

An Unflinching Call for Freedom: Clara Luper's Pedagogy at the Center of Sit-Ins



*By Rachel E. Watson**

On August 19, 1958, members of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) Youth Council walked into Katz Drug Store and requested to be served at the counter. Katz Drug Store had no problem serving white people at its lunch counter, but refused the group of thirteen children because they were black. After a few days of the group sitting in Katz until closing time, the store's management decided to desegregate the chain of stores throughout the region, marking a victory for the Youth Council.¹ However, it is important to approach the sit-in movement with the understanding that this was not the start of the story, nor the start of the sit-ins, despite it being one of the first downtown eateries that the group decided to visit. The story of downtown Oklahoma City's desegregation began well before the NAACP Youth Council initiated the sit-ins, with the beginnings of Clara Luper's antiracist teachings.

Clara Luper's actions and activism were largely responsible for the desegregation of public places in Oklahoma City. Her leadership of this part of the black civil rights struggle centered on a pedagogy of an unflinching call for freedom, resisting the antiblackness that functioned on interpersonal and institutional levels permeating all aspects of civil society, especially in the United States.² Her activism and the success of the Oklahoma City sit-ins as a social movement are directly linked to her classroom pedagogy, her students, and her use of the classroom as a site to grow the spaces and places that reject antiblack racism. Previous studies of Luper emphasize antiblack racism on an individual level, but fail to engage with Luper as challenging inherently racist or problematic institutions. These studies also leave out discussions of her pedagogy, its classroom engagement, and the way it shaped her engagement with individual racist people and institutions.

Luper's name frequently comes up in discussions of Oklahoma history, particularly in discussions centered on the Oklahoma Civil Rights Movement or black women in Oklahoma.³ The most extensive inquiries into Luper are from amateur historians, either candidates for graduate school degrees or hobbyists. The only existing work that situates Luper as a black woman for the purpose of a theoretical discussion is a thesis for a master's degree in education, and not in the field of history.⁴ However, even this work has a tendency to replicate earlier scholarship through retelling much of the same information about Luper found in Carl Graves's 1981 article, "The Right to be Served: Oklahoma City's Lunch Counter Sit-ins, 1958–1964."⁵ Much of the scholarship on Clara Luper barely scratches the surface of the extent of her involvement in desegregation. While some more recent scholarship is shifting toward acknowledging or emphasizing the role of black women in the Civil Rights Movement, the majority of the work on Luper and the sit-ins in Oklahoma City is repetitive. The work on Luper presented here is a shift from traditional histories of Luper's activism to a history that centers her as a black feminist leader, using decolonial and feminist tools to analyze her pedagogy and methods.⁶

Luper believed that education was an essential step in encouraging the kind of activism that she and her students used to accomplish substantial change in their community. One cannot be an activist without proper education about the issues, and Luper believed that history education beyond the textbooks often assigned to classrooms was particularly necessary. She stated:

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Clara Luper, right, August 1966 (2012.201.B0366B.0552, Oklahoma Publishing Company Photography Collection, OHS)

The textbooks must be changed. For example, the Oklahoma history books, before 1980, hardly had anything about women and women were the backbone of the state. The more you know about women, the more you know about blacks, the more you know about Indians, the better off you are. History books have been written by white men.⁷

The employment of an antiracist, inclusive history in her classroom made it easier for Luper to mobilize her students for the change she sought to make in Oklahoma regarding segregation. She taught a history that was inclusive of women and people of color, even though the textbooks on which she relied did not include those narratives. She knew, however, that many educators did not understand the reasons for inclusivity, which explains the need for a change in the textbooks.⁸ Her classroom was just as important to her activism as the sit-ins, because without her pedagogy of antiracism she would not have been able to mobilize young students against white supremacy.



