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The Disorientation of the Teaching Act: Abolition as Pedagogical Position

By Dylan Rodríguez

Prison Regime/the Disorientation of the Teaching Act

The global U.S. prison regime has no precedent or peer and has become a primary condition of schooling, education, and pedagogy in every possible site. Aside from its sheer accumulation of captive bodies (more than 2.5 million, if one includes children, military captives, undocumented migrants, and the mentally ill/disordered),¹ the prison has become central to the (re)production and (re)invention of a robust and historically dynamic white supremacist state: at its farthest institutional reaches, the prison has developed a capacity to organize and disrupt the most taken-for-granted features of everyday social life, including “family,” “community,” “school,” and individual social identities. Students, teachers, and administrators of all kinds have come to conceptualize “freedom,” “safety,” and “peace” as a relatively direct outcome of state-conducted domestic war (wars on crime, drugs, gangs, immigrants, terror, etc.), legitimated police violence, and large-scale, punitive imprisonment.

In what follows, I attempt to offer the outlines of a critical analysis and schematic social theory that might be useful to two overlapping, urgent tasks of the radical teacher: 1) to better understand how

the prison, along with the relations of power and normalized state violence that the prison inhabits/produces, form the everyday condition of possibility for the teaching act; and 2) to engage a historically situated abolitionist praxis that is, in this moment, *primarily pedagogical*.

A working conception of the “prison regime” offers a useful tool of critical social analysis as well as a theoretical framework for contextualizing critical, radical, and perhaps abolitionist pedagogies. In subtle distinction from the criminological, social scientific, and common sense understandings of “criminal justice,” “prisons/jails,” and the “correctional system,” the notion of a prison regime focuses on three interrelated *technologies and processes* that are dynamically produced at the site of imprisonment: first, the prison regime encompasses the material arrangements of institutional power that create informal (and often nominally illegal) routines and protocols of *militarized physiological domination* over human beings held captive by the state. This domination privileges a historical anti-black state violence that is particularly traceable to the latter stages of continental racial chattel slavery and its immediate epochal aftermath in “post-emancipation” white supremacy and juridical racial segregation/apartheid—a privileging that is directly reflected in the actual demography of the imprisoned population, composed of a Black majority. The institutional elaborations of this white supremacist and anti-black carceral state create an overarching system of physiological domination that *subsumes* differently racialized subjects (including whites) into institutional routines (strip searching and regular bodily invasion, legally sanctioned torture, ad hoc assassination, routinized medical neglect) that revise

while sustaining the everyday practices of genocidal racial slavery. While there are multiple variations on this regime of physiological dominance—including (Latino/a, Muslim, and Arab) immigrant detention, extra-territorial military prisons, and asylums—it is crucial to recognize that the genealogy of the prison’s systemic violence is anchored in the normalized Black genocide of U.S. and New World nation-building.²

Second, the concept of the prison regime understands the place of state-ordained human capture as a *modality of social (dis)organization* that produces numerous forms of interpersonal and systemic (race, class, gender, sexual) violence within and beyond the physical sites of imprisonment. Here, the multiple and vast social effects of imprisonment (from affective disruptions of community and extended familial ties to long-term economic/geographic displacement) are understood as fundamental and systemic dimensions of the policing and imprisonment apparatus, rather than secondary or unintended consequences of it.³

Third, the prison regime encompasses the multiple *knowledges and meanings* that are created around the institutional site and cultural symbol of “the prison,” including those that circulate in popular culture and among the administrative bureaucracies and curriculum of schools.

Given this conception of the prison regime as a far-reaching and invasive arrangement of social power, state violence, and human domination, we might better be able to understand the significance of everyday routines of school-based discipline that imply the possibility of imprisonment as the punitive bureaucratic outcome of misbehavior, truancy, and academic failure. What, then, is the

condition of “teaching” in the context of a prison regime that is so relentless in its innovation and intrusiveness?

We might depart from another critical premise: that the prison⁴ (jail, detention center, etc.) cannot be conceptualized as a place that is wholly separate or alienated from the normalized intercourses of civil society or “the free world.” Speaking more precisely to the concerns raised by this issue of *Radical Teacher*, 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.

