Fugitive Pedagogy
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CARTER G. WOODSON AND THE ART OF BLACK TEACHING

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HARVARD UNIVERSITY PRESS
Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, England • 2021
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Preface: A New Grammar for Black Education

For the horrors of the American Negro’s life there has been almost no language.

Our language, when it comes to black education, is impoverished. Knowing how education has been a site of deep hurt and suffering on the one hand and yet a sacred site of black spiritual strivings on the other, we might look to more precise grammar to name and wrestle with this embattled reality. I desired a way to write about education as black people experienced it, in the interstices of this liminal reality—wedged between their collective striving and the antiblack domination they sought to escape—a way of writing that would account for the intentional ways black people navigated these deeply violent contexts and dreamed up new worlds and new ways of being. The problem of language is one that plagues black education studies and one that is widespread in the academy more generally, because for so long black life has been a problem for thought. Only language that goes beyond the descriptive can aid the observer who desires to sift through such a lived paradox and the futures it structured. But not just any language will do.

James Baldwin pointed us to a source: “The privacy of [the American Negro’s] experience, which is only beginning to be recognized in language, and which is denied or ignored in official and popular speech—hence the Negro idiom—lends credibility to any system that pretends to clarify it.”1 A dynamic language is needed to appreciate the complexities of black life. Black idiom, for its interpretive capacity and ability to archive vexing yet important textured aspects of life within the Veil, offers such nuance—historical knowledge, sets of relations, and ways of knowing carried in black speech acts—a black way of saying, these “verbal race rituals and customs” do theoretical work.2
As such, this book relies on the fugitive slave archetype, and on fugitive pedagogy—a term that is neither (to borrow from folklorists) fully “emic” (from within) nor “etic” (from without) but a hybrid of the two. The fugitive slave emerged as a folk hero and cultural symbol in curriculums developed by black teachers. The fugitive slave appeared in school naming practices and within commemorative ceremonies in school activities and rituals. Black Americans established a heroic tradition around the stories and names associated with this pedagogy of escape in their schools and classrooms. As a folk hero in black curricular imaginations, the fugitive slave carried important insights about the interior life of teachers and students. This was the “fugitive spirit” of black education, to borrow from the poet and literary critic Nathaniel Mackey. Fugitive spirit was fact, metaphor, and formal disposition in black literary practices and (I extend this to include) black education more broadly. Fugitivity has taken on heightened analytical significance in recent decades for the study of black politics and culture, and it can be understood as a contemporary idiom anchored by old knowledge from the black past.

As I put closure on my research in the African American Studies Department at the University of California, Berkeley, I realized that to truly appreciate Carter G. Woodson or his iconic 1933 book, *The Mis-education of the Negro*, required a serious engagement with the veiled world of black education and black teachers only partially visible to the white public of their time and the historical record left behind. The black teachers and students called on in this book became portals into a heritage of fugitive pedagogy. I hope to tell their story in a way that moves beyond mere description and narratives of heroic struggle, and instead tease out central conflicts pertaining to questions of black ontology and the deeper meaning of education in black people’s struggle for human goodness and flourishing; for a new world to be and new ways to be in the world. As Toni Morrison showed through her fictional character Sixo: a language is only worth speaking or writing or singing if you can see a future in it. I look to black teachers of the past, whose fugitive acts can teach us so much about the future. They represent a tradition that has been plundered from today’s black educators, who are its rightful inheritors. I see the cast of characters in this book as standard bearers. A tradition passed through these teachers and their students. Their heritage is one worthy of both praise and deep study.
How some of these slaves learned in spite of opposition makes a beautiful story. Knowing the value of learning as a means of escape and having longing for it, too, because it was forbidden, many slaves continued their education under adverse circumstances.

—Carter G. Woodson, The Negro in Our History (1922)
But some of us would try to steal
A little from the book.
And put the words together,
And learn by hook or crook.

