

ABSTRACT

With a growing recognition in the national consciousness of the presence of policing in schools, there has been much recent discussion of the need for change within educational systems. National organizations such as the Cops Off Campus Coalition work towards the removal of “all forms of policing and police involvement” from schools, locating these demands within such broader movements as prison and policing abolition, calls to abolish the military industrial complex, and the Land Back movement. These and other abolitionist organizations work towards anti-carceral education in recognition of the disproportionate policing of students of color, the surveillance endemic within both public and private educational institutions, and the broader harm created within communities as a result of police intervention. In this thesis, I engage with these traditions of education for liberation, by turning to pedagogy as a method of producing the kinds of epistemologies, curiosities, and freedom dreaming central to abolitionist praxis. This work will outline the tensions between academic and abolitionist practice, by looking to the field of critical university studies; trace the practice of freedom dreaming across historical and current activist practices; and sit with the uncertainties of abolitionist work, with the ultimate goal of beginning to outline the shape of a pedagogy that enables the epistemological elements of abolitionist thought.

Towards an Abolitionist Pedagogy:
Epistemologies of Liberation in the Neoliberal University

Cait Mallery

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INTRODUCTION

It's 8pm on a Thursday night, and I'm sitting with a student who's three days into a nasty cold and crying over a writing assignment they just can't figure out. I can offer an ear to talk through ideas with, my own knowledge about structuring essays, or my own institutional knowledge about the kinds of words professors like to hear in this kind of assignment, but I can't change the system putting this kind of pressure on the student, and in many ways, this student is one of the luckier ones. They're a domestic student with English as their first language, and the kind of knowledge about how to navigate the system that means they don't struggle to translate their thoughts into technical jargon. In my on-campus job as a peer writing mentor for students working through essays, presentations, and other assignments, this is not the first time I've been in this kind of position, and it won't be the last. I've been here myself—stressed over a class I didn't understand, an assignment with no room for creativity or innovation, or a lack of flexibility in how I'm allowed to do the work—and I questioned in that moment, is this mode of education creating space for curiosity around what it might look like to challenge oppressive systems? Is this truly what learning has to look like?

Another day of the week and in another sphere of my life, I sit in a meeting of the committee ostensibly tasked with reimagining the role of “public safety and service” on my college campus. A euphemistic renaming of the college police force changed largely

in response to anti-policing sentiments on campus, the work “Public Safety and Service” currently does is simply policing by another name.¹ I am more than a little bit uncomfortable in this meeting, as I am in most meetings with this committee, often being one of two students and the most openly abolitionist in the room. The other members of the committee, though often well-meaning, have far different levels of institutional power than I, and I remain constantly aware of the ways this work brushes up against my own police and prison abolitionist ideals in often uncomfortable ways. I often have to frame my own interventions or ideas in ways that are less explicitly abolitionist (by softening my language or switching out words entirely), and I worry about the risk for my ideas being co-opted or distorted without a clear enough statement of my values. And yet, the reason I continue to show up is because I believe there is room for experimentation and creating alternatives to policing even in this space, so long as I am willing to let myself be disoriented, or uncertain as to what the most ethical next steps are. This goes against what I have been taught for years as a student and organizer, about the importance of clarity and a clear path ahead. I specifically recall previously being looked to as a student organizer in previous campus activism, and recognizing a shared expectation that I would be able to define what the correct next steps were to get us to our goal. Looking back to the committee on reimagining the role of campus police, this was not the first time that I would wonder how the same systems bringing that student to tears in a peer mentoring meeting with

¹ Maya Schenwar, Victoria Law, and Michelle Alexander, *Prison by Any Other Name: The Harmful Consequences of Popular Reforms* (New York, NY: The New Press, 2021).

me place limits around us both. These limits constrain the very kind of unfinished, disorienting, and experimentative work needed for truly liberatory abolitionist action.

Reflecting on my own experiences with abolitionist work, I've come to realize the unlearning I have had to do to be truly effective in the work. As a white, upper-middle class academic, there are a lot of values and ideals I enter into the work with that are actively counterproductive to the reality of implementing abolitionist work. Owing to my background in academia and my bias towards the kinds of data and information I've been told is most important, I constantly notice myself first approaching an issue by looking for preexisting data or research. I search for certainty, a single answer to a multifaceted and deeply entrenched problem, and in doing so I constrain what I'm able to get done. I'm reminded of an experience I had early on in my activist work, reading through a piece of legislation on in-person visitation rights for incarcerated people in my county—very quickly, I realized that the county was blatantly out of step with stated legislation, and that my ability to find this discrepancy did not necessarily mean that anything would get done in fixing the discrepancy. I could read out the technical jargon in the legislation during my county's Board of Supervisors meeting and point out line-by-line where the policy was not being enacted, however this would not change the current conditions of the people unable to see their friends and families. My focus for quite some time on proving this gap in the legislature meant that I was unable to bring my attention to the actual needs of those currently incarcerated. At the time I was doing the work, this was protection from the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic in early summer of 2020.

Having to move from this abolitionist work back to academia during the school year highlighted a few big gaps in how we're learning and teaching that now draw me to the field of abolitionist pedagogy specifically, and which have continued to propel my work forward throughout this thesis. As stated earlier, higher education can and does cause harm, in ways that compound across lines of race, gender, class, ability, and more. The second is that higher education can at the same time be a force for liberatory learning, both in providing a space to build critical theory surrounding systems of oppression, and as a locus of power which educators and learners continue to leverage as a force of change against systems of oppression. I myself first came to abolitionist work in the classroom, and it would be hypocritical of me to disregard these roots entirely. Thirdly, as I myself am planning to do work within higher education, as I have felt drawn to do, I have to find some way of sitting with both this harm and potential for transforming the harm.

Central to this thesis are two methodological tenets underlying my approach to this work. Firstly, I have attempted, as much as is possible, to refuse to write in a manner wholly inaccessible to those working outside of academia. As much as abolitionist praxis may rely on or interact with theory, to write in a way that assumes the reader has the same amount of background on abolitionist work, pedagogy, or feminist jargon as I do would render this work simply a part of the infrastructure shutting out the people most directly affected from abolitionist theory. As such, although I may at times still fall short of this mark given my own position as an academic and as someone who's grown up within these institutions, the work of this

thesis aims to be accessible to wherever the reader is at within either abolitionist movement work or teaching and pedagogy.

Secondly, this work is heavily informed by a belief in the importance of at times unfinished, experimentative, and disoriented theory and praxis. As a movement based in challenging deeply-entrenched societal ideas around incarceration and punishment and creating entirely new systems in place of harmful systems in place today, abolition requires experimentation. My first chapter assesses these harmful systems, by looking to key texts in the field of critical university studies in order to unpack what is and is not possible from within the university. My second chapter engages with the experimentation mentioned above, by engaging with Robin D. G. Kelley's *Freedom Dreams* and previous writing on curiosity in the classroom in order to better understand how this curiosity may be suppressed or cultivated in the classroom. And my third chapter writes more explicitly on the importance of disorientation, or a sense of uncertainty in activist action, by engaging with feminist philosopher Ami Harbin.

In recognition of the presence of carcerality within not just institutions of policing but within teaching practices and pedagogy, educators and abolitionists such as Bettina Love have argued for the adoption of a model of "abolitionist teaching". Defined by Love as, "Choosing to engage in the struggle for educational justice knowing that you have the ability and human right to refuse oppression and refuse to oppress others, mainly your students" (Love, 11), this mode of teaching requires a disruption of many methods of orienting teachers and students in relation to each other that have been normalized by carceral systems. In Rodríguez' words, "The massive carceral-cultural form of the prison has naturalized a systemic disorientation of the teaching act, so that

teaching is no longer separable from the work of policing, juridical discipline, and state-crafted punishment,"² and will require deep and ongoing conversations among educators, students, and all others involved in the learning process about how to uproot carcerality in all its forms.

Within the space of this thesis, I hope to contribute to these conversations and outline a few of the key tenets of an abolitionist pedagogy. This research will draw on pre-existing definitions of abolitionist pedagogy, current practices within the field of abolitionist pedagogy, and points of potential intersection between abolitionist ideals and academia. From this research, I will define a pedagogy of critical curiosity, freedom dreaming, and disorientation, as generative terms for educators and learners within this field to sit with.

² Dylan Rodríguez, "The Disorientation of the Teaching Act: Abolition as Pedagogical Position," *Radical Teacher* 88, no. 1 (2010): pp. 7-19, <https://doi.org/10.1353/rdt.2010.0006>, 8.

1

“WE ARE NOT EDUCATED HERE: WE ARE TRAINED:”

THE UNIVERSITY IN CRISIS

As a child of professors, I grew up listening to stories about academia over the dinner table. I knew what a sabbatical was before I reached ten, was well versed in the university accreditation process through middle school, and was thoroughly acquainted with the many ways one could plagiarize an essay by the time I got to college. I also knew about the many obstacles that are placed in the way of students, and how the right teacher can either stand in the way of or uplift students through these obstacles. Whether students were dealing with being the first in their family to go to college, and the uncertainty that comes with that; the stress of having to hold down one or more jobs while attending college; or institutional racism, manifesting in harmful interactions with other students or professors, the environment a professor creates in the classroom can make space for students to breathe or ramp up the pressure. When I made the decision to go into academia just as my parents had, I struggled with the fact that I would be working in the same system of higher education that is the source of so much struggle for so many students, faculty, and the many others who are directly impacted by academic investments. These include more structural investments, such as the many universities with investments in fossil fuels, and the institutional trends, such as the consistent trend of disproportionately denying admittance to students of color in higher

education institutions. This chapter will attempt to introduce the harm caused by the university system as well as the potential for fostering liberatory thought and action, as well as how the two are not necessarily separable; detail the epistemic barriers to a substantive critique of academia, as well as how some current critique risks reinforcing harmful structures; and discuss the potential for resistance in both pedagogy and in restructuring the classroom as a whole.

“Cop Shit” and School Resource Officers: Policing in Academia

To get to the specific harms caused by the mechanisms of the university, this chapter will point first to the ways policing shows up both physically and interpersonally in the classroom. Abolitionist scholar Dylan Rodríguez describes policing and incarceration as not just structures defining punishment and crime, but as “relations of power and normalized state violence...[which] form the everyday condition of possibility for the teaching act.”³ In other words, the relationships of power and violence within the carceral system act as a template for power. This template is then reproduced by both professors and students, in determining how to handle everyday issues such as cheating and classroom management. Just as police utilize technology and physical domination to constrain those deemed criminals, often based upon seemingly minor infractions, the role of teachers requires the employment of punitive technologies to exert control over the classroom, punishing students for seemingly small violations such as lack of attendance or assignment guidelines.

³ Dylan Rodríguez, “The Disorientation of the Teaching Act: Abolition as Pedagogical Position,” *Radical Teacher* 88, no. 1 (2010): pp. 7-19, <https://doi.org/10.1353/rdt.2010.0006>, 7.

Jeffrey Moro, writing on his experiences of teaching in higher education, rather succinctly calls this punitive approach to teaching “cop shit.” Defining cop shit as “any pedagogical technique or technology that presumes an adversarial relationship between students and teachers”, Moro lays out how this presumption of an adversarial relationship positions students and teachers as existing on either side of a binary. He writes,

When a classroom becomes adversarial, of course, as cop shit presumes, then there must be a clear winner and loser. The student’s education then becomes not a victory for their own self-improvement or -enrichment, but rather that the teacher conquered the student’s presumed inherent laziness, shiftiness, etc. to instill some kernel of a lesson.⁴

This approach to teaching is clearly in opposition to critical pedagogy, as outlined later in this chapter, however it also clearly parallels the relations between punishment, crime, and justice that many abolitionists challenge in anti-carceral abolitionist work. There is a presumption that students, particularly students of color, are guilty unless proven otherwise, and that professors are there to safeguard the gates of academia from those who might attempt to trespass.

By positioning systems of surveillance, punishment, and social control as the norm within the classroom, colleges and universities perpetuate what are known as “carceral logics” within society as a whole. Educator Carla Shalaby provides a clear definition of these “carceral logics”, writing,

Carceral logics refer to the normalized and seemingly commonsense ideas, practices, behaviors, and ways of being and thinking that have been shaped—often unconsciously or invisibly—by a commitment to punishment,

⁴ Jeffrey Moro, “Against Cop Shit,” Jeffrey Moro, February 13, 2020, <https://jeffreymoro.com/blog/2020-02-13-against-cop-shit/>.

imprisonment, exclusion, and disposability. These logics uphold the carceral state by explicitly and implicitly driving the kinds of actions and beliefs required to justify the existence of police and prisons.⁵

This chapter and this chapter overall outline these very abolitionist interventions and resistance against carceral logics.

Just as policing shows up in how students interact with teachers and vice versa, it also shows up in the very physical presence of police in schools. In a K-12 context, the number of schools employing School Resource Officers (SROs) has increased exponentially—from 1% of schools in 1975 to 58% in 2018 employing at least one law enforcement officer.⁶ Just as with police presence outside of schools, SROs are disproportionately present in schools with a large percentage of students of color. This disproportionate presence then leads to a greater number of arrests, surveillance of students, and a culture of disciplinary violence for students of color. This trend similarly occurs on college and university campuses as well, with a 2015 US Department of Justice report showing an increase up to 68% of 4-year colleges employing campus police.⁷ These campus police are often utilized to police students of color in public

⁵ Education for Liberation Network, & Critical Resistance Editorial Collective (Eds.). (2021). *Lessons in liberation: An abolitionist toolkit for educators*. AK Press, 110.

⁶ Diliberti, M., Jackson, M., Correa, S., and Padgett, Z. (2019). *Crime, Violence, Discipline, and Safety in U.S. Public Schools: Findings From the School Survey on Crime and Safety: 2017–18* (NCES 2019-061). U.S. Department of Education. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics. Retrieved 4/2/2022 from <http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch>

⁷ Brian A Reaves, “Campus Law Enforcement, 2011-12” (Washington DC: Office of Justice Programs, 2015).

spaces,⁸ quell student protest with force and military action,⁹ and respond to mental health crises with a use of force.¹⁰

In addition to the presence of police and the impact of policing in teaching, faculty and administrators are often working within legal frameworks that require them to interface with carceral systems. Title IX is one such example of a legal framework. Often referenced as the piece of legislation mandating gender equality in sports access on campuses, Title IX in fact prohibits any form of discrimination based on sex or gender at colleges and universities. Part of this legislation pertains to sexual violence on college campuses, and mandates how colleges must respond to and investigate sexual violence. According to the Cops Off Campus Coalition,

Title IX offices operate on an adjudicatory model that prioritizes investigating whether an incident occurred or not, and if found to have occurred, what kinds of sanctions and punishments are meted out to the perpetrator. Thus, even when Title IX processes are not linked to the literal police or to the criminal legal system, it is organized around a logic of punishment. As an AAUP report notes, Title IX policies are often implemented to protect institutions from investigations

⁸ Carl Takei, "Colleges and Universities Have a Racial Profiling Problem," American Civil Liberties Union (American Civil Liberties Union, September 24, 2018), <https://www.aclu.org/blog/racial-justice/race-and-inequality-education/colleges-and-universities-have-racial-profiling>.

⁹ Lauren Kaori Gurley, "UC Santa Cruz Reinstates 41 Graduate Students after Months-Long Strike," VICE, August 11, 2020, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/xg8mdn/uc-santa-cruz-reinstates-41-graduate-students-after-months-long-strike>.

¹⁰ Sara Weissman, "Higher Ed Institutions Reexamine Role of Police in Student Mental Health Care," Diverse, October 26, 2020, <https://www.diverseeducation.com/home/article/15108008/higher-ed-institutions-re-examine-role-of-police-in-student-mental-health-care>.

and lawsuits, rather than to advance gender equality or to protect or support survivors.¹¹

Professors are implicated in this system in the use of mandated reporting policies, or policies requiring that employees of the college must file a report whenever students share experiences of sexual violence on campus. It is important to note here that survivors do not have to provide their consent for this information to be shared, that sharing this information may put marginalized survivors in further contact with systems that have previously harmed them, and that mandated reporting policies are proven to deny survivor autonomy, potentially resulting in both physical and psychological harm.¹² By looking at systems like mandated reporting, we can see the ways in which teachers are drawn into systems of policing not just in how they teach and in physical interactions with police, but in the systems and legislation that they act according to.

