

Living the Dream of Martin Luther King, Jr.: A Philosophy of Education

Presidential Address

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The daily news, from the mainstream journalism of record to that peddling the most disreputable distortions and lies, is filled with a struggle over race and schooling as intense and widespread as seen in decades. Armed right-wing formations of that struggle now threaten bodily harm against teachers, school leaders, and others hoping to teach the tangled truths of the aftermath of slavery and untangle the devastating impact on the lives of the least advantaged communities. Education Week has identified 37 states where Republican Party lawmakers have attempted to restrict how teachers and schools address race and racism in American history, and in 14 of those states they have achieved some success through law and direct imposition by executive or administrative authority — often specifically citing the “ill” effects of “critical race theory” or the “1619 Project” or “ethnic studies.”²

These battles occur alongside the history of how the normal and legitimate processes and ideologies of schooling contribute to the pervasive cultural and material formation of Black youth as dangerous criminals within a dominant society uniquely afraid of Black children.³ Nearly 70 years after *Brown v Board of Education* and countless government reports and scholarly studies, most BIPOC youth still suffer the ongoing disinvestment in their school facilities and curricular resources, teacher quality,⁴ and extended learning opportunities.⁵

These schooling battles and histories also occur alongside the history of state sanctioned murder of Black people. In the year following the police murder of George Floyd in May 2020, U.S. police officers killed 229 Black people ranging in age from three months to 88 years, the majority being male.⁶ Even with so many eyes upon them, police set a record in 2021 for fatal shootings

and killed Black people at more than double their population percentage.⁷

Assaults on the lives and life opportunities of BIPOC people emerge not only from the armed wing of the state and the state schooling apparatus but also from the openly organized White supremacists, now so prolific that scholars have published a field guide to their identification, hatreds, and alliances.⁸ Meanwhile, the vast majority of Whites, even if ambivalent, remain passive in response to all this violence.

I want to name this situation of deadly violence against Black people — whether in forms that are spectacular, swift, and public, or in other forms that are more intimate, slow and diffuse — as a primary problem for the philosophy of education. What is an ethical response that is also a political response, a praxis that will transform the world so that enough will have been enough already? What conceptualization of philosophy of education is adequate to the urgency and significance of Black lives mattering?

In this paper, I sketch a response in conversation with insights forged decades ago, when the general situation was sadly the same, and with new forms of critical theorizing, holding space, and shaping struggles that have been emerging from Black theorists.⁹ In consideration of the current conditions, I return to Martin Luther King Jr.'s "dream," and I review King's demand for its realization;¹⁰ I then explore what it might mean to "live the dream" in relation to schooling and the tasks for a philosophy of education.

THE DREAM OF MARTIN LUTHER KING JR.

The deadly violent situation of racism often disappears within explanatory systems that blame the victims of the violence, explanations reinforced by the meritocratic myth of public schooling and the lure of the "American Dream" — a 1931 Depression Era conceptual coinage that re-animated the schools' nineteenth-century equal opportunity promise without delivering on it.¹¹ The hope that free universal public education could shape an empowered and critical citizenry to forge more just and democratic communities continues to have force, even while many people find other freedom dreams and other forms of education to be more motivating.¹² The effort to make education serve

freedom and justice in the context of schools and a society predicated on Black death and suffering perhaps can be illuminated by Martin Luther King Jr.'s dreamscape that insisted Black life into the nightmare violence of daily life. King was assassinated for living that dream, and it may be telling for how we might ground a philosophy of education adequate to the carnage we witness daily.

The dream of Martin Luther King Jr. has often been reduced to children being judged for their character and not the color of their skin, but he begins his famous speech by saying that he has arrived 100 years after the Emancipation Proclamation to “cash a check” against the “withering injustice” of the “manacles of segregation” and the moral outrage of poverty in the midst of vast prosperity. He stood “in the fierce urgency of now,” ready with his people “to cash this check, a check that will give us upon demand the riches of freedom and the security of justice.”

As in his admonition to moderates in his letter from the Birmingham jail, King refused the call to “be satisfied” with the redemptions to date because “We can never be satisfied as long as the Negro is the victim of the unspeakable horrors of police brutality.” I ask, how can we be satisfied now, with the reality of deadly violence for Black people still pervasive?¹³ King next insisted that “We can never be satisfied as long as our children are stripped of their selfhood and robbed of their dignity...” Six decades ago, King insisted that freedom and justice were impossible given the connections between the armed enforcement of a racist culture by the police and the diffuse enforcement of a racist culture by its educational and institutional guardians.

Have we fully faced this connection and the demand placed on us as educators, as philosophers of education, to redeem the check that is the demand of King's dream? Where do freedom, economic justice, an end to state sanctioned violence, and a commitment to the well-being of Black children figure in our work? The redemption of this check is a precondition of achieving King's dream for the children of the future, yet educational scholars and policy leaders too often do little beyond naming the “education debts” that are long overdue¹⁴ while students, women, and BIPOC folks across the globe raise the cry that “the

debt is owed to us!” to challenge the deep structure of poverty and servitude that produces incalculable violence in the lives of women and children.¹⁵ How do we respond to these debts and cries?

I am not surprised that educators and scholars, like the dominant culture, cut out the conditions of possibility for the dream to cut to that closing comforting image of children,¹⁶ and thus once again defer the dream of freedom and equality. Yet even in those closing stanzas, King begins anew with equality and justice to clarify what is necessary to set that table of brotherhood and sisterhood — the bounty will come from the transformed social, cultural, and economic relations that will have already undone the inequitable social orders of the most spectacularly violent places (of that time). Then children can be fairly judged by their character, and we will have achieved the realization of what King considered to be a heavenly truth recognizable by any right-thinking person.

Now we see that to “live the dream” of MLK Jr. is to live a life that redeems this check, that brings an end to police violence against Black people, and that brings an end to the assaults on the dignity and self-hood of Black children, so that Black people can live lives of freedom and equality. However, those who “live the dream” necessarily come into contact with individuals and structural forces that have long resisted change and continue to benefit from existing power relations.¹⁷ As we know, they murdered King for living the dream and demanding redemption for this check.