“Learning to Read” (1853)
—FRANCES ELLEN WATKINS HARPER, teacher and abolitionist

Tessie McGee read to her class in a steady measured tone, quietly engaging in a calculated act of subversion. She was black, twenty-eight years old, and taught history in 1933–1934 at the only black secondary school in Webster Parish, Louisiana.¹ The state’s all-white Department of Education and local school board gave clear instructions: teachers were to keep a preapproved outline openly displayed on their desks, which they were to follow closely to acquaint their students with the targeted learning objectives.² Black educators and families in Webster Parish had little formal control over curriculum, even though the school was paid for with funds raised by “double taxing” themselves—cultivating neighborhood patches of cotton that they handed over to local school officials. Despite being tax-paying citizens, blacks found state allocations of resources to be far less for their children’s education as compared with white children’s.³ On many occasions, McGee made what she deemed to be necessary revisions to the mandatory curriculum. Based on her own judgment, and perhaps at the recommendation of fellow black teachers, she often read passages from Carter G. Woodson’s “book on the Negro,” which rested comfortably in her lap. She kept the book out of sight, understanding the likely repercussions were she to be caught. Like most black educators, Miss McGee was a public employee and vulnerable to the disciplinary practices of Jim Crow authorities. But she was undeterred. “She read to us from that book,” one of McGee’s students recounted. “When the principal
would come in, she would . . . simply lift her eyes to the outline that resided on the desk and teach us from the outline. When the principal disappeared, her eyes went back to the book in her lap.”

The scenario from Miss McGee’s classroom illuminates what this book calls *fugitive pedagogy*. My use of the term *fugitive* draws inspiration from the literary scholars Steven Best’s and Saidiya Hartman’s discussion of “fugitive justice.” Although focused on slavery, redress, and the historicity of what is lost and irrecoverable in the future, Best and Hartman introduce the idea of “two competing narratives of the fugitive’s identity.” Fugitive connotes the dual image of one who escapes enslavement or jailed confinement, which justifies one’s capture and even death at the hands of law enforcement. Yet as Best and Hartman explain, the violence of enslavement, “legal” capture, and brutality engenders, as well, the countervailing narrative of and by the fugitive as victim of antiblack domination. Adapting such a conceptualization to American education reveals parallel, equally competing historical images. On the one hand, the dominant story of the nation’s past had long vilified, devalued, and disrespected black people, thereby justifying racial discrimination in the forms of enslavement and later segregation, disfranchise-
ment, lynching, and imprisonment. On the other hand, this very exclusion, violence, and confinement in a land that professed the ideals of liberty and justice for all prompted a counterhistorical narrative and way of knowing—indeed one represented in the extensive factual evidence contained in Carter G. Woodson’s books, which documented the wrongs done to black Americans but also their achievements and contributions to the modern world. And as the case of Tessie McGee makes clear, much of this type of black education occurred in a covert manner.

Black education was a fugitive project from its inception—outlawed and defined as a criminal act regarding the slave population in the southern states and, at times, too, an object of suspicion and violent resistance in the North. Similar to black America’s political struggles in general, the quest for freedom through education extended from their grassroots efforts in the time of slavery. While very distinct contexts, there was never a complete break from slavery to freedom. For over a century, scholars have consistently relied on descriptors that signify how secrecy and subversion formed part and parcel of black education. In the 1920s Carter G. Woodson observed that enslaved black people pursued “learning as a means of escape.” Present-day historians, such as Thomas Webber, note that the enslaved established ways of doing and being in the quarter communities that served educational purposes and that this system of knowledge and values was held internally, away from the watchful eye of masters and overseers.6 Heather Williams has masterfully reconstructed enslaved people’s pursuit of literacy “in the secret places.” She then revealed that even as black people were legally permitted to become educated in the postbellum South, the violent suppression of their efforts persisted, and they continued to resist in the best ways they knew how.7

More pointedly to the subject of this book, the historian James Anderson has argued that by the end of the Civil War there were “cumulative experiences and cumulative traditions and values that transmitted over a long period of time” about literacy and education. This educational worldview “enter[ed] into freedom and emancipation with the slave population.”8 Attentive to this observation, Fugitive Pedagogy charts the constitutive elements and political relationships that formed the core of the black educational heritage in slavery and how they carried over as the political foundation for what came after. The subversive educational acts by black Americans during
the Civil War period through Jim Crow were tied to a longer history of fugitive educational practices that began in the time of slavery.9

