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"Can a Poem Stop a Jail from Being Built?" *On Fugitive Counter-Ethics as Prison Pedagogy*

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PRISON PEDAGOGIES

Learning and Teaching with Imprisoned Writers

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“Can a Poem Stop a Jail from Being Built?”

On Fugitive Counter-Ethics as Prison Pedagogy

MEGHAN G. MCDOWELL AND ALISON REED

In 2016, we began facilitating a reading group at the Norfolk City Jail. Once a week during the semester, we met with six to eight men who qualified for “program privileges” and thus were given the option by jail staff to participate in the reading group. Each week we gathered to discuss the day’s reading in what passed for a classroom inside the jail: a noisy corridor that connected two cellblocks. Against one wall there were four white picnic tables, bolted down to the floor, stacked one after the other. Though these accommodations were better suited for cafeteria-style dining than collective study, we did our best to position our bodies so as to bend sharp angles into a passable circle.

A guard station was located at one end of the corridor, ostensibly for our protection. On any given day, one to three guards milled about the station—busying themselves with mundane tasks, checking social media, or making small talk with one another. At best, the guards ignored us; at worst, they exercised what can be described as a form of authoritarian arbitrariness. More days than not, we arrived to find more than half the jailed students missing. The guards were responsible for escorting students to the “classroom,” yet they often claimed to forget about our reading group, despite the fact that it was scheduled for the same day and time every week. Moreover, students were consistently left off the escort list or prevented from coming to class owing to unspecified violations.

To counter the guards’ presence, we gathered around the tables placed farthest from their station. This choice felt like our spoken and modest effort to reappropriate the space for our own purposes, to use the relative distance, noise, and heat emanating from the cellblocks to buffer our conversations. In a space of hypervisibility, our group desired to keep something for ourselves. Of course, we also knew that the conduct of the guards, the positioning of the “classroom,” the sensory disregulation induced by erratic temperatures, sounds, and a lack of natural light were specifically engineered to make teaching and group study nearly impossible. Yet despite or perhaps because of this terrain of (im)possibility, we came together to read, reflect, exchange ideas—to plan, plot, and make sense of ourselves.

Our aim in this chapter is to critically examine the coming together of two white, queer, prison abolitionists employed as faculty members at a nearby university and a small group of jailed students who were almost exclusively modestly educated black men in the prime of their lives for its generative possibilities. Through a shared reading and study of texts

1. The demographics of our reading group reflect nationwide trends, in which modestly educated black men in the prime of their lives from low-wealth neighborhoods are disproportionately policed, arrested, and incarcerated (Gilmore 2007; Wolfs, Leonard, and Quealy 2015).

2. We want to emphasize this point. Our focus in this chapter is to amplify jailed students’ theorizations of the carceral state. We are attempting to put this critical analysis in conversation with the logic that governs the neoliberal university in order not only to underscore the symbiotic relationship between the jail and the university but also to highlight contradictions in this relationship that allow for the growth of alternative ways of knowing and being in the world. Our focus here, then, is not on the mundane reading of the ways in which we all internalize the carceral state—replicating its logics and practices in our daily lives. Although this important work must continue to be done, in this chapter we offer an abolitionist reading of the knowledge produced during our study group meetings and emphasize the political possibilities for building inside/outside alliances that account for vastly different material experiences with incarceration. We thus recognize the fragility yet urgency of a coalitional "we" that describes a shared commitment across social locations. However, real institutional restraints sometimes impede our earnest desire for collective study with jailed students. For example, we did not obtain approval
ranging from The Hunger Games (Collins 2008) to Between the World and Me (Coates 2015), our group posed questions about racial capitalism, white supremacy, insurgent knowledge production, history, and resistance. Whereas the national debate on mass incarceration focuses largely on federal and state prisons, jail—with roughly 731,000 people locked up on any given day and nearly 12 million new admissions in an average year—is arguably mass incarceration’s “front door” (Vera Institute of Justice 2015). Given this fact, jails are increasingly urgent yet often overlooked sites to consider questions about power, pedagogy, and justice.

Specifically, we argue that jailed students have theorized a set of obligations, what we term “fugitive counter-ethics,” that not only serves as an indictment of the harmful and harm-inducing logics that govern the neoliberal university but also suggests ways to build alternative pedagogical praxes guided by improvisation, self-determined action, and what Michael Hames-García (2004) calls “relational freedom”—the core principles of fugitive counter-ethics.

