



## ANOTHER LIFE IS POSSIBLE: Black Fugitivity and Enclosed Places

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“You know that school is racist. There is no other way to put it.” Mrs. Wright’s calm indignation belied her fury about what she described as “outright bigotry” directed to Black students at County High School. “For years, my son and the other Black students have had to go through hell just to get the most basic form of an education. Just ask him and he will tell you.” Mrs. Wright’s son, P. J., sitting beside his mother, was silently engaged in the conversation. Taking his cue, he spoke with amazing grace and calm, given the weight of his story.

So, yeah, all of the Black students know that the school really doesn’t care about us. We never get the benefit of the doubt and the teachers just expect us to fail, period, point blank. Let me give you an example. It is the first day of my Language Arts class, so I walk in looking for a seat in the front row because my mom is always on me about sitting in the front of class. I already know that I probably will have to move because most teachers have assigned seating, but sometimes in our senior [year] classes, we can sit wherever we want. But our teacher has assigned seating and it is not before too long that I look around and notice that all of the Black kids are in the back of the class. After the teacher is done with the seating chart, I raise my hand and tell the teacher that I want to sit in the front row. She responds

with something like “those rows are reserved for students who want to learn.” So then I ask her, “Well, you must think that none of the Black kids want to learn?” The class got real quiet and you could just feel all of the eyes looking at her, waiting to see what she was going to say. She did not like that too much, and she threatened to send me to the assistant principal’s office. I am not one to back down, so I respond, “Well, if you send me, you might as well send all of us [Black students], since you don’t want us here anyway.” And I mean instantly, she told me to get out and go to the assistant principal’s office. Now, you may think this is a wild story or there is something off with this teacher, but let me tell you this has been happening every year with all sorts of teachers.

Mrs. Wright continued the story:

I get a call from the school, and I immediately went there and demanded a meeting with the teacher and the principal. They hemmed and hawed and said that maybe there could be a change [in seating] during the middle of the year, but she had arranged the students based upon test scores [with the lowest test scores in the back of the class]. I told them that was the craziest thing I have ever heard, because if that truly was the case, then why don’t you have the students with the lowest test scores sitting in the front of the class? The principal replied that it was a new strategy that was being carried out throughout the district. Well, I know that is not the case because in some of his [P. J.’s] other classes, he gets to select his own seat. So at a certain point you really have to question: is there something up with the teachers, or is there something up with a school and, for that matter, the whole district that allows and even rewards teachers to treat Black students as less than the other students? And for Black males, I can tell you from experience with P. J. that, unless they are playing basketball or football, you are pretty much useless to them. The really cold and inhumane part of the situation is that P. J. is going to be all right—I am going to make sure to that. He is going to college if I have to yell, scream, and kick my way through all of his classes, but that is not the case for everybody and furthermore, why should it be? Why should we have to take off from work to come down to the school just to make sure that our child is not being the target of blatant racism? I mean, when you really look at it, it is clear that they do not want us at these schools, and really, given what they put these Black children through, who could blame them for not going?”

This discussion took place in a makeshift conference room at an organization focused on assisting Black students in navigating the difficult terrain of education in Los Angeles, California. As part of a larger research project, I had been working with this organization as well as teaching at County High School (CHS), where P. J. was completing his senior year. The meeting was set up in an effort to help P. J. and his mother with strategies for accessing resources within and outside of the school. On the one hand, P. J. and Mrs. Wright's story is inspirational, as they did not fear the actions of the school or the district and actively sought out community support to counter processes of racism; yet their narrative is emblematic of the intense, mundane violence levied at Black students and their families throughout Los Angeles.

On a grander scale, the profound conundrum that the majority of Black students faced at CHS left an indelible mark on my thinking about the social rendering of public education in the United States. It also generated a persistent question, which provides the impetus behind this essay: what damage is done by reinforcing a narrative that Black students should not drop out of school? By no means hyperbolic, this question negotiates between two theoretical interventions that I put forward: *enclosed places* and *Black fugitivity*. Rooted in a liberal tradition of social progress, the current realities of Black education are mired in a brutal system of punitive containment and curricular evisceration that I argue forms the basis of an enclosed place. Yet the counterweight to and a conduit out of the multiple forms of violence central to education as enclosed places is what I call Black fugitivity. My conceptualization of Black fugitivity is based on the disavowal of and disengagement from state-governed projects that attempt to adjudicate normative constructions of difference through liberal tropes of freedom and democratic belonging. It builds on [Tina Campt's \(2014\)](#) argument that "the concept of fugitivity highlights the tension between the acts or flights of escape and creative practices of refusal, nimble and strategic practices that undermine the category of the dominant." These practices of refusal, operating alongside practices of disengagement, are central to Black fugitivity and extend beyond common understandings of resistance. Refusal is the embodied knowledge at the core of social visions of being that are irreconcilable with liberal, difference-making state projects. Refusal in the context of Black fugitivity is thus immersed in the politics of refusal as theorized by [Audra Simpson \(2016, 330\)](#): "Refusal holds on to a truth, structures this truth as stance through time, as its own structure and comingling with the force of presumed and inevitable disappearance and operates as the

revenge of consent—the consent to these conditions, to the interpretation that this was fair, and the ongoing sense that this is all over with.”

