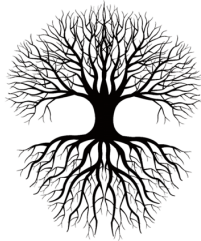


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# On Worries and Joy: School Abolition and the Necessity of Ancestral Wisdom

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**To cite this work:** Stovall, D. (2020). On Worries and Joy: School Abolition and the Necessity of Ancestral Wisdom. *Root Work Journal*, 54–62. <https://doi.org/10.47106/11112533>

**To link to this work:** <https://doi.org/10.47106/11112533>

*The purpose of this account is not to downplay the severity of the moment (uprisings, global health pandemic, life under capitalism and White supremacy, etc.). To the contrary, I believe that the more informed we are about a situation, the more it pushes us to rethink our resistance. At the same time, I also know it is hard work. More importantly, the work is so intense that it is completely impossible to take it on as a solitary endeavor. Because it requires our collective will, this unique historical moment allows us to rethink abolition and the necessity of collective community care. Both practices allow us to grapple with the intensity of now while building with others to claim our humanity.*

**Our hearts are heavy with grief.** The constant reminders of the normalization of Black death at the hands of the police and from the totality of White supremacy brings about feelings of rage, anger, fatigue, despair. Despite the fact that the multitudes of Black people have known these for time immemorial, we are witnessing a “moment of clarity” by members of the White power structure who are forced to reckon with what we’ve known all along: White supremacy rests on the fact that Black people are understood as deviant before we are considered human.

For mainstream white society, this is a heavy pill to swallow. For those of us who experience marginalization, oppression, and isolation on a daily basis at the hands of White supremacy, it allows us to assess the moment and move forward with the understanding that this world in its current form is unacceptable. Where some may be worried about

what the new world will look like, there are some of us that understand that building it is an imperative.

By now, many of us have been inundated with social distancing and shelter-in-place orders related to the global health pandemic brought to us by way of the novel coronavirus COVID-19 (SARS-CoV-2). Whether it be family members, friends, essential workers, and first responders we have come to know, few (if any) in our circles are able to steer free of its wrath. As the novel coronavirus violently interrupts life and livelihood across countries and continents, those who have historically been deemed disposable are exposed to the worst of its fury. Given the upside-down moment that we’re all living in, COVID-19 comes to us amidst two additional pandemics that are never acknowledged by mainstream white society for their global reach and subsequent devastation: capitalism and White supremacy. Despite the fact that many of us are intimately familiar with the pandemics of White supremacy and capital-



ism, there are some who are collectively amazed at the fact that they've terrorized certain communities long before COVID-19. As communities organize to resist White supremacy and capitalism, the weight on the collective of Black life could appear daunting to those who may have just come to consciousness about the severity of the moment.

The purpose of this account is not to downplay the severity of the moment. To the contrary, I believe that the more informed we are about a situation, the more it pushes us to rethink our resistance. At the same time, I also know it is hard work. More importantly, the work is so intense that it is completely impossible to take it on as a solitary endeavor. Because it requires our collective will, this unique historical moment allows us to rethink abolition and the necessity of collective community care. Both practices allow us to grapple with the intensity of now while building with others to claim our humanity. In this moment we must look beyond cross burnings, physical assaults, lynching, the use of racial epithets to perceive the totalizing power of White supremacy. In its most insidious and all-encompassing form, White supremacy operates as the assumed views and values of White, Western European descended, cis-gender, heterosexual, protestant, able-bodied males as normal right and good while making everything else strange and/or deserving of gratuitous punishment. For those of us who see White supremacy and live in its crosshairs as targets, it viscerally appears in the form of incarceration rates, inhuman learning conditions, menial access to healthcare, housing discrimination, wrongful land appropriation (colonization), lack of employment, and inaccessibility to healthy food. Its greatest power, if we are not careful, is its capacity to shift our thinking to believe that the aforementioned issues are the fault of those harmed by them. A clearer view of White supremacy understands the previously mentioned issues to be structural instead

of what is propagated in mainstream media outlets as the result of "poor choices". Luckily, for our sakes, history rightly complicates this mode of thinking if we dare pay attention to the founding principles of life in the United States: slavery, genocide, and colonization.

