

Carceral Educations: Schools, Prisons, Police, and the Obligations of an Abolitionist

Michael Miller mjmillier1@sheffield.ac.uk @no_michael_

Lindsay Miller llmiller1@sheffield.ac.uk @praxivist

With our time here, Lindsay and I are imagining and studying schools, and more to the point, schooling, prisons and imprisonment, police and policing, categories and categorizing, abolition and abolishing. We're thinking with these themes here and now more specifically through pedagogical processes of individuation. Pointing toward the abstract for this paper, we're focusing on education and the school that instills, reproduces, archives, legitimizes, but can never contain the leaky, the excessive, the more and less than one. We're thinking about pedagogical practices and processes of individuation with what we've been calling Abolition Pedagogies, which is a term riffing off of Dylan Rodriguez and the paper "The Disorientation of the Teaching Act: Abolition as Pedagogical Position".

So, what do we mean when we put together Abolition and Pedagogy? When we think of Carceral with Education?

In the recent video series "Breaking down the prison industrial complex" by Critical Resistance, Rodriguez says that the "rise of reformist and even allegedly abolitionist practice, discourse, and analysis around criminal justice, prisons, jails, and so forth, is actually being accompanied by a buttressing and amplification and a strengthening of policing." For example, calls for inclusion into and protection by the state for those who apparently 'deserve' it have also been echoed-back with calls for expanding criminalization and state-sanctioned violence to those who apparently 'deserve' it through exclusionary rights-based reforms foundational to the continuation and expansion of existing social structures.

This "far-reaching and invasive arrangement of social power, state violence, and human domination" is what Rodriguez calls the Prison Regime...further than the "rhetorical marker of 'prison'..." "within and beyond the physical sites of imprisonment" and requires that we not only critically discuss policing and imprisonment - in all its various forms - but we add that this must be coupled with a level of abstraction that interrogates the very notions of justice, ethics, safety, freedom, citizenship and democracy so as to recognize that the power relations that categorize as such are genocidal (as Steve Martinot & Jared Sexton's work teaches us).

In thinking with the Prison Regime, in taking serious the questions and provocations of Rodriguez, Lindsay and I and others ask, where does our understanding of the carceral end? Moreso, where does our carceral understanding end and where does it begin? Our carceral imaginings and imagination? How can we get past this? Behind this? Break out? Escape? Here again we bring in Fred Moten who says that “the whole point about escape is that it’s like an activity, it’s not an achievement. You don’t ever ‘get’ escaped...no!...and what that means is that what you’re escaping from is always after you, it’s always on you...” - and further, we say it’s always in you, in us, as us, and we’re always on, in, and as it. Following Denise Ferreira da Silva - “What if, then, moving otherwise, dismissing value, entertaining excess — that which in a thing has no value — one stays with violence?”

This question deeply influences pretty much everything, and further gestures toward an obligation of an abolitionist, thus we necessarily bring in Che Gossett - @queercruising - who tweets “all of our theories and analyses of violence have gotta be abolitionist, otherwise they get co-opted by state and academic violence or violence of the state and academia”

With this we study how we might refuse the impulse to get away from violence (as if that’s possible in the world as we know it) - to capture violence (as if it can be contained) - to think that we have resolved violence when it can and has been argued that violence is not and cannot be knowable or is something that operates at the point where thought breaks down at its limit - what we’re getting at, which we can never get to, is a violence that is in excess of, is excess to recognizable, nameable, knowable concepts and conceptions.

We argue that one cannot approach a discussion of carceral education without discussing power, as was already alluded to with Martinot and Sexton. We cannot discuss power without discussing knowledge. As the knowledge that has legitimized what is conceived of as ‘carceral’, ‘education’, ‘violence’ and ‘reform’ is and has always emerged out of (and is constitutive of) power as a relationship of force, one which entangles each of these concepts together and exposes how they were always already of the same substance. Here power is thought of as more than brute force, but as a microphysics - tactical, technical, subtle, and exercised through an intricate network of implicated relations. This Foucauldian view of power-knowledge as a ‘relationship of force’ opens up the possibility, according to da Silva, for violence (both symbolic and productive) to be considered as an aspect of the political. Policy as a political endeavor,

then, can be viewed as a violent form and re-form of correction, “forcing itself” as Harney and Moten write, “with mechanical violence upon the incorrect, the uncorrected”.