In this spirit, we have chosen to frame our chapter around four pedagogical imperatives that stem directly from and remain in conversation with fugitive counter-ethics. We begin with the concept of “false teaching” theorized by a jailed student in our class. The term false teaching describes the deliberate, systemic omission of social identities and movement legacies that pose a challenge to the dominant order of the US educational apparatus. Next, we unpack how jailed students theorize the fugitive counter-ethics of improvisation and self-directed action through a critical reading of The Hunger Games. We connect this theory to Stefano Harney and Fred Moten’s (2013) concept of “study” as a method to make visible and to disarticulate the forms of antirelativity that implicitly guide teaching expectations in the neoliberal university. We close by taking up the last principle of fugitive counter-ethics, “relational freedom.” We draw from the black radical tradition’s theorization and practice of revolutionary love to argue that relational freedom is a call to action that challenges the neoliberal university’s positioning of prison education programs as a humanitarian project divorced from social movements and structural change.

False Teaching and the “Humanizing” Rhetoric of Prison Programs

A close reading of Ta-Nehisi Coates’s book Between the World and Me generated a serious discussion about the ways educational projects often occlude histories of struggle. During a back-and-forth conversation, students began to theorize the idea of “false teaching,” which guides this section. False teaching, to paraphrase students, means pedagogy delimited by what power wants you to know. Neoliberal education programs of false teaching, including those that take place in prison, serve the interests of the state rather than those of radical political projects. Following student theorists, we offer a critique of how so-called humanizing rhetoric writ large dominates the way prisons and the people in them become legible to policy makers and universities. Both the university and the jail cleave to a limited vision of education as preparation for assimilation into the oppressive status quo, while those deemed unassimilable become props for other people’s morality and invulnerability. A fictitious concept of the prisoner gets figured as a fungible, captive audience for reconciling demands of tough-on-crime yet soft-hearted security. In other words, prison expansion works hand in hand with so-called humanitarian efforts to cage prisoners less brutally. The racialized figure of the prisoner, as an abstract receptacle for white fears of violence and fantasies of saviorism, centralizes the pitfalls of prison programs marked by education for assimilation.

Destructive political aims—to reaffirm the status quo as a benevolent good—underwrite the prison program’s humanizing rhetoric. In addition to softening the image of the jail, this rhetoric presumes to index incarcerated people with more “human” faces, but for radical pedagogues in
prison and jail settings it is the inhumanity of cages and of the people who champion them that sparks abolitionist action. Such institutional rebrandings evoke the specter of race, but only in its containment and rehabilitation to fit safely into the racial order’s expectation of its capitalist production. The humanizing rhetoric of jails acts as a vehicle through which the language of cultural pathology flows between the jail and the university in the guise of justice. The university constantly pushes this humanizing rhetoric, which obscures the ongoing operations of an institution never designed for radical study.

The notion of “false teaching” makes visible the masks education wears to defang radical study through its safe containment. Indeed, the relationship between social justice and the neoliberal university is rife with contradiction. Public education, as one of the collective goods in the process of rapid privatization, has become a key site of struggle amid current austerity politics and ongoing post-civil rights backlash. The neoliberal trifecta of austerity, precarity, and contingency works to gut tenure lines, compound student debt, and dismantle disciplinary formations, in particular those with explicit social justice missions. Ethnic studies programs emerged out of midcentury student-of-color-led activism and today strive to remain accountable to these legacies despite institutional attempts to erase or sanitize racial justice movements. Although organizers in the 1960s and 1970s fought for diversification of university curricula and hallways, their victories were also defeats, as the culture wars of the 1980s made way for two warring threads, paradoxically strengthened by each other: one, white rage against the presence of liberatory praxes emerging out of social identities and movements not aligned with the presumed Eurocentric basis for knowledge consumption at the university; and, two, the co-optation of the language and strategies originally deployed by decolonization movements. Multiculturalist logics of diversity management, inclusivity, and comfort sanitize and tokenize race while absenting the critique of institutional racism, a critique that has the power to radicalize people across racial lines.