Proceeding from an understanding of the intimate connection between Black fugitivity and the social and political governance of plantation-based economies, my argument is for the repositioning of Black fugitivity from a static historical act to one of the core theoretical devices informing Black radical planning and action. Purposeful in its enactment, Black fugitivity has demonstrated through the means of disengagement, as one of its basic tenets, the facade of state power and the liberal frameworks that buttress enclosed places. It is through this interplay of refusal, disengagement, and forced containment that the essay wrestles with the function of education in an era of rampant abandonment and indicates how a set of solutions based on Black radical action provides a path forward.

While the field of education is often thought of as a niche subfield within the realm of the social sciences, I posit that within contemporary capitalism, the formal education of Black people has become central to any analysis of state-crafted forms of discipline, violence, punishment, and containment. In the article, I explain that the history of the education of Black people in Los Angeles in many ways foregrounds the buildup of the massive prison system and its complementary policing apparatus in California. Yet pushing the conversation beyond punitive forms of violence, a major aim of this article is to analyze the myriad ways that education reproduces multiple forms of violence on Black youth. It is imperative, I contend, that we shift our framing from state-sponsored education as a redemptive structure of social progress to an understanding of education as one of the key sources of support for forms of structural oppression. In this manner, education demands to be positioned as a central focus of study, insofar as it points to the capacity of the state to make processes of Black subjugation normal/invisible under the guise of liberal beneficence.

My analysis is situated within the inner workings of compulsory education in Los Angeles. Drawing on a six-year-long fieldwork project based both in a school where I taught (for one academic year) and in a community-based program that focused on the education of Black youth, this article has two primary objectives. First, my aim is to detail the lived experience of Black youth within a social paradigm governed by forms of racial, gendered, and class violence that are central to contemporary capitalism. Framed by the backdrop of unrelenting liberal narratives of individualism, upward social mobility, and race-blind/neutral school governing mandates, the article reckons with the material and ideological conditions produced within sites of Black education that belie the mythical facade of

advancement, inclusion, and civility within liberal discursive practices. My interlocutors in this article are young Black men who showed grace and power in the face of obscene challenges. Yet my intent is to not read the lives of these young men as exceptional or within a tradition that valorizes Black masculinity as the vehicle of the Black communal struggle. Rather, through their lived experiences of Black fugitivity as refusal and disengagement, the article reveals the racialized and gendered tenets of enclosed places that set up the demonstration of respectable Black masculinity as the solution to structural conditions of Black subjugation.

My second aim is to synthesize an understanding of Black radical action against specific education-based liberal projects that give life to enclosed spaces. Based on both historical and contemporary forms of state-sanctioned violence against Black youth via compulsory education in Los Angeles, the fugitive strategy is revealed to be both illegible and dangerous within a liberal framework. Akin to Elizabeth Povinelli's (2011) careful reading of late liberalism's attempt to make difference real through what she describes as the function of social tense, the lived reality and actions of subjugated people cannot be read through the filter of the liberal discursive projects that restrict racialized populations to very specific modalities of being. Explaining the tension between lived reality and liberal interpolations of Indigenous groups in Australia, Povinelli (2011, 73) writes: "As neither this nor that they stand as a constant refusal of the techniques of recognition and their inversion in late liberalism." In the case of young Black Angelenos, their actions are illegible due to the criminalization of Blackness and further complicated by the inability of liberal discourse to grapple with the construction of a Black criminal/deviant subject who is nonetheless able to advance logical argumentation and develop action against injustice.<sup>1</sup>

The danger arises as Black fugitivity exposes the fraudulent intent of education within Black communities. Against the backdrop of the moniker *dropout*, the logic of Black fugitivity reveals the absurdity of forcing Black youth to attend schools to which no one else wants to send their children. That is, there is a social understanding governed by modalities of race of which Black education forms the baseline and on which liberal notions of upward mobility are based. The result is a twofold effect whereby all forms of violence are deemed necessary to control a criminal population, and, race and class considerations demand a move away from Black forms of education to ensure upward mobility. Black fugitivity thus exposes the function of Black education and places the locus of agency within a Black radical tradition that is antithetical to the liberal governing practices attempting to diffuse the effects of rapid abandonment.

My discussion of Blackness as it pertains to Black communities and Black education is informed by two distinct theoretical interventions on race and race-making. The first is [Cedric Robinson's \(2000\)](#) framing of the Black radical tradition as a response to the imposition of violence inherent in racial capitalism. Robinson's work is important, because his theorization of race lies at the heart of critical readings of Black radical action during contemporary capitalism ([Kelley 1994](#); [A. Davis 2003](#); [Gilmore 2007](#); [Vargas 2010](#)). Further, [Robinson \(2007\)](#) provides an alternative avenue for discussing matters of social structure and disciplining/punishment that are typically associated with the work of Michel Foucault. Discussing the relationship between Black radicalism and Western society, [Robinson \(2000, 73\)](#) argues, "It is not a variant of Western radicalism whose proponents happen to be Black. Rather, it is a specifically African response to an oppression emergent from the immediate determinants of European development in the modern era and framed by orders of human exploitation woven into the interstices of European social life from the inception of Western civilization." It is in this manner that Black radical action emanates from a genealogy that fully grasps the limitations, pitfalls, and social reckoning of liberal state projects.

