

**WE WANT TO DO
MORE
THAN
SURVIVE**

**ABOLITIONIST TEACHING AND THE
PURSUIT OF EDUCATIONAL FREEDOM**

BETTINA L. LOVE

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with teachers, administrators, and students from Haiti, Mexico, Colombia, Cuba, and Guatemala. The school printed permission slips in three languages: English, Spanish, and Haitian Creole. As diverse as the school was, and still is, its diversity was held together by poverty. The school was a perfect example of the need for intersectionality in the field of education, of how race, ethnicity, nationality, and class intersect and leave students living and learning in enclaves of racial (dark) and economic isolation.

Back in 2003, when I was teaching second and third grade, I did not have the sociopolitical awareness or language to know that I was witnessing and participating in dark suffering and the educational survival complex. I remember feeling overwhelmed with confusion the first time I learned that many of my students had never gone to South Beach in Miami, or that a few were repeating the third grade because their parents were migrant workers, so they never completed a full year of school in the same year. A student of a migrant family would start at our school, leave in the middle of the year, and then return after their parents' seasonal work had ended. The flux of work coupled with the high-stakes testing of No Child Left Behind perpetually and deliberately did, in fact, leave these students to flounder; to be blunt, they were not even playing in the same game as their peers who lived on the pristine roads of South Florida.

A good number of my students came from poor working families. These parents went to work every day at the bottom of the US wage distribution; they worked simply, at best, to survive. The reality is that "our political economy is structured to create poverty and inequality."² Schools reflect our political economy. The fact that schools are funded by local property taxes ensures that students who live in poor communities receive an education that will maintain, and, in fact, widen the gap between the über-rich, the rich, the rapidly shrinking middle class, the working poor, and the poor. This system renders schools ineffective in providing poor students any type of real social mobility. Schools in higher-income districts or rich enclaves are well-resourced, have high-quality teachers, and have low

CHAPTER 2

EDUCATIONAL SURVIVAL

Survival: The state or fact of continuing to live or exist, typically in spite of an accident, ordeal, or difficult circumstances.

— OXFORD ENGLISH DICTIONARY

American history is longer, larger, more various, more beautiful, and more terrible than anything anyone has ever said about it.

— JAMES BALDWIN¹

I STARTED MY TEACHING CAREER MORE THAN FIFTEEN YEARS ago in Homestead, Florida, not far from Everglades National Park and Turkey Point. In 2016, a nuclear power plant leaked dangerous water waste into Biscayne Bay, ultimately polluting nearby drinking supplies. Like most teachers, I did not live near my school; I lived in Miami, approximately forty miles away. I was young and wanted nothing more than to call my family in cold upstate New York to casually remind them that I was living in tropical Miami, just miles from the beach. However, Monday through Friday, and on some weekends, I drove down what felt like the never-ending highway of US 1 and entered what seemed to be a different world unfamiliar to most. It was my first time living in a place where saying the word "diversity" felt genuine. There were so many shades of dark children who spoke with the tongue of my ancestors unknown to me. Although my school was filled with mostly Black students, the halls were packed

teacher turnover. In addition, the Parent Teacher Associations of affluent schools work to ensure that extracurricular activities, community initiatives, and field trips are offered to the already privileged.

To put some real numbers to the lives of average families, in 2017, 95 percent of wealth created went directly into the pockets of the top 1 percent of society.³ Meanwhile, the median income for a family of four was \$54,000, with \$16,000 in credit card debt, more than \$172,806 in home mortgages, \$28,535 in car loans, and just under \$50,000 in student loans.⁴ This economic state is what our country calls the middle class—folx in debt, barely hanging on, living paycheck to paycheck. This perpetual state of financial precariousness is only exacerbated when you are dark, poor, and living in isolation.