Capitalism, as the third contagion, is a totalizing system that is based on the exploitation of labor by way of control of the means of production. To feed itself, capitalism demands economic growth in ways that are unsustainable. The current idea of "re-opening" the economy in the time of a pandemic has nothing to do with the plight of workers as much as it has to do with states lessening their responsibilities to its residents. If small businesses can't access loans, then they can't pay their workers. When they can't pay their workers, many are forced to close. In the same equation, lapses in the supply chain disallow health care professionals to get personal protective equipment (PPE) they need. Essential workers in grocery stores, gig economy delivery services, large shipping companies, and the postal service (currently the largest employer of Black men and in the top five of employers of Black people) are forced to work long hours, exposing themselves to a potentially deadly pathogen that can attach itself to skin and surface, deepening their chances of becoming sick. At the same time, the ownership class, who still control the means of production and distribution, are able to cash in with minimal cost to their bottom line. Many of these workers are people of color who are perpetually dumped on in this cycle. In this way capitalism is racialized, in that it structurally determines, by race, who will "lose" in a manufactured struggle for supremacy in global markets. The scholar Robin D.G. Kelley, in his reflections on the political theorist Cedric Robinson, is correct in that "capitalism and racism...did not break from the old order but rather evolved from it to produce a modern world system

of “racial capitalism” dependent on slavery, violence, imperialism, and genocide (<http://bostonreview.net/race/robin-d-g-kelley-what-did-cedric-robinson-mean-racial-capitalism>). In addition to COVID-19, capitalism and White supremacy are pandemics that punish those who are found to be “out of compliance”. Both decide who will rule and who will obey. If we understand White supremacy and capitalism as baseline realities, then it becomes easier to embrace radical imaginaries that push us to work with others to change our condition and the conditions of others.

Scholar and activist kihanna ross has challenged us to think deeper about the specificity of White supremacy in the form of anti-blackness. She argues that “anti-blackness covers the fact that society’s hatred of blackness, and also its gratuitous violence against black people, is complicated by its need for our existence” (<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/04/opinion/george-floyd-anti-blackness.html>). Because many Black people are clear about what this means in their daily lives, it is unacceptable to us that our minds, bodies, and souls be the elongated sites of such gratuitous punishment.

At the same time, I am pleased that the creators of this journal challenge us to “remember our futures.” For me, this is the gateway to begin to discuss the ways our ancestors prepared us for this moment, providing us with the necessary tools to build the world to come. They understood that revolutions, in their messiness and unevenness, are catalytic points that provide foundation for the next set of work. Where this might be hard for some to see as people are rising up in the streets, it is a moment to embrace ancestral wisdom while working with others to shift our current conditions to one that are not rooted in the racist, paternalistic, jingoistic, misogynist, anti-Black foundations of the State. For these

reasons, and countless others, now is the time to embrace a politic of abolition to permanently think, talk and act differently. In the spirit of our ancestors, the remaining sections of this account will speak to what we have known and can no longer refuse.

### *The Irredeemable Nature of ‘School’ and the Call for ‘School’ Abolition*

One of the spaces I have come to know with deep familiarity over the years is schools. I explicitly separate ‘school’ from education given our ancestral wisdom about the difference between the two. Where the former serves as a system of order, compliance and rewards for demonstrating how well we can regurgitate the rules of White supremacy, education is the process by which we can ask questions about schools and schooling. When those questions are answered, the answer may not have ‘school’ as a viable option. I place ‘school’ in quotes to indicate it as more than a building, but rather a series of ideas and concepts that we are compelled to agree with. Given the ideological and material realities of ‘school’ I think it is in sync with questions around prison abolition’s challenges to end the systems and practices that get people involved in the Prison Industrial Complex. If we engage in such a practice, then they could very well be a world without prisons. I take the concept and make it applicable to schooling because in many spaces identified as ‘schools’ there is very little education taking place.