Challenging the Crisis Consensus, and Other Epistemological Barriers

Whether an issue of lack of funds, systemic inequalities in university admissions, debates on free speech in the classroom, a growing number of dropouts, or the impact of student debt on the US economy, the prevailing sentiment is clear: “US universities

¹¹ “FAQs,” Cops Off Campus Coalition, April 20, 2021, <https://copsoffcampuscoalition.com/faq/>.

¹² Merle Hope Weiner, “A Principled and Legal Approach to Title IX Reporting,” *Tennessee Law Review* 85, no. 1 (2018): pp. 71-188, <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3133270>, 88-98.

are in crisis.”¹³ This chapter’s specific focus in this crisis is that of the role of prisons, policing, and carceral relations (the way we relate to each other and how that is shaped by punishment and crime) in the structure of the modern university. However, in beginning to respond to said crisis, and to outline what it might look like to teach in ways that act against this crisis, it is necessary to first backtrack and trace the very framing of this crisis, or what is commonly termed the “crisis consensus”, that it is situated around. Is the university truly in crisis? To state that the university is in crisis simultaneously invokes an ideal university, one which does not struggle with the issues the current university in crisis is facing. Drawing from abolitionist praxis, abolitionists will be familiar with this dynamic as one that is similarly produced by the statement that prisons are “broken”. In order for mass incarceration to be the result of a broken system, there must be some form of incarceration that is not harmful. Abolitionist praxis by nature rejects the premise that prisons are somehow reformable, or that there exists an ethical form of the prison. Similarly, Abigail Boggs and Nick Mitchell, writing in the field of critical university studies, challenge the idea that the university is in some way broken—the consensus surrounding the state of crisis in the university is a form of contemporary academic discourse that simultaneously points out issues within how the university functions, and at the same time “pivots on the invocation of the university as a good in itself, as an institution defined ultimately by the progressive nature at its core.”¹⁴ This balance between a critique of the university and upholding its status as

¹³ Boggs, Abigail, and Nick Mitchell. "Critical University Studies and the Crisis Consensus." *Feminist Studies* 44, no. 2 (2018): 432-463. [doi:10.1353/fem.2018.0028](https://doi.org/10.1353/fem.2018.0028), 434.

¹⁴ Boggs and Mitchell, 434.

fundamentally progressive ultimately traps any critique within the realm of romanticization, and limits what it is possible to achieve in practicing an anti-carceral pedagogy.

Abolitionist and critical university studies scholar Eli Meyerhoff brings two key ideas to this analysis. First, a challenge to the progressive nature seemingly at the core of academia, and second, an understanding of how basing one's analysis in an appeal to this seemingly progressive nature risks expanding the very system of harm one is trying to challenge. In the 2020 book *Beyond Education*, Meyerhoff traces the historical basis of academia to political struggles drawing back decades, and in doing so outlines the current tenets of academia. Meyerhoff defines the "education mode of study", or the mode of learning academia is structured around, with seven key ideas. The first is the vertical imaginary, or the structure of academia wherein students move up the metaphorical ranks as they progress through school. Students may drop out of the educational system or move up the ranks, as well as be positioned above or below their peers with the labels of upperclassmen or underclassmen. This vertical imaginary relates closely to Meyerhoff's second key idea, that of a romantic narrative of progress through the educational system. In this narrative, students "heroically overcom[e] obstacles as they climb up education levels."¹⁵

Meyerhoff's third key idea is that of a separation between the knowledge that is produced by students and the means of study. In other words, students are always consumers of knowledge, and rarely producers. The production of knowledge is

¹⁵ Eli Meyerhoff, *Beyond Education: Radical Studying for Another World* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2019), 21-22.

something that happens elsewhere, and therefore the embodied and lived knowledge of students and the communities they come from lacks the perceived legitimacy of knowledge coming from professors. This separation of students from the mode of studying is additionally mirrored in the next point, that of zero-point epistemology. Just as students are separated from the mode of study, zero-point epistemology mandates a total separation of the researcher's experiences and potential biases from the field they operate in. Fifth and sixth in Meyerhoff's definition are the obedience of the student to the teacher's expertise, as well as affective credit and debt framing a pedagogical economy, or emotions of shame and pride motivating the learning process. Both of these points shape how students relate to professors, by positioning the professor as the absolute authority that students then feel either shame or pride around fulfilling the expectations of. Lastly, in direct relation to abolitionist critiques of prisons as sites of societal warehousing, the final tenet of Meyerhoff's educational mode of learning is that of binaries of educational value versus educational waste, as in the figure of the graduate and dropout.¹⁶

By analyzing the historical basis of several of these characteristics, Meyerhoff shows how modern practices of education are based in political struggles such as feudal revolt and monarchy. *Beyond Education* argues that the construction of the dropout as a public figure, for example, is tied up in the language of "cultural deprivation" as a reference to Black and brown communities.¹⁷ Dropouts and graduates were placed at two ends of a binary, effectively reinforcing a cultural narrative of higher education

¹⁶ Meyerhoff, 15.

¹⁷ Meyerhoff, 68.

linearly increasing a person's value, a value which was already perceived to be lower for Black and brown workers. As another example, Meyerhoff traces the roots of the romantic narrative of education in feudal struggles against the monarchy; in order to counter feudal uprisings, the monarchy used the romantic narrative of education as a way to legitimize the rule of the king and king's advisors. These narratives cause harm today in how we still recognize the figure of the dropout as associated with criminality and Blackness, and in how we still view education as the near-monolithic path to success. This latter narrative in particular serves to reinforce the massive accumulation of wealth and power within such categories as whiteness, by positioning those who do not succeed financially or socially as simply failing to be dedicated or hard working enough. In the above definition of the education mode of learning as only one mode among many possible methods of learning, and a mode of learning that promotes broader harm, academics such as Meyerhoff argue that it is not just institutions of academia that are harmful but how we define and practice education as a whole.

Understanding the harm central rather than incidental to current structures of learning and teaching, it becomes clear that romanticizing this mode of education risks returning us to the same harm we are seeking to escape. This impulse to romanticize the educational process is a tendency that is common within some activist and educational spaces, and Meyerhoff writes that "movements for educational equity and justice tend to naturalize romantic stories about education, thereby not only defeating their own purposes but also expanding the racialized and gendered carceral regime."¹⁸ In arguing against building new jails and prisons, leftist academics and activists often utilize

¹⁸ Meyerhoff, 5.

slogans like “schools, not jails,”¹⁹ and in doing so position the two as opposite ends of a binary. On the one hand, or in this framing of schools, universities are anti-carceral, and in fact are spaces of liberation from which we might challenge jails and prisons. On the other hand, the structure of the university as rooted in white supremacist ideals of merit makes centering a substantial anti-carceral critique more than a little difficult. Returning to the framework of the “crisis consensus”, this language forecloses any critique of the core values of academia—although there may be ways that conservative or oppressive ideas sneak into teaching and learning, the underlying principles of higher education are positioned here as emancipatory.

In Stefano Harney and Fred Moten’s text *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study*, a critical manifesto in the field of critical universities studies, the authors think it’s not quite so simple. “The slogan on the Left, then, ‘universities, not jails,’ marks a choice that may not be possible. In other words, perhaps more universities promote more jails. Perhaps it is necessary finally to see that the university produces incarceration as the product of its negligence.”²⁰ Universities and incarceration do not exist on opposite ends of a spectrum, but rather reinforce each other mutually. Abolitionist scholar Dylan Rodríguez describes prisons as being “a primary condition of

¹⁹ Jasmine Gripper and Erin George, “Schools, Not Jails: How Educational Racism Fuels Mass Incarceration in New York” (New York, NY: Citizen Action of New York, 2019).

²⁰ Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study* (Wivenhoe United Kingdom: Minor Compositions, 2013), 41.

schooling, education, and pedagogy in every possible site"²¹--in other words, incarceration makes our educational system possible in that "policing/surveillance, criminalization, and immobilization are as much schooling practices as they are imprisonment practices. As such, any efforts to rethink how we teach must not make the assumption that pedagogy has merely strayed from the path of virtue and learning for learning's sake, but must recognize the roots of pedagogy and education in systems of harm.

Another important consideration in applying a critical pedagogy is that of the language of critique itself, and the role of critique in reproducing the values of higher education. In an invitation to engage in abolitionist university studies penned by several prominent abolitionist scholars, the authors write that, "Critique is not simply a practice but a mode of institutional reproduction. It allows us to experience ourselves as if we are outside of the institution while remaining firmly ensconced in its liberal narrative of self-valorization."²² In other words, as academics we may practice a critique of the university but cannot escape the context of the university and the ways our modes of critique may reproduce the university's validity. I am personally cognizant of my own role as a student, and how in the course of writing this thesis I am adding to my list of credentials by utilizing the structural power of academia. Similarly, many of the authors I cite are working within an academic context, and by publishing critiques

²¹ Dylan Rodríguez, "The Disorientation of the Teaching Act: Abolition as Pedagogical Position," *Radical Teacher* 88, no. 1 (2010): pp. 7-19, <https://doi.org/10.1353/rdt.2010.0006>, 7.

²² Abigail Boggs et al., "Abolitionist University Studies: An Invitation," *Abolition University*, 2019, <https://abolition.university/invitation/>, 5.

of higher education they are often, somewhat paradoxically, increasing their own social power within certain circles of the institution. This is not to say that no work performed in academia or critique levied simultaneously against and within the institution is worth considering or a useful contribution to the conversation, but rather that we must remain cautious of the ways we as academics may work, either intentionally or unintentionally, to reproduce academic systems of value that we are trying to oppose. How are we, in our critique, returning to a mode of study that values critique and therefore reinforcing our place within an academic hierarchy?

“We Are the Crisis”: Decentering the Crisis Consensus

Having outlined a few of the ways policing causes harm in the university, as well as narratives of responding to this harm that may risk reproducing harm, this chapter turns to looking at how students and faculty respond with both pedagogical resistance and protest. This account of political struggle and organizing begins in California’s universities, circa 1968. UC Berkeley and San Francisco State were beginning to experience a whirlwind of student protest and strike, centered around demands for the founding of Black Studies and Ethnic Studies departments. Organized by the Black Student Union and Third World Liberation Front (TWLF), the protests from November 6, 1968 to March 21, 1969 to this day still hold the title of the longest student strike in the United States.²³ In looking back at these protests and the subsequent formation of the

²³ Bates, Karen Grigsby, and Shereen Marisol Meraji. “The Student Strike That Changed Higher Ed Forever.” NPR. NPR, March 21, 2019. <https://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2019/03/21/704930088/the-student-strike-that-changed-higher-ed-forever>.

first departments for ethnic studies at UC Berkeley and SF state, it's important to look at how students chose to articulate their demands. Engaging with the archives, students' demands and internal organizing documents show that they were not only focused on what was taught, but how it was taught, and therefore these protests are deeply relevant to the history of critical pedagogy in the United States.

In a memo titled "No One is Free Unless Everyone Is Free; Everybody Out!" and distributed by SF State's Black Student Union on November 7th, 1968, the call to strike begins with a sweeping indictment of the educational system. "We are not educated here: we are trained. We are trained to separate thought (clean) from emotion (unclean)...We are trained not to question the assumptions underneath the classroom babble, because to challenge and tear down those assumptions would be to make ourselves free."²⁴ Although the official list of demands doesn't include such demands as to rethink the structure of the classroom, instead asking for the reinstatement of professors and the establishment of specific departments, there is a clear awareness within the movement of how academia as a broader structure is tied to certain modes of learning and thinking. Protestors didn't limit their analysis to higher education either, also publishing educational material aimed towards high schoolers that spread awareness on both educational tracking and the rights of a student when interacting with police.

²⁴ "No one is free unless everyone is free: Everybody out!" 7 November, 1968, Box 44, folder 326, item 9, SF State Strike Collection, San Francisco State College, San Francisco, CA.
<http://digital-collections.library.sfsu.edu/digital/collection/p16737coll7/id/441>.

Years later, this legacy of student protest is continued in the tradition of such groups as the Cops Off Campus Coalition, an organization with branches across North America. Although protestors are utilizing new forms of organizing, including increasingly digital methods of information-sharing, the connection between the activism of the TWLF and Cops Off Campus comes in the way both groups center their analysis around the carceral investments of the university. Cops Off Campus rose to prominence in mid-2020, organizing for the first time Abolition May as a month-long push to get cops off of campuses. This chapter looks to Cops Off Campus both because it begins to contextualize the abolitionist work happening on US campuses today, and because of the research project led by Cops Off Campus that locates the work of policing on campuses as a part of a broader carceral investment by the university. This project, launched in mid-2020, asks such questions as, “What does university policing look like from the perspective of those who are policed? What other transformations and policies accompany it?”, and “What specific interests does university investment in policing serve?”²⁵ By interrogating both the interests and motivations behind policing and the less-visible aspects of policing on campus, this project continues the tradition of protest that interrogates structures propping up inequality.

Resistance In, Against, and Despite the University

Having listed a number of the ways in which academia can be rooted in harmful systems, as well as the ways activists act outside of the classroom, how is the possibility

²⁵ Audrey Beard et al., eds., “Cops Off Campus Research Collective,” Abolition University, 2020, <https://abolition.university/cops-off-campus-research-collective/>.

of liberation still present in academic work? Harney and Moten simultaneously challenge and restate the centrality of teaching to this resistance, writing,

It is not teaching that holds this social capacity, but something that produces the not visible other side of teaching, a thinking through the skin of teaching toward a collective orientation to the knowledge object as future project, and a commitment to what we want to call the prophetic organization. But it is teaching that brings us in.²⁶

In other words, the act of teaching cannot by itself be liberatory. Rather, we need to zoom out to examine what it means to teach, and begin to understand teaching as a relationship to the future and to what we need to create. This is a deeply abolitionist impulse, and requires an understanding of teaching as something that is prefigurative in nature (we teach and learn and in doing so, create the society we want to live in).

One such space of liberatory possibility and future-forward learning is the realm of the undercommons. Moten and Harney define the undercommons as “the downlow low-down maroon community of the university...where the work gets done, where the work gets subverted, where the revolution is still black, still strong.”²⁷ This statement, as with previous statements on the possibilities of being in but not of the university, sits with multiple contradictions and multiplicities. What might it mean to both do the work and subvert the work? In a truly abolitionist fashion, Harney and Moten argue that we can approach this balance by embracing criminality. Moten and Harney describe a scholar in the undercommons as something of a fugitive—one that sneaks in and

²⁶ Moten and Harney, 27.

²⁷ Harney and Moten, 26.

“steal[s] what one can” from the university.²⁸ This is not necessarily a literal theft, but rather a stealing *back* and relationship to academic structures and what is traditionally defined as criminality that relates closely to modern abolitionist praxis, and merits further attention as a method of creating abolitionist scholarship interpersonally and in the classroom. This is the beginning of an argument of how one might exist in but not of the university, and the philosophical perspective underpinning a truly abolitionist pedagogy.

The practice of existing in but not of the university finds a direct example in the history of experimental colleges in the US, beginning in 1965 when San Francisco State College students founded an experimental college. This experimental college had as its self-professed focus “growth of a free, self-directed individual”, “development of the student to conceptualize awareness of one’s own processes and potentialities”, and “tapping one’s own creativity.”²⁹ Classes offered ranged from the more esoteric, such as Grass, Acid, and Zen and Metaphysical Education,³⁰ to classes on community organizing and challenging the educational system. Interestingly, the founding of the SF State experimental college came just before a series of student protests led by the Third World Liberation Front and Black Students Union, as mentioned previously. This experimental college was the first of its’ kind, but certainly not the only creative educational project to create a space to learn in the undercommons, and in doing so

²⁸ Harney and Moten, 26.

²⁹ “SFSU Archives: Experimental College,” LibGuides, accessed April 10, 2022, <https://libguides.sfsu.edu/sfstearchives/experimentalcollege>.

