

The Vision (what I wanted to happen):¹

I love teaching.

Beginning. Middle. End.

Not only do I love teaching, I love the idea of learning how to teach and applying new pedagogies in any course I develop and deliver. I also love learning from students, colleagues, and whomever else, so I can become a better teacher.

It's a risk but one I'm willing to take to improve and contribute to the classroom and university experience(s) of university students.

So, I was reading [Charles M. Blow's The Devil You Know: A Black Power Manifesto](#) and had an idea.

Well it wasn't an idea for a course, but I decided to revamp/reconfigure/redesign an existing course ('The Black Atlantic'), because I said, why not?²

I'm always trying to find ways to improve my pedagogy and root it in *praxis*. I always want to find ways to position history, and my history courses, to contemporary society and Black Futures (a new area for me that I'm very much interested in).

I'm also trying to find ways to address (not fix - I know the solution, but it ain't all that palatable to the masses) racism. And I believe that we can use the classroom to explore

¹ This first section, "The Vision," was the 'syllabus' I posted online to prospective students. Diverging from typical conventions as I posted this on an open-access blog. The hyperlinks allowed students, and the public, to access further information to particular unfamiliar topics. The second section, "The Reality," is the outcomes and analysis of the course. The methodological structuring of this foreword is deliberate as I challenge the reader to follow the journey of what students experienced in engaging with this course for the first time: organized chaos. My teaching philosophy is centred around the ability to 'connect the dots of the splatter on the wall.' I take a post-structuralist approach to challenge my students to not be constrained by the idea that scholarship (and life) can fit neatly in 'paint-by-numbers' 12-week syllabus.

² The course description of the 'The Black Atlantic': "Using a number of approaches, including Black Feminist Theory and Critical Race Theory, students will explore the diverging and converging histories of Black people(s) in the 'Atlantic' and examine the diachronic realities of the Black Self in the twenty-first century." The key course objectives are as follows: "To develop an interconnected historical understanding of Black people in the Atlantic World; to 're-think' and 're-write' the place of Black people in historical and present-day society; to understand the role race, gender, class, and migration played in the history of Black people; and, to engage in and develop knowledge of Black-centric historical narratives of heterogeneous Black communities, ethnicities, nations, and nation-states."

these ideas and it isn't just for 'consultants,' 'public intellectuals,' and keeping it real, social media, to lead the charge in the 2020s and beyond.

Background:

I did a lot of research during my PhD on historical Black settlements across Canada, and mainly in Southwestern Ontario and the East Coast. Lucan, Shrewsbury, Buxton, Dawn Settlement, Africville, North Preston, those spots.

I also did/do work on 'Back to Africa' movements/settlements from Canada and the US (not just Garvey, but the 19th Century debates between whites and Blacks in Canada and the US), Maroon Communities in the West Indies, and generally have a personal interest in what's happening in places like Ghana with their [Right of Return](#).

Problem:

Anti-Black Racism in Canada. Not interpersonal, but systemic.
That's the problem.

Solution:

This course. Duh.

The idea for this course is for us to explore an 'alternate B[!]ack Future.' The idea is to look back to go forward (what we can loosely define as the Akan word '[Sankofa](#)').

We ain't going to talk about defunding the police, or Black Studies programs & curricula, or bias training, or anti-racism training, or hiring more Black doctors/judges/profs/teachers, or any of the 'solutions' we throw around to 'fix' anti-Black racism. Those all of have merit (maybe not the bias training, but this isn't the course for that).

Feeding off of Blow's book and the few hundred years of 'Black Settlement' histories, we are going to imagine a realistic "B[!]ack Future" settlement, right here in Canada.

Where you ask?

Nova Scotia.

Why?

There are approximately 1.2 million Black folx (as of 2016 census) in Canada. There are approximately 970,000 folks that live in Nova Scotia (as of 2016 census).

Coles notes solution?

The massive issues that Black folx face (particularly in Ontario) as they relate to anti-Black racism, fall under provincial jurisdiction: health care, policing (municipal and provincial), judicial, child welfare, and education.

The idea is that if every single Black person in Canada moved to Nova Scotia (there are approx 21k Black folk already living in NS), we would be the majority.