After the Civil War and especially in the decades following the end of Reconstruction, black education in the South was violently suppressed or starved of adequate state funding and left to perish. Between 1866 and 1876 well over six hundred black southern schools were burned. At the turn of the twentieth century, W. E. B. Du Bois described whites’ fierce opposition to black education as having “showed itself in ashes, insult, and blood.”10 Students and their teachers met with white aggression, and consequently black education was only partially revealed to the public eye. The plot—by which I mean the embedded political aims of its pedagogy—continued to be concealed and held close.11 An amassed set of values and traditions, I am arguing, stood at the core of the covert demeanors and tool kit of practices necessary to advance the plot of black education. Glenda Gilmore has written about black women builders of schools as “double agents” during Jim Crow.12 Vanessa Siddle Walker has exposed the private partnerships between black educators and the NAACP. These teachers were “hidden provocateurs,” she argues, forced to keep their political ties underground because of their economic vulnerability as employees of the state and given their physical vulnerability as black people living under de jure segregation.13 Across this genealogy of scholarship emerges a persistent thread. When it came to the pursuit of freedom through education, black people consistently deployed fugitive tactics. Enslaved people learned in secret places. During Jim Crow, black educators wore a mask of compliance in order to appease the white power structure, while simultaneously working to subvert it.

While my conceptualization of fugitive pedagogy ushers in a new paradigmatic framing of black education in a general sense, its meaning will be largely couched in the particular, emblematic narrative of Carter G. Woodson (1875–1950)—the author of Miss McGee’s concealed textbook. Woodson was the son and student of former slaves, a veteran schoolteacher of nearly thirty years, and he became the second black American to receive a PhD from Harvard in 1912, after W. E. B. Du Bois. However, while he is the central character of this book, I am no less interested in the educational world that surrounded Woodson as I am in the educator himself. *Fugitive Pedagogy* calls attention to a tradition that passed through Carter G. Woodson, not one that began with him or for which he was solely responsible. The book’s baseline
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narrative tells of Woodson, a man born in the first generation after Emancipation, who published numerous scholarly monographs and articles and founded the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History (ASNLH) in 1915 and Negro History Week in 1926 (what has become today Black History Month). Celebrated as “the father of Black History,” Woodson represented much more than this, however. As *Fugitive Pedagogy* brings to light, he was first and foremost a schoolteacher—having taught English, French, and History and having served as a public school principal in West Virginia and Washington, DC. His life’s work was influenced and made possible by the pedagogical work of black schoolteachers.

Nor is this book an attempt to retell Woodson’s life story in exhaustive biographical detail. Instead it offers a schematic treatment of his development from student to teacher to educational leader and theorist. Embedded in this particular narrative is a more general story of black education, one that stretches from the time of slavery through Jim Crow. This second, more expansive narrative is a conceptual story of antiblack exclusion and confinement on the one hand and blacks’ engagement in fugitive educational politics on the other. The dialectic formed between the two narratives is key to understanding the fugitive character of black educational heritage. In this sense, the book uses a seminal historical figure to read a broader social and intellectual history through that person’s journey.

In *Fugitive Pedagogy* I analyze the educational world surrounding Woodson as illustrative of a larger phenomenon that elevates the stories of his collaborators for the purpose of rendering a work of history, cultural theory, and pedagogical insight. Indeed, teachers like Tessie McGee were representative of the tens of thousands of Woodson’s collaborators across the country. Her actions were closer to the rule than to the exception. Using Woodson to anchor the story, however, allows for a more cohesive narrative and analysis that is both thick and expansive, while comprising fragmented story elements from teachers and students to whom he was connected. In the Webster Parish Training School, Tessie McGee’s dissident method of instruction constitutes a textbook example of fugitive pedagogy. The physical and intellectual acts by black teachers and students explicitly critiqued and negated white supremacy and antiblack protocols of domination, but they often did so in discreet or partially concealed fashion. Embedded in McGee’s actions is the heritage of black education: a lived tension between antiblack persecution in
“the American School”—which refers to the schooling apparatus of the United States that manifested in diverse institutional forms, laws, and social policies—and the intellectual and embodied acts of subversion black people deployed to navigate those constraints. The content of Woodson’s textbook, the organizations he founded and was a part of, as well as McGee’s subversive pedagogical acts through the employment of Woodson’s words and ideas, all embody a fugitive project. Woodson’s textbook rejected the degrading representations of black life in official school curricula, which always had physical implications as well. McGee escaped this official curriculum by way of the “hidden transcript” literally resting on her lap. The public display of the “official” outline was a masked performance of complicity—an embodied text that accompanied the subversive content in Woodson’s history book. McGee’s physical act of switching texts taught a lesson to her students who witnessed it. She demonstrated how defiance could at times be disguised by public performances of deference to the coercive regime of school authorities.