Indeed, to “live the dream” of Martin Luther King Jr. is to dwell in “contact zones” that critical modern language theorist Mary Louise Pratt defined as: “social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today.”¹⁸ Survival itself is an achievement in contact zones, and when it is rooted in traditions and practices such as Indigenous peoples’ enduring survivance,¹⁹ then creative pathways are revealed toward more just futures. Pratt recognized that practices of “transculturation” can “construct a new picture of the world” built on forms of self-representation that are at the same time “interventions” in the dominant modes of understanding and practice.²⁰ To live the dream is to not yet

have been deadened or made dead by the schools, culture, and institutions of the dominant society, and to collaborate with others who are seeking to know, think, feel, and be otherwise.²¹

“LIVING THE DREAM”

To begin to “live the dream” is to forge a particular kind of wakefulness, a more deathly knowledge, in the midst of histories beyond timekeeping of deadly violence against innocents; it is to be awake to how our schools and other state institutions, communal spaces, media and language, and our homes and self-understandings themselves are thoroughly inhabited and haunted by common-sense structures of superiority-inferiority and privilege-constraint constituting the quotidian invisibilities and visibilities of the racist social, economic, and political order.²² This is how we all embody at the same time un/freedom and in/justice. Schools have long been part of the “prolonged assault on every . . . elementary human need” that produces for Black people a “natal alienation” that makes their lives in the face of “social death” continually precarious.²³ How many different forms of Black death must schools be implicated in, and how many decades of suffering and violence need to be documented, before we take the redemption demand seriously, and create a new grammar of schooling that enables new grammars of the self for BIPOC, low income, and all children whose lives of wonder, curiosity, and joy cannot find fulfillment in the old orders.

To forge new grammars of the self, Baldwin and Fanon recognized that their refusal and destruction of one pole of the binary Black (Negro)-White entailed radical ruptures in the total array of cultural, psychological, and material normative practices and understandings, including in self-understanding, that upheld both poles. Moreover, as Baldwin acknowledged, the “social forces which menaced me . . . had become interior . . . and the answer was to be found in me. I think that there is always something frightening about this realization.”²⁴ For Baldwin, therefore, “the question of color, especially in this country, operates to hide the graver questions of the self.”²⁵

To “live the dream” is to take up these graver questions of the self, and in the context of schooling, it is to abolish, immediately, both the most evident

and also the most insidiously diffuse forms of practice and meaning-making that destroy the dignity and self-hood of Black children and youth. When we make “historicity the starting point”²⁶ — the way that culture and history make us at the same time as we make culture and history — we foreground how identities are shaped by the dominant ideologies of race, gender, class, and abilities but that those defining orders and objectifications are never the truth of who we are and cannot elide our power to be otherwise.

To disrupt and transform the meaning-making operations, the relational and cultural forces, that reinforce inequitable experiences of entitlement and ease for the dominant, and suffering, shame, and resentment for those at the bottom of the schooling hierarchies, we have to take seriously both the urgency and the necessary scale of the task. The entire range of ethical-social-emotional-knowledge-material ordering regimes imbricated within the mechanics and logics of the grammar of schooling play their particular roles in the persistent deadly violence.²⁷ The supposed “one best system” of scientifically designed, standardized, sequential, and differentiated ranking and sorting system that promises to yield a meritocratic and egalitarian social order continues to hold sway over the ideology of schooling,²⁸ and continues to fail to be enlivening for the vast majority of BIPOC and low income students and their teachers.²⁹ From the colonial schools’ obedience to the task of disciplining youth to put each in their place in the order manifested by church and state to the schools of today, real lives and life chances are at stake in schools, moment to moment, day after day, month after month, year after year, decade after decade, now century after century.

This deadly contact zone of schools should trigger moral alarm rather than laws to arm teachers, install metal detectors, and garrison more police on campus. But the seeming rationality of the hierarchies of the “one best system” of schooling and the efficiencies of the grammar of schooling provide rationales that resist change, even after documenting the damage at the level of systems, individuals, and groups. They have also resisted efforts to build and mobilize knowledge for school transformation among BIPOC families and White liberals and progressives. It must be noted, however, that Whites have not proven to be

consistently trustworthy allies in making schools support the social, emotional, intellectual, and economic health of Black children: mainstream media podcasts explore how “Nice White Parents” make public schools work for their own kids despite evident inequities, and scholars have again carefully documented how, “despite the best intentions,” White parents opportunity-hoarded and insured that even integrated schools yield inequitable outcomes that favor their own families and social and religious networks.³⁰ Indeed, one has to “know one’s Whites” as Tressie McMillan Cottom reflected: “To know our whites is to understand the psychology of white people and the elasticity of whiteness. It is to be intimate with some white persons but to critically withhold faith in white people categorically ... To know our whites is to survive without letting bitterness rot your soul.”³¹

These contentious spaces where people struggle together to “live the dream” and create a grammar of schooling that would be more capacious for BIPOC children and families and the formation of equitable democratic communities are not for the faint of heart nor for those easily discouraged and distracted by false hopes.³² Yet other schools and other communities are possible! BIPOC communities continue to fight the construction of their children as willfully defiant and destined to be labeled and channeled into the most deadening and dangerous work (including that outside the law) and into living in the least nurturing and most poisoned spaces (think food deserts and toxic neighborhoods, decrepit schools buildings, joyless juvenile detention centers and jails).³³ Multiracial coalitions of teachers, students, parents, scholars, and community leaders continue to resist policies and practices that harm BIPOC communities with over-policing, school closures, gentrification, and substandard facilities and material resources.³⁴ Where people are in movement seeking to live otherwise and make institutions serve liberatory dreams, fruitful guidance can also be found for the “interior” work that is a necessary part of transformative practices. In these contact zones where new cultures and selves emerge, people “must make mistakes and learn from them, make more mistakes and learn anew. They must taste defeat as well as success, and discover how to live with each. Time and action are the teachers.”³⁵

AWAKE IN THE DREAM

A new grammar of schooling needs to be shaped by the needs of a new grammar of the self, a self that is resolutely open to the demands, risks, and possibilities of “living the dream” of freedom and justice. These new grammars can get clarified within theorist Christina Sharpe’s helpful notions of “wake” and “wake work.”³⁶ Here we can discover some of what it might mean to refuse the deadening prescribed social roles and understandings that maintain unjust hierarchies and some of what it might mean to disrupt the ongoing social, cultural, economic, and psychological production of Black death-inferiority-social death and White life-supremacy-privilege-social power, some of what it might mean to affirm ways of feeling, knowing and being otherwise that express Black joy, creativity, and dreams of freedom and justice.

