WE DON’T NEED NO EDUCATION
DEESCHOOLING AS AN ABOLITIONIST PRACTICE

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This essay comes from the gut, about a set of concerns that have both guided me and been a perpetual source of dis-ease as I continue to make my way to and through school. I am not here with answers, but instead am pursued by burning questions. The intensity of their flames might make it seem that everything I write actually ends with an exclamation point, when it is in fact also always shadowed by a question mark, the proper punctuation for the perennial question: “What is to be done?” What is to be done in the face of the contemporary crises engendered by neoliberal capitalist imperialism as it manifests through the United States, an imperial nation that continues to form itself through modes of conquest, colonization, and white supremacy—both “at home” and abroad?

Opening with this question is not a way to obscure the fact that many are at work to oppose existing forms of oppression and exploitation. I write here in and through those efforts, with a particular eye to how dominant interests continue to shape current crises to their advantage.¹ I believe we need to keep a fluid account of what they are up to in order to mount effective opposition and build meaningful alternatives. The “we” in this case refers most specifically to those of us working at the nexus of scholarship and activism. Not all of us who do this are located within

¹. To put it in overly simple terms: it is my understanding that “the crisis” that was once the aspiration of many leftists, with the belief that it would propel a resolution to the fundamental contradictions of capitalism, will not arrive. Instead, capital has turned perpetual crisis into its own raison d’être. I am here following interpretations of this crisis as they are found in works such as To Our Friends, released by the Invisible Committee in 2014. Invisible Committee, To Our Friends, trans. Robert Hurely (Boston: MIT Press, 2015).
the educational system, but my comments are geared primarily to those of us who are because I have found it inevitable, across the different kinds of projects that I have engaged in, that I butt my head up against the limits of this system as a means for liberation. By “this system” I mean obligatory education, consisting of kindergarten through twelfth grade as mandated by U.S. law, as well as higher education, particularly at the community college and undergraduate levels.

My analysis of obligatory education takes its cue from Ivan Illich’s *Deschooling Society*, a book that I first stumbled upon while researching in the Brooklyn Public Library. The title was in their catalog but not in their stacks, kept instead in the basement along with other books that they deemed no longer useful enough to be in circulation but not worthless enough to actually throw away. In this manifesto, Illich outlines how the educational system in capitalist societies such as the United States (and indeed especially in the United States) is one that confuses process with product; conflating schooling with the acquisition of knowledge, and mistaking the acquisition of skills with their just, equitable, and even emancipatory utilization. He points out how, instead, the educational system in a capitalist society is geared toward class stratification and the maintenance of class privilege through capitalist exploitation. Illich wrote at a time when the school system divided pupils into those destined for vocational training and those on the path through liberal arts education to, possibly, professional graduate degrees. His divisions can account for the range of higher education, which spans community colleges to research-one universities, but it is actually kindergarten and the obligatory education of K–12 where his point is most clearly made that school is a, if not the, primary site for the reproduction of oppression and inequality. Of particular concern to Illich, writing at the dawn of the seventies, was how school became the first in a series of institutions that train individuals to become clients rather than autonomous agents. It was thus a primary gateway to an institutional web where “Medical treatment is mistaken for health care, social work for the improvement of community life, police protection for safety, military poise for national security, the rat race for
productive work.” Of particular concern to me, here, is also how among these institutionalizations, school remains the primary place where the myth of meritocracy as a means for upward mobility remains lodged. For most, schooling still represents the means of liberation within a system that nevertheless attempts to institutionalize us and our ambitions.

In spite of the persistence of this promise, if we return our focus to the current conjuncture, what we find is an educational system that is clearly in crisis. Everything from the mass closing of public schools in major U.S. cities like Philadelphia and Chicago to the battles over standardized testing and the rise of corporatized charter schools and for-profit colleges indicates how this crisis provides an opportunity for the restructuring of education to fit the agenda of neoliberal capital. When it comes to college education we must also now account for the majority of students who are graduating with disastrous amounts of debt. The burden is so untenable that some have begun to publicly resist repayment. I have also been in conversation with colleagues who feel that it is no longer ethical to support a structure that channels students into what scholar-activists such as Andrew Ross and Silvia Federici have identified as a new kind of indentured servitude. To expand upon that concept we might also turn to the increasingly unstable workforce at colleges and universities, which has trickled upward (so to speak) to include teaching faculties made up more and more of part-time, temporary, and casual workers whose plight is being brought home to all of us through the brave organizing of adjuncts across the nation. The precarious position of both students and employees increases the likelihood of stress-related illnesses and the inability to access resources for adequate and timely healthcare. This is thus a matter not only of life and debt, but also of life and death. Indeed, it is a case of if not one, then probably the other.