Equally important, teachers like McGee gained access to these alternative scripts of knowledge through “insurgent intellectual networks” to which they were connected—institutions like Woodson’s ASNLH and black teacher associations. The latter associations betray an expansive veiled yet networked black educational world, one where black Americans said one thing and did another, meaning that the true political intentions undergirding black educational strivings were rarely on full display, given rampant antiblack violence. African Americans responded often in quiet, calculated acts of resistance against oppressive school settings that reflected a world order built on black subjection. As a collective endeavor, fugitive pedagogy comprised networks of teachers as well as their students. For example, the principal entering McGee’s classroom was a black man named J. L. Jones. Records suggest that he was an advocate for including black culture and history in the curriculum. He was a leading member in the Louisiana Colored Teachers’ Association, which explicitly endorsed Carter G. Woodson and his work. It is not implausible, then, to consider that Jones and McGee may have very likely conspired together, the principal testing the teacher to ensure she could protect herself and the school if a white official entered the room. Their interactions performed for students a strategy of technical compliance without actually complying. Wearing the mask, as Paul Laurence Dunbar called it, was part and parcel of black teachers’ professional disposition.
In black segregated schools, the intrusion of white surveillance had a hand in shaping school ecology. It was not atypical for white people to drop by unannounced during the school day, either to show off “their negro school” to visitors or for some other routine inspection. While disruptive to the school day, these visits were primarily meant to demonstrate power, which was essential to reproducing domination. This is to say, the person walking into McGee’s classroom could just as easily have been a white school official. Black educators walked a tightrope in their efforts to challenge the school system and social reality in which they found themselves. These circumstances meant that critical aspects of their work had to be done covertly. If they were to fall or be caught, there was no safety net to catch them. Just a few years prior, a black principal was threatened and fired in Oklahoma, and his teachers reprimanded, after a Klan-run white school board learned that Woodson’s textbook, *The Negro in Our History*, had—as they put it—“crept into our Negro schools.” Examples of this kind of violent oversight are plentiful. They move forward and backward in time as far as black teachers are concerned.

Oliver Pope had been teaching in his hometown of Templeton, Virginia, in 1908 when the white superintendent (also a former Confederate soldier) made an unexpected visit to his schoolroom. The visit just so happened to coincide with a class discussion on the Negro vote during Reconstruction. The superintendent challenged Pope in front of his students and soon afterward terminated his teaching contract. A worse fate came to Harry and Henriette Moore. They were married, and both were schoolteachers as well as civil rights activists in Florida. The Moores were fired in 1946 because of their activism surrounding equal pay for black teachers. Their home was bombed on Christmas in 1951, killing them both, after their organizing to challenge the wrongful conviction of four young black men, one of whom was killed in police custody.

The vulnerability of black teachers as a professional group had long been a sharp reality, and it continued to be the case after the Supreme Court ruled in favor of school desegregation in the mid-twentieth century. Black educators were aware of this, as were many of their students who witnessed moments when their teachers were forced to conceal their pedagogical objectives in the presence of intrusive white power. Subjection to surveillance and violence, motivated by no causal logic whatsoever, was a fact of blackness. Black American educators developed strategies to contest this reality,
which ranged from broad institutional realms down to the interpersonal and psychic levels.

*Fugitive Pedagogy* talks pointedly, in a more interpretive sense, about black education at the level of experience. Black people’s political clarity meant they understood their teaching and learning to be perpetually taking place under persecution, even as they created learning experiences of joy and empowerment. As one student recalled of his Kentucky school, it was as though he and his classmates were being initiated into “a kind of freemasonry” of the race, as in a secret society replete with unspoken yet understood meanings about the work black education was to do, things that people came to know as a taken-for-granted kind of truth—an affective epistemology—knowledge shared between teachers, principals, and often times the students themselves, because of their shared vulnerability.25 This kind of living history sat in classrooms like McGee’s. She was not alone in teaching from Woodson’s books. Sales records indicate a wide circulation among black teachers.26 But the full impact of fugitive pedagogy far transcends the quantification of individual subversive acts such as hers. The broader effect of such practices on black American teaching, along with the roots of such practices in a long tradition, is the primary topic of this book.