The second theoretical thread emerges from Deborah Thomas's postulation of modern Blackness. Thomas deftly positions the contestations, limitations, and opportunities of Black organizing within shifting models of capitalist exploitation. Writing about the case of modern Blackness in Jamaica, [Thomas \(2002, 48\)](#) posits:

Under conditions of a capitalist globalization that has intensified older hierarchies of race, class, gender, and nationality as well as created new ones, and within a context wherein the degree to which subordinated people have been able to exercise their own agency has been severely circumscribed by power structures over which they have very little control, the public ascendance of modern blackness signals a momentous change. This is true whether aspects of cultural production associated with modern blackness are evaluated as challenges or capitulations to dominant ideologies and practices.

Situating Thomas's intervention within education, we can understand the actions taken by Black youth against enclosed places as deriving from a set of politics that may reproduce oppression within the confines of governing doctrines (such as the law), but that at its crux is an assertion of agency within a social arrangement that demands subservience. Further, Thomas's framing of modern Blackness provides a means to understand the relationship between race and class within contemporary capitalism. Central to contemporary capitalism has been the massive

incorporation of Black politics of social and economic respectability, themselves indebted to logics of liberalism. As a means to dampen Black radicalism, the state has been able to call on Black partners to discipline the actions of those who have been abandoned by contemporary capitalism and forced into enclosed places. Thomas's inflection of modern Blackness provides a means to grasp the complexity of these relationships and to refocus our positioning of Black radical action as the logical conclusion to the structural constraints of contemporary capitalism.

### ENCLOSED PLACES: Formation and Purpose

In her analysis of contemporary capitalist development in the United States, the geographer Ruth Wilson Gilmore draws a connection between the construction of forgotten places and the politics of the people who inhabit them. Writing about forgotten places in relationship to prisons, [Gilmore \(2008, 32\)](#) argues, "In the United States, these people and locations are among the most vulnerable to the 'organized abandonment' that accompanies globalization's large-scale movements of capital and labor, and as such they are subject to many other processes that accumulate in and as forgotten places."

Gilmore's theoretical intervention of forgotten places helps to frame the development and implementation of and resistance to another large state structure: public education. Within the burgeoning ethnographic literature that traces the myriad connections between prisons and public education, one of the main arguments is about how the curriculum, physical structure, and modes of punitive discipline practices in schools—primarily Black schools—mirror and also foreground the development of prisons in the United States ([Meiners 2007](#); [Nolan 2011](#); [Winn 2011](#); [Sojoyner 2016](#); [Wun 2016](#); [Vaught 2017](#)). Yet a major distinction between prisons and public education lies in the literal and metaphorical situation of space. Geographically, many prisons are sited in rural or desolate spaces that place a physical barrier between them and densely populated areas. Ideologically, the racial and class dynamics of prisons, and the people housed within them, also provide the moral impetus to disregard the dire results inherent in the passage and implementation of laws central to carcerality.

Respecting these two differences and yet emphasizing key continuities relating to the interplay between the mobilization of capital and race, I posit that, rather than as forgotten places, we should understand the structure of public education of Black communities in terms of *enclosed places*. Situated at the proverbial and physical center of neighborhoods, schools are a vital component of the development and maintenance of community and culture ([Anderson 1988](#);

Rickford 2016). Yet it is the compulsory nature of education that sets it apart from prisons and from the majority of large state structures in the United States. The commonsense rhetorical positioning of education as central to the civic process is situated within a liberal framework of upward mobility and social advancement, which informs public consensus around its compulsory standing. Yet as the aforementioned ethnographic studies bring to bear, for Black youth, education functions to reproduce particular forms of racial, gender, class, and sexed violence that counters the liberal inflections of education as a public good. It is in this regard that education within Black communities forms an enclosed place: a rendering of state capacity that functions to negate alternative social visions presented by Black radical forms of indigenous knowledge, which might otherwise resist and counter the multiple forms of violence inherent in contemporary capitalism. Operating within a liberal discursive tradition, enclosed places employ reform-based practices that incorporate obedient and nonthreatening forms of racial, gender, and sexed difference to prevent the exposure and consequential undoing of highly oppressive forms of governance that are key to the liberal project.

To provide some context for the enclosed place of Black education in Los Angeles, the following section provides a brief historical overview of the education of Black people in the city. The historical narrative ends in the current period and transitions to ethnography, which provides a snapshot of the lived experience produced by enclosed places. The article concludes with an analysis of Black fugitivity and investigates how Black fugitive logic provides a social vision that counters the multiple forms of violence inherent within enclosed places.

### *The Making of Enclosed Places: Black Education in Los Angeles*

The education of Black people in Los Angeles County has been a major point of contention since the 1930s and became markedly violent with the mass migration of Black southerners to California during the 1940s (Bass 1947). Fueled by industrial growth, Black Southerners moved west in hopes of better wages, but segregation laws and restrictive housing covenants forced them to reside in wretched conditions and also to deal with white vigilante gangs who attempted to thwart their movement within and throughout the city (M. Davis 1992, 2006; Johnson 2013). Given the intimate connection between housing and education, public schools throughout the city became battlegrounds. The hallmark of this period was the infamous white mob attack led by a group of parents on Black students at John C. Fremont High School in 1947 (Bass 1947).<sup>2</sup> The physical violence was accompanied by the planned defunding of Black schools throughout



Black communities. In the face of often ill-prepared teachers and a lack of financial resources, Black parents found themselves at constant odds with the city (*Los Angeles Sentinel* 1969).

