Keynote Address

Out of the Classroom and into the Streets: What Movements Teach Us about Learning and Struggling Toward Justice

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Abstract: Organized action aimed at achieving social justice expressed in sustained efforts such as Black Lives Matter and the Movement for Black Lives focuses our attention on the generative knowledge and world-building projects that organizers are cultivating through their collective political labors. Social movements offer a liberatory blueprint of radical thought and imaginative praxis for how we continue to struggle through the despair of our times. In social movements, we find alternative models of *being* in community and engaging together in struggle, and of visioning and enacting more just worlds through practices of collective learning that aim to shift consciousness and, ultimately, catalyze material action. For these reasons, we also find in social movements the shared will and a growing capacity to continue to fight against oppressive regimes until *we* win.

Over the past decade, we have witnessed a persistent onslaught of attempts to undo the gains made by struggles to achieve racial and educational justice through abolitionist organizing within and beyond schools. In K-12 and higher education, these attacks have included anti-Black and anti-trans legislation (Fields, 2023; George, 2021; *Human Rights Watch*, 2024; Nakajima & Jin, 2022), book bans (Alter, 2024), and the stifling of academic freedom, free speech, and the right to protest egregious acts of state violence and genocide (*StudentNation*, 2024). First, they came for Critical Race Theory (Schwartz, 2021). Then, they came for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion. Now, even being "woke" has become a dog whistle for attacks against racial justice (Watson, 2024). What are we to do in the face of organized backlash, which works to narrow the terrain of struggle and foreclose avenues of redress? What *can* be done?

My work over the past two decades as a community organizer, most recently in the Movement for Black Lives (M4BL) grassroots campaigns challenging state violence against Black communities, has illuminated limitations of engaging transformative movements struggling towards justice as merely "moments" or "moods" (Strong et al., 2023, p. S3). Instead, focusing attention on generative knowledge and world-building projects organizers are cultivating through their collective political labors, social movements offer a liberatory blueprint of radical thought and imaginative praxis of how we continue to struggle through the despair of our times. In social movements, we find alternative models of *being* in community and engaging together in struggle, of visioning and enacting more just worlds through practices of collective learning that aim to shift consciousness and, ultimately, catalyze material action.

As a scholar-organizer theorizing at times from my position within social movements and, in other moments, from a position of community solidarity, I work to amplify the theory and praxis of global Black social movements on their own terms — not to make these fugitive acts legible to the academy, but practicable within and beyond the campus-movement boundary. My efforts have included investigations of movement learning practices such as popular education campaigns within historic and emerging African liberation struggles (Strong & Nafziger, 2021), political education strategies in the Movement for Black Lives in the U.S. (Nafziger et al., 2023; Strong, Ndgo et al., 2022), and collaborative experiments in solidarity within and across movements (Rogers et al., 2023; Strong, Nafziger et al., 2022). These movement-generated

learning practices are most often constituted by those historically marginalized and pushed out of academic institutions that function as an occupying force and driver of state abandonment (Baldwin, 2021). My discussion here of the role of organizers as educators, intellectuals, and pedagogues, refuses the forms of misrecognition that render illegible the abundant modes of intellectual practice held in Black organizing communities — and instead considers what social movements might teach the field of education about learning and struggling toward justice.

Movement Knowledge

Perhaps the tyranny of the present has allowed us to forget that it is *organizers* we must thank for shifting academic discourse toward closer attention to state violence, anti-Blackness, and racial capitalism as frames of political analysis and redress. As the late education scholar-activist Aziz Choudry reminds us, it is critically important that we examine the intellectual life of contemporary movements if we want to understand the forms and pedagogies of learning and knowledge that are produced within and through political struggle (Choudry, 2015). Drawing on previous analysis of the theory and praxis of Black Lives Matter (Strong et al., 2023), I present three movement artifacts that exemplify the intellectual leadership of social movement actors in knowledge creation from the vantage point of lived experience to transform structural conditions materially. Given its formation around extrajudicial murders of Black people, Black Lives Matter (BLM) is rightfully credited with mainstreaming "state violence" as a discursive register for naming how anti-Black racism results in Black people's disproportionate experiences of "premature death" (Gilmore, 2007). Less appreciated are the knowledge production practices that contributed to this discursive shift. The 2012 report *Operation Ghetto Storm*, released by the U.S. Black liberation organization, Malcolm X Grassroots Movement, and circulated within radical movements circles, represents a critical source of movement knowledge (Eisen, 2014), which played a vital role in shaping our current discourse. Released between the first appearance of the BLM hashtag and the formation of the BLM organization, the report, in the tradition of Ida B. Wells' pioneering documentation of post-Reconstruction lynchings, documented the extrajudicial killings of more than three hundred Black people by police, security guards, and vigilantes (1997). The report's unflinching analysis is but one example of the significance of knowledge production within Black grassroots organizing praxis in theorizing state violence and making it visible.