To champion the language of race while absenting discussions of racism satisfies an institutional need for antiracist subjects divorced from praxis,3 replacing a real commitment to the eradication of injustice through community organizing with celebrated forms of “service and volunteerism”—the neoliberal replication of colonialist logics of the White Man’s Burden (Hanks and Meiners 2014). The uncritical celebration of community-outreach programs eviscerates notions of the collective good, replacing it with individual acts of benevolent charity. Although educational institutions should certainly have a relationship with adjacent communities, strategic “outreach” without meaningful exchange incorporates the language of community into the neutralization of a power imbalance. In other words, the mere existence of justice-oriented programming in universities and prisons does not demonstrate a genuine investment in social transformation but rather often a hierarchical relationship of care between community and university wherein the university gets falsely lionized as public servant. In the case of education-in-prison programs specifically, the neoliberal university capitalizes on the strategies of prison abolition but does not pursue the broader vision of a holistic transformation of society that builds social relations and concepts of justice not dependent on violent masquerades of crime and punishment.

We stand at a crossroads where white students rage against the sanitized pledge to social justice in higher education, and yet that commitment has already been co-opted to serve the interests of the neoliberal university. (One might imagine a hoard of hunters taking aim at a menacing polar bear, but that bear was taxidermied long ago by those same hunters.) Given the redoubling of backlash, what does it mean to be in the university but not of the university, to use Harney and Moten’s generative formulation? How might we extend that question to think through prison pedagogy that is in the jail but not of the jail? As Harney, Moten, and others have argued, a commitment to prison abolition requires a radical

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3. We are grateful for ongoing conversations with Felice Blake, organizer of Antiracism Inc. We also thank a member of that collective, Daniel Silber-Baker, for inspiring our essay title through his deep exploration of how radical acts of the imagination contest prison expansion.
rebuilding of the university anew, and the transformation of education requires an abolitionist commitment to the impossibility of “humanizing” cages.  

Education in the university by design prepares students to become good consumer-citizen-subjects (hence the reviling of disciplines that at least in theory reject normative terms of racial capitalist existence). Under the guise of decreasing recidivism, the carceral institution selectively champions programs that prepare formerly incarcerated people for reentry into a world where they will properly abide by rather than disrupt the social order’s rules of capital—a paradox when one considers that the existing social order depends on the criminalization of those very bodies as capital. Jailed students are acutely aware of these contradictions. To paraphrase an observation made by several of the students we have studied with: “Forget jail. It looks like a jail out there.” A student recording broadcast on the Inside Prison Podcast offers a similar analysis: “My living conditions—where education is limited by vision of recidivism haunting my re-entry like the shadows of barbed wire fences” (Rose 2016).

The neoliberal university, then, molds education into a repackaged commodity with a waning market value and in so doing exploits the language and labor of justice movements while absolving people invested in those very movements from its classrooms. Without recognizing its role in reproducing hierarchy, the university situates prison education programs in the fray of absented activists and a Teach for America brand of hardship tourism that does little to structurally address and redress the school-to-prison pipeline, a two-tiered public K–12 system, segregation, and other educational injustices (Tomlinson and Lipsitz 2013, 12–16). This Teach

4. As Harney and Moten write, “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 contains incarceration as the product of its negligence” (2013, 113, italics in the original). See also Kelley 2016.

5. One example of this paradox would be how neoliberal distance-learning programs at prisons and universities understand students as income generators (Lewen 2008, 695).

for America-style incorporation of the community good finds an easy outlet in the popular framing of prison programs as “humanizing” incarceration—often against the program facilitators’ stated aims and political proclivities.

What remains most troubling about the university’s anxious repetition of the insidious refrain “people, not prisoners” is its categorical denial of humanity to incarcerated people not brought into the fold of service or volunteer projects administered by the university. Cloaking prisoners in the language of dehumanization ignores how they theorize their own lives, offer transformative solutions, as well as incite and mobilize organizers on the outside with their active struggle on the inside. In addition to not minimizing the very real restrictions that antiblack, anti-Latinx, anti-indigenous, and antipoor carceral regimes enact on individuals, hegemony sees the creative vitality of people refusing oppressive ways of organizing social life as a danger to its perpetuity. Prisons exist not only as a simple solution to complex economic and social problems but also as a political tool of maintaining dominance—incarcerating challenges to power. The proliferation of political prisoners in the wake of black liberation movements makes this claim clear (Camp 2016).

