

Broken: A Story of Black Transformation in Search of Thick Love OR Loving Black Men in the Religious Studies Classroom

Joseph L. Tucker Edmonds

Religious Studies & Africana Studies, Indiana University–Purdue University Indianapolis

“Love it. Love it hard. Yonder they do not love your flesh. They despise it. They don’t love your eyes; they’d just as soon pick em out. No more do they love the skin on your back. Yonder they flay it. And O my people they do not love your hands.”

—Baby Suggs Holy in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*

I think of love as being at the edges of consciousness, a kind of unsourced resonance that, once there, ends up being gathered, as a rainstorm, in mind as dream, as pleasure, as delightful. But like a dream, it can be fuzzy and easily forgotten once one awakens from sleep.

—Ashon Crawley, *The Lonely Letters*

This is not a story of Black failure.

I thought I was I going to do better this time.

Rich was full of light and enthusiasm the first day that he walked into my classroom. I immediately spotted the fresh Jordans, the tight line, the sly smile, and the way he leaned in when I began my first lecture. He asked me how I was doing as he left the classroom. We acknowledged each other at the beginning of the next class session, but there was little recognition. He a 19-year-old working class brother from Central Indiana, the first to attend college; holding down two-jobs and living just far enough off-campus to never feel a part of the community. He didn’t complete the first assignment.

I lectured on Black religion and revolution. I quoted David Walker, Toussaint Louverture, James Baldwin, and Fannie Lou Hamer. I played music, laughed at my own jokes, and invited my students to share their stories. A radical classroom was predicated on my full participation and embodied and full-throttled commitment to being vulnerable and accessible. I shared pieces of my life not realizing that my rehearsed and respectable stories of Black persistence and mobility sounded just like that, rehearsed, and a collection of finely scrubbed anecdotes that could be shared in any and every space. I refused to step off the pedestal that I had worked

so hard to get on. I told another story that highlighted my difference without regard to his well-being and safety. I laughed out loud, literally closing my eyes, knowing that he was not laughing with me. I didn’t dare to confirm my suspicions.

I called him to the front of the classroom. Talk to me after the end of lecture, I said. Unaware that I was reinscribing the type of surveillance and violence that had pervaded many of his educational encounters. This was not going to be a talk affirming him or his future. Without missing a beat, I noticed that you haven’t turned in the first couple of assignments. What’s going on? I asked, trying to deploy a more informal tone to disarm this student. Do you want to set up a time to meet with me? We can do this.

Why did I shift to we? When did I become a co-laborer or partner in his struggle? When had I in any significant way altered the power difference or attended to his vulnerability? When did we create a relationship or have any intimacy that existed outside of this classroom or my office hours? I needed a “we” in order to prevent a repetition of what had happened before in my classrooms, in the university, and in the other moments he didn’t feel comfortable sharing with me. I could be a part of creating structures and spaces that would save him, right?

Black men fail or are pushed out of college classrooms at alarming rates. At public institutions across the country, the dropout, fail, and withdrawal rates for Black men outpace any other group by multiples. They are sidelined for a variety of reasons, personal and structural, but I would like to make a case that the lack of intimacy and interest in most classrooms on college campuses deny entry and opportunity for most Black men, especially first-generation Black men at public and state universities. Even the spaces that have recruited faculty of color and created retention programs have yet to think critically about the classroom or the modern university as a space for their true liberation and freedom. Curricula and syllabi, even within the newest disciplines or those designed to address the historical erasures of people of color, often duplicate methods and framings that are not helpful, if not harmful, to Black men. The university, in this regard, looks no different from the other spaces that have failed to address or attend to the unique needs of Black students, especially Black men like Rich. The university, like public schools, the public square, and the economic market, has accepted the premise of Black male exclusion, failure, or mediocrity. Is there a space or a moment or inchoate model where my relationships, my classroom design, or the modern university can attest and begin to attend to this system of exclusion?

Fred Moten suggests the “undercommons” and the quest for fugitivity as the foundation of these spaces. The classroom must function as an undercommons, or it must at least make space for the student to challenge its very existence and the primary disciplining function of the classroom. The undercommons are maroon communities of people who are looking for community and connection in spaces that often deny or criminalize those acts. These communities tend to operate under and outside tradi-

tional systems and regimes. Therefore, the marginalized and the not fully seen, these Black men and boys, need an undercommons. As Moten and Stefano argue, the goal is not the abolition of universities, classrooms, or other carceral spaces, but the interrogation and “the abolition of a society that could have prisons, that could have slavery, that could have the wage, and therefore not abolition as the elimination of anything but abolition as the founding of a new society.” The undercommons or the fugitive learners must live “with brokenness, to neglect our debts, and to refuse to repair (or reform) ourselves.” Am I ready to live with brokenness, indebtedness, and disrepair? Can I exist within a marooned community or create one within my classrooms?