Sharpe reminds us that “In the wake, the past that is not past reappears, always, to rupture the present.”³⁷ In that rupture is the possibility to refuse the deadly choices on offer, to see with the “sharpened optics” of the “undying” — such as those with breast cancer whom poet Anne Boyer describes as having “the sharpened optics of life without futurity, the purity of the double vision of any life lived on the line.”³⁸ Philosopher Maxine Greene argued the arts as much as philosophy enabled the kind of critical vision that puts truth to work, and the ruptures produced can awaken people from the deadly sleepwalking numbness and reassuring evasions that maintain a status quo of the ongoing nightmare of racist violence. This awakening can overcome the fear of being otherwise, and Greene sees a pedagogy of freedom emerging when a community of people step into and through the ruptures to forge an articulate public that holds the power to make substantive change. Sharpe asks in her project: “what, if anything, survives this insistent Black exclusion, this ontological negation and how do literature, performance, and visual culture observe and mediate this un/survival.”³⁹ So we might ask, too, how do they mediate survival? What do we find when we meld philosophy and the arts into a pedagogy of freedom, a pedagogy of survivance of the undead, of those who are not satisfied with and refuse the deathly choices on offer? “Does not one have to act upon one’s freedom along with others — to take the initiative, to break through some boundary? Does not one have to claim

what are called “human rights,” to incarnate them in the life of community?”⁴⁰

To awaken in the wake and achieve a sharpened optics of un/survival in the face of the dominant ideology and the negation of Black existence is, following Sharpe’s thinking, akin to passing through a portal of no return to a transformed existence of new understandings and new ways of being. Through that portal, Sharpe invites us to dwell with being in the hold of the ships containing African bodies deeper into enslavement, to dwell in the wake of their enslaved survival and its aftermath, and to dwell in the funeral wakes and mourning that mark the pervasive and excessive Black deaths noted in Afropessimism.⁴¹ When awakened in the wake we can infuse mourning with the celebration of death-defying survivance, and thus stay in a “state of wakefulness; consciousness” that entails an “awareness of precarity” and also reveals the “unfinished project of emancipation” through which communities can redeem the debt that MLK insisted was the precondition of freedom and equality.⁴²

The critical precarity of wakefulness and the community relationships that sustain it lead Sharpe to recognize that “thinking and care need to stay in the wake” and that such wake work is “to live in relation to this requirement for our death.”⁴³ The vigilance of wake work includes not only vigils that bear witness, but also showing up when needed in contact zones to “defend the dead” and those who are meant to be dead by the dominant ideologies and practices.⁴⁴ Vigilance in the wake calls us to show up where the quotidian work occurs among those consciously, simultaneously both “inhabiting and rupturing” the epistemes of slavery and property. It is in those spaces where “we might imagine otherwise from what we know now in the wake of slavery,”⁴⁵ where the arts can render alternative visions and dreams from and into the voices, self-understandings, and relations that construct new ways of life: “Black people everywhere and anywhere we are, still produce in, into, and through the wake an insistence on existing; we insist Black being into the wake.”⁴⁶ Our task then as philosophers of education is to join in this insistence that fuses critique to material resistance and to transformation of the deathly elements of schools and everyday life; our task is to abolish schools and create communal sites designed for the expansion of human capacities, of people’s skills and talents for collaboratively grappling

with the limiting conditions of their lives while becoming otherwise-than as defined by dominant ideologies; these learning communities will live a different dream and seed new movements of social and cultural transformation.⁴⁷

This is a doubled task, first to forge communities that “mourn the interminable event” of the death left in the wake,⁴⁸ communities that “inhabit that Fanonian ‘zone of non-Being’ within and after slavery’s denial of Black humanity” and,⁴⁹ second, to forge the undead insistence of other dreams, of other schools and communities, and of lives otherwise. Communities ready to face the deadliness of life in the wake will also be ready to face similar tasks in confronting the planetary climate crisis created by racial capitalism that puts the fate of the earth at risk.⁵⁰ The diffusion and scale across both time and space of the threatened and already present catastrophic climatic destruction can make it difficult to perceive and respond; that is, like the racist violence that generally occurs gradually and out of sight within and due to schools, substandard housing, inadequate nutrition and healthcare, and dehumanizing jails and prisons, the diffusion and scale of the violence can overwhelm understanding and the needed response.

To “live the dream” awakened in the wake, then, is to discover and make connections with communities already forging a sustainable and just society by confronting the spectacular and swift violence of racism while forming the long-term relational bonds necessary for resistance to and transformation of the slow, more subtle and even intimate, forms of violence that uphold injustice, including within our own self-understandings. That is, to achieve our freedom requires the opening of public spaces of sociality along with personal perspectives, and this happens in a praxis that is at once a refusal of violence and a realization of care and relation,⁵¹ that is communal, a “we formation,”⁵² a “knowing ourselves as part of a crowd”⁵³ — a historical crowd often obscured, marginalized, and difficult to discern in the glare of the dominant ideology and its repressive capacities. To “live the dream” is to participate in counter histories and movements, in the cultural production of knowing and being otherwise.