Thus, I do not think the crucial question in our historical moment is whether or not our teaching ultimately supports or adequately challenges the material arrangements and cultural significations of the prison regime—just as I believe the central question under the rule of apartheid is not whether a curriculum condones or opposes the spatial arrangements of white supremacy and intensified racist state violence. Rather, the primary question is whether and how the act of teaching can effectively and radically displace the normalized misery, everyday suffering, and mundane state violence that are reproduced and/or passively condoned by *both* hegemonic and critical/counter-hegemonic pedagogies.

I am arguing that our historical conditions urgently dictate that a strategic distinction must be drawn between liberal, social justice, critical, and even “radical” pedagogies that are capable of even remotely *justifying, defending, or tolerating* a proto-genocidal prison regime that is without precedent or peer, on the one hand, and those attempts at abolitionist

pedagogy that—in an urgent embracing of the historical necessity of innovation, improvisation, and radical rearticulation—are attempting to generate new epistemic and intellectual approaches to meaning, knowledge, learning, and practice for the sake of life, liberation, and new social possibilities. I am concerned with addressing a pedagogical tendency that artificially separates the teacher-student relation and “the school” from “the prison.”

Such strategic distinctions are useful for delineating the ways that multiple pedagogical epistemes⁵ (including otherwise critical and radical ones) operate from the *a priori* notion that prisons and policing serve necessary, peace-and-safety making, and “good” social functions that are somehow separable or recuperable from their historical primacy to socioeconomic/class repression, American apartheid,⁶ racial slavery,⁷ indigenous land displacement and cultural genocide,⁸ and white supremacist colonization.⁹ In other words, what might happen to the disoriented teaching act if it were *re-oriented against* the assumptive necessity, integrity, and taken-for-grantedness of prisons, policing, and the normalized state violence they reproduce?

Schooling Regime

The structural symbiosis between schools and the racist policing/prison state is evident in the administrative, public policy, and pedagogical innovations of the War on Drugs, “Zero Tolerance,” “No Child Left Behind,” and the school-based militarizations of the “school to prison (and military) pipeline.”¹⁰ Angela Y. Davis has suggested that “when children attend schools that place a greater value on discipline and security than on knowledge and intellectual development, they are attend-

ing prep schools for prison.”¹¹ These punitive iterations of an increasingly carceral schooling industrial complex, however, represent a *symptomatic* reflection of how the racist state—and white supremacist social formation generally—are producing new categories of social identities (and redefining older ones) that *can only be “taught” within a direct relationship to the regulatory mechanisms and imminent (state) violence of the prison industrial complex and the U.S. prison regime.* (Even while some are relatively privileged by the institutional logics of relative de-criminalization, their bodily mobility and academic progression are contingent on the state’s capacity to separate and “protect” them from the criminalized.)

There are, at first, categories of social subjects that are *apprehended and naturalized* by the school-as-state—gifted and talented, undocumented, gang affiliated, exceptional, at-risk, average—who are then, by ontological necessity, hierarchically separated through the protocols of pseudo-standardized intelligence quotient, socioeconomic class, race, gender, citizenship, sexuality, neighborhood geography, etc. This seemingly compulsory, school-sited reproduction of the deadly circuits of privilege and alienation is anything but new, and has always been central to the routines of the U.S. schooling regime, particularly in its colonialist and post-emancipationist articulations.¹² The idea of the U.S. prison apparatus as a regime, in this context, brings attention to how prisons are not places outside and apart from our everyday lives, but instead *shape and deform* our identities, communities, and modes of social interaction.

I have written elsewhere that the prison regime is an apparatus of power/violence that cannot be reduced to a minor “insti-

tution” of the state, but has in fact become an apparatus that *possesses and constitutes* the state, often as if autonomous of its authority.¹³ Here, I am interested in how this regime overlaps with and mutually nourishes the multiple “schooling regimes” that make up the U.S. educational system. The U.S. prison, in other words, has become a *model and prototype for power relations more generally*, in which 1) institutional authority is intertwined with the policing and surveillance capacities (legitimated violence) of the state, 2) the broadly cultural and peculiarly juridical racial/gender criminalization of particular social subjects becomes a primary framework for organizing institutional access, and 3) the practice of systemic bodily immobilization (incarceration) permeates the normal routines of the “free world.” To trace the movements of the prison’s modeling of power relations to the site of the school is to understand that policing/surveillance, criminalization, and immobilization are as much *schooling* practices as they are *imprisonment* practices. The teacher is generally being asked to train the foot soldiers, middle managers, administrators, workers, intellectuals, and potential captives of the school/prison confluence, whether the classroom is populated by criminalized Black and Brown youth or white Ph.D. candidates. Two thoughts are worth considering: the teaching act is constituted by the technologies of the prison regime, and the school is inseparable from the prison industrial complex.