Considering Carceral Educations, an example of this is in the analytical framework of what is called the school to prison pipeline, which describes policies and practices that patrol and criminalize (certain) students who cannot or will not fit an increasingly surveilled, controlled, and competitive school system. Damien Sojoyner describes this as "an easy and accessible narrative pertaining to prisons and public education", and fails to conceptualize the multidirectional fluidity of these seeps and leaks, these assemblages of violence, the excessive violence. The ahistorical, apolitical storytelling of education-related practices either places the blame and the impetus of change on the student caught in the 'pipeline', or directs action (or directs direct actions) toward policy, toward convincing policy makers, toward becoming our own policy-makers and, pushing it further, policing ourselves, each other, and becoming our own police force - when we accept and even reach toward reactionary reformist-based processes labeled as solutions, the illusion of control is maintained.

In consideration of the obligations to be and of an abolitionist, Rodriguez posits that statistical and empirical evidence working to demonstrate the necessity, at bare minimum, of a total overhaul of “the way policing, incarceration...and criminal justice work”...so often presented...is largely not-in-the-least convincing. And further, this focus on the countable, the quantifiable, in the hopes of accountability merely reaffirms policing or carceral logics in the language of ethics that attempts to rationalize civil society’s existence *as is*.

So, rather than trying to convince with stats and empirical evidence, Rodriguez proposes a different way, with a need to focus on the cultural dimension, with having new stories to tell, with new ways to re-tell historical stories.

With this though, Lindsay and I are interested in a different thing, which is the refusal of the impulse to *convince* in itself...what would it mean to experiment with a praxis of refusing the desire to convince? A praxivist imaginary that doesn’t require convincing but requires, in staying with the violence, displacing. In alignment with Martinot and Sexton: “We seek to displace without dispensing with the institutional rationalisations of white supremacy in order to see its own vigorous reconstitution. This will ultimately mean addressing every social motif as entailing

a paradoxical or even incomprehensible scandal, something beyond the rules of society yet pawned off on us as proper and legitimate.”

Take this very conference, for instance, and the paradox - even scandal - of this conference being a site or a geography that ‘vigorously reconstitutes’ the carceral. That it is sponsored by The Centre for Crime, Justice and Policing here at the University of Birmingham whose external partners include: The College of Policing, South African Police Service, West Midlands Police, Belgium Federal Police, Dutch National Police, Metropolitan Police Service, Serious Crime Analysis Section of the National Crime Agency - and through collaboration and ‘evidence-based’ approaches’ seek to make policing better and more efficient - can be seen as legitimizing and thus reconstituting institutional rationalizations of white supremacy. When this came to our attention we seriously considered withdrawing from the conference but decided to displace without dispensing. We decided to stay with the violence.

So with that we want to end and continue in an untimely way with what we’ve recently been calling Abolition Pedagogy. We’re putting Rodriguez’s writing about Abolition as Pedagogical Position into a generative tension with consideration of Hortense Spillers’ articulations of how movements that “begin in the flesh with a certain kind of urgency or immediacy,” once translated, become “curricular objects” that produce “professors and seminars and books and papers and conferences and...”

How does objecting to (or refusing) the curricular object and studying to object, as Yang & Tuck would call it, help us to distinguish “between liberal, social justice, critical and even ‘radical’ pedagogies that” as Rodriguez says, “are capable of even remotely justifying, defending, or tolerating a proto-genocidal prison regime...and those attempts at abolitionist pedagogy”? Rather than seeking ‘new’ alternatives which could be taken as settler colonial thinking (or ‘inquiry as invasion’ as Tuck and Yang articulate) that is (pre)occupied with trying to ‘discover new frontiers’ and ‘chart new territories’, we’re studying with an abolition that can assist us to together imagine what is already here - the violence as well as what Moten calls the amazing chance that is constitutive of this violence.

This, to us, is very much in alignment with da Silva’s (2013) radical praxis and ‘knowing at the limits of justice’ which unsettles what is viewed as ‘the old’ but doesn’t attempt to reach for ‘the

new'. We wonder how we can stay and move with the tensions and refuse the desire to run, roll, or turn toward a solution that merely reinstantiates the violence of the world as we know it. With this, we end by considering that the obligations of an abolitionist have no end. That what we are obliged to abolish is without end within the world as we know it, and thus includes the obligation to end the world as we know it. Because we cannot abolish prisons without abolishing a world that could have prisons, that could have prisoners.