A philosophy of education for “living the dream” enables people to integrate knowledge production and dissemination with knowledge mobiliza-

tion that moves critical understanding into organized power. Feminist theorist Maria Lugones has shown how to widen and deepen the paths of those who “trespass,” those who do not and/or cannot conform to the dominant orders and are forced to be and move in places where they are not wanted, not allowed, or even forbidden by law or by armed enforcers.⁵⁴ Such trespassing must often be in coded secrecy among co-conspirators for the sake of survival; sometimes the trespass blatantly disrupts the boundaries, insisting being otherwise into existence and asserting new meaning into even the most limiting and restrictive spaces.

Greene and Sharpe recognize the importance of the arts, of creative language and practices for revealing the nature of our situation and insisting these other dreams into existence. Philosophers of education and other educators must recognize that the silent codes of racism and domination that haunt American life resist rational exorcism,⁵⁵ and they must also acknowledge that for more than a century the nation’s schools have not been transformed into just institutions by the leading research.⁵⁶ Similarly, school reformers and those seeking to change the culture of schooling must recognize that rigorous research demonstrates that implicit bias and diversity trainings have little effect,⁵⁷ and there is little reason to expect the latest version of Diversity Equity and Inclusion initiatives to be much different.

The logics of the grammar of schooling rank and sort into the racial, gender, and economic orders, so we must find new logics and methods for pedagogies of “living the dream.”⁵⁸ Perhaps if Quine is right that “logic chases truth up the tree of grammar,”⁵⁹ then the logics of freedom and equality perhaps must also chase truth through Sharpe’s notion of the “anagrammatical” — the use of language so that “new meanings proliferate” and texts are “formed into a secret message” that can prevent the dominant ideologies from holding sway.⁶⁰ These pedagogies must make “the meanings of the words fall apart” so that the old significations no longer stick.⁶¹ For example, the anagrammatical reveals the way that the meaning of “blackness” “slides, signification slips, when words like child, girl, mother, and boy abut blackness.”⁶² The anagrammatical provides new logics and structures for comprehending the world and rearranging its cultural formations and practices. It is “blackness anew, blackness as a/temporal, in

and out of place and time putting pressure on meaning and that against which meaning is made.”⁶³

Indeed, the very letters, words, sentences, and meanings that can hurt, wound, and be markers of death can be reordered and rearticulated within emancipatory projects, and it is these “true words” as praxes that establish new ways of being together in community(ies) that insist on more just relations.⁶⁴ As with our dreams and visions, we should neither over- nor under-estimate the material force of engaging anagrammatically with transforming the world. Words matter, and as poet Anne Boyer reminds us, “Sometimes to give a person a word to call their suffering is the only treatment for it.”⁶⁵ While a pedagogy of “living the dream” will have to find words to soothe and heal the suffering and to mourn the deaths, it must also find words to intervene directly with power structures.⁶⁶ Thus, as Amanda Fricker argued, the “naming” of “sexual harassment” redressed epistemic and hermeneutic injustices and facilitated women’s exercise of social and political power in ways that transformed everyday life not only for women but for all of us.⁶⁷ From an anagrammatical perspective, we see that every word has the power to transform the world by how, when, where, and by whom it gets spoken, written, or sung. People read and write the world before they read and write words,⁶⁸ and when this inalienable, primordial literacy is grounded in an anagrammatical reading and writing of new worlds through education as a practice of freedom, then “the more the people become themselves[,]the better the democracy.”⁶⁹

DREAM PROJECTS

As we have been examining what it might mean to “live the dream” of Martin Luther King Jr. and the implications for a philosophy of education as a practice of freedom, we have learned that to live this dream is fraught, and it disrupts foundational features of the given orders and even our own particular “inner” understandings of the world and ourselves. We have recognized that we need new grammars of learning and of the self, and that the communities that seek to foster them need a wide variety of creative capacities and skills to navigate the multiple challenges that must be faced. Sharpe observes: “Despite knowing otherwise, we are often disciplined into thinking through and along

lines that reinscribe our own annihilation ... We must become undisciplined. The work we do requires new modes and methods of research and teaching...⁷⁰ King too knew that the civil rights movement's development of nonviolence was its own inventive transformation of contact zones: "It is an axiom of social change that no revolution can take place without a methodology suited to the circumstances of the period."⁷¹ Of course, it would be much easier if these ways made of no-ways had maps to traverse them, but these are roads made by walking in both the light and in the dark, always precarious.⁷²

To embody anagrammatical work in the wake that is at once both a critique and denunciation of ideology and its structuring of everyday life and an annunciation and expression of living otherwise, comes with costs, as Sara Ahmed has argued is the case with living a feminist life. It is at times a killjoy task to refuse the deadly strictures of existing arrangements, to resist efforts to domesticate feminist and anti-racism demands, and to bear witness to unjust suffering and to the courage of being otherwise, but it is the relations of community that sustain the work at intimate and private as well as at the public and cultural scales that are needed for structural change.⁷³ So we have again arrived back at that contact zone, where death-dealing forces of oppression, domination, and exploitation meet life-affirming forces, in the same moment, in the same body(ies), in the same spaces of the thickly interwoven web of culture, meaning, dreams, and material experience. The wake work of living the dream reaches from the most intimate and private silences to the most public pronouncements, from the most private rituals to the most public responsibilities, and it has neither beginning nor end — it is a way of life that reaches backward and forward for generations.

