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On Knowing: Willingness, Fugitivity and Abolition in Precarious Times

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The author complements his JoLLE keynote speech, available on video, with an essay that situates historical means of oppression within two current pandemics: the coronavirus crisis and the longstanding crisis of White supremacy. He expands this notion to include societal advantage beyond Whiteness, particularly the advantages that accrue to wealthy, western European descended, able-bodied, cis-gender, Protestant, heterosexual males, whose lives have been normalized to represent all that is right and good. Schools, he maintains, are structured to support the value system of a single demographic group, making U.S. schooling fundamentally unjust extensions of discrimination more broadly practiced. He asserts that teachers dedicated to abolishing oppressive systems must teach to refute what the world says about Black and Brown youth. He maintains that a post-pandemic world would abandon its orientation to markets and status quo preservation. Rather, it will shift its emphasis to a commitment to cultivating students' knowledge of themselves, their solidarity as members of a community, and their self-determination beyond the bounds of the discriminatory structures that have long dominated US society and its schools.

Keywords: abolition, fugitive, knowing, literacy, pandemic, political



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Introduction¹

I remain thankful to the JoLLE Editorial Board, particularly Tamara Moten and Stacia Long, for even thinking of me as someone to deliver one of the keynote addresses for their Winter Conference. Because the online version of my talk will also be present in the journal, I thought it would be important to break the monotony of you having to see and read the exact same thing. For those who are expecting this document to be a facsimile of the keynote, I offer my sincerest apologies in advance. Instead of viewing this essay as a rejoinder to my comments delivered on February 2, 2020 at the JoLLE Winter Conference, it may be more useful to understand it as an extension of my presentation, which was recorded electronically.

In essence, the point I'm trying to make in the keynote is that *we've known for quite some time what it takes to educate those who have been deemed disposable by mainstream society*. The issue is because they have been deemed disposable due to their location along the lines of race, class, gender, age, (dis)ability, and sexual orientation, we have developed excuses in schools as to why we should discard them. More importantly, we remain steadfast in our commitment to the disposability of the excluded. Going further, we also know *that engaging this group of people around an education that supports knowledge of themselves, self-determination and a willingness to collectively participate in healing and restoration means that you have to operate with a sense of fearlessness in the midst of deepening precarity*.

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Two Pandemics

I also know that at the time of my writing the world is witnessing a global health pandemic. The novel coronavirus known as COVID-19 (or SARS-CoV-2 in the medical community) is taking a deathly toll across the globe as we witness either preparedness from governments (e.g. South Korea) or tragedies of the absurd (e.g. the federal response of United States). In the end, lives are in the balance as those on the margins remain the most vulnerable to continual suffering and containment. Because the definition of pandemic identifies a widely spread disease or health alarm that is spread across countries and/or continents, it is important to take

great care when discussing the seriousness of the moment. As COVID-19 is upon us, I would also call our attention to the lingering global pandemic of White supremacy/racism. Although more insidious at times, its omnipresence is worthy of note. To be clear, I

have an expansive view of White supremacy/racism that is not reduced to individual acts of bigotry. Instead, I understand the phenomenon to consist of the perceived views and values of white, wealthy, western European descended, able-bodied, cis-gender, Protestant, heterosexual males to be normal, right and good. Schools in the U.S. have always reflected this viewpoint. Anyone who does not conform to this assumed set of beliefs is “othered” in the form of suspensions, expulsions, or other forms of marginalization in classroom space. *And we've known this for a very long time.*

¹ I acknowledge that there is a gender spectrum and that myriad pronouns exist that we can use when referring to individuals in our writing. Throughout this article I use

pronouns to refer to individuals that correspond with the pronouns that they use to refer to themselves.