³⁰ “Experimental College 1967 Summer Catalogue,” 1967. <https://libguides.sfsu.edu/sfstearchives/experimentalcollege>.

embrace the spirit of the undercommons by “stealing resources—including spaces, money, teachers, credits, and technologies—for studying in but not of the normal university.”³¹ This is a practice that can be reproduced in the work of both teachers and students, and the focus on new and innovative methods of learning brings this thesis to the question of pedagogy.

Just as students resist policing and harm perpetuated by the university, teachers have unique ways of challenging hegemony as well. One of these methods is in how professors teach and structure their classrooms, or the pedagogy that teachers utilize. Professors may hold a pedagogy in which they center the practice of dialogue in the classroom, for example, or a pedagogy in line with the “cop shit” described by Moro above. Critical pedagogy, or a mode of education that works to disrupt traditional power structures in the classroom, comes from the work of such theorists as Paulo Freire. In his book “*Pedagogy of the Oppressed*”, Freire describes pedagogy as not simply a method of structuring interactions between teachers and students or of creating new grading structures, but as a “philosophy or social theory” in and of itself.³² This definition comes from Freire’s own work in using education as a tool to counter economic instability, and was at the time a new method of thinking about education and teaching. This thesis draws from this definition of pedagogy, and in doing so defines abolitionist pedagogy as a social theory of education drawing from abolitionist philosophy and praxis.

³¹ Meyerhoff, 169.

³² Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (London, UK: Penguin Education, 1972), 24.

Since Freire first defined the term in 1968, the field of critical pedagogy has exploded into a variety of different interpretations across a number of disciplines and fields. Fundamentally, each of these critical pedagogies does the work of questioning what it means to be a teacher, what it means to be a student, and how power operates in the classroom. It's important to recognize at this point that a feminist pedagogy, for example, is not just a matter of teaching about feminism or of teaching feminist ideals in the classroom. Rather, a feminist pedagogy involves rethinking how traditional relationships and modes of thinking in the classroom are rooted in gender-based power imbalances. Looking at feminist philosophy, one key point of discussion is the mind-body split in academia (the way one is defined as a source of objective knowledge and the other as fundamentally biased), and the ways academics are encouraged to distance lived experience from their work. Feminist pedagogues may bring this into the context of learning and the classroom by encouraging students to seek out nontraditional sources, or forms of information that are not traditionally thought of as academic. I myself have been encouraged in gender studies classrooms to rethink what I define as a valid source of data or information, and utilize personal experience and oral history in defining ideas. Similarly, an abolitionist pedagogy is not necessarily a pedagogy of how to teach about abolition—rather, an abolitionist pedagogy incorporates abolitionist ideals and praxis into the classroom, reshaping how students and professors relate to each other relative to the carceral system. Chapters Two and Three will be on specific practices and ideals characterizing an abolitionist pedagogy, but for now this

chapter contextualizes abolitionist pedagogy within both a larger tradition of resistance and practice that is simultaneously *in but not of* the academy.³³

Pedagogical Implications

Having outlined the tensions within practicing abolitionist pedagogy, what are the implications for how teaching and learning may still be abolitionist in the space of higher education? Firstly, an abolitionist pedagogy requires an awareness of how teachers are utilized as mechanisms of outsourcing policing practices, both voluntarily and against one's will, through the use of such protocols as mandated reporting. Although many of said practices may have the largest effect outside of classroom spaces (such as in one-on-one interactions with students), all interactions with students shape the learning process, and as such I still include them under the heading of pedagogy. There is no simple way to act against these procedures and still remain employed at a university, however the first step in such an action involves clear transparency with students about what one's responsibilities are under university policy, and what a student can and cannot say in certain spaces in order to avoid falling under the purview of what a professor is required to report to a potentially harmful or policing mechanism. This may look like statements in one's syllabus of what one is required to do, an ability to redirect a student to resources that are not similarly mandated to report, or the knowledge of which resources on campus are likely to redirect a student to carceral institutions (whether the counseling center on campus is likely to call campus police in

³³ This "in but not of" position comes in large part from Moten and Harney, who define the position of the academic in the undercommons as in but not of the university.

response to a suicidal student, for example). Although my own work is not that of a professor, in my capacity as a writing center mentor I frequently encounter students in various states of distress, and part of bringing my own abolitionist praxis into this work has been familiarizing myself with which resources both on campus and in the area are affiliated with carceral institutions, as well as a continual awareness of when I am and am not on the clock as a mandated reporter as a college employee.

Following Harney and Moten, professors must additionally act to “steal what one can”³⁴ from the university—in the context of the resources available to professors, this may often look like integrating work with abolitionist organizations into class work, or hosting speakers with lived experience in incarceration either in class or at events available to the broader campus. I pull from my own experiences in abolitionist classes in these suggestions, in which a key part of my own mobilization into abolitionist work was compiling a resource guide for the California Coalition of Women’s Prisoners (CCWP). This former suggestion does not come without risks or caveats, as there is always a risk of students coming from positions of privilege and causing harm in their collaborations with directly impacted community partners, however if carefully facilitated with a focus on non-extractionist collaborations these interactions can be a good method of drawing student work away from the university and into the broader community. The latter suggestion is something I myself have been able to practice in my work with student organizations on campus, by directing organizational funds towards paying speakers from local activist groups.

³⁴ Harney and Moten, 26.

Looking to the intersections of ableism and carcerality in the classroom, professors must additionally reject the assumption that students are trying to act against them in asking for things like accommodations and extensions—such assumptions perpetuate a carceral culture in which students are guilty for asserting their needs, and need to be adequately controlled in order to function in learning spaces. Although many colleges and universities have pre-existing accommodations policies, these policies typically require students to have accommodations on file alongside documentation of a diagnosed disability—given that diagnoses are differently available across lines of race, class, and gender, it's important to additionally act against institutional assumptions of guilt that position students and professors as being in opposition to each other, foreclosing upon the potential for real solidarity. Educator and disability justice activist Lydia X. Z. Brown includes the following language in their syllabus in order to destabilize predominant assumptions around learning in the classroom, and I offer Brown's language as one possible option of how to act against pedagogical methods that require bodily control over students:

All students are also always allowed to ask for extensions or alternative assignments for any assignment, including adjustments to the final paper (but you still have to write one). I will pretty much grant any and all extension requests, and you don't need to give details for why you need an extension. If you ask for one, I believe you that there is some reason that you need one. Usually, I will ask you when you think would be fair and feasible for you to get it done, and that will become your new deadline to turn it in. If you have any access needs that I can better support by changing any aspect of my teaching (including class discussions) or the way I have handled assignments/readings, you are welcome and encouraged to let me know in public or in private how I can better support your access needs. Disabled students/students with disabilities may also formally register with the office responsible for disabled student support services, which is the official

process for receiving reasonable accommodations in the classroom. You need not have a specific reason or diagnosis to talk to me about your access needs; everyone deserves to learn in the way that makes the most sense for them at any point in time.³⁵

By assuming that students have the knowledge to best take care of themselves in the classroom, and that professors need not exert control over said students' bodyminds, abolitionist pedagogy integrates the knowledge of disability justice movements. Brown prioritizes this value of student autonomy in their syllabus, by not assuming an intention to subvert them as a teacher (granting extensions without requiring details), and reaffirming students' knowledge of their own abilities outside of more formal accommodations structures.

Lastly, from the work of groups like the Experimental College of San Francisco State, it is important that educators be willing to try new things, and integrate curiosity into their pedagogical practices (both their own curiosity and that of students).

Recognizing the ways the western neoliberal university is in many ways directly harmful to not only students, faculty, and staff, but additionally to a broader societal conception of who holds knowledge and where knowledge comes from, a willingness to critique what one defines as knowledge-making practices is crucial to preparing students for the broader project of challenging who holds power and creating new mechanisms of existing interpersonally.

³⁵ Lydia X. Z. Brown, "Syllabus Language," *Autistic Hoya*, September 20, 2017, <https://autistichoya.net/resources/syllabus-language/>.

2

FREEDOM DREAMING AS PEDAGOGY–CRITICAL CURIOSITY

When I was in third grade, I decided to leave the public school system and try homeschooling. This decision was motivated by factors ranging from the restrictive guidelines of my elementary school, to my desire to have more time to read what I was most interested in—I often joke that I started homeschooling when the books I read from home were the best part of my day, and I figured out I could just as easily do that while at home. I had little confidence in my ability as a student at the time, and I was lucky enough that my parents both recognized and were willing to act so that I didn't end up becoming fully uninterested with learning altogether. Both of them had also previously had negative experiences in traditional schooling, and their own positions as educators in addition to their strong belief in self-determination for children meant that they were willing and able to help me transition to a different schooling model. There were tears on the part of my friends, who were more than a little bit confused about my decision to voluntarily leave school, however I felt, if not necessarily confident that what I would do next would be a good match for me, confident that what I was currently doing wasn't working. However, despite the fact that I had been given free range of what direction I wanted my education to go in, I initially struggled with the breadth of my options. When I look back on that transition period in conversations with my family, my mother always brings up the time I asked her, "Where will you get the worksheets to

teach from?” She laughed a bit, and told me that there was more than one way to learn, and worksheets and timed problem sets didn’t have to be the beginning and end of the learning process.

I had some sense of curiosity about what I could learn outside a traditional schooling context, but it would take me a few more years of exploring what learning could look like before I started really unraveling my previous assumptions and reaching on instinct for the more familiar world of standardized testing. When I did, I was able to start creating my own path ahead, in a model of education I later learned is called “unschooling” (detailed further in chapter three). Just as I struggled to imagine a method of learning that didn’t require textbooks and tests, I want to look in this chapter at how we are able to explore in the classroom, and what factors impact our ability to be curious.

This chapter introduces my first key idea in what it means to practice abolitionist pedagogy, based on pedagogies of curiosity. Specifically, this chapter dialogues with the concept of freedom dreaming from Robin D.G. Kelley’s foundational text *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination*. Freedom dreaming is a central tenet of abolitionist work, and this chapter outlines what it might mean to freedom dream in the classroom. This chapter argues that curiosity is an active and not passive component of freedom dreaming (curiosity as praxis?). What we are curious about and the ways we are able to freedom dream are always structured by factors such as and modes of learning, as well as who holds power in the classroom. Curiosity is never apolitical. The chapter turns to Shankar and Zurn’s “critically curious pedagogy” as one possible mode of encouraging

freedom dreaming in our classrooms, and how carceral logics discourage modes of dreaming beyond what currently is.³⁶

Freedom Dreams of Utopia

Writing on his own childhood, author Robin D. G. Kelley states in *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination*, “The dream of a new world, my mother’s dream, was the catalyst for my own political engagement. I came to a black nationalism filled with idealistic dreams of a communal society free of all oppressions.”³⁷ Kelley refers here to the Black nationalist movement, which aimed to reclaim Africa as a homeland for Black people in America and beyond. Early proponents of the movement included Marcus Garvey, who came to be the face of a movement known as Garveyism in the late 1910s and early 1920s. This return to Africa looked, to Garvey, primarily like a way of reclaiming Black people’s rights as a people and as a country, and in doing so claim “that freedom that Victoria of England never gave; that liberty that Lincoln never meant; that freedom, that liberty, that will see us men among men; that will see us a nation among nations; that will make of us a great and powerful people.”³⁸ But freedom and liberty looked like different things for different people; a future of autonomy free from white exploitation for some, solidarity with colonized peoples transnationally for others, and for some companies, a slogan to profit off of Black liberation movements.

³⁶ Perry Zurn et al., *Curiosity Studies a New Ecology of Knowledge* (University of Minnesota Press, 2020), 269.

³⁷ Robin D. G. Kelley, *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination* (Boston, MA: Beacon, 2003), 3.

³⁸ Marcus Garvey, “The Negro World,” *The Negro World*, September 11, 1920, <https://www.international.ucla.edu/asc/mgpp/sample03>.

Garveyism largely lost momentum following a series of both financial and interpersonal struggles. However, the strength of the movement at its height and clarity of the material demands associated with Garveyism as a form of freedom dreaming should not be understated. The 1920 conference of Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) was estimated to have two thousand representatives coming from 22 different countries, with an audience of 25,000 for Garvey's most famous speech.³⁹ The legacy of Garvey's call for freedom and liberty in 1920 speaking from Liberty Hall, New York, reverberates out to the present day, as remembered in Kelley's own Black nationalist ideals. It is this tradition of Black nationalist action and activism that Kelley offers as an example of what he comes to call freedom dreaming. Freedom dreaming is defined by Kelley as the imagination of a world or society beyond what is currently in existence, and the collective organizing of a movement towards bringing this imagined society into existence⁴⁰. As such, freedom dreaming is both imaginative (requiring the ability to imagine what a society absent of oppression might look like), and creative action (requiring the ability to move towards bringing these ideals into the present). In the case of early Black nationalist calls to return to Africa, this combination of imagination and creative action involved the use of both storytelling and the mass marketing of shares in the Black Star Line Steamship Corporation. This combination served to simultaneously outline what a Black nationalist society would

³⁹ "The 1920 Convention of the Universal Negro Improvement Association," PBS (Public Broadcasting Service), accessed April 4, 2022, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/garvey-unia-convention/>.

⁴⁰ "The 1920 Convention of the Universal Negro Improvement Association," PBS (Public Broadcasting Service), accessed April 4, 2022, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/garvey-unia-convention/>.

look like and at the same time pull people into the movement and invite an engagement with the process of imagining this new world.

Black nationalism was not just an identity-based movement, but the collective self-determination of a shared story and mythology making clear the possibility of different conditions. Speaking on the transnational perspective taken by UNIA in looking to Africa as a source of freedom, one former member of the movement states, “People began to have a world perspective, but in having a world perspective, you also looked around you and you knew that things were not right where you were.”⁴¹ In promoting Africa as utopia, Garveyists opened up the possibility of dreaming for more than what they had limited access to in America. The shape of this dreaming was often inspired by examples of current and past African civilizations, Liberia and Egypt in particular showing up in Black nationalist rhetoric. Liberia was said to be “a black man’s utopia, the land where race prejudice was a thing of the past, and every person in the republic enjoyed the fruits of citizenship”, and Egypt as a site of great civilizations and temples.⁴² Although in reality the conditions of both countries were not quite as idyllic as pictured (Liberia, for example, was by no means free of US imperialism in the case of the Tennessee-based Firestone Rubber Company’s 1926 establishment of a

⁴¹ "Marcus Garvey: look for me in the whirlwind interviews." *Journal of Pan African Studies* 9, no. 10 (2016): 303+. *Gale Literature Resource Center* (accessed March 19, 2022). https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A485671380/LitRC?u=mlln_w_mounthc&sid=bookmark-LitRC&xid=fe9ab364.

⁴² MOSES, WILSON J. “MARCUS GARVEY: A REAPPRAISAL.” *The Black Scholar* 4, no. 3 (1972): 38–49. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41163608>.

massive rubber plantation and subsequent exploitation of locals), stories and rhetoric involving both nations served to propel Black nationalist freedom dreams forward.

As for the actions used to bring forth these freedom dreams, Garvey's call to action was clear throughout his work with UNIA:

The command has gone forth, "Ships and more ships." Africa must be linked to the United States of America. Africa must be linked to South and Central America. Africa must be linked to the West Indies, so that there can be an unbroken intercourse between the four hundred million Negroes of the world.⁴³

First founded in 1919, the Black Star Line was UNIA's attempt to put material resources and the power of the people behind the Black nationalist movement.⁴⁴ The purpose of the corporation was ostensibly to assemble a fleet of steamships that could assist in the transportation of people and resources across international waters to Africa--however, the importance of the Black Star Line was not simply for financial gain. Rather, it is noted that, "The Black Star Line was less a business venture than the new ark."⁴⁵ As a representation of the political aspirations of the Black nationalist movement, the Black Star Line was less a corporation than it was a tangible manifestation of freedom dreams. The four ships in the fleet held such names as the SS Frederick Douglass, and sailed with an entirely Black crew and captain.⁴⁶ This campaign served as a metaphorical counterpart to the journeys of previous slave ships--the back to Africa movement was in this way being realized in distinct opposition to earlier forced migration into chattel

⁴³ Garvey, 1920.