To "live the dream" of Martin Luther King Jr. people must, as Maxine Greene argues, "insert themselves in the world by means of projects, embarking on new beginnings in spaces they open themselves."⁷⁴ None of these projects would be "the first to try to reawaken the consciousness of possibility" nor "to seek a vision of education that brings together the need for wide-awakeness with the hunger for community."⁷⁵ Each of these imagined and embodied projects of cultural transformation connects with lengthy histories of such work in

contact zones, with projects and movements that have included everyone of all ages and walks of life. Mary Louise Pratt reminds us that “Along with rage, incomprehension, and pain, there were exhilarating moments of wonder and revelation, mutual understanding, and new wisdom — the joys of the contact zone ... No one was excluded, and no one was safe.”⁷⁶

The precarity and lack of safety extend to the disruptions caused in the “recognition of one’s own responsibility for what is happening,” that our freedom comes with the anguish that suffuses our predicament and our responsibility.⁷⁷ Dominant ideologies must be actively ejected from our understandings and practices, and these processes bear their own measures of force and coercion, even when reflexively directed. Thus, to be awakened in the wake and “live the dream” requires compassionate support in collaborative learning processes that are integrated with projects of social reconstruction. Greene argued that “Crucial is the recognition that conditions must be deliberately created to enable the mass of people to act on their power to choose.”⁷⁸ Learning processes that investigate oppressive conditions so as to resist and transform the fast and slow violence in our quotidian lives and in our self-understandings necessarily force us to make choices and act within sites of trauma that, as Troy Richardson points out, place particular ethical burdens on us.⁷⁹ These ethical burdens require commitments within forms of collaboration and “working with” one another across differences without a “mastery” of the relationships or of the projects, which must occur under conditions of uncertainty and vulnerability. Only when we give up the preexisting orders can our creative endeavors make contact zones fertile ground for change. These “transculturation” practices of survivance in the wake demonstrate that we should “reconsider the models of community that many of us rely on in teaching and theorizing and that are under challenge today.”⁸⁰

Only in community can we amalgamate the “interior” immaterial force of dreams, visions, and imaginings with “external” material forces to alter the world. As Baldwin noted, “Though we do not wholly believe it yet, the interior life is a real life, and the intangible dreams of people have a tangible effect on the world.”⁸¹ But as freedom dreams become realized, it is self-evident that justice is neither inevitable nor irrevocable, and so the creative and joyful work of living

dreams of being otherwise will necessarily get confronted by the reality of deadly violence when the empire strikes back to maintain the status quo. King's "urgency of now" has pressed itself against conscience for centuries, so new grammars of self, community, and education are needed to support children and youth to stand in and stay with that transformative tension of life and death. To become the sort of person who can stand in that tension and "live the dream" enables one to be still and still moving; as Hortense Spillers argues, the "flat line" of social death is actually ongoing dis/equilibria inducing a historical stillness, a creative capacity to forge new grammars woven from history and imagination.⁸²

The uniquely American contact zones of race, property, schooling, and community have been generative of distinctive American experiences of "survival over dominance" and forms of education as a practice of freedom seeking to serve the realization of dreams of being otherwise than as ordered by injustice.⁸³ Currently, scholars and education activists collaborate with BIPOC and low income folks to fight back against school closures and the over policing of BIPOC low income youth who are at the same time excluded from meaningful employment and self-expression opportunities, and these communities that are "living the dream" provide new directions for youth civic engagement and social-emotional development.⁸⁴ These types of learning environments where the world is being actively redesigned can foster the social, emotional, and epistemic capacities for youth to become "long haul people" who are the leaders who make transformative impacts no matter the actual length of their individual lives.⁸⁵ They grasp that they live in multiple space/times simultaneously in ways that give them power to move history with other dreamers, with communities and generations that have never given in to the lies, the violence, the exploitation, the injustices of their own space/time.

THE TIME HAS COME

These reflections have shown that to "live the dream" of Martin Luther King Jr. means we must urgently demand that the time has come to redeem the promise of freedom, to break the links between spectacular state sanctioned violence against Black people and the less visible, slower, but still deadly violence of schools. The time has come to insist on new grammars and logics to form

ourselves, our communities, and our institutions. These reflections have also shown that the insistence of Black life into being in contact zones helps “to create such a crisis and foster such a tension that a community which has constantly refused to negotiate is forced to confront the issue . . . [this] type of constructive, nonviolent tension . . . is necessary for growth” as King reminds us.⁸⁶ “Struggle is par for the course when our dreams go into action.”⁸⁷

Communities that embrace the “inner” and “outer” struggles of transformative change are open to any age, and any supposed race, gender, class, ability, religion, or language.⁸⁸ As we learn from the freedom dreams of the Black radical imagination that gave life to movements across time and sustain this wake work at the scale and duration needed to confront the severity and scope of the threat, it is the love that people in movement have for one another and the compelling truths of their visions of equality and freedom that make survivance possible.⁸⁹ Projects of transformation ground the “armed love” and “truth force” that enables ethical force to move the world, enables the powers of knowing, speaking, and living otherwise than as prescribed by unjust orders to forge more just and democratic communities.⁹⁰ This confronts us with extreme choices. King challenges us: “So the question is not whether we will be extremists, but what kind of extremist we will be. Will we be extremists for hate or for love? Will we be extremists for the preservation of injustice or for the extension of justice?”⁹¹

In this extremism, “[t]here is a need for a wild patience” as we “make present what is absent, to summon up a condition that is not yet.”⁹² Where is that wildly patient extremism among philosophers of education? Do our visions for public education end all the inequitable ranking and sorting regimes that help reproduce Black suffering and social death, and do they prepare all youth for “wake work” and the imaginative reconstruction of the social, cultural, economic, and political institutions that order everyday life? Are we prepared to redeem the debts created by racism to “live the dream” of Martin Luther King Jr.?

King was disappointed in the White moderates who embraced forms of revolt that stopped short of the revolutionary action needed.⁹³ The reach of the more recent struggles to make Black lives matter once again discomforts liberals

and rouses the reactionaries. I believe it is time, finally, to refuse compromises with old systems that merely extend inclusion into unjust orders, which will only once again put the lie to the promise of decades of reform while White supremacy continues to reign, and schools keep feeding low income and BIPOC children into a maw that King recognized “strips them of their selfhood and robs them of their dignity.”⁹⁴ These freedom dreams of equality and justice are not the utopias that more than a century of school reform have tinkered toward,⁹⁵ and they call into question the roots of schooling in the colonial orders that commanded a God-given place for each, and the power to put each in their place to insure that no individual brilliance or exception to the dominant orders (religion, race, class, gender) would fundamentally alter the overall maintenance of power relations. The dreams for education in the wake draw from the kind of soul work and processes of “self-realization” that bell hooks argues is part of teaching to transgress in education as a practice of freedom,⁹⁶ and as Nobel Laureate poet Louise Glück reminds: “The soul is silent. / If it speaks at all / it speaks in dreams.”⁹⁷

I agree with Maxine Greene’s insight that “We may have reached a moment in our history when teaching and learning, if they are to happen meaningfully, must happen on the verge. Confronting a void, confronting nothingness, we may be able to empower the young to create and re-create a common world, and, in cherishing it, in renewing it, discover what it signifies to be free.”⁹⁸ Maybe we are on the verge of confronting the deadly voids and nothingness imposed on Black children and youth, on Black life, and if we begin there, more just and democratic communities would truly become possible.