The 1940s and 1950s gave way to a much more formal and draconian system of educative governance during the 1960s and 1970s. On the heels of the 1965 Watts Rebellion, the city implemented an official program called Police Role in Government that sought to repress organizing in Black public schools (Sojoyner 2013). Piloted in 1969, the curriculum was taught by officers of the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD). As outlined in the pedagogical manual, a major tenet was to indoctrinate Black youth into becoming proper, subservient citizens. The establishment of the program had deleterious effects on Black education in Los Angeles. Instructional time was siphoned off and replaced with a behavioral modification program masked as educational enrichment. The relationship between the LAPD and school districts in Los Angeles became a fruitful enterprise, with Police Role in Government serving as a key model for further expansion into the lives of Black Angelenos.

By the 1980s and 1990s, the police were firmly entrenched in Black education. The Drug Abuse Resistance Education (DARE) program was piloted in Los Angeles in 1983 and furthered the existing relationship between the LAPD and school districts, as police were placed in schools to teach classes and also to perform random drug searches on campuses. The DARE program was accompanied by a new truancy program implemented during the 1990s, Abolish Chronic Truancy (ACT). It placed the Los Angeles County District Attorney's office over matters of discipline for school absence. While the district attorney's office handled the procedural matter of criminal prosecution, the relationship more generally ensconced the presence of policing, as both the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department and the LAPD served as the strong-arm mediators who rounded up students.

By the 2000s the presence of police on public school campuses in Black communities seemed commonsensical. Not only were police officers teaching courses but schools also soon housed police substations on their campuses under the guise of public safety. The irony of the massive buildup of a comprehensive police infrastructure was that, while vast financial resources were being allocated to ill-fated programs and policies, the formal curricular portions of school budgets were being gutted. The implementation of No Child Left Behind under George W. Bush's administration served to eviscerate what was remaining of an already tottering curricular base. Forced to abide by an arbitrary set of standards, public

schools within Black communities throughout Los Angeles began to eliminate key electives such as visual and performing arts courses to stave off the possibility of losing federal funding (Sojoyner 2016).

The cumulative effect of draconian disciplinary policies, alongside the gutting of the curriculum, has rendered schools in Black communities in Los Angeles sites of containment. Surveilled by various layers of law enforcement, Black schools have effectively become warehouses to hold Black youth. To this end, schools and prisons share a fundamental operating logic: incapacitation (Gilmore 2007).<sup>3</sup> Given that state-based solutions are indebted to a charter-school model governed by the ideological and material infusion of private finance and real-estate capital, the situation has dramatically worsened (Watkins 2011; Saltman 2012). Very simply, the state of Black education is appalling, and so I return to my foundational question: what damage is done by reinforcing a narrative that Black students should not drop out of school?

Located within the current educational moment, which is dominated by asinine forms of standardized testing, hypermilitarized school sites, and liberal discursive practices of social advancement, the following ethnographic section provides a glimpse into the structural conditions and lived realities of organized abandonment under contemporary capitalism. By uncovering these dynamics within school settings, I have two objectives: the first is to describe one of the primary fissures caused by organized abandonment, that is, the disjuncture between the liberal project of civic responsibility/work and the astronomical rates of unemployment due to a lack of social infrastructure and jobs in Los Angeles. As a means to resolve this tension, schools in Black communities, functioning as enclosed places, serve to reproduce Black economic, political, and social misery and simultaneously to render said misery as a product of Black failure. The second objective is to demonstrate that even in the face of the exceptional, the basic racist tenets of liberal discursive practices prevent the incorporation of Blackness into the state. Not appreciated as a legible form, Black intellect is cast aside as a social pariah, lurking somewhere between criminal and lazy. Reacting in a violent manner, schools imbue psychological trauma onto Black youth and attempt to cultivate an internalized rationale of incompetence/indolence. Thus schools as enclosed places operate to diminish/rebuke/castigate any Black intellectual capacity that does fit into the prescribed, hierarchical arrangement of racialized subjects. As a methodological note, the names provided in the ethnography are pseudonyms chosen by the research participants. Containing hidden and layered

meanings, the names are reflective of their decisions and are based on an approach that I developed early on in my fieldwork.

### *The Politics of Race and the Unmasking of Liberalism*

It was late March, and as usual I left CHS to navigate Los Angeles traffic through a maze of back streets. Roughly twenty minutes later, I pulled into the parking lot of the after-school program with which I had been working. Advocating for students, the program often intervened on their behalf to counter many of the heinous practices levied against Black students. On this Thursday in late March we set up a meeting on behalf of Devon Kennedy.

While I was often proud of the students I worked with, Devon was without a doubt one of the most brilliant individuals I came across. Devon had the ability to read something once and not only memorize it but also fully integrate it with material he had learned months before. At sixteen years old, he rarely had to study: high school courses were not a challenge for him, and to top it off, he was a high-level athlete. Standing a shade over six feet four inches, he was an excellent basketball player. The problem for Devon, and for many of the students in the after-school program, was a confrontation between the workforce of teachers, composed of mostly white middle-class men and women, and the young Black men and women from poor to lower middle-class backgrounds like themselves. Countless stories narrated the degradation of the students' intellectual ability, and conflict was always on the horizon. So Devon had requested a meeting that Thursday with me, my colleague from the program, and Devon's Advanced Placement European history teacher.