In terms of race, a 2014 study found that the wealth gap between White and Black families had widened to its highest levels since 1989.⁵ The children of Black families that do reach the middle class have a more difficult time maintaining that status, much less achieving more than their parents. For example, Black college graduates are twice as likely to experience unemployment as their White counterparts. College-educated Hispanics were hit hard by the collapse of the housing market: their net worth crashed 72 percent between 2007 and 2013.⁶

Although these reported statistics paint a bleak picture, they do not even come close to capturing the lives of my former students in South Florida. My students were far from middle class; the median household income in that area for 2003 was roughly \$36,850, with 28.3 percent of people living below the poverty line (\$19,500 for a family of four). Today the poverty line is roughly \$24,250, with racism and sexism still at the core of poverty, woven into the fabric of the US. According to 2016 US Census data, women were 35 percent more likely to live in poverty than men.⁷ Of the 16.9 million women living in poverty, 45.7 percent live in extreme poverty, with an income at or below 50 percent of the federal poverty level.⁸ It is no coincidence that women of color and their children make up a vast majority of women living in poverty.

Education researchers know that without a long-term strategy to eradicate the causes of racial and economic isolation—such as discrimination, predatory lending, housing displacement, the gender wage gap, rising healthcare costs, and unemployment (which leads to the 99 percent being no better than indentured servants to the 1 percent)—“heroic attempts to restructure schools or to introduce new pedagogical techniques in the classroom will be difficult to sustain.”⁹ No type of pedagogy, however effective, can single-handedly remove the barriers of racism, discrimination, homophobia, segregation, Islamophobia, homelessness, access to college, and concentrated poverty, but antiracist pedagogy combined with grassroots organizing can prepare students and their families to demand the impossible in the fight for eradicating these persistent and structural barriers. Pedagogy should work in tandem with students' own knowledge of their community and grassroots organizations to push forward new ideas for social change, not just be a tool to enhance test scores or grades. Pedagogy, regardless of its name, is useless without teachers dedicated to challenging systemic oppression with intersectional social justice.

To that end, the state of Florida labeled my school a failing school, an “F” school. In Florida, individual schools are given letter grades based on Florida's Standards Assessment, with the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT) being a significant portion of the grade. Yearly, these grades are released in the newspaper for all to see. As a first-year teacher, I was confused about what my job was as an educator. What were my priorities? I felt as though my job centered on teaching to the test to raise test scores so the school would not be taken over by the state or closed down. At times it felt like our students' low test scores threatened our ability to keep our jobs, our homes, our livelihoods. It was also the first time in my life I was making enough money to cover my bills. I didn't want to give that security up, even though I was underpaid. I was struggling to remember why I became a teacher, and the students were struggling with the purpose of it all. We were all trying to survive.

that works for everyone, especially those who are put at the edges of the classroom and society. Abolitionist teaching is teachers taking back their schools, classroom by classroom, student by student, parent by parent, and school community by school community. The work is hard and filled with struggle and setbacks, which is why Ella Baker's model of grassroots organizing rooted in creativity, imagination, healing, ingenuity, joy, and freedom dreaming is vital to the undoing of the educational survival complex and to all justice work.

Abolitionist teaching is not a teaching approach: It is a way of life, a way of seeing the world, and a way of taking action against injustice. It seeks to resist, agitate, and tear down the educational survival complex through teachers who work in solidarity with their schools' community to achieve incremental changes in their classrooms and schools for students in the present day, while simultaneously freedom dreaming and vigorously creating a vision for what schools will be when the educational survival complex is destroyed. No one teacher or parent can abolish the educational survival complex but if we work together, we can. Currently we are tweaking the system, knowing that these adjustments are what we need for the here and now, but we are always keeping our eyes on the root causes of dark children's suffering. Ella Baker once said that the "reduction of injustice is not the same as freedom." The ultimate goal of abolitionist teaching is freedom. Freedom to create your reality, where uplifting humanity is at the center of all decisions. And, yes, concessions will be made along the way, battles will be lost, and sometimes teachers, parents, and community members will feel like they are not doing enough, but the fight is fought with the indomitable spirit of an abolitionist who engages in taking small and sometimes big risks in the fight for equal rights, liberties, and citizenship for dark children, their families, and their communities—this is fighting for freedom.