The “prison industrial complex,” in contrast to the prison regime, names the emergence over the last three decades of multiple symbiotic institutional relationships that dynamically link private business (such as architectural firms,

construction companies, and uniform manufacturers) and government/state apparatuses (including police, corrections, and elected officials) in projects of multiply-scaled human immobilization and imprisonment. The national abolitionist organization Critical Resistance elaborates that the prison industrial complex is a “system situated at the intersection of governmental and private interests that uses prisons as a solution to social, political, and economic problems.”¹⁴ In fact, as many abolitionist scholars have noted, the rise of the prison industrial complex is in part a direct outcome of the liberal-progressive “prison reform” successes of the 1970s. The political convergence between liberals, progressives, and “law and order” conservatives/reactionaries, located within the accelerating political and geographical displacements of globalization,¹⁵ generated a host of material transformations and institutional shifts that facilitated—in fact, necessitated—the large-scale reorganization of the prison into a host of new and/or qualitatively intensified structural relationships with numerous political and economic apparatuses, including public policy and legislative bodies, electoral and lobbying apparatuses, the medical and architectural/construction industries, and various other hegemonic institutional forms.

Concretely, the reform of the prison required its own expansion and bureaucratic multiplication: for example, the reform of prison overcrowding came to involve an astronomical growth in new prison construction (rather than decarceration and release), the reformist outrage against preventable deaths and severe physiological suffering from (communicable, congenital, and mental) illnesses yielded the piecemeal incorporation of

medical facilities and staff into prison protocols (as opposed to addressing the fact that massive incarceration inherently creates and circulates sickness), and reformist recognition of carceral state violence against emotionally disordered, mentally ill, and disabled captives led to the creation of new prisons and pharmaceutical regimens for the “criminally insane,” and so on. Following the historical trajectory of Angela Y. Davis’ concise and accurate assessment that “during the (American) revolutionary period, the penitentiary was generally viewed as a progressive reform, linked to the larger campaign for the rights of citizens,”¹⁶ it is crucial to recognize that the prison industrial complex is one of the most significant “reformist” achievements in U.S. history and is not simply the perverse social project of self-identified reactionaries and conservatives. Its roots and sustenance are fundamentally located in the American liberal-progressive impulse toward reforming institutionalized state violence rather than abolishing it.

The absolute banality of the prison regime’s presence in the administrative protocols, curricula, and educational routines of the school is almost omnipresent: aside from the most obvious appearances of the racist policing state on campuses everywhere, it is generally the fundamental *epistemological* (hence pedagogical) assumption of the school that 1) social order (peace) requires a normalized, culturally legitimated proliferation of state violence (policing, juridical punishment, war); 2) the survival of civil society (schools, citizenship, and individual “freedom”) depends on the capacity of the



state to isolate or extinguish the criminal/dangerous; and 3) the U.S. nation-building project is endemically decent or (at least) democratic in spirit, and its apparent corruptions, contradictions, and systemic brutalities (including and especially the racial, gender, and class-based violence of the prison industrial complex) are ultimately reformable, redeemable, or (if all else fails) forgivable.

It is virtually indisputable—though always worth restating—that most pedagogical practices (including many “critical/radical” ones) invest in producing or edifying “free” and self-governing citizen/subjects. The assumptive framework of this pedagogical framework tends to *conflate civil society with “freedom,”* as if one’s physical presence in civil society is separable from the actual and imminent state violence of criminalization and policing. (Is a criminalized and policed person really “free”?). This pedagogical approach also leaves unmasked the question of whether the central premise of the teaching practice itself—that a given pedagogy *is actually capable* of producing free citizen/subjects under such historical conditions—might implode if its conditions of possibility were adequately confronted. To clarify: as teachers, our

TIMOTHY D. CLARK-BEY, “CIVILIZED SLAVERY” (2010)

generic pedagogical assumption is that we are either teaching *to* “free” student-citizens who must be empowered and encouraged to live up to the responsibilities of their nominal freedom (a task that may be interpreted differently and contradictorily depending on the teacher), or that our pedagogy intends to participate in the *creation* of free student-citizens who are capable of being trained to participate robustly in civil society, outside and apart from the social dominance and institutional violence of the prison regime. In both instances, the underlying task of the teacher is to train the student to avert direct confrontation with the policing and imprisonment apparatus, and to remain un-incarcerated and relatively un-criminalized by the state.