An Over-commitment to ‘Schooling’

My concerns lie with our continued commitment to “schooling” over education. Schooling guarantees the reign of White supremacy/racism in the form of irrelevant curriculum, questionable content, and high-stakes testing that are not reflective of any type of learning. Education challenges us to ask questions of our conditions and *could* lead to a situation where young people make the decision to refute the schooling that continues to dehumanize them. To many in language and literacy, my words may be read as incendiary or insurgent. As a scholar of Critical Race Theory, I don’t necessarily view this as a bad thing. Now is a good time to revolt against the madness that befalls the masses of teachers who are asking the question: *What the hell did I get myself into?* If the teachers are asking this question, then we can only imagine what our students are asking. They’re probably looking at each other saying, *“This cannot be my life right now!”* When we consider those students that might be on the margins who may be Black, poor, Latinx, Indigenous/First Nations, Arab, South Asian, undocumented, (dis)abled, queer/trans or any combination of these, the thing we try to pass on to them as education often borders on the ridiculous. Instead, what we’re giving them is schooling rooted in the norms of White supremacy. We know it’s not working, but we still fashion it as the presumed “gateway” to mobility. Those who “get out” of the conditions of marginalization are touted as individual success stories. Missing are the narratives of those who are left behind in schools that were never intended to work in the first place. *Again, we’ve known this for quite some time.*

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Literacy is Political

Whereas I am not a scholar of language and literacy, I am clear about the political nature of literacy. Learning to understand your conditions coupled with the ability to articulate your concerns across multiple mediums (literacy) is political because it is imbued in a set of power relationships that have often determined power for some and servitude for others. Historically, the price paid for engaging in such a task could at any time mean someone’s life.

As an educator, I see how difficult it is for my students to imagine that a person could be

physically maimed or killed for learning how to read in the U.S. less than six generations ago during the period of human enslavement. When they often retort, “That was a long time ago, Stovall,” I remind them that my grandmother Edna Stovall was born in 1918, her mother was born in the 1890’s. The Emancipation Proclamation (ending slavery outside of incarceration) was signed in 1863. From this moment I

propose the question, If we do the math, what does that make my grandmother’s grandparents? After the befallen silence, I remind them that someone I’ve known in my lifetime who passed away two years ago in 2018 at the age of 100 was the granddaughter of someone who was enslaved. My point is not to admonish them, but to have them consider that education for some has always been a life and death situation.

Given the severity of punishment for learning, the proponents of ‘schooling’ believe “too much knowledge” can be dangerous. Specifically, the

dissemination and creation of knowledge by the wrong people can upset configurations of power by providing the oppressed with the capacity to change conditions according to their terms and their understanding of justice. We rarely provide the foundation story to Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* because of its revolutionary ending. Once the *compesino* farmers who were Freire's students learned how to read, they took over the farm outside Recife, Brazil. The idea of takeover is what we constantly struggle with in relationship to our students. In fact, we hope and pray that they don't realize the sham they've been subjected to. We hope that by the time they realize that "schooling" is not intended to work for them, they'll be too discouraged to join the resistance or they have already been discarded by the schooling system. I can at least state my joy that history has often refuted this point in the form of student and community resistance, but I still grow weary when I think of the burden it places on young people. The question we should be asking is, *Are willing to join them?*

Fugitivity and the Abolitionist Educator

The comrade Dr. Bettina Love (2019) has dared members of the teaching community to entertain the concept of abolition in their teaching. The point of abolition still makes folks weary because they falsely equate it to abomination. Where there are things that are deserving of abomination (e.g., racism/White supremacy) the practice of abolition is more rooted in a process that is willing to end the conditions that justify marginalization. When teachers are engaged in an abolitionist pedagogy, they are teaching with the understanding that the conditions of the school (if those conditions are disrepair, lack of resources, and other toxicity) are

not the fault of the students or the families that send them there. Instead, they understand the system is only doing what it is intended to do under racism/White supremacy. As soon as this point is actualized, they create a different path. A path that we dare say is fugitive, or immersed in the process of realizing that there has to be a detour from the order and compliance of the school. It is not running *from* something as much as it is running *to* a destination that is created and determined by those who are experiencing injustice.