This book has much to say about persecution and the art of teaching in the black American experience.27 It begins by drawing a narrative line that connects the dots between those enslaved persons who stole away to learn and the teachers and students whose actions occurred in what Saidiya Hartman calls “the afterlife of slavery,” or what Woodson referred to as “the sequel to slavery.”28 This tradition is marked by both racist condemnation and blacks’ repeated acts of escape and rebellion.29 It also takes seriously work that reveals the aggressive structural neglect and intentional devaluing of black educational strivings in this country’s history, a story of continued backlash that demanded unceasing vigilance on the part of black people.30

Scholars have documented the long history of black people striving to learn in the face of physical violence as well as intensely racist intellectual and ideological currents. This tradition is well documented in the narratives written by the formerly enslaved, which have been a major source for scholarship on black education and literary traditions before the Civil War.31 The
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tradition is also prevalent in the historical writings on black education during Jim Crow.32

Recent scholarship has done well to complicate and revise earlier representations that depicted black teachers as mere accommodationists, helpless victims, or hindrances to black people’s struggle for freedom.33 As more is revealed about the lives of these educators, it becomes clear that scholars must evaluate them on their own terms. Black teachers were a distinct group of political actors. They were even set apart from other black American professionals and leaders. Due to Jim Crow wages, many black educators “supplemented incomes by stints as laborers and domestics.” One South Carolina educator expressed this reality in plain language at a 1922 teachers convention: “He teaches ’tis true, but he also farms, preaches, laws, barbers, insures, clerks, typewrites, keeps books, sews, cooks, nurses, launders, dresses hair, and God only knows what else, in order to eke out an existence.”34 Despite common perceptions, black teachers were rarely comfortably middle-class, even as they benefitted from an elevated social status in black American communities.

Furthermore, while black educators did not always participate in traditional forms of public protest, the work done in their classrooms had direct implications for the black freedom struggle, a movement that was sparked and carried out by their students and that black teachers often strategically supported in the shadows, if not in the open. One scholar has made this case clear when writing about black teachers in Birmingham as “schoolhouse activists.” Through a sociohistorical analysis, we see such educators implementing pedagogical practices within school walls that instilled political ideals and values that their students put into action, outside the classroom.35 Black teachers engaged in these practices well before World War II. Moreover, they incubated a socioemotional context for learning that inspired freedom dreams in later generations. We need only look to the autobiographies of Civil Rights and Black Power leaders, activists, and intellectuals to observe this fact.36

This book moves beyond the purely narrative and descriptive to analyze how the transgressive nature of education was embedded at the very core of black thought and activism. In doing this, new conceptual tools are generated: a new grammar of and for black education.37 The theory of fugitive pedagogy accounts for the physical and intellectual acts of subversion engaged
in by black people over the course of their educational strivings. Such acts as McGee’s physically concealing the textbook, the students witnessing her do this and afterward return to Woodson’s text, all stand in relationship to one another as a proxy for a world of black subversive practices of teaching and learning.

**Fugitivity: The Metanarrative of Black Education**

*Fugitive Pedagogy* asks: What has been the nature of black people’s relationship to the American School? And how have they worked to enact their own visions of teaching and learning within this structural context? In pursuing these questions, I take seriously the reality that black life has been shaped by the history of racial chattel slavery and the futures it structured.

