One of the many strands that has gone into giving power to white normativity is the construction of what sociologist, Dr. Elijah Anderson calls, “white space.” This concept of white space and black space conceived in the white imagination, permeates American culture in systematized ways with the turn of each century. Laws, imbued with racial bias, were put in place by the government and enforced by police officers and white nationalist groups, such as the Ku Klux Klan. Laws that were supposedly designed to protect American citizens from hurt, harm and danger solely offered a hedge of protection around the white space, putting the being of innocent black people at risk while relegating their existence to where it belongs, in the black space. What ought to seem arbitrary and trivial in the land of the free is indeed a contemporary issue that is up for debate daily on a micro-level as black and white Americans negotiate the contours of space, being and belonging in this country. This paper seeks to construct a theo-sociopolitical framework for examining the existence of black bodies in white spaces through the lenses of black and womanist theology and sociology to prove that black bodies, indeed belong in all spaces. The negotiation of black existence in white spaces as a de-colonial, political act is a salient issue for religious educators, because the classroom is a white space in which these moves of resistance must occur.

**Introduction:**

“You can’t be black and comfortable…” stated CNN commentator Bakari Sellers as he responded to the influx of recorded encounters between police officers and people of color, more specifically black people as a result of the beckoning calls of concerned white citizens. Meeting at Starbucks, staying at an Airbnb with friends, playing golf, asking for cutlery from Waffle House, visiting a college with your brother on a college tour, and grilling with charcoal in a public park are apparently suspicious actions that warrant a call to the local police department from concerned white citizens, predominately scared white women. While the actions listed above might be understood by most as commonplace activities for many Americans, recent history proves that engagement in these past times by black people creates incidents worthy of calling the police.

Even though, I would argue that these are prime examples of white imagination running wild with perceived threats, a sense of entitled innocence and white superiority, this would only

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serve as a rather shallow critique of this visceral reaction, white people calling the police on black folks when they believe there has been a violation. In fact, calling the police is merely one example of how a larger historical phenomenon is at play through a specific systematized network. The historical phenomenon in question is white people policing black bodies and staking claim on space(s). While there are many factors that play into this phenomenon, it is clear that space, belonging and being are at the heart of this matter. This two-sided debate is simple. Many white people and institutions wrought with racial bias against people of color operate under the assumption that black people must prove their right to be in white spaces whereas people of color, particularly black people, stand firmly in their being by asserting, “I belong here.”

As previously stated, white people calling the police on black folks when they feel threatened or violated has been occurring in the American context since the “boys in blue” started patrolling the streets to protect the rights of all citizens. What police have really been patrolling and in many ways controlling is human existence in particular spaces. Even when the cops are not a fitting resource to police spaces, such as boardrooms, football fields and classrooms, black existence and humanity is still policed by white people, when they feel the boundaries of the white space have been transgressed. Since the inception of the institutionalization of slavery, there has been designated spaces for whites and non-whites on American soil.

For example, white slave owners lived in the “big house,” while enslaved Africans lived down in “the quarters.” Slave owners made it clear where black people were allowed to engage in fundamental, everyday life activities, such as sleeping, eating, working and worshipping. This concept of white space and black space conceived in the white imagination, permeated American culture in systematized ways with the turn of each century. Laws, imbued with racial bias, were put in place by the government and enforced by police officers and white gangs, such as the Ku Klux Klan. Laws that were supposedly designed to protect American citizens from hurt, harm and danger offered a hedge of protection around the white space, putting the being of innocent black people at risk while relegating their existence to where it belongs, in the black space.

What ought to seem arbitrary and trivial in the land of the free is indeed a contemporary issue that is up for debate daily on a micro-level as black and white Americans negotiate the contours of space, being and belonging in this country. This paper seeks to construct a theo-sociopolitical framework for examining the existence of black bodies in white spaces through the lenses of black and womanist theology and sociology to prove that black bodies, indeed belong in all spaces. The negotiation of black existence in white spaces as a de-colonial, political act is a salient issue for religious educators, because the classroom is a white space in which these moves of resistance must occur.