Group carrying "Freedom Now" signs written by Clara Luper at a sit-in in the Capitol Hill area of Oklahoma City (20246.38.408.1, John Melton Collection, OHS)

Being in the classroom and having direct relationships with students was very important to Luper, as teaching was what she loved to do. In the summer of 1970, her position as a teacher at Northwest Classen High School was threatened by the Oklahoma City Public Schools Board of Education, which offered her a position as a research assistant rather than a teacher for the upcoming school year.⁹ Luper refused the research position, despite the pay increase that accompanied the position because, as she stated, "As a teacher, I feel that my greatest contribution comes as a result of my direct contact with the human product. . . . My first and only love has always been the student."¹⁰ Her commitment to teaching was so great that she refused a pay increase and risked not holding a position at all for the coming school year. In the classroom, Luper focused on her students and their needs rather than the curriculum, making her attentive to the problems impacting her community. Doing so is what enabled her action in Oklahoma to be so effective in accomplishing desegregation and equal access to public spaces, as the majority of white educators with whom she worked were not aware of the needs of black students.¹¹

Clara Fired? Boss Says No

Clara Luper said Thursday night that her contract to teach at Northwest High School has not been renewed for the approaching school year, but her principal said she is on his teaching roster.

Mrs. Luper said Thursday night at a city minority employment committee meeting that all other teachers' contracts had been renewed by July 1, but hers had not.

She said she had been offered a position in research, but declined the offer because she prefers to "work with people" rather than figures.

Mrs. Luper charged that her contract not being renewed was an illustration that "people who speak out get cut out."

June Dawkins, principal at Northwest, said as far as he knows Mrs. Luper is on his agenda to teach.

*Article from the Daily Oklahoman,
August 14, 1970 (newsok.com)*

Luper's position enabled her to teach about broader racism in the United States, beyond the antiblackness that Luper and most of her students personally experienced during the sit-ins. Whiteness operates to the disadvantage of all people of color, not just black people, and evidence that Luper taught about the discrimination other people faced because of white supremacy is best seen in a speech written by one of her students.¹² Barbara Posey, the president of the NAACP Youth Council in 1960, discussed the racism experienced by American Indian



Clara Luper, standing right, with members of the NAACP Youth Council, c. 1954 (2012.201.B0366B.0556, Oklahoma Publishing Company Photography Collection, OHS)

peoples in a speech at the fifty-first annual NAACP Convention: “We will go back to Africa *when* the English go back to England, the Irish back to Ireland, the French back to France and when the white man gives America back to the Indian and goes home. Until then, we, the youth of America, will carry out our plans for a democratic America [emphasis in original].”¹³ The protesters were often told to go back to Africa, and this response calls attention to the colonization of the Americas and the land stolen from the indigenous peoples. Posey, as a student of Luper, is knowledgeable about the oppression faced by others and recognizes that blackness and redness are in conversation because of the way white supremacy positions them.

The students in the NAACP Youth Council initially made the decision to battle for equal access to public spaces, but they were empowered to make that decision and act on it by the Youth Council adviser, Luper. In 1957 Luper wrote and directed a play called *Brother President* about the nonviolence doctrine of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.¹⁴ The play drew a high turnout from all across the state, filling the

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Clara Luper is pictured giving instructions to a group of NAACP Youth Council members before they went out to test the compliance of restaurants with the new federal civil rights law and new Oklahoma City public accommodations ordinance, July 1964 (2012.201. B0366B.0546, Oklahoma Publishing Company Photography Collection, OHS).

auditorium at Dunjee High School. They then presented the play at East Sixth Street Christian Church, where the national youth director of the NAACP, Herbert Wright, saw it and asked them to present *Brother President* at a New York City “Salute to Young Freedom Fighters Rally.”¹⁵ Luper planned the trip to maximize its educational value.¹⁶ The students traveled to New York City via a mostly northern route, through areas that did not have segregation laws and students had free access to public spaces. They returned via a route through Southern states, where the students were forced away from lunch counters and made to eat brown paper bag lunches instead.¹⁷ Youth Council members were aware for the first time that there were other ways of living and that the situation they faced in their hometown could be different. It was after returning from the trip that the council met and decided to desegregate downtown Oklahoma City.¹⁸ Luper’s work in writing and producing the play was the first step along the path to an integrated Oklahoma City, though at the time of its writing she had no way of knowing that *Brother President* would introduce



State Theatre, 20 North Robinson, and Katz Drug Store, 200 West Main in Oklahoma City, printed by Baxtone in Amarillo, Texas (19687.TO.0030.55.9.96, Chester R. Cowen Collection, OHS)

her students to integration. She set the stage that let those in the council identify a problem and take action to fix it, and her students were essential to her work to eliminate antiblack segregation codes.