The disenfranchisement and “dehumanization” of radicalized prisoners achieves the political end of absenting their voices from the struggle, but it would be highly presumptive at best to assume prisoners allow the inhumane weapons of the state or legal status to wholly crush their personhood. As Cedric Robinson reminds us in Parergon of Memory and Meaning (2007), the messiness of power disallows its desired seamless hold on subjects. Much scholarly attention has necessarily been focused on social debt and what Orlando Patterson (1982) describes (in the context of slavery’s reduction of enslaved people to the legal status of nonpersonhood) as “social death.” But it is incarcerated social life, precisely, that exists

6. In a landmark study of blackness as a condition of ontological impossibility, Patterson defines “social death” as slavery’s denial of legal rights to personhood to enslaved Africans and their descendants, reducing the slave to a “social nonperson” in the eyes of the law (1982, 5). Many ethnic studies scholars have mobilized and extended Patterson’s influential “social death” thesis to the afterlives of slavery. Abdul JanMohamed (2005),
as the precondition for its annihilation. Ultimately, we must understand the rhetoric of dehumanization in jails and prisons to be part of the same mechanism that facilitates the humanization of jails and prisons through the civilizing mission of the neoliberal university's production of "good" (i.e., capitalist-conforming) subjects. Fugitive counter-ethics, in its insistence on incarcerated social life over and against state-sanctioned death economies, instead looks to how prisoners theorize their own lives, write their own narratives, and activate—through their artistry and activism—abortionist visions of a world without cages.

**Trojan Horse Tactics: Study and The Hunger Games**

In 2016, we began our spring semester by reading *The Hunger Games* (2008–10), the best-selling dystopian trilogy by Suzanne Collins set in a futuristic world destroyed by human-induced climate change. Through the eyes of the novel’s sixteen-year-old heroine, Katniss Everdeen, the series examines dynamics of social control, capitalism, (in)justice, solidarity, and resistance. According to our field notes, the third week of class began in typical fashion, which is to say there was no clear beginning. Unlike on the outside, the form and rituals that typically inaugurate the start of class were unavailable to us at the jail. There was no classroom to enter, let alone to stand authoritatively in front of, nor were we temporally bound by a class period. On this particular day in the jail, half the class was missing, leaving just four students. Yet among those who were present, the conversation was lively. We flowed in and out of discussions about musical tastes, professional sports, and the poor selection of books at the jail library and learned the names of other prisoners who were interested in joining our reading group.

Dylan Rodriguez (2008), and Lisa Marie Cacho (2012), for example, examine how the operation of racial power—from the prison-industrial complex to immigration policy—constrains people's material circumstances and psychic lives. The daily violence of racial regimes means that some subjects are “formed, from infancy on, by the imminent and ubiquitous threat of death” (JanMohamed 2005, 2).
that Rue's death is a catalyst for Katniss, enabling her to make life in the arena by deciding to overthrow the Capitol on her terms. By escaping the games without having to kill, Katniss and her fellow tribute turned accomplice Peeta not only expose but also refuse the logics of the Capitol. To paraphrase another student, Katniss refuses to be a pawn in the Capitol's death match. Rather than do what is expected of her—kill or be killed—Katniss does the unexpected and becomes illegible to the game itself by creating her own moves. After all, the student commented, the Capitol can never fully own the hearts and minds of tributes.

This analysis also illuminates the core elements of what we term fugitive counter-ethics. As articulated here, fugitive counter-ethics gestures toward a commitment to improvisation (doing the unexpected), self-determined action (making her own moves), and what Hames-García identifies as "relational freedom"—the belief in a "collectivist self and the impossibility of freedom while others are unfree" (2004, 230). Moreover, the fugitive counter-ethics theorized here demonstrates jailed students' astute capacity to find and make life "where death and destruction dominate" (Gordon 2008, 63)—in other words, to remember there is love out there, too.

Fugitive counter-ethics grates against the educational status quo of training students to be better capitalists by emphasizing study over and against instruction. As opposed to a neoliberal education, critically conscious study proposes another mode of thinking about justice-oriented pedagogy that is collective, collaborative, and nonhierarchical. In elaborating this concept of study, Harney and Moten emphasize one of its meanings "as a sketch in preparation," which turns on the "unfinished or the unready or the unfit" (2013, 173). Those deemed "unfit" for existing institutions, such as the jailed students we studied with, often offer the most transformative epistemologies for social change.

