Activism in the Boonies for Black Lives and Educational Change: A Critical Conversation with Youth Rural Activist Gem Amber Sun Helper

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In the wake of the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, Toni Cade, and many unnamed others, the movement for Black lives ignited a mass of youth voice and participation. The struggle to transform education for Black students is now at the forefront of the Black Lives Matter movement and includes demands for ethnic studies curriculum, the hiring of Black educators and counselors, accountability for racialized bullying and school violence, the abolishment of zero tolerance policies, and the removal of school police. This conversation with youth rural activist Gem Amber Sun Helper explores her organizing for Black lives in education in a rural upstate New York community.

Across four one- to two-hour online meetings, Gem Amber Sun Helper and I (Ezekiel Joubert) discussed the importance of youth activism in rural education, the differences between urban and rural relationality, the Black Lives Matter movement in small rural school districts and communities, and what it means to learn to be Black in a rural community in the North. In collaboration, we read, selected, and revised parts of transcriptions of our meetings to create the conversation presented below.

Ezekiel Joubert III: Can you tell the readers a little about yourself and your journey toward organizing for Black lives in your rural community?

Gem Amber Sun Helper: I'm 21 years old. I'm currently a junior majoring in anthropology at SUNY Cortland. I've always been interested in organizing, but I really started getting into it this past summer. I think I was either a freshman or a sophomore in high school when the Black Lives Matter [BLM] protests started under that name specifically. I remember wanting to be a part of it. But my dad would not let me attend because he thought it was dangerous. But I was always interested and kept up to date with their actions and activities. I was recently able to get more involved during the George Floyd protests. I actually helped organize some of the protests in my community in upstate New York. It's a really small rural town. Literally has one traffic light.

Ezekiel: I moved to a rural community in the Midwest when I was 12. Did you always grow up there, and what was it like to go to school there?

Gem: Actually, I was born in Brooklyn. When I was about two years old, we moved to Jersey City. And then when I was about six or seven, in first grade, we moved upstate to the middle of nowhere. When we moved up there, it was so small that not everyone had access to the internet, and the phone lines didn't go all the way up the mountain. In Jersey City, we were bopping to artists like Usher and Mario, which represented urban culture and Black music. Here we only had two radio stations, rock and country. In many ways they represented the music taste and culture of rural White folks. It was a culture shock to me. And since then, I've been back and forth between New York City and Upstate New York. I went to elementary and middle school upstate, and I went to high school in Brooklyn.

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Ezekiel: I understand. I experienced a similar feeling of culture shock and still do when I return home to the countryside. Now that you are back in upstate New York, what led you to the Black Lives Matter organizing you are doing?

Gem: I grew up immersed in Black history. In second grade, I was Harriet Tubman for Halloween. I grew up knowing everything about my history. When I was young, I was able to tell you all about Black historical figures, where they were born and when they died. I memorized how many people Tubman saved and how many trips North she took. I could tell you all about Frederick Douglass and Martin Luther King, too. I have always looked up to organizers and activists. I wanted to be like them. I wanted to be written down in the books next to them. I have always wanted to be engaged in the same ways they were. And so growing up, I wasn't one of those kids who thought that racism no longer existed. I was aware that there's still racism in the United States. And I was aware that it was not just interpersonal but systemic.

Additionally, I had grandparents like my great-grandma, who is 101 years old and lives where she grew up in Florida. She was a school teacher and an editor. My grandparents always told me stories about things like the Civil Rights movement and what their own parents went through. This encouraged me to grow up with that mindset; I'm here because of them. And I want the people who come after me to think the same. I want to help lead a generation forward. I want to make it easier for the youth coming after me. And so, when I saw the protests while in high school, I thought to myself, *here's my chance to participate in the next civil rights movement. I could be a part of social change.*

Ezekiel: To fast forward, what motivated the current organizing you are doing?

Gem: Going to school upstate, I had questions about rural educational experiences and systemic racism. There were kids in my class who treated me differently, and sometimes the teachers did, too. I thought that I was the only one who had these experiences growing up. I thought that I was just a weird kid. And that they were treating me that way because of something that I had done. However, I learned over time that other students of color had the same type of experience.

So, me and another young woman of color who went to the school in the area, Ariel Galvez, a young woman of Latina heritage, came together to create an organization called New York Stands Against Racism in Education. Currently, we seek to reform our small-town school system. This includes helping them develop a student of color advisory board, racial sensitivity trainings, and more.

I remember when I was in school, kids would talk about who they liked. The school was small; there were only six girls in the class. One kid told me that he liked everybody in the class except for me because I was not the same color as him. Though I was younger and did not understand all of it, I internalized what he had said. The teacher should have said something, or somebody should have said something because there were adults present in the lunchroom who heard it. Things like this would happen all the time, and teachers wouldn't say anything. I don't know if they didn't care or just didn't know how to address it.