At that time, Clara Luper held a position as a history teacher at Dunjee High School, which enabled her to teach her students about injustices in the world and how to correct them. One of the primary injustices faced by students in the Oklahoma City area was segregation. Luper wrote that her position as a teacher was essential to her ability to recruit young people for the NAACP Youth Council.¹⁹ The youthfulness of the protesters in Oklahoma City is also part of what the NAACP believed made the demonstrations peaceful, as white opposition may have been more likely to become violent with adult sit-in participants.²⁰ The participants in the initial sit-ins did face backlash from white patrons and waitstaff, but the students remained committed to their nonviolent approach because of Luper's careful teachings.²¹ The sit-ins would not have been successful without Luper's influence on students.

Luper's pedagogy is distinguished in antiracism, as shown through her continued rejection of systemic antiblackness. In 1958 the explicitly stated goal for the Oklahoma City NAACP Youth Council under

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A sit-in at John A. Brown Department Store in Oklahoma City, August 27, 1958 (20246.38.409.1, John Melton Collection, OHS)

adviser Clara Luper and President Gwendolyn Fuller was freedom in the form of the elimination of segregation in public accommodations.²² The first tactic for reaching this goal was through calling and writing letters to individual restaurants, requesting that individual business owners choose to desegregate.²³ This tactic had the potential to work because Oklahoma City's segregation was not a municipal law, but a policy enforced by the owners, supposedly because they would lose white business if they opened their restaurants to people of color.²⁴ They began with this because Luper's doctrine of nonviolence was rooted in recognizing white humanity—that is, people with white skin are humans and can be called to combat white supremacy.²⁵ Luper refused systemic racism and encouraged others to refuse to participate in anti-blackness by changing their policies. Doing so in this way offered owners an opportunity to change segregation policies before facing other, more direct means of challenge.

The movement's goal was not to shame people into changing anti-black policies, but rather to fight against the explicitly harmful segregation codes. Barbara Posey, the secretary of the NAACP Youth



Barbara Posey and Dwayne Crosby during a sit-in at John A. Brown in Oklahoma City. Photograph by John Melton (20246.38.410.3, John Melton Collection, OHS)

Council in 1958, told the store manager of Katz Drug Store, the first store to be targeted for sit-ins, “We don’t intend to cause you or your store any embarrassment. We only want to be served.”²⁶ Posey used first person to articulate the demand for equal service, emphasizing the protest and the desire for change. She illustrates the unflinching, antiracist demand, pointing out that the intention was not to negatively impact store owners. Posey redirects the conversation from the focus on white business owners to the larger concern of systemic antiblackness in downtown Oklahoma City. This redirection is difficult in the case of Oklahoma City because segregation was a code that had been implicitly agreed on by the white store owners.²⁷

Sit-in participants frequently had to remind their opposition that the protests were for the end of white supremacy, a call frequently articulated as a call for freedom. Luper relates the following story of some of the harassment protesters faced:

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John A. Brown at 209–221 West Main Street in downtown Oklahoma City (21412. BH2209, Z. P. Meyers/Barney Hillerman Photographic Collection, OHS)

“Don’t you wish you were white so you could eat at John A. Brown’s [a lunch counter in a department store]?” the white Central High School students said. “No,” Lynzetta Jones said, “I don’t want to be white, I just want to be free.”²⁸

There are several parts of the interaction here to analyze. First is the white students’ assumption that the desire for equal access to public spaces is the same as the desire to have white skin. The demand for civil society to not discriminate against persons based on skin color is not the same as wanting to be a part of the oppressive and privileged groups in civil society. The implication on the part of the white students is that Oklahoma City’s racial tensions are because of the existence of black people and people of color, not because of the discrimination against them. The second part of this is the demand that black humanity become a part of white civil society. Lynzetta Jones does not want to lose part of herself, her blackness, in order to achieve total freedom, but rather is calling for an end to antiblack racism. Jones’s response reiterates that blackness and black people are not the problem. The problem is the systemic antiblackness that whiteness perpetuates.



