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CLARA LUPER: A HISTORICAL EXAMPLE FOR CONTEMPORARY TEACHER
ACTIVISTS

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Abstract

The purpose of this thesis is to provide contemporary teacher activists resisting against the racism of the New Jim Crow with a historical template for engaging in activism, through the biography of Clara Luper as a political activist and teacher. As a teacher working in the classroom, Luper fought against White Supremacy by constructing an explicitly anti-racist and student-centered classroom in which the care, development, and empowerment of all students was prioritized. As a political activist in her work as advisor to the NAACP Youth Council, Luper fought against the segregation policies of Jim Crow, and her success desegregating public establishments and continuing her work as a teacher and political activist was largely attributable to the support of a grassroots community of Black supporters. Luper's biography as a teacher and political activist offers contemporary teacher activists working in public schools with a template for engaging in activism against the New Jim Crow and the perpetuation of racial caste through the public school system.

Chapter 1: Introduction

Clara Luper was a Social Studies teacher who taught at seven different schools throughout her forty-one year teaching career. In 1944, she began her teaching career at the Industrial Institute for the Deaf, Blind, and Orphans in Taft, Oklahoma. She spent the first half of her career teaching at various segregated schools, spending the longest time, seventeen years, at Dunjee High School. After integration, Luper spent the second half of her career in predominately White high schools, spending sixteen years teaching at John Marshall High School until her retirement in 1989.¹

Luper's teaching career reflected the unique racial history of Oklahoma and the changing national landscape of public education. Unlike in the South, African Americans first came to Indian Territory both as slaves and freedmen of the native tribes who had been expelled from their land during the Indian Removal Act.² After Emancipation, African Americans either became freedmen or were adopted into the tribes.³ In the late 19th century, African Americans were among those who settled on the unassigned lands that were opened up for settlement.

This began a brief period in Oklahoma history in which there was an active campaign among Black Oklahomans to recruit African Americans searching for a better life to the territory. Edward McCabe, who would eventually go on to establish Langston University, even envisioned establishing Oklahoma as a Black state in which African Americans enjoyed full citizenship through political representation. It was during this

¹ Oklahoma City Public Schools Archive (hereafter OKCPS Archive).

² Jimmie Lewis Franklin, *Journey Towards Hope* (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1982), 4.

³ *Ibid.*, 9.

time that all-Black towns, some of which still exist today, were established in Oklahoma Territory.⁴

In *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, legal scholar Michelle Alexander argues that a persistent pattern within American history is that when the status quo of White Supremacy is threatened by expanding minority rights, those in power use their power to subjugate the minority population. As Jim Crow laws were used to destroy the growing political power of African Americans during Reconstruction, with statehood, White Democrats in power, fearing the growing power of Black Oklahomans, included Jim Crow regulations within the Oklahoma Constitution. These regulations included separate facilities for public accommodations, such as trains, and separate schools for Black children.

In this newly established Jim Crow society, Black Oklahomans experienced many of the same degradations and injustices as African Americans in the South. Segregation extended beyond trains to movie theaters, restaurants, and libraries.⁵ Separate schools were unequal in resources and teacher pay, and overt acts of violence took place, such as lynching and whipping. One of the most infamous acts of violence was the Tulsa Race Riot of 1921. The massacre began over the allegation made by Sarah Page, a White elevator operator, who accused Dick Rowland, a Black man, of attempting to rape her.⁶ As a result of the allegation, Rowland was arrested, and the alleged crime was sensationally described in the local newspaper. Because of the account, armed White men charged toward the jail, and in response armed Black men

⁴ Ibid., 17.

⁵ Ibid., 50.

⁶ Ibid., 144.

went to the jail in order to protect Rowland.⁷ What resulted was a skirmish between the two groups that culminated in the systematic destruction of the Black community in Tulsa by the White community through looting and arson. The violence was so pervasive that the National Guard was called in to quell the violence, and at the end of the massacre, Black lives were lost and Black livelihoods destroyed.⁸

Amidst this environment, Black individuals and organizations actively fought against White Supremacy. During the process of Statehood, the Black community fought for a constitution in which their rights were guaranteed and in which they weren't discriminated against. Through their advocacy, Black community members ensured that there was a voting provision included within the Enabling Act, the precursor to the Oklahoma Constitution, that explicitly guaranteed equal voting rights to Black citizens. When it was clear that Democrats were going to include Jim Crow regulations within the Constitution, a delegation of Black Oklahomans, including Edward McCabe, went to the capitol to appeal to President Roosevelt to reject the proposed Constitution.

Organizations such as the Black press and the NAACP served as vehicles of empowerment for the African American community in Oklahoma. Oklahoma City's only Black newspaper, the Black Dispatch, was founded in 1915 by Roscoe Dunjee, a prominent Black Oklahoman who was involved in organizations such as the National Negro Business League, the Southern Conference for Human Welfare, and the

⁷ Ibid., 147.

⁸ Ibid., 148.

NAACP.⁹ For forty years, the Black Dispatch reported on issues that were pertinent to the Black community.

Shortly before the Black Dispatch was founded, a chapter of the NAACP was established in Oklahoma City. Mirroring the national strategy of the organization, the Oklahoma branch of the NAACP fought to dismantle the injustices of Jim Crow through legislation. One case of national importance was that of *Sipuel vs. Board of Regents of the University of Oklahoma*. At the encouragement of the NAACP, Langston graduate Ada Lois Sipuel Fisher applied to the law school at the University of Oklahoma in 1946. Through a three-year legal process that resulted in her case going before the Supreme Court, Sipuel-Fisher was finally admitted to the University of Oklahoma Law School in 1949, and her case opened up higher education to African Americans.¹⁰

Luper was particularly influenced by Sipuel-Fisher's experience because they attended Langston together. Luper recalls excitedly discussing the meaning of the 14th amendment to the Constitution with Sipuel-Fisher. She writes, "Ada Lois Sipuel, my classmate, and friends and I debated that constitutional amendment known as the Citizenship Amendment...and we would all go back and forth. 'They're talking about me! I am a citizen of the United States. I fit all of the qualifications.' And Ada Lois said she was going to go to Oklahoma University."¹¹ Sipuel-Fisher's fight against Jim Crow served to precipitate Luper's own burgeoning activism.

⁹ Ibid., 56.

¹⁰ Melvin C. Hall, "Ada Lois Sipuel Fisher" (The Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History and Culture), <http://www.okhistory.org/publications/enc/entry.php?entry=FI009>.

¹¹ "Do I Have to Love My Enemies?" Clara Luper Collection (hereafter CLC), Oklahoma History Center (hereafter OHC), (Box 58 FF9: Do I Have to Love My

After graduating from Langston in 1944, Luper began her career as a public school teacher. For two years, she taught at two different now non-existent segregated schools, the Industrial Institute for the Deaf, Blind, and Orphans, in Taft Oklahoma, which was one of the all-Black towns established at the end of the 19th century, and Lincoln High School in Pawnee, Oklahoma. For four years (1946-1950), Luper taught at Douglass High School in Oklahoma City, which was the alma mater of writer Ralph Ellison and the workplace of prominent Oklahoman civil rights figures such as F.D. Moon and Emma L. Freeman.¹² In 1950, she began teaching at Dunjee High School, where she would teach until 1968. At Dunjee High School, within the unique cultural milieus of the “Age of Brown” and the “Valued Segregated School” Luper began her work as a political activist.

As a school that remained segregated long past the 1954 *Brown v. Board* ruling that prohibited school segregation, Luper’s time at Dunjee was concomitant with what Ben Keppel, in his book *Brown v. Board and the Transformation of American Culture*, calls “The Age of Brown”. Keppel argues that in the Age of Brown, there was a “new habit of citizenship” of public school integration that conflicted with the reality of life in public schools after *Brown v. Board*. Michelle Alexander writes that, “after the Supreme Court declared separate schools inherently unequal in 1954, segregation persisted unabated...the statistics from the Southern states are truly amazing. For ten years, 1954-1964, virtually nothing happened.”¹³ U.S. Representative John Lewis was a

Enemies, Advisors Do Your Thing, A Martin Luther King Special, And the Walls Came Tumbling Down).

¹² Franklin, *Journey Towards Hope*, 65.

¹³ Michelle Alexander and Cornel West, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: New Press, 2012), 223.

freshman in high school when the *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling happened. Keppel writes, “John Lewis never rode in the new school bus or attended the more modern racially integrated school that he had understood as the promise implied in the court’s ruling. In reality, ‘nothing in my life had changed.’”¹⁴ Although there was a new societal expectation of public school integration, the reality was that it simply did not happen in many places.

Amidst this social environment of expected but not yet realized change, as a Valued Segregated School, Dunjee High School was a perfect cauldron for burgeoning political activism. Despite the traditional conception of segregated schools as inferior, scholar of African American Educational Studies Vanessa Siddle Walker writes that the conception of inferior segregated schools excludes the subjective experiences of the individuals attending and working within these schools. Through analyzing studies of segregated schools from 1935-1969, Siddle Walker describes the “Valued Segregated School”, an institution in which the entire Black community took pride.¹⁵ Those who worked in these schools refuted racism through creating high expectations for their students and explicitly valuing Black students. Siddle Walker writes, “By ‘being somebody’, the teachers and principals suggest that students were not to feel bound by the segregated world in which they lived, but were to be made to believe that if they worked hard enough they could ‘be anything they wanted to be’”.¹⁶ Although the reality

¹⁴ Ben Keppel, *Brown vs. Board and the Transformation of American Culture* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 2016), 22.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 260.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 267.

was that segregated schools had unequal resources to that of White schools, they were also institutions that united the Black community in refuting racism.

It was within the cultural milieu of the Valued Segregated School and The Age of Brown that Luper began her work engaging in grassroots activism when she became advisor to the NAACP Youth Council in 1957. Despite the professional risks with being involved in the NAACP, Luper and the NAACP Youth Council engaged in direct action protests throughout the 1960's, and this work was enabled by an extensive web of grassroots support she received from the Black community. Black organizations, such as schools, businesses, and churches, as well as a consistent group of lay people and professionals, offered the NAACP Youth Council invaluable support that ranged from providing a space for the Youth Council to meet to providing legal counsel to those who were arrested while participating in the Sit-In Movement.¹⁷

In utilizing the local community to join her in a grassroots effort to dismantle the segregation policies of Jim Crow in Oklahoma City, Luper's biography as a political activist serves as an historical example for contemporary teacher activists looking to fight against racism in the era of the New Jim Crow. Michelle Alexander describes the New Jim Crow as the modern-day manifestation of an old problem: the existence of a racial caste in the United States. She argues that racial caste continues through the system of mass incarceration, and this problem is made more pernicious by the fact that we are living in an era of colorblindness in which race is seen as a problem of the past.

Critical educational theorists, such as Michael Apple, argue that public schools are spaces that reproduce societal inequalities instead of ameliorate them. Of public

¹⁷ Clara Luper, *Behold the Walls* (Jim Wire, 1979), 78.

schools, he writes, “Poor achievement is not an aberration. Both poverty and curricular problems such as low achievement are the integral products of the organization of economic, cultural, and social life as we know it.”¹⁸ In contrast to the popular conception that schools are avenues of social mobility, public schools are spaces in which societal problems are replicated.