There is no one way to be an abolitionist teacher. Some teachers will create a homeplace for their students while teaching them with the highest expectations; some will protest in the streets; some will fight standardized testing; some will restore justice in their classrooms; some will create justice-centered curriculums and teaching

CHAPTER 5

ABOLITIONIST TEACHING, FREEDOM DREAMING, AND BLACK JOY

Let's begin by saying that we are living through a very dangerous time. Everyone in this room is in one way or another aware of that. We are in a revolutionary situation, no matter how unpopular that word has become in this country. . . . To any citizen of this country who figures himself as responsible—and particularly those of you who deal with the minds and hearts of young people—must be prepared to "go for broke." Or to put it another way, you must understand that in the attempt to correct so many generations of bad faith and cruelty, when it is operating not only in the classroom but in society, you will meet the most fantastic, the most brutal, and the most determined resistance. There is no point in pretending that this won't happen.

—JAMES BALDWIN¹

EDUCATION CAN'T SAVE US. WE HAVE TO SAVE EDUCATION.

Abolitionist teaching is as much about tearing down old structures and ways of thinking as it is about forming new ideas, new forms of social interactions, new ways to be inclusive, new ways to discuss inequality and distribute wealth and resources, new ways to resist, new ways to agitate, new ways to maintain order and safety that abolishes prisons, US Immigration and Customs Enforcement, and mass incarceration, new ways to reach children trying to recover from the educational survival complex, new ways to show dark children they are loved in this world, and new ways to establish an educational system

approaches; some will stand with their students to end gun violence in schools; some will fight to end the prison-industrial complex in and outside of schools; some will fight in the effort so communities can peacefully govern themselves to control their children's education, housing, healthcare, and ideas about peace, justice, and incarceration; and some will do a combination of all of these. Still, some will leave the profession mentally, physically, and spiritually depleted, looking for a way to make an impact on education outside the classroom, but *all* are working to restore humanity with their eyes on abolishing the educational system as we know it. Abolitionist teaching is welcoming struggles, setbacks, and disagreements, because one understands the complexity of uprooting injustice but finds beauty in the struggle. Abolitionist teachers fight for children they will never meet or see, because they are visionaries. They fight for a world that has yet to be created and for children's dreams that have yet to be crushed by anti-Blackness.

TWEAKING THE SYSTEM IS NOT ENOUGH

For centuries, we have tried to tweak, adjust, and reform systems of injustice. These courageous efforts, righteous and just in their causes, are examples of the pursuit of freedom. However, we have learned from our collective freedom-building as dark folk that tugging at the system of injustice is just the first step, as White rage will counter and bring in reinforcements to maintain injustice. For example, when President Abraham Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1863, Texas slaveholders forced enslaved Black folk to remain in bondage for two and a half additional years. Black folk in Texas did not learn of their freedom until June 19, 1865, when Union soldiers arrived on the shores of Galveston, announcing the freeing of more than two hundred thousand enslaved Black folk in the state.

However, freedom was short-lived because the system and structures of oppressing dark people were not abolished at the root. The Thirteenth Amendment abolished slavery unless as a punishment for a crime. This deliberate, racist loophole forced free Black folk to become slaves all over again, as they were imprisoned for petty crimes

such as vagrancy or were falsely arrested. They were returned to a new form of slavery for their alleged "crimes": the prison labor system or convict leasing. The South was accustomed to free Black labor and was not going to give that up because of a few laws or a Civil War; instead the system of slavery was able to be tweaked because its roots were still intact. Prisons sold the labor of Black men to local companies for cheap. While incarcerated and forced to work for pennies, these men also faced high fines and court fees for their petty crimes, if there was a crime at all. To pay back these "fees," prisoners were forced to work on plantations for "former" slaveholders, now known as prison holders. The bones of this unfair prisoner payment system are still in place centuries later. In 2016, over half a million people were in jail because they could not afford bail.³ In the same year, eight hundred people died awaiting trial or serving short stints in jail for minor offenses.⁴

The work done in the fields was still done by dark bodies long after the Emancipation Proclamation was signed. The debt peonage system, or debt slavery, which was created from the centuries-old, established system of slavery, forced a person with no money, such as a newly freed slave, to agree to work on a plantation as a sharecropper. The landowner provided a portion of his land to use and the materials needed to farm; in return, the sharecropper gave a percentage of his earnings from the crops to the owner. The catch was that the prices of the supplies and land usage fees were so high that the sharecropper would never be able to pay off his debt. As a result, sharecroppers were in debt year after year, and the landowners remained their masters, even with slavery abolished on the books.