Nova Scotia also has a rich Black history and a lot of the [Afro-centric infrastructure](#) that doesn't exist in other provinces.

Meaning?

We would be in the majority of who we vote for and who runs the show. Yes, representation isn't the solution to oppression; however, it's a shift of who has the power to be our neo-colonial overseers.

And those overseers would look like us.

We'd have political power.

And we wouldn't have to leave Canada. We would still pay taxes. As Canadians. In Canada. And contribute to the Canadian narrative. Just in a 'Black provinces' - which for the record, wouldn't be closed to non-Black folks, and also one that we would have to respect the [Two Row Wampum](#).

The Course:

Clearly this isn't a fully flushed out idea, and that's the point of the course: To flush out this idea (*manifesto?*).

This is a senior-level course (it *is* a 4th year History course) for folks/folx that are serious about independent and collective learning, followed by public sharing of their work.

Students would be tasked with taking on an individual topic (chapter) to create a collective idea (book) to 'imagine' this Black Settlement in Canada. The topics would be historical, contemporary, and futurist issues that we would need to address in order for us to make this B[|]ack Settlement happen.

The only hard course reading would be Blow's book. Otherwise, students are on their own to make the magic happen. Yes, we would still be meeting weekly to flush this all out, but we're learning for a purpose. As change agents.

Proposed Topics (chapters):

- Histories of B[|]ack Settlements across the Globe - focus on North America, the West Indies, and West Africa. With a focus on lessons learned;
- Historical Black settlements across Canada, with a focus on Nova Scotia (i.e. Africville);
- A history and contemporary realities of Settler Colonialism and Indigenous peoples in Nova Scotia;
- Histories and contemporary realities of Afro-Nova Scotians;
- Histories and contemporary realities of political/constitutional structures in NS;
- Histories and contemporary realities of education, justice, child welfare, employment, and real estate for Black folx in NS; and,
- Climate and ecological impacts and forecasts.

Pretty much this course is about exploring what is possible, as opposed to harping on what is (im)possible. We are taking a Sankofa approach to this work.

Let's try something different.

And worst case scenario? We write a book.

Or move to PEI.

The Reality (what actually happened):

One thing this course taught me (and what life continues to teach me), is humility.

I thought I had this brilliant idea for a course (and Black Future) that all these (Black) students would gravitate towards and we would start a revolution. Well, maybe not a revolution, but at least provide a concrete solution using academic spaces, resources, structures, and time.

I had an idea, not a fully flushed out one, but a general idea of how I wanted to guide students through social constructivist pedagogies and epistemologies. I thought it was sound, practical, and novel.

First off, I didn't have many Black students. To be completely honest, by the end of the course, I had one (and she was/is an exceptional human being). A Black prof, creates a Black course, for Black students, for Black liberation, and falls flat.

Fail.

Welcome to working and teaching in a PWI (Predominantly White Institution).

Secondly, I wanted students to follow my (seemingly) 'brilliant' idea of a 'made-at-home Back-to-Africa' movement.

It took about 30 minutes into our first lecture (conversation) for my students to call me out on how this idea wasn't going to work. (I am going to refer to them as comrades since this project ultimately ended up being a holacracy).

Fail.

This idea didn't last a full week.

Humility.

But I licked my wounds, regrouped, put my pride and PhD aside, and this became one of the best courses I have ever created. One that I will probably never try to recreate with another group.

Here is how the course went down:

Purpose:

The shift in focus, and I would argue that this should be the paradigm shift for educators who attempt to 'decolonize' (I am not a fan of this concept in its coopted pacification) or embed anti-racist pedagogies for a non-white (I use this term deliberately in my work) student body, is the ability to de-centre one's power and privilege as the course instructor or professor.

You no longer own the course.

The course is not yours.

The content is not yours.

You are not in charge.

The students are.

They take the course, and its content, in whatever direction they feel is best. For them. As a collective. You as the professor, must have the ability to pivot your focus, view, and syllabus. You must also have a wide range of scholarly background in a number of different fields and topics – with the ability of connecting the dots to seemingly disparate historical and contemporary topics.

