³ Lyrics from the song “Lost Ones” by Lauryn Hill.

banter, despite the fact that I have never considered any of these interlocutors friends.

As just one more grounding example, in another context and in a whole other place, I once met with an administrator about a serious issue. I had kept a lawyer on retainer for two years under that state's statute of limitations about a departmental incident from which I might need protection. I literally met with the administrator using the script that my white male legal counsel gave me, to which the administrator simply responded: "I can see you are emotional about this." Imagine the white privilege and delusional comfort that it takes to think a Black woman's required, legalistic meeting is just an emotional outcry. This was also a context in which the administrator always told the offending party the details of any compliance breach that I reported. I guess I was supposed to feel bad or worried when those faculty would then try and retaliate by rolling their eyes at me and/or isolating me. Despite multiple compliance violations on the one hand and retaliatory behaviors on the other, the space incessantly celebrated itself as antiracist, DEI-focused, friendly, and collegial. It's like the "upside-down world" in the TV show *Stranger Things*.

In this same institution, BIPOC and Queer graduate students often described microaggressions to me, but the instances they described often seemed more like macroaggressions than routine or casual slights. White graduate students routinely confused Black graduate students with one another, even though they were the minority, and even when they were wearing nametags; interrogated Black women's clothing and makeup choices; quizzed BIPOC students on their academic credentials; told Black students which topics of study were appropriate for only Black undergraduate students versus for everyone; and called Queer and BIPOC students an "echo chamber" in race-centered classes. While an individual instance might constitute a microaggression, when you stack these up, you have a macro-discriminatory pattern. However, teacher-talk, social media, and contemporary scholarship in US schools often labels such transgressions as microaggression, a gross appropriation from the 1970s research and purpose of Black psychiatrist, Chester Pierce (1970).

These BIPOC and/or Queer graduate students in this program were experiencing themselves as the targets of ethical misconduct in the workplace, infractions that Pierce believed required different responses from therapists than what was theorized in the research at the time, but not an ignoring of reporting requirements. When I have raised these issues in faculty meetings, some faculty simply insisted that "it's not everybody," as if that could ever be justification. Racist patterns perpetrated by white graduate students were ignored even though these students were teaching first-year writing classroom like the one I describe above, and would go on to teach such classes as new college faculty very soon. Universities that allow hostile behaviors towards marginalized communities, behaviors that even corporate compliance culture in an anti-DEI backlash rejects, and then deliberately isolate Black women who are performing mundane, required reporting are not spaces that will ever offer Black people a basic, humanizing or equity-based education.

I have taught in American universities for more than twenty-five years now as adjunct, instructor, assistant professor, associate professor, and now professor at all of the following: Black college, Minority-Serving Institution, Hispanic-Serving Institution, Predominantly White Institution; urban and suburban; private and public; wannabe "R1" (university with the highest level of research), social-climbing R2 (university with a high level of research), down-and-out comprehensive (university that offers two-year associate's degrees and four-year bachelor's degrees), and white-canon-loving liberal arts institution. Every institution where I have worked has met the minimum legal requirements that would be required for me to show and prove a pattern of racist discrimination in a court of law, not only in terms of my own personal treatment, but in terms of the wider culture that flourishes in personnel meetings and administrative interactions. I avoid legalistic court processes because they come with gag orders that would mean, for instance, that the specific learnings I am uncovering in this endarkened feminist narrative could never happen so publicly. The energy,

however, that it takes to avoid the people and situations that scream “lawsuit over here—come get a hot, fresh one” is exhausting.

“My Folks Gon Keep It Solid”⁴: When Fugitive Learning Interrupts and Rewrites the Logics of Oppressive Institutions

As fate would have it, when I left the university where students were assigned “interviews with crackheads,” that college faced a lawsuit from recent alumni that was widely published across national news outlets alleging multiple counts of sexual misconduct and drug use on campus and off-campus.