Folk who fight for prison abolition, such as Angela Y. Davis and Ruth Wilson Gilmore, understand that they are trying to tear down the prison-industrial complex while simultaneously building up radically revolutionary and sustainably empowering new systems of justice. History tells them, and us, that if we just change, adjust, or even eradicate one piece of the oppressive hydra, such as the prison-industrial complex or educational survival complex, another piece will grow in its place. They also understand the connection

between the proliferation of prisons and other institutions in our society, such as public education. Reflecting on her work, Davis said in 2005, "Prison abolitionist strategies reflect an understanding of the connections between institutions that we usually think about as disparate and disconnected. They reflect an understanding of the extent to which the overuse of imprisonment is a consequence of eroding educational opportunities, which are further diminished by using imprisonment as a false solution for poor public education."⁵ An ahistorical understanding of oppression leads folk to believe that quick fixes to the system, such as more surveillance, more testing, and more punishment, will solve the issues of injustice and inequality. This way of thinking is a fallacy of justice like the achievement gap is a fallacy of educational improvement.

ACHIEVEMENT GAP (SHARECROPPING)

The achievement gap is not about White students outperforming dark students; it is about a history of injustice and oppression. It is about the "education debt" that has accumulated over time due to the educational survival complex. It is one of the fallacies of justice to know that the achievement gap is due to race and class and yet never proclaim racism and White rage as the source of the achievement gap. Calling for teaching practices that tweak the system and for more resources are fine places to start but they will never radically change the system of persistent inequality in education. Dark students and their families are sharecroppers, never able to make up the cost or close the gap because they are learning in a state of perpetual debt with no relief in sight. But dark people still fight, hope, love, believe, and freedom-dream despite obstacles prepacked and tightly wrapped in racism, hate, and rage.

It is with this endurance that abolitionist teaching starts in the imagination of educators, but only after a deep and honest interrogation of America's antidarkness, racism, and White rage that created the educational survival complex. That imagination informs what is possible, as students and teachers are constantly told what is not possible in education, especially for dark children. New teachers walk

into classrooms believing that inner-city schools cannot have a strong community, caring parents, and brilliant dark children. But my entire life is possible because dark folk freedom-dreamed. These dreams were filled with joy, resistance, love, and an unwavering imagining of what is possible when dark folk matter and live to thrive rather than survive. These freedom dreams and the places that helped them move into reality are important markers of what is possible.

BEACON HILL

There are two places in the US where I feel most alive, where my feet are on fire, my mind cannot stop racing, my soul feels whole, and my heart is filled with joy: Boston and New Orleans. To me, certain parts of these two cities embody abolitionist teaching: in New Orleans, it is Congo Square; in Boston, it is Beacon Hill. On the north side of Boston, in view of the Charles River and enclosed by Bowdoin Street, Cambridge Street, Boston Common, and Embankment Road, stands Beacon Hill. During the late 1700s through the mid-1800s, Beacon Hill was a well-established free Black community and the home of the abolitionist movement in the United States. Black and White abolitionists and newly freed Black folk from all over the country came to Beacon Hill to live, to work, to seek refuge, or to pass through one of its several Underground Railroad stops.

The Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Infantry, the first Black soldiers allowed to fight in the Civil War, consisted of residents from Beacon Hill and throughout the US; fathers and sons enlisted together. Black men from all corners of the country came to Boston and Beacon Hill to serve in the Fifty-Fourth, including Charles and Lewis Douglass, sons of abolitionist Frederick Douglass. Governor John Andrew of Massachusetts, a member of the antislavery community, appointed Robert Gould Shaw to lead the all-Black infantry. Shaw initially declined but was persuaded by his parents, wealthy, well-connected White abolitionists. The free Black men of the Fifty-Fourth fought knowing that if they were captured they would be sold into slavery, and yet they refused their wages in protest because they were paid less than White soldiers. The Fifty-Fourth famously fought the battle