In the era of the New Jim Crow, as institutions which reproduce rather than challenge or reconstruct an unequal social order, public schools can become institutions in which officially colorblind policies punish and alienate students of color. Zero-tolerance policies, exclusionary disciplinary methods such as suspension and expulsion, and involvement of the police in school discipline, “may have an adverse, disparate impact on some groups” that, “may lead to high rates of juvenile involvement in the criminal justice system”. Although they may have the best intentions, for students of color, particularly Black students, the public school can become a “school-to-prison pipeline” in which, “legal policies, education policies, and social constructs funnel struggling children from schools to jails and prisons.”¹⁹ Mirroring the larger society in which racial caste is continued through colorblind policies of the criminal justice system, through officially colorblind school policies, students of color are often pushed out of the public school system.

¹⁸ Michael W. Apple, *Ideology and Curriculum* (New York: Routledge Falmer, 2009), 33.

¹⁹ “Civil Rights and the School-to-Prison Pipeline in Oklahoma: A Report of the Oklahoma Advisory Committee to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights,” (May 2016), http://www.usccr.gov/pubs/Oklahoma_SchooltoPrisonPipeline_May2016.pdf.

Michelle Alexander's solution to the problem of the New Jim Crow is through eschewing color-blindness for a new habit of citizenship she calls, "color consciousness".

She writes:

Seeing race is not the problem. Refusing to care for the people we see is the problem. The fact that the meaning of race may evolve over time or lose of its significance is hardly a reason to be struck blind. We should hope not for a colorblind society but instead for a world in which we can see each other fully, learn from each other, and do what we can to respond to each other with love.²⁰

Color consciousness does not hide from the reality of race but chooses to care through real difference. In toppling the real, pernicious problem of racial caste in the United States, Alexander writes that what is necessary is a, "fundamental shift in public consciousness" through a grassroots mass movement that, "creates a new public consensus".²¹

As Luper fought against Jim Crow segregation through a grassroots movement, contemporary teacher activists can work against the manifestation of the New Jim Crow in the schools through enlisting the support of the local community. Teachers can educate those in their local community towards color-consciousness and teach them about the ways in which public schools often become hostile spaces for students of color. Knowing this reality, local communities can in turn partner with public schools to create spaces that can serve as buffers for alienated students so that they aren't immediately shuffled to juvenile detention centers or prisons.

²⁰ Michelle Alexander and Cornel West, *The New Jim Crow*, 231.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 223.

After engaging in the public activism of the 1960's, Luper continued working as advisor to the NAACP Youth Council. In 1968, with the implementation of public school integration in Oklahoma City, Luper was transferred from Dunjee High School to the predominately White Northwest Classen High School.²² Luper worked at Northwest Classen for two years (1968-1970) a period which she described as "inspiring and exciting."²³ However, written and audio transcripts reveal that the integration process at Northwest Classen was a difficult experience for Luper and her Black students. Luper was particularly targeted for her position as a teacher and a Black Civil Rights Activist, and when her teaching position was threatened, the grassroots community of Black supporters that had supported her throughout the Sit-In Movement and the other direct action protests of the Youth Council enabled her to continue her work within the classroom.

After a brief year at Northeast High School (1970-1971) and subsequent two-year leave of absence (1971-1973), in 1973, Luper began teaching at the predominately White John Marshall High School. Student essays, colleague recommendation letters, and Luper's own writing from this period reveal Luper's intellectual and social practices as a teacher. As a Black teacher, Luper actively fought against White supremacy through establishing an explicitly anti-racist classroom in which students of all backgrounds were valued and seen as possessing unique potential. She prioritized the care and humanity of students and established the classroom as a critical space in

²² OKCPS Archive

²³ Clara Luper, *Behold the Walls*, 249.

which students were empowered by a curriculum that included the teaching of non-dominant historical narratives which validated her students' lives and experiences.

Luper's biography as a teacher serves as a template for contemporary teacher activists working against the new Jim Crow within the classroom. As Luper explicitly confronted race within her classroom, teachers can construct color conscious classrooms in which the reality of race and racial disparities are discussed. Teachers can construct anti-racist classrooms in which all students' voices are heard and their backgrounds are celebrated. Like Luper, teachers can establish curriculums in which historically marginalized groups are an essential element of the curriculum. With the support of the local community and through the institution of the public school, contemporary teachers can begin educating students towards color-consciousness, and in doing so begin a grassroots movement to create a new public consensus towards ending the racial caste system in the United States.

Luper continued teaching at John Marshall High School until her retirement in 1989.²⁴ Her work as a political activist first came to my attention when I was in high school through her national and local contributions to the Civil Rights Movement. Later, I learned that in addition to being political activist, she had a long career as a teacher, and as an Oklahoma teacher interested in social justice, I became interested in her simultaneous work as a leader in the Civil Rights Movement and her work as a teacher.

²⁴ OKCPS Archive

Teaching for Social Justice

I chose to become a teacher because I believed that public education could serve as an instrument of social justice. For the past four years I have worked as a public school teacher in Oklahoma in a variety of settings. I began my teaching career as a student teacher at a suburban high school located near a major state university; the following semester, I taught as a long-term substitute in a rural high school. I began my first full-time teaching position at a Title One Middle School, teaching there for a year.²⁵ For the past two years, I have been a Freshman English Teacher at a large suburban high school.

As a feminist in these various classroom experiences, I engaged in what critical educational theorist Kathleen Weiler calls *feminist-counter hegemonic resistance*, which she defines as, “the creation of a self-conscious analysis of a situation and the development of collective practices and organization that can oppose the hegemony of the existing order and begin to build the base for a new understanding and transformation of society.”²⁶ Through interviews in which feminist teachers described their teaching practice, Weiler learned that teachers exemplified feminist counter-hegemonic resistance through the creation of humane and democratic classrooms in which the care of students is prioritized and the voices and experiences of students are valued. These feminist teachers also created critical classrooms in which

²⁵ “Title One: Improving the Academic Achievement of the Disadvantaged,” (accessed December 18, 2017), <https://www.normanpublicschools.org/Page/2480>.

²⁶ Kathleen Weiler, *Women Teaching for Change: Gender, Class & Power* (New York: Bergin & Garvey Publishers, 1996), 52.

“consciousness is interrogated” through “raising issues and questioning accepted social values and ideology”.²⁷

Within my classroom, each day students responded to prompts in personal notebooks that connected issues from whatever we were reading at the time to their own lives and to the world in which they live. For example, while reading *Romeo and Juliet*, I had students journal about Romeo and Juliet’s parental interference in their relationship and whether or not the approval of students’ parents in their own relationships was important in their lives. I also had students compare the Capulets and the Montagues with two contemporary groups of people who struggle to get along to challenge them to reflect on the timelessness of group conflict. These notebooks were also an excellent way for me to get to know all of my students and to respond to them individually through commentary in the margins. One former student of mine felt empowered and cared for through our classroom journal practice, writing in a note to me, “Thank you for taking the time to get to know your students and seem interested in their personal life...I now feel better to write down how I am feeling and to get out the emotions.”²⁸

Another way in which I challenged my students was through whole-class discussions. These were sometimes structured as Socratic Seminars and at other times had a less defined format. Nevertheless, the guiding principles of classroom discussions were always the same: as the one speaking, have the courage to say what you think,

²⁷ Ibid., 114.

²⁸ Letter from Student, Mustang High School, April 18, 2006.

regardless of what others might say, even if you might be wrong; as the listener, respect the right of the speaker to voice her opinion without open derision or disrespect.

From one particularly opinionated hour, one student wrote:

I appreciate how we have discussion days and you actually care about what everyone has to say and you listen to everybody even though we all usually fight each other about it. It means a lot that someone, especially an adult, cares about my opinions and thoughts because I have plenty of adults in my life who don't really care to hear how I think or just think it's irrelevant...I think the way you understand everyone's different opinions has helped me be more understanding of the way other people think and realize that not everyone thinks the way I do, and you've helped me realize that it's okay to not all think the same.²⁹

Prioritizing students' personal voices and experiences matters in a healthy classroom, but creating socially conscious students requires other approaches, as well. These approaches include complicating students' views of normativity. From my position as a White woman teaching within a predominantly White suburban school, I worked to expose my students to curriculum that challenged our lived experiences of what is "normal".³⁰ Through *Tuesdays With Morrie*, by Mitch Albom, we explored the wisdom of Morrie Schwartz, a Jewish sociology professor at Brandeis who used his experience with ALS as an opportunity to share with others about living a meaningful life. While reading *The Help*, by Kathryn Stockett, I centered our class discussions on the racism and sexism that shaped the contours of the two protagonists, Miss Skeeter's and Aibileen's, lives. By reading *Life of Pi*, by Yann Martel, we explored the beliefs of the three major religions to which the protagonist, Pi, adheres: Islam, Christianity, and

²⁹ Letter from Student, Mustang High School.

³⁰ Barbara Applebaum, "Critical Whiteness Studies," (Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Education, accessed December 18, 2017), <http://education.oxfordre.com/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190264093.001.0001/acrefor-e-9780190264093-e-5>.

Hinduism. After completing the book, I invited student speakers from a nearby university to conduct an “interfaith panel” in which they gave students general information about their faiths and then dialogued with students about any questions they had regarding their religions; it was the first time many students had heard an explanation of other religions from people who actually practiced those faiths.

Though I grew up in a conservative environment in which discourse about feminism was either non-existent or demonized, as a college undergraduate, reading feminist writers such as Mary Wollstonecraft and Simone de Beauvoir gave me language to express my own struggles with establishing agency and self-worth within a patriarchal society. As a teacher, the sense of alienation and lack of voice I personally felt as an adolescent compelled me to construct a classroom in which students’ opinions and feelings were prioritized and valued. Kathleen Weiler writes that creating classrooms that privilege student voice is a practice of feminist teachers who, “select topics for discussion and study but also attempt to legitimize their students’ voices by acknowledging their students’ own experiences and calling for their students’ own narratives.”³¹

Research Method and Sources

In constructing what Luper’s biography as a teacher, including her teaching philosophy and classroom activities, I relied on transcripts I found through the Clara Luper Collection at the Oklahoma History Center. The Clara Luper Collection at the Oklahoma History Center consists of seventy-seven boxes that are divided into categories pertaining to different aspects of Luper’s life. I culled most of my

³¹ Kathleen Weiler, *Women Teaching for Change*, 131.

information on Luper's teaching through researching the categories

"Education/Teaching" (boxes 52-57), and "Scripts and Research" (boxes 58-64).

Some of the limitations of this method of research is that some of the transcripts that I found, such as Luper's teaching philosophies, had no date, so I can't adequately demonstrate if some of Luper's practices were consistent throughout her teaching career or if they evolved as her teaching career progressed. This also applies to the activities done within Luper's classroom. For example, there is a manuscript in which Luper describes her method of teaching history called, "History Made Easy", and some of the methods within this document, such as using the classroom to practice Democracy, are described in student essays while Luper taught at John Marshall, however, I have no way of knowing if Luper also used these methods at other schools in which she taught.

In order to construct Luper's biography as a political activist, I relied on her first-person account through her autobiography, *Behold the Walls* (1979). Though disorganized and not necessarily in chronological order, this work provided me with a general description of Luper's direct action protests throughout the 1960's and described the lives of Black lay people and professionals who supported the work of the NAACP Youth Council. To flesh out the lives of these people, I used Gene Aldrich's book, *Black Heritage of Oklahoma* (1973) and *The Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History and Culture* accessed through the Oklahoma History Society website. I also used online obituaries to make connections between Youth Council members and some of the Black lay people Luper spoke of in *Behold the Walls*.