Therefore, we argue that study must inform our pedagogical practices in a way that might be deemed criminal, especially in the intellectually hyperpoliced spaces of the jail and the university. Our use of the word criminal here signals an embrace of Moten and Harney's argument that the only ethical relationship we can have with the university is necessarily a criminal one: "To abuse [the university's] hospitality, to spit its mission, to join its refugee colony, its gypsy encampment, to be in but not of—this is the path of the subversive intellect in the modern university" (2013, 101). Intentionally taking on the mantle of criminality exposes and undermines entrenched expectations of who and what constitutes both crime and education in the popular imaginary.

Fugitive counter-ethics as pedagogy deploys Trojan Horse tactics to exchange radical ideas—such as using Suzanne Collins's The Hunger Games as the platform for discussing key concepts from Cedric Robinson's work Black Marxism (1983). In so doing, we could critique state-sponsored brutality through coded language: for example, when the guards loomed over our shoulders during our class, as they were apt to do, especially when conversation seemed particularly lively, we called (out) the police by their ironic name in Collins's dystopian world, peacekeepers, which we would signal to humorous effect using air quotes, referred to the US government as "the Capitol," the seat of power in the text; and elaborated histories of slavery with reference to District 11, the segregated agricultural unit of production in The Hunger Games, rather than directly invoke plantation capitalism in the antebellum South. What we call "Trojan horse tactics" suggest possibilities for the symbolic, evocative language of fiction, which can do work for us both to strategically hide and to reveal radical critique, particularly as necessary in spaces of confinement.

Practicing study as an expression of fugitive counter-ethics in the classroom puts an emphasis on creating spaces of mutual transformation and

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7. We are grateful for a lively discussion with Eli Meierhoffer in which he elaborated his concept of "nodes of study" from his forthcoming book We Are the Crisis: Study against the Romance of Education. See also Dyke and Meierhoffer 2013.

8. Humor, in fact, serves as a Trojan horse tactic. Shared laughter enables horizontal sociality around a mutual distrust of prison guards, for example, by making visible who we stand with and for.
deep teaching against hollow forms of “diversity” or “representation” that replace analysis of entrenched realities of racism with myths of its heroic defeat. Study, after all, should be about ego-shattering exposure to history rather than complacent comfortability and genocidal erasure. As Coates recollects during his time at what he calls “Mecca,” Howard University, “It began to strike me that the point of my education was a kind of discomfort, was the process that would not award me my own special Dream but would break all the dreams, all the comforting myths of Africa, of America, and everywhere, and would leave me only with humanity in all its terribleness” (2015, 52).

Whereas teaching at the jail might function like neoliberal education in that it divorces learning from social justice movements and their radical pedagogies, using fugitive counter-ethics to guide our pedagogical practices demands a commitment to exposing how and why the neoliberal carceral state scapegoats certain groups of people for what are in effect complex social, political, and economic problems (Gilmore 2007). Study must also expose students to black freedom dreams and movement legacies—to survival amid suffering and to a deeply politicized love in the face of immense violence.

In short, fugitive counter-ethics in the classroom requires study, capacious visions of personal freedom and collective social life, as well as nonauthoritarian teaching for the transformation of—not assimilation into—existing institutions. Refusing the call to order therefore serves as an inaugurating act that shares as kin one student’s urging not to be a pawn in authority’s game. Although risky and fraught with myriad forms of neoliberal entrapment, devising pedagogical practices that center study—a mode of being “with and for”—remains an ethical imperative if we are to work against the limited vision, shared by universities and jails alike, of education as preparation for assimilation into a society predicated on racially gendered premature death.

9. The phrase “teaching for transformation, not assimilation,” guides Ninth Ward organizer and teacher Kalamu ya Salaam’s activism in New Orleans, especially with Students at the Center. For more information, see http://www.sacnola.com/.

Writing Relational Freedom

This section considers one student’s call for fugitive counter-ethics not only to disinvest in death economies but also to invest in community-based alternatives to jails and prisons. This investment in collective social life makes necessary the space of art as a vessel for bringing abolitionist imaginaries into existence. At the end of the semester, one student produced a creative piece that contrasted the physical and psychic conditions of the jail to the conditions of a world where imagination becomes reality. Although this world may read at first glance like wishful thinking or cliché, the student’s writing advanced an argument in the black radical tradition about materializing visions of a transformed social world through art and activism. This juxtaposition of harsh material realities against the possibilities of other worlds-within-worlds powerfully demonstrates the abolitionist ethos of fugitive counter-ethics. Thus, we suggest that we must wrest love back from its institutional incorporation to promote humanization projects dependent on and ultimately bolstering the inhuman apparatus of the state. Our students reminded us of the urgency of ‘evolutionary love’ in the fugitive planning of life economies.