Using the unfortunate incident, which took place at Yale University in the Hall of Graduate Studies between Lolade Siyonbola, a black graduate student and Sarah Baarsh, a white graduate student as a case study to localize the negotiation of black bodies in white space within the ivory tower, I will craft a theo-sociopolitical framework through which one can see how space construction becomes a strand that gives power to white normativity. Placing the work of Dr. Emilie Townes, Dr. Kelly Brown Douglas and Dr. Elijah Anderson in conversation to show how the fantastic hegemonic imagination perceives black bodies when they transgress the boundaries of white space. The act of transgression functions as a violation of the line of whiteness in America’s exceptionalism narrative, which in turn gives white people license to stand their ground.
Therefore, the maintenance of white space gives power to white normativity. Once this framework is set, I will analyze the “napping while black” incident to draw out important points for a broader discussion on the negotiation of black existence as a de-colonial, political act across the landscape of predominately white institutions, particularly in the classroom. Based on my analysis, I will offer some points for consideration suggesting what resistance might look like for black people in white space, and how people can participate in the de-colonial project of dismantling white normativity. This is an especially important conversation for religious educators, because our methods of resistance against white normativity in white spaces can be taught to and duplicated by students, who will reach people beyond the university and seminary setting.

I. Napping While Black at Yale- A Case Study

On May 8, 2018 around 1:00 in the morning, Lolade Siyonbola, an African Studies graduate student at Yale University was sound asleep in the common room on the twelfth floor of her residence, the Hall of Graduate Studies, when Sarah Baraash, a doctoral student, walked into the room, turned the lights on and told Lolade she was calling the police. Astonished, Lolade engaged in conversation with Sarah about why she felt the need to call the police. Captured in a fifty-eight second video live streamed through Lolade’s personal Facebook page, was a short, yet telling account of the harrowing words spoken and negative disposition displayed by Sarah. At 1:50 am, Lolade simply wanted to know why her neighbor and fellow student called the police on her for sleeping in that unrestricted public space. Standing in the doorway of her room, Sarah said, “I have every right to call the police,” after taking a picture of Siyonbola. “You cannot sleep in that room.” As Braash took the picture, Siyonbola suggested she continue by taking another and she should get her good side this time. Braash closed her dorm room door and both students waited for the police to arrive.

Around 1:56 am, four police officers employed by Yale Police Department arrived on the twelfth floor of the Hall of Graduate Studies to investigate the reported situation. Lolade began recording a second video, which lasted close to seventeen minutes. She told the officers that she needed to return to the common room to finish her paper. A white male officer asked Lolade to present her identification. After asking him why, non-black woman of color police officer retorted, “…because this is a Yale building and we need to make sure you belong here.” So Lolade


3 Wootson, Jr., “A black Yale student fell asleep in her dorm’s common room. A white student called police.” Ibid.

4 “Lolade was live” https://www.facebook.com/reneson.jeanlouis. Lolade’s original live stream video was reposted by Reneson Jean-Louis on his personal page on during the afternoon on May 8th. Jean-Louis is the the friend Lolade references in this video, whom on which Sarah called the police a few months prior. This video has been posted on other news media outlets; however, I was first made aware of this incident at Yale through Jean-Louis’s page. Therefore, this was my original source for research.
proceeded to use her keys to open the door to her dorm room, while stating, “okay. let me open my apartment for you, so that you can see that I belong here. I don’t think there’s a need for you to be here.” After opening the door in front of the officers and Sarah, the white male cop insisted Lolade present her identification card to him. Lolade asked why she needed to present the card after proving that she lived there, which was what the police officers said they needed. The disgruntled black student was reluctant about giving the officers her identification. She continued to ask them why this was necessary. The officer attempted to explain himself by stating, “I have never met you before and I have never met her before. She called us and said there was someone who appeared to be some place they weren’t supposed to be…” Laughing under her breath, Lolade provides the officer with her identification card. He steps away and called police headquarters to have her name run through the database.

Another white male officer begins to ask Lolade questions about her interaction with Sarah. She told them what happened and added that Sarah called the police on her friend (Reneson Jean-Louis) a few months ago for being in the building as well. Close to ten minutes goes by as the police officer with her ID card has to re-spell her name multiple times for the officers at headquarters. The white male attempted to engage Lolade in small talk about the paper she was writing. She responded, “I deserve to be here. I pay tuition like everyone else. I’m not going to justify my existence here.”