⁴⁴ "American Experience | Marcus Garvey | People & Events," PBS (Public Broadcasting Service), accessed April 4, 2022, http://www.shoppbs.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/garvey/peopleevents/e_blackstar.html.

⁴⁵ Kelley, 29.

⁴⁶ "American Experience | Marcus Garvey | People & Events,"

slavery. Members of UNIA were compelled to buy stock in the company with the goal of contributing, in some small or large way, to the movement for liberty and freedom espoused by Garvey. Although the Black Star Line and UNIA as a whole did not succeed in facilitating a large-scale movement back to Africa, the movement characterized by Garvey's impassioned speeches and the self-empowerment and pride of his followers still serves as a vital example of what it looks like to practice freedom dreaming.

Surrealism and Black Creativity as Freedom Dreaming

As freedom and liberation for marginalized people is so antithetical to the current state of white supremacist culture, steps towards this freedom must by necessity require radical transformation. Kelley proposes that the creativity necessary to imagine this kind of radical transformation is best embodied by the surrealist movement, and the history of Black creativity behind it. Kelley defines surrealism as "the exaltation of freedom, revolt, imagination and love...surrealist thought and action are intended not only to discredit and destroy the forces of repression, but also to emancipate desire and supply it with new poetic weapons."⁴⁷ Central to this definition is the emphasis on creativity and imagination in freedom dreaming, as well as the connections Kelley makes in the chapter to Black art and music. Surrealism is here a "revelation of the mind...an unleashing of the mind's most creative capacities, catalyzed by participation

⁴⁷ Kelley, 158.

in struggles for change.”⁴⁸ In this quote, Kelley reiterates the importance of creativity and art to political struggle, and thus the need for politicized art as a tool for mobilization and freedom dreaming. The work of moving towards abolitionist futures directly parallels the practice of surrealism utilized by creatives like science fiction authors. From Octavia Butler’s statement that “Our destiny is to take root among the stars”⁴⁹ in her pivotal novel *Parable of the Sower* to Walidah Imarisha’s statement that “All organizing is science fiction”⁵⁰ in the social justice and science fiction anthology *Octavia’s Brood*, organizers have been using creative practices of freedom dreaming in order to bring new worlds into the present. “Once the imagination is unshackled, liberation is limitless”⁵¹, and this unshackling of the imagination must involve creative practices.

The importance of surrealism and freedom dreaming to abolitionist work comes in part from the way abolitionist work is often prefigurative. Prefigurative politics are those politics which aim to imagine before the fact future possibilities. Practicing a prefigurative politics means aligning one’s present actions and interpersonal relationships with the futures activists are working towards.⁵² For an abolitionist, this

⁴⁸ Kelley, 191.

⁴⁹ Octavia E. Butler, *Parable of the Sower* (New York: Four Walls, Eight Windows, 1993), 77.

⁵⁰ Walidah Imarisha and Adrienne M. Brown, *Octavia’s Brood: Science Fiction Stories from Social Justice Movements* (Oakland, CA: AK Press, 2015), 3.

⁵¹ Imarisha and Brown, 4.

⁵² Barnard Center for Research on Women, Reina Gossett + Dean Spade (Part 1): Prison Abolition + Prefiguring the World You Want to Live In, YOUTUBE (Jan. 7, 2014), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XDQIW1uJ8uQ> [<https://perma.cc/5KCJ-SM77>].

might mean structuring one's relationships with others such that policing or punishment are not the primary modes of responding to conflict. For example, rather than responding to calls against police brutality by calling for increased policing using body cameras, an abolitionist might respond to this call by proposing a decrease in the number of police on the streets, or Within larger activist groups, the organization may practice a prefigurative politic by responding to issues like interpersonal sexual violence by utilizing restorative or transformative justice practices, rather than defaulting to using the police or expelling someone from the community⁵³. "The Revolution Starts At Home," a 2011 zine created by activists working through these same questions of how to practice non-carceral methods of accountability and justice within activist circles, offers a number of essays on more tangible ways to practice said non-carceral interventions. These essays offer suggestions ranging from calling on friends and family of those who have committed harm to support their healing, to building safe spaces for survivors of harm, to manifestos on what healthy consent looks like.⁵⁴

Prefiguration is difficult because it often requires that activists organize their movements in ways that are either untested or not widely used—although practices of transformative justice are by no means new, going back to Indigenous communities

⁵³ Chin-in Chen, Jai Dulani, and Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, *The Revolution Starts at Home: Confronting Intimate Violence Within Activist Communities* (Chico, CA: AK Press, 2016).

⁵⁴ Leah Lakshmi Piepzna Samarasinha, Ching-In Chen, and Jai Dulani, *The Revolution Starts at Home* (2011), <http://criticalresistance.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/Revolution-starts-at-home-zine.pdf>

through history,^{55, 56} the practice of intervening in violence in the current context using transformative justice and alternatives to policing are less clearly-defined. As such, abolitionists are, as a part of a simultaneously political and creative practice, willing to try new things in order to imagine what a future without police or prisons might look like.

Black Feminist Imagining

Who gets to freedom dream, and whose freedom dreams are deemed just the right side of creative rather than too unruly or unrealistic to even bring into movement work? In other words, who gets the opportunity to bring their dreams into the world, and whose dreams are dismissed as merely fantasy? Although abolitionist work is by nature a pushing or breaking of boundaries, the mere statement of abolition as a goal does not erase pre-existing limits on what is deemed possible or what is deemed unrealistic. There are still limits on what we are willing to accept as possible, as evidenced by the co-optation of abolitionist ideals away from radical demands to abolish the police and towards centrist calls towards reform.⁵⁷ In these cases a lack of ability to picture what a world without police might look like restricts the scope of any

⁵⁵ Restorative Justice Project, "What Is Restorative Justice?," Restorative Justice : A Diversion Toolkit for Communities (The Restorative Justice Project), accessed April 19, 2022, <https://rjdtoolkit.impactjustice.org/establish-a-foundation/restorative-justice/>.

⁵⁶ JON'A F. MEYER, "History Repeats itself: Restorative Justice in Native American Communities," *Journal of Contemporary Criminal Justice* 14, no. 1 (February 1998): 42-57

⁵⁷ Mariame Kaba, "Yes, We Mean Literally Abolish the Police," *The New York Times* (The New York Times, June 12, 2020), <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/12/opinion/sunday/floyd-abolish-defund-police.html>.

possible freedom dreaming. Importantly, who is perceived as having the ability to dream up new worlds is divided along lines of class, race, and gender. Even within carceral abolitionist movement spaces, the boundaries placed on how to strategize around abolitionist ideals often block out the freedom dreams of the most marginalized groups. As a final key point in Kelley's analysis of Black radical freedom dreaming, and a point which will be extended out through the rest of this chapter in discussing freedom dreaming in the classroom, freedom dreaming and the enactment of those dreams is not a practice that is equally accessible. For each of the groups represented in calls for reparations and liberty by groups like UNIA, the Black Economic Development Conference, and the Black Panthers, there were others whose voices were not present in the conversation: "The utopian visions of male nationalists or so-called socialists often depend[ed] on the suppression of women, of youth, of gays and lesbians, of people of color."⁵⁸ As such, freedom dreaming in the present day must come out of not just the legacies of Black nationalist movements and surrealist creativity, but from the Black feminist engagements with radical imagining that intervened in harmful traditions of misogyny in these movements.

One primary example of Black feminist engagements with freedom dreaming comes from the Combahee River Collective (CRC), often known by their 1977 statement in which the group first developed the term "identity politics" and paved the way for the theoretical underpinnings of Kimberlé Crenshaw's later theory of intersectionality⁵⁹.

⁵⁸ Kelley, 10.

⁵⁹ Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor et al., *How We Get Free: Black Feminism and the Combahee River Collective* (Chicago, Illinois: Haymarket Books, 2017).

First founded in 1974, the CRC was a space for Black feminist theorists to do both theoretical and political work, by holding regular retreats to develop and share Black feminist theory while simultaneously engaging in political campaigns. One former member of the group, Barbara Smith,⁶⁰ writes of the retreats that “We would call them retreats, but, in fact, they were political meetings that had lots of different elements. So, it was a way for people who were separated to be in the same place and do some political work with each other.”⁶¹ It was from these political meetings that the members of the CRC developed a theory of their own oppression as Black lesbians that would come to constitute the Collective’s 1979 statement. To fully analyze the text of this statement would take far more pages than I have to spend, so here I will simply draw attention to one excerpt of note:

Above all else, our politics initially sprang from the shared belief that Black women are inherently valuable, that our liberation is a necessity not as an adjunct to somebody else's but because of our need as human persons for autonomy.⁶²

Understanding the work of the CRC as a form of freedom dreaming, we can come to read this text as a demand for the rights and liberation of Black women, and more explicitly a call for a future free of violence against Black women. The Collective, in offering this statement of the inherent value of Black women and necessity of their

⁶⁰ As a student at Mount Holyoke College, the institution this thesis is written within, Smith created the first retreat of this kind in collaboration with a current professor—this history serves as a direct example of how freedom dreaming is possible even within and in spite of institutional limits on radical Black thought.

⁶¹ Duchess Harris, *Black Feminist Politics from Kennedy to Clinton* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 20.

⁶² Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor et al., 18.

liberation, prefigures a liberatory future recognizing that “if Black women were free, it would mean that everyone else would have to be free since [Black women’s] freedom would necessitate the destruction of all the systems of oppression.”⁶³

Just as the Black Star Line acted as a physical mechanism to enact UNIA’s dream of returning to Africa, the Combahee River Collective utilized mass education and self-defense as a way of bringing into practice a world free of violence against Black women. Following the 1979 murders of eleven Black women in Boston and the subsequent lack of attention to the intersectional nature of the violence, the CRC published and circulated a pamphlet entitled “Eleven Black Women—Why Did They Die?”⁶⁴. The resource itself included both a theoretical analysis of the intersections of race and gender in violence against Black women, as well as practical self-defense tips. In collaboration with a number of different activist organizations in the newly formed Coalition for Women’s Safety, members of the CRC worked together to

Develop and publicize a counter-narrative that politicized the slayings as violence against women, aided and abetted by the conjoined racism and sexism of elected officials, the Boston police department, and the establishment media...Advocating a program of collective self-protection in lieu of calling for increased police protection, several of the coalition’s member groups worked to create grassroots emergency services for their neighborhoods.⁶⁵

Although less transnational in geographical scope than UNIA’s calls to return to Africa, the “Why Did They Die?” pamphlets along with the community-based emergency

⁶³ Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor et al., 22-23.

⁶⁴ Combahee River Collective, “Eleven Black Women: Why Did They Die,” *Eleven Black Women: Why Did They Die* (Boston, MA: Combahee River Collective, 1979).

⁶⁵ Emily L. Thuma, *All Our Trials: Prisons, Policing, and the Feminist Fight to End Violence* (University of Illinois Press, 2019), 131-132.

services to follow are another crucial example of what it looks like to practice freedom dreaming: the Collective identified what freedom meant to them, and put into action their next steps towards achieving that goal.

Abolition as Prefigurative Politic

In the years since Kelley's book popularized the term, freedom dreaming has come to be defined as a creative, expansive, and multifaceted project across abolitionist movement spaces. Freedom dreaming has been practiced as hip-hop theater about the end of mass incarceration,⁶⁶ educators bringing Kelley's concepts into fourth grade classrooms,⁶⁷ artistic collaborations across prison walls,⁶⁸ Black disabled care and interdependence,⁶⁹ and more. Activist and artist Tourmaline says that, "Freedom dreams are born when we face harsh conditions not with despair, but with the deep knowledge that these conditions will change—that a world filled with softness and

⁶⁶ Sarah Branch, "Freedom Dreaming: A Call to Imagine," BRIC, June 8, 2018, <https://www.bricartsmedia.org/blog/freedom-dreaming-call-imagine>.

⁶⁷ Kevin Ko-wen Chen, "4th Graders Re-Envision Justice in Their Freedom Dreams," 4th Graders Re-envision Justice in Their Freedom Dreams | Ethical Culture Fieldston School, November 19, 2020, <https://www.ecfs.org/en/news/2020/11/19/4th-graders-re-envision-justice-in-their-freedom-dreams/>.

⁶⁸ "Freedom Dreams," Prison + Neighborhood Arts/Education Project, 2016, <https://p-nap.org/freedom-dreams/>.

⁶⁹ Jalyn Radziminski, "Black Disability Freedom Dreams," AAPD, January 4, 2021, <https://www.aapd.com/flh-black-disability-freedom-dreams/>.

beauty and care is not only possible, but inevitable.”⁷⁰ This sense of the inevitability of change does not simply arise from the scale of the issues abolitionists face, but rather out of a sense of dedication to one’s community and a responsibility to fight for them. Abolitionist activist Assata Shakur famously stated, “It is our duty to fight for our freedom. It is our duty to win. We must love each other and support each other. We have nothing to lose but our chains.”⁷¹

Reading Shakur’s quote in conversation with that of Tourmaline, we can come to recognize the centrality of care, love, and hope to abolitionist work across time. [talking about Shakur’s care for others while incarcerated] Despite attempts to characterize Shakur Similarly, Tourmaline’s work is centered around Tourmaline having stated that said work is “Although both activists are very different in both their approach to abolition and their respective time periods, the same themes of hope and a shared responsibility towards liberation are present in Tourmaline’s work in the present day as they are in Shakur’s statement. Both quotes demonstrate the role of being willing to look beyond current conditions in freedom dreaming—there can be no freedom dreaming without the ability to dream up new ways of being in relation to each other absent prisons and policing.

⁷⁰ Tourmaline, “Filmmaker and Activist Tourmaline on How to Freedom Dream,” *Vogue* (*Vogue*, July 2, 2020), <https://www.vogue.com/article/filmmaker-and-activist-tourmaline-on-how-to-freedom-dream>.

⁷¹ Assata Shakur, *Assata: An Autobiography* (Chicago, Illinois: Zed Books Ltd., 1987), 52.

Crucial to the practice of freedom dreaming outlined here is that it is an active project—in a 2016 interview Kelley states of the focus of his book, “The Black Radical Imagination is not a thing but a process...It is about how people in transformative social movements, moved/shifted their ideas, rethought inherited categories, tried to locate and overturn blatant, subtle, and invisible modes of domination.”⁷² Freedom dreaming means an active investment in and continual process of creating a post-carceral future, where practitioners take steps to move towards an interpersonal practice that doesn’t rely on prisons or policing. This definition of abolition as interpersonal practice draws both from the work of Ruth Wilson Gilmore in describing “antirelationality” as a tool of racial capitalism (i.e. a method of replacing traditional ways of relating to one another in favor of those relations needed to sustain racial capitalism), as well as from the ways prisons and policing specifically dismantle interpersonal relationships.⁷³ This dismantling of interpersonal relationships occurs across several different axes—incarceration produces a physical separation of community members from their friends and family, enforcing isolation for those inside and what is referred to as “doing time on the outside” for others; and simultaneously, reenforcing ways of relating to one

⁷² Robin D.G. Kelley, Walidah Imarisha, and Jonathan Horstmann, “Black Art Matters: A Roundtable on the Black Radical Imagination,” Red Wedge (Red Wedge, July 26, 2016), <http://www.redwedgemagazine.com/online-issue/black-art-matters-roundtable-black-radical-imaginatio>.

⁷³ Ruth Wilson Gilmore, “Race and Globalization,” in *Geographies of Global Change: Remapping the World*, ed. R. J. Johnston et al. (New York: Wiley-Blackwell, 2002), 261.

another grounded in punishment and justice.⁷⁴ The latter of these two axes is known as “carceral logic”, the effects of which being that “[Modern societies], like a hammer that sees only contexts in which to pummel, have become carceral states that see only contexts in which to punish and imprison”.⁷⁵ As such, one form of abolitionist freedom dreaming is imagining what methods of relating to each other outside of the context of prisons and carceral punishment might look like, and beginning to put these methods into action.