Responding to the queries above, I deploy fugitivity as an analytic to parse through key aspects of black social and political life as it pertains to education. The terminology builds from the historicity of the fugitive slave—enslaved blacks that engaged in both physical and psychic forms of flight. This subversion manifested in various forms—whether this be running away for a day, hiding in the trunk of a tree, alternative spiritual practices, climbing into holes in the ground at night to have school, or the establishment of maroon societies in the dismal swamps of Virginia. More pointedly to enslaved people’s fugitive pursuits of education, I argue that their insistence on black educability—that African-descended people were reasoning rational subjects—disrupted “the chattel principle,” the very laws and logics condemning them to a subgenre of the human species, a people who could be legitimately owned as property, even in the womb. Fugitivity enunciates subversive practices of black social life in the African Diaspora, over and against the persistent violence of white supremacy and its technologies of surveillance and domination that were bound up in and animated by the chattel principle. It is the constant seeking of an outside to white supremacy that might elusively be understood as black freedom. The language honors the plot that is an insistence on black living, even amid the perpetual threat of black social death, the latter being a dominant ideology that black people always refused, even as it had real consequences given that those who benefitted from their domination were empowered and backed by the broader political structure and the law.
Fugitivity—and fugitive pedagogy in particular—is the metanarrative of black educational history. It is a social and rhetorical frame by which we might interpret black Americans’ pursuit to enact humanizing and affirming practices of teaching and learning. To this latter point, I am referring to the reality that the literate slave was akin to a fugitive slave, particularly when we take into account antiliteracy laws, which criminalized reading and writing by black Americans, making it a punishable offense. The first proscription of this kind emerged as early as the Slave Code of 1740, enacted in response to the Stono Slave Rebellion, which—it is key to note—preceded the American Revolution. This legislative response stemmed from the belief that the rebel slaves communicated their plans for insurrection using the written word.41 The South Carolina legislature decided that “the having of slaves taught to write, or suffering them to be employed in writing, may be attended with great inconveniences.” The law would be extended to include free blacks in 1800. And Georgia, in 1770, made both reading and writing illegal for the enslaved.42 Antiliteracy laws and ideology approached universal standing in the South during the decades immediately preceding the Civil War—but, to be clear, it was a carryover from the colonial period. Irrespective of their frequency or when and how they were enforced, antiliteracy proscriptions represent a set of structural antagonisms, as laws and law-like social customs, to which fugitive pedagogy was a response.

Black education was suppressed across regional boundaries, even in places that never technically banned black education. Suspicion about black education was strongest in the South, where it posed the most immediate threat. Prior to the Civil War, the overwhelming majority of black people lived in southern states, and in the eyes of the law, their education was deemed criminal activity. But legal proscriptions of black education grew out of antiblack attitudes shared across the South and North. A few southern cities (Baltimore and New Orleans, for instance) and several northern cities (Boston, Cincinnati, New York, Philadelphia) had schools for free blacks prior to Emancipation, but even in these cities, suspicion and surveillance of black education prevailed. In northern cities, the greatest opposition arose when whites feared that schools might attract unwanted black migrants, instigate black political activism, and especially when black Americans sought entrance to white schools. In Canterbury, Connecticut, a white Quaker teacher named Prudence Crandall allowed a black girl to enter her private school in the early
1830s. When her white students withdrew, she opened the school to black girls, attracting students from free black families as far away as Philadelphia, Providence, New York, and Boston. In response, the townspeople harassed the black girls on the streets, piled manure on the school property, and set it on fire. Yale professors and students protested in front of the homes of New Haven residents who supported an idea posed by black leaders to establish a black college there in 1831. They claimed, “The founding of colleges for educating colored youth is an unwarranted and dangerous undertaking.” Antiliteracy laws in southern states made explicit a shared antipathy for black education, linked to a general disdain for black people, that featured prominently in the American national culture. Black achievement and criminality were closely linked transgressions in an antiblack world.

The criminality of black learning was a psychosocial reality. According to Frederick Douglass’s master: a slave having learned to read and write was a slave “running away with himself”: stealing oneself, not just stealing away to the North or stealing away to Jesus but stealing away to one’s own imagination, seeking respite in independent thought. The theft of one’s mind was directly relational to, perhaps even a precondition for, the theft of one’s body. For these reasons, enslaved people who could read and write were branded as “objects of suspicion,” marked as black-fugitive-learning-flesh.