I didn’t know any of these students who illuminated this harm in the lawsuit. But guess who was right smack dab in the middle of it? Yup, the same professor who had assigned that “crackhead” essay. Like I said, it’s always just a matter of time. In the years that I was a tenured faculty member at this university, that professor was paid almost a million dollars more than me, based on my math after learning his salary as reported in national newspapers. My students and I were not surprised by the lawsuit nor the university’s choice on where and with whom they had so calculatingly laid their monetary value and scholarly respect, even though it cost them dearly. All you can do is shake your head and move on.

Though my endarkened narrative inquiry sets out to deeply investigate a specific moment, my telling this story argues for the non-singularity of a singular event. Sometimes it feels like each college where I have worked has been the same place: *HotMessUniversity.edu*. When I left the university where students were assigned “interviews with crackheads,” I penned a letter to the president about all the goings-on. Many BIPOC faculty embraced the letter; meanwhile, a white administrator in the provost’s office, a long-standing faculty member at the college and close friend and supporter of the white supremacist professor who my students so deftly counteracted, publicly dismissed my comments. According to her, the contents of my letter simply represent the kinds

of things that I always complain about: “Carmen always does this.” One might wonder why someone appointed to the provost’s office is not concerned by a racist curriculum that racially stratifies the city’s residents and potentially causes physical harm off-campus. I could tell multiple stories such as this about multiple universities—all harboring the same resentments when I reveal their dirty laundry as if it is my job to simply bleach and whitewash all that. University faculty and administration will go to extreme lengths to ignore and thereby maintain toxic positivity alongside oppression.

My desire for a fugitive space and pedagogy in the academy means that I also reject hierarchical forms of leadership and instead take my cue from the history of Black feminist activists, from Ella Baker to Mariame Kaba, who have always called themselves community organizers. They organize. They do not lead. There is a distinction that they are making in relation to Black communities and praxis. I’m not dismissive of the importance of university leadership and don’t support the almost automatic assumption and suspicion from many leftist corners that administrators all work for the dark side of the enterprise; institutions are just never that simple. The administration of American universities, however, is a tight system of vertical and still-too-patriarchal rankings and titles where complicated flow charts present who the leaders are, who answers to whom, what you are and are not responsible for, and where everyone rests on a bottom-up chain of command. As of today, I have turned down every university’s request and every national “head-hunter’s” call to join administration. For me, the most transformative work happens in the classroom and not in the department or institution. That’s where the organizing happens. Organizing, perhaps a more specific kind of leadership, involves sitting in the pockets where the most radical challenge is possible. For me, that will always be the classroom, though this is never safe or easy work. As a Black feminist scholar and writing teacher, I think of the transformative possibilities of classrooms as a kind of fugitive learning, as Black studies scholars have defined it.

⁴ Lyrics from the song “Yeah, Glo!” by GloRilla.

The prolific Black studies theorist Fred Moten argues that fugitivity involves Black people's refusal to accept unjust standards imposed from an oppressive elsewhere. He calls fugitivity a kind of desire and spirit that is always dreaming of escape and transgression even when not achievable. Fugitivity embraces living on the outer edges, plays with what is considered improper, and does not compromise with racist regimes by rendering them as inevitable (Moten 2003). Jarvis Givens (2012) further situates fugitivity as the analytic that best represents the politics of Black teaching and learning and the metanarrative of Black educational history. The very act of humanizing learning for Black masses is always already fugitive given the historical racism of anti-literacy laws in slavery and Jim Crow, more than a century of segregated schooling, government-sanctioned defunding schemes, and carceral systems of punishment for Black learners.

The notion of fugitivity is, of course, rooted in the specific history of fugitive slaves who pursued physical and psychic forms of flight: running away from plantations, deeply respecting the underground railroad and North Star as markers of freedom, hiding in the trunk of a tree or garrison, attending "night school," worshipping via alternative religious practices like the Abakua, living in maroon societies, and embracing African foodways and culinary practices (Roberts 2015). Black studies practitioners talk of fugitive learning today as a continuing practice of subterfuge against white supremacy in everyday life that connects Black ancestral understandings of chattel slavery to an ongoing praxis towards Black freedom. In this way, fugitivity is not simply a metaphor for resistance, because it roots Black freedom in the historical refusal to accept social death under racial capitalism (Best and Hartman 2005). I think especially about the work of Black feminists like Tina Campt (2017) who point out that fugitivity and refusal are intertwined. In her work on Black aesthetics, especially photography, Campt reminds us that a radical visual archive by the African diaspora sits right alongside deliberate state, global, and daily violence that intends solely to count, catalog, categorize, surveil, and degrade Black subjects; these most dispossessed makers design new possibility in the constraints of everyday life, even when attempts at

self-expression cannot be fully realized (Campt 2017). Fugitive success is not experienced as a wholesale annihilation of longstanding regimes, but in cleverly and joyfully thwarting them from moment to moment.