By this time, a black male officer emerges from the elevator with the woman cop (now totaling four police officers) and engages Lolade in conversation. He walks up to her, shakes her hand, introduces himself and asks, “are you are Yale student?” She quickly responds, “of course I am a Yale student. How else would I be in here?” The black police officer attempts to reassure her that everything is going to be okay, but Lolade expresses that she is being harassed. He discounted her understanding of her experience multiple times by telling her that she was not being harassed and that the police only wanted to get to the bottom of the situation.

The officers were having a difficult time finding Lolade’s name in the database, because her preferred name was printed on the ID card opposed to her government name. In Siyonbola’s defense, the woman officer told her supervisor, the black cop, that Lolade had already used keys to open her dorm room and her ID card to gain access into the common room. While writing notes on the incident, the woman officer asked Lolade if there was a common room on this floor. Out of frustration, Lolade told her there was not and responded, “it doesn’t matter why I chose to go up there, because I am a free citizen in this building and I do what the hell I want.” The supervisor interrupted their verbal exchange and stated, “well this is private property and we are police officers here, so we are allowed to do our jobs…we determine who is allowed to be here.

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5 “Lolade was live,” Ibid.
6 “Lolade was live,” Ibid.
7 “Lolade was live,” Ibid.
8 “Lolade was live,” Ibid.
9 Lolade was live,” Ibid.
and who is not allowed to be here regardless of whether you feel you are allowed to be here or not, okay?” 10 Again, Lolade laughs and says, “I hope that makes you feel powerful.” 11 The supervisor responds, “it’s not about feeling powerful. We are going to get to the bottom of this and that is the bottom line.” 12 After refuting Lolade’s claims of harassment from Sarah and from the police, the supervisor was alerted by the white male, who had her identification card that she was in fact in the Yale system. Finally, Lolade’s card was returned and she was released to continue with the rest of her night.

What took place in this case study is not an isolated incident. Precarious situations for black people have historically been constructed by their white counterparts as a reaction to the perceived threat of black bodies in white space, conjured up in the white imagination. Collectively the work of Dr. Emilie Townes, Dr. Kelly Brown Douglas and Dr. Elijah Anderson show how the fantastic hegemonic imagination perceives black bodies when they transgress the boundaries of white space. The act of transgression functions as a violation of the line of whiteness in America’s exceptionalism narrative, which in turn gives white people license to stand their ground. Their work grounds my understanding of a theo-sociopolitical framework for examining the negotiation of black bodies in white space.

II. Black Bodies in White Space

In order to think critically about the negotiation of black bodies in white spaces through a theo-sociopolitical framework, we must first define and describe what typically happens in white space. Sociologist, Dr. Elijah Anderson notes, “white spaces vary in kind, but their most visible and distinctive feature is their overwhelming presence of white people and their absence of black people.” 13 Anderson describes a black person’s experience in the white space as one marked by social distance at first, because white people are concerned about a black person being in their space without their permission. When a black person is occupying white space without this imagined permission, then white people may feel as if their right to that particular space is threatened. If the black person can prove he or she has business in the white space, then white people will cautiously give them a provisional pass to remain and socialize. The social atmosphere of the white space is tense, but tolerable until the black person says or does something white people feel is out of line. In that moment of acute disrespect, Anderson argues, “insecure whites often become the major actors in constructing the ‘nigger moment.’” 14 The attempt to put black folks back in their place draws the color line between black and white people, which ultimately reminds black folks that their bodies are negotiating white space.

10 Lolade was live,” Ibid.

11 Lolade was live,” Ibid.

12 Lolade was live,” Ibid.


One might wonder why and how some white people, particularly Christians, actively and complicitly perpetuate white normativity through the white space. One way to approach this query is to take on the daunting task of attempting to get inside the minds of white people. The work of Dr. Emilie Townes will help us approximate toward this task. In *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil*, Townes amalgamates Foucault’s understanding of fantasy and imagination with Gramsci’s utility of hegemony to generate a new concept, the fantastic hegemonic imagination. The imaginary and fantastic are a part of living in the quotidian.