My colleague and I drove to the school and parked in one of the stalls marked off with spray paint for visitors. The main entrance had a series of bars and thick wire-meshed gates. Much as in other schools in the area, we were checked in by the first level of security at the entrance. This procedure was followed by two more checkpoints at which security guards verified our identities. Devon's classroom was located on the opposite end of the campus in a series of temporary bungalows that had turned permanent and that gave off an ominous echo, due to the lack of a structural foundation underneath the fiberglass composite structures. We walked through the door and found Devon and his teacher in the room. Devon sat in the very back row of the classroom, while his teacher was sitting at her desk as we made our introductions. Standing fairly short, she had a slightly high-pitched tone that immediately became defensive as we inquired into Devon's standing in the course. "Devon just does not show up in class. He

is here physically, but I can tell when he goes into one of his daydreams and just does not know how to focus,” she replied when we asked why she thought Devon was not faring well in her course. As it stood at the time, Devon was failing the course, and he was convinced that his teacher was out to get him. Her comments regarding his intellectual disposition validated his analysis of the situation. When we informed her that Devon was one of the smartest people, let alone students, we had ever met, she gave us an incredulous look. “Well, I have had students who are extremely exceptional and Devon is simply not one of them. Quite frankly, he is lazy and while I have given him opportunities to succeed, he simply refuses. He does not take notes in class. Only my most special students can get away with that, and Devon is not one of them.” Twice in the span of ten seconds she had stated in no uncertain terms that Devon was a failure. I looked back at Devon, who could hear everything she said. He was staring straight ahead, looking both resigned and extremely angry. “Mrs. Wolfe,” I interjected, “Devon has been in other Advanced Placement courses and he has done very well. I am pretty sure that given the chance, you will see that he can achieve great things.” Her response, in a very cold and matter-of-fact tone, was that “if he worked hard enough, which up to this point he has not been able to do, he can earn a D, but I very much doubt that.” At this point, I became agitated and could not imagine having to spend a whole academic year in the same classroom with an authority figure who completely discounted my intelligence. Sensing that the conversation had reached its limit, my colleague and I thanked her for her time and walked out of the room with Devon.

In a state of disbelief, I attempted to break the tension and jokingly asked Devon, “So, tell me again, how is it you are failing this class?” He laughed and replied, “Man, she does not like me at all. I mean, most of our exams are subjective. Like we get these open-ended questions and have to write a response to them, and all I get back is Ds and Fs. So after a while, I realized that it was not worth putting any time into the class. Plus, you know she never wanted me in the class. I am the only Black kid in there, and it is pretty obvious that she thinks I am taking a spot from one of her *special* kids in the magnet program.” Laughing as he put up air quotes around the word *special*, he told us that he had a plan and just had to make it to the end of the year in “one piece.” “I am going to get the last laugh, though,” he stated very quietly. “She has a policy that anyone who gets a five on the [Advanced Placement] exam automatically gets an A in the course. So, my plan is to get a five.” The test, given once every May, was graded on a scale of one to five, with a five being the highest possible score. “Devon,” I

replied, “I know you can do it, but, man, that is putting your eggs all in one basket.” Near the school entrance, he stopped walking and stated, “You just saw what happened in there, right? I have no other choice.”

Later that summer we all found out what Devon had known all along: he earned a five on the exam, and the teacher was forced to change his grade from an F to an A.

### **A REVOKING OF ENCLOSED PLACES: Black Fugitivity and Black Fugitive Logic**

Over the past six years, I have witnessed and been told countless stories similar to the ethnographic moments detailed in the previous section, in which Black people’s encounters with public education were predicated on particular forms of state-sanctioned violence. Complicating matters was the fact that reform-based solutions—led by a coalition of city officials and nonprofit social justice organizations—that aimed to improve the quality of education for Black communities was informed by a liberal framework that removed any structural analysis and intensely focused on individual behaviors (Sojoyner 2016). Here, *Michel-Rolph Trouillot’s* (2001, 126) analysis that “state power has no institutional fixity on either theoretical or historical grounds” was exemplified in the lives of Black Angelenos who were negatively impacted by an array of modalities of state power used to maintain public education as an enclosed place.

However, as the historical and contemporary record has demonstrated, state power is neither omniscient nor is it a proactive force. In the case of Los Angeles, the efforts of the state to extend the boundaries of enclosed places have occurred in reaction to Black demands for education free from the forms of racial, gendered, sexed and class violence that are inherent to the state project. Following in the generative ethos of that tradition, I suggest that as a strategic move to simultaneously assert Black humanity, counter the growth of enclosed places, and plant seeds for alternative forms of education, Black fugitivity provides a framework through which to understand the egregiousness of enclosed places and to make legible radical Black actions.

My framing of Black fugitivity is informed by a historical and political trajectory in which the fugitive is the simultaneous embodiment of life, culture, and pathways to freedom, on the one hand, and the singular exposure of the state as a tenuous system of unstable structures constantly teetering on the brink of illegitimacy, on the other. Given this duality, Black fugitivity often proves contradictory, thereby often reproducing forms of oppression while simultaneously es-

tablishing spaces (sometimes momentarily) of freedom. However, at its core, it is an approach by which fugitives disengage from state processes.