My own desire for escape from the deep pit of white supremacy means that I work very hard to protect my thinking, aesthetic, languaging, and sense of worth from the academy's everyday norms and logics. I am trained in the discipline of rhetoric and composition studies where I often feel subjected to seemingly endless notions of writing and pedagogy as something that can be wholly decontextualized from the racist sociopolitics of the college, local area, and world. Far too many still imagine that a class where students are focused on Black Freedom and antiracism is less than or antithetical to "real" skills development in literacy instruction. Reading and writing with/as/because of/for Black freedom is, in fact, a higher force of learning and pedagogy. Trying to convince hostile groups of this fact is futile and gets in the way of the spirit and intellect that it takes to actually do that kind of teaching. So I stay fugitive.

The students who revised the "crackhead interview" assignment deployed sophisticated literacies and analyses and represent quintessential models of fugitive learning. They read that professor for filth, to his face, all up in his classroom: they openly questioned his confluences between addiction and their communities; they challenged his idea that he had a *carte blanche* right to the stories of everyday people walking the streets of the Bronx; they objected to his callous disregard for their safety and inability to see them as worthy of care. When the professor did not validate their critiques, they went underground and did background research on him and the politics of the university. Instead of interviewing Bronx natives about crack cocaine, they interviewed more senior Brown and Black students at the college about *the professor*. Talk about turning the ships around! They read me, too. We hadn't been together very long in the semester when they came to see me, but they seemed to know that they could talk to me about things. In fact, when they told me the professor said, "Just go to the Bronx," my automatic angry and loud response was along the lines of:

“No, *TF* he did not.” I only remember my outburst because they laughed at me, like they already knew I was gonna get vexed and not support his racism under the ruse of collegiality and its code of silence at that university. The students’ plan to just quote from movies, perform the racist stereotypes the professor liked, and then exit the course unscathed was, of course, also brilliant.

But that’s not all.

Those students expected a certain kind of reading and writing in college about justice, race, and drug addiction. That expectation was already fugitive. They were not raised in Reagan’s 1980s war on Black and Brown communities, but they are the heirs of that struggle, literally the children of those of us who survived. Their desire and insistence that their college learning be used towards deliberate interventions in historical racist systems challenge the neoliberalist glossings of many college mission statements about “responsible global citizens” while ignoring oppressive in-house and local systems. When the students were denied the radical, antiracist curriculum and writing assignments that they desired, they simply pursued that content and politics in the work they did in my writing class.

Like many students before them, they created pamphlets and informational packets for community centers, friends, and family about programs, grants, and events that support those seeking rehabilitation and/or new life afterwards. Some students wrote more traditional literature reviews about histories of race, addiction, and criminalization—not for the purpose of writing a schoolish paper, but for the purpose of having ready-made facts and infographics. As young people like to say today: “If you stay ready, you don’t have to get ready.” Other students worked on websites and materials for community organizations that focused on a range of wellness issues for Black and Brown peoples. One young woman focused on the targeting of Black and Brown folk by the Bronx’s inequitable bail system and was paid as a full-time staff member at a local advocacy center by the end of the semester. For this student, learning about the pronounced racial disparities for BIPOC who are detained for pretrial court hearings ignited her interests in community organizing. Students

studied and wrote all these things in their first year of college in a writing class that I themed “Digital Rhetorics/Digital Justice.” The idea of the class was really simple: students would curate and join the digital spaces and events that represented the justice issues most pressing for them. I trusted them to fill in all the blanks. And they did.