One of the methods by which abolitionists challenge antirelationality and carceral culture is through the use of letter-writing. Both the physical and cultural structures of prisons create divides between different groups, segregating those incarcerated from the rest of the population. Groups such as Black and Pink connect those outside prisons with those inside, with the goal of challenging these divides caused by prison walls. This kind of writing may seem like a small or incremental action, but the act of refusing to accept the boundaries created between the free world and those on the inside can be a deeply radical act. Because antirelationality is one of the primary weapons used by the prison-industrial complex to legitimate the separation of people from their communities, refusing to allow that separation to happen through

⁷⁴ Donald Braman, *Doing Time on the Outside: Incarceration and Family Life in Urban America* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2007).

⁷⁵ Michael J. Coyle and Mechthild Nagel, *Contesting Carceral Logic: Towards Abolitionist Futures* (Abingdon, Oxon ; New York, NY: Routledge, 2021), 1.

letter-writing means engaging in a form of utopian freedom dreaming. Letter-writing means “Caring for other people, communicating, [and] mutually destroying systems.”⁷⁶

Challenging antirelationality means not just crossing boundaries between the free world and the prison, but additionally creating alternatives to carcerality. Although mass incarceration and policing remain the dominant methods of responding to harm in a US context, many abolitionists have begun experiments and creative projects aimed towards freedom dreaming new ways of responding to harm. Just five minutes away from the college I am writing this work from, educators and students in Holyoke High School utilize transformative justice, a method of engaging and fostering accountability with people who have committed harm rather than removing them from the community, in order to respond to moments of conflict among the student body. This example also begins to move the work of this chapter towards theorizing how freedom dreaming can take place within schools and educational spaces, not initially as an examination of pedagogy but as a method of establishing the abolitionist and freedom dreaming potential of spaces within educational institutions.

First launched in 2015, the Pa'lante Restorative Justice program at Holyoke High was a response to the presence of the school to prison pipeline on Holyoke High's

⁷⁶ Jared Rodriguez / Truthout et al., “Prison Pen Pals Chip Away at the Prison-Industrial Complex One Letter at a Time,” Truthout (Truthout, March 28, 2022), <https://truthout.org/articles/prison-pen-pals-chip-away-at-the-prison-industrial-complex-one-letter-at-a-time/>.

campus⁷⁷. Organizers chose to disrupt the administration's frequent use of suspensions by utilizing Indigenous circle practices, bringing their freedom dreaming project into practice. Utilizing freedom dreaming in the context of Holyoke High meant imagining a way of dealing with conflict that didn't involve suspensions or pushing students out of schools and into prisons. Pa'lante provided a "counter-narrative" against popular ideas about the majority-Latine student body attending Holyoke High, a way of pulling students in rather than pushing them out, and an interruption of a long-standing pattern of discipline across schools⁷⁸. This is only one example of organizers using freedom dreaming to create a new idea of what their society can look like, however freedom dreams can look like everything from collaborative murals as a method of resisting gentrification to large-scale protests against pipelines built across Indigenous land⁷⁹. Common to each of these examples is a focus on what is required to not only recognize that a system of regulating student behavior, housing, or environmental policy isn't working or is actively harmful, but to be willing to dream up something new.

Freedom Dreaming in the Classroom

⁷⁷ NEPR Ben James, "Holyoke Students Lead the Charge for Changing Disciplinary Practices," Holyoke Students Lead The Charge For Changing Disciplinary Practices | WBUR News (WBUR, June 11, 2018), <https://www.wbur.org/news/2018/06/11/holyoke-students-changing-disciplinary-practices>.

⁷⁸ James, 2018.

⁷⁹ Kaitlyn Selman and Cori Farrow, "Freedom Dreams and Abolitionist Youth Organizing," Abolition Journal, October 7, 2020, <https://abolitionjournal.org/freedom-dreams-and-abolitionist-youth-organizing/>.

Freedom dreaming has already been established by educators such as Bettina Love as a key aspect of abolitionist teaching. In her 2019 book *We Want to Do More Than Survive*, Love writes, “Abolitionist teaching asks educators...to abandon teaching gimmicks like “grit” that represent the experiences of dark youth as ahistorical and further pathologize them and evoke collective freedom dreaming.”⁸⁰ Here freedom dreaming is defined in the context of the classroom as imagining and working to create new ways of teaching and learning, and specifically those that acknowledge white supremacy and carceral cultures and reject their presence in the classroom.

Educators practice freedom dreaming in their classrooms in a number of different ways, which I find several vibrant examples of in *Lessons in Liberation*, an anthology written by abolitionist educators. Returning to Kelley’s description of freedom dreaming as rooted in histories of Black liberation movements, one educator, Osceola Ward, writes about what it looks like to practice freedom dreaming in the classroom as a way of connecting with Black history and one’s ancestors.

Creating a different entry point into the transformative potential of education, I reveal the long genealogy of Black folks who used textual literacy to assist their fight against white supremacy in service of abolitionist efforts...We use our [community circle] as a space to honor these ancestors, and to center their knowledges in our efforts to fortify our freedom dreams (2021, pp. 195).

This reference back to histories of activism and Black liberation movements directly relates back to the modes of freedom dreaming Kelley proposes in *Freedom Dreams*—just as he structures the book as an overview of past freedom dreaming practices that may

⁸⁰ Bettina Love, *We Want to Do More than Survive: Abolitionist Teaching and the Pursuit of Educational Freedom* (Boston, MA: Beacon, 2020), 12.

then inform the current practice of freedom dreaming, abolitionist educators may build a dreaming practice into the classroom setting by looking back to past examples.

Moving to freedom dreaming as an artistic practice as highlighted in chapter six of *Freedom Dreams*, the educators publishing *Lessons in Liberation* bring art and creativity into their educational practices quite literally, by including a section of the anthology titled “Nourishing Our Imaginations: Abolitionist Art”. This chapter is composed entirely of abolitionist art, and demonstrates the ways art is a crucial part of the freedom-dreaming process, and how teachers are including art in their analyses of addressing structures of power. I include a few of these art pieces below, to highlight the ways in which abolitionist artists and educators use the language of freedom and imagination.

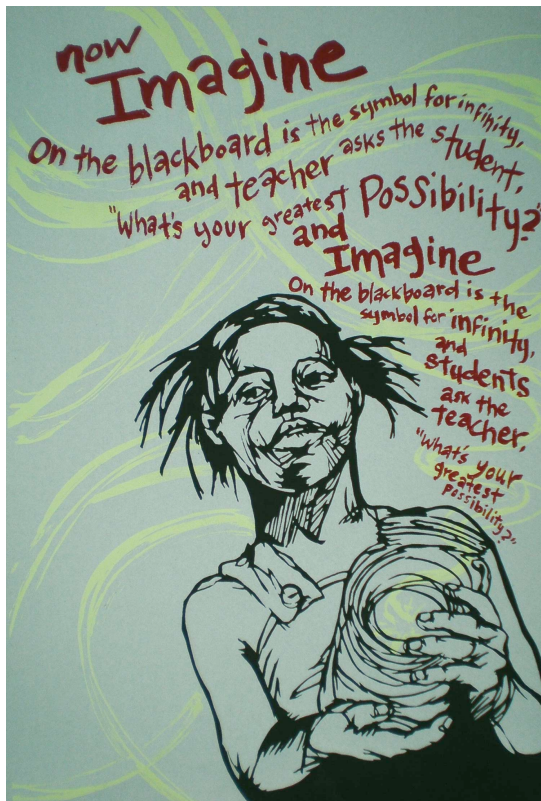


Figure 1 (left): *Blackboard*, by Bec Young.⁸¹ [Image description: an illustration of a Black girl holding a jar and gazing out of frame—the background is blue and green swirls, and text next to the girl reads, “Now imagine on the blackboard is the symbol for infinity, and teacher asks the student, “What’s your greatest possibility?” and Imagine on the blackboard is the symbol for infinity, and students ask the teacher, “What’s your greatest possibility?””]

Figure 2 (right): *Study*, by Peter Railand.⁸² [Image description: An illustration of two children sitting back to back on top of a city roof. Both are reading books, with ribbons curling out of the books reading “Dream”, “Empower”, “Question”, and “Study”, against a blue sky, the only color in the heavy line-art image.]

Although not necessarily surrealist art themselves, both pieces of art exhibit the same “exaltation of freedom, revolt, imagination and love” as is in the definition of surrealism stated previously. The first piece situates imagination in the classroom, by providing an example of what it might look like to engage in a mutual questioning of what is possible, and the second image leads us to education as a mode of dreaming.

Freedom dreaming is additionally a practice not limited to a specific age range or classroom topic—Akiera “Ki” Gross, for example, writes about their work encouraging freedom dreaming in a kindergarten context,

Kids are encouraged to feel limitless in the creativity of their solutions, because there is nothing intentionally hindering their thoughts. Much like children at play, each question refuses the banality of oppression, inviting them—at will—to freedom dream possible futures as present realities. (2021, pp. 179)

⁸¹ Young, Bec. *Blackboard*. 2010. In Education for Liberation Network, & Critical Resistance Editorial Collective (Eds.). *Lessons in liberation: An abolitionist toolkit for educators*. 142. Chico: AK Press, 2021.

⁸² Railand, Peter. *Study*. 2018. In Education for Liberation Network, & Critical Resistance Editorial Collective (Eds.). *Lessons in liberation: An abolitionist toolkit for educators*. 142. Chico: AK Press, 2021.

Important to note from this quote is the reference to curiosity, and a refusal to limit freedom dreaming and curiosity to a specific educational context.

Freedom to Freedom Dream

Having established the role of freedom dreaming in abolitionist movements and in the classroom, I now want to ask the reader: What gives us the ability to freedom dream, or to imagine a world beyond the one we live in? What are the forces constraining and encouraging this kind of radical imagination? And, perhaps most relevant in this context, how does the constraining of freedom dreams show up in the classroom? In this section, I want to argue for the connections between freedom dreaming and curiosity and examine the ways in which our curiosity is not apolitical in nature, with the goal of utilizing the model of “critically curious pedagogy” as relates to a pedagogy of freedom dreaming.

Curiosity as explored here indicates a willingness to question and explore alternative ideas, and is a trait that often shows up in advice for teachers as a key trait to cultivate among students. In connecting curiosity to freedom dreaming here it is not the intention to equate the two, or say that one must naturally lead to the other—certainly, one can be curious without then practicing the more actively creative endeavor of freedom dreaming—rather, in utilizing both terms in conversation with each other, this work aims to point to the various political and material investments in how and what students can be curious about, and how these investments prevent or encourage the practice of freedom dreaming.

Writing on the topic of curiosity in the classroom and pedagogy, academics Arjun Shankar and Perry Zurn coin the term “critically curious pedagogy” to refer to a pedagogical approach which “aims to stay accountable to the complex sociopolitical processes in and against which curiosity is either cultivated or suppressed” (2020, pp. 269). In other words, critically curious pedagogy looks at the root of curiosity, and how simply encouraging curiosity in the classroom is not enough if educators don’t additionally attend to the outside forces encouraging or constraining curiosity. Some of these forces are outlined throughout *Curiosity Studies*, wherein authors highlight the roles of race, capitalism, and gender in shaping curiosity. This pedagogy locates its intellectual genealogy in experiential learning pedagogy, feminist pedagogy, critical pedagogy, and abolitionist pedagogy, and as such is an ideal conversational partner in expanding our definition of an abolitionist pedagogy. This work argues that just as the outside forces referenced by Shankar and Zurn constrain curiosity, they may constrain the practice of freedom dreaming as well, and therefore abolitionist pedagogues must attend to how they show up in the classroom. Abolitionist pedagogy is not only a matter of encouraging students to freedom dream, but of asking what the forces are that constrain freedom dreaming.

What Constrains Freedom Dreaming?

Looking at race as one factor impacting an ability to practice freedom dreaming, Narendra Keval writes of the relationship between race and curiosity,

Curiosity requires a capacity to tolerate the anxieties of not knowing the other in advance but through a process of discovery...Retreating into a racist imagination is one attempt to resolve these anxieties by trying to bolt down certainty, which

shifts the focus from an inner threat to an outer one, creating monsters of our imagination that are grafted onto the ethnic characteristics of others (2020, pp. 147-148).

In other words, racism keeps us from being able to be curious, instead pushing us towards the familiar, and away from the more creative and untrodden paths of freedom dreaming. In an attempt to avoid the uncertainty associated with questioning one's own position in a racial hierarchy, white students may avoid the curiosity that comes hand in hand with freedom dreaming. An abolitionist pedagogy must therefore present an active challenge to white students' anxieties regarding issues of race, and challenge white students to look beyond centering whiteness. One way of doing so might look like actively centering authors of color while structuring syllabi.

Additionally, carceral learning tactics are a classroom practice that actively work to constrain freedom dreaming, and which affect Black and brown students disproportionately. This refers back to Jeffrey Moro's "cop shit" here, in defining carceral learning tactics as "any pedagogical technique or technology that presumes an adversarial relationship between students and teachers".⁸³ These learning and teaching tactics are easier at times to pinpoint in the K-12 classroom, by looking at research and writing on the school to prison pipeline—a system defined as "the practice of pushing kids out of school and toward the juvenile and criminal justice systems."⁸⁴ This process of pushing kids out of schools shows up in various ways—not just the physical presence

⁸³ Jeffrey Moro, "Against Cop Shit," Jeffrey Moro, February 13, 2020, <https://jeffreymoro.com/blog/2020-02-13-against-cop-shit/>.

⁸⁴ Mary Ellen Flannery, "The School-to-Prison Pipeline: Time to Shut It Down," NEA, May 1, 2015, <https://www.nea.org/advocating-for-change/new-from-nea/school-prison-pipeline-time-shut-it-down>.

of police in schools, as mentioned previously, but additionally the surveillance of youth of color, punishment of trivial transgressions, and teaching practices that rely upon police to maintain control of a classroom. To date, Black students are three times more likely to be expelled or suspended than white students, and in-school suspensions as a disciplinary measure disproportionately affect students of color as early as preschool.⁸⁵ Anti-Black racism manifesting as surveillance and targeting are the primary factors behind these rates, as rooted in both the history of anti-Black surveillance during chattel slavery, and more specifically in schools as the systemic exclusion of Black students out of a fear of Black literacy.⁸⁶

Providing a direct example of the ways carceral culture or carceral logics show up in and move beyond the classroom, abolitionist educator Carla Shalaby draws upon the work of other educators within the Education for Liberation Network to highlight parallels between common classroom governance practices and policing. Shalaby offers examples of what we do in schools, what we do out in the world, and what young people are learning from these classroom practices, such as what happens when teachers punish, pathologize, or diagnose so-called “troublesome” students; we can compare this practice to what we do “out in the world” in “interven[ing] on these

⁸⁵ U.S. Education Department, Office for Civil Rights, Civil Rights Data Collection, 2017-18 State and National Estimations, released June 2021, available at <https://ocrdata.ed.gov/estimations/2017-2018>.

⁸⁶ Patrick Cremin, “School Policing Was Designed to Criminalize Black Students. We Must Follow Black Voices Calling for Its Abolition.,” *Harvard Civil Rights-Civil Liberties Law Review*, July 8, 2020, <https://harvardcrcl.org/school-policing-was-designed-to-criminalize-black-students-w-e-must-follow-black-voices-calling-for-its-abolition/>.

individuals through fines, arrest, or other forms of punishment.”⁸⁷ In doing so, Shalaby argues that young people are learning that “individuals who are a problem need help, correction, and remediation”, and that “If you get in trouble a lot, it means there’s something wrong with you that needs to be fixed.”⁸⁸ Positioning an individual as a problem as outlined above not only limits the ability of a student to critique learning tactics in a more formal setting, as any response to their own problematization becomes merely another symptom of the problem, but it enforces a binary of good and bad in the classroom that additionally limits a students’ ability to be curious. The language of the student as a problem becomes a dissuading factor for the student, if they come to agree with others around them that they are in fact a problem and that the teacher must be the solution.