Focused critique and political action against anti-Blackness have also been central to the political and ideological contributions of the Movement for Black Lives. On February 26, 2017, the fifth anniversary of the murder of Trayvon Martin, a Black teenager murdered as he walked home from a convenience store, BLM launched the #TrayvonTaughtMe social media campaign to amplify how "Trayvon's extrajudicial murder …catalyzed a generation of organizers and activists to take action for Black lives" (Black Lives Matter 2017, p. 2) — and, we might add, also inspired a generation of educators and scholars to write and teach about it. Released as tool kits for BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and Other People of Color) organizers, white people, and Spanish speakers, #TrayvonTaughtMe distilled lessons learned from Martin's death and the struggle for justice that ensued: namely, that "anti-Blackness is pervasive and implicit" (1). BLM organizers insist that broad analyses of racism are often limited in their capacity to assess, with precision, the specific structures imperiling the lives of Black people, historically and contemporarily. In this sense, too, BLM has sharpened our attention to patterns of anti-Blackness and their varied historical instantiations, spurring the salience of anti-Blackness as a concept within public discourse and, indeed, scholarship and practice within the field of education.

In June 2021, in commemoration of the first anniversary of the murder of George Floyd and the centennial of the "state-sponsored bombing" of the Greenwood community of Tulsa, Oklahoma, then popularly known as "Black Wall Street," BLM released a statement demanding reparations "for all Black people" as redress for the "full range of past and ongoing harms against Black people" (Black Lives Matter, 2021, para. 2-5). Recognizing the extensive history of reparations movements across the African Diaspora, BLM's insistence that without reparations structural discrimination will "continue to thrive" represents a coherent shift in the movement to a sharper analysis of the economic foundations of anti-Black racism and state violence — as well as the evolving formation of an abolitionist vision for what it will take to undo these realities, including material recompense for historical and continuing structural violence (para. 2). In a 2023 special issue of *Comparative Education Review,* which I co-edited, comparative and international education scholars expound further on the significance of this turn toward political economic analyses of racial capitalism and its implications for abolitionist practice and reparative justice in education (Walker et al., 2023).

Though I am writing from my vantage point within the Movement for Black Lives, which is an archive of collective memory for all of us living through the past decade of struggle, rebellion, and reprisal, I want to be clear, as organizers themselves are, that the intellectual labor and inventive learning practices we see modeled in recent movements, is an extension of a longer history and practice of critical consciousness-building among Black activists referred to most commonly as the Black Radical Tradition. Scholars have theorized the Black Radical Tradition as the "revolutionary consciousness that proceeded from the whole historical experience of Black people" (Robinson, 2000, p. 169). From Pan-African struggles against slavery, colonialism, and imperialism to movements against segregation, mass incarceration, and extrajudicial killings of Black people today, the Black Radical Tradition is an intellectual and political inheritance "over generations of collective intelligence gathered from struggle" (Robinson, 2000, p. xxx). Black movements *learned* through struggle what are the sources of their oppression and what are successful strategies of resistance**.**

Assata Taught Us

Countless known and unknown Black women activists have contributed to the Black Radical Tradition, from Ida B. Wells and her Black women's club movement to Ella Baker's decades of activism in Black freedom movements. Baker, in particular, continues as a reference point for BLM's embrace of horizontal leadership or "leaderfulness" (Taylor, 2016). Through her political imprisonment and writings, which are central to the canon of abolitionist thought, the work of Angela Y. Davis (2003, p. 103) draws critical attention to relationships between prisons, white supremacy, and, thus, Black liberation, noting "racism hides from view within institutional structures, and its most reliable refuge is the prison system." Davis joins an indispensable group of revolutionary Black "imprisoned intellectuals" (James, 2004) — including Malcolm X, Assata Shakur, George Jackson, Huey P. Newton, and Mumia Abu Jamal, among many others — whose revolutionary activism and political thought have fundamentally shaped the consciousness and organizing strategies of the Movement for Black Lives.