Fugitive learning is therefore a praxis where college students design immediate interventions in the everyday oppression their communities face; it also recognizes, unravels, and rewrites racist logics exploiting the most marginalized communities. It transforms relationships to communities such that BIPOC leadership is not individual but relational. Historically, US colleges have understood BIPOC students as young people who will go back into their communities as “race leaders”: speak as/for people of color, quell the masses, and offer bourgeois services. This definition of leadership, however, is not the same as a radical solidarity with and understanding of the lives of racially subordinated groups. Fugitive learning directs a differing affect, direction, and purpose for leadership for both students and teachers.

In a moment such as this one where any college class related to BIPOC, race, gender, and sexuality is closely surveilled and demonized, administrative leaders who link college education to large-scale justice initiatives face a heightened level of public (and trustees’) scrutiny and punishment, perhaps more so than classroom teachers. Administration is a public-facing practice at the local, state, and/or national levels, so there’s just not as much hiding or charged invisibility that is required for fugitive practices. University presidents function more and more like CEOs of large national brands—or as *the brand itself*—who are always in the national spotlight. Administrators tied to provosts’ and deans’ offices are often local/city/state leaders as much as campus leaders. It seems less and less likely that any upper-level administrator can be a radical champion of educational justice and not get fired. At their very best, they hold the dogs back and off of the rest of us, a task that is also not easy. Teaching, on the other hand, is classroom-facing and student-community-facing and so fugitive possibility is endless. There

is more flexibility to de-focus the myopic lens of white supremacy's microscope.

By the time the “crackhead”-interview-assigning professor was facing a lawsuit and possible dismissal from the university, most of the students in my class had graduated and were long gone from the university. I always suspected, however, that we were experiencing the hauntings of their brave defiance, alternative registers, reworkings of oppressive educational requirements, and dreams of different futures—not just at the college, but in the city at large. Their fugitive learning was not just about a refusal to accept racist knowledge and unfair systems in fanciful and creative ways, though it did that well. Fugitive learning is also a redesign, based on endarkened political needs and experiences, towards freedom and escape. This group of students quite literally transformed their writing classroom into an alternative universe in the midst of institutional racism and the complete disregard for the dignity of their communities. Fugitive learning doesn't just provide a critique, but also access to new possibilities for what we can do in our time at universities.

References

- Alexander, Michelle. 2010. “The War on Drugs and the New Jim Crow.” *Race, Poverty & the Environment*. 17 (1): 75–77.
- Alger, Jonathan. 2012. “Higher Education Law and Policy 2.1—The Rise of the Compliance University.” *The Center for Excellence in Higher Education Law and Policy Stetson University College of Law*, February 20. https://www.jmu.edu/audit/_files/compliance/compliance-resources/the-compliance-university.pdf.
- Best, Stephen and Saidiya Hartman. 2005. “Fugitive Justice.” *Representations* 92 (1): 1–15.
- Campt, Tina. 2017. *Listening to Images*. Duke University Press.
- Davis, Angela. 2003. *Are Prisons Obsolete?* Seven Stories Press.
- Dillard, Cynthia. 2000. “The Substance of Things Hoped for, the Evidence of Things Not Seen: Examining an Endarkened Feminist Epistemology in Educational Research and Leadership.” *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 13 (6): 661–681.
- Dumas, Michael J. 2016. “Against the Dark: Antiblackness in Education Policy and Discourse.” *Theory Into Practice* 55 (1): 11–19.
- Givens, Jarvis. 2021. *Fugitive Pedagogy: Carter G. Woodson and the Art of Black Teaching*. Harvard University Press.
- Gumbs, Alexis Pauline. 2014. “Nobody Mean More: Black Feminist Pedagogy and Solidarity.” In *The Imperial University: Academic Repression and Scholarly Dissent*, edited by Piya Chatterjee and Sunaina Maira. University of Minnesota Press.
- Harney, Stefano and Fred Moten. 2013. *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study*. Minor Compositions.
- Hinton, Elizabeth. 2016. *From the War on Poverty to the War on Crime: The Making of Mass Incarceration in America*. Harvard University Press.
- Hurtado, Aida. 1996. “Strategic Suspensions: Feminists of Color Theorize the Production of Knowledge.” In *Knowledge, Difference and Power: Essays Inspired by Women's Ways of Knowing*, edited by Nancy Goldberger, Jill Tarule, Blythe Clinchy, and Mary Field Belenky. Basic Books.
- Hurtado, Aida. 1998. “Sitios y Lenguas: Chicanas Theorize Feminism.” *Hypatia* 13(2): 134–159.
- Jalal, Hawre, Jeanine M. Buchanich, Mark S. Roberts, Lauren C. Balmert, Kun Zhang, Donald S. Burke. 2018. “Changing Dynamics of the Drug Overdose Epidemic in the United States from 1979 through 2016.” *Science* 361.
- Kelley, Robin. 2016. “Black Study, Black Struggle.” *Boston Review*. March 1. bostonreview.net/forum/robin-kelley-black-struggle-campus-protest/.
- Kim, Jin Woo, Evan Morgan, and Brendan Nyhan. 2020. “Treatment versus Punishment: Understanding Racial Inequalities in Drug Policy.” *Journal of Health Politics, Policy and Law* 45 (2): 177–209.
- Kynard, Carmen. 2023. “‘Oh No She Did NOT Bring Her Ass Up in Here with That!’ Racial Memory, Radical Reparative Justice, and Black Feminist Pedagogical Futures.” *College English* 85 (4): 318–345.
- Lorde, Audre. 1984. *Sister Outsider*. The Crossing Press.
- Malaklou, M. Shadee. 2021. “Reaching Backwards in Time: The Feltness of Unfreedom in an Antiblack World.” *Theory & Event* 24 (2): 598–604. <https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/tae.2021.0029>.