The fantastic is comprised of different structures including domination and subornation in which people, who comfortably exist in what seems to be a sinister supernatural realm, do not find these forces unusual. On the other hand, those of us outside the fantastic are keenly aware of the sinister activity, because our everyday realities are constantly confronted by it.\(^\text{15}\) Even our awareness does not protect us from the coercive power of hegemony[the set of ideas that dominant groups employ in a society], which secures our consent as participants in the fantastic hegemonic imagination. The author notes, “the notion of consent is key, because hegemony is created through coercion that is gained by using the church, family, media, political parties, schools, unions, and other voluntary association—the civil society and all its organizations.”\(^\text{16}\)

Townes further posits,

> the imagination that creates the fantastic can control the world in its own image. This imagination conjures up worlds and their social structures that are not based on supernatural events and phantasms, but on the ordinaries of evil. It is the imagination, I argue, that helps to hold systematic, structural evil in place.\(^\text{17}\)

Images such as sapphire, tragic mulatta, welfare queen, brute and pickaninny, which are used in the cultural production of evil have become harmful stereotypes for black people. Stereotypes are harmful for black people, because these imagined caricatures influence and at times dictate how white folks systematically weave white normativity into the construction of white space in society.

The fantastic hegemonic imagination is where the coercive conceptions about black bodies and the thought to manipulatively misuse space are both conjured. Without hesitation, Townes directly links this mentality to evil. However, history reveals that many white Americans have justified their violent actions with and rooted their prejudiced ideologies in their theological interpretation of God’s divine promise and plan to settle in the new world. The initial encounters of Anglo-saxons with native and African peoples on what will become United States soil is a point in history in which we can locate the practice of policing of black bodies and the construction of white space. During this time, many Anglo-saxons used Christianity to justify stealing native land and commodifying black bodies. They believed these terrible actions were in accordance to the rights God granted them, which were interpreted as the rights of whiteness.

\(^{\text{15}}\) Ibid, 19.

\(^{\text{16}}\) Ibid, 21.

\(^{\text{17}}\) Ibid, 21.
Dr. Kelly Brown Douglas argues, “the rights of whiteness as cherished property are the unspoken but understood privileges bestowed by America’s narrative of Anglo-saxon exceptionalism.” America’s grand narrative of exceptionalism is rooted in the myth of racial superiority, which suggests all white people, even immigrants are members of a race of people chosen by God. So when racial superiority is challenged or threatened by non-white people, white folks use their privileges to re-establish hierarchical order in their space. Therefore, they exercise the right to either stand their ground or elicit the assistance of police to reinforce their exceptional identity as occupants of white space. Rooted in distorted, divisive theology, the structural establishment of white space has sociopolitical implications on how black bodies negotiate transgressing into this exclusive terrain.

Some social and political implications stem from white people weaponizing stereotypes to define black space. Again, Anderson offers an entry point through which we can understand white people’s conception of “the iconic ghetto,” which is one of the spaces black people are believed to occupy. Anderson coined the term, “iconic ghetto” to directly refer to the idea prejudiced white people have in mind when they encounter black folks. Anderson posits:

For both blacks and whites, the term ghetto is almost always pejorative. Outsiders typically have little direct experience with the ghetto; they gain their perspective from the media, from tales shared by friends, from fleeting glimpses of the ghetto’s inhabitants downtown, or, in some cases, from having been threatened by residential racial succession themselves, with their own neighborhoods moving toward becoming ghettos. Accordingly, they imagine the ghetto as impoverished, chaotic, lawless, drug-infested, and ruled by violence. Like most stereotypes, this image contains elements of truth, but it is for the most part false.

Anderson illuminates the reality that the ideas people have about black people living in the ghetto are not based on individual encounters with actual people, but from distant observations or presumptions. The negative stereotype that is constructed about the ghetto affects the conclusions drawn about the people living in these communities. The difference between the conclusions made by black people, who do not live in the ghetto and white people is that white people associate the negative stereotypes with all black people. Therefore, ghetto becomes synonymous with black no matter the social status of the person.

Middle to upper class black people have a peculiar experience when they are in white spaces. Regardless of the black person’s credentials, the white person typically associates said black person with a stereotype, such as sapphire. This is the fantastic hegemonic imagination at work.

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19 Ibid, 4.


21 Ibid, 14.
even when a black person has “proven” his or her expertise and credentials warrant their existence in the white space. Black professionals and students are always on defense when they come into contact with white people, because there is an increased possibility that the white person automatically associates them with the iconic ghetto. Anderson writes, “when whites encounter a black stranger in public, the iconic ghetto almost invariably serves as a reference point to interpret his or her identity and the import of his or her presence, and this is especially true when the ghetto community is located nearby.”