This different direction is the one I've been the most interested in, because it is the pathway of most of

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the teachers that I've ever liked in school. I remember their lasting commitment to education over the school and them not caring about getting in trouble with an administrator or the district. Scope and sequence were

never a concern. Instead, content and pedagogy represented the method and tools by which to refute what the world says about Black and Brown youth. These folks never used words like "classroom management" to engage a process by which to create a structure to demonstrate the importance of the relationship with you and your family through love and accountability. The fact that they were in relationship with you and your family to develop your capacity to change the conditions for yourself and those like you. Their collective pursuit of education with you and your classmates refused the assumptions of the school.

When we come across these teachers we often think them to be unicorns. We believe them to somehow have this magical ability to do the impossible. It's important to state that this is the furthest from the truth. To the contrary, we have only witnessed the end product of their commitment. We don't see the

countless hours of preparation it takes to do your work in spite of the school. Missing from our analysis is how they work to strengthen their commitment to refute what Michael Dumas calls the “site of Black suffering” (Dumas, 2014). These teachers understand that we continue to ask students to suffer in a place that is structured on dehumanizing them. In order to teach under these conditions, they are willing to imagine another space for their students and to engage a process by which to build it. My concern is that our preparation of teachers hopes for this but does little to actually bring this to reality. If we go a little deeper, many of our teacher training programs are structured to deter pre-service teachers from asking material and ideological questions of the school. The fear is that if we create more abolitionist teachers, the school will cease to exist. If our freedom dream is to create teachers with these pedagogical skills and sensibilities, *what will we do to support them?*

In the End...

Many members of the world’s population have never felt so uneasy. Few have lived under such a precarious moment. Even fewer have lived through a global health pandemic. For others, the second pandemic (racism/White supremacy) is as common as a runny nose from seasonal allergies. In this moment, I would also ask us to consider those who live in these precarious situations absent of a global health emergency. Over the past couple of weeks, many of my comrades have been telling me that “things will not go back to what they were” after the COVID-19 crisis. From my perspective, this can be understood as either a damning or hopeful statement. The damning moment will be if corporate responsibility continues to outweigh human commitment to health and wellbeing. If corporations are still considered to have the same rights as people and education is still thought of as a “privilege” offered by the state, we will not be able to

claim victory. Where others see these realities as immutable, I offer hope, but a conditional hope at best. Hope in its material form will only come if people are willing to focus their efforts on those who have historically been excluded and discarded.

When this group of people is centered as the priority of our work, we are able to understand what it means to live under perpetual precarity. Similar to a common mistake made in classroom teaching, the process of “teaching to the middle” never works. Instead, it stands as a faulty survival strategy employed when educators are forced to exist under the hegemony of standardized testing (another precarious situation). Because the bet has already been hedged on the students who already meet the state or district standard and the few that are closest to meeting the benchmark, those who have been excluded will remain marginalized.

The rise of the machines (primarily in the form of online learning) is not reaching the historically marginalized and isolated. Because exclusion moves along the lines of race, class, gender, age, (dis)ability and sexual orientation, this precarious moment will either be maintained or interrupted. In these unclear moments I am reminded of participants in the Black Freedom Movement in the U.S. and members of the Lumad struggle in the Mindanao region of the Philippines. In both movements they held to the mantra of trusting their struggle to be one that demands justice for those on the margins. Despite the current uncertainty of the moment, we are constantly reminded that the way things are do not work for the many. Instead, they are affirmations of few (who are often wealthy, inconsiderate autocrats who reap the benefits of inherited wealth or financialized capital). If we do not make the decision to do something different, this time on earth will remain uncertain. Without question, things will not be the same after the pandemic passes. Simultaneously,

there is also the chance to support those who are building something different. Something that is not rooted in the new “market” of schools or the newest tech craze that is still based on exclusion over

access. It will be rooted in people who are committed to knowledge of themselves, solidarity, and self-determination². But, *we’ve known this for a long time.*

² As of 2019, the San Francisco Unified School district (SFUSD) has adopted the tenets of knowledge of self, solidarity, and self-determination as its guiding

principles for instruction across all content areas in k-12 instruction.

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