People in the shoe department during a sit-in at John A. Brown (20246.38.283.1, John Melton Collection, OHS)

An integral part of Clara Luper's pedagogy was viewing whiteness and blackness as traits of an individual, independent of skin color. This is because asking white people who benefited from systemic anti-blackness to join the struggle against white supremacy was one of her central tactics in dismantling segregation. Luper described a fellow protester, Earl Temple, as a man who was black by choice, because "blacks come in all colors."²⁹ Luper's argument was not that his skin had physically gained more melanin, but that he had access to white spaces and instead chose to disavow that access in favor of protesting with those who were refused service. Individual actions also had far-reaching impacts in the black freedom struggle, and desegregation in Oklahoma City would not have been accomplished if not for the belief that individuals can make substantial, enduring changes. One prime example of this is the first black person to eat at the Anna Maude Cafeteria, one of the restaurants that took the longest to change its segregation policies. The first black person to eat there was a baby who was

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Mrs. John A. Brown, a member of the Sorosis Club of Oklahoma City, c. 1947, photograph by Ramon Griffin of Oklahoma City (23258.AL.1.L29.O.R., Sorosis Club of Oklahoma City Collection, OHS)



smuggled into the restaurant by a white woman, an action that elicited strong reactions from the white community.³⁰ White individuals breaking away from white civil society to protest white supremacy were a major component of the change-making mechanism for the removal of explicit antiblack codes from various restaurants in Oklahoma City.

Clara Luper called in, rather than called out, individuals who enforced antiblack policies, as a more effective method of achieving freedom.³¹ As stated previously, Oklahoma City had no municipal laws enforcing segregation, meaning that changing the minds of individual owners would change the segregation policy. John A. Brown's, a department store with a lunch counter inside, was one of the most contentious loci of protests from August 1958 to late 1959, with the owner being one of the most resistant to integration.³² Mrs. John A. Brown, the owner, identified in sources only by her husband's name, finally agreed to integrate as a result of a one-on-one conversation with Clara Luper in which Mrs. John A. Brown began to embrace black humanity.³³ White people in positions of power who decided to resist white supremacy were essential to the integration efforts.

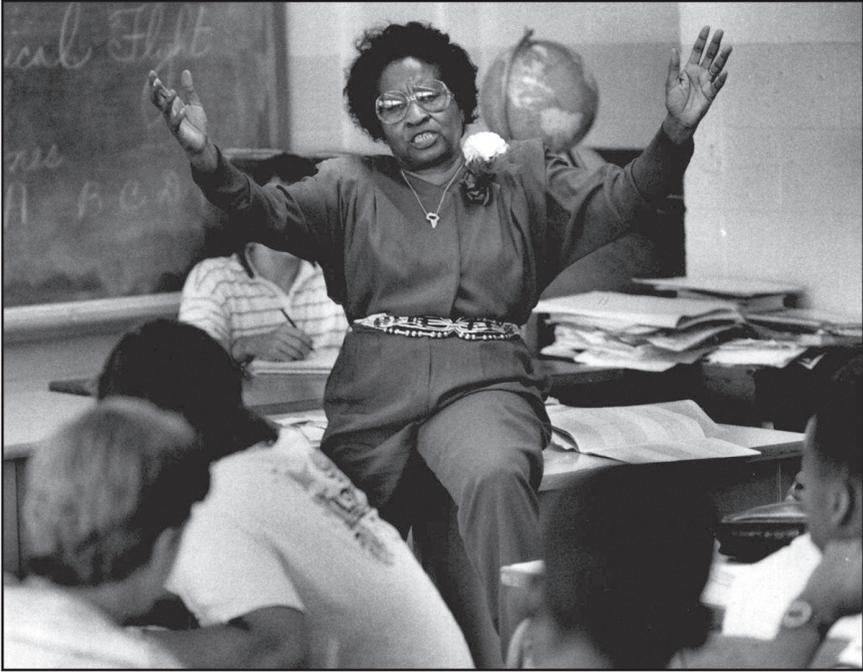
Despite the protests in Oklahoma City not resulting in mass arrests, the police still played an important role in the results of the sit-ins.