2. Ivan Illich, Deschooling Society (London: Marion Boyers, 2002), 1. This is a reissue of the original 1971 edition.
Here I can turn to my own experience working at an elite private liberal arts college that guaranteed that its students did not have to take out loans. This was part of a long overdue push to diversify their student body, and the result has been a larger number of students of color and/or low-wealth students on campus who were not getting a degree in debt so much as a lesson in indebtedness. The latter formed a kind of backdrop for the back-room drama that was a regular occurrence in my office: streams of students of color (and most often women of color) depressed, contemplating dropping out, or on the verge of a nervous breakdown. Mental health, physical health, and social health were all at stake. The combination of dis-ease was such a regular occurrence that after years of mentoring students through such moments I actually found myself saying, repeatedly, “Well, at least you get to leave after four years. I’ll still be here.” The weight of their cumulative pain, as well as the kinds of marginalization that I also experienced institutionally, had led me to that utterance. The sentiment was not unattached to physical symptoms, either, as I had suddenly found myself developing new auto-immune issues.

Lest these symptoms be read as an idiosyncratic or individualized response, let us remember the studies that have appeared, periodically, pointing to the disproportionate rates of cancer and disease among women, women of color, and particularly Black women in the academy. While there are many ways to explain this, what I want us to consider is the relationship between stress, the internalization of different forms of marginalization, and chronic or malignant (or both) physical manifestations. My own recognition of this reality has led me to consider how debt and premature death structure higher education and how historically underrepresented communities—people of color, women, LGBTQ+ folk, and undocumented immigrants—bear a disproportionate share of both. What is more, these trends have taken root over precisely the same decades when colleges and universities have been

5. For more on this see, for example, the articles collected under the Feminist Wire Forum, “Take Care: Notes on the Black (Academic) Women’s Health Forum,” available at thefeministwire.com.
opening their doors more widely, if incompletely, to historically underrepresented and underserved communities. This, then, is a picture of what we could term education in the post-civil rights United States.

And yet, the diversity that exists has also been the outcome of our insistent, persistent demands, even as these demands meet the dominant imperative to create and manage a multiracial middle class. We want more faculty and students from oppressed and marginalized groups because we are still woefully underrepresented. We want our histories, cultures, and ways of knowing included in the curriculum and supported so that we don’t have to continuously fight for their upkeep. In this sense, ours is a demand for inclusion. But, for me, it also simultaneously raises the question of inclusion into what? As I have just outlined above, inclusion is killing us—literally. So, what are the alternatives? I used to believe that Black Studies, Asian/Pacific American Studies, Latinx Studies, and Native and Indigenous Studies (often lumped together under “Ethnic Studies”) were the answer. Indeed, discovering Ethnic Studies, as a practice, is what kept me from dropping out of graduate school. For here were areas of study with storied roots in student-led social movements centered on a critique of the relationship between power and knowledge, and calling for a dialectical relationship between thought and action. What is the possibility for this kind of a demand to complicate inclusion as I have analyzed it? Is it sufficient to retain a critical edge as we collaborate to maintain our often precarious status as Ethnic Studies scholars and students in underfunded and almost always on the verge of dissolution programs and departments? I don’t think so.

In fact, after many years of toeing something akin to that critical line (as I am even now doing to some extent), I have come around to the wise warnings issued by Fred Moten and Stefano Harney in *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study*, and by Robin D.G. Kelley in his introduction to “Black Study, Black Struggle” (written during another wave of student-led protests that hit college campuses across the nation over the past couple of years). Part of their point is quite basic, actually. Critics

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7. Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study*
whose critique demands more of the institution than it currently gives continue to justify that institution’s existence, and implicitly if not explicitly empower it as the necessary site of redress. The system of higher education needs us to believe in it, and there is a way in which our protests can profess—willy-nilly—a kind of belief. In this sense critique leads to complicity.

Consider this: I have built a career based on teaching Ethnic Studies courses that open up windows onto an interrogation of society and its structures and that explore, in thought and action, possibilities for social justice. Rarely has a semester passed when I haven’t gotten a handful of students coming to me and asking their own version of the question, “What is to be done—and how can I do it?” In doling out advice I usually stress that each student work to fulfill their true talents, whatever they may be, and keep themselves connected to struggles for social justice. Liberation needs everyone to show up in all of our variety. During these conversations I am also very careful, because I am wary of producing a cadre of college-educated organizers who feed the nonprofit industrial complex that continues to corral social movements in the United States. The point at which underrepresented college students return to work in their communities as part of this complex is also a point where the neoliberal privatization of social services meets the myth of meritocracy embedded in the U.S. educational system.

Let me approach this from another institutional angle, given the ways in which mass criminalization has become a hallmark of the post-civil rights United States. A key feature of this development has been a cradle-to-prison pipeline that systematically denies whole segments of society access to school. Confronted with this reality, toward the end of graduate school, I began to cross the lines between prisons, jails, and schools. I have since worked on developing curricula with men serving life sentences in a maximum security prison in Pennsylvania, taught a college course for credit at a local county jail that is also an Immigration


and Customs Enforcement (ICE) detention center, and worked as an educator with the formerly incarcerated and individuals in alternatives to incarceration. In the last case, students came to the classroom either voluntarily (ex-prisoners) or because of a court mandate (alternatives to incarceration) in order to prepare for the high school Graduate Equivalency Diploma (GED). I don’t wish to deny the very real sense of accomplishment (especially among ex-prisoners) or punishment (especially for those with court mandates) that people felt as they worked in this setting. Many of us, however, labored under the knowledge that the GED is, in some sense, a failing proposition. It does not get its holder that much more than life without it would. Its promise lies in the possibility that it might become a stepping stone into a system that is, ultimately, set up to fail the majority of individuals and communities who have become wards of the state through the prison-industrial complex. So, in the face of all of this, I have found myself calling not only for us to abolish the prison-industrial complex but also to de-school society.