It is from Assata Shakur's 1973 statement, "To My People," written while imprisoned after her arrest by New Jersey police, that "Assata's chant," the unofficial call-and-response of Black Lives Matter, was culled. The chant, collectively repeated from a whisper to a rousing shout, instructs:

It is our duty to fight for our freedom.
It is our duty to win.
We must love each other and support each other.
We have nothing to lose but our chains.

Elsewhere in the statement, Shakur writes (para. 14-17, emphasis added): "Black people must *learn how to struggle by struggling*. […] Black revolutionaries do not drop from the moon. We are created by our conditions. Shaped by our oppression. We are being manufactured in droves in the ghetto streets. […] There is, and always will be, until every Black man, woman, and child is free, a Black Liberation Army. The main function of the Black Liberation Army at this time is to create good examples, to struggle for Black freedom, and to prepare for the future." Shakur's assessment of the role of Black people's material conditions in creating and shaping the Black revolutionary is a common thread within the Black Radical Tradition and within the orientation of contemporary Black organizers who identify themselves as part of this tradition. This orientation articulates a vision of the political as *pedagogical*, an ideological stance that understands political socialization and education as embedded within the everyday realities of Black life and, critically, Black freedom struggles.

My work theorizing within the Movement for Black Lives has affirmed this orientation. With comrade scholar-organizers, I have embarked on collaborative studies with organizers, which examine the role of learning within Black movements and struggles toward racial justice both in the United States and Africa. In interviews in a 2023 study of political education within my organizing home, Black Lives Matter Philadelphia, Black organizers (myself included) described growing up within Black communities as a fundamentally politicizing experience (Nafziger et al., 2023). While organizers came from different socioeconomic backgrounds, a mix of working and middle class, we shared similar experiences of individual and institutionalized racism and direct or indirect violence at an early age, despite ranging in age from late twenties to early fifties.

For instance, Gina, the youngest organizer in the group, characterized her stepfather as a "strong Black thinker" and described being raised in an environment with different Black communities as helping her cultivate a sense of Black consciousness (Nafziger et al., 2023, p. 8). Josiah's mother was a member of the Black Panther Party in the 1960s and 1970s in Philadelphia. Laniece, who grew up in the South and later moved to Philly as a college graduate, noted that her mother was among the first generation of federal workers who were part of an Affirmative Action program and helped organize other marginalized workers in the 1970s. Of my own experiences, I recalled the example of my father, who served as the block captain of our North Philadelphia street, and modeled Black self-determination in everyday practices of community building and care. We all emphasized, with pride, the social commitments of our families, whose examples shaped our understanding of anti-Black racism and the belief in Black communities' power and capacity to fight on their own behalf.

Organizers engaged with lived experience as the foundation for politicized education. The communities the Black Lives Matter Philly organizers engage are not removed from experiences of police brutality or the carceral state, nor are they removed from local Black histories, as organizers live in neighborhoods where parks and streets are named after Black historical figures, and children attend one of the only school systems where African American history is a requirement for high school graduation. Rather than develop conventional paradigms of political

education, which often resemble the learning practices of formal schooling, BLM Philly organizers worked to facilitate a dialectical learning process that starts from people's experiences and invites them to examine and imagine what to do with these experiences and how to transform their thinking into action (Nafziger et al., 2023, p. 17). What movements teach us is that such projects cultivate forms of collective discovery that dissolve the boundaries between schooling and the contexts of people's everyday struggles, unsettling what Gutiérrez (2020, p. 428) theorizes as "how we see what counts as learning [and] where we see learning."