Epistemologies of Dreaming

This section will draw on work done within the field of critical race theory and critical philosophies, in order to make sense of the structure of carceral logics in ways that allow educators to work against them. Looking at the topic of epistemology, or the field of philosophy concerned with the production and repression of knowledge and how we know what we know, there are two key ideas that are directly useful for theorizing on freedom dreaming in the classroom: epistemic resistance, and an epistemology of ignorance. By utilizing theory on epistemology, the goal is to locate our

⁸⁷ Education for Liberation Network, & Critical Resistance Editorial Collective (Eds.). (2021). *Lessons in liberation: An abolitionist toolkit for educators*. AK Press, 106-107

⁸⁸ Education for Liberation Network, 107.

ability to freedom dream within a broader intellectual tradition of resistance against dominant frames of knowledge. As outlined above, carceral logics are one such dominant frame of knowledge. Through this framework, a professor might look at an incident like two Black students arriving late to class, and choose to respond by calling the police. Freedom dreaming as a form of resistance to this kind of incident means repositioning one's own frame of knowledge, so that one can come to see the presence of such a response as being produced by larger narratives around who deserves to be criminalized.

Feminist philosopher José Medina's approach to epistemic resistance comes out of a theory of epistemic injustice, or injustice that affects the very ways we are able to construct knowledge. This theory lends itself particularly well to abolitionist thought, as many abolitionists approach their work with the understanding that an abolition of police and prisons requires us to be able to construct knowledge in very new ways. Epistemic injustice is then those forms of injustice that prevent us from being able to imagine something new. Just as this chapter has previously highlighted racism as something that restricts what knowledge or curiosity can be created, Medina's reaction to this epistemic injustice is that of epistemic resistance. Defined as "the use of our epistemic resources and abilities to undermine and change oppressive normative structures and the complacent cognitive-affective functioning that sustains them," epistemic resistance in the context of the classroom requires professors and students alike to utilize

means that requires an assessment of one's own complacency in epistemic injustice.⁸⁹

Crucial to this epistemic resistance, professors must practice a critically curious pedagogy not just in their teaching but in their own learning as well. They need to be able to question where their own curiosity comes from in order to make space for freedom dreaming and being able to freedom dream themselves, and to do that they need to recognize their own institutional ties and what constrains them. Just as this chapter has discussed some of the forces impacting students' epistemic resistance to freedom dreaming, professors are by no means exempt from these outside influences. Educators in particular are incentivized to value certain kinds of knowing and certain investments in carceral systems, as a function of their own roles in the educational system.

This investment in the educational system is referred to by Meyerhoff as an "epistemology of educated ignorance", or "ways of knowing that hinder thought about critiques of, and alternatives to, the education-based mode of study."⁹⁰ Offering the previously mentioned "crisis consensus" as an example of this kind of epistemology, Meyerhoff states that defining the educational system as being in crisis hinders ways of thinking that challenge the existence of the university at all. Similar to how abolitionists critique portrayals of incarceration that refer to prisons as "broken" rather than functioning exactly how they are designed to do, moving past an epistemology of

⁸⁹Medina José, *The Epistemology of Resistance: Gender and Racial Oppression, Epistemic Injustice and Resistant Imaginations* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2013), 3.

⁹⁰ Meyerhoff, 36.

educated ignorance would require an acknowledgement that the educational system is not in crisis, but rather functioning exactly as it was designed to.

To move past an “epistemology of educated ignorance” would also require an interrogation on what the specific roles of academics and critical pedagogy are in the reproduction of hegemonic power through the existence of academia. The writers behind Abolition University (the mission statement of which being “studying within/against/beyond the university”) state of academia, “Critique is not simply a practice but a mode of institutional reproduction. It allows us to experience ourselves as if we are outside of the institution while remaining firmly ensconced in its liberal narrative of self-valorization” (2020, pp. 5). Instrumental to this quote is the distinction made between critiquing the university and moving outside academic standards of valor. Even within spaces of critical pedagogy and theory, academics frequently rely on institutional resources and status in order to practice and publish their work, and are required to continually conduct research and publish in order to maintain their employment in academia. This is not to say that critique coming from within the university and structural change cannot coexist, but rather that one’s use of critique to question academic norms “cannot account for the ways in which critique organizes us within a larger institutional framework of valuation.”⁹¹ Under this framework, there are institutionally-approved methods of critique, and institutionally-approved students and professors who utilize them, and those students who are deemed to be too disruptive or

⁹¹ Abigail Boggs et al., “Abolitionist University Studies: An Invitation,” Abolition University, 2019, <https://abolition.university/invitation/>, 5.

unruly in their critique.⁹² Additionally, the university is deeply experienced at intervening in critique for the purpose of demonstrating a depoliticized mode of “critical thinking”, thus disrupting and rendering toothless said critique. At the college this thesis is written within, one more recent and poignant example of this phenomenon is found on the college’s “Why a Women’s College?” page, which reads, “At Mount Holyoke, the first of the powerful Seven Sisters colleges, social activism is in our DNA...Mount Holyoke has long been committed to access and social justice.”⁹³ Under this text is an image of a 2018 student #MeToo protest, used as an example of the college’s commitment to activism—nowhere on the website is it mentioned that said protest was explicitly against the college, for a lack of action in continuing to employ a professor accused of sexual assault.⁹⁴

Pedagogical Implications

To bring both critically curious pedagogy and freedom dreaming into the classroom, there are a few more concrete suggestions this section will offer on pedagogical practice and strategy. Firstly, looking to the work of other abolitionist educators it is possible to identify methods by which these educators are encouraging

⁹² Mark Stern and Kristi Carey, “Good Students & Bad Activists: The Moral Economy of Campus Unrest,” *Journal of Curriculum and Pedagogy* 17, no. 1 (August 16, 2019): pp. 62-81, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15505170.2019.1649768>.

⁹³ “Why a Women’s College?,” Mount Holyoke College, September 3, 2021, https://www.mtholyoke.edu/about/why_womens_college.

⁹⁴ Dusty Christensen, “Mount Holyoke Students Rally in Support of Sexual Assault Survivors,” *Daily Hampshire Gazette* (Concord Monitor, October 24, 2018), <https://www.gazettenet.com/Students-rally-as-Mount-Holyoke-after-sexual-assault-all-egations-21042456>.

freedom dreaming in the classroom. Crucially, in following Kelley's characterization of surrealism and art as freedom dreaming, an abolitionist pedagogy of freedom dreaming encourages a sense of creativity, by allowing space for students to dream beyond what may be considered the norm in the classroom and to put these freedom dreams into action. This may look like integrating multiple methods of completing assignments into the class, having students build a larger project or event and put it into action by the end of the semester, or encouraging students to imagine how the classroom and learning could look differently from how it currently exists. A further example of how to facilitate these kinds of conversations around freedom dreaming is located in part two of the reading and reflection guide at the end of this thesis, titled, "What ideas and modes of thinking are activists using to challenge the PIC?"

Shakur and Zurn, in the conclusion of *Curiosity Studies* wherein they coin the term "critically curious pedagogy", state that "a critically curious pedagogy, because it allows for multiplicity and sociocultural contextualization, is as important for professors in the natural sciences as it is for those in the humanities and social sciences."⁹⁵ Similarly, this section claims that bringing curiosity and freedom dreaming into the classroom allows students to build upon the skills needed to practice abolitionist work, whether or not the classroom is teaching specifically abolitionist content. As such, methods of building curiosity in the classroom need not necessarily be around building a curiosity towards abolitionist work in order to still be a form of

⁹⁵ Shankar and Zurn, 280.

abolitionist pedagogy. Shakur and Zurn's principles for critically curious pedagogy are as follows:

(1) Bringing students into the process of deciding on assignment goals and content, (2) making curiosity an explicit part of the assignment prompt, (3) cultivating a research mindset in students through the assignment protocol, (4) providing multimodal variations to assignment structure, (5) linking assignments to students' experiences outside of class, and (6) creating a collaborative environment in which assignment outputs can be discussed.⁹⁶

I myself have experienced some of these forms of critically curious classroom practices while working with assignments that were very deliberately integrating students' perspectives into the structure of the assignment, and have certainly noticed an expanding view on what is possible not only in the classroom but in learning in general. My practices as an activist on my college campus have come to involve more frequently reaching out to other activists for advice or collaborations. At the same time, these classroom practices as well as those that integrate freedom dreaming and otherwise disrupt traditional educational etiquette can be deeply disorienting for students—suddenly conceiving of oneself as a source of knowledge and an active participant in defining the learning process means shifting one's view around what learning can be. It is this and similar senses of disorientation that I turn to in the next chapter, and which I identify as a key tool in producing an abolitionist epistemology.

⁹⁶ Shankar and Zurn, 281.

3

GENERATIVE DISORIENTATION AND UNCERTAIN ACTION

At the beginning of the 2021-2022 academic year and during my last year in college, I decided to join a task force with the mission of reimagining the role of police on my college campus. I am one of a few students on the committee, and the students are at times outnumbered by campus police officers in the conversation. In beginning to work on the task force, I held no large amount of confidence in what the college would actually commit to changing. Needless to say, sitting with this work while simultaneously sitting with the research I am doing in the field of abolitionist pedagogy brings up no small amount of irony and cognitive dissonance. Prior to my joining the committee, the group had recently rebranded our campus police force “Public Safety”, in an effort to create a more friendly or approachable police force in the context of broader protests against police. I know that my sphere of influence is relatively small as a student without the same institutional connections as the staff members on the committee, and that I am one of perhaps one or two people on the committee who believes in an abolitionist politic. I have aimed to promote what has been termed “non-reformist reform” by abolitionist activists⁹⁷, or reforms that begin to move power and resources away from police with the eventual goal of abolition entirely. This has

⁹⁷ Michael J. Coyle, David Scott, and Mohamed Shehk, “Abolitionist Reforms,” in *The Routledge International Handbook of Penal Abolition* (Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon ; New York, NY: Routledge, 2021).

included identifying the places where campus police⁹⁸ do not legally need to be providing services, such as offering transportation to and from nearby medical facilities, and promoting alternatives to police intervention in these areas. However, this work is slow going, and I remain aware of the risks of the co-optation of these demands. As such, I have decided that the only ethical way to go about this work is with a deep sense of the necessity of uncertainty.

To be uncertain in abolitionist interactions with the state or institutions of power is a tricky balancing act. In a 2020 guide published by anti-carceral organization *Interrupting Criminalization*, the group cautions that,

Decision makers and system actors and even opponents will begin co-opting defund and divest/invest language and community ideas without taking any concrete actions to move defund demands forward. Similarly, institutions are sophisticated at absorbing and repackaging community demands to appear as if they are reimagining the system with people when they are in fact working to preserve it.⁹⁹

To be at all uncertain or irresolute about one's beliefs risks a co-optation of your language and work—especially when surrounded by deeply-held beliefs in carceral logics, it can seem easier to shift what counts as a success rather than shifting the mindsets of those around you. However, it is precisely for this reason that disorientation is a necessary condition for abolitionist work. Following feminist philosopher Ami Harbin and abolitionist theorist Liat Ben-Moshe, “Abolition is not about prescriptive

⁹⁸ Although as previously stated this police force has been renamed “public safety”, I refer to them here as campus police in order to act against the false equivalency of safety with policing, recognizing that “campus safety” is still a registered police force with the state of Massachusetts and as such is limited in the capacity to promote lasting safety.

⁹⁹ Megyung Chung et al., “Navigating Public Safety Task Forces: A Guide From The Ground” (*Interrupting Criminalization*, 2021), 32.

solutions, as decisions in one case will not work in another, which is challenging for doing activist work, especially on a mass scale...abolition politics invites us to abandon our attachment to definitive types of knowing and especially to knowing all(s)."¹⁰⁰ By embracing a sense of disorientation and, at times, discomfort within this work, I have rejected any sense of certainty that I know the most effective or ethical method of engaging in abolitionist work. It is precisely this sense of disorientation that I argue must be a part of abolitionist pedagogies, and which I explore in the chapter to follow.

As outlined by Ben-Moshe, abolition is not just a political movement but “a specific epistemology that produces an ethical position, one which resonates with the kind of disorientating (or jarring) ways of knowing that require or lead to epistemic humility (not knowing what to do or how to go on).” The nature of abolitionist thought as based in epistemologies of disorientation (or modes of thought that are based in uncertainty) means that an abolitionist pedagogy must similarly disorient students around these norms. However, it’s important to note that some students are already disoriented by the broader systems of punishment and regulation shaping their educational experience, and that not all disorientations lead to productive action. Some students, when faced with the disorientation of recognizing one’s position in a broader culture of white supremacy, may either dig in their heels or feel a sense of hopelessness. Additionally, to disorient students requires an understanding of the ideals around which students are currently oriented.

¹⁰⁰ Liat Ben-Moshe, “Dis-Orientation, Dis-Epistemology and Abolition,” *Feminist Philosophy Quarterly* 4, no. 2 (2018), <https://doi.org/10.5206/fpq/2018.2.3491>, 6.

This chapter will start by outlining the ways in which abolitionist thought relies upon both disorientation and dis-epistemologies, the latter of which is defined by Ben-Moshe as “letting go of the idea that anyone can have a definitive pathway for knowing how to rid ourselves of carceral logics.” Disorientation leads us to question the carceral pathways we are currently on (those leading us to respond in punitive ways to harm), and embracing dis-epistemologies can lead us to building new pathways entirely. Following this, the chapter will then outline a description of who is currently disoriented and who is oriented around white supremacist and settler-colonial norms. In the space of the classroom, some students fit into traditional academic norms around race, class, language, and ability, and are thus already in a position of being oriented. However for those students who are not (students for whom English is not their first language, disabled students, and first-generation college students, for example), they enter into the classroom already disoriented. Using a model that encourages the disorientation of students unilaterally in the classroom does not attend to the differences between these different groups of students, and has the potential to either and an understanding of how students in the modern US university are currently oriented in the space of the classroom, with the goal of better understanding how both professors and students can encourage disorientations as a part of an abolitionist pedagogy.

Disorientations of the Teaching Act

Writing in a 2014 edition of “The Radical Teacher”, abolitionist scholar Dylan Rodríguez states, “The massive carceral-cultural form of the prison has naturalized a

systemic disorientation of the teaching act, so that teaching is no longer separable from the work of policing, juridical discipline, and state-crafted punishment.”¹⁰¹ By defining prisons as carceral-cultural in nature, Rodríguez states that “the prison regime encompasses the multiple knowledges and meanings that are created around the institutional site and cultural symbol of “the prison.”¹⁰² This includes carceral logics around who is worthy of punishment and justice, as stated in previous chapters; the financial investments placed in incarceration by corporations like phone companies providing phone services to incarcerated people; and the investments politicians and white Americans have in maintaining a clear boundary between criminality and the rest of society. Prisons hold a specific place in American society and culture, and Rodríguez argues that the embeddedness of this institution in American culture has led to a mutualistic relationship between prisons and schools. Just as the existence of incarceration builds the relationships and structures under which we teach and learn, institutions of schooling in fact reproduce these power structures within the context of education, and as such perpetuate carceral logics students then go on to reinforce.

Disorientation is the central defining concept used by Rodríguez in relation to the classroom as a particular space. *The Disorientation of the Teaching Act* defines disorientation as a negative experience, moving the work of teaching away from equitable relationships in the learning process and towards the reproduction of carceral

¹⁰¹ Dylan Rodríguez, “The Disorientation of the Teaching Act: Abolition as Pedagogical Position,” *Radical Teacher* 88, no. 1 (2010): pp. 7-19, <https://doi.org/10.1353/rdt.2010.0006>, 7.

¹⁰² Rodríguez, 8.

logics. Although this chapter will concur with Rodríguez that much of the work of teaching in American colleges and universities reproduces structures promoting policing and prisons, this chapter's interjection in this language of disorientation is in shifting from Rodríguez' definition of disorientation to a feminist philosophical engagement with the term. Rather than disorientation being defined by Rodríguez as a shift in the role of teachers away from a previous orientation towards equity (mirroring the crisis consensus' model of a previously equitable educational system now in crisis), this chapter engages with and explores productive disorientation as abolitionist praxis. In other words, this chapter argues that disorientation can be positive, and in fact productive, and that abolitionist work requires some measure of disorientation. Recurrent throughout is the question of how we might enact or encourage disorientation as a pedagogical practice, and how disorientation in fact may encourage a challenge to carceral structures of harm.

