

# “You Must Accept Them and Accept Them with Love”

## The Privileged Elite and the Struggle for Educational Justice

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IN 1963, ON THE 100<sup>TH</sup> ANNIVERSARY OF THE SIGNING OF THE EMANCIPATION PROCLAMATION, James Baldwin published a letter to his 15 year-old nephew. In it, he works to acknowledge the truth of the young man’s condition and, indeed, the Black condition in America: “You were born into a society which spelled out with brutal clarity and in as many ways as possible that you were a worthless human being.” The words of Baldwin’s letter state the hard facts of a racial order designed to steal the Black man’s sense of somebodiness, and then go on to constitute an armament, of sorts—a collection of weapons that might buffer this young man from society’s intention to destroy him. He arms his young charge with an impassioned insistence on love for the very countrymen who deny his human being—a political love that seeks to educate, awaken, and free the oppressor:

There is no reason for you to try to become like white men and there is no basis whatever for their impertinent assumption that *they* must accept *you*. The really terrible thing, old buddy, is that you must accept them, and I mean that very seriously. You must accept them and accept them with love, for these innocent people have no other hope. They are in effect still trapped in a history which they do not understand and until they understand it, they cannot be released from it ... But these men are your brothers, your lost younger brothers, and if the word “integration” means anything, this is what it means: that we, with love, shall force our brothers to see themselves as they are, to cease fleeing from reality and begin to change it (24, emphasis in original).

That same year, more than 1000 miles south of Baldwin’s Harlem, SNCC and CORE organizers were busily preparing for the 1964 Freedom Summer in which Black voters would be registered and 41 Freedom Schools would open in churches, in store fronts, and on back porches

around rural Mississippi. Though the immediate and concrete campaign was about voter registration and literacy for political citizenship, the Mississippi Project was—at heart—about the education of Black people, for Black people, and by Black people (Moses & Cobb, 2001). The curriculum of the Freedom Schools had young people critically examining their conditions, challenging the white power structure, engaged in questions like, *what does the majority culture have that we want? What do they have that we don't want? What do we have that we want to keep?* (Freedom School curriculum, 1991).

Gail Falk—a white college student at Radcliffe—volunteered for the Project as a teacher and ventured south for the summer, as did so many of her privileged peers from colleges across the country. These white students of social and material privilege intended to transform the lives of Black “others”—to teach, to help, to make a difference. The motivations for their volunteerism sounded much like those of privileged college students today who engage in social justice work. These students, including those with whom I work, seek the intrinsic and extrinsic reward of justice work, they perceive themselves to be a material and intellectual resource, and they work to assuage the guilt of white privilege (Howard, 2011). Following her experience that first summer, Gail wrote a letter home explaining that she would postpone her return to college to continue working with the Movement:

There is a certainty, when you are working in Mississippi, that it is important for you to be alive and to be alive doing just what you are doing. And whatever small bit we did for Mississippi this summer, Mississippi did ten times as much for us. Working there has given me clarity about what I want to be learning in college that three years in Widener Library could not give. Now that I have taught, I know what I want to learn about teaching. Now that I have helped people understand what it means to be a citizen in a democracy, I know things that I still have to understand. Now that I have worked with people to change the society in which they live, I know what I want to learn about societies and how other people have changed theirs... I guess the thing that pulls me back most are the people who made us part of their community... In Mississippi I have felt more love, more sympathy and warmth, more community than I have known in my life. And especially the children pull me back. (in Martínez, 2007; p. 262)

These privileged college students received a critical education, rooted in love, that their elite schooling failed to provide. Embraced by the Black mothers who fed and housed them for the summer, bearing firsthand witness to the stark realities of poverty, living in fear of the violent hatred enacted by those of their own race, these young people learned lessons that only participation in the struggle could teach (Martínez, 2007). Considered successful as they were as students in the country's “top” schools, they found themselves woefully ignorant in Mississippi. They were the sisters and brothers, the lost younger sisters and brothers, forced to see themselves as they are: the beneficiaries of the spoils of racism, largely excused from the experience of human suffering.

The place of these privileged white student volunteers in the Movement was not without controversy. Quite the contrary, the debate over whether to accept them as teachers was a hot one, and a source of significant tension and strife among Black organizers (Ransby, 2005; Payne, 2007; Perlstein, 2008; Clark, 2009). How could an education designed to undercut white power be provided by students of the white power elite? Scholars and school leaders today similarly wonder whether white, middle-class teachers are capable of providing a culturally competent

educational experience for marginalized students, let alone a revolutionary one designed to upset the social order. But in 1964, just as is the case today, it seemed there might be no choice. Whether or not they were wanted, the white student volunteers were arriving—and in large numbers. Rather than let them get in the way of the effort, organizers had to “deal with the reality that they were coming and would have to be used in some manner that was concretely beneficial during the summer” (Cobb, 2008; p. 73). So these privileged students were ultimately accepted—if not with love, then by necessity.