Whether or not the teacher can claim to succeed in this task, a basic historical truth is obscured and avoided: the structural symbiosis between the schooling and prison regimes has already rendered the prevailing cultural and institutional rubrics “freedom” an utter sham, no less than the Declaration of Independence was a pronouncement of displacement, liquidation, and enslavement for the majority of the continent’s inhabitants. Within the schooling regime/prison regime nexus, many are taught into freedom in order to administer, enforce, and passively reproduce the unfreedom of others, while some are trained into a tentative and always-temporary avoidance of unfreedom, meagerly rewarded with the accoutrements of civic inclusion (a job, a vote, a home address). Numerous others are trained to inhabit a space across or in between these fraudulent modalities of freedom. If the radical teacher’s primary challenge does not initially revolve around the creation of pedagogical strategies that can produce

“free,” self-governing, critical student/subjects, but instead centers on the structurally violent conditions of possibility for “pedagogy” itself, in what form can critical, radical, liberationist teaching actually occur? To revise a previous question: how might the conceptual premises and practical premises of classroom pedagogy be transformed, rethought, and strategically disrupted in order that an abolitionist re-orientation of teaching becomes feasible and effective?

The (Pedagogical) Necessity of the Impossible

A compulsory deferral of abolitionist pedagogical possibilities composes the largely unaddressed precedent of teaching in the current historical period. It is this deferral—generally unacknowledged and largely presumed—that both undermines the emergence of an abolitionist pedagogical praxis and illuminates abolitionism’s necessity as a dynamic practice of social transformation, over and against liberal and progressive appropriations of “critical/radical pedagogy.”

Contrary to the thinly disguised ideological Alinskyism that contemporary liberal, progressive, critical, and “radical” teaching generally and tacitly assumes in relation to the prison regime, what is usually required, and what usually works as a strategy for teaching against the carceral common sense, is a pedagogical approach that asks the unaskable, posits the necessity of the impossible, and embraces the creative danger inherent in liberationist futures. About a decade of teaching a variety of courses at the undergraduate and graduate levels at one of the most demographically diverse research universities in the United States (the University

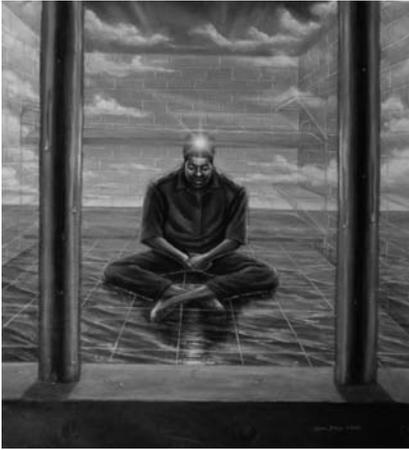
of California, Riverside) has allowed me the opportunity to experiment with the curricular content, assignment form, pedagogical mode, and conceptual organization of coursework that directly or tangentially addresses the formation of the U.S. prison regime and prison industrial complex. Students are consistently (and often unanimously) eager to locate their studies within an abolitionist genealogy—often understanding their work as potentially connected to a living history of radical social movements and epistemological-political revolt—and tend to embrace the high academic demands and rigor of these courses with far less resistance and ambivalence than in many of my other Ethnic Studies courses.

There are some immediate analytical and scholarly tools that form a basic pedagogical apparatus for productively exploding the generalized common sense that creates and surrounds the U.S. prison regime. In fact, it is crucial for teachers and students to collectively understand that it is precisely the circulation and *concrete enactment* of this common sense that makes it central to the prison regime, not simply an ideological “supplement” of it. Put differently, many students and teachers have a tendency to presume that the cultural symbols and popular discourses that signify and give common sense meaning to prisons and policing are *external* to the prison regime, as if these symbols and discourses (produced through mass media, state spokespersons and elected officials, right-wing think tanks, video games, television crime dramas, etc.) simply amount to “bad” or “deceptive” propaganda that conspiratorially hide some essential “truth” about prisons that can be uncovered. This is a seductive and self-explanatory, but far too

simplistic, way of understanding how the prison regime thrives. What we require, instead, is a sustained analytical discussion that considers how multiple layers of knowledge—including common sense and its different cultural forms—are constantly *producing* a “lived truth” of policing and prisons that has nothing at all to do with an essential, objective truth. Rather, this fabricated, lived truth forms the template of everyday life through which we come to believe that we more or less understand and “know” the prison and policing apparatus, and which *dynamically produces our consent and/or surrender to its epochal oppressive violence*.