Both *Freedom's Teacher* (2009) by Katherine Charron, and *Ready from Within* (1996) by Septima Clark and Cynthia Stokes Brown, further established the essential

role Luper's support system played in protecting her as a teacher and political activist through the biography and autobiography of teacher and Civil Rights Activist Septima Clark. Like Luper, Clark's teaching position was jeopardized because of her activism; However, Clark's lack of a support system resulted in the termination of her teaching career in the state of South Carolina.

Several sources helped set the historical frame for Luper's work as a Civil Rights Activist. Jimmie Lewis Franklins' *Journey Towards Hope (1982)* and *Black History in Oklahoma (1971)*, by Kaye Teall, provided me with general information about Black history in Oklahoma. Hilton Kelly's *Race, Remembering, and Jim Crow's Teachers (2010)*, Vanessa Siddle Walker's article, "Valued Segregated Schools for African American Children in the South: 1935-1969: A Review of Common Themes and Characteristics"(2000), and Ben Keppel's *Brown vs. Board and the Transformation of American Culture* provided information about the unique cultural milieu in which Luper's Civil Rights Activism was born.

Both *The New Jim Crow (2012)*, by Michelle Alexander, and Michael Apple's *Ideology and Curriculum (2009)* gave me an understanding of how racism is manifested in society and public schools. In the *New Jim Crow*, Alexander describes how, despite the rhetoric and policies of colorblindness, a racial caste is perpetuated in American society through the system of mass incarceration. *Ideology and Curriculum* gave me an understanding of how, as institutions that reproduce existing social structures and dynamics, the public school system replicates the racial caste system Alexander describes through the school-to-prison pipeline.

There were several sources that helped me understand my own position as a contemporary White Feminist teacher working for social justice. *And They Were Wonderful Teachers* (2009), by Karen Graves outlined the reasons why teachers are often hesitant to engage in overt political activities, as well as how Black teachers who did engage in political activities protected themselves from reprisal. Kathleen Weiler's *Women Teaching for Change*, provided me with a theoretical lens through which to interpret my own work within the classroom. Barbara Applebaum's article, "Critical Whiteness Studies" (2016) introduced me to the limitations of working for social justice as a White woman.

Thesis Outline

This thesis is divided into three chapters; Chapter One details Luper's work as a classroom teacher. Within the classroom, Luper fought against White Supremacy by constructing an anti-racist classroom in which the care and development of students was prioritized. As a Social Studies teacher, Luper empowered her students through teaching them the process of Democracy and through prioritizing Black history as an important part of the curriculum. Chapter Two details Clara Luper's work as a political activist fighting against the segregation policies of Jim Crow through engaging in direct action protests as leader of the NAACP Youth Council. This chapter also details how the grassroots support of the local Black community was integral to Luper's success as a political activist. Chapter Three describes the traumatic transition Luper and Black students at Northwest Classen High School experienced during public school integration in Oklahoma City. This chapter also describes the conflict that Luper experienced as a result of her work as a political activist and public school teacher, and

how the grassroots support of the Black community enabled her to retain her position within the classroom.

Chapter 2: Clara Luper in the Classroom

Luper's own writing, student essays, and colleague recommendation letters reveal that within the classroom, Luper resisted White Supremacy through establishing an anti-racist classroom in which students of all backgrounds were valued, cared for, and whose potentials were developed. Through these transcripts it's also clear that Luper used her subject as a tool to empower students to work for their own emancipation. Through Luper's teacher biography, Contemporary teacher activists looking to use their position as classroom teachers to fight against racism during the era of the New Jim Crow can emulate Luper's creation of an anti-racist and student-centered classroom in which the curriculum is used as a tool for student empowerment.

Clara Luper as Teacher Activist

Luper's decision to become a teacher was rooted in both the importance her family placed upon education and the possibilities that the teaching profession provided. The great-granddaughter of slaves, Luper describes herself as coming from, "a very poor family that had a lot of dreams and no education."³² Although Luper's parents had little formal education and her grandmother was, "barely able to read and write,"³³ Luper credits her family as instilling within her the importance of education, saying

³² "Clara Luper Show," (Oklahoma Historical Society Audio Department, hereafter OHSAD, created March 3, 1980),

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dBMem0grMv8&t=18s>.

³³ "Do I Have to Love My Enemies?" CLC, OHC, (Box 58: FF9).

education, “was something cemented into the hearts of all their(her parents) children.”³⁴

One anecdote from her childhood Luper uses to illustrate this is how her grandmother taught her to count. Clara says, “She taught us how to count, and when she went as far as she could, she said, 'go learn something else and I'll bake you a cookie'. And God knows I wanted that cookie. We believed in education.”³⁵

The teaching profession also offered Luper an occupation in which she would be both a respected member of the Black community and could achieve social mobility. In *Race, Remembering, and Jim Crow's Teachers*, Hilton Kelly writes, “Teaching offered not only something approaching a living wage, but high status in the Black community as well.”³⁶ Teachers were well-respected members of the Black community because of their middle-class position and because of the role education played in uplifting the community.

As a Social Studies teacher, Luper’s work within the classroom was characterized by a commitment to caring for and developing the whole student and empowering them through the teaching of her subject. Luper’s own writing reveals that she was committed to establishing a student-centered classroom in which all students’ unique backgrounds were valued. At the front of one of her planners, she illustrates her commitment to establishing a democratic and critical classroom, writing:

Goals for 1978

³⁴ “Biography,” CLC, OHC: Resumes, Biographical Information, Written by Clara Luper and Others.

³⁵ “Clara Luper Show,” OHSAD, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dBMem0grMv8&t=18s>.

³⁶ Hilton Kelly, *Race, Remembering, and Jim Crow's Teachers* (New York, NY: Taylor and Francis, 2010).

- I. To create a learning and working environment which insures the full development of human potential and respect for the worth and dignity of each individual.
- II. To enable the students to recognize and understand the dehumanizing effects of bias, prejudicial attitudes and discriminatory behavior.
- III. To work toward the protection and elimination of hostility, apathy, distrust, inequality, inequity, and discrimination and racism.
- IV. To develop positive feelings of self-worth, self-understanding, and security.
- V. To understand and appreciate the contribution and lifestyles of the various cultural, racial, ethnic, religious, and socioeconomic groups in our global society.
- VI. To develop respect and protection for diversified and dissenting points of view.
- VII. To establish a school climate where democratic processes are supported, developed, and utilized.
- VIII. To develop and establish methods for sharing feelings, concerns, and goals that will promote common understanding and mutual respect between and among various individuals and groups.
- IX. To develop self-discipline and self-responsibility, self respect and respect for the feelings, ideas, property and values of others.
- X. To promote democratic pluralism in respect to cultural and racial differences through the use of media, discussions, supplementary materials and textbooks.³⁷

These goals illustrate that Luper was aware of the multiplicity of experiences and perspectives that existed in a public school classroom, and that she was dedicated to building a classroom in which this reality was respected. As a Black teacher at the predominately White John Marshall High School, Luper intentionally created a classroom in which the reality of White supremacy was addressed and the value, potential, and development of all students was prioritized.

In two other manuscripts, Luper elaborates on her student centered teaching philosophy. In the first, titled “My Philosophy of Teaching”, Luper describes the evolution of her teaching philosophy, writing, “My philosophy of teaching has changed through the years. I started out with a philosophy that I could teach because I was a teacher. I felt that teachers were a distributor of a product and could be easily

³⁷ “Goals for 1978,” CLC, OHS, (Box 57: FF1, Notebooks, Ledgers, Teaching)

distributed to the students.”³⁸ Luper goes on to describe her new philosophy of teaching, which she calls, “The Diamond Philosophy”. The following are the tenets of Luper’s “Diamond Philosophy”:

1) *All Students are diamonds.*

- (Regardless of Race, Creed, Religions, or Economic conditions)

2) *Diamonds need special care.*

- They need to be discovered, Hidden talents, and dreams can only be discovered with special care and digging.

3) *Diamonds need protection.*

- Protection from life’s perplexing problems: discouragement, inferior class status, parental and teacher problems.

4) *Diamonds need cleaning*

- This might mean remedial work and special tutoring and peer help.

5) *Shine the Diamonds*

- Enforce the work code

6) *Admire the Individual sparkle of each Diamond*

- Special recognition

7) *Love your diamonds*

8) *Show off and preserve your diamonds*

Give each student the “confidence of victory.”³⁹

³⁸ “My Philosophy of Teaching,” CLC, OHS (Resumes, Biographical Information, Written by Clara Luper and Others).

³⁹ Ibid.

Luper's Diamond Philosophy reveals that the care and development of all students, regardless of their background, was a central element of her teaching practice. In the second manuscript, Luper again positions the student at the center of the classroom and the teacher as the one who works to unfurl student potential.

She writes:

A good teacher is a real friend to students, welcomes and encourages students to come for help with their problems regardless of its nature...I believe all children have a right to an education regardless of their mental capacity, rate of maturation or ability to adjust socially. Trainable children's hidden potentialities are probed by a good teacher and developed to their fullest extent.⁴⁰

Reflecting John Dewey's belief that the purpose of education is to unfurl individual students' potential, Luper believed that an essential aspect of her role as a teacher was to work to draw out all students' individual potential.⁴¹

Correspondence from those that worked and observed Luper while she was a teacher at John Marshall High School confirmed that she adhered to the philosophies she posited through her writing and established her classroom as a student-centered site of care. Luper's department head at John Marshall High School described Luper as, "an extraordinary human being" who was, "indiscriminately accepting of others, tolerant of all possibilities and human vagaries."⁴² Another colleague at John Marshall described Luper as, "A person who can formulate genuine human relationships with students. Hundreds of students continue to come to Mrs. Luper after graduation to say, 'thank

⁴⁰ "Untitled Manuscript," CLC, OHC, (Box 63: FF5, Notes, Drafts for Lectures, Speeches, Other Writing, Most Handwritten).

⁴¹ John Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, (published July 26, 2008), <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/852/852-h/852-h.htm>.

⁴² "Letter from Richard Garrett," CLC, OHS, (Box 52: FF1, Correspondence from Students).

you, Mrs. Luper, for caring.”⁴³ To the John Marshall principal, a parent of one Luper’s students wrote, “More than just teaching, she listens to her students...History may be her subject area, but students are her interest and those students know it.”⁴⁴

Student Empowerment

In addition to the creation of a caring and critical classroom, Luper participated in the African American tradition of using education as a vehicle for emancipation by establishing a classroom in which students were empowered through the curriculum and the development of their voice.

Historically, the denial of education was linked to the political disenfranchisement of African Americans. During slavery, literacy was denied slaves because an educated slave was more likely to escape. After emancipation, this lack of education was used to politically disenfranchise African Americans, and education was seen as an avenue towards full citizenship and political empowerment. In *Freedom’s Teacher*, Katherine Charron writes, “Freedmen and women well understood that their future economic and political security depended on securing basic literacy skills and pursued them with equal fervor in both the city and the country.”⁴⁵ In *Souls of Black Folks*, prominent African American thinker W.E.B. Dubois spoke of education as offering African-Americans personal empowerment through enlightenment.

He writes:

⁴³ “Letter from Cheryl Fowler,” CLC, OHS, (Box 53: FF2., School-University Correspondence).

⁴⁴ “Letter from Mrs. Ronald C. Frame,” CLC, OHS (Box 53: FF1, School, University Correspondence).