Harbin's Disorientation and Moral Life

Feminist philosopher Ami Harbin, writing in her 2016 book titled *Disorientation and Moral Life*, defines disorientation as "temporally extended, major life experiences that make it difficult for individuals to know how to go on."¹⁰³ Harbin provides examples ranging from losing loved ones, to experiencing natural disasters, to going through a breakup, but the common thread throughout each experience is a feeling of not knowing how to go on or what one's next steps should be. Harbin does acknowledge

¹⁰³ Ami Harbin, *Disorientation and Moral Life* (New York, New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 2.

the relationship between disorientations and trauma, as the two may often come hand in hand (xii), however she argues that the two are not necessarily equatable. Rather, Harbin frames disorientation as a disruption of the everyday in which we may be forced to reassess our current orientations and beliefs, and as such disorientations are an integral part of our own moral growth. In contrast to Rodriguez' use of the term disorientation to indicate the aggregation of both teaching and policing, Harbin defines a form of disorientation that may in fact encourage a challenge to carceral structures of harm.

Harbin highlights several key connections between disorientation and learning, and goes on to detail the role of disorientation in producing specific forms of action and being in relation to others. Significantly, in opposition to some other forms of literature on what produces moral action, Harbin argues against the need to be certain in order to act morally. Disorientation is rather an upsetting of one's relationship to dominant norms, which has the potential to produce such states of being as epistemic humility or unreliability:

As in the case of students learning about oppression and privilege for the first time, awareness generated of political complexity in this way can have the effect of making us aware of our epistemic unreliability, or of the likelihood that since we were so unaware once, it could easily happen again.¹⁰⁴

This kind of epistemic humility does not necessarily result in a reorientation of one's beliefs that leaves an individual feeling oriented again. Therefore, when we do act against injustice in this state of disorientation, we act not in line with a solid sense of

¹⁰⁴ Harbin, 91.

confidence that our point of view is the correct one, but rather we act “despite ourselves.”¹⁰⁵ Given the significant negative affective experiences tied up with disorientations, taking Harbin’s definition at face value requires that we as readers first acknowledge a few key ideas about disorientations. First, we must acknowledge the ubiquity of disorientation—although not everyone may have lived through a massive environmental displacement or experienced war within their home country, feeling disrupted by specific losses or changes to our day-to-day is not at all an uncommon occurrence. Secondly, we must recognize the role of the everyday in sparking reevaluations of our core ethics or beliefs (in fact, in doing so we are able to place disorientation within the context of the classroom, as occurs later in this chapter). And third, disorientations may be experienced differently and in different contexts depending on factors such as race, gender, class, etc. This last key idea is what brings us from the last chapter’s discussions on differential access to curiosity to this chapter’s discussions on the differential effects of disorientation.

Disorientations of Abolition

The value of disorientation shows up prominently within abolitionist praxis. Turning to the seemingly contradictory forms of activism that Harbin deems “irresolute action”, abolitionist struggles against incarceration and for those currently incarcerated come to mind. Frequently, abolitionist activists are stuck between two seemingly contradictory goals. While the main goal of the movement involves the future abolition

¹⁰⁵ Harbin, 97

of prisons and policing, it can be difficult at times to reconcile this move towards abolition with a desire to improve the material conditions of those currently incarcerated. The tensions between reform and abolition—the former often resolidifying the validity of incarceration as a practice and seeking to create stronger and more robust systems of policing, and the latter seeking to abolish the practice entirely—mean that supporting those currently on the inside may necessitate irresolute action. For example, it is not uncommon for prisons to be overcrowded or in poor condition, subjecting incarcerated people to unhealthy and inhumane living conditions. The reformist response to such an issue may involve redirecting resources towards healthcare or other material needs for those incarcerated, which may risk re-entrenching the model of prisons as fundamentally good or moral systems merely corrupted, rather than systems functioning as intended.¹⁰⁶ Abolitionists are stuck in the difficult position of having to take action in ways that reinforce the validity of harmful systems, in order to provide direct and immediate support for those on the inside. This might look like simultaneously advocating for better training for guards, in order to improve the material conditions of those inside, while at the same time trying to resist reformist narratives that position “kinder” jails as the answer to mass incarceration. Harbin states of these conflicts, “Where conflicting calls to action do exist, and where both/and action is possible and productive, holding a “both/and” perspective is likely to involve more conflicted, trepidatious action, but can lead to action that does justice to the coexistence

¹⁰⁶ Critical Resistance, “A World Without Walls: The CR Abolitionist Organizing Toolkit” (Oakland, CA: Critical Resistance, 2004), 33.

of important goals that are in tension.”¹⁰⁷ For abolitionist action to hold that tension of “both/and”, it requires sitting with disorientation, and at times acting in ways that might outwardly be oriented against abolitionist principles.

The both/and of this tension additionally lends itself well to imagining new and expansive solutions to the systemic problems of carceral systems—if neither option (immediate abolition nor reform) is ideal or possible, the requirement then becomes to create new ideas in the space between. Key to this idea is that no imagined alternative or freedom dream is applicable evenly to all situations; students organizing against the presence of police in schools will take entirely different approaches from organizers working against solitary confinement on a statewide level; organizers having conversations on how to address domestic violence in ways that don’t require policing will be talking about different ideas than academics theorizing on carceral logics. As such, abolitionist work is always an ongoing experiment, framed around creating new ways to support one’s community outside of the police. The “One Million Experiments” project offers a particularly striking example of the experimentation and creativity central to abolitionist work. Led by anti-carceral organizations Project NIA and Interrupting Criminalization, initiatives run by scholar-researchers Mariame Kaba and Andrea J. Ritchie,¹⁰⁸ the project includes a list of experiments in community safety from across the globe.¹⁰⁹ The goal of these community projects is not to create one single set of

¹⁰⁷ Harbin, 138.

¹⁰⁸ “Team,” Interrupting Criminalization, accessed April 23, 2022, <https://www.interruptingcriminalization.com/team>.

¹⁰⁹ “Index,” 1M Experiments, accessed March 26, 2022, <https://millionexperiments.com/Index>.

strategies on how to create alternatives to policing across these projects; rather, community members are developing a diverse spectrum of community support initiatives. These projects are led by groups such as religious congregations, worker co-ops, universities, and city councils, with offerings ranging from digital smartphone applications to support domestic violence survivors, community fridges, mental health crisis hotlines, and mutual aid in the form of herbal medicine. These projects are constantly evolving, and because of the creative nature of abolitionist organizing, someone engaging in abolitionist work may often be in the position of “not knowing how to go on” in having a predetermined path for their organizing, or of being disoriented. Working towards abolition therefore requires an ability to sit with the unfinished nature of the movement as still working towards the closure of jails and prisons and rejection of carceral culture, on the longer-term path towards abolition.

Orientations

If disorientations occur as a result of a disruption, often negative in nature, to everyday life, who is most likely to be oriented and disoriented? And who gets the privilege of not having to reorient one’s point of view in the wake of a significant disruption? Harbin argues that “considerations of experiences of disorientation must include the social and relational position of those who experience major disruptions.”¹¹⁰ Although anyone may experience the loss of a job or the death of a loved one, the impacts of these disorientations may vary from person to person, depending upon their

¹¹⁰ Harbin, 33.

support network and compounding pressures in other areas of life. And on the other hand, there are some forms of disorientation that only certain groups may experience—the disorientation of experiencing systemic racism, for example. As such, some groups may be more likely to be oriented in a societal structure that is designed around themselves and their points of view—for example, "being white in racist society is typically orienting."¹¹¹ This discrepancy in who is oriented around issues of race and class matter to an abolitionist pedagogy because if abolitionist work and thought require an ability to work in the in-between of a carceral present and an abolitionist future, Western settler-colonial epistemology and white supremacist thought actively discourage this kind of disorientation. For example, Activist Tema Okun characterizes either/or thinking as well as a belief in only one way to do things as both being key tenets of white supremacy culture.¹¹² Both of these traits may show up in the classroom through strict rubrics around the correct way to answer a prompt or complete an assignment, a lack of space for opposing thought, and the persistent presence of binaries without a subsequent challenge to these binaries (i.e. binaries around good and bad, etc). Successful abolitionist movements share both a divestment in carceral logics as well as a practice of dis-epistemology, that is, to imagine what might exist outside and beyond policing and prisons. To begin to unravel these orientations, we need to ask how students and professors are currently oriented in the context of American higher education.

¹¹¹ Harbin, 75.

¹¹² Tema Okun, "White Supremacy Culture Characteristics," WHITE SUPREMACY CULTURE, 2021, <https://www.whitesupremacyculture.info/characteristics.html>.

In order to fully understand disorientation in the university, one must first understand what the university is oriented *towards*. Sara Ahmed's *Queer Phenomenology* offers one such mode of thinking through which to approach orientation. In Ahmed's analysis, phenomenology, or the study of consciousness as "always directed "toward" an object", by necessity must include a study of the orientation of the body and the self.¹¹³ This may be a physical orientation (as in the orientation of one's body relative to a table or chair), or a mental orientation (understanding how "orientations involve different ways of registering the proximity of objects and others").¹¹⁴ It is both the physical and mental orientation of university students and professors that impacts how one may be disoriented under an abolitionist pedagogical practice.

The orientation of students in the university is most important here in two spheres: the university as a colonial project informing students' understanding of space and place, and the orientation from which students enter into the university. Gardner Seawright, writing on how place-based educators may view place, states that "Western epistemology, and subsequently Western schooling, has come to be seen as placeless."¹¹⁵ Although this analysis does point out a common issue with educational methods that create sharp distinctions between the school and the community, to say that Western education is placeless loses sight of the broader context. Writing from a feminist theorist

¹¹³ Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 2.

¹¹⁴ Ahmed, 3.

¹¹⁵ Gardner Seawright, "Settler Traditions of Place: Making Explicit the Epistemological Legacy of White Supremacy and Settler Colonialism for Place-Based Education," *Educational Studies* 50, no. 6 (February 2014): pp. 554-572, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131946.2014.965938>, 555.

perspective, this conception of Western education as placeless additionally risks reproducing a zero-point epistemology. A “zero-point epistemology”, or an epistemology that presumes a “view from nowhere”, removes the viewer from the context they’re operating in.^{116, 117} The goal of the viewer or researcher should be to separate their research from their personal stakes, local context, personal identities, and potential bias. Feminist epistemologist Donna Haraway challenges this epistemology by proposing a model of situated knowledges—a form of knowledge that takes into account and does not try to bypass the positionality of the viewer. Understanding Western education as not placeless but rather deeply informed by the context of place gives us a perspective from which to locate the orientation of the Western university.

Within a US context, as this thesis is written within, all institutions of higher education are located on occupied or stolen Indigenous land. We may look to land-grant universities as an example of this fact; the 1862 Morrill Act granted recently colonized land to specific states for the purpose of utilizing said land to maintain higher educational institutions.¹¹⁸ However, regardless of whether or not a particular institution is a land-grant institution, all universities established in what is now known as the US are on indigenous land. Different institutions take different approaches to acknowledging or not acknowledging this fact, however any institution operating in

¹¹⁶ Donna Haraway, 1991, “Situated Knowledges,” In *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women*, New York: Routledge.

¹¹⁷ Santiago Castro-Gómez, “The Missing Chapter of Empire,” *Cultural Studies* 21, no. 2-3 (2007): pp. 428-448, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09502380601162639>.

¹¹⁸ la paperson, *A Third University Is Possible* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 26.

this context is influenced by settler modes of thought regardless of how openly this is acknowledged. In this context, settler modes of thought are defined in line with Seawright's work on place-based education. In contrast to Indigenous epistemologies prioritizing a direct and mutual relationship with the natural world, settler traditions of place "have been developed out of a deeply rooted anthropocentrism and hierarchized vision of the world...produc[ing] a fetish of ownership that sits at the foundation of settler traditions of place."¹¹⁹ Within the context of the classroom, this may look like a reproduction of zero-point epistemology and a displacement of students within the means of production of knowledge. When teachers situate students as being outside of the means of production of knowledge, students become simply consumers within the educational system, rather than individuals with the ability to produce new knowledge themselves. Similarly, the reproduction of zero-point epistemology runs the risk of decontextualizing the knowledge that students and professors have, situating this knowledge as universally true rather than coming from the context of a particular time and place (the 21st century Western university).

Additionally, to look at the educational norms many students have been exposed to immediately before entering the collegiate or university setting, it is important to note the role of college applications and standardized testing in a K-12 context. Although these same norms are certainly present after entering college, they reach their apex in the application process and the realm of standardized testing. The No Child Left Behind Act of 2002 mandated standardized testing for all public school students

¹¹⁹ Seawright, 559.

between third and eighth grade, and although an increasing number of colleges have done away with application requirements for tests such as the ACT and SAT, standardized testing still remains the norm for many colleges in the application process.¹²⁰ This testing acts to validate white supremacist and eugenicist ideas around merit and educational potential, specifically targeting students of color.¹²¹ These narratives around merit are a part of a legacy of bias going back to the beginning of standardized testing, in which “the lower scores of African Americans were regularly used to track Black students into vocational education or for White teachers to explain away any difficulties these students might be having in their classrooms.”¹²² Because these tests so strongly perpetuate the myth of the meritocracy regarding who does and who doesn’t get higher scores on tests (despite originally being proposed as a great equalizing factor to measure student achievement, and despite data showing that 60% of the variance in test scores comes from factors like food insecurity and family income), many students enter college with these ideas around who is worthy and who is not deeply ingrained.¹²³ As such, students are oriented relative to this meritocratic mode of

¹²⁰ FairTest, “More than 1,815+ Schools Do Not Require ACT/SAT Scores from Current High School Seniors Applying for Fall 2022,” FairTest, 2022, <https://www.fairtest.org/more-1815-schools-do-not-require-actsat-scores-cur>.

¹²¹ Wayne Au, “Hiding behind high-stakes testing: Meritocracy, objectivity and inequality in U.S. education,” *The International Education Journal: Comparative Perspectives* 12, no. 2 (2013).

¹²² Wayne Au, 9.

¹²³ David C. Berliner, “Effects of inequality and poverty vs. teachers and schooling on Am (2012). Effects of inequality and poverty vs. teachers and schooling on America’s youth. *Teachers College Record*, 116(1). retrieved from <http://www.tcrecord.org> (2014 paper publication)

thinking, which intersects with both neoliberal and white supremacist ideals. It is both this epistemological fixedness common to settler-colonial thinking and the belief in a meritocracy organizing educational opportunities that specifically restrict freedom dreaming.

Disorientations

In considering how racism functions as a form of disorientation, in turning to Du Bois, he identifies double consciousness as an example of disorientation that may be unresolved over time. Writing *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois defines double consciousness as follows:

It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.¹²⁴

A constant evaluation of oneself as racialized against the standards of a white society may understandably be disorienting. Harbin additionally points out that one may alternatively come to an awareness of race through suddenly entering a context where one does not feel a need to measure oneself up against those standards, and be disoriented by the sudden change. In both cases, Black and brown people are left with a sense of disorientation around one's position within a broader system of racialized hierarchy. Harbin is cautious to clarify here that this disorientation caused by

¹²⁴ W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk: Essays and Sketches* (Seattle, WA: A. C. McClurg & Co., 1903), 3.

experiencing racism does not universally result in a generative awareness of oppression and how it exists in the world—rather, Harbin’s point in the book, and as explored here through unpacking how anti-Black racism differentiates how disorientation is distributed, certain groups may be more or less predisposed to experiencing disorientation, and any classroom approach that seeks to encourage disorientation must take this into account.