Cabral Taught Us

In May of 1975, after a prolonged liberation struggle and the assassination of revolutionary leader Amilcar Cabral, world-renowned critical educator Paulo Freire and his team from the Department of Education of the World Council of Churches and the Institute for Cultural Action (IDAC) were invited by the government of the West African nation Guinea-Bissau to lead revolutionary revisions to the education system and to oversee the efforts for universal education. Frantz Fanon's influence on Paulo Freire's thought is well documented (Weiler, 1996), but the Brazilian educator was also deeply influenced by Cabral. In a 1985 presentation about his experiences in liberated Guinea-Bissau, Freire describes Cabral as one of those "leaders always with the people, *teaching and learning mutually* in the liberation struggle" (Freire, 2021, p. 12). Though much of the literature on Freire in Africa focuses on his impact *on* Africa, a closer examination reveals that Freire often borrowed heavily from African revolutionary movement leaders, whose rich ideas around the role of culture and struggle in critical consciousness are often overlooked in his writings (Strong & Nafziger, 2021).

Freire's epistolary memoir, *Pedagogy in Process: The Letters to Guinea-Bissau*, initially published in 1978, describes his sojourn in the country and the efforts to develop a national literacy program for newly liberated people. These letters, to which I now turn, offer important lessons of comradeship, learning, and change within and through struggle. They also push the boundaries of critical pedagogy, challenging the false boundaries between the educational process of decolonizing knowledge and the waging of anticolonial *material* struggles. In Letter #2, authored from exile in Geneva in April 1975, Freire writes to Mario Cabral, Amilcar Cabral's brother and Commissioner of State for Education and Culture, in response to the former's invitation to collaborate with the government of Guinea-Bissau: "Our conviction is that *we will have nothing to teach there if we do not learn from and with you*. For this reason, we go to Guinea-Bissau as comrades, as militants, curiously and humbly, and not as foreign technicians with a mission.… We can discuss, also, the political nature of literacy education as of all education, a fact that demands of educators a growing *clarity regarding their own political stance*, and the coherence of their practice with that stance" (65-66, emphasis added). I understand Freire to mean that we have to be clear about our politics, and our practice has to align with that politics for our help, as educators, as humans struggling toward justice, to be authentic, reciprocal, or useful.

In his exchange with Mario Cabral, written three months later in July, Freire turns his focus to his approach to training educators to contribute to literacy education as a cultural and material struggle, which he constructs based on the political thought of Amilcar Cabral. Freire writes:

> In our training seminars for teachers, we have not emphasized methods and techniques, but, rather, *political clarity*. This emphasis becomes even more important when we are talking about qualifying middle-class young people who

> have not yet committed the "class suicide" to which Amilcar Cabral refers and which he accomplished in so exemplary a manner.… Without the "reconversion" upon which Amilcar Cabral insisted so frequently, it is not possible for the middle-class intellectual to internalize the liberation struggle and to be integrated within it. Without this reconversion it will never be possible for middleclass urban youths to participate with the peasants in the *authentic* cultural struggle for which adult literacy education is a starting point.… If the educator takes refuge in his role as educator of the people without accepting *his own need to be educated by the people*, then his revolutionary oratory is counteracted by an alienating and reactionary practice. (p. 68-70, emphasis added)

In other words, Freire, following the revolutionary teachings of Amilcar Cabral, is instructing us that what we need as educators is "clarity" in our politics. It is not enough to assume the role of the educator if we have not done the work to divest from our compromised class and institutional positions or if we do not understand that a core aspect of our work is, first, to be educated by the people we profess to serve.

Finally, in November 1975, following his first visit to Guinea-Bissau, Freire reflects more substantively on how "the theory of knowledge that serves a revolutionary objective is put into practice in education." He writes:

> We discover that education is a process that takes *social practice* as the basis for learning and study. Education is itself a dimension of social practice. It seeks to know the reason for the practice and, through this knowledge as it deepens and develops, it also seeks new practice that is consistent with the overall plan for the society…. We have spoken before of the impossibility of separating practice from theory. A society that seeks to live the radical unity between the two overcomes the dichotomy between manual labor and intellectual labor. The result is *a totally different model of education*. In this model, the school — whether primary, secondary or university level — is not essentially different from the factory or the farm, nor does it stand in opposition to them. Even when a school exists outside the factory or the practical tasks of agriculture, this does not signify that it is in any way superior to them, nor that factory or agricultural work are not in themselves schools also. In a dynamic vision of the unity between theory and practice, the school, inside or outside the factory, cannot be defined as an institution bureaucratically responsible for the transfer of a select kind of knowledge. It is rather a pole or moment of that unity. (p. 77-78, emphasis added)

Freire reminds us that, in a radically reimagined vision for society, "the school" is everywhere. Learning is everywhere. We learn through social practice, reflection on that practice, and seeking new, better, more transformative practices. If we are going to invoke Freire and be guided by his teachings, informed as they were by the work of revolutionaries struggling to build a new, more just society, let us invoke *this* Freire: the militant and the comrade.

In this spirit, to conceptualize the transformative learning and knowledge production happening within movements I examine forms of pedagogical experimentation that bridge theory and practice and the university and broader struggles I refer to as "organizing pedagogies". This frame is rooted in the intellectual and material legacies of the "Black Revolution on campus" beginning in 1968 and stretching into the 1970s, through which Black students, in comradeship

with university workers and community members, insisted that "universities should reflect and serve the people of their communities" (Biondi, 2012, p. 2). While these struggles are, perhaps, best known for achieving the demand of institutionalizing Black and Ethnic Studies, they also catalyzed radical experiments in teaching, learning, and community that posited "study and struggle, theory and practice" as a unified liberatory process (Alkalimat, 2021, p. 303).

Organizing Pedagogies

In 2020, universities became key terrains of abolitionist experimentation, absorbing and extending the political energy of national unrest calling for the defunding of police. When campuses reopened after months of pandemic closures, campus organizers, networked through the burgeoning nationwide campus abolition movement, demanded institutional accountability beyond institutional public-relations statements about commitments to diversity and inclusion. At that time, I was a faculty member at the University of Pennsylvania, whose historic and ongoing exploitation of Black Philadelphia communities became the focus of my organizing within the campus abolitionist collective, Police Free Penn (PFP), which aimed to abolish policing, transform community safety at Penn, and expose the complicity of the university in the theft of "human remains, human health, and human life" (Police Free Penn, 2020). PFP was formed during the 2020 uprising in Philadelphia when undergraduate and graduate students, postdocs, faculty, staff, and alums convened on Zoom video chat to explore the implications of local abolitionist organizing for the campus community. I was an organizer within an ad hoc formation of Black community activists representing Black-led abolitionist organizations, the Black Philadelphia Radical Collective (BPRC), which organized the first local protest on May 30, 2020. After that event, I assumed a leadership role in sustaining Philadelphia's resistance through direct actions during the summer and fall (Strong, Ndgo, et al., 2022).

Here, I draw from an autoethnographic case study that was the focus of a collaborative writing experiment with two comrade-scholars with whom I organized in Police Free Penn (Rogers et al., 2023). In our article, we analyze our experiences as educational organizers and laborers through the lens of a May 2021 PFP direct action. Encompassing a rally, a street protest, and an outdoor film screening, the #PennReparationsNow action called for reparations for the medical experiments that deceased dermatology professor Albert Kligman conducted on inmates at Holmesburg Prison in Philadelphia County between 1951 and 1974, which resulted in one of the most profitable patents in history for the acne and anti-aging creams Renova and Retin-A.

Adrianne Jones-Alston, whose father, Leodus Jones, was one of the prisoners harmed by these experiments, traveled to Philadelphia from Virginia to speak at the direct-action event. During her moving testimony about the impact the experiments had on her father's physical and mental health following his release from prison, Jones-Alston recalled intimate effects of her father's incarceration and medical exploitation, emphasizing the consequences the experiments had on her own life as well. Noting in her remarks the university's ongoing profits from Kligman's lucrative patents, Jones-Alston made an unambiguous demand that Penn pay reparations for these harms: "He [Kligman] targeted a group of poor, Black, incarcerated men and women and did exactly what he wanted to do. His work ethics went out the damn window. Yet he's still being honored as a role model professor here at Penn? Damn. I should own this street. There's still professorships, and lecture halls, and laboratories [named for Kligman] here at Penn University? Are you all serious? What kind of fuckery is that?" (quoted in Rogers et al., 2023, p. 154).