You need to teach and be a student at the same time. All the things I genuinely enjoy about academia.

Logistically, this is a tough road to travel, particularly in a space where marks and grades matter.

I learned as much as I taught, and one of the key aspects for me was to find new pedagogical frameworks from with-in and with-out the academe. We speak about interdisciplinary work in PWIs, but it is relegated to the same restrictive frameworks of structured 'Ivory Tower' epistemologies. Apologies as I am a non-Indigenous person coopting Indigenous ways of knowing, however, I believe that interdisciplinary work should be centred around the scholar and scholarship being 'in relation' to the world around them. Learning and adopting practices from anything and everything (even social media, within reason).

This is where I have to give a lot of thanks and praise to the folx at [TRAD](#) for introducing me to their concept of Creole Education:

“Creole education seeks to combine indigenous knowledge, and community memories with contemporary knowledge to create possibilities greater than the sum of their parts. It seeks to build on indigeneity to build the confidence of learners and provide them the tools to be full agents in their humanity. It is an education for curiosity, confidence, and freedom. It is built on three principles - **healing, creativity, and power.**”

Healing:

“We create experiences that enable learners to take stock of our ancestral and present wounds and begin to heal and through fostering a nurturing community.”

Creativity:

“We teach you how to create how to conceive of an idea and make it manifest in the world.”

Indigeneity:

“We explore the many ways humans have been and can be on earth, and those systems and ideas connected to our ancestry. We learn principles of many mindednesses, seek out relationships between ideas, and learn how foreign ideas become localized.”

Power:

“We engender self-efficacy in learners and cultivate the places where we experience power. We are learner-driven, start with diversity in mind, and create a format for you to explore your interests, and build your power.”

This course embodied the ideals of education for “curiosity, confidence, and freedom.” Moving forward, I suggest those attempting to adopt ‘anti-racist’ or ‘anti-oppressive’ frameworks to bring the work of those outside of the academe into this space.

Week to Week ‘lectures’:

Each week we had conversations. I’ve always believed in social constructivist principles in my classrooms, and I’m firm with this idea, even in a lecture-based course.

Students had one required reading (and a plethora of recommended ones) and I stuck with the fact that I wanted them to have an ideological and theoretical grounding in Blow’s book. Yes, I am well aware of the limitations of his work, but as an accessible

lever to this work, particularly for non-History majors, and those that have never been exposed to Black revolutionary studies? This book hits the mark.

The first three full weeks, we talked about his book and this was followed by a 'Vulcan Mind Meld.'³ This is the part of University I've always enjoyed: the ability to share knowledge, ideas, and perspectives. What I argue the humanities, liberal arts, and social sciences *should* be all about.

We had eight students in the class and our discussions were on Microsoft Teams. I'm always open to having guests sit in on my classes, and this one wasn't any different. All parties were invited to 'watch-in' to listen and engage in the discussion.

Subsequent weeks followed with students presenting their draft articles, peer review sessions and feedback, and finally presenting their final works.

Overview of Each Paper:

Of the eight students in the course, we are publishing six articles. It was not a requirement for their course mark that they had to do the extra work going through the publication process. I wanted to use this article submission process as a way for undergraduate students to learn how to navigate and survive the nefarious machinations of academic publishing.

I did not tell students what topics to research; however, I did guide and support each student on their individual topics. Through our weekly course conversations and peer review sessions, student topics and ideas flowed organically from one to the other. The cross pollination of ideas was a strength of this course, and having the ability for students to build their works together benefitted the quality of their analysis and depth of their knowledge. Nova Scotia remained our Black futurist axis/access point.

Kirsten Mosey's "Black Liberation and Indigenous Sovereignty: An Analysis of Property Rights in Nova Scotia" proposes that all Black Canadians move to Nova Scotia to create a decolonial, anti-racist, non-patriarchal, abolitionist settlement. Recognizing the denial of the right to collective self-determination for Black Canadians, Mosey's work explores how Black Canadians can work in solidarity with Indigenous solidarity movements to correct the injustices of settler-colonialism.

³ For those non-Trekkies, this is an opportunity for us to share our ideas in a non-hierarchical space.