1 Ronald David Glass, Professor of Philosophy of Education, McHenry 3122 (EDUC), 1156 High Street, University of California, Santa Cruz, CA 95064; rglass@ucsc.edu.

2 Sarah Schwartz, “Map: Where Critical Race Theory is Under Attack,” Education Week (June 11, 2021), Update February 3, 2022. <https://www.edweek.org/>.

3 Kristin Henning, *The Rage of Innocence: How America Criminalizes Black Youth* (New York: Pantheon, 2021).

4 In places where more general references make sense, I will be replacing Black with BIPOC, though the analytic of the argument is grounded primarily in the anti-Blackness of racism. In this essay, I will only be making limited comments on the complex issues involved in situating the analysis of racism in the U.S. relative to a range of non-dominant, non-White groups created in the formation of race. On racial formation, see Michael Omi and Howard Winant's path setting work, *Racial Formation in the United States* (New York: Routledge, 2014) and the many subsequent discussions and debates it generated.

5 The Centennial Special Issue of *Educational Researcher – A Living Lens: AERA Past Presidents Reflect on 100 Years of Educational Research*, *Educational Researcher* 45, no. 2 (March 2016) – included feature articles by 14 past presidents, and virtually all are rather pessimistic in their assessments of the role and relevance of educational research, whether in the policy domain, research methodologies, or in a variety of areas of practice.

6 Retrieved from Mapping Police Violence, <https://mappingpoliceviolence.org/>.

7 Marisa Iati, Steven Rich, and Jennifer Jenkins, “Fatal police shootings in 2021 set record since The Post began tracking, despite public outcry,” *Washington Post* (February 10, 2022). I sadly note that Gil Scott Heron's otherwise insightful 1971 hit song “The Revolution Will Not Be Televised” got it wrong that “There will be no pictures of pigs shooting down brothers on the instant replay.” Televised police murders are only one form of the many murders that permeate racial capitalism, whose victims range across both age and wellness, and include those facing catastrophic illness like breast cancer, as poet Anne Boyer reveals in her unveiling of the logics and practices of those who profit from the pain, vulnerability, and immanence of mortality among those who contend with it. As with Blacks in the face of racist violence, women forge their own dreams of living otherwise. See Anne Boyer, *The Undying*:

Pain, Vulnerability, Mortality, Medicine, Art, Time, Dreams, Data, Exhaustion, Cancer, and Care (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2019).

8 Kathleen Belew and Ramón A. Gutiérrez, eds., *A Field Guide to White Supremacy* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2021).

9 I am thinking from/with twentieth-century engaged scholars such as Franz Fanon (*Black Skin White Masks*, and *The Wretched of the Earth*) and Maurice Merleau-Ponty (*Phenomenology of Perception*), philosophers of education such as Paulo Freire (*Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and multiple other publications) and Myles Horton (*The Long Haul*, and, *We Make the Road by Walking*), and more recent theorists such as Frank B Wilderson III, *Afropessimism* (London: WW Norton & Company Ltd., 2020), Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), and, in particular, Christina Sharpe's *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016).

10 There are many ways to access the text of Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech delivered on 1963, though my own access for this essay was via the National Public Radio website where the text can be readily paired with the recording of the speech: <https://www.npr.org/2010/01/18/122701268/i-have-a-dream-speech-in-its-entirety>.

11 Historian James Truslow Adams coined the term in 1931 in his book *The American Epic* in which he sought to resurrect the values lost when Americans neglected "to live" in their "struggle to 'make a living'" though even this intervention eventually got turned toward materialist interpretations; see: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_Truslow_Adams.

12 The engagement of Blacks and Indigenous people with public schooling in the US has always been fraught, and much recent work has been elaborating the important local and regional differences. For foundational themes in these regards, see: James D. Anderson, *The Education of Blacks in the South, 1860-1935* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1988); David Wallace Adams, *Education for Extinction: American Indians and the*

Boarding School Experience 1875-1928 (Lawrence, KA: University of Kansas Press, 1995); K. Tsianina Lomawaima and Teresa L. McCarty, *To Remain an Indian: Lessons in Democracy from a Century of Native American Education* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2006).

13 King cites Mississippi and Alabama to invoke the worst of racism, and though they remain core bastions of white supremacy they are hardly the only parts of the old South that have risen again, and the Southern racists have always had allies scattered across every other region of the country. We have never needed to look only to the South to see Blacks being publicly murdered.

14 Gloria Ladson-Billings, "From the Achievement Gap to the Education Debt: Understanding Achievement in U.S. Schools," *Educational Researcher* 35, no. 7 (October, 2006): 3-12.

15 Lucí Cavallero and Verónica Gago, *A Feminist Reading of Debt* (London, UK: Pluto Press, 2021).

16 King closes his "I have a dream" speech again demanding the equality that is the basis of justice and sets the conditions for the sons of slaves and slave owners to sit together at the table of brotherhood. Then Mississippi could be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice, then children could be judged by the content of their character and not the color of their skin, and then even Alabama Black and White boys and girls will join hands as sisters and brothers. King declaims that when that day of equality arrives it will realize a Biblical vision of the low made high, the high made low, the rough made plain, and the crooked made straight, and then freedom might truly ring!