Earl Temple, pictured facing the camera in white shirt, tie, and hat, at the Anna Maude Cafeteria in Oklahoma City during a civil rights protest (20246.38.281.1, John Melton Collection, OHS)

The police department's action, or lack thereof, for the demand for free access to public spaces was an important part of the continued enforcement of white supremacy. In some cases, the Oklahoma City police could not separate a journalist from the protesters, which resulted in the arrest of Abram Ross, a black journalist reporting on the events.³⁴ Police action was also important in the case of Tulsa, where many protesters were arrested for violation of trespassing laws rather than laws relating to black access to public spaces when the Civil Rights Movement hit full steam there in 1964.³⁵ During the Tulsa protests, Luper was one of thirty-three people arrested for trespassing, despite using the same tactics as in Oklahoma City.³⁶ However, the number and frequency of arrests did not correlate with speed of desegregation, and the municipal government in Tulsa outlawed segregation after just months of demonstrations on the part of organizations.³⁷ This may be, in part, related to the fact that the movement in Tulsa began much later than in Oklahoma City, and the national climate was much dif-

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Clara Luper giving her class one final lesson on life during her last day of teaching, May 1989 (2012.201.B0366B.0557, Oklahoma Publishing Company Photography Collection, OHS).

ferent in 1964, when protests began in Tulsa, than in 1958 when protests began in Oklahoma City.

For Luper as well as her students, the black freedom movement was (and still is) about an end to white supremacy. Luper imparted her antiracism to her students through her teaching that white supremacy ought to be resisted. Luper's student Gwendolyn Fuller stated:

I do not believe the managers of John A. Brown's and other restaurant owners will continue to hold on to a long lost dream of white supremacy. Rather I believe and pray that they will join with the organization and people who are working to make democracy and Christianity work in Oklahoma City.³⁸

Fuller's words echoed much of Luper's rhetoric; in many places in her book, Luper discusses the people opposed to the sit-ins as victims of a system of white supremacy.³⁹ Luper stood firmly against white supremacy and resisted it wherever possible, and her students, like

Fuller, adopted that message and imitated Luper's resistance. This can also be seen in the NAACP Youth Council platform during Fuller's presidency; she and Barbara Posey articulated the Youth Council's goal as freedom through eliminating segregation in public accommodations.⁴⁰

Clara Luper's pedagogy and classroom were key influences in her ability to mobilize students for the desegregation of downtown Oklahoma City. She taught antiracism as a means to push back against antiblackness and white supremacy in interactions between individuals and on the broader scale of institutional policies. She taught her students that becoming a part of the antiracist movement was a way they could effect systemic, lasting change for the benefit of their community. Earlier scholars of Luper's work deemphasized her pedagogy and classroom practices in favor of stressing the sequence of events, prioritizing a historical chain of events instead of what she taught and believed. Her challenges to systemic white supremacy in the classroom encouraged her students to fight against white supremacy in public places in Oklahoma.

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Endnotes

* Rachel E. Watson completed a bachelor of arts in history at the University of Central Oklahoma in 2018, and will complete a master of science in education at the University of Pennsylvania in 2019.

¹ Joel Edward Baehler, "Organizing the 'Living Dead': Civil Rights in Oklahoma City and Tulsa, Oklahoma, 1954–1964," (master's thesis, Oklahoma State University, 2012), 57.