As a pedagogical tool, this framework compels students and teachers to examine how deeply engaged they are in the violent common sense of the prison and the racist state. Who is left for dead in the common discourse of crime, “innocence,” and “guilt”? How has the mundane institutionalized violence of the racist state become so normalized as to be generally beyond comment? What has made the prison and policing apparatus in its current form appear to be so permanent, necessary, and immovable within the common sense of social change and historical transformation? In this sense, teachers and students can attempt to concretely understand how they are a dynamic part of the prison regime’s production and reproduction—and thus how they might also be part of its abolition through the work of building and teaching a radical and liberatory common sense (this is political work that *anyone* can do, ideally as part of a community of social movement).

Additionally, the abolitionist teacher can prioritize a rigorous—and vigorous—critique of the endemic complicities of liberal/progressive reformism to the



transformation, expansion, and ultimate reproduction of racist state violence and (proto)genocide; this entails a radical critique of everything from the sociopolitical legacies of “civil rights” and the oppressive capacities of “human rights” to the racist state’s direct assimilation of 1970s-era “prison reform” agendas into the blueprints for massive prison expansion discussed above.¹⁷

The abolitionist teacher must be willing to occupy the difficult and often uncomfortable position of *political* leadership in the classroom. To some, this reads as a direct violation of Freirian conceptions of critical pedagogy, but I would argue that it is really an elaboration and amplification of the revolutionary spirit at the heart of Freire’s entire lifework. That is, how can a teacher expect her/his students to undertake the courageous and difficult work of inhabiting an abolitionist positionality—even if only as an “academic” exercise—unless the teacher herself/himself embodies, performs, and oozes that very same political desire? In fact, it often seems that doing the latter is enough to compel many students (at least momentarily) to become intimate and familiar with the allegedly impossible.

Finally, the horizon of the possible is only constrained by one’s pedagogical willingness to locate a particular political struggle (here, prison abolition) within the long and living history of liberation movements. In this context, “prison abolition” can be understood as one important strain within a continuously unfurling fabric of liberationist political horizons, in which the imagination of the possible and the practical is *shaped but not limited* by the specific material and institutional conditions within which one lives. It is useful to continually ask: on whose shoulders does one sit, when undertaking the audacious identifications and political practices endemic to an abolitionist pedagogy? There is something profoundly indelible and emboldening in realizing that one’s “own” political struggle is deeply connected to a vibrant, robust, creative, and beautiful legacy of collective imagination and creative social labor (and of course, there are crucial ways of comprehending historical liberation struggles in all their forms, from guerilla warfare to dance).

While I do not expect to arrive at a wholly satisfactory pedagogical endpoint anytime soon, and am therefore hesitant to offer prescriptive examples of “how to teach” within an abolitionist framework, I also believe that rigorous experimentation and creative pedagogical radicalism is the very soul of this praxis. There is, in the end, no teaching formula or pedagogical system that *finally* fulfills the abolitionist social vision, there is only a political desire that understands the immediacy of struggling for human liberation from precisely those forms of systemic violence and institutionalized dehumanization that are *most culturally and politically sanctioned, valorized, and taken for granted* within one’s own pedagogical moment. To refuse

or resist this desire is to be unaccountable to the historical truth of our moment, in which the structural logic and physiological technologies of social liquidation (removal from or effective neutralization within civil society) have merged with history's greatest experiment in punitive human captivity, a linkage that increasingly lays bare racism's logical outcome in genocide.¹⁸

Abolitionist Position and Praxis

Given the historical context I have briefly outlined, and the practical-theoretical need for situating an abolitionist praxis within a longer tradition of freedom struggle, I contend that there can be no liberatory teaching act, nor can there be an adequately critical pedagogical practice, that does not also attempt to become an abolitionist one. Provisionally, I am conceptualizing abolition as a praxis of liberation that is creative and experimental rather than formulaic and rigidly programmatic. Abolition is a "radical" political position, as well as a perpetually creative and experimental pedagogy, because formulaic approaches cannot adequately apprehend the biopolitics, dynamic statecraft, and internalized violence of genocidal and proto-genocidal systems of human domination.

