

Fugitive Pedagogy: Carter G. Woodson and the Art of Black Teaching

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Born in 1865 during the last years of the American Civil War, Carter H. Barnett was a teacher and the principal of Frederick Douglass School in Huntington, West Virginia, where he edited the *West Virginia Spokesman* and contributed to the state's Black teacher association. Positioned on the edge of a tattered 1896 photograph, he stands to the right of fifty-some school children assembled in motley garb on the school steps, Garnett's own studious dress and the hat held in his hand testament to his status as Principal of this six-room school.

In 1900 Garnett was fired after he alienated local white leaders by proposing a series of Black candidates for political office who were independent from the local Republican Party. His replacement, the beneficiary of the persistent vulnerability of Black educators and—likely unbeknownst to the white school board—his cousin, was Carter G. Woodson, now well-known and indeed lionized as the 'Father of Black History Month.' Barnett's story is a particularly resonant instance of the many under-examined stories unearthed in Jarvis Givens's *Fugitive Pedagogy: Carter G. Woodson and the Art of Black Teaching*. Utilising Woodson as a centripetal focus, Givens unveils the full tapestry of Black education life, juxtaposing the fortunes and misfortunes of a realm "always in crisis; always teetering between strife and hope and prayer" (p. 22).

Givens, an assistant professor at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, maps this liminal position by excavating a pedagogical heritage of 'fugitivity', following the insights of theorists including Édouard Glissant, Saidiya Hartman, and Nathaniel Mackey. Invoking Mackey's conception of the "fugitive spirit" of Black social life more broadly (p. vii), *Fugitive Pedagogy* describes the everyday acts of subversion Black teachers employed to teach students about Black history and heritage amid "persistent discursive and physical assaults." (p. 34). As Givens takes pains to emphasise, these acts were not isolated episodes but instead "the occasion, the main event", representing the visible aspects of an "overarching set of political commitments" that dated to the period of enslavement and continued to be anchored in celebrations of the folk heroism of the fugitive slave (p. 16). The fugitive slave's example symbolised a space of existence outside of prescribed racial orders, where African Americans could collectively assert their capacity to be educated, rational, and human. In the words of Master Hugh from *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, a slave who knew how to write was "running away with himself" (p. 12).

A great strength of this analytic, as opposed to resistance or freedom, is to emphasise that Black educational efforts were always fated to struggle against centuries of legislation and beliefs that denied Black educability. Incorporating Achille Mbembe's *Critique of Black Reason*, Givens suggests that this "chattel principle" that rendered African-descended peoples fungible property to be exchanged by slaveholders denied their potential rationality, catalysing subsequent antiliteracy laws (p. 10). Slaves were to have "only hands, not heads", hence the declaration of legislation following 1739's Stono Rebellion that "the having of slaves taught to write, or suffering them to be employed in writing, may be attended with great inconveniences" (p. 11). Locating Black educators in the 'Afterlives of Slavery', Givens thus suggests that to be Black and educated has always represented "an insistence on Black living, even amid the perpetual threat of Black social death" (p. 10).

Fugitivity also voices the affective and embodied natures of teaching, where classrooms underwent "aesthetic transformation... to defy the normative protocols of the American School" (p. 204). For Givens, education is corporeal, embodied, and freighted with emotional resonance, its putative impossibility under dominant racial scripts "etched into Black flesh" (p. 20). Conversely, miseducation and antiblack curricular violence are situated as symbiotic with physical violence, hence the frequent quotation of Woodson's assertion "there would be no lynching if it did not start in the schoolroom." (pp. 95-96). Thematically, Givens thus emphasises Black education as a learning experience, something recovered by trawling a "patchwork of sources" from a diverse archive to privilege the often understudied experiences of Black students themselves and uncovering that common contradiction between "what they said or wrote" (p. 20).

Givens's "collage of fugitive pedagogy" (p. 24) is constellated around the "particular, emblematic narrative" (p. 4) of Carter G. Woodson (1875-1950), the author, historian, and founder of the Association for the Study of African American Life and History (ASALH). As opposed to echoing Jacqueline Goggin and Pero Galgo Dagbovie's accomplished biographies of Woodson, *Fugitive Pedagogy* analyses Woodson in constant relation to the ASALH's broader network of scholars to demonstrate how Woodson "inherited a tradition and then played a crucial role in expanding it" (p. 16). (1) By effectively dethroning Woodson, this networked approach paints a more expansive portrait than the patrilineal tendency to centre the individual achievements of this 'father' of Black Studies.