17 Robin D. G. Kelley, *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2002).

18 Mary Louise Pratt, "Arts of the Contact Zone," *Profession*, (1991): 33-40. Published by the Modern Language Association, Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25595469>. Pratt's generative conception was given as a keynote address at the Responsibilities for Literacy conference, Pittsburgh, PA,

September 1990. Pratt, *Contact Zone*, 34.

19 Gerald Vizenor, *Manifest Manners: Narratives on Postindian Survivance* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1994/1999).

20 Pratt, *Contact Zone*, 34-35.

21 I was among the handful of honorees in 2001 to receive a Phoenix, AZ, Human Relations Commission Martin Luther King Jr. “Living the Dream” Award, and since then I have often pondered the irony that awardees in such work are honored for simply surviving – to live the dream is to be under attack for insisting justice into the world, and not yet being dead. Among the assaults I was being recognized for surviving were the defacement of our home by a swastika and KKK on my family’s arrival to Phoenix on our first Sabbath evening, my refusal of the offered police guard while I taught my classes and walked between my car and campus office, my continuing to speak openly about racial, gender, and class injustice despite the myriad intensely agonistic public and private encounters that sought to silence me, and my standing with others to forge alternative spaces and programs. The truth is, the quotidian work of staying in the life/death dynamics of “living the dream” of Martin Luther King Jr. rarely makes anyone’s highlight reel of life, but it is what makes dreams become reality.

22 Karen E. Fields & Barbara J. Fields, *Racecraft: The Soul of Inequality in American Life* (Brooklyn, NY: Verso Books, 2014).

23 Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982/2018), xii.

24 James Baldwin, *Nobody Knows My Name: More Notes of a Native Son* (New York: Dell Publishing Co., Inc., 1961), xii.

25 Baldwin, *Nobody Knows My Name*, xiii.

26 Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), 84.

27 David Tyack and Larry Cuban, *Tinkering toward Utopia: A Century of*

Public School Reform (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995).

28 David Tyack, *The One Best System: A History of American Urban Education* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1974).

29 Many scholars over the past half century have documented the ways that the formal and informal operations of schools reproduce a gendered working class culture that limits the life opportunities of youth (for example: Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis; Jeanne Anyon; Jeannie Oakes; Julie Bettie; Paul Willis; and others), just as scholars have filled bookshelves documenting the damage to BIPOC children, leading some Indigenous scholars to ask researchers to shift their focus from the damage done to the structures and people responsible for the damage. On this latter point, see: Eve Tuck, “Suspending Damage: A Letter to Communities,” *Harvard Educational Review* 79, no. 3 (Fall 2009): 409-427.

30 Chana Joff-Walt, eds. Sarah Koenig, Neil Drumming, and Ira Glass, produced by Julie Snyder, *Nice White Parents*, 2020, Podcast. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/23/podcasts/nice-white-parents-serial.html>; Amanda E. Lewis & John B. Diamond, *Despite the Best Intentions: How Racial Inequality Thrives in Good Schools* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015); A number of philosophers of education have presented work at the annual conferences of the Philosophy of Education Society in recent years that has analyzed racism and various interventions meant to address the issues that hinder the involvement of White people in antiracism work; see various contributions from, for example, Kal Alston, Barbara Applebaum, Larry Blum, Kathy Hytten, Troy Richardson, and Audrey Thompson.

31 Tressis McMillan Cottom, “The Problem with Obama’s Faith in White America,” *The Atlantic* (December 13, 2016).

32 Ronald David Glass, “Critical Hope and Struggles for Justice: An Antidote to Despair for Antiracism Educators” in *Discerning Critical Hope in Educational Practices*, eds. Vivienne Bozalek, Brenda Leibowitz, Ronelle Carolissen & Megan Boler (New York: Routledge, 2014), 101-112.

33 See, for example, Mark R. Warren, *Willful Defiance: The Movement to*

Dismantle the School-to-Prison Pipeline (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021).

34 See, for example, Eve L. Ewing, *Ghosts in the Schoolyard: Racism and School Closings on Chicago's South Side* (University of Chicago Press, 2018); Ronald David Glass and Brett Stoudt, "Collaborative Research for Justice" in *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, Themed Issue, eds. R.D. Glass & M.R. Warren, *Collaborative Research for Justice and Multi-Issue Movement Building: Challenging Discriminatory Policing, School Closures, and Youth Unemployment 27*, no 20 (May. 2019), DOI: [10.14507/epaa.27.4470](https://doi.org/10.14507/epaa.27.4470); See also, Mark R. Warren and Ronald David Glass, "Collaborative Research and Movement Building for Educational Justice: Reflections on the Urban Research Based Action Network," in *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, Themed Issue, eds., R.D. Glass & M.R. Warren, *Collaborative Research for Justice and Multi-Issue Movement Building: Challenging Discriminatory Policing, School Closures, and Youth Unemployment 27*, no 20 (May. 2019), DOI: [10.14507/epaa.27.4445](https://doi.org/10.14507/epaa.27.4445).

35 Martin Luther King, Jr., *Why We Can't Wait* (1963; repr., New York: Signet Classic, 2000), 29.

36 I believe Sharpe gives permission for this use: "...it is also my hope that the praxis of the wake and wake work might have enough capaciousness to travel and do work that I have not here been able to imagine or anticipate." Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 22.

37 Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 77.

38 Boyer, *Undying*, 79.

39 Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 14.

40 Maxine Greene, *Dialectic of Freedom* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1988), 3.

41 I understand Orlando Patterson's conception of social death as different from the ontological total annihilation that Wilderson seems to argue for in *Afropessimism*. I think this argument actually betrays Fanon's insight that

Wilderson quotes in his opening epigraph – “I found I was an object in the midst of other objects” – since Fanon’s insight invokes an “I” that cannot be wholly objectified. However, Wilderson argues that “Blackness is conterminous with Slaveness: Blackness is social death: which is to say that there was never a prior meta-moment of plenitude, never equilibrium: never a moment of social life” (*Afropessimism*, p. 102).

42 Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 4, emphasis original; Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 5.

43 Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 5, 7.

44 Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 10.

45 Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 18.

46 Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 11.