Much understandable resistance exists to the assertion of sociality and love as galvanizing forces, which is steeped in the bleeding-heart liberal discourse this chapter seeks to oppose, but in the black radical tradition love has always meant something more than compassion or romance, something more than the false hope of salvific community or human rationality that inevitably reverts to a dialogue of transcending rather than transforming unlivable social conditions. As James Baldwin prophesizes in a letter to his nephew on the one hundredth anniversary of Emancipation, “There is no reason for you to try to become like white people and there is no basis whatever for their impertinent assumption that they must accept you. The really terrible thing, old buddy, is that you must accept them. And I mean that very seriously. You must accept them and accept them with love” ([1965] 1993, 8). The revolutionary call of (and to love is not about selective humanization but about mutual recognition that we must abolish the structures that differentially order the conceptual trap of the “human” as such. Baldwin’s point, which failed students took seriously, is to contest
the inhumanity of power’s abstraction of the human—not to seek recognition within its existing racial schema. If we understand the interconnected web of survival, love, and activism as an assertion of preexisting humanity, not as a claim to it, we can think more critically about the false generosity of the neoliberal university and its pedagogy of de/humanization.

In a writing project we worked on at the end of the semester, students wrote letters to real, imagined loved ones after the model of Baldwin and Coates. They testified to feelings of aloneness without a safety net of love and care and to the intense vulnerability and unsafety of getting positioned as a threat to society. Despite loss, students urged others toward self-determination in the ethos of relational freedom: “See I’m telling you guys these things because I don’t want y’all to lose faith, because when you lose faith you lose self. I remember a time when I lost myself.” Students in our class imagined futures where unfreedom wasn’t one’s birthright: “As Ta-Nehisi Coates stated, ‘And I am now ashamed of the thought, ashamed of my fear, of the generational chains I tried to clasp onto your wrists.’ Instead of clasp the generational chains upon your wrists, let’s break the chain.” The chain represents both a systematic cycle of injustice and literal, physical restraint. After all, in an era during which we have seen a steady decrease in violent crimes, we have also seen an unprecedented increase in incarceration.10 College-in-prison programs can, with minimal cost to the university, erect a smooth facade over larger patterns of

10. As Ruth Wilson Gilmore points out, the “California state prisoner population grew nearly 500 percent between 1982 and 2000, even though the crime rate peaked in 1980 and declined, unevenly but decisively, thereafter” (2007, 7). Amid an economic crisis, unchecked spending on the death economies of prisons, detention centers, and jails drastically reduces funds for life economies. In the name of reducing government regulation and so-called public safety, economic policies and mass incarceration severely cut public expenditure for basic social services such as education and health care—proving that profits take precedence over people. The university follows the same logics of rapid privatization and austerity measures— endemic to neoliberalism—that actively disinvest in public education, holistic health care, youth development, and other community programs and at the same time invest in the carceral state’s expansion. Simultaneously, however, the university touts rhetorics of service in which prison programs figure increasingly, despite a slash in funding during the Clinton era.

redirecting funds from justice initiatives led by students and faculty of color to prison-building projects.

Although the benevolent incorporation of social justice rhetoric exposes some uneasy pedagogical congruities between the educational and carceral state, we also want to reflect on one of the most jarring differences between each site: the visibility of white supremacy. Whereas in university classrooms white supremacy must be unveiled precisely by reckoning with its enforced invisibility, in the jail whiteness remains relentless and repetitive. White supremacy and class privilege can be seen, heard, felt, and understood through the bodies cycling in and out of captivity as well as the edifice of cages that unevenly contains them: indeed, our incarcerated students understood white supremacy as structure. Their resistance to discussing white supremacy in class was not, as we initially guessed, the popular and reactionary refusal to discuss race so endemic to our times—but something else. Over the course of our time studying Between the World and Me, it became apparent that this book was a student favorite11 precisely because of its examination of systemic racism. However, students were most interested in Coates’s intracommunal analysis of race and racism. White supremacy was the stale air of the jail, the redundant and repetitive voices outside the block, and the cold metallic bars of their cages. Even the one white student in the class had a complex analysis of how his whiteness functioned as property within racialized space and how a critical conversation about whiteness implicated but did not exile him. Therefore, to overemphasize whiteness seemed an affront to the realities of life inside.