Also, sometimes the teachers themselves held certain prejudices. They would compliment me and say things like, "You're really well spoken" or "You're not like the others." These were racial microaggressions that might have seemed well intentioned but never felt that way.

More importantly, countywide, race and racial justice were ignored. Over the last few years, there have been certain instances of outright racial violence against students of color in the county, like kids getting dragged and pushed down the stairs, and stuff like that. Each time it was confronted, it was swept under the rug. My experience and these recent events made me decide that if I was going to start somewhere, I should start with where I grew up.

Ezekiel: That reminds me of the Michael Beyer poem, "How the Road Leans, to Where I'm From." What does it mean to do youth activism or to be a youth organizer for Black lives in a rural community in the Trump era?

Gem: Like I said, my brothers and I attended a really small school. There are about 500–600 students, pre-K through grade 12. The graduating classes are smaller than a regular city classroom. And because of this, the school is able to do unique things. For example, there is a senior lounge and a senior staircase, where only the seniors are allowed. Once there were some students who hung a Confederate flag over the railing of the staircase and posed for pictures with it. It took them quite a while to take it down. I don't even know if the students were reprimanded for hanging it. So a girl asked if she could put the Pride flag there, and the administration said no because they thought it was "too political." There have been many similar instances in this school, specifically with the Confederate flag, because the school allows it. I remember this one kid who repeatedly, and without consequences, wore a sweatshirt that said, "If the shirt offends you, then I did my job." However, the school reprimanded a boy for wearing a Black Lives Matter shirt. They were very specific as to who were allowed to express themselves politically and who weren't.

This really small rural community sometimes lives up to how people imagine it. To answer your question: What does it mean to be a youth activist during this current moment? It is to realize that a lot of the kids that I grew up with don't have the same ideals that I thought they had. Because it is a small town, you grow up knowing everybody. You're kind of friends with everybody, too, and you start to think that these kids care about you or that these kids share your ideals, just to find out that sometimes they don't.

Ezekiel: So in some ways, you were integrated when you were younger. But do you feel like as you grew older, something changed, especially as it relates to growing up during a Black Lives Matter moment? Do you think that there were folks who, like you said, took different points of view? Or have they always had them? I've been trying to figure this out and have been thinking about this as *rural youth relationality*. I learned that elementary students are more likely to have interracial friends, and then when we grow into adolescence our friend groups change based on race. For example, many of my White friends stopped hanging out with me or were pressured to not be associated with me by friends and family in the latter part of middle school.

Gem: That first part you said, I really felt that because there were kids who were my best friends in school. They sat right next to me. We would color, copy each other, and play together. One kid specifically, I would never talk to him now. I would never hang out with him. We're not friends. We do not have the same interests. Everything he does goes against my beliefs. I don't like the word betrayal, but for me it felt like a betrayal to my existence, you know. He does not have my best interest at heart at all. It makes me wonder why my parents didn't tell me when they were suspicious of some of my friends and teachers. I guess they didn't want me to be prejudiced and to make assumptions. But I get it now.

This gets to the whole of trying to recruit people to join our activism, especially because I came back to this town after high school. So, thinking about the kids who were my friends, I haven't talked to them in a second [a long time]. What are they like now? Would they join the movement? Or would they be against me and my work? It's kind of hard to reach out to people. But every time you reach out to somebody, it's always a gamble where I might have to realize a new reality. I always think, "I really hope we're still cool. I really hope that you're with me on this." However, and most striking, I am surprised by the younger generation, their parents, and their siblings who have been willing to show solidarity. Some of which are going against and pushing back on their whole family.

Ezekiel: Okay, so who have you organized with, and where do you all meet, given what you have said about the town?

Gem: It is a mix of both youth and adults, but mostly young adults who are alums and their younger siblings. We have not met in person due to the coronavirus pandemic. We use social media to organize and hold weekly meetings. Though this has put a pause on life, we have been able to initiate conversations and create plans for moving forward. Though sometimes it's been a struggle to keeping it going, we do try to have meetings every week. We invite community members who are already a part of social organizations that have been reaching out to us as well.

Ezekiel: What are some of the challenges or limits of doing rural organizing?

Gem: There have been instances of people retaliating against activists. In the community, things like violent threats, shooting out windows, or putting firecrackers in mailboxes have happened to organizers and folks with BLM signs. The community, like many U.S. small towns, has racist history behind it. There was a Klu Klux Klan chapter here. I just recently learned that they used to meet up on the hill above the graveyard where I go hiking. While it did not ruin my hike, it gave me a different perspective on how they exerted their power. For example, they used to burn crosses at the top of the hill that overlooked the town for everyone to see.

Small-town politics where everybody knows everybody is a challenge. For example, when me and my brothers were younger, we were walking home from school. We were fighting in the street. We were arguing or something. We were just kids, siblings. It took us 20 minutes to walk home, and by the time we got there, our mother was waiting for us at the door asking us about our fight. This is small town life. Everyone's always keeping an eye. There is not much to do in town besides watch after what everyone else is doing.