47 Jane Mansbridge and Aldon Morris, *Oppositional Consciousness: The Subjective Roots of Social Protest* (University of Chicago Press, 2001). It must be said that the quotidian nightmare of daily life for many BIPOC and low-income folks, women, and others, might well be the dream of the dominant, and thus the realization of these competing dreams and ways of life occur in contact zones where literally everything is at stake.

48 Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 19.

49 Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 20.

50 Nixon identifies the “slow violence” of property relations and environmental destruction that gets dispersed across space and time: Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013).

51 Greene, *Dialectic of Freedom*, 5.

52 Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 19, quoting Keguro Macharia.

53 Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 19, quoting Édouard Glissant.

54 María Lugones, *Pilgrimages/Peregrinajes: Theorizing Coalition Against Multiple Oppressions* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers,

2003).

55 Fields & Fields, *Racecraft*.

56 Educational Researcher Centennial Issue March 2016.

57 Frank Dobbin & Alexandra Kalev, “Why Doesn’t Diversity Training Work? The Challenge for Industry and Academia,” *Anthropology Now* 10, no. 2 (2018): 48-55, DOI: [10.1080/19428200.2018.1493182](https://doi.org/10.1080/19428200.2018.1493182); Tiffany L. Green and Nao Hagiwara, “The Problem with Implicit Bias Training,” *Scientific American* (August 28, 2020), <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/the-problem-with-implicit-bias-training/#>.

58 On the logics of the grammar of schooling see Tyack and Cuban, *Tinkering toward utopia*. Also see, David Tyack and William Tobin, “The ‘grammar’ of schooling: Why has it been so hard to change?” *American Educational Research Journal* 31, no. 3 (1994): 453–479. On how the logics of the grammar of schooling interact with the logics of ranking and sorting to produce inequality, see Jeannie Oakes and John Rogers, with Martin Lipton, *Learning Power: Organizing for Education and Justice* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2006), particularly the first three chapters.

59 W.V.O. Quine, *Philosophy of Logic*, 2nd edition (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986), 35.

60 Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 76.

61 Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 77.

62 Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 80. Orlando Patterson, *Social Death*, xiii also affirmed that social death is never a totality, regarding this “death, not as final, but as potentially generative, allowing for the undying and rebirthing into the social life of manumission and eventual full freedom.”

63 Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 76.

64 Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*; Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (New York: International Publishers, 1971).

65 Boyer, *Undying*, 17.

66 As King notes, in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, the youthful Scout helps disperse

the lynch mob simply through the power of calling the would-be lynchers by their name (*Why We Can't Wait*, 24).

67 Amanda Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007). See also, Ian James Kidd, Jose Medina, and Gaile Pohlhaus Jr., *The Routledge Handbook of Epistemic Injustice* (London: Routledge, 2017).

68 Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.

69 Myles Horton and Paulo Freire, *We Make the Road by Walking: Conversations on Education and Social Change* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1990).

70 Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 13.

71 King, *Why We Can't Wait*, 20.

72 Linnea Beckett, "Tantear Practices in Popular Education: Reaching for Each Other in the Dark," *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 41, no. 1 (2020): 120-140. On the challenge of having to follow anti-racism pathways without maps, see Audrey Thompson, "Anti-racist work zones," *Philosophy of Education* (2004): 387-395.

73 Sara Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017).

74 Greene, *Dialectic of Freedom*, 134.

75 Greene, *Dialectic of Freedom*, 23.

76 Pratt, "Contact Zone," 39.

77 Greene, *Dialectic of Freedom*, 5.

78 Greene, *Dialectic of Freedom*, 18.

79 Ronald David Glass, Jennifer M. Morton, Joyce E. King, Patricia Krueger-Henney, Michele S. Moses, Sheeva Sabati, and Troy Richardson, "The Ethical Stakes of Collaborative Community-Based Social Research," *Urban Education* 53, no. 4 (2018): 524, 503-531.

80 Pratt, "Contact Zone," 34; although Pratt's "today" was 30+ years ago, I think it is still true for our today in 2022.

81 Baldwin, *Nobody Knows My Name*, 12.

82 Hortense Spillers, *Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture* (University of Chicago Press, 2003).

83 Vizenor, *Manifest Manners*, 167; Myles Horton, *The Long Haul* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1990); Horton and Freire, *Make the Road by Walking*; Roland G. Paulston, *Other Dreams, Other Schools: Folk Colleges in Social and Ethnic Movements* (University Center for International Studies, University of Pittsburgh, 1980); Carl Tjerandsen, *Education for Citizenship: A Foundation's Experience* (Santa Cruz, CA: Emil Schwarzhaupt Foundation, Inc., 1980).

84 Already mentioned: Warren and Glass; Glass and Stoudt; Warren et al; Lipman. Also see, Mark R. Warren and Karen L. Mapp, *A Match on Dry Grass: Community Organizing as a Catalyst for School Reform* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

85 Ethan Chang and Ronald David Glass, "Toward a Just Leadership Learning Ecology: A CHAT-IT Analysis of the Highlander Idea," *Educational Administration Quarterly* (2021), DOI: 10.1177/0013161X211054835, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0013161X211054835>

86 King, *Why We Can't Wait*, 67.

87 Kelley, *Freedom Dreams*, 198.

88 King, *Why We Can't Wait*, 24-26.

89 Kelley, *Freedom Dreams*.

90 On "armed love," see Paulo Freire, *Teachers as Cultural Workers: Letters to Those Who Dare Teach* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1998), 40-41. "Truth force" is a translation of satyagraha, a Sanskrit word that Gandhi used to the power of nonviolent direct action for justice.

91 King, *Why We Can't Wait*, 77.

92 Greene, *Dialectic of Freedom*, 135, 16.

93 King, *Why We Can't Wait*, 107.

94 King, *I Have a Dream*

95 Tyack and Cuban, *Tinkering toward Utopia*.

96 bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as a Practice of Freedom* (New York: Routledge, 1994).

97 From Glück's poem, "It is Daylight" in *Ararat* (New York: Ecco, 1992).

98 Greene, *Dialectic of Freedom*, 23.