- Martinez, Aja. 2020. *Counterstory: The Rhetoric and Writing of Critical Race Theory*. National Council of Teachers of English.
- McClish-Boyd, Keondria and Kakali Bhattacharya. 2021. "Endarkened Narrative Inquiry: A Methodological Framework Constructed through Improvisations." *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 34 (6): 534–548.
- Mogadime, Dolana. 2021. "Living at the Margins: Black Feminist Pedagogy as Transformative Praxis During the 1980s–1990s and Epistemic Exclusion in the 21st Century—Where Do We Go Now?" *Journal of Contemporary Issues in Education* 16 (2). <https://doi.org/10.20355/jcie29442>.
- Moten, Fred and Stefano Harney. 2004. "The University and the Undercommons: SEVEN THESES." *Social Text* 22 (2): 101–115. <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/55785>.
- Moten, Fred. 2003. *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Okello, Wilson Kwamogi. 2024. "Unspeakable Joy: Anti-Black Constraint, Loopholes of Retreat, and the Practice of Black Joy." *Urban Education* 0 (0). <https://doi.org/10.1177/00420859241227956>.
- Pierce, Chester. 1970. "Offensive Mechanisms." In *The Black Seventies: An Extending Horizon Book*, edited by Chester Pierce C. and F. B. Barbour. Porter Sargent Publisher.
- Roberts, Dorothy. 2000. *Killing the Black Body*. Vintage Books.
- Roberts, Neil. 2015. *Freedom as Marronage*. University of Chicago Press.
- Royster, Jacqueline Jones. 2000. *Traces of a Stream: Literacy and Social Change Among African American Women*. University of Pittsburgh Press.
- Sandoval, Chela. 2000. *Methodology of the Oppressed*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Seid, Brianna. 2024. "The Facts on Bail Reform in New York: How Pretrial Detention and Release Works Now." *Brennan Center for Justice*, March 13. brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/facts-bail-reform-new-york-how-pretrial-detention-and-release-works-now.
- Sequeira, Bobby. 2022. "With the Highest Unemployment, Poverty in the State, What's on the Horizon for Bronx Job Seekers?" *Bronx Times*, December 28. Accessed January 17, 2025. bxtimes.com/with-the-highest-unemployment-poverty-rates-state/.
- Yang, K. Wayne. 2017. *A Third University Is Possible*. University of Minnesota Press.