Now, am I being too harsh? If so, it is on purpose and as a means to be provocative. As someone who has been in the school system for longer than it should perhaps be legal, I am hardly in a position to tell anyone not to pursue their GED, attend community college, or get a college degree if that is what they have the desire and means to do. Nor am I here to deny that even in the face of debt and death, a college education might be able to provide access to needed resources. But it should be clear from the structure of our society as it stands that at best this will bring up an individual or an individual family, and leave whole communities behind. In fact, acculturation within the system of education is often a means for students to become estranged from their communities of origin. This was, in effect, the lesson that was underscored for me at the aforementioned liberal arts college. At the root of so many a student’s dilemma was the simultaneous weight of collective responsibility and the cultural separation engendered by a college education. Lest we attribute this malaise too exclusively to the post–civil rights making of a multiracial middle class, we would be wise to remember the role that Indian boarding schools have had in cultural genocide and the breaking apart
of indigenous families and communities. *Naming the relationship between education and settler colonization is critical, particularly given the way in which school curricula promotes a national culture characterized by an amnesia that enables the continuous reproduction of settler colonialism and its social, political, economic, cultural, biological, and spiritual brutality.*

My essay has, in some sense, now reached a point of no return. Centering indigenous sovereignty undoes the project of capitalist imperialism as it has taken shape through the white settler colonial nation-state. And yet it is at this very point that the project of undoing this unholy alliance begins to unravel in my mind. This unraveling has less to do with acquiescence to a system whose goal is to debt us to death, and more to do with being tired of focusing on already existing forms of dominant power in a way that reinforces them. This is again me butting my head up against a wall where critique can be a form of complicity. Lest this lead down a road of despair, I want to first recognize that for me, what we call Ethnic Studies did not actually start with the student led social movements at the dawn of what I have been calling the post–civil rights United States. To start there is to center educational institutions as the beginning and end of our horizon. *Instead, I want to remember that inasmuch as Ethnic Studies bears a relationship to the long histories of our communities, our cultures, and our ways of knowing, it has its roots in practices that were and are antithetical to the institutions of capitalist imperialism. It is in the ongoing struggle to maintain indigenous epistemologies and cosmologies; it is with the enslaved who taught themselves to read against the master’s will; it is with the immigrants who were excluded and detained and who carved their voices into the walls of their holding cells; it is with the imprisoned whose quest for knowledge is self-led and oriented toward collective liberation; it is with the movements for migrant rights that work to link their struggle to ones for indigenous sovereignty. This list is obviously not exhaustive, but just a beginning, a way to think about who we understand as having knowledge, and how we come to learn not simply skills that will lead to resources within a capitalist system but also ways of knowing that are inherently oppositional to that system. The question of ways of knowing is critical. Following the insights of Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, while specific to the*
context of Nishnaabeg intelligence, also allows me to see how the unraveling of my mind is perhaps also a way out of having been schooled in this system, and into new epistemologies. This, then, is an attempt to reframe what we can understand as resources, and re-vision ourselves as having access to an abundance. It is also to recognize that efforts to de-school, while not always going under this particular moniker, are and have been ongoing.

But what about those of us who remain, in some way or other, working within the system as such? Here I want to turn to our capacity to practice small acts of marronage. In keeping with the proposition itself, I will proceed by being more suggestive than comprehensive or proscriptive as I reflect on how the practice of Ethnic Studies evolved for me and a small group of students at my last job. These were young people whom I had worked with over multiple semesters and years, both inside the classroom and outside as an advisor and fellow activist in local struggles around migrant justice and against mass criminalization. We were in a setting where institutional resources were available for “service learning.” The college encouraged collaboration between faculty, students, and underserved communities who were not, until now, under its purview. It is important to recognize how this is a neoliberal manifestation of noblesse oblige for the ways in which it privatizes the distribution of resources and services that were once part of the purview of the state. Given this context, my student collaborators and I slowly but surely came to understand that the most meaningful forms of action for us came to be the ones that went under the radar—the ones that were sideways and slanted and drew upon the undercommons as so powerfully articulated by Harney and Moten. We found ways to be in the institution but not of it, to not subordinate ourselves to its forms of recognition but instead to employ its resources in ways that were not legible or reducible to its designs or demands. We were not poster children; we were poachers. Thus, I have already said too much and must leave the rest purposefully vague because publicity is precisely not the point. The question of whether or not we de-schooled Ethnic Studies is open. So too is the question of how

the undercommons relates to visions of abolition. What I want to leave you with, at this juncture, is simply a practice of diversity that is not a demand for inclusion so much as it is a call to diversity our tactics—as a strategy for survival.

REFERENCES