⁴⁵ Katherine Mellon Charron, *Freedom’s Teacher* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 52.

In the following years, a new vision began gradually to replace the dream of political power...it was the ideal of 'book learning'...here at least seemed to have been discovered the mountain path to Canaan...to the tired climbers, the horizon was ever dark, the mists were often cold, the Canaan was always dim and far away. If, however, the vistas disclosed as yet no goal, no resting-place, little but flattery and criticism, the journey at least gave leisure for reflection and self-examination; it changed the child of Emancipation to the youth with dawning self-consciousness, self-realization, self-respect. In those somber forests of his striving his own soul rose before him, and he saw himself, darkly as through a veil; but yet he saw in himself some faint revelation of his power, of his mission. He began to have a dim feeling that, to attain his place in the world, he must be himself, and not another.⁴⁶

For Dubois, education brought self-realization, and it was only through this self-realization that African-Americans would be able to, "be a co-worker in the kingdom of culture, to escape both death and isolation, to husband and use his powers and his latent genius."⁴⁷

As a teacher, Luper empowered students through the curriculum and by developing students' voices. In student essays titled "Luperland", written during Luper's last year as a teacher at John Marshall, multiple students write how they learned to find and project their voices in Luper's class. One student wrote, "I think my greatest achievement in this class was to partially overcome my shyness. I know I still act shy sometimes, but I've learned to stand up and speak out if I really want something. There is no more 'uhs' or shaking. I feel perfectly comfortable when I stand in front of my classmates to speak on certain issues." In teaching students confidence in public speaking, Luper taught her students agency and self-expression. Another student wrote, "Luperland is where I learned to stand up and open my mouth...I learned to have eye

⁴⁶ W.E.B. Dubois, *The Souls of Black Folks*, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/408/408-h/408-h.htm>.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

contact, to be strong, to take control, and go after what I wanted.” One student wrote about how she felt empowered to use her voice and share her story after Luper opened up about her own personal struggles with the class.

This student wrote:

I also learned that she is not the typical teacher. She often told us of rough times she had, and I can relate to a lot of that. For the first 16 years of my life, until my marriage, I was raised on beans, potatoes, cornbread, homemade ‘icebox’ stew and macaroni. Also, I did not have any hot water in my entire house. Even on the day of my wedding, I heated water and took a ‘sponge bath’. I did not have a toilet, not even outhouses. The canyon near my house was where those matters took place. To this day, my family members remaining at home still take cold showers in summer and heat water in winter. I learned that small towns are full of hypocrites. No one liked me because I lived roughly, even though I made good grades. So, Mrs. Luper, I hope you understand why I am like I am and why I turn turned to poetry for a friend. I believe we have things in common that few people have.⁴⁸

This student describes how her poverty alienated her from her community and from her peers at school. However, Luper sharing the struggles she had faced in being someone who was disenfranchised because of her race empowered this student to share her own narrative of struggle.

Luper also used the subject she taught to empower students; viewing American History as the story of people who emancipated themselves through American Democracy, Luper created a classroom in which students learned democracy by practicing it, and through acquiring the tools to participate in American Democracy, Luper empowered students to participate in the narrative of American History as emancipation. Luper believed in the ideal of American democracy and spoke about it in reverential and almost religious tones.

⁴⁸ “Luperland,” CLC, OHC, (Box 52: FF8, Student Papers, Classwork).

She wrote:

“Until two centuries ago, the idea of freedom was only a dream. Human importance was only an idea. Tyranny and slavery were the reality of man’s experiences. Then suddenly, the dream, the idea, grew into a bold and beautiful political system called ‘Democracy’. Men said, ‘Never hereafter will human beings be satisfied with anything less, when they hear of this, they will demand it as their right.’”⁴⁹

To Luper, the values espoused in the founding documents were not some nebulous rhetoric meant only for a select few Americans. Luper believed that the assertion within the Declaration of Independence that, “All men are created equal” meant *everyone*—regardless of color or creed or sex, and that the 13th, 14th, and 15th amendments to the Constitution guaranteed freedom and full citizenship to all. To Luper, the deprivation of rights to African-Americans and other American citizens was simply an aberration from the purity of the ideals of equality enshrined in the Constitution and Declaration of Independence.⁵⁰ Because Luper viewed democracy as a vehicle for human emancipation, she believed it was essential that her students learn how to be participants in American Democracy. Luper used her classroom as a laboratory in which students “practiced democracy” through engaging in civil discourse, disseminating information, and participating in democratic elections.

In “Luperland”, students practiced engaging in civil discourse by debating topics that ranged from abortion to protective tariffs.⁵¹ Students practiced disseminating and processing information through news reports. Each student was given a state, country, and a president, and were required to give reports to the classroom over events

⁴⁹ Clara Luper, *Behold the Walls* (Jim Wire, 1979), 136.

⁵⁰ “Advisors, Do Your Thing,” (Box 58: FF9).

⁵¹ “Luperland,” Box 52: FF8.

particular to their given topics. In addition to debates and news reports, students learned the process of democracy through conducting classroom elections.

Students learned the election process and function of government positions through the election of a President, Vice President, and a Presidential Cabinet. Transitions of power were simulated through the election of a new President and Vice President each quarter. One student writes of his experience in Luperland, “This classroom is set up like the government of the United States of America. I have held the position of President, Senator, and Representative of North Dakota, Secretary of Defense, and Secretary of Education.”⁵² Luper also had students elected as ambassadors to different countries. These classroom ambassadors were responsible for, “reporting to the president on the latest developments in Czechoslovakia, France, or England, plane hijackings and other events which might affect the United States government.”⁵³ Of learning about history in this way, another student wrote, “Each person had a job to do and it was up to him/her to do it. History came alive for me. Through role play I gained an insight to history.”⁵⁴

In addition to empowering students through practicing Democracy, Luper empowered students through the inclusion of non-dominant narratives of history within her classroom. Luper said that she taught, “all kinds of history-Jewish, red, Black and White”.⁵⁵ Luper especially included African American history into her curriculum, and this was evident at the schools in which Luper taught. Luper’s extensive knowledge of

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Clara Luper, *Behold the Walls*, 253.

⁵⁴ “Luperland,” Box 52: FF8.

⁵⁵ Clara Luper, *Behold the Walls*, 252.

Black history is demonstrated through “Clara’s Calendar”, a compilation of important moments in Black history as they occurred every calendar day of the year.⁵⁶

As a teacher at Dunjee High School, Luper wrote and had her students perform various plays on Black History during Negro History Week.⁵⁷ One of these plays, Brother President, about MLK Jr., received such acclaim that the students who performed in it were invited to perform the play at the Rally for Freedom Fighters in New York City.⁵⁸ Luper continued supplementing Black history into the curriculum as a teacher at John Marshall High School. Continuing the tradition of presenting plays on Black history during Black History Week, John Marshall students performed Luper’s original play, “The Dred Scott Story”.⁵⁹ Additionally, Luper’s play “Brother President” was made into a movie by the film department at the University of Oklahoma and shown at various locations in Oklahoma City.⁶⁰ At John Marshall, Luper exposed students to Black politicians through taking them on a field trip to the National Black Caucus in Tulsa, and by inviting Jesse Jackson to come speak to students.⁶¹ Luper believed that understanding Black history was an integral part of understanding American history, writing, “Black history gives us the knowledge that Black history is White history and we can’t truly study one without studying the other.”⁶²

⁵⁶ “Days to Remember in Black History,” CLC, OHC, (Box 58: FF12, Days to Remember in Black History).

⁵⁷ Clara Luper, *Behold the Walls*, 1.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁵⁹ “The Dred Scott Story,” CLC, OHC, (Box 53: FF6 Education- Related Flyers, Form Letters)

⁶⁰ “Letter from Betty G. Mason,” CLC, OHC, (Box 53: FF3, School, University Correspondence)

⁶¹ “Luperland,” Box 52: FF8.

⁶² “Untitled Manuscript,” CLC, OHC, Box 63: FF3 (Notes, Drafts for Lectures, Speeches, Other Writing, Mostly Handwritten).

Chapter 3: Clara Luper the Political Activist

As youth advisor to the NAACP Youth Council, throughout the 1960's Clara Luper and the Youth Council fought against Jim Crow segregation policies in Oklahoma City through a variety of direct action protests such as sit-ins, marches, and even a strike. The work of Luper and the youth council was supported by a grassroots group of Black community members from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds that provided the council with material, emotional, and legal support. Luper's biography as a political activist serves as a template for contemporary teacher activists working in the era of the New Jim Crow. As the grassroots support of the local Black community enabled Luper and the NAACP youth council to conduct direct action protests, teacher activists looking to fight against the school-to-prison pipeline must ally with the local community in working to create a safety net for students of color who have been pushed out of the public school system.

Direct Action Protests

Throughout the 1960's, Luper and the NAACP engaged in direct action protests which were enabled through the grassroots support of the local Black community. In 1957, Luper had replaced Lucille McClendon as Youth Council advisor to the Oklahoma City branch of the NAACP Youth Council.⁶³ As a teacher at the all-Black Dunjee High School, Luper was a respected and influential member of the community, and she used her position to recruit students from Dunjee High School and from Fifth Street Baptist Church, the local church she attended.⁶⁴ Luper's recruitment from the

⁶³ Clara Luper, *Behold the Walls*, 1.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

school and church was strategic: both of these institutions were centers of Black social life, and a commonality of purpose existed between the home, the church, and the school. In *Race, Remembering, and Jim Crow's Teachers*, Hilton Kelly calls this “cultural synchronization”, and it was within this environment that Luper and the Youth Council began their work.⁶⁵ Members of the Youth Council were comprised of youth ages seven to fifteen, and Luper had close relationships with these youths and their families.

She wrote:

There was no Advisor-Youth Council membership relationship then. It was a far deeper feeling that I had for the NAACP Youth Council members. I had watched them grow up from infancy. I had seen their minds develop and the values which they would carry through their lives change. I knew their parents and knew how much their parents loved them. I knew how unpopular it was to have your children involved in the NAACP Youth Council activities. It was even more difficult to get adults involved in the Council.

Luper and the Youth Council made the decision to actively work to desegregate public establishments in Oklahoma City while on a trip to the “Salute to Young Freedom Fighters Rally” in New York City. Enabled by money raised by members of the Black community, Luper and the Youth Council had been asked to present the play, “Brother President” at the rally by the NAACP National Youth Director. “Brother President”, which was about the life of Martin Luther King Jr., had first been presented at Dunjee High School during Negro History Week.⁶⁶ On the way to New York City, Luper and the Youth Council traveled through the North, and the youth were able to experience something they had never experienced before: integration.

⁶⁵ Hilton Kelly, *Race, Remembering, and Jim Crow's Teachers* (New York City, NY: Routledge, 2010), 10.

⁶⁶ Clara Luper, *Behold the Walls*, 1.

Luper writes:

The cast, most of whom had never been out of Oklahoma City, stopped in St. Louis for dinner and experienced their first integrated lunch counter service. This they continued to enjoy and appreciate on the trip. Words are inadequate to describe the expression and action of young people who, by tradition and custom, had been separated by the strong Visible Walls of segregation.