Adrianne's demands for reparative justice exist in the context of hundreds of years of Penn's institutionalized complicity in the exploitation of Black communities in Philadelphia. As educators and organizers, this direct action needed to serve as political education for the campus community on these histories of harm, which PFP had been researching and protesting for months. These harms included the establishment, in the mid-19th century, of the Samuel Morton Cranial Collection at the Penn Museum of Anthropology and Archaeology, which measured and displayed the crania of Africans enslaved on Cuban plantations and Black Philadelphians whose graves were robbed to establish the collection (Muhammed, 2021); and, the theft of the remains of two Black girls, Delisha and Tree Africa, the city of Philadelphia murdered in the May 13, 1985 police bombing of The MOVE Organization, a West Philadelphia-based revolutionary organization (Strong, 2021). Demands for repatriation and reparations for the Morton Collection and Delisha and Tree Africa were both fights that I was actively involved in organizing.

Abdul-Aliy Muhammad, whose journalism and advocacy helped bring into public view the call for reparations around both the Morton Collection and the desecration of the remains of MOVE children (Muhammad, 2021b), also spoke at the Reparations Now event. Muhammad minced no words in expressing a sense of betrayal to the PFP and broader campus community in learning that the possession of the remains of Black children had been an open secret among museum staff and the Anthropology Department, whose offices also sit in the Museum building. Abdul-Aliy stated that when university members are silent about the harms of the university, we are merely shifting the burden to speak up onto outsiders with less status and power in the university system:

> Someone felt so complicit from holding onto that information that they reached out [to me], and at first [they] did not want to speak on record. So you got this information, you feel bad, and "I wanna tell you and have you do something with it, Black person. Black person, take on this information you are just hearing for the first time and do something with it. Black person, who was one [years old] when that bomb was dropped, Black person from West Philly, I want you and your labor to tell this story." It's disgusting, it's gross. I don't have any damn power. I organize and raise my voice, but I'm not in these institutions. They don't listen to me. They'll listen to you. *So what are you doing? What risks are you taking?* (quoted in Rogers et al., 2023, p. 159-160, emphasis added)

Here, Muhammad challenges campus members to question the knowledge and power systems that rationalize this code of silence and take risks from their positions within the university. The testimonies and demands of survivors and descendant communities for direct reparative acts on the part of the university represent the crux of organizing pedagogies as a conceptual frame: that, ultimately, learning must catalyze transformative action, and we must, necessarily, transgress the imposed boundaries between campuses and broader movements.

What Movements Teach Us

Movements offer profound lessons for how we learn and struggle toward justice. As education scholars increasingly engage in anti-racist struggle, the Black Radical Tradition and other activist traditions offer us "concrete techniques of struggle, including modes of collective study, public advocacy, experiential learning, participatory action, and future making" as guides for thought and action (Rogers et al., 2023, p. 164). If, as Freire writes (2021, p. 65), "we will have nothing to teach… if we do not learn from and with." Organizing alongside and in

solidarity with the communities we are part of and those that we wish to serve challenges our learned complicity with the institutionalized violence of schools and universities. Rather than extracting and co-opting the language of movements, training our attention on the intellectual contributions of non-academic movement actors opens avenues for engaging with historically marginalized communities and those directly harmed by universities as more than objects of research.

More fundamentally, if we as educators and academic laborers strive to be co-conspirators within broader struggles for justice, we must move beyond mere acknowledgment of institutional harms and commit to material repair and the thorny work of organizing. Organizing in solidarity and community offers strategies for scholars and educators actively to demonstrate the relationship between radical pedagogy and liberatory praxis. In 1969, weeks before his death, chairman of the Chicago chapter of the Black Panther Party and revolutionary-intellectual Fred Hampton famously made this interrelationship plain when he stated, "Theory is cool, but theory without practice ain't shit." To my question at the outset, "What can even be done?" Hampton's words provide an answer. Movements teach us that we keep fighting. We fight until we win.

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