Conceptually, the capacity of the State to create a place that has as its goal the anesthetization of a population through constant acts of dehumanization such as isolation rooms for students deemed to be “willfully defiant,” constant police presence/ surveillance, metal detectors, lack of soap, dilapidated infrastructure, lack of resources, and perpetual blame of the families that send their children there. We must consider such a place to be irre-



deemable. However, it is important to note that under White supremacy, this school is doing exactly what it was intended to do: isolate, marginalize and regulate Black bodies in perpetuity. Reforming a place that was never meant to work is futile. We need something new. In concert with prison abolitionists, we need to consider 'school' abolition.

For the multitudes of Black people that have interacted with public education since the early 19th century in the Western Hemisphere, we find ourselves up against a historical question that has an answer that many people don't like. When we offer up whether 'school' was intended to educate anyone, let alone Black people, the answer is an unequivocal "no". Before Black people attended public schools en masse, there were a series of institutions set up by formerly enslaved people to address their community concerns, beginning with the needs of young people. Public schooling came much later when White government structures could instill a system of defacto and de jure isolation of Black people from the resources needed to provide quality education (Anderson, 1988, Watkins 2001, Siddle Walker 2018).

Schools, as a reflection of the larger society, are steeped in the realities of White supremacy and capitalism. In public schooling, there has always been an attempt by those in power to control the narrative of what should be taught (strange aberrations of the historical record) and what schools should produce (an orderly and compliant citizenry). The contradictions inherent to the process of schooling lay bare the contradiction between 'school' and education. If school represents order and compliance rooted in anti-Black violence and colonial deference to Whiteness, then education is the process by which to refuse these things outright.

At this moment education has the capacity to abolish the conditions that normalize violence and hostility towards Black bodies while demonstrating a commitment towards creating something else. The goals of the traditional 'school' have always been resisted by Black communities through strategies such as creating autonomous schools, pushing for Black teachers entering the workforce, and the use of familial and community networks to educate young people. Now is an opportune moment to revisit the resistance of earlier generations.

Despite abject isolation, there were places where Black people were able to educate themselves. At the same time, for many of us, these schools were not idyllic places. Instead, these instances where people were willing to educate us were beyond the white, mainstream rules and regulations. Because they were spaces where teachers dared to love us and engage us critically, we have to grapple with the fact that these teachers did not educate us because of a righteous system, but in spite of an evil one. In order to engage a politics of abolition, we must interrogate the assumptions we hold about the role of schools and disabuse ourselves of the illusions we have about our relationship to them. When we move away from the politics of respectability--the idea that Black success is contingent upon on acceptance and performance of the norms of mainstream white society—we can look at this world and at ourselves and see that there is a better way.

At this point, I envision that some Black folks may still read this and think, "so what does this mean for schools? Why can't we just have a focused discussion on the impact of the more pressing issues of COVID-19 and police violence"? To their pending frustrations I would reply "the disparities brought to bear by the current moment have been happening to us for a very long time—none of it is right or acceptable—and for these reasons we cannot let the

distractions of greed and personal gain steer us away from seeing it". Currently, in Chicago, almost 70% of deaths from COVID-19 have been Black folks. As schools have been forced to shutter their doors, the realities of structural racism and poverty are laid bare. Given the shift to remote or online learning, the first group of people I think about are those who have limited or no access to reliable Wi-Fi networks, computers, or tablets. Before the shelter-in-place orders issued by local and state governments, 60% of young people in Chicago Public Schools (CPS) accessed the internet via their phones. During the COVID-19 crisis, 60% of CPS students had not logged in to their online accounts. Coupled with a population loss of almost 300,000 Black residents, the city of Chicago is in a moment where it will either rededicate itself to the issues at hand or continue to remind its residents of who is valued and who remains disposable.