For example, Givens's first chapter provides a fresh perspective on the already well-examined subject of Woodson's life from 1875-1912 by emphasising his socialization into a vibrant pre-existing "black educational world" (p. 26). This deliberately privileges Woodson the teacher over Woodson the later scholar, highlighting how reading newspapers to the Civil War veterans he worked alongside in West Virginia's coal mines and witnessing his teachers, frequently themselves formerly enslaved men, allowed Woodson to develop "a studied perspective on the distinct vocational demands of being a black teacher" (p. 26). Taking Woodson as emblematic of the first post-emancipation school generation thus stresses the continuities in Black education's striving against a pre and post-emancipation antiblack social order, revealing how teaching the formerly enslaved consequently remained "an act of unmaking the terms of their relation to the

word and world” (p. 35).

Chapter Two highlights how Woodson’s desire to denaturalize prevailing forms of scientific judgement found an “institutional embodiment” in the ASALH, one instance of Woodson’s wider designs to form a Black “counterpublic” (p. 71). Whilst this is also well-trodden ground, the fugitive pedagogy motif nonetheless helps to explain the Association’s shift from the interracial historical alliance conceptualized in 1915 to its more polemic form in the 1930s. This was, Givens argues, a direct response to the epistemological violence of racist films such as *Birth of the Nation* and the physical violence of contemporary race riots such as 1919’s ‘Red Summer.’ In a position of eternal vigilance, the Association was thus portrayed “standing like the watchman on the wall, ever mindful of what calamities we have suffered from misinterpretation in the past and looking out with a scrutinizing eye for everything indicative of a similar attack” (p. 62).

Chapter Three moves to embed Woodson in a distinct tradition of Black educational thought, a literature of educational criticism that sought to counter the disfiguring of Black knowledge within American public life. As opposed to emphasising the barriers preventing access into American schools and universities, Givens instead underscores the “epistemological underpinnings of education provided to those who made it past these barriers” (p. 97). Thus, Woodson’s *Mis-Education of the Negro* (1933) critiqued the “imitation resulting in the enslavement of his mind”, particularly from institutions like Harvard which rendered its students “blind to the Negro” and unable to “serve the race efficiently” (pp. 98-99). In the most theoretically expansive section of *Fugitive Pedagogy*, Givens articulates this Woodsonian critique of pedagogical ‘mimicry’ to the adjacent conceptions of several extra-American Black thinkers regarding the disfiguring of Black knowledge: Aimé Césaire’s ‘thingification’, Sylvia Wynter’s ‘narrative condemnation’, and Ng’g’wa Thiong’o’s ‘cultural bomb.’

Chapter Four too ballasts fugitive pedagogy in the remembrance of the Black fugitive as an “an archetype who symbolized Black people’s political relationship to the modern world and its technologies of schooling” (p. 128). This archetype indicates the wider use of Black historical achievements as models for present political action within textbooks that sought to vindicate Black intellectual and political life by recalling the full history of resistance within the Black diaspora. In this sense, Givens concludes, the Black textbook was “itself a literary genre inaugurated by runaway slaves” (p. 158). This tradition rendered curricular violence visible, distilling the possibility of resistance by evoking a Black aesthetic that situated subversion and defiance as long-standing threads of Black existence.

Chapter Five looks to connect Woodson to a cadre of Black schoolteachers. Adapting the term “abroad marriages”, originally applied to those enslaved who married those living on different plantations, Givens shows how Woodson the ‘abroad mentor’ utilised the Black press, the ASALH, and particularly Negro History Week to translate his ideas to school teachers, pausing along the way to examine the inequity in school provision and the restrictions on teaching they faced, particularly in the South. One notable example was the Negro Manual and Training High School in Muskogee, Oklahoma. In 1925 its Principal Thomas W. Grissom was forced to resign after officials found Woodson’s *The Negro in Our History* being taught, with the school board decreeing that nothing could be “instilled in the schools that is either klan or antiklan” (p. 168).