Given the urban locale of many institutions of higher learning, communities labeled “the ghetto” are often within close proximity. According to Anderson’s theory, this geographical reality increases the chance a black student, faculty or staff member will experience a nigger moment.

Unfortunately, nigger moments are experiences that have defined the white space over time. The rights of whiteness are exercised to protect the imagined exceptional identity of white people as well as maintain the boundaries of the white space. The essence and worth of a black person’s being is questioned each time they transgress these boundaries and enter this domain. Our bodies are policed as our belonging is placed under scrutiny. Policing black bodies is a phenomenon that has theological, social and political implications on the lives of black people. Loload was faced with these implications as she was napping while black at an educational institution.

III. Case Study Analysis

Through this case study, we chronicle an example of the many micro-aggressions black people endure on a daily basis as our presence in white spaces is interrogated. Nigger moments happen more than you might think. Ironically, this situation took place in one of America’s most esteemed ivory towers, Yale University. Historically, most black people at Yale were relegated the position of cook, custodian, or bus driver until the university decided to begin admitting students in substantial numbers during the mid-1960’s. Many of the black people who work at Yale are residents of a community located less than a block away from the Hall of Graduate Studies. Their community is often described pejoratively as “the hood.” Therefore, there is an increased possibility that black students’ belonging in this historically white space will be questioned and challenged. As evidenced in this case study, Sarah saw a black woman sleeping in the common room of their community residence. Sarah stood tall in her imagined exceptional identity, looked beyond the books and laptop, saw black skin and concluded Lolade did not belong in this white space. Thusly, the police were called to question Lolade’s being and prove she did not belong in the Hall of Graduate Studies.

Ibid, 17.

22 Schiff, Judith Ann. “Pioneers.” in Yale Alumni Magazine.(January/February 2006: Yale Alumni Publications, Inc., New Haven, CT) http://archives.yalealumnimagazine.com/issues/2006_01/old_yale.html. accessed. 5.12. 18. James Pembroke Pennington was the first African American to take classes at Yale through Yale Divinity School from 1834-1849, but he was never awarded a degree during his lifetime. After Pennington, other African American students were admitted and received their degree; however, the most black students to graduate at once was the fourteen students in the 1969 class. Today, Black/African American students make up close to 7.6% of the university.
What is most intriguing about this video, particularly the beginning of the second one was the police officers never questioned whether or not Sarah was student, yet demanded to see Lolade’s identification even after she opened the door to her dorm room with a key. Even though the officers claimed they were following protocol to get to the bottom of Sarah’s complaint, which was a perceived threat of someone being in the building who did not appear like she should be there, the burden of proof completely fell on Lolade. Once proof was provided that Lolade belonged there, more questions ensued and additional evidence was requested.

The majority of the second video, Sarah was absent. We can only wonder where she went and what type of conversation the police had with her, if one took place at all. I would argue, based on the footage and the response of the police, it was solely Sarah’s rights of whiteness and being that was protected in this situation. She was presumed to be a law-abiding citizen, who had no prior history of placing calls to the police for similar reasons. If the police had conducted a fair and more thorough investigation, then they would have seen in their records that she called Yale Police Department a few months ago on Reneson Jean-Louis, a Haitian-American student at Yale, for simply being in the hallway as he was waiting for Lolade.

Since Baarsh believed Siyonbola was not allowed to sleep in the common room, Sarah felt she had the right to call the police for a non-violent offense. Was Baarsh offended by Lolade’s black body intruding into imagined white space? Was Sarah threatened by Siyonbola’s presence? Applying basic knowledge about the security measures for getting into residential property would have helped her conclude the following: all Hall of Graduate Studies residents must use their student identification card to get into the gate, because they are the only students on campus with access to this building; all students living in the tower must use the same card to use the elevator; and all students must use their card to get into the common room. However, Sarah’s first inclination was not to think about what was (or was not) happening. It was to react to who she saw. Clearly, the Yale Police Department did not employ this knowledge during the time of interrogation either. Each person in the position of power was preoccupied with policing Lolade’s body and ensuring Sarah was safe.