While Black fugitivity often registers as an element of a bygone era, strategic acts of Black refusal and disengagement have remained at the fore of Black radical action and planning. Building on [Michaeline Crichlow and Patricia Northover's \(2009\)](#) theorization of “fleeing the plantation,” my argument considers Black fugitivity outside the realm of an agrarian model of capitalist exploitation. Writing about the shift away from plantation-based economies, [Crichlow and Northover \(2009, 34\)](#) write that “the current neoliberal project visited on disparate places and people has witnessed the emergence of new sets of social relationships dislocating the moral economics of those ‘peasants working for capital.’” It is in this context of contemporary capitalism that Black fugitivity is situated within a set of social relationships functioning under economic models predicated on abandonment, where employment and social resources are scarce.

It is in this manner that the formation of Black fugitivity points to a different theoretical trajectory than the classic reproduction-of-class arguments commonly associated with the anthropology of education. Exemplified by [Paul Willis's \(1981\)](#) inquiry into how class and social position are internalized and reproduced by youth, the framing of such arguments within contemporary capitalism demands new analytics. Within a landscape where Black communities remain without the basics of a social infrastructure (e.g., employment, health care, housing), the theoretical impulse of Black fugitivity is to repudiate the liberal mechanisms that undergird the reproduction of class strata. The logic of Black fugitivity is framed around an understanding that the trappings of social mobility, inherent within the discourse and ideological construct of education in the United States, will not save you. The incommensurability of being reproduced within a structure based on the degradation of Blackness lies at the heart of Black fugitivity's departure from the argument of class reproduction.

Indeed, refusal, including the refusal of class reproduction, constitutes a central element to Black fugitivity. As described by Tina Campt, refusal is tantamount to understanding the politics of Black fugitivity. [Campt \(2014\)](#) states, “It's the refusal to be a subject to a law that refuses to recognize you. Its defined not by opposition or necessarily resistance, but instead a refusal of the very premises that have historically negated the lived experience of Blackness as either pathological or exceptional to the logic of white supremacy.” In the case of the southern plantation economy, it was the refusal to accept a set of highly exploitative and violent lived conditions that demanded the extraction of Black physical,

social, and emotional labor. In the case of contemporary capitalism, it is the refusal to accept a set of highly exploitative and violent lived conditions that remain devoid of employment and social resources but are deeply integrated into the material, social, and political mechanisms that produce enclosed places. Transferring the Black fugitive from one set of historical conditions to the present is best achieved through an explication of *Black fugitive logic*: a cultural and racial calculus of refusal and disengagement informed by a common set of lived experiences that dictate that the racially charged tenets of capitalism, across historical moments, are incapable of reform and are only capable of reproducing violent conditions for Black life. As a means to locate Black fugitivity and, by extension, Black fugitive logic within contemporary capitalism, the following section provides an ethnographic rendering of refusal from within an enclosed place.

### *The Beauty of Black Fugitivity*

We sat on painted black steel chairs that littered the sidewalk of the elongated shopping center. Underneath a large green umbrella, Marley and I spoke at length. Spanning the gamut from sports to music to education to politics, we hopped and jumped around subjects with an ease that took years to develop. Our first interaction with each other was tenuous at best. During the summer of 2009, the Southern California Library, located in South Central Los Angeles, had contacted me to teach a summer program that would focus on the relationship between schools and prisons in California.<sup>4</sup> Centered on Ruth Wilson Gilmore's book *Golden Gulag* and a series of comic books published by the Real Costs of Prisons Project,<sup>5</sup> the goal of the course was to engage with Black youth about the effects of the criminal justice system within their community. Marley, at the time, was a confident fourteen-year-old who at a very young age had cultivated a lot of respect in his neighborhood. I would come to find that such respect was based on Marley's vision of empowerment, which included a vast redistribution of social infrastructure that would transfer multiple forms of capital back to his neighborhood and others like it throughout Southern California. A masterful organizer and someone deeply concerned about issues of police violence, Marley was at once funny and loving and yet serious when it came to the condition of Black life in Los Angeles. Thus, when I entered the scene as an outsider, Marley was highly skeptical.

Marley's skepticism did not come purely from a conventional need to develop trust, but from a life's history of being situated as a problem that needed to be solved. By the time we met, Marley had already disengaged from the formal

education system and had been in and out of the juvenile justice system several times.

Marley's skepticism of my presence at the Southern California Library in large part derived from his familiarity with university faculty making their pilgrimage down to South Central Los Angeles and collecting information—all never to be seen again. During our many conversations about this topic, Marley would often state in a jesting yet poignant tone, "Don't forget, y'all making more money off of prisons than the damn guards." Marley's truth was that while the aforementioned cohort of intellectuals were framed in the historic terms of saviors to wayward youth, in an ironic twist, they all needed the system to stay intact to preserve their own livelihoods.

Marley's initial distrust of me soon gave way to ambivalence, which then turned to a begrudging form of acceptance and, after about three years of knowing each other, morphed into mutual admiration. Organizing events together and having a common affinity for the Southern California Library allowed our relationship to take on a familial dynamic. Spending time with each other's families and sharing meals over intense conversations, we soon understood that while I had more years of formal academic training than Marley, he had learned much more during the course of his life than any class had taught me.

Marley had long ago disengaged from the formal education process and never expressed any desire to go back. Although I knew his position on education, I had never explored with him why he had made the decision to leave school. After we discussed various forms of education and how they could potentially be implemented, I asked Marley, "So, you know, I never really understood why it is that you stopped going to school. I understood that you thought it was a bad fit and that there were outside issues that were pressing, but what drove you to that decision?" Giving it a moment's thought, he replied, "I mean, how is that going to put food on my plate? How is that going to keep the police off me? How is that going to help the hood? I really think that school should be about people learning life lessons and not trying to pump people with information which, 90 percent of the time, is not needed. What is the point in staying there?"