Finally, Chapter Six looks to centre students as “partners in [the] performance of fugitive pedagogy” by analysing biographical materials recounting the school days of prominent civil rights activists, politicians, and scholars including Angela Davis, John Lewis, and John Bracey (p. 199). Whilst subsequent activists are likely to be far from representative, Givens effectively emphasises the aesthetic ecology of the classroom and how the value systems undergirding school routines, rules, and projects including Negro History Week “inducted [students] as neophytes in a continuum of consciousness” (p. 222). This collection of visual narratives, Givens argues, formed an ‘oppositional gaze’, a disposition to question social technologies that perpetuated antiblack violence. The example of Congressman John Lewis is particularly resonant, as Givens shows Lewis prefiguring his later contribution to the sit-in movement by asking a public library in Troy,

Alabama for library cards for him, his siblings, and his cousins despite their full awareness of the futility of this request.

If *Fugitive Pedagogy* has one weakness, it is the underplaying of intraracial differences inevitable within Givens's artifice. Whilst Givens stresses that fugitivity is a variable practice, he asserts that "surely there are deviations, but they are not the concern here" (p. 16). Correspondingly, *Fugitive Pedagogy* makes no attempt to comprehensively trace variations in region, class, and gender. In a book of just over 300 pages, this is a pragmatic decision which avoids diluting the argumentative thrust. Yet consequential statements of intraracial equality are on occasion made rather too briefly. For example, Givens looks to identify the ASALH as "an intellectual project with Black Americans across age, class, and gender in mind," defining his inclusion of gender here as a "careful assertion" (p. 84). Granted, Givens effectively illustrates that Black women consistently made up more than three-quarters of the profession and rose to prominent positions, with Mary McLeod Bethune becoming the ASALH's President from 1936 to 1951. Yet this is not to say that Black women's contributions were adequately recognised or recompensed, particularly given Patrice Morton's suggestion that the ASALH failed to challenge many myths of Black womanhood prior to the late 20th century.⁽²⁾

Second, further research is needed to layer fugitive pedagogy into the full scope of Black institutional life, investigating how fugitive pedagogy translated to ancillary sites of education, including clubs, sporting societies, libraries, and churches. Givens consciously distances his argument from quantitative assessments of the inequality of educational provision yet this risks obscuring regional variations in resources and the vital ties between low wages, economic precarity, and professional vulnerability. *Fugitive Pedagogy* largely develops 'upwards' from individual acts of fugitivity, occasionally de-emphasising the institutional context. This means that readers hear little about mundane but vital factors including roofs, heating, lighting, desks, school grounds, teacher-pupil ratios, or the disproportionate private ownership of Black schools. With the firings of both Grissom and Barnett, Givens correspondingly emphasises the outcome rather than the process, occluding the logics and justifications of school boards and the pressures placed upon them by local (white) communities. Should an adequate archive exist, an ecological study focused on fugitive pedagogy within a single school would particularly flesh out Givens's framework.

Third, given the roots of fugitive pedagogy in the discrete experience and memories of slavery, could other insurgent pedagogies employ fugitive practices? If not, there is a risk that the fugitive model shifts a further emotive and educative burden to Black teachers, compounding the long-standing tendency already recognised by Givens for Black teachers to double tax themselves to achieve liberatory ends. Givens suggests so, situating Black fugitive pedagogy as one discrete tradition within a broader genre of educational criticism that critiqued orthodox models of schooling, a purposive attempt to "leave room to consider... bodies of educational criticism by Native American educators and thinkers, Marxist educators, and feminist teachers and thinkers, among others who understand their political motivations for teaching to be in direct tension with the protocols and dominant ideology of the American school" (p. 251, cf.76). Further, recounting recorded acts of fugitivity necessarily underplays the longer slog of merely existing and making a living within white institutions, with all the undoubtedly uneasy cross-racial cooperation and interest convergence this entailed. When reckoning with this subject matter, any historian is condemned to see only the tip of the iceberg, only those acts visible in the archive through exorbitant chance and, more than often than not, only when refracted through the institutional memory of surveillance institutions. Whilst Givens has collected a vast archive of Black voices, there remains the risk of privileging more palpable disobedience over the dissemblances and circumlocutions which could allow Black teachers "wearing the mask" to articulate an activist ethos within the confines of objectivity.