At the rally, the council members were able to meet with those fighting for Civil Rights in the South. On their way back to Oklahoma, Luper and the Youth Council decided to go back through the South.⁶⁷ They first stopped at Arlington National Cemetery, which had an impact on Youth Council secretary Barbara Posey. Luper writes, “Barbara Posey, the secretary of the Youth Council, told the group that since all of these people had died for our freedom, we need to really get busy and do something for our country. Yes, these people, that are buried at Arlington Cemetery did all they could for freedom.”⁶⁸ Barbara Posey was involved with the work of the Youth Council along with her entire family; her sister, Alma Faye was a fellow Youth Council member, and her mother, Alma V. Posey, supported the work of the Youth Council.⁶⁹ Barbara Posey would go on to play an influential role in the work of the Youth Council during the Sit-In Movement; she continually served as spokesperson for the council, represented the Youth Council at national events, and eventually became president of the Youth Council.⁷⁰

⁶⁷ Ibid., 2.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 3.

⁶⁹ “Alma V. Posey,” (The Oklahoman, published February 1, 2005), <http://legacy.newsok.com/obituaries/oklahoman/obituary.aspx?n=alma-v-posey&pid=3110036>.

⁷⁰ Clara Luper, *Behold the Walls*, 59.

As the Youth Council traveled through the South back to Oklahoma, they were struck by the contrasting experiences they had from their time going through the Northern United States. In contrast to the integrated restaurants in the North, the Youth Council had trouble finding places in which they could eat in the South, and Luper recounts that the council resorted to eating paper-sack lunches because they couldn't find places to sit down and eat. Experiencing the desegregated accommodations compared with the segregated accommodations, meeting other people working for full citizenship in the U.S. at the "Salute to Young Freedom Fighters Rally", and visiting Arlington National Cemetery compelled the Youth Council to make the decision to focus on the desegregation of public accommodations in Oklahoma City. Luper writes, "Back in Oklahoma City, the group decided to break down segregation in public accommodations for all time and pay any price for it. 'That will be our project- to eliminate segregation in public accommodations,' the group said."⁷¹ Through their exposure to different ways of life, the New York City trip served as a politicizing experience for Luper and the youth council.

The Sit-in Movement

After returning from "The Salute to Young Freedom Fighters' Rally", Luper and the Youth Council began the process of desegregating public accommodations in Oklahoma City. First, they established a Public Accommodations Committee, consisting of Barbara Posey as the spokesman, two other council members and a White woman named Carolina Burke. The Public Accommodations Committee met directly with Oklahoma City business owners and managers and asked them to desegregate their

⁷¹ Ibid., 3.

establishments. When they refused, the committee met with the city council and city manager, who said that they, “don’t tell the businessmen who to serve and they don’t tell us how to run our city government”.

The failure of the petitions of the Public Accommodations Committee led Luper to seek the support of community churches. Letters were written to both White and Black churches, asking for their help in desegregating public accommodations. According to Luper, “The White church leaders turned deaf ears” and the Black churches were reticent but offered to support the Youth Council by allowing them to use their churches as meeting places and raising money and awareness of the council activities.⁷² Some Black churches, such as Calvary Baptist Church, and St. John’s Baptist Church, consistently served as meeting places for the Youth Council as they engaged in direct action protests throughout the 1960’s, and the pastors of these churches, Reverend W.B. Parker and Reverend W.K. Jackson respectively, directly engaged in youth council protests.

After directly petitioning businesses failed, Luper and the Youth Council decided that more drastic action through the method of direct action protests would be needed in order to desegregate public establishments in Oklahoma City. Clara Luper’s daughter, Marilyn, and fellow council member Areeda Tolliver suggested to the Youth Council that they choose Katz Drug Store as the first place in which they protest. Luper and Areeda Tolliver’s mother, Ruth, coordinated transportation, and Portwood Williams, Lillian Oliver, and Mary Pogue provided transportation to Katz Drug Store. Both Portwood Williams and Mary Pogue had children on the NAACP Youth Council, and

⁷² Ibid., 3-4.

Lillian Oliver was a former assistant NAACP Youth Council Advisor and good friend of Luper's.⁷³ Portwood Williams was Luper's neighbor and participated in the Sit-In Movement along with his son and daughter, Portwood Williams Jr., and Donda West, who would eventually become chair of the Department of English and Speech at Chicago State University and mother of international rap star, Kanye West.⁷⁴ In one of his songs, "Never Let Me Down", West credits his grandfather for instilling within him his sense of social conscience. He writes, "I get down for my grandfather who took my momma, made her sit in that seat where White folks ain't want us to eat, at the tender age of six she was arrested for the sit-in, and with that in my blood I was born to be different."⁷⁵

The first direct action protest by the Oklahoma NAACP Youth Council happened August 19, 1958, at Katz Drug Store.⁷⁶ Both of Mary Pogue's children, Lana and Linda, were participants in this first protest, along with Marilyn Luper, her brother Calvin, Barbara and Alma Faye Posey, and Portwood Williams Jr. The sit-in protest at Katz Drug Store served as a catalyst for the polarization of the Oklahoma City community. After the protest, Luper experienced threatening phone calls and criticism from members of both the White and Black communities. She writes, "The call that really caught me unexpectedly came from a Black man who would not tell me his name,

⁷³ Ibid., 5.

⁷⁴ "Donda C. West," (The Oklahoman, published November 18, 2007), <http://legacy.newsok.com/obituaries/oklahoman/obituary.aspx?pid=98147273>.

⁷⁵ "Never Let Me Down," (Genius, published February 10, 2004), <https://genius.com/Kanye-west-never-let-me-down-lyrics>.

⁷⁶ Clara Luper, *Behold the Walls*, 6.

but he told me how good the White folks had been to him and I was disgracing my race by taking those poor innocent children downtown.”⁷⁷

However, the negative reactions Luper received were counterbalanced by the outpouring of support she received from the Black community. New members, such as Edmund Atkins and Henry Rolfe Jr., joined the Youth Council; Edmund Atkins was the son of Dr. Charles and Hannah Atkins, both prominent Black Oklahomans who consistently supported the Youth Council.

Of the Atkins’s, Luper wrote:

(Dr. Charles Atkins) was my doctor and his advice had always been respected and carried out through the years he had been our family doctor. We had depended on both his medical, recreational, and educational advice. He had never missed an opportunity to support the sit-ins mentally or financially. He checked on our welfare daily...his wife had been helpful in supplying us with new information and materials.”⁷⁸

Hannah Atkins later became a legislator in the Oklahoma House of Representatives, Oklahoma Secretary of State, and a delegate to the thirty-fifth United Nations Assembly.⁷⁹ Henry Rolf Jr.’s father, Henry Rolf Sr., owned Rolfe Funeral Home, which along with Temple and McKay Funeral Homes, would provide transportation for continuing sit-in protests.⁸⁰ A. Willie James, who had helped raise money for the Youth Council to go to the “Salute to Young Freedom Fighter’s Rally,” and Dr. E.C. Moon Jr. helped collect money so the Youth Council would be able to

⁷⁷ Ibid., 12.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 50.

⁷⁹ “Hannah Diggs Atkins,” (The Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History and Culture, accessed November 29, 2017),

<http://www.okhistory.org/publications/enc/entry.php?entry=at002>.

⁸⁰ “History and Staff,” (Rolfe Funeral Home, accessed November 29, 2017),

<http://www.rolfefuneralhome.com/who-we-are/history-and-staff>.

eat.⁸¹ Dr. E.C Moon Jr., was a dentist and president of the Oklahoma NAACP. Of Dr. E.C. Moon Jr., Luper wrote, “The youth loved him. He was a sensitive man of rare qualities...He was a leader, a man of conviction and compassion. To him, justice was more than a word, it was a responsibility. His was a continuation, not a spasmodic operation. He maintained a constant interest and added a new dimension to the movement.”⁸²

Throughout and beyond the six-year span of the Sit-In Movement, Luper consistently received emotional, material, and legal support from the Black community, including Black organizations and a core group of both lay and professional people. This web of support helped with the logistics of the direct action protests and protected Luper from professional reprisal. In *And They Were Wonderful Teachers*, Karen Graves writes that Black teachers engaging in activism would often, “vest their resistance in professional organizations” and “invite professionals from the private sector...as a shield of protection for the teachers who most certainly would be fired for their activism”.⁸³ Employing the strategy of other teacher activists, the grassroots support of the local Black community served as a source of protection for Luper.

When someone threatened to bomb Luper’s home after a sit-in protest at John A. Brown’s Luncheonette, Ruth Tolliver and her daughter, Areda, stayed with Luper, and Dr. Atkins and Dr. A.L. Dowell watched Luper’s home while she continued to participate in the sit-in protest.⁸⁴ Dr. A.L. Dowell was an optometrist whose son,

⁸¹ Clara Luper, *Behold the Walls*, 14.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 132.

⁸³ Karen L. Graves, *And They Were Wonderful Teachers: Florida’s Purge of Gay and Lesbian Teachers* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 136.

⁸⁴ Clara Luper, *Behold the Walls*, 21.

Robert, was a member of the Youth Council. Dr. Dowell would go on to play an important role in the desegregation of Oklahoma City Public Schools through his lawsuit against the Oklahoma City Board of Education. Of him, Luper wrote, “He and his wife’s office served as an information headquarters. They would coordinate and sift information, giving it to their clients...they supported the movement financially daily.”⁸⁵

Two years into the Sit-In Movement, some public establishments had been desegregated. However, in an effort to precipitate complete desegregation, the Black community considered a general boycott of Oklahoma City establishments. In an effort to prevent this and to address the demands of the Youth Council, Governor J. Howard Edmondson formed the Committee on Human Relations.⁸⁶ Along with many others, Luper and Youth Council supporters Dr. Charles Atkins, F.D. Moon, and Mr. James E. Stewart were members of the committee.⁸⁷ Both Moon and Stewart were important Black professionals in Oklahoma City; F.D. Moon was the uncle of E.C. Moon Jr. and a prominent Oklahoma educator who would eventually go on to be the first African American to serve as president of the Oklahoma City Board of Education,⁸⁸ and James E. Stewart was president of the Oklahoma City branch of the NAACP who would go on to become Vice President of ONG (Oklahoma Natural Gas).⁸⁹

⁸⁵ Ibid., 62.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 109.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 62.

⁸⁸ William D. Welge, “Frederick Douglass Moon,” (The Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History and Culture, accessed December 4, 2017), <http://www.okhistory.org/publications/enc/entry.php?entry=MO011>.

⁸⁹ Hannah D. Atkins, “James Edward Stewart,” (The Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History and Culture, accessed December 4, 2017), <http://www.okhistory.org/publications/enc/entry.php?entry=ST032>.

The proposed general boycott was a contentious issue within the Black community; Luper writes, “This was a hot issue; the Black community leaders were split down the center, as to the kind of boycott, if a boycott at all.”⁹⁰ Luper, E. Melvin Porter, Archibald Hill Jr., and Cecil L. Williams believed that the community should not wait on the Human Relations Committee and should go ahead and conduct a general boycott of downtown businesses. Both E. Melvin Porter and Archibald Hill Jr. were prominent Oklahoma City lawyers who served in the Oklahoma legislature,⁹¹ were leaders of Civil Rights Organizations, and supported the work of the NAACP Youth Council directly through participation and indirectly through providing Luper and the Youth Council with legal support.⁹² Luper called E. Melvin Porter the, “Patrick Henry of the Sit-ins” for his proactive approach during the Sit-In Movement.⁹³ Cecil L. Williams was a former army paratrooper and Oklahoma City businessman who consistently supported the Youth Council.⁹⁴ Those against a general boycott or a boycott at all, such as Jimmy Stewart, Dr. A.L. Dowell, and Dr. Charles Atkins, were concerned about retaliation that might be directed towards the Black community. At a community meeting at St. John’s Baptist Church, it was decided that the Black community would go on and conduct a general boycott of all downtown establishments.⁹⁵

⁹⁰ Clara Luper, *Behold the Walls*, 162.