So while “a literate slave was supposed to be a contradiction in terms,” black people’s educational strivings were acted out in the space of this contradiction. Thinking in these structural terms, I would go as far as to suggest that literate slaves and their symbolic (as well as literal) descendants—black teachers—represented an ongoing strike by black people against the conditions of slave work, whereby black folks were captive laborers to be super-exploited within a national political-economic system predicated on chattel slavery and its afterlives. The literate slave represents a protracted refusal by black people against the arbitrary logics of racial capitalism imposed on their lives. They insisted that they were more than a hand without a head, to paraphrase Frederick Douglass. Black teachers were the progenies of literate slaves, whose educational strivings were an embodiment of fugitive spirit. The literacy and independent thought of the latter were coterminous with flight, and black teachers post-Emancipation emerged as a professional class who embodied the very ideas of black aspiration and progress, making them symbols of inspiration and, simultaneously, prime targets of white aggression.
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The language of fugitivity absorbs and reconfigures long-standing scholarly observations that education and freedom have been inextricably bound in black American life. As stated earlier, black people appropriated schooling to work in service of their freedom dreams, having recognized the functions of education in the context of the American social order. This articulation, however, that black people saw education as a bridge to freedom only reveals but so much of the story. Upon closer examination, we witness that black education was certainly about freedom—but more precisely, part of a more expansive plot against the current configuration of the modern world and, particularly, the perversely color-coded arrangement of the human species. Fugitive pedagogy names the educational acts of escape constituting the pre-condition of black freedom implied by the very notion of “education as freedom.” Fugitive pedagogy, then, might be thought of as what it means to put this philosophical ideal into practice. This is not a contradiction to the familiar extrapolation—that black people saw education as freedom—but instead a restating of the narrative to elevate critical parts of the story, namely, to underscore how this philosophical ideal widely held by black people was lived out and enacted.

Black education was a schooling project set against the entire order of things. This is something we must be clear about. In its resounding assertion that black people were rational subjects—that they were not simply hands without a head (captive laborers with no capacity for reason)—black education has been a persistent disruption to the known world instituted through racial chattel slavery. This is the assertion embedded in the abolitionist David Walker’s claim that “for colored people to acquire learning in this country, makes tyrants quake and tremble on their sandy foundation.” It anchors Frederick Douglass’s incisive observation that “knowledge unfits a child to be a slave.” The insistence on black educability troubled notions like those imparted by Thomas Jefferson—the precursor to the American Common School Movement—when he asserted that the Negro was incapable of producing poetry, or original and reflective thought. Writing of Phillis Wheatley, Jefferson maintained that poetry written by “the blacks” was simply “beneath the dignity of criticism.” This was not just about a distaste for Wheatley’s lyrical style or some lack of technique. It was an insistence that black people were beneath the threshold of humanistic potentiality. Jefferson’s claim rested on the belief that mastery of the arts and sciences and the production of
literature were a visible sign of reason, the apex of human civilization—
achievements beyond the realm of possibility for black people. The plot of black
education insisted otherwise. In this sense, fugitive pedagogy was the pursuit
of an otherwise arrangement of the world and what it meant to be human.50

Fugitivity as a Historically Situated Analytic

While fugitivity is anchored by the historical figure of the fugitive slave, it
also indexes a broader repertoire of secret acts and subterfuge in black life
and culture. Zora Neale Hurston, the Black Renaissance anthropologist,
writer, and cultural critic, wrote about this fugitive interiority as the crux of
black culture—what she referred to as a “feather-bed resistance”: “The white
man is always trying to know into somebody else’s business. All right, I’ll set
something outside the door of my mind for him to play with and handle. He
can read my writing but he sho’ can’t read my mind. I’ll put this play toy in
his hand, and he will seize it and go away. Then I’ll say my say and sing my
song.”51 As Hurston extrapolates, black people constructed an interior world
within their veiled existence, in the shadow of the antiblack color line, even
as they had to engage in various practices of acquiescing to the mainstream
social order. And there were those before Hurston who put it in simpler terms:“Got one mind for me and another for the master to see.” This duality, while
a result of domination, was repurposed as a pragmatic disposition.52

This book deploys fugitivity as more than an elaborate metaphor. It liter-
ally and figuratively emerges from the historical records of black education,
extending directly from the discourse of black American teachers and edu-
cational communities. They named schools after fugitive slaves, and these his-
torical figures repeatedly appear in curriculum content developed by black
teachers. The infinitely returning figure of the fugitive slave can be tracked
through the curricular imaginations of these educators as represented by text-
books they wrote for schoolchildren, whereas fugitive slaves were studiously
absent in the official curriculum prescribed by white authorities (see
Chapter 4). The striking reality of this last point is what initially prompted
the use of fugitivity in this book. The subversive language also mimics the
allegorical terms taken up by educators to describe their own practices at
times, their insistence on “showing two faces” or working around white
school authorities (see Chapter 5).53 Fugitive pedagogy cuts across the archive
in multiple ways. The language of fugitivity is first informed by this thematic
in the historical record. It is then taken up at the symbolic level as a tool for
interpretation, to analyze how black Americans navigated antiblack exclu-
sion and confinement in the American School, how it became embodied as
a professional disposition and set of practices.