I was confused. Marley was an avid reader of science magazines and an admirer of environmental science in particular. I replied, "This, coming out of the mouth of a die-hard nature buff. I know that you are not suggesting that we get rid of science." With a smile on his face as if he had laid the perfect trap, he calmly sat back in the chair and proposed:



You tell me this. I am in school reading these textbooks that are, like, over ten years old and outdated. The textbooks are talking about “this is how a plant grows” and “this what happens when you put a zygote here” and everything else, right? In the meantime, I am asking the teacher, “this is cool and all, but can’t we talk about how this relates to our lives?” The teacher don’t care, because they got to get through the material for the test or whatever. But the crazy thing is this—while I am reading about all this stuff in the textbook, the craziest stuff is going on right outside of my house. I mean, the city is pulling up all of the trees, it is like a desert outside. Like, you know what they just did in order to bring the space shuttle through LA.<sup>6</sup> They cut down all those trees to bring a space shuttle through the damn city! Now you tell me if that don’t make no sense. In the very class where we are talking about how trees and plants are essential to human life, right outside the door, they are cutting down all the damn trees! Then you look up and down the block and you don’t see any parks that have different plants or different types of trees. All you see is like a big field where you can play football or baseball, but ain’t nothing else. So once again, why am I in class and supposed to learn about some theory of the reproductive cycle, when outside the theory is getting blown up on its head?

*Black Fugitivity: Politics of Disengagement and Refusal*

The politics of gender cast a long shadow in the lived experiences of my interlocutors. The actions of these young men ran in direct opposition to the countless efforts by policymakers, private foundations, and state officials to make respectable, law-abiding “men” out of these “boys.”<sup>7</sup> Their indifference and provocation illustrate the contradictory nature and uselessness of such a gendered stance toward respectability under late capitalism. P. J.’s and Marley’s testimony and Devon’s strategic disengagement make clear the logic of refusal. The young men’s actions thus force us to reckon with an unnerving question: who among us would be content living in a social milieu where we were forced to learn within an educational structure that had severely outdated resources and pedagogical practices, was heavily policed, and due to the drastically uneven distribution of resources, could not even dangle the menial carrot of a living wage upon graduation? Yet this is the expectation and moral imperative that we place on Black students such as P. J., Marley, and Devon. On a very basic level, the liberal rhetorical strategies that conflate education with future economic and social success have fallen flat for Black youth throughout Southern California.<sup>8</sup>

Effectively countering the liberal logic of enclosed places, Devon's tactical response of refusal to participate in class is an abdication of a liberal framework that masks the insidious processes of racial violence, as well as a profound means to maintain his humanity. Through his brazen plan, he managed to dissociate from the pejorative invocations of his inability. However, it must be stated that Devon had very few options. The school was in full support of his teacher, and he sought support from the only source of assistance he had available to him. While his stance proved heroic, we should recognize that Devon had to endure levels of state-sanctioned emotional and psychological violence that no youth should ever have to endure.

Marley's alternative strategy of complete disengagement demonstrated a key function of the radical nature of the Black fugitive logic: the proposition of an alternative social vision for the utilization of social resources. His intervention of developing pedagogical techniques that incorporated the realities of the community performed two key tasks central to Black fugitive logic. The first was to utilize the formal setting of education as grounds to teach about the duplicitous nature of state power. In Marley's case, the issue of cutting down the trees served as a literal and metaphorical device to understand the manner in which state power was commonly experienced in manipulative ways. While the parading of the space shuttle *Endeavor* through the streets of Los Angeles was marketed as a public good, there was very little discussion of what that entailed for residents, for whom such a spectacle meant the destruction of their communities. Marley's insistence that a communal narrative be inserted into the formal educational setting constitutes a direct threat by exposing the oppressive mechanisms of state power while simultaneously assisting Black youth in understanding the complexities of crucial processes in the natural and physical sciences.

Marley's call for the incorporation of the lived conditions of his community into education, as well as Devon's and P. J.'s strategies of countering the politics of a violent space, are tightly meshed to the second function of Black fugitive logic—exposure through refusal. Their disengagement from the formal educational process has to be understood not as a blanket rebuke of education but as an action in opposition to state-mandated education that attempts to disempower Black youth. In many ways, the three young men's actions are manifestations of [Tina Campt's \(2014\)](#) invocation of fugitivity as a tactical practice to counter the imperatives of the state. Marley's withdrawal, which is representative of more than 30 percent of Black students in California ([Tucker 2010](#)), illustrates in many ways a collective yet unorganized recognition of the oppressive tendencies found

within the formal education system. As perceived by Marley, the emphasis on banal forms of testing and draconian educational mandates represent state power doubling down through increased control over both the curriculum (what is taught) and pedagogy (how teachers can teach). Perhaps more damning is Marley's implication that the intention of the formal education system is to obfuscate paths of resistance and dissent for the masses of Black youth. In this manner, the chasm between what is taught by the school and the lived reality of Black students is not a lack of knowledge and/or recognition on the part of the state, but rather an attempt to prevent meaningful discussion and forms of learning that would directly lead to questioning and rebellion against processes that uphold state power.