### *A Fugitive Path Forward*

When enslaved people made a decision to break free, they knew the only option was to run. Not to run out of a fear of their captors but to run to freedom, which is the ability to fully embrace opportunities outside of captivity. In both instances, the most important element is the decision to engage a fugitive way of knowing. We made the decision to run because the situation we were in did not work for us or the people we cared about. On the South and West sides of Chicago and many other urban centers around the world, many young people are clear that the current schooling system is not working for them. Contrary to a market-based ideology that says competition will save education, a fugitive stance understands that "winners" and "losers" are predetermined before the game begins. In this current moment, if you are poor, immigrant, Black, Brown, (dis)abled, undocumented, queer, trans or any combination of these, late stage capitalism has

scripted your loss, hence the need to rise against. Given the pre-existing conditions of white supremacy and capitalism, prison abolitionists remind us of the occasional use of "non-reformist reforms" such as the elimination of cash bail, decriminalization/legalization of marijuana, and sex-trafficking legislation. If these are the projects to pursue "in the meantime," they have the potential to be steppingstones that help us to eventually reach abolition. Now is a particular moment to act on radical imaginaries that provide real, tangible, steps to create a different way of living. When we take into account the past, present and future struggles of oppressed people for self-determination, we quickly understand that we've been here before. Unique to this moment is the reality that there is a very small window of opportunity to press the reset button on our current conditions. Educators can take a page from the current rent strike movement, the struggle to decarcerate those affected by the prison industrial complex, essential worker uprisings across the country, and uprisings by Black youth in order to move towards 'school' abolition. Different from utopian scenarios posited by socialists of the 1920s and 30s, the radical imaginary demands that we take into account the world for what it is in the current moment while making moves to shift our reality.

In education, the fugitive and radical imaginaries allow for insight into doable actions and have even been installed as stop-gap measures. To some, they may seem impossible. To others, their abolition is long overdue. The end of standardized testing: contrary to popular belief, no human on the planet has died from the inability to take a high-stakes standardized test. Currently used as the marker for academic achievement, their origins are deeply embedded in white supremacy and eugenics.

The end of grading and grades: numerous k-12 institutions, colleges and universities have moved to a



pass-fail system of grading, meaning that an arbitrary system of rewards will not be provided to those who can demonstrate how well they can regurgitate the logics of white supremacy in their assignments.

The end of pre-service teacher evaluations rooted in capitalism and extortion: numerous states have canceled the use of a teaching evaluation mechanism known as EdTPA (Education Teacher Performance Assessment). In turn, this has saved thousands of pre-service teachers paying \$300 to have a person evaluate their teaching who has no working knowledge of the context that the teacher candidate is teaching in.

It is important to note that all of the aforementioned strategies have been actualized. They are not utopian, but are rather real-life albeit temporary, implementations that can and must be made permanent. As educators, we should join the ranks of everyday folks that are fighting and pushing us to rethink life as we know it. If we know schools don't work for Black youth, and actually cause suffering, then we must see ourselves as having the capacity to do something differently. The question remains: will we make it happen?

### *Black Love in an Anti-Black World*

Our yearning for joy in a world that demonstrates its hatred for us in perpetuity can make it hard to get through the day. At the same time, words like "wellness", "self-care", and "joy" are often fleeting in a world that expresses its commitment to dislodge you from yourself. In our grappling and understandings of anti-Blackness and White supremacy, it can be tough to claim peace of mind when you take into account the seriousness of the situation. At the same time, our understandings of anti-Blackness and White supremacy should push us to consider

what it means to live in a world that is founded on our exploitation and death. As our elders in the Church have said, "the devil stays busy". I always have understood this to be an affirmation that because we live in a world that justifies its hatred for us, it is critical to take every ounce of our being to overcommit to the spaces that bring us joy over the ones that bring us pain and suffering. It is a monumental task, but the act of us loving us is the only option. In the end, leaning on our ancestral wisdom is important, as it continues to provide the necessary guideposts to build a new world from the ashes of the one that seeks to destroy us.