Sophia L. Amstutz's "(Re-)Envisioning A Black Nova Scotia" discusses the historical impact of Black women in Nova Scotia, along with the beginnings of envisioning what a Black future would be like within the province of Nova Scotia, Canada.

Lauren Pazzano's "Abolish to Transform: Exploring Potential Futures in a Black Nova Scotia" states that the prison is "human-made" and can be "human-destroyed." This article is a deconstruction of sorts. Pazzano argues that we as a society need to eradicate the prisons and the precincts so something else can be built in its place. The author argues that we need to "burn down" the oppressive logics that capture our imaginations and put radical compassion, love, joy, and empathy in its place.

Julia deKwant's "Past, Present, and Future Potentialities of the Nova Scotian Education System" builds its foundation on the substantial history of Nova Scotia's statewide denial of full citizenship for its Black inhabitants. Whether through informal or formal mechanisms, contemporary Black students continue to face the ramifications of such history, experiencing high rates of suspension, low academic scoring, and disproportionate enrollment into non-university preparatory courses.

Cindy A. Doan's "The Problem of the Colonized: Lessons from Sierra Leone and Africville" engages with the complexities of power and decolonization. Doan situates Africville's destruction as part of a grander pattern of colonialism in which negative spaces were created for Black people in order to justify systemic change. This change was motivated by white self-interest, ostensibly presented as acts of salvation.

Idah M. Nambeya's "Women and Colonialism in Zambia" focuses on the status of women in Zambia during pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial periods. It highlights how colonialism perpetuated gender imbalances in Zambia and it examines the resilience of women's leadership in different developmental contexts.

Lessons Learned

I can admit that I learned a lot about my own intellectual and pedagogical frameworks. On the surface, a course like this may seem best suited for in-person teaching (and to be fair, there is no real substitute for face-to-face learning); however, I found it to be a break for students from the typical monotony of synchronous and asynchronous learning during the pandemic. Students had the freedom to be and exist at a pace that suited their own individual learning styles and life.

That being said, some students preferred more structure to the week-to-week engagements and course/learning outcomes. I can understand this as many students spent the past 4 or 5 years in ‘traditional’ learning and university environments. I decided to flip the script and it takes some time getting used to. And it may not be for everyone.

From the outset, you must make it clear to students that this course has an exceptionally high workload. I personally may not see a 25-30 page paper as particularly arduous, but a paper of this length was new to the majority of students.⁴ Moreover, students were expected to do substantial reading to support their research and articles. I was not ‘on’ students to submit their work, but I treated this course as graduate-level seminar where expectations were high. Autonomy was expected and initiative was critical. For some, it may have been seen as too high; however, for the students that remained in the course, the quality of their work is exceptional.⁵ My aim was to give students the space to succeed, with a significant safety net, where I was there to guide them along the way. Similar to how a supervisor guides their PhD student. And analogous to that relationship, the course required independent, curious, and driven students. Students needed to take ownership of their learning and education.

Hence why I decided I was not going to ‘mark’ their work. I consciously decided to break from Eurocentric course evaluations and assessments. It would be disingenuous of me to ask students to challenge Eurocentric epistemologies, meanwhile I reverted to assessing their work through Eurocentric assessment tools. Yes, I am cognizant of the university-industrial complex, by which students are consumers, paying for a product (marks/degree). And yes, students did receive final marks for their transcripts. However, for at least this course, they did not have to focus on ‘what the professor wants so I can get X grade.’ I wanted to give them the freedom to contribute to a nascent but growing body of scholarship. And more importantly, to build their own competencies in this field.

I don’t think I’ll ever teach this course again. At least I would never use this topic again. The *communitas* build in this moment cannot be replicated, nor do I ever want to use this course – and students – as a comparative benchmark for future iterations. It was great in its destabilized chaos. A fleeting moment in time to be experienced once. And never again. Mind you, I think it would be beneficial to use this course and its creole education that undergirds the pedagogical frameworks in avenues and spaces across the academe.

⁴ Part of this comment is the reflexivity of professors and TAs remembering that a 25 page paper is daunting for undergrads.

⁵ Some students dropped the course, while another was unable to complete the final assignment.