This affective pooling of testimony, urgency, and energy around a conversation on Ta-Nehisi Coates at the jail contrasted starkly with teaching James Baldwin’s The Fire Next Time on campus. Yet Between the World and Me clearly echoes The Fire Next Time’s epistolary form and central concerns around criminal white “innocents” (for Coates, the Dreamers), violence and history, and a deeply politicized love born out of struggle. Just as Coates describes how fictions of race attempt to obfuscate white brutality in an era of mass incarceration, the figure of the prisoner acts as foil to white

11. Confirmed in our end-of-semester surveys.
“innocence” and immunity. Baldwin’s text asks white students to unpack how their freedom depends on the unfreedom of so-called others in order to generate a new basis for identity formation not predicated on subordination.

Discussion of Baldwin’s work in the college classroom outside prison typically necessitates diagramming the burning house about which Baldwin famously writes—“Do I really want to be integrated into a burning house?” ([1965] 1993, 94)—to bring to light the routinely invisible whiteness of its foundations. In the fifty-year gap between Baldwin’s and Coates’s publications, from 1963 to 2013, at the bicentennial of the Emancipation Proclamation, exists that slow-burning flame: the omnipresence of whiteness whose interests both the jail and the neoliberal university protect. Pairing Baldwin and Coates offers vital classroom conversation at both the university and the jail on how to disrupt the insidious people/prisoners binary. Moreover, as one student reminded us, writing projects that hinge on the relational freedom central to fugitive counter-ethics juxtapose the pains and pleasures of living to imagine an otherwise and otherwhere free from mass incarceration’s replacement of communal care with cages.

Abolitionist Time Zones

Creative production cannot directly stop a jail from being built, but it can shift the political landscape that rationalizes prison-expansion projects. During our study of Coates’s Between the World and Me, we kept returning to the question of what it means to lose one’s body. In so doing, students developed the concept of “time zones” to characterize the jail. Changing landscapes and experiences make possible the recognition of time’s passing, but the warped temporality of the jail transforms moving time into still time, wherein repetition and monotony produce anger and listlessness. In this way, students reflected, the class allowed them to take hold of time. This active reclamation defies state restraints on time, as students wear reminders of their court or release date printed on their ID wristbands. Amid the jail’s suspended time, abolitionist imaginaries can come into existence through the moving time of growth and study. The abolitionist orientation of fugitive counter-ethics does not wait for a messianic upturning of global racial capital but exists in transformative zones of social encounter—the messy work of living out activist imaginaries through collective praxis.

Fugitive counter-ethics urges us to consider how we can act as accomplices to former, current, and future students inside jail struggling to get free in the long run and how we can alleviate their suffering in the short term. One possible route is to forge alliances between inside students and outside students that are defined not by paternalistic notions of service, community, or democratic engagement but by fugitive counter-ethics: improvisation, self-determined action, and relational freedom— theorized here as the revolutionary call to remember that, as one student said, there is love out there, too. Although no moest task, networking our teaching into ongoing social justice movements will undoubtedly open up “other sites of intervention, build [unforeseen] allegiances, and create new modes of communication” (Harkins and Meiners 2014, 12). With that, we improvise; we study; we account for and are accountable to the queer, black, brown, indigenous, poor, and rebellious bodies housed by the state; we turn to fugitive thought for insurgent practices of safety, justice, and freedom; we employ haunting as an experiential mode to devise new pedagogical practices that are disloyal to the project of the neoliberal university itself. As we inhabit the structures that inhibit and incite our subtle social transformations, we must listen carefully to visions of a just world that jailed students call into being.

References


12. Following our initial reading group, we cofounded Humanities Behind Bars, a prison education program committed to abolitionist praxis. Codirected by Kendrick McClay, a formerly incarcerated student, Humanities Behind Bars also formed Humanity Without Bars, a grassroots community organization devoted to collective study and critique of the carceral state as part of its coalitional efforts to join local antiprison activist struggles. For more information, see http://humanitiesbehindbars.org/.