Before poet, scholar and activist Audre Lorde joined the ancestral realm, she reminded us of the necessity of the revolutionary act of self-care in any struggle to build something new. At the current moment, self-care is often misconstrued to mean self-indulgence. Over the years, my sexism and toxic masculinity wouldn't allow me to hear the callings for self-care. I embraced the toxic belief that all was "for the struggle" and that any form of emoting or vulnerability was "weak" and "counterproductive" to the needs of the people.

However, the human body will remind you of your limitations if you fail to listen. In my early twenties, I was able to ignore what my body was telling me with some modicum of fitness and an attempt to amass power in the gym. I might have briefly felt confident that I could "work hard and party harder." However, my body and mind started to give way to repeated abuse in the form of unhealthy food, alcohol, and other substances I used to self-medicate. It was in these moments when I would refuse my feelings of hurt, despair, and uncertainty to try to "push through." What I didn't recognize is that pushing through could have easily sent me on a path to premature death. Care of one's self in this instance becomes a revolutionary act because, as the ances-

tors have taught us, if I can't do right by me, then there is no way that I can do right by the struggle. Where this may appear to be individualistic on the surface, I see the saying as a reminder about the need to think about the radical intervention of collective community care.

I was reminded of this moment in an interaction with a collective of Black women under the direction of scholar and Dr. Ruth Nicole Brown. Under her leadership, the Saving Our Lives Hearing Our Truth collective (SOLHOT) organized a conference in Chicago in 2019. It included a series of workshops with Black girls throughout the city, one of which was a panel led by a few alumni of the program discussing wellbeing. As the panelists discussed their various projects with Black girls across the city, the Q&A left a deep impression on my understanding of collective community care. One of the questions from the audience was about how to engage in self-care from a community perspective. The panelist responded with an anecdote to challenge us to reframe self-care as collective well-being. Once, she couldn't find a member of the collective who was scheduled to lead a SOLHOT session. She and her other group members worried when they couldn't find her but were relieved when they caught up with her after the session ended. The missing member told them that she had a bad day and needed to engage in some self-care. Everyone understood but reminded her that the responsible thing to would be to let folks know that she was unavailable for the day. She argued that images of her relaxing comfortably on social media, pampering herself while the girls were doing the work, could have had a negative impact on individuals and the collective. "It's cute that you've got lavender on your back—" she said to the audience "—but what does it mean to have "lavender on our backs collectively"? It was a valuable lesson for me given how I had previously seen self-care being propped up as a capitalist in-

dustry, missing the ancestral knowledge that collective, community-based practices are what restore us and remind us of the relationship between our own care and the care of others. Time to replenish the self should never be excluded from our freedom dreams. At the same time, we must act with humility, integrity and accountability with our comrades if we are operating in the spirit of eliminating the conditions of perpetual precarity.

The women of SOLHOT taught me that the practice of abolition must include a commitment to developing clarity around our needs in order to maintain ourselves during our lowest points. As we are in a moment of reckoning, we must remember that the test of our work is best felt in the moments between rebellions. It is in these moments that we must continue to work fugitively when the enemy thinks things are "peaceful". Our work must be consistent, based in the understanding that we are currently "in the meantime". Because complete abolition remains aspirational, we must engage practices that build a path towards it. Being in the meantime means that there is work to do right now. Non-reformist reforms are not the panacea, nor will they ever be. They are, however, important spaces of engagement as the enemy backpedals and is exposed for what he is. Because Black life remains under threat, our ancestors remind us that our precarity should not be understood as a burden. Instead, abolition allows us to reimagine it as our reminder about the imperative to rethink and rebuild a world where we are finally free.



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