⁹¹ Gene Aldrich, *Black Heritage of Oklahoma* (Edmond, OK: Thompson Book and Supply Co., 1973), 62.

⁹² Clara Luper, *Behold the Walls*, 78.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 34.

⁹⁴ “The Black Businessman,” *Black Voices*, Vol. 3, February 1973, CLC (Box 34: FF10).

⁹⁵ Clara Luper, *Behold the Walls*, 166.

The boycott began at Calvary Baptist Church, and boycott supporters marched downtown with signs and leaflets. Not all Black members of the community participated in the general strike, and when Luper and the Youth Council saw members of the Black community continuing to shop downtown despite the boycott, she writes, “We purchased school bells and every time we saw some Blacks shopping in a store, we would walk up behind them and ring our bells and keep walking.”⁹⁶ Though it’s unclear how effective the boycott was in precipitating further desegregation, the Sit-in Movement continued until 1964.

Other Direct Action Protests

Though the Sit-In Movement officially ended in 1964, Luper and the Youth Council continued to engage in direct action protests throughout the 1960’s. Two of the largest of these protests were the March to Lawton and the Sanitation Strike. Though it was prohibited by national law, Doe Doe’s Amusement Park in Lawton, Oklahoma, continued to operate as a segregated establishment. Hearing about continued segregation from Archibald Hill Jr., Luper, the Youth Council, and E. Melvin Porter began to protest segregation at Doe Doe’s Amusement Park.⁹⁷ Eventually, Luper decided that their methods of protest were ineffective, and she planned a hundred-mile march from the Oklahoma State Capitol in Oklahoma City to Doe Doe Amusement Park in Lawton, Oklahoma.⁹⁸ On July 4th, flanked by highway patrolmen, Luper, the Youth Council, and a bevy of supporters began the March to Lawton. Many of the people within the Black community that supported Luper and the Youth Council during

⁹⁶ Ibid., 169.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 190.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 197.

the Sit-In Movement were involved in the march. In her autobiography, Luper provides an extensive account of the antics of Senator E. Melvin Porter as he marched along with the Youth Council to Lawton;⁹⁹ Ruth Tolliver, Lillian Oliver, Mary Pogue, and Nancy R. Davis helped supply the Youth Council with food.¹⁰⁰ Nancy R. Davis had been the first Black woman to enroll at Oklahoma State University and a colleague of Luper's at Dunjee High School. Her entire family participated in the March to Lawton; her daughter, Nancy Lynn Davis, marched with the Youth Council,¹⁰¹ and her husband, Fred, provided the marchers with food, and along with Cecil L. Williams, helped find a place for the marchers to stay at night.¹⁰²

When the marchers made it to the halfway point in Chickasha, they were greeted by a multitude of Black supporters who provided them with food and encouragement.

Luper writes of the overwhelming reception:

The crowd came around us and we were all treated as if we were celebrities. The tables were filled with fried chicken, barbecue of all kinds, beef roast, baked ham, a multitude of cakes...there were hand-written notes wishing us luck...an old fashioned freedom rally was held at the park...speeches of welcome were delivered to us by various Black leaders in Chickasha...I was so overcome with emotions that I went behind Fred Davis' truck and cried."¹⁰³

For lodging, the marchers slept wherever they found themselves- once at a gas station, another time at the Wichita Wildlife Refuge.¹⁰⁴ Once they arrived in Lawton, they were greeted with a reception at a local park.¹⁰⁵ From there, they completed their

⁹⁹ Ibid., 199.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 201.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 197.

¹⁰² Ibid., 205.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 204.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 201.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 205.

march to Doe Doe's Amusement Park, where they were met by other protesters and the Mayor of Lawton, Wayne Gilley. Luper writes, "Mayor Wayne Gilley came to the park and pledged immediate action. He stated that a recently created human relations commission would take up a proposed ordinance to eliminate discrimination in all public places on Tuesday."¹⁰⁶ The march had been successful in integrating Doe Doe's Amusement Park.

The last major direct action protest in which Luper and the Youth Council participated would prove one of the most controversial. Occurring in 1969, the Sanitation Strike began out of the Freedom Center, which a year earlier had become the new home for the NAACP Youth Council.¹⁰⁷ With Dr. Charles Atkins as the chairman, the Freedom Center served both as a home for the NAACP Youth Council and as a space for troubled youth within the community.¹⁰⁸ Because of Luper's position within the community and the fact that they were not members of a union, sanitation workers brought work complaints to Luper and asked her to be their spokesperson.¹⁰⁹

Luper, along with Cecil L. Williams, was a member of the Minority Employment Committee, which was a committee formed by the City Manager to increase minority employment. As part of the committee, Luper had been critical of the lack of Black leadership in the sanitation department because eighty percent of the department was Black.¹¹⁰ Luper presented the complaints she received from the

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 206.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 285.

¹⁰⁸ "To These Ends the Freedom Center is Dedicated," CLC, OHC (Box 26: FF1, Freedom Center Correspondence).

¹⁰⁹ Clara Luper, *Behold the Walls*, 212.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 211.

sanitation workers to the committee: among other demands, the sanitation workers wanted a shorter work week and an increase in pay. When the grievances were presented to Robert Oldland, the city manager, he refused to accommodate all of the demands of the sanitation workers.¹¹¹ In response, as the Sanitation Workers' representative, Luper gave Oldland one week to meet all the sanitation workers' demands; If Oldland still refused, the workers would go on strike. Because of his refusal to meet their demands, on August 19th, Black Oklahoma City sanitation workers began a general strike that lasted seventy-five days.¹¹²

National and local leaders threw their support behind the sanitation strike; both the Civil Rights organizations of the NAACP and the SCLC sent representatives to advise and participate in the strike. National Youth Secretary James Brown Jr., National Board of Directors member Ken Brown, Regional Director for the Southwest Richard Dockery, and Tri-State Field Director Phillip Savage all participated in the strike and/or used their expertise to advise Luper and the protestors.¹¹³ Local and regional NAACP chapters pledged to support the sanitation strike. Representing the SCLC, Reverend Ralph Abernathy and field organizer Roland Betts came down to participate in the strike.¹¹⁴

Locally, the entire Black community, including those that supported Luper during the Sit-In Movement, threw their support behind the strike. Black churches such as St. John's Baptist Church and Fifth Street Baptist Church, were used as home bases

¹¹¹ Ibid., 213-214.

¹¹² "Sanitation Workers Win Strike," (The Crisis, December 1969), goo.gl/Fiob96.

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Clara Luper, *Behold the Walls*, 231.

and places where rallies supporting the strike took place.¹¹⁵ St. John's pastor, Reverend W.K. Jackson, played a significant role in the strike. When Luper had to resume her work as a teacher at Northwest Classen High School, Jackson took her place as strike coordinator. Other local Black pastors supported the Sanitation Strike by collecting money to support sanitation workers.¹¹⁶ During the strike, protesters would meet at Westwood Yard, where the garbage trucks were kept and try and physically prevent garbage trucks from leaving by stepping in front of them.¹¹⁷ Luper, Representative Hannah Atkins, Dr. A.L. Dowell, and Reverend W.K. Jackson were all arrested for obstructing the garbage trucks.

The sanitation strike culminated on October 31st in "Black Friday", which was a massive march in which thousands marched to City Hall to demonstrate their solidarity with the sanitation workers.¹¹⁸ Though Luper had work that day, she had told the principals at Northwest Classen that she would be participating in Black Friday, since, "I was Black before I was a teacher."¹¹⁹ The day began like all of the strike days, with protesters going to Westwood Yard and standing in front of the garbage trucks. This time, Archibald Hill Jr., Dr. A.L. Dowell, and SCLC field organizer Roland Betts were arrested and charged an exorbitant fine of \$5000 each. The owner of Temple's Funeral Home, Earl Temple, was contacted by E. Melvin Porter and loaned the men money to pay their fee.¹²⁰

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 219.

¹¹⁶ "Sanitation Workers Win Strike," *The Crisis*, goo.gl/Fiob96.

¹¹⁷ Clara Luper, *Behold the Walls*, 220.

¹¹⁸ "Sanitation Workers Win Strike," *The Crisis*, goo.gl/Fiob96.

¹¹⁹ Clara Luper, *Behold the Walls*, 235.

¹²⁰ Ibid., 233.

From Westwood Yard, the Youth Council marched to Fifth Street Baptist Church and then to Washington Park, where Luper writes there were supporters, “of all ages, sizes, and colors”. Students from all-Black schools, such as Douglass High School, had skipped school to participate in the strike, but also students from Central High School, Star Spencer, and Luper’s own school, Northwest Classen, had come to support the sanitation workers. Luper writes, “I looked out and saw a whole army of White and Black students. A White student from Northwest Classen walked up to me and said, ‘I had to come’”.¹²¹ From Washington Park, two-thousand protesters marched to City Hall, where there was a rally.¹²² Luper writes that Black Friday, “affected the schools, paralyzed the businesses, created employment problems, and moved over 400 police and troopers in the downtown area where they were armed with riot sticks, tear gas, and shotguns”.¹²³ As a result of the march, a settlement was reached with sanitation workers and the strike ended on November 7th.¹²⁴

Implications for Contemporary Teacher Activists

Luper’s biography as a political activist offers contemporary teacher activists a model for fighting against racism in the era of the New Jim Crow. First, by allowing students to participate in the process of identifying a problem, planning a course of action in response to that problem, and executing direct action protests, Luper connected the school to the local community. In fighting against the perpetuation of racial caste through the public school system, contemporary teacher activists must first

¹²¹ Ibid., 234.

¹²² “Sanitation Workers Win Strike,” *The Crisis*, goo.gl/Fiob96.

¹²³ Clara Luper, *Behold the Walls*, 237.

¹²⁴ “Sanitation Workers Win Strike,” *The Crisis*, goo.gl/Fiob96.

begin by listening to those on whose behalf they are advocating and include them in the activism process.

Another way in Luper's political biography serves as an example for contemporary teacher activists is through Luper's establishment of a grassroots support system. As a teacher within the Black community, before engaging in political activism, Luper had already established relationships with the family members of her students on the NAACP Youth Council. Building on this base of support, lay people and professionals rallied to support the work of the NAACP Youth Council. Once a course of action has been determined, contemporary teachers fighting against the school-to-prison pipeline can first begin by establishing relationships with the families of the students on whose behalf they are advocating. Building on this support system, teacher activists must establish relationships with both lay and professional members of the local community who support taking action to prevent the alienation of students of color in the public school system. Luper and the NAACP Youth Council were supported by the local Black community for six years as they worked to desegregate public establishments in Oklahoma City, and contemporary teacher activists looking to find solutions to the perpetuation of racial caste through the public school system will need to rely on a strong support system within the local community that will sustain their activism.

There are some limitations for contemporary teacher activists looking to Clara Luper's biography as a political activist to emulate fighting against racism within the era of the New Jim Crow. Luper conducted her activism in a different era than that of which we are currently. As a Black teacher activist at the beginning of the Civil Rights

Movement, Luper and the youth council were fighting against very obvious manifestations of racism. In the era of colorblindness, teacher activists must fight against manifestations of racism that are no-less real than those during the Jim Crow era but less culturally acknowledged as racism. Teacher activists working against the school-to-prison pipeline might find particular resistance in conservative communities that are hostile to the very acknowledgement of racism.