I want a classroom and a relationship with Black men that begins with and acknowledges absence. I imagine a space that is organized to erase the failure, mediocrity, and exclusion of Black men and boys. I imagine a space that pushes back against what Lewis Gordon calls the “disciplinary decadence” that pervades every nook and cranny of the modern university and in many ways forms and informs the modern Black intellectual. I’ve been formed to discipline and to deny access and now how could I be expected to create classrooms modeled on what has been called “democratically-engaged pedagogy” and “full participation.” I hoped and prayed that my mere presence was enough or that my pedagogical practices of critical reading and radical welcome would inherently make space for Black men. I was wrong. Recent studies suggest that after the pandemic, counting for the impact of Black professors and support systems, “Men of color enrolled at particularly low rates amid a pandemic in which Black students and their families disproportionately suffered from infections, job loss, and financial strains. Enrollment for Black men dropped 14.3 percent in spring 2021 compared to the previous spring, while enrollment for Black women fell 6.9 percent over the same time period.” My presence alone was and is not enough, but I still need and want to do more in my classrooms and learning spaces.

I had assumed that freedom or justice would come easy to me, but my commitment to disciplining my students oozes from my pores. Why would I want to create a fugitive space or alternative practice in settings where I have always felt free or almost free? How does this text make you feel? What other texts or experience can you connect to today’s lecture? How can we place this idea or thought into a genealogy of Black freedom? My Black male teaching persona, while explicitly repulsed by the logics of competition and comparison, engaged in activities, produced assignments, and constructed encounters that did just that. My classes, rather than re-imagining freedom and liberation, were saturated in the practices of hazing, carcerality, and containment. Maybe it was a space where I could be seen; maybe the classroom was a space that I could apply order and certainty to in a world that felt so chaotic; maybe I didn’t need the approval or love of other Black men to succeed and feel whole here.

Close the door before you sit down. Sean always entered the class after I had started lecturing. He had yet to turn in any assignments, and this was the fourth week of classes. I mentioned the upcoming writing assignment

while looking in his direction. I noted that there were multiple options for completing this assignment and that the due date was flexible. He complimented my shoes as he asked me about the due date. I suggested that we meet after class. He never showed up.

This is not a story of Black pathology.

Terrell was tired. He worked the third shift, helped his grandmother, and was carrying a full academic load. Putting his head down constantly and disconnected from the course material, it was clear that he didn't want to be in class that morning. His shirt looked unkempt, his skullcap was haphazardly pulled down over his forehead, and he avoided my gaze every time I made my way by his desk.

During the fifth week of class, thirty or so days into the semester, professors at my urban research university in the Midwest are tasked with administratively withdrawing students. This process was designed as a mechanism to remove students who had mistakenly registered for a class and never attended or students that were unable to attend due to financial, health, or some other exigent circumstance. It is a tool of the modern university to ensure that all students holding seats have adhered to the structural and logistical constraints and needs of the university. While it had historically been facilitated by the registrar's office or the emerging class of student support staff or academic advisors who populate many offices across the academic complex, this responsibility has been primarily placed in the hands of the hurried, often under-compensated, multi-tasking professor. If a student has not attended your class or has not completed a sufficient amount of work, the professor is supposed to initiate an administrative withdrawal. Without being required to talk to the student and based on the sample size of eight, maybe ten classes, I am told to foreclose a possibility that feels insurmountable. I am not asked to make any interventions, nor am I asked to consider my culpability, failure of the curriculum design, or the outright disregard of the university. With a single keystroke, I am tasked with either letting Jermaine go or failing him for another ten to twelve weeks. I let him go.

Dubois may have said it best. "Well sped, my boy, before the world had dubbed your ambition insolence, had held your ideals unattainable, and taught you to cringe and bow. Better far this nameless void that stops my life than a sea of sorrow for you."

This story is not Broken.

Jason didn't return after fall break. I saw him once in the student center during the last week of classes. He nodded, and I did the same. I was on my way to the class where we first met on an unseasonably cool day in August. My lecture that day was on Black religion and Christian fatigue. I was visibly tired as I stood behind the lectern. For the first time that semester, I veered off script and sat down while I talked to my students. For the next forty-five minutes, we talked about failure and fatigue, the undemocratic

and capitalist impulses of the modern university, their competitive drive for grades and their hopes for eventual job security, and the students who didn't make it to the end of the semester. I shared my story. I said for the first time that while harmed and saddened by a system that doesn't see or acknowledge all people, I was in the process of unlearning a system that by chance or a result of my myriad contortions had made space for me. I acknowledged that space for me wasn't enough. I wanted the love that lingered in the dark spaces of my consciousness and opened unexpected and never seen vistas.