As a productive and creative praxis, this conception of abolition posits the material possibility and historical necessity of a social capacity for human freedom based on a cultural-economic infrastructure that supports the transformation of oppressive relations that are the legacy of genocidal conquest, settler colonialism, racial slavery/capitalism,¹⁹ compulsory hetero-patriarchies, and global white supremacy. In this sense, abolitionist praxis does not *singularly* concern itself with the "abolition of

the prison industrial complex," although it fundamentally and strategically *prioritizes* the prison as a central site for catalyzing broader, radical social transformations. In significant part, this suggests envisioning and ultimately constructing "a constellation of alternative strategies and institutions, with the ultimate aim of removing the prison from the social and ideological landscape of our society."²⁰ In locating abolitionist praxis within a longer political genealogy that anticipates the task of remaking the world under transformed material circumstances, this position refracts the most radical and revolutionary dimensions of a historical Black freedom struggle that positioned the abolition of "slavery" as the condition of possibility for Black—hence "human"—freedom.

To situate contemporary abolitionism as such is also to recall the U.S. racist state's (and its liberal allies') displacement and effective political criminalization of Black radical abolitionism through the 13th Amendment's 1865 *recodification* of the slave relation through the juridical reinvention of a racial-carceral relation:

Amendment XIII

Section 1. Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, *except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted*, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction.²¹ [emphasis added]

Given the institutional elaborations of racial criminalization, policing, and massive imprisonment that have prevailed on the 13th Amendment's essential authorization to replace a regime of racist chattel slavery with racist carceral state violence, it is incumbent on the radical teacher to assess the density of her/his entanglement in this historically layered condition of

violence, immobilization, and capture. Prior to the work of formulating an effective curriculum and teaching strategy for critically engaging the prison industrial complex, in other words, is the even more difficult work of examining the assumptive limitations of any “radical pedagogy” that does not attempt to displace an epistemological and cultural common sense in which the relative order and peace of the classroom is *perpetually reproduced* by the systemic disorder and deep violence of the prison regime.

In relation to the radical challenging of common sense discussed above, another critical analytical tool for building an abolitionist pedagogy entails the rigorous, scholarly dismantling of the “presentist” and deeply ahistorical understanding of policing and prisons. Students (and many teachers) frequently enter such dialogues with an utterly mystified conception of the policing and prison apparatus, and do not generally understand that 1) these apparatuses in their current form are very recent creations, and have not been around “forever”; and 2) the rise of these institutional forms of criminalization, domestic war, and mass-scale imprisonment forms one link in a historical chain of genocidal and proto-genocidal mobilizations of the racist state that regularly take place as part of the deadly global process of U.S. nation-building. In other words, not only is the prison regime a very recent invention of the state (and therefore is neither a “permanent” nor indestructible institutional assemblage), but it is *institutionally and historically inseparable* from the precedent and contemporaneous structures of large-scale racist state violence. Asserting the above as part of the core analytical framework of the pedagogical structure can greatly enable a discussion

of abolitionist possibility that thinks of the critical dialogue as a *necessary continuation* of long historical struggles against land conquest, slavery, racial colonialism, and imperialist war. This also means that our discussions take place within a longer *temporal* community with those liberation struggles, such that we are neither “crazy” nor “isolated.” I have seen students and teachers speak radical truth to power under difficult and vulnerable circumstances based on this understanding that they are *part of a historical record*.

I have had little trouble “convincing” most students—across distinctions of race, class, gender, age, sexuality, and geography—of the gravity and emergency of our historical moment. It is the analytical, political, and practical move toward an *abolitionist* positionality that is (perhaps predictably) far more challenging. This is in part due to the fraudulent and stubborn default position of centrist-to-progressive liberalism/reformism (including assertions of “civil” and “human” rights) as the only feasible or legible response to reactionary, violent, racist forms of state power. Perhaps more troublesome, however, is that this resistance to engaging with abolitionist praxis seems to also derive from a deep and broad epistemological and cultural *disciplining of the political imagination* that makes liberationist dreams unspeakable. This disciplining is most overtly produced through hegemonic state and cultural apparatuses and their representatives (including elected officials, popular political pundits and public intellectuals, schools, family units, religious institutions, etc.), but is also compounded through the pragmatic imperatives of many liberal and progressive nonprofit organizations and social movements that reproduce the political limitations of the

nonprofit industrial complex.²² In this context, the liberationist historical identifications hailed by an abolitionist social imagination also require that such repression of political-intellectual imagination be fought, demystified, and displaced.