These three areas for further investigation notwithstanding, *Fugitive Pedagogy* ultimately offers an engrossing reminder of the importance of collective education that is particularly resonant in the world of individualised algorithmic learning that followed the COVID-19 pandemic. Ambitious and theoretically virtuosic in exposition, magnetic and energizing in execution, the clarity of its theoretical interventions suggests that its broad brushstrokes will be imminently nuanced by other scholars empowered by the

fugitive framework and its relevance to current pedagogical debates.

As the February 2022 victory of a diverse coalition against Indiana's House Bill 1134 signals a growing resistance to anti-CRT legislation, Givens is particularly commendable for his insistence on Black education's prescriptive moral force. A more diluted 'anti-racist' pedagogy within contemporary education that often tends towards the personal and psychological, towards diversity and inclusion, is cut short shrift compared to a progressive pedagogy that acknowledges the structural determinants of white supremacy. For Givens, education provides an alternative prospectus for living. If this may appear somewhat utopian, *Fugitive Pedagogy* at least provides a powerful argument for cross-professional solidarity between academia and schoolteachers. This will undoubtedly be furthered by Givens's creation (alongside Princeton's Imani Perry) of the Black Teacher Archives. As Givens notes, this disposition represents "an international refusal of contemporary trends where teachers are deprofessionalized in general and where black teachers in particular have been systemically alienated, often being positioned as unintellectual and nonpedagogical knowers" (p. 239).

Excavating Black education's persistent fugitive ethos also emphasises that the 'political' education challenged by recent anti-CRT laws has only been rendered visible and legislatively-eradicable in proportion to white discomfort. Historicizing this ethos thus provides a warning against retreating to political 'neutrality' as such an option has never existed. Ultimately, *Fugitive Pedagogy* suggests that any pedagogy seeking to advance Black achievement is necessarily 'political', if only because the mere social fact of Black literacy confounds the founding principles of the American Republic.

To be sure, teachers in the present United States face their own dilemmas. Contemporary educators face not only an onslaught of anti-CRT legislation but also the dilemmas of retaining any activist impulse behind Black education within a racial liberalism that stresses the integration of Black history into multi-racial educational programmes disarticulated from the Black counterpublic sphere. As Givens recently recognised in *The Los Angeles Review of Books*: "We must also recognize... that [the] siloed inclusion of Black knowledge into mainstream institutions- often in defanged fashion- can only do so much to disrupt the self-corrective nature of said systems." (3)

Jarvis Givens's *Fugitive Pedagogy* places educational strivings at the heart of the Black freedom struggle, providing historians of the United States a digestible testament to the methodological interventions and activist orientations of recent historians of Black education. Suitable for both advanced undergraduates and the public, Givens's work deserves a central role in syllabuses on the Black freedom struggle, the sociology of knowledge, and broader histories of resistance to educational domination. As the global education sector rebuilds following COVID-19, *Fugitive Pedagogy* cogently conveys this literature's overwhelming emphasis on the virtues of disciplinary self-introspection and recovering shared professional heritages. If much of the fugitive tradition with its attendant varieties remains to be fully pieced out, Givens nonetheless articulates a grammar for struggle that can provide refortification to our own generation's embattled teachers who choose to think otherwise. Teetering once more between "strife and hope and prayer", *Fugitive Pedagogy* articulates a language that provides historical ballast for the present and argumentative weapons for the future.

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Notes

1. Pero Gaglo Dagbovie, *The Early Black History Movement*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007) & Jacqueline Anne Goggin, Carter G. Woodson: A Life in Black History, (Baton Rouge:

- Louisiana State University Press, 1993).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Patricia Morton, *Disfigured Images: The Historical Assault on Afro-American Women*, (New York: Greenwood Press, 1991).[Back to \(2\)](#)
 3. Jarvis Givens, 'Fugitive Pedagogy: The Longer Roots of Antiracist Teaching,' *The LA Review of Books*, August 18th, 2021.[Back to \(3\)](#)

Additional image: Mary McLeod Bethune with students of the Daytona Educational and Industrial Training School for Negro Girls. (World Digital Library/Wikimedia Commons/Public Domain)

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[1] <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/item/356751>