The response by the state to the fugitive actions of Black youth sheds light on the fear of exposure of the forms of violence committed within enclosed places. As outlined in my brief history of Black education in Los Angeles, the county and city have been swift to criminalize acts of fugitivity. The Abolish Chronic Truancy (ACT) program has provided the impetus for the state to enlist all of the facets of the criminal-justice and judicial systems to track down Black youth and place them back in the clutches of enclosed places. Yet such a response is typical with respect to the attempted state suppression of Black fugitivity. [Stefano Harney and Fred Moten \(2013, 57\)](#) argue that this consistent response is based on the criminalization of the fugitive for fear and knowledge of what Black mobilization would bring to bear:

Governance and criminality—the condition of being without interests—come to make each other possible. What would it mean to struggle against governance, against that which can produce struggle by germinating interests? When governance is understood as the criminalization of being without interests, as a regulation brought into being by criminality, where criminality is that excess left from criminalization, a certain fragility emerges, a certain limit, an uncertain imposition by a greater drive, the mere utterance of whose name has again become too black, too strong altogether.

Building on Harney and Moten's insights, we can connect Black fugitive logic with Camp's framing of fugitivity and Trouillot's analysis of the state. The criminalization of Black fugitivity is a reaction to the Black fugitive's insistence on refusal and on not being placed in the metaphorical and literal clutches of state power. Such was the case with Marley, who was very explicit about the role of state mandates (e.g., compulsory education) within Black communities. In this

regard, Black fugitive logic functions as the catalyst that pieces together the multifaceted state apparatus that enacts state power. The diffusion of power throughout its many institutions and structures is thereby made known through the Black fugitive's ability to decipher and name the many tentacles of the liberal state project (Gordon 2011).<sup>9</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Through the many conversations I have had with Black youth such as P. J., Marley, and Devon, I have been forced to take stock of a general set of principles regarding communities at odds with the state. At a very fundamental level, the question arises: how do you negotiate, or enter into any type of fruitful relationship, with an entity that on multiple levels has proven detrimental to your humanity? One solution that has proven highly effective is the contemporary expression of Black fugitivity. I have learned, however, that this expression is often necessarily fragmented and not legible within a liberal framework. It is not by chance that Black youth such as Marley were not seduced by the panacea of state processes, but instead were read and treated as criminals. These young men cannot be organized by the state to demonstrate reform and respectability; they cannot be taught within enclosed places to learn their place within society. It is difficult to see how they will be brought into the proverbial fold of the liberal project in a way that state power can reproduce itself in a legitimate manner.<sup>10</sup> The fragmented nature of fugitivity may represent the perilous economic and social situations within which Black Angelenos find themselves, but it also demonstrates how absurd the commonsense rhetoric of liberalism has become. Within a society built on such problematic invocations of state power, a troubling question returns: what damage is done by reinforcing a narrative that Black students should drop out of school? The lesson I learned is that the young Black people I have had the opportunity to work with are in desperate need of resources. What they do not need, however, are failed but repackaged analytical and practical paradigms labeled as solutions. It is up to us as scholars, organizers, and caring individuals in a collective society to catch up to the profound insights already developed and implemented if we do not wish to face a future of certain ruin.

## ABSTRACT

*The Black fugitive in the United States has been a metaphorical and literal construction for both exposing oppressive forms of state governance and the development of strategic plans to achieve freedom from the state. Commonly thought of within a*

historical setting, the Black fugitive in this article is situated within the contemporary urban setting of Los Angeles, California. As told through the lived experience of young Black residents of the city, the narrative of fugitivity exposes the false promises of state governance, which is theorized as an enclosure. Specifically, this article focuses on self-removal from the state structure of formal education as a vehicle to understand Black fugitivity as a generative source of freedom from violent forms of state governance. [education; race; the state; urban anthropology]

## NOTES

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1. A major issue at stake is also the disavowal of fugitivity as a form of liberal political practice. Elizabeth Povinelli (2011, 76) comments that until such action is deemed worthy of recognition, it is intensely marked by the state as dangerous.
2. As covered in the *California Eagle* (Bass 1947), there were actually two attacks on Black youth at John C. Fremont High School during that year.
3. Ruth Wilson Gilmore (2007, 21) states that “the generally accepted goal for prisons has been *incapacitation*: a do-nothing theory if ever there was one.”
4. The Southern California Library is a research library and meeting space in South Central Los Angeles that houses an expansive collection of progressive and radical archival material.
5. The comics are now out of print, but have been anthologized in Ahrens 2008.
6. In 2012, the space shuttle *Endeavor* was paraded through South Central Los Angeles on its way to the California Science Center.
7. The Obama administration’s My Brother’s Keeper initiative exemplifies this logic; see <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/my-brothers-keeper>.
8. The period from the late 1960s through the 1980s brought massive unemployment to Los Angeles County. The decline of the automobile industry resulted in the shuttering of more than ten plants employing between five and fifteen thousand workers each. Many Blacks who moved to the area never again found work that paid a living wage (Horne 1997; M. Davis 2006).
9. Avery Gordon (2011, 8) connects processes of refusing to engage with the state to the ideological thrust of abolition as a political project: “Abolition involves critique, refusal, and rejection of that which you want to abolish, but it also involves being or ‘becoming unavailable for servitude,’ to use Toni Cade Bambara’s words.”
10. I emphasize legitimacy here, because although the criminal justice system forms a part of legitimate state power, societies that utilize forms of brute force as a main form of governance continually face questions of legitimacy by an increasingly fragmented public (Robinson 2000).

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