There are also limitations for White teachers looking to advocate on behalf of students of color. White teachers will never have the credibility that Luper, as a Black teacher with strong relationships and ties within the Black community, had, but they don't have to in order to be committed to working against racism in the era of the New Crow. Allowing Black teachers to take the lead in connecting with students of color and their families, White teachers can work alongside Black teachers and establish White allies within the school and local community.

Chapter 4: Persecution for Teacher Activism

As part of the integration process in Oklahoma City, in 1968 Luper was transferred from the segregated school in which she had been employed for seventeen years to the predominately White Northwest Classen High School. As reported by Luper and from student essays by Luper's Black students, this was a difficult process for Luper and her Black students. As a prominent Civil Rights Activist and leader in the Sanitation Strike, Luper experienced her greatest period of persecution and criticism for her work as a teacher activist at Northwest Classen. When Luper was forcibly promoted in an effort to remove her from the classroom, members of the Black community that

supported her throughout the direct action protests of the 1960's rallied behind her allowed her to remain within the classroom.

Public School Integration in Oklahoma City

In 1954, the *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling prohibited racial segregation in public schools and mandated desegregation with "all deliberate speed". Because the impetus for desegregation was placed on localities, the method and time in which desegregation occurred varied throughout the United States. Some school districts' resistance to comply with desegregation orders were met with lawsuits that's purpose was to precipitate desegregation. Derrick A. Bell Jr., describes this process in his article, "Serving Two Masters: Integration Ideals and Client Interests in School Desegregation Litigation".

He writes:

It quickly became apparent that most school districts would not comply with *Brown* voluntarily. Rather, they retained counsel and determined to resist compliance as long as possible...Suits were filed, school boards resisted the suits, and civil rights attorneys tried to overcome the resistance. Obtaining compliance with *Brown* as soon as possible was the goal of both clients and attorneys. But in most cases, that goal would not be realized before the named plaintiffs had graduated or left the school system."¹²⁵

The process described by Bell Jr., is illustrated through the manner in which desegregation took place in Oklahoma City. The immediate response to the the *Brown v. Board* ruling in Oklahoma was positive. The governor at the time, Governor Gary, urged Oklahoma school boards to, "carry out the mandate of the Supreme Court as fast

¹²⁵ Derrick A. Bell, Jr., "Serving Two Masters: Integration Ideals and Client Interests in School Desegregation Litigation," (The Yale Law Journal, 85, no. 4, March 1976), 18.

as possible.”¹²⁶ In *Journey Towards Hope*, Jimmie Lewis Franklin writes that Governor Gary, “exemplified statesmanship during the early period of desegregation” through his, “constant contact with educational leaders...his strong stand against violence, and his effective use of the media.”¹²⁷ The response to the Brown v. Board ruling in Oklahoma was even praised by Thurgood Marshall.¹²⁸

Reflecting the uneven national response to the Brown v. Board ruling, there was no unified statewide plan for public school desegregation in Oklahoma. Instead, desegregation occurred gradually and in a piecemeal fashion.¹²⁹

Gene Aldrich writes:

Confusion on how to carry out desegregation led to a number of plans. Some Black schools were discontinued and the children sent to a previously all-White school. In the large cities, districts of attendance were realigned to admit some Blacks. Transfer programs were set up in some districts. Housing segregation patterns in some cities prevented complete desegregation, as many White people still desired to follow the 'neighborhood school' concept in which children would not be taken from their neighborhood schools to be mixed with Negro children.¹³⁰

By the late 50's the state was seeing increased numbers of Black students attending White schools. According to the State Superintendent Dr. Oliver Hodge, by 1958, 7000 Black students were attending White schools, and the next year, 10, 246 (“one- fourth of the total Negro school population”).¹³¹

¹²⁶ Arthur L. Tolson, *The Black Oklahomans: A History, 1541-1972* (New Orleans, LA: Edwards Printing Company, 1974), 182.

¹²⁷ Jimmie Lewis Franklin, *Journey Towards Hope* (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1982), 84.

¹²⁸ Allan Saxe, *Protest and Reform: The Desegregation of Oklahoma City* (University of Oklahoma, 1969), 127.

¹²⁹ Kaye Teall, *Black History in Oklahoma* (Oklahoma City Public Schools, 1971), 279.

¹³⁰ Gene Aldrich, *Black Heritage of Oklahoma* (Edmond, Oklahoma: Thompson Book and Supply Company, 1973), 50.

¹³¹ Kaye Teall, *Black History in Oklahoma*, 279.

Despite the initial gains made towards integration in the public school system in Oklahoma City, White flight resulted in the re-segregation of some schools. In a 1961 Daily Oklahoman article, Oklahoma City, along with Miami, was described as engaging in the process of, “re-segregation...where formerly all White southern and border state schools which were integrated have gradually become all Negro schools as Whites have moved out of the ‘integrated’ districts.” As an example, three formerly all-White Oklahoma City elementary schools: Creston Hills, Culbertson Elementary, and Webster Junior High, transformed into all-Black schools within five years after desegregation.¹³²

In 1961, the Oklahoma City Optometrist and NAACP Youth Council Supporter Dr. A.L. Dowell brought a lawsuit against the Oklahoma City Board of Education on behalf of his son, Robert. The district would not allow Robert to transfer from the all-Black Douglas High School to Northeast High School, even though open transfer was allowed to White students. Dr. Dowell accused the Oklahoma City Board of Education of placing, “conditions, limitations, qualifications, and restrictions” on Black students who are interested in attending or are attending an integrated school.¹³³ He argued that, “Oklahoma City schools use the law to detain rather than attain full compliance with the decision of the U.S. Supreme Court.” As a result of this lawsuit, in 1963, Federal District Judge Luther Bohanon ruled that Oklahoma City Public Schools had only undergone “token integration”, and in both 1963 and 1965, he mandated that Oklahoma City Public Schools completely integrate.¹³⁴ In response to the Bohanon ruling, a plan

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ Ibid., 280.

¹³⁴ Ibid., 281.

was drawn up in which the Oklahoma City Public School System would integrate through busing in 1968.¹³⁵

Integration Struggles

As a Black Civil Rights Activist and teacher, Luper's move to Northwest Classen in 1968 was a source of controversy for the parents of White students and a personally difficult experience for Luper and her Black students. In an address broadcast on the Clara Luper Radio Show, Luper says that, "all hell broke out" at Northwest Classen, "because I had been arrested, at that time, over twenty times."¹³⁶ After her transfer, Luper was barraged with "hate calls and threats...constantly reminded that no 'nigger jailbird' would teach at Northwest Classen High School."¹³⁷ Luper writes that, "groups paraded up and down in front of my windows" in protest of her presence at Northwest Classen, and "demonstrations were staged outside of my classroom."¹³⁸

Within the school, Luper coped with the racism and ignorance she experienced from teachers and students with humor and forthrightness. Knowing that White students would be reserved and possibly fearful of having Luper as their teacher, Luper says that on the first day at Northwest Classen, she entered the classroom, banged on the desk and shouted, "Hey! I'm of the African background, and when people don't get into my lessons, I beat drums!"¹³⁹ When confronted with students who directed a racist chant towards her, Luper writes:

¹³⁵ Allan Saxe, *Protest and Reform: The Desegregation of Oklahoma City*, 217.

¹³⁶ "Clara Luper Show," OHSAD, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dBMem0grMv8&t=18s>.

¹³⁷ Clara Luper, *Behold the Walls*, 248.

¹³⁸ Ibid.

¹³⁹ "Clara Luper Show," OHSAD, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dBMem0grMv8&t=18s>.

As I walked down the hall to my classroom, a group of White 9th graders were down at the end of the hallway. They began to chant: "Here comes a Nigger, here comes a Nigger". I walked straight down the hallway and said, "Did you young men, call me? I was not smiling and I said, "My name is Mrs. Clara Luper and remember I'm your teacher.' Those young men held their heads down and apologized to me. I never had any more trouble out of the students at Northwest Classen."¹⁴⁰

Another time, a teacher approached Luper with concerns about, "what to call her." Luper deadpanned, "You'll make that decision, but in making it consider your own health and future as an Educator. Don't be misled by anything that you've heard about the non-violent, Clara Luper."¹⁴¹ Despite the humor Luper employed to cope with the difficulties she had beginning as a teacher at Northwest Classen, a poem published in her magazine, *Black Voices*, demonstrates that the persecution she received as a teacher activist deeply affected her.

A Black Teacher in a White Classroom

My classroom is an upper room and here, they are in front of me--
Ready to deny and betray me because of my Blackness. Ready to
place me on the cross of Shame. Ready to nail my hands with the
hammer of oppression.

Ready to pour the hatred of past centuries down my battle scarred
Freedom Hungry Back. I must taste the vinegar of disappointment as
my head is cemented to the cross of programmed superiority.

I'm a Black teacher in a White classroom.

I hear the crowd saying move her, she is not fit to teach "our kind"-
Sit-ins, walk-ins, and garbage ins have been her lot. The spit of
hypocrisy mingles with the signs of the mob, mingles with the tears
and sweat of bygone ages and slowly falls to the ground.

I'm placed in the grave of slavery, with the master smiling heroically,
but the morning comes telling the news of Spring. I'm alive, and I can
now shake off the grave garments of segregation and discrimination.

My students, dressed in God's great colors, Black, White, Yellow,
and Red, blossoms like the daisies of the field and say to me, "You

¹⁴⁰ Clara Luper, *Behold the Walls*, 248.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*

belong here in this classroom, for it isn't White, or Black. It's colorless...the same as a thought."¹⁴²

Luper begins this poem by expressing how she had been degraded at Northwest Classen because of her work as a political activist, where, "Sit-ins, walk-ins, and garbage-ins have been her lot." With, "I'm placed in the grave of slavery, with the master smiling heroically", Luper acknowledges that the tribulations that she is experiencing at Northwest Classen are the manifestation of an old problem. However, Luper finds strength to continue her work within the classroom through the acceptance of her students, who, "Black, White, Yellow, and Red...say to me, 'You belong here in this classroom.'"

Black Students at Northwest Classen

Student essays from some of Luper's Black students reveal that the transition to a predominately White school was also difficult for them, also. Through these essays, students expressed a sense of fear, alienation, and conflict in their relationships with White students.

At Northwest Classen High School, Black students were a miniscule portion of the total population. Luper anecdotally described the demographics of Northwest Classen as having twenty Black students and 3000 White students.¹⁴³ Regardless of the precise number, it's clear that at Northwest Classen High School, Black students were a minute portion of the total population. One student wrote about the fear she felt being so outnumbered, saying, "What I mean by scared is we are over here deep inside the White

¹⁴² "A Black Teacher in a White Classroom," (Black Voices, May 1971), CLC, OHC (Box 34: FF8).

¹⁴³ "Advisors, Do Your Thing," 60th Annual Convention of the NAACP, CLC, OHC (Box 58: FF9).

man's part of town outnumbered by something that looks like fifty to one and all it takes is one Black and White fight to start a riot because we're afraid the Whites start double-teaming or getting used to whipping the Blacks."¹⁴⁴

These students experienced a considerable social dislocation in moving to Northwest Classen. Students felt the loss of the support they had enjoyed from the teachers, principals, and community members in segregated schools. One student wrote about feeling disrespected and uncared for by White teachers at Northwest Classen, saying, "(Teachers) can give us the right to learn to be honest, let us speak in class. Show us that they are willing to teach us, hear what we have to say, give us respect as they would want us to do, talk to us as human beings besides saying 'you people' and all of that because the words 'you people' get under my skin." Another student wrote that they felt administrators were unduly harsh towards and suspicious of Black students, writing, "The administration should council with the Black and White students to find a solution to the solving all problems, and they shouldn't watch us as if we are wrong all the time."