So White people who oppose and those who support know what your family looks like and where you live exactly; they even know what cars you drive. And so to get support, we have leaned on younger youth of all races who are interested and want to help. However, I believe that there's some White children out there who want to join, but they're not as brave as those involved. Now, I don't use the word bravery a lot, but some White kids go against what their parents desire, knowing the consequences. They have been willing to disobey them and go against the history, politics, and morals of the town. For example, one of my friends was told by an adult White person in the town that their parents would be really disappointed.

Ezekiel: Can you say more about what your organization does to participate in the movement for Black lives at school?

Gem: Since the recent BLM protests, I have been able to work with a collective of small-town organizers. We have been working on many initiatives related to addressing racial violence in schools and more. It is important to note here that many of these incidents have been covered up by school administrators, and students have even had gag orders placed on them with regard to talking about their experiences. So our first duty was to create a forum where everyone can describe their experiences, and then attach this to a petition to prevent the narrative that we are just blowing hot air and to push back on the notion that we are just "city slickers" coming up here to place urban values on a rural community. I understand why they are worried about this in some ways. Because during the pandemic people

from the city have been buying homes and property; rural gentrification is real.

Schools have official policies in place for when racial violence or bullying occurs, however they often avoid going through the proper channels. For instance, if a student punches me in the face, and they say it is because I'm Black, that's two different things. The school is supposed to do what is outlined. But they refuse. Though they may send students home, at the same time, they do not want to address the reasons why the bullying occurred. They might even gaslight you, depending how old you are. They'll tell you no one's going to believe you. or no one's going to like you. They just straight up try to make you feel bad for what happened to you.

We want to document and challenge instances like this. Within the school, there are coordinators who are there to address discrimination. You're supposed to go to them, and they're supposed to support you. But some superintendents or the principals do not embrace this process or the role of the coordinators. We would like families to know that if these channels do not work there are ways to protect students. Like, there are school policies that allow you to go to the human rights department of New York State, and that the schools should not prevent you from knowing and receiving your rights. So part of the petition is gathering testimonies to prove this pattern. Our goal is to send the petition to the school board, board of directors, and the state. Also, we know that it is in the student handbook, but we think they should do more to share with the community how they deal with racial discrimination.

Ezekiel: Holding school officials accountable to school policies as well as ensuring the public understands them is important for school transformation. Often activists admit to burnout or that movements are hard to maintain after the protests are over. How do you hope to make the activism you are participating in sustainable?

Gem: A part of what we're trying to implement reflects our interests in sustainable activism. We want it to be something that we can hand off to whoever is currently at the school. We understand that this is not our last stop in life and that we're not always going to run the group or be involved in the school system. So part of creating a group is building a structure to try to make it self-sustaining. Just like the student of color advisory board, you have your bylaws, and you have everything written out, and once you graduate you pass it on to the next group of students.

We also think about activism burnout. I feel like this always happens, where, unfortunately, somebody has to die. And then there are protests. And then five years later, somebody dies, and there are protests again, and then it just dies down because people are tired. A part of what we are doing is to engage across the community in the movement for Black lives and more. We noticed that there were so many people at our protests in town, more people than I had ever seen before. At one point there were over 300 people marching down our main street. We didn't expect that many people. However, we know that there is a slow burn, people get energized, they are well meaning and intentioned, and they just want to help, but they don't keep it up forever. We have aimed to attempt to keep interest in the community by creating a path for passing down the organization and strategies to the future generation.

Ezekiel: Have there been any new developments since last summer? What are some of your next steps?

Gem: We have been able to get the signatures needed for our petition and met with the school board. We learned that there were already steps in place addressing a lot of our concerns, but a lot of them were trauma based and seemed to exclude race. We were able to talk with them about it, and things seem to be going in the right direction.

Unfortunately, we had a recent incident happen in the school. A few kids who attend a vocational program for criminal justice posted photos making a mockery of George Floyd's death. It made its rounds on social media, eventually making the news. As heartbreaking as it was, it brought more current students to our organization.

Ezekiel: What are some of your next steps as a youth rural organizer?

Gem: This past year has been different, to say the least. As a country, we have been through many polarizing events that seem to transpire on a rolling basis. Although these issues seem to be appearing out of thin air, a lot of them have been building up before the beginning of the United States. Racism and discrimination have been revisited multiple times over the past 400 years. 2020 happens to be another big year in the fight for racial equality. Rural activism is a small sector of that fight. With my own complicated history of identity and finding myself in a town where I was not always wanted, I have been able to reflect on what it really means to fight for your right to exist. I think that we are finally getting an answer to what happens to a dream deferred. Langston Hughes was right—a dream will never stay deferred for long. It won't rot or sweeten over, and if it takes too long, it will explode and take everything with it. For me, that means dismantling the system of racism that made it necessary.