I loved Sylvester. He stopped by my office. He interrupted me during my lectures. He actually called me and asked me to lunch. I decided to create a class and imagine a university that loved Sylvester as much as I did. This is a story about loving Black men in the classroom and the university.

This is a love story.

I have always been free and seen in the classroom. I have been affirmed, and I have had the right and privilege to interrogate my questions, concerns, and ideas. I have had teachers who have held my hands and my heart as they moved me through the learning process. They implicitly and explicitly taught me that the classroom could and should not only be a joy-filled exploration of content, but that my story, my experiences, and my ways of learning can and should be centered in the classroom. I no longer saw me or my East Coast, middle-class Black story; I saw Sylvester. All of him.

We began by exploring what love might look like in the classroom. What has love looked like in your home? What has love look like in your most fulfilling relationships? Have you ever experienced love in the classroom? I couldn't promise him, or any of them, that this term would be different or, that by engaging in this process, intimacy would be the likely result. I suggested that this type of love required a different type of commitment and that it would subvert the notion of the late capitalist, transactional model of the university. Love in this case would be costly, thick, and come at the expense of the comfort and relative consistency that many of my white, cis-gender, or high performing and frequently affirmed students had come to expect. I looked down for a moment, as I unassuredly made the next statement. I am committed to loving you and this classroom over the next sixteen weeks. Love language and intimacy didn't roll off my tongue as easily as abstract and well-placed quotes of Black liberation

and the histories surrounding the genius of Black religion. I stuttered a little, and I thought about retracting the statement. Maybe I should have replaced "love" with joy or fugitive or safe, but I knew that it was love and care that I was grasping for. I quoted bell hooks, the doyenne and guide of my love pedagogy: "When teachers teach with love, combining care, commitment, knowledge, responsibility, respect, and trust, we are often able to enter the classroom and go straight to the heart of the matter, which is knowing what to do on any given day to create the best climate." I then played Stevie Wonder, "Love's in need of love today; don't delay, send yours in right away." A little too on the nose, but I needed the gentle prose of rhythm and blues as a safe bulwark in the midst of my uncertain plea. If this is too much for you or if you feel like you can't consent to this type of experimentation, I will not be offended if you decide to look for another section.

As Sylvester left class that day, our eyes quickly locked. I thought I saw fear and resignation. I muttered to myself, This can't be happening again. Had I missed the mark. Was I too eager? Had the departure from the traditional surveillance, control, and decided indifference of the mainstream classroom been too much for



this class and Sylvester? Did they not believe me? Did he not trust me? Was it too vague or too invasive? I thought about calling them back to their seats to better contextualize this assignment, or even jettisoning it in that very moment. As I was gathering my papers and considering the implications of this classroom session for my career and my reputation, Sylvester stopped at the door of the classroom. I went to meet him as he quietly waited, and I thought that I would sweeten the deal or soften the blow by either lowering the expectations of this love language or offering him some insider knowledge. I didn't know what to expect. I couldn't read his body language, and my anxiety and uncertainty made me uneasy. Uncharacteristic of me and my usual teaching persona, I did not try to fill the silence. He had unassuming confidence that matched his all-black outfit, his neatly tied shoes, and the pad and pencil that seemed to be a throwback from an earlier time.

He simply said, I like this. No flourish, no elaboration. He shook my hand and disappeared into the sea of students seemingly within reach but clearly unaware of a burgeoning love and a hope that I couldn't explain.

I started the next class by reading a love letter—one that I had written. I told them that this was what love looked and sounded like for me as an eighteen-year-old freshman at an elite private university in the Northeast. They could hear my longing for home and my unpolished pleas for empathy and attention from my high school love. A few of

the students stared at me uncomfortably; others looked away. Sylvester was quietly taking notes in his pad. I told them that we would encounter the interior lives of Black folks and Black religious communities this semester. We would use their letters, their frailties and fragilities, and the sounds of their voices to understand their histories, their significance, and ultimately their methods of resistance, resilience, and rest. I quoted Saidiya Hartman, James Baldwin, Tupac, and Sade. This is no ordinary love. A couple of the students recognize the song lyrics; most do not. I then ask them if and how they are willing to share of their lives and would they be willing to hold the stories of their classmates and their teacher as we journey this semester. I suggest that this type of radical presence is the only way to be fully free.