Additionally, Black students described feeling a general sense of distrust towards and attitudes of racism and general resistance from White students. One student wrote, "I think they should show the Black students here at Northwest that they are willing to go to school with the Negro and prove to us that they are not better than us". Another student wrote, "I get along with them but don't like most of them because they try to be too nice. I can see straight through the front of most of them. People just don't

¹⁴⁴ "Northwest Classen Student Essays," Northwest Classen High School, CLC, OHC (Box 52: FF8 Student Papers, Classwork).

act that way...so what they need to do is to stop putting on a front and let people know what they really stand for.”

Because of these difficulties, some Black students expressed the desire to return to their segregated neighborhood schools. One student wrote, “...sure I would rather go to the school I last attended than being bused across town to go to another school...Let the negro be in the majority rather than in the minority.”

Another student wrote about feeling a sense of resignation and hopelessness:

I think we the Black students as a whole try to stick together and adjust to the new school because we can't change court decisions. So we should stay together and wait until it will change. We shouldn't fight but no one can stand to be pushed around called bad names and other things. If we hold our grounds the court may change their decision and if not, we will have to find another way.¹⁴⁵

Forced Promotion

Luper's participation in the Sanitation Strike deepened her unpopularity with White Northwest Classen parents, even as these parents' children rallied behind her. In the midst of the strike, Luper was summoned to the principal's office. She writes, “Mr. Cheney the principal called me to his office. His face was red and he looked as if he were completely exhausted. He said, ‘Clara, I don't know how to tell you this, but my office is just flooded with calls and from what I'm hearing the parents are going to take their children out of your classroom.’”¹⁴⁶ Luper again responded with humor, “Good! I would like to draw my salary for one year without teaching one child.”¹⁴⁷ When a parent did try to withdraw their child from her class, Luper recounts, “Then one of the

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

¹⁴⁶ Clara Luper, *Behold the Walls*, 249.

¹⁴⁷ “Clara Luper Show,” OHSAD,
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dBMem0grMv8&t=18s>.

rich ones came to my door, stuck her head in, called one of my students; she crossed my line. I rushed out there to 'em. Who are you? Redheaded and freckled, he told his mother, 'I'm not going anywhere. I'm learning in this classroom momma, and I'm going to stay here', and slammed the door in her face."¹⁴⁸ Despite the threats, only one parent followed through with their threat to remove their child from her class.¹⁴⁹

Though her first two years at Northwest Classen had been fraught with controversy, Luper described them as, “inspiring and exciting.”¹⁵⁰ Luper enjoyed teaching with other excellent teachers, and she was beloved by her students, who often supported her even when their parents would not. At the end of the 1970 spring semester, Luper was given the next year’s schedule and fully expected to be resuming her duties as a Social Studies teacher at Northwest Classen. Luper writes that she, “worked hard during the summer preparing for my next year’s work.”¹⁵¹

Three weeks before the beginning of the new year, the Assistant Superintendent set up a lunch meeting with Luper. During this meeting, Dr. Lunn told Luper that she was being “promoted” from her position as a Social Studies teacher at Northwest Classen to “Associate Director of the Media Research Program”.¹⁵² Luper had neither asked for nor wanted this position, even though taking it would mean a salary increase.¹⁵³ She told Dr. Lunn that accepting a position outside of the classroom would, “take my heart out of me” and “My heart is with the children and in an office without

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

¹⁴⁹ Clara Luper, *Behold the Walls*, 249.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

¹⁵¹ Ibid., 249.

¹⁵² Ibid.

¹⁵³ Ibid., 250.

the children, I'd dry up just like a 'raisin in the sun'.¹⁵⁴ In using the phrase, 'raisin in the sun', Luper was alluding to an important phrase within the African-American community. The phrase was first used in the poem, "Harlem", by Langston Hughes as a way to describe, "what happens to a dream deferred"¹⁵⁵ and later used as the title of the 1959 play by Lorraine Hansberry.

Despite her eloquent refusal to accept the position, on August 17th, 1970, Luper received a letter from the Executive Personnel Director of Oklahoma City Public Schools.

The letter read:

The purpose of this letter is to inform you of your transfer to the position of Research Associate, Media Design and Development, for the school term 1970-1971. It is the practice of the Oklahoma City Public Schools to assign personnel according to the needs of the system and the abilities of staff members. After considering this assignment and your professional training and experience, it is felt that you can make a unique contribution in this position.¹⁵⁶

Luper sent a letter back the very next day to the Executive Personnel Director.

It read:

For the past twenty years, I have been employed as a teacher of the public schools to the Oklahoma City area. I have never sought nor applied for any position other than a classroom teacher. As a teacher, I feel that my greatest contribution comes as a result of my direct contact with the human product. While your generous offer of \$300 per year increases my salary to some extent, on the other hand it educationally assassinates me. In view of my feelings, I would rather continue as a classroom teacher. My first and only love has always been the student. I look forward to receiving a classroom assignment.¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵⁵ Langston Hughes, "Harlem," (Poetry Foundation, accessed January 28, 2018), <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/46548/harlem>.

¹⁵⁶ "Letter from Robert B. Cheney," (Oklahoma City Public Schools), CLC, OHC (Box 56: FF6).

¹⁵⁷ "Letter from Clara Luper," (August 18, 1970).

In response to news of Luper's forced promotion, she received an outpouring of support from both the local and national Civil Rights community. Luper writes that, "I received telegrams and telephone calls from all over the United States including calls from NEA and other teachers Associations. I was flooded with job offers." Reverend W.K. Jackson, who had played such an influential role in the Sanitation Strike, used his position within the CLC (Coalition of the Civil Leadership) to come to Luper's aid.¹⁵⁸ F.D. Moon and Jimmy Stewart also supported Luper. The Director of Secondary Education, Dr. Jesse Lindley, defended Luper's right to be a teacher and political activist and asserted that she had not committed a fireable offense.

In an article in the Tulsa Tribune, he wrote:

Her political activities do not disqualify her as a teacher...not too many years ago a teacher's job depended on her being able to please everyone in the community. To prevent that sort of pressure on teachers, we have set up a code which is part of the state law that describes the grounds and methods by which a teacher can be fired...Mrs. Luper has not violated any of those requirements.

The president of the Oklahoma City Teachers Association, Eve Williamson also defended her right to be both a teacher and an activist, saying, "I feel strongly that every teacher has a right to be a first-class citizen and to participate in political activities...until those political activities interfere with her ability as a teacher in the classroom, she is free to advance any cause she desires."¹⁵⁹

To Luper's delight, local teachers threw off their attitude of caution and rallied behind her. She writes, "Every Black teacher in Oklahoma City along with large number of White teachers supported me and were willing to make personal sacrifices on

¹⁵⁸ Clara Luper, *Behold the Walls*, 250.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 253.

my behalf...the teachers offered to contribute part of their salaries to help me...I felt happy inside because the teachers were actively involved.”

As the date approached for Luper to begin her new position, she made the decision to attend the Miss Black America Beauty Pageant in New York City, which was being held the same day she was supposed to report to the Media Center. When Luper returned from the pageant, she says that, “Reverend W.K. Jackson gave me a good scolding” for attending the pageant, “and told me to call Dr. Lindley”.¹⁶⁰ Through Luper’s conversation with Dr. Lindley, she was able to resume her work as a classroom teacher. However, she was transferred to Northeast High School.

The tumultuous process of public school integration in Oklahoma City in 1968 was reflected through the experiences of Luper and her Black students at Northwest Classen. Without the protection of the segregated school, Luper’s role as a Civil Rights Activist and teacher was a source of controversy for White parents whose protestations jeopardized Luper’s work as a classroom teacher. However, because of the support of the Black community, Luper was able to continue doing the work that she loved within the classroom.

Conclusion

The life of Clara Luper serves as an historical example for contemporary teacher activists working in the era of the New Jim Crow and fighting against the perpetuation of racial caste through the public school system.

Working within the cultural milieu of the valued segregated school and the Age of Brown, as a teacher at Dunjee High School, Luper began engaging in political

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 250.

activism through her role as advisor to the NAACP Youth Council. Luper, the youth council, and a grassroots system of supporters from the Black community engaged in a variety of direct action protests throughout the 1960's, the most famous being the sit-in protests of the Oklahoma City Sit-In Movement. The support of the local Black community helped Luper handle the precarious position of being a politically engaged teacher, and she relied upon them for material, emotional, and legal support.

This support system was comprised of Black lay people, such as Portwood Williams and Theodosia Crawford,¹⁶¹ and the involvement of prominent Black professionals, such as Dr. A.L. Dowell and Senator E. Melvin Porter. Many of these individuals' support of the Youth Council was a family affair: the children were members of the NAACP Youth Council and the parents participated in the direct action protests and/or supported the protests in other ways. Black churches and their pastors, Black-owned businesses that ranged from Drive-Ins to Funeral Homes,¹⁶² and all-Black schools such as Douglas High School served as meeting places and provided resources to support the work of the youth council.¹⁶³

When Luper was moved to Northwest Classen High School during public school integration in Oklahoma City, she experienced her greatest period of persecution for her work as a teacher and political activist. With the continued support of the Black community, she was able to continue her political activism through the 1969 Sanitation Strike, and when her job was threatened because of her leadership in the strike, it was

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 89.

¹⁶² Ibid., 13.

¹⁶³ Ibid., 223.

her support system that rallied behind her and enabled her to continue her work as a classroom teacher.

As a teacher, transcripts from the Clara Luper Collection reveal that Luper fought against White Supremacy through the creation of a classroom in which the care, personal development, and empowerment of all students was prioritized. Luper's genuine care of students was noticed by colleagues, supervisors, and students.

A student teacher observing Luper in her classroom wrote:

“I have always been extremely impressed with Mrs. Luper and her classes. She establishes a special rapport with her students that a few select teachers have done...yet perhaps the most impressive aspect of Mrs. Luper is that she cares deeply. She feels what the student feels. I have seen her laugh with students and I have seen her cry when she is aware of a student problem. She rejoices with students' success and she encourages when someone is in need of a helping hand.”¹⁶⁴

Through teaching History as the story of many groups of people who use the tools of American Democracy to emancipate themselves, Luper equipped her own students to be a part of this narrative. She also included non-dominant narratives of history, such as Black History, as a major part of her curriculum and empowered students through developing their individual potential and teaching them how to use their voice.

As Luper fought as a teacher activist against Jim Crow and White Supremacy, in the era of the New Jim Crow, teacher activists have a unique opportunity to use their position to educate their students towards a new habit of citizenship of color-consciousness in which students are taught to recognize race, racism, and the

¹⁶⁴ “Letter from Brett McKnight,” CLC, OHC (Box 53: FF2, School University Correspondence).

continuation of racial caste in America through the system of mass incarceration. As demonstrated through the work of the grassroots members of the Black community that enabled Luper's work as a teacher activist, effectively creating a new public consensus that race exists and matters will require contemporary teacher activists to engage in this work with allies within the school and with the support of the local community.

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