Yale University succeeded in making sure both students could move through the security channels of the building with individually issued cards and keys; however, the Yale police department did not protect the supposed equal rights of both students involved. The police proceeded with what they called “protocol” when questioning Lolade. They even told her they had the right (and power as demonstrated through their actions) to determine who was supposed to be in that dormitory. As each of the police officers verbally interacted with Siyonbola, she maintained composure and stood sure-footed in the space that she knew to be her home away from home. Her response in that moment and thereafter via various news outlets was an act of resistance that affirmed her black body belonged in that white space. Even though Lolade’s experience took place outside of the classroom, there are a lot of dynamics for religious educators to consider as we think of what resistance might look like for black people in white spaces, and ways people can participate in the de-colonial project of dismantling white normativity.

IV. “I Belong Here”-resisting white normativity in Religious Education

24 Two years, while attending Yale Divinity School, I lived in the Hall of Graduate studies. I am aware of these security measures from firsthand experience.
One method of resistance for black people, particularly students is to continue transgressing the boundaries that protect white space. We must enter into these spaces and stand our ground by asserting our voices, dynamic presence, and intelligence. Unfortunately, the classroom is a white space that is often policed by professors before the semester begins through the development of a reading list, course objectives, and assignments. The boundaries are set and often communicate, “you do not belong here, but a provisional pass will be given for this semester.” When this is the case, black students should not feel as if the burden of proof to show we are worthy of the opportunity to study in these educational settings falls squarely on our shoulders. Instead, we resist that oppressive force by standing tall in our God-given worth each time the rights of whiteness are weaponized against us and nigger moments occur. Every time a black student stands their ground, the white space becomes less normative. Religious educators can also assist in dismantling white normativity in our classrooms by employing reflexivity as a pedagogical technique and personal practice.

Religious educators must exemplify the practice of and teach their students to engage in self-reflexivity and communal-reflexivity as ecclesial and public leaders. Reflexivity is a skill academics in our field as well as religious education practitioners in other arenas can practice to decolonialize the explicit and implicit white spaces surrounding them. The practice of reflexivity will reveal blindspots, biases and other factors that contribute to the perpetuation of white normativity in classrooms, syllabi, assignments, denominational doctrines, sermons, and small group curricula. It is especially important to teach students, especially white students, how to reflexively think about their theology around the doctrine of humanity and how it shapes their ecclesiology.

The conceptions of racial bias in the fantastic hegemonic imagination and the employment of this bias through stand your ground culture is exactly what Townes suggests, evil. God has not created a hierarchy in humanity. People who live into this exceptional identity of whiteness, cannot espouse to belief in a God who has created everyone equally in the same image. Their interpretation is based on a false hierarchy created by white supremacists to establish a social order within colonized contexts. The hierarchy of humanity that continues to exist in the American context, particularly in our educational institutions is rooted in the Anglo-saxon myth and the exceptionalist identity. This is not of God’s doing, but is an example of humankind’s sweet embrace of a doctrine of humanity that makes ontological claims, which perpetuate oppression.

This skewed vision of the doctrine of humanity and interpretation ontology influences our ecclesiology. With the Church universal in mind, it appears that we must continue to teach and demonstrate the importance of loving our neighbor as ourselves. The Church must demonstrate these Christian values in the public square so that the moral ethos of our communities can be positively influenced. The Church must exist beyond the four walls; however, there is work that must take place inside the walls of the church as well. Hate speech is preached every Sunday in a space that should be liberative for all who worship. Specifically, predominately white churches must face the fact that racism was imagined in the minds of their ancestors and maintained in society through social, political and economic structures all in the name of Jesus. Essentially, a church that worships a white racist God is a threat to the flourishing of humanity, particularly to the existence of black beings in white spaces.
In conclusion, I stand with Lolade as she resisted the oppressive forces, which interrogated her being and belonging in white space. Her resilience in the midst of a nigger moment is what black people must do if we want to survive. Religious educators must become more reflexive as they construct courses and engage in pedagogical practices if they want to participate in the de-colonial project of dismantling white normativity. Although immediate change is not guaranteed, our fight is not in vain as it contributes to dismantling evil. While oppressive forces might continue to question the being of black people in white spaces, black folk’s acts of resilience and resistance screamed back, “I belong here.”

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“Lolade was live” [https://www.facebook.com/reneson.jeanlouis](https://www.facebook.com/reneson.jeanlouis).


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