Perhaps, then, there is no viable or defensible pedagogical position *other* than an abolitionist one. To live and work, learn and teach, and survive and thrive in a time defined by the capacity *and political willingness* to eliminate and neutralize populations through a culturally valorized, state sanctioned nexus of institutional violence, is to better understand why abolitionist praxis in this historical moment *is primarily pedagogical*, within and against the “system” in which it occurs. While it is conceivable that in future moments, abolitionist praxis can focus more centrally on matters of (creating and not simply opposing) public policy, infrastructure building, and economic reorganization, the present moment clearly demands a convening of radical pedagogical energies that can build the collective human power, epistemic and knowledge apparatuses, and material sites of learning that are the precondition of authentic and liberatory social transformations.

The prison regime is the institutionalization and systemic expansion of massive human misery. It is the production of bodily and psychic disarticulation on multiple scales, across different physiological capacities. The prison industrial complex is, in its logic of organization and its production of common sense, *at least* proto-genocidal. Finally, the prison regime is inseparable from—that is, present in—the schooling regime in which teachers are entangled. Prison is not simply a place to which one is displaced and where one’s physiological being is disar-

ticulated, at the rule and whim of the state and its designated representatives (police, parole officers, school teachers). The prison regime is the assumptive premise of classroom teaching generally. While many of us must live in labored denial of this fact in order to teach as we must about “American democracy,” “freedom,” and “(civil) rights,” there are opportune moments in which it is useful to come clean: the vast majority of what occurs in U.S. classrooms—from preschool to graduate school—cannot accommodate the bare truth of the proto-genocidal prison regime as a violent ordering of the world, a primary component of civil society/school, and a material presence in our everyday teaching acts.

As teachers, we are institutionally hailed to the service of *genocide management*, in which our pedagogical labor is variously engaged in mitigating, valorizing, critiquing, redeeming, justifying, lamenting, and otherwise reproducing or tolerating the profound and systemic violence of the global-historical U.S. nation building project. As “radical” teachers, we are politically hailed to betray genocide management in order to embrace the urgent challenge of genocide abolition. The short-term survival of those populations rendered most immediately vulnerable to the mundane and spectacular violence of this system, and the long-term survival of most of the planet’s human population (particularly those descended from survivors of enslavement, colonization, conquest, and economic exploitation), is significantly dependent on our willingness to embrace this form of pedagogical audacity.

Notes

1 According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, the imprisoned population in 2008 was over 2.3 million, including more than 785,000 in jail (*Jail Inmates at Mid-year 2008*, March 2009, NCJ 225709) and over 1.5 million in state and federal prisons (*Prisoners in 2008*, December 2009, NCJ 228417). Census data reported in 1999 (the most recent available data), on the other hand, shows over 130,000 children incarcerated under some form of “juvenile corrections,” (see Melissa Sickmund, *Juveniles in Corrections*, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, June 2004, NJC 202885; and Daniel P. Mears, “Exploring State-Level Variation in Juvenile Incarceration Rates: Symbolic Threats and Competing Explanations,” *The Prison Journal*, Volume 86, Number 4, December 2006, 470-490).

2 See João Costa Vargas, *Never Meant to Survive: Genocide and Utopias in Black Diaspora Communities* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008).

3 See Marc Mauer and Meda Chesney-Lind (Eds.), *Invisible Punishment: The Collateral Consequences of Mass Imprisonment* (New York: The New Press, 2002); see especially Jeremy Travis, “Invisible Punishment: An Instrument of Social Exclusion,” 15-36; Gwen Rubinstein and Debbie Mukamal, “Welfare and Housing—Denial of Benefits to Drug Offenders,” 37-49; Donald Braman, “Families and Incarceration,” 117-135; and Beth E. Richie, “The Social Impact of Mass Incarceration on Women,” 136-149.