² In this paper, whiteness and blackness are understood as ontological foundations of civil society, particularly in the United States. Antiblackness specifically operates on different levels, between individuals and organizations that favor whiteness over blackness. Whiteness and antiblackness also have gendered implications, meaning gender is a necessary tool for deconstructing these ontologies. This is drawn from theorists such as Frank Wilderson III, Tiffany King, Alexander Weheliye, and Sylvia Wynter, who draw on the works of Frantz Fanon, a theorist who Luper may have read.

³ The term Civil Rights Movement with capitalization will refer to the period of the black freedom struggle from 1954–68, but the author wants to recognize that the black freedom struggle has a longer history than this period and is still continuing.

⁴ Karen M. Scott Clark, "The Contributions of African-American Women to Education in Oklahoma" (PhD diss., Oklahoma State University, 1996).

⁵ Carl R. Graves, "The Right to Be Served: Oklahoma City's Lunch Counter Sit-ins, 1958–1964," *The Chronicles of Oklahoma* 59, no. 2 (Summer 1981): 153–54.

⁶ Decolonial here is largely understood in reference to Fanon's work studying in Algeria, but is applicable to the United States because of the nation's roots in settler colonialism. Decolonization is resistance to the hegemony of whiteness, working towards indigenous land rights.

⁷ Clara Luper, interview by Rose Aguilar, August 1, 2005, Clara Luper Collection, Oklahoma Historical Society Research Center, Oklahoma City, OK (hereafter cited as Luper Collection).

⁸ Clara Luper, interview by Karen M. Scott Clark, March 31, 1994, partial transcript in Clark, "The Contributions of African-American Women to Education in Oklahoma," 108.

⁹ "Clara Fired? Boss Says No," *Daily Oklahoman* (Oklahoma City, OK), August 14, 1970, 1.

¹⁰ Clara Luper to Robert Cheney, August 18, 1970, Luper Collection.

¹¹ Luper interview by Clark, 108.

¹² Critical race theorist Frank Wilderson III identifies blackness, whiteness, and redness as the three structures that are the foundation for United States civil society. It is necessary to discuss the three in conversation because of the historical foundation of the United States. Tiffany King gives a better explanation of how all three work together, explaining that the settler/master clears Native flesh and enslaves black flesh.

¹³ Barbara Posey, untitled speech (speech, 51st Annual NAACP Convention, Minneapolis, MN, June 24, 1960), published in *Women in the Civil Rights Movement, 1954–1965*, eds. Davis W. Houck and David E. Dixon (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2009), 122.

¹⁴ Clara Luper, *Behold the Walls* (Oklahoma City, OK: Jim Wire, 1979), 1–2.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 2.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 1–2.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 1.

²⁰ "City's Negroes Ponder Future of 'Sitdowns,'" *Daily Oklahoman*, August 31, 1958, 8.

²¹ Barbara Posey and Gwendolyn Fuller, "Protest Drug Counter Discrimination," *The Crisis* 65, no. 10 (December 1958): 613.

²² Luper, *Behold the Walls*, 2–3.

²³ Graves, "The Right to Be Served," 153–54.

²⁴ Posey and Fuller, "Protest Drug Counter Discrimination," 612.

²⁵ Luper, *Behold the Walls*, 7.

²⁶ Posey and Fuller, "Protest Drug Counter Discrimination," 613.

²⁷ Graves, "The Right to Be Served," 154.

²⁸ Luper, *Behold the Walls*, 25.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 77.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 66–67.

³¹ "Calling out" refers to the practice of pointing out problematic behavior in another person, usually publicly, to get them to stop that behavior. Conversely, "calling in" is usually done privately to educate a person on their errors and change their behavior after self-reflection.

³² "NAACP Sets New Moves," *Daily Oklahoman*, September 21, 1959, 13.

³³ Luper, *Behold the Walls*, 51–53.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 155.

³⁵ "33 Arrested in Tulsa in Sit-In Disturbance," *Daily Oklahoman*, March 31, 1964, 1.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ Baehler, "Organizing the 'Living Dead,'" 102–03.

³⁸ "NAACP Youth Council Questions and Answers," *Black Dispatch* (Oklahoma City, OK), October 10, 1958.

³⁹ Luper, *Behold the Walls*, 146.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 2–3.