Alternatively, there is a very different kind of disorientation experienced when white people come to an awareness of their own whiteness, through interacting with or being in community with people of color. Those experiencing this disorientation may respond with either an increased awareness of racial inequality and their own position within this system of inequality, or a refusal to rethink one’s position and a re-entrenchment of white supremacist values. As Harbin states of this and other forms of disorientation, the former response may not necessarily lead to action, but it does stand a chance of leading to a greater epistemic humility. Harbin additionally clarifies that the disorientations experienced by people of color as a result of experiencing racism are very different from the disorientations experienced by white people as a result of understanding oneself as a perpetrator of racism.

Similarly, disorientations surrounding colonialism and one’s understanding of the presence of colonialism affect both settlers and colonized peoples, however in very different ways. Settlers may come to an understanding of their role in the continued displacement and genocide of indigenous populations through a greater understanding

of the history one is located within, by being called out or called in¹²⁵ by Indigenous peoples in community, or by being in community with people who are directly impacted by settler violence. This kind of disorientation may also lead to greater epistemic humility as detailed above, although it does not universally do so.

Conversely, being subject to settler colonialism leads to a very different kind of disorientation. Harbin writes:

It can be hard to go on after the disorientation of coming to see oneself as a beneficiary of colonial privilege. But it is hard to go on in a very different sense after the disorientation of experiencing ongoing colonial violence against one's family. Suggesting that these kinds of "hard to go on" experiences could be on a par with each other is not only false but itself violent.¹²⁶

As such, any attempt to universally promote disorientation as an educational or epistemological tool must be grounded in the recognition that some students have already been forcibly and violently disoriented by the effects of settler-colonialism, racism, and other forms of hegemonic violence.

Looking more specifically at how abolitionists respond to disorientation, it is additionally important to consider the ways in which prisons and the carceral system often play a large role in producing disorientations. A sudden separation from the free world and one's community in the form of incarceration are profoundly disorienting, as is a reentry into the free world after being incarcerated. Abolition often requires acting against this disorientation (i.e. through supporting formerly incarcerated people in regaining their footing during the process of reentry). Formerly incarcerated activist

¹²⁵ This framework of calling in and calling out comes from Loretta Ross' and Ngọc Loan Trần's work in defining calling in as an alternative to calling out, based in a shared recognition of humanity with the person being called in.

¹²⁶ Harbin, 17.

Assata Shakur writes on her own experience of reentry, "I was completely disoriented. Everything was the same, yet everything was different."¹²⁷ Incarceration as the theft of one's autonomy and agency heavily contributes to this sense of disorientation: writing on one instance of being moved from one prison to another, Shakur states, "My abrupt transfer from one jail to another, without either notice to my lawyers or explanation to me, was a scenario that would be repeated over and over again during the next few years."¹²⁸

It is not just the physical fact of separation and confinement that acts to disorient those incarcerated in the criminal legal system. Patrick Doolittle, writing on the topic of disorientation and what he terms "bureaucratic paradoxes", argues that prisons intentionally effect disorientations upon incarcerated people for the purposes of control. Although Doolittle's definition of disorientation is not based upon that of Harbin's work, his definition of disorientation as "inmates' feeling that: 1) they have no sense of the truth and 2) they have no control over what happens to them"¹²⁹ bears some significant resemblance to Harbin's "hard to go on" definition,¹³⁰ and may be understood as interrelated in the context of this discussion. These bureaucratic paradoxes show up in the simultaneous omnipresence of guards in the prison combined with the difficulty of reaching a guard to file actual complaints. Other rules which, by

¹²⁷ Assata Shakur, *Assata: An Autobiography* (Chicago, Illinois: Zed Books Ltd., 1987), 266.

¹²⁸ Shakur, 80.

¹²⁹ Patrick Doolittle (2017), 10.

¹³⁰ Harbin, 17.

design, are impossible to follow to the letter may include the impossibility of accessing or fulfilling the requirements that prisons place upon incarcerated people, such as going through certain rehabilitative programs. Although both of the above examples of disorientation are distinctly different from the disorientations often experienced in and around the classroom, both examples provide us with a chance to learn how abolitionists respond to disorientation, and how a response to this disorientation might take shape in the classroom.

Learning to disorient

Pulling together previous examples of privilege as typically orienting and abolition as requiring disorientation, this section argues that abolitionist pedagogy must therefore include a deliberate effort to make space for disorientation in the classroom. Feminist pedagogue Megan Boler defines a similar theory as a “pedagogy of discomfort”, stating that the benefit of this approach is not the ability to permanently establish new ideas or knowledge, but rather “learning to live with ambiguity, discomfort, and uncertainty.”¹³¹

In drawing on how to support disorientations, I am brought back to my first experiences with abolitionist thought in the classroom, and the profound sense of disorientation I felt surrounding not just the ideas we were encountering but the ways we were encountering them. What was most challenging was not the idea of abolition as a social good but rather the uncertainty associated with abolition, and the ways that uncertainty made its way into the classroom. What was most jarring in these

¹³¹ Megan Boler, *Feeling Power: Emotions and Education* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1999), 198.

classrooms, and what has best served me in my own work in abolitionist spaces, was the purposeful move away from traditional classroom norms.

In the first semester of my sophomore year, I took a class titled “Transformative Justice to Research Justice”. Labeled an “interactive team-based seminar” in the syllabus, the class was one of the more disorienting of those I’ve taken because of both the work we were able to do in collaboration with community organizations, as well as the uncertainty I remember sitting with surrounding these projects. [need to get more specific here!] Although the content was new to me as well as the teaching methods (having not been introduced to abolition previously), it was the pedagogy that I found most profoundly disorienting, and which I point to as an example of one method of making space for disorientation.

Another key example of my own experiences with disorientation in the classroom, and specifically what determines whether disorientation is productive or harmful, was in taking a class on abolitionist thought and praxis in the spring of 2020. This class was one of several I took during the semester the pandemic struck, and I reflect back on the experience as an example of how one can come out of serious disorientations with a more critically curious and compassionate perspective. Like many other students during this period of online classwork and global uncertainty, I struggled to balance the anxiety, fear, and change with ongoing classes and homework. What stuck out to me the most in this period of transition was how some professors allowed space for us to acknowledge this sense of disorientation in the classroom, and in doing so provided a structure for us to not gain a sense of reorientation but rather

determine how to go on while in a still-disorienting setting. Strategies for this kind of teaching would look different across different kinds of disorienting settings, but in this particular context what was most helpful for me was the space the teacher created in the classroom for us to feel confused and disoriented together. One particularly memorable moment was how professors chose to hold class after the announcement had gone out that the campus was moving to a remote format. Some professors chose to hold classes as usual, even continuing with exams or assignments in a moment of panic. Others chose to take a few minutes at the start of class to acknowledge the uncertainty. Where I was best able to determine how to go on with learning while in a state of continual disorientation was in those classes that deliberately set aside our goals for the day and the strict structure of the syllabus, choosing instead to offer up a space for students to talk and process. As Harbin states, “The effects of [consciousness-raising] disorientations are open-ended. They do not delimit how much of one’s understanding may be shaken, or how much awareness will be gained.”¹³² As such, how a student may respond to disorientations either in or out of the classroom is dependent on the mode of support and recognition of these disorientations being provided.

My third key instance of disorientation, and one which I want to highlight as it does not relate directly to my own learning about abolition, was in my shift from a strict schooling environment to a highly unstructured “unschooling” environment. This experience took place much earlier on in my life, so I want to note that my observations on this period are less coming from solid memories or ethnographic details as they are from reflections I’ve had with family members in the years since. The first few years of

¹³² Harbin, 83.

my life as a student were spent attending a private religious elementary school from kindergarten through third grade. Located in Riverside, California, the school was founded in 1922 with the goal that students would “learn to render effective service”.¹³³ I recognize much of what I want to uproot in educational practice when looking back at this period, including but not limited to a focus on test-taking to measure student progress, a lack of diverse perspectives within the classroom, and a highly-regimented schedule of learning.

In sharp contrast to this schooling model, from third grade on I learned through “unschooling”. First defined by John Holt in the 1960s, this model of schooling is based around the idea that “children want to learn about the world, are good at it, and can be trusted to do it without much adult coercion or interference.”¹³⁴ Unschooling bears some resemblance to critical pedagogies mentioned throughout this work, given the focus on decentralizing testing and the physical boundaries of the classroom, empowering students as both learners and creators of knowledge, and emphasizing the ability of learners to direct their own experience. My own experience transitioning from traditional schooling to an unschooling model was not unlike the experiences of many other K-12 students transitioning into unschooling. According to Gray and Riley, close to 44% of students engaging with the unschooling model did so as a function of

¹³³ University, La Sierra. "Our History - La Sierra University". La Sierra University | Change Your World.

¹³⁴ Holt, J. (1977). *Growing Without Schooling*, 1(#1), 1.

negative experiences with traditional schooling.¹³⁵ Just as with my experience beginning to learn about abolition in college, the time I spent expanding my knowledge on what schooling could look like was simultaneously liberatory and disorienting. One specific point early on in this transition was in my own sense of confusion about how to learn without the rigid structure of worksheets and quizzes—I eventually settled into a sense of curiosity about the world around me and self-motivation that led me to do independent research on topics like hummingbird populations and redwood tree ecosystems from a young age, and this period of disorientation sticks out to me as an example of how a change in the mode of learning can produce disorientation. This re-centering of different perspectives is something Harbin highlights as a cause of disorientation in the classroom as well, stating that, “Like in consciousness-raising contexts, critical classrooms can be disorienting when they uproot deeply held assumptions about whose histories and ideologies can be trusted, and when they do not directly transplant a new, permanently trustworthy root system of assumptions.”¹³⁶ Although my own experiences in critical classrooms (and in unschooling outside of classrooms) are very much unique to my own family structure and the privileges I had in being able to learn in new ways, disorientation is not specific to this kind of unschooling model but rather something that may come into being in a variety of different learning contexts. This concept in combination with my own lived experience

¹³⁵ Gina Riley and Peter Gray, “The Challenges and Benefits of Unschooling,” *Journal of Unschooling and Alternative Learning* 7, no. 14 (2013): pp. 95-110, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-49292-2_8.

¹³⁶ Harbin, 84

undergoing pedagogical disorientation is one of the key ideas leading me to the importance of abolitionist praxis as a pedagogical project.

Pedagogical Implications

Inviting disorientation into the classroom is a tricky thing, not least because if not properly navigated, it can lead to more harm than good. As Harbin outlines, “critical classrooms can be disorienting when they uproot deeply held assumptions about whose histories and ideologies can be trusted, and when they do not directly transplant a new, permanently trustworthy root system of assumptions.”¹³⁷ Although disorientation has the potential to create different relationships with power and with oneself through this process of uprooting assumptions, Harbin is cautious to note that in some cases, “students’ discomfort can manifest in resistance to the material discussed.”¹³⁸ As such, professors must carefully manage when to encourage a lack of orientation, when to manage said disorientation, and when to sit with disorientation and not immediately move towards resolving it. The first of these options is informed by my example of unschooling as outlined above. By deliberately removing some of the structure of class activities, assignments, and/or discussions, professors can allow students to deal with questions of how to move forward, and specifically how to move forward even when the path ahead isn’t clearly laid out. Importantly, this empty time or space must be long enough that students are able to fully acknowledge and recognize their own reactions of

¹³⁷ Harbin, 84.

¹³⁸ Harbin, 88.

disorientation—briefly disorienting students without reflection risks having this classroom time be characterized as a waste of time, or badly managed classroom time.

When students are experiencing disorientation, professors must additionally be aware of their own biases towards certainty, and be deliberate in taking stock of how academics and students frequently respond to uncertainty by asserting a sense of certainty, even when said certainty is false. This may look like assessing how questions may be leading students towards a specific desired answer (or how students may respond to seemingly open ended questions by trying to find the answer they believe their professor is looking for), facilitating moments of reflection when students do respond to these open-ended questions by asserting certainty, and openly acknowledging tendencies within both one's specific discipline and within academia as a whole towards rejecting uncertainty. And finally, it is important to acknowledge the bodily effects of disorientation around previously held ideals, and recognize the impact of uncertainty on one's own presence in the classroom. In this point I draw both from my own experiences dealing with increased anxiety while disoriented, and additionally the strong presence of somatics and embodiment work within both abolitionist work and organizing work as a whole. Making space for the body (whether that's by integrating grounding practices into one's teaching or asking questions such as those posed under the "What would it look like to teach and learn in ways that prepare us for broader struggle against the PIC and other systems of oppression?" section of the reflection guide at the end of this work) makes the work of being disoriented more sustainable in the long run.

CONCLUSION

Both during the process of starting and ending this thesis, I have been more and more aware of the incidents of lack of care and neglect that are not just commonplace but are institutionalized within institutions of higher education such as my own. I've returned again and again to this thesis and the core tensions within as friends have balanced mental health crises and impending due dates, workplace exploitation within the institution they are supposed to be learning from, relationship violence within the queer community that is meant to be a safe haven, and harmful interactions with campus police that leave me wondering if safety is truly possible here. Institutional reactions to these crises have ranged from a complete lack of response, to increased policing, to overworked staff members trying to support three times the number of students they have the resources for. Put simply, although I truly value the lessons learned and relationships forged within the communal structure of higher education, underneath it is a sense of fury that the institution I came to learn at and which my friends came to grow within is unable to act in substantive ways against larger systems of oppression affecting students daily. As explored in chapter one, this experience is not specific to me. Student activists have been shouting their anger at an institution that seeks to control rather than teach them for ages, and exploring alternative methods of learning in collaboration with each other. However, it is precisely the fact that I first came to abolition in the context of the classroom that I choose to stay with a pedagogical

question (“How can we practice an abolitionist pedagogy from within higher education?”) rather than reject the premise of abolition in higher education entirely.

In *Decarcerating Disability*, Liat Ben-Moshe defines prisons as sites of “reeducation and normalization.”¹³⁹ In framing prisons as sites of reeducation specifically, Ben-Moshe gestures to the original process of education which has failed at properly educating the subject and which must be reinforced. Over the past three chapters, this thesis has engaged with one of many potential original sites of education, that of the neoliberal university as a site which normalizes the existence of the prison through carceral logics. The two coexist with each other—just as the university normalizes relations of punishment and control over students’ bodies, the prison acts as a site of fear which universities may gesture to in order to reinforce their own validity.

In the context of abolitionist praxis, “The goal is the abolition of a society that would have prisons and building a new one from the rubble.”¹⁴⁰ What this thesis holds as a central point is that the process of building a society that would have prisons occurs in large part in the educational process of building epistemological frameworks. These frameworks—those of what is and is not possible around abolition or punishment, around who gets to be a victim and who is always a perpetrator, and what harm means—are reinforced in the ways we learn and teach. Challenging not just the existence of prisons but the broader epistemological frameworks upholding them is the work of an abolitionist pedagogy. Crucially, this kind of pedagogy is not limited to the teaching

¹³⁹ Liat Ben-Moshe, *Decarcerating Disability: Deinstitutionalization and Prison Abolition* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2020), 120.

¹⁴⁰ Ben-Moshe, 133.

of abolitionist praxis and histories. The skills necessary to engage with abolitionist movements (such as a willingness to sit with disorientation and an ability to practice freedom dreaming) can be taught through everything from queer theory to the scientific process. Abolitionist pedagogues can engage in a prefigurative practice by beginning to bring these dis-epistemologies into the classroom, and by encouraging students to resist immediately resolving disorientation in much the same way as resolving disorientation must be resisted as an automatic assumption in abolitionist movements.

I believe that it is possible to work within the tension between the capitalist and carceral demands of higher education, such as Title IX reporting, a culture of overwork and meritocracy, and white supremacy culture, and still produce epistemologies of liberation. This is both in spite of this tension, and at times because of it. As outlined in chapter three, generative action does not require the resolution of disorientation in order to move forward, and pedagogy need not promote the resolution of this disorientation in order to foster generative discussions and thought. Looking forward, it would be a turn away from both Harbin's theory of disorientation and my own belief in the importance of uncertainty to state that I feel resolute in my own path forward through abolition and academia. However, what this research has brought me as a student and an abolitionist, and what I hope it may bring others, is a better understanding of how to move forward in uncertainty and with a fundamental refusal to pretend we alone can know the path forward towards liberation.

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