4 While there are important bureaucratic, juridical, geographic, and institutional distinctions to be drawn between the multiple sites of state-proctored incarceration, I have chosen to use the rhetorical marker of “prison” to encompass this spatial and institutional form. This is not to occlude or obscure the specificity of

these different carceral sites, but rather to indicate that each of those sites emerges from a shared institutional genealogy in “the prison/penitentiary.”

5 Here I am working from Michel Foucault’s notion of an episteme as “the strategic apparatus which permits of separating out from among all the statements which are possible those that will be acceptable within... a field of scientificity, and which it is possible to say are true or false.” Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977* (Colin Gordon, ed.) (trans. Colin Gordon) (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 197.

6 See Douglas S. Massey and Nancy A. Denton, *American Apartheid: Segregation and the Making of the Underclass* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).

7 See Sally E. Hadden, *Slave Patrols: Law and Violence in Virginia and the Carolinas* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001).

8 See Luana Ross, *Inventing the Savage: The Social Construction of Native American Criminality* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1998) and Ward Churchill, *A Little Matter of Genocide: Holocaust and Denial in the Americas, 1492 to the Present* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1997).

9 See Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (1963) (trans. Richard Philcox) (New York: Grove Press, 2004); C.L.R. James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L’Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution* (New York: Random House, 1963); and Albert Memmi, *Racism* (trans. Steve Martinot) (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000).

10 See Damien Schnyder, *First Strike: The Effect of the Prison Regime Upon Public Education and Black Masculinity in Los Angeles County, California* (Ph.D. Disserta-

tion, University of Texas); Victor M. Rios, "The Hyper-Criminalization of Black and Latino Male Youth in the Era of Mass Incarceration," *Souls: A Critical Journal of Black Politics, Culture, and Society*, Volume 8, Issue 2, 2006, 40-54; and Henry A. Giroux, "Mis/Education and Zero Tolerance: Disposable Youth and the Politics of Domestic Militarization," *boundary 2*, Volume 28, Number 3, 2001, 61-94.

11 Angela Y. Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2003), 39.

12 See Andrea Smith, "Soul Wound: the Legacy of Native American Schools," *Amnesty International Magazine*, Summer 2003, (access date January 8, 2010) http://www.amnestyusa.org/magazine/summer_2003/soul_wound/; Carter G. Woodson, *The Mis-Education of the Negro* (1933) (Mineola, N.Y.: Dover Publications, 2005); W.E.B. DuBois, *Black Reconstruction in America* (1935) (New York: Free Press, 1998); and Renato Constantino, "The Mis-Education of the Filipino," *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (1970), 20-36.

13 See Dylan Rodríguez, Chapter 2, "Domestic War Zones and the Extremities of Power: Conceptualizing the U.S. Prison Regime," *Forced Passages: Imprisoned Radical Intellectuals and the U.S. Prison Regime* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 39-74.

14 Critical Resistance website, "What is the PIC?" (access date December 14, 2009) <http://critical-resist.live.radicaldesigns.org/article.php?preview=1&cache=0&id=58>.

15 See Ruth Wilson Gilmore's authoritative study of the emergence of the California prison system in the later 20th and early 21st centuries, *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Global-*

izing California (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).

16 Angela Y. Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?* 27.

17 See Eric Cummins, *The Rise and Fall of California's Radical Prison Movement* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994); Norval Morris and David J. Rothman, *The Oxford History of the Prison: the Practice of Punishment in Western Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995); Angela Y. Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?*; Phil Scraton and Jude McCulloch (Eds.), *The Violence of Incarceration* (New York: Routledge, 2009); Jamie Bissonette, *When the Prisoners Ran Walpole: a True Story in the Movement for Prison Abolition* (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 2008).

18 See Joy James, Chapter 1 "Erasing the Spectacle of Racialized State Violence," *Resisting State Violence: Radicalism, Gender, and Race in U.S. Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 24-43.

19 See Cedric Robinson, *Black Marxism: the Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (1983) (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

20 Angela Y. Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?* 107.

21 "Transcript of 13th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution: Abolition of Slavery (1865)," (access date January 8, 2010) <http://www.ourdocuments.gov/doc.php?doc=40&page=transcript>.

22 Dylan Rodríguez, "The Political Logic of the Non-Profit Industrial Complex," *The Revolution Will Not Be Funded: Beyond the Non-Profit Industrial Complex* (INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence, Eds.) (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 2007), 21-40.