As I look into two young brothers' eyes, one who was clearly falling asleep and the other who was trying to locate an exit, I stop reading the syllabus and stop trying to make the theoretical argument for radical love and intimacy in the university classroom. I don't talk about the ways in which we will attend to Black joy as well as Black melancholia. I stop emphasizing the ways we will encounter the lives of every day working-class Black men and women to go along with

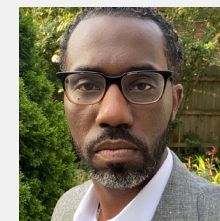
the stories of the exalted and celebrated heroes and sheroes of Africana history. I don't even describe the ways in which I will use the options of ethnography and autoethnography as methods to recover their and their families' stories. I stop for a moment, and I take a deep breath. I am scared, and I hate how I am feeling right now. My palms are sweating, but I need you and you need me. We can run from this and return to a classroom and practices that feel safe, but I want better for you and for me. I love you before you turn in your first paper, pass or fail your first quiz, and whether or not you share any details about your life. I love you, I love this work, and I love the possibilities this space and this time afford us to leave differently than how we entered. One of the young brothers along with four other students don't return the next class session. There was no email or excuse. Just an empty seat and a named removed from the roster.

Morrison in *Beloved* powerfully articulates the tension that arises as a result of a pedagogy organized around a thick and abiding love. "Love is or it ain't. Thin love ain't love at all."

The last week of class, Sylvester and I are feverishly emailing and texting as he completes his final assignments. We laugh when he walks into our penultimate class twenty-five minutes late. He alerts the entire group that he overslept,

and he brushes the hand of his newly minted romantic partner, who has been his friend and conversation partner the entire semester, as he slides into a seat right beside her. There is an ease to our relationship that mirrors my relationship with others in the class. He interrupts me as I begin my comments for the next segment of class, and one of his classmates/co-conspirators in the learning space reminds him that he might know the answer if he had arrived on time. I urge her to update him when we take our mid-class break. Show your brother some love, sis. As we end the class that day, I remind them that our love story does not have to end here. I provide them with possible trajectories for our continued intimacy. We talk about the family reunion model where our love is organized around ritualized gatherings that happen periodically. The level and nature of intimacy may decrease, but we will see each other at some point soon and we will feel free to call on each other when in need. I talk about the referral model of love that includes providing my loved-ones referrals to networks, providers, teachers, and companions that can love and support them in ways that I can't or couldn't. As I watch Sylvester talk, I refer to the last model. This is the trajectory where our relationship is shaped by resonance and reciprocity. This is the model where our relationship deepens with suggestions, recommendations, and late-night conversations. This is the future where I listen as he describes his relational and professional failures as well as dreams of new possibilities. This is when he, as a PhD-candidate completing his dissertation, hears and feels the fullness of my grievances and fatigue. This is a thick love that is not constrained by classrooms or college-wide objectives or the constraints of tenure and promotion. This is a love that sees Sylvester.

This was not my last or only love.



About the Author

Joseph L. Tucker Edmonds is Associate Professor of Religious Studies and Africana Studies at the Indiana University School of Liberal Arts at IUPUI (Indianapolis). His research interests include alternative Christianities in the Black diaspora, Black embodiment, and the role of sacred texts in Black religious traditions. Tucker Edmonds' research is shaped by his critical and reflective pedagogical practice and his commitment to producing community-engaged scholarship with students and community members. His first book, *The Other Black Church: Alternative Christian Movements and the Struggle for Black Freedom* was released in 2020, and it

explores the role of the Black body in twentieth century Christian movements. He currently serves as the associate director of the Center for the Study of Religion and American Culture and as an editor of *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation*.

Notes & Bibliography

¹ Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study* (New York, NY: Minor Compositions, 2013), 42.

² Lewis R. Gordon, *Disciplinary Decadence: Living Thought in Trying Times*, The Radical Imagination Series (Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2006).

³ Sturm, Susan, Tim Eatman, John Saltmarsh, and Adam Bush, "Full Participation: Building the Architecture for Diversity and Community Engagement in Higher Education," *SURFACE: Syracuse University*, September 2011, <https://surface.syr.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1001&context=ia>

⁴ Sara Weissman, "A 'Loud and Clear' Call to Invest in Black Men," *Inside Higher Ed*, September 27, 2021, <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2021/09/27/college-leaders-look-boost-enrollment-black-men>.

⁵ W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folks*, Fifth Edition (Chicago, IL: A.C. McClurg & Co., 1904), 213

⁶ I think that Black joy is important, and there has been important work on the recovery of Black joy, the role of fugitive imaginations, and play. See Lindsey Stewart, *The Politics of Black Joy: Zora Neale Hurston and Neo-Abolitionism* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2021); Jarvis R. Givens, *Fugitive Pedagogy: Carter G. Woodson and the Art of Black Teaching* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2021).