I ground this project in the language of fugitivity as opposed to “resistance”
or “agency,” because the concept, in its historical reference, holds in place
both the realities of constraint and black Americans’ constant straining
against said confinement. It is careful not to overstate either. Fugitivity is
never one or the other. As Fred Moten aptly notes, and I paraphrase: escape
is an activity; it’s not an achievement. The possible threat of recapture al-
ways lingered—similar to an abrupt firing, as was the fate of many black ed-
ucators, when physical harm was not used as a strategy of coercion. Escape
was always unresolved and uncertain, both for the fugitive slave and the fu-
gitive pedagogue. The precarity and vulnerability of black people within the
American School curtailed any permanent resolve that might be achieved by
their infinite acts of educational resistance. As such, Fugitive Pedagogy is nei-
ther a history of triumph nor one of defeat. It is instead one of protracted
struggle, one in which progress unfolds in perturbed fashion, one where we
see black people wrestling with the object of education as a humanistic en-
deavor, one to be weaponized against their domination.

Critical parts of black education had always taken place underground—
sometimes under a desk, as in the case of Tessie McGee’s use of Woodson’s
textbook; or under a hat, as was the case for the enslaved Richard Parker of
Virginia, who kept his copy of the Webster Blueback Speller on his head, under
a hat, and hidden from public view; or literally under the earth, as Mandy
Jones recalled of the pit schools in the woods surrounding the Mississippi
plantation on which she was enslaved. Orbiting at the margins of the Amer-
ican School has always been a veiled black educational world, where fugitive
pedagogy was a critical part of content and form.

One way of looking at these individuated scenarios might be to see them
as isolated acts of what some call everyday resistance, or infrapolitics. An-
other might see these scenarios as story elements of a more general narrative
of black education and the politics therein, which transcend any particular
act or event. This book follows the latter line of thought, forwarding fugi-
tive pedagogy as a metanarrative of black education, a new frame for seeing
this history. These acts were ordered by an overarching set of political commitments sustained by black institutions and shared visions of freedom and societal transformation. They were not sporadic. They were the occasion, the main event. Fugitive pedagogy is the plot at the heart of the matter—the story and the scheme.

The Case of Carter G. Woodson

The heritage of black education stands at the center of Woodson’s life, but this can only be fully appreciated after a reframing of his intellectual contributions in more expansive terms. The collective memory of Woodson that has extended into the twenty-first century was made possible largely because of his partnerships with other educators and the work of teachers and students who gave life to his ideas by putting them into practice. It was Woodson’s deep entrenchment within the networks of black teachers as a rank-and-file member, and then as a thought-leader, that made what Pero Dagbovie termed “the early Black history movement” so iconic.59

There is no intent here to suggest that Woodson represents all things about black education in any singular fashion; nor do I wish to add him as a third fountainhead of knowledge to the lingering Booker T. Washington-versus-W. E. B. Du Bois binary (because despite scholarship that moves beyond this binary, it persists as a dominant paradigmatic framing in discourse, public and academic). To challenge any impulse for reading this book in such a way, I consistently position Woodson in relation to a broader network of black schoolteachers and education scholars who were his contemporaries and predecessors, thus demonstrating how Woodson inherited a tradition and then played a crucial role in expanding it.

Likewise, fugitive pedagogy is not an essentialist categorical theory about all black teachers—surely there are deviations, but they are not the concern here. This book is a recuperation of a set of politics and relations that were both ubiquitous and a preeminent aspect of black educational heritage. By my assessment, it represents the best in the tradition of black American teachers as a professional group. In recovering this through line in the history of black education, I have rendered Woodson’s narrative and educational model as one of its greatest exemplars. And it is one of broad reach: temporally, geographically, and in terms of educational level.
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