I begin in the 1960’s because we know that trying to address modern questions without the wisdom of history is foolish. One such question is whether those of relative privilege have any place in today’s Movement for educational justice, which I locate in classrooms successfully designed to teach freedom, as well as in the grassroots struggles we are witnessing nationwide against corporate-driven reform, high-stakes standardized testing, school closings, top-down reform mandates, and scripted curriculum (Strauss, 2013). We can apply some of the same historical arguments for and against the participation of white people of privilege in these struggles, but in the end the question might once again be answered by default. Those of privilege have already arrived on the scene of educational struggle—aware or unaware, prepared or unprepared, invited or uninvited—because they fill many of the positions and institutions these grassroots efforts are aimed at transforming. And these privileged, at one point, were college students just like mine, sitting in education courses at institutions designed in the image of privilege and elitism.

Today’s volunteers flock to organizations like *Teach for America*, with as many as 1 in 10 seniors from Ivy League universities applying to become corps members (Labaree, 2010). In urban centers, significant numbers of hiring spaces are held sacred for this supposedly elite national corps, often disadvantaging local, qualified candidates more familiar with the communities in question. These young folks of privilege grow a bit older and saturate the foundations that fund community organizing and nonprofits. They hold key positions in the multi-billion dollar corporations that provide philanthropic support for educational initiatives (McCarthy, Contardo & Eckert, 2010). They occupy the majority of school- and district-level leadership roles (Kowalski, McCord, Peterson, Young, & Ellerson, 2010), they populate school boards and committees, and they hold critical positions in government and educational policy-making. They tend overwhelmingly to be the folks at the “top” that the grassroots struggle against.

Those of privilege will interact with and necessarily mediate the work of community organizing and other grassroots efforts for educational justice. We could conclude, as Cobb did, that if they are coming—indeed, if this privileged elite is already here—then we have little choice but to attempt to train them to be on the side of justice, to be “concretely beneficial” in the fight for schools worthy of our children. Here, though, I want to favor a different conclusion. I want to suggest that love—not necessity—should drive our efforts to work with young people of privilege.

Undertaking the training of the privileged in a haze of ambivalence, suspicious of their motives for working in communities unlike their own and lamenting their lack of political consciousness, cripples the engaged and sustained relationship required to train them for the schools children deserve. By contrast, leveraging love might allow us to embrace the beautiful and particularized challenge of their training rather than resenting the practical need for it.

The love I mean to describe is not emotional or affectionate but, rather, political. It is love for collective human being translated in the educational effort to awaken consciousness and

resist dehumanization in all its forms. Echoing Baldwin, I am calling on love as a weapon of power against oppression. As oppression seeks to dehumanize, love recognizes, recalls, and resurrects human being (Freire, 1970/2000). This recognition of human being in our students is the antidote to domination (DeLissovoy, 2010), and Freire referred to this political love as an “armed love.” Antonia Darder (2002) gives shape to armed love by arguing for it as a “political and radicalized form of love.” She writes,

... it is never about absolute consensus, or unconditional acceptance, or unceasing words of sweetness, or endless streams of hugs and kisses. Instead, it is a love that is unconstructed, rooted in a committed willingness to struggle persistently with purpose in our life and to intimately connect that purpose with what [Freire] called our “true vocation”—to be human. (41)

The love required in the struggle for educational justice, in the training of educators who will teach for freedom, can only be fueled by an impassioned, enraged hatred of oppression and a resistance—through the very act of love—to all forms of educational dehumanization. To love is to resurrect and insist on human being.

Some few years before Baldwin’s letter was published, Martin Luther King, Jr. (1957) delivered a speech entitled, “Love Your Enemies,” in which he conveyed a definition of love embodied by the Christian concept of *agape*—a Greek word for the love of fellow men. His love, too, is political, collective, a form of power:

Agape is not a weak, passive love. It is love in action. Agape is love seeking to preserve and create community. It is insistence on community when one seeks to break it. In the final analysis, agape means a recognition of the fact that all life is interrelated. All humanity is involved in a single process, and all men are brothers. To the degree that I harm my brother, no matter what he is doing to me, I am harming myself.” (18)

Love has a place in revolution and social movement because it is resistance. By its insistence on recognizing human being, love angrily and vehemently defies social structures and schooling practices that seek to destroy any young person’s sense of somebodiness. Love creates space for solidarity in the shared struggle for justice by shortening the distance between self and Other.

Loving those of wealth and privilege as we train them to become educators is a project that must be undertaken not just for the sake of the children they will go on to teach, but for their own sake as people deserving of a chance to become more fully realized human beings. A pedagogy of love rests first on this understanding. Educating these students of privilege for others, as if they themselves are only of secondary importance to the overall goal of improving the educational experience of historically marginalized youth, will not do. Dr. King (1957) tells us that:

Agape does not begin by discriminating between worthy and unworthy people, or any qualities people possess. It begins by loving people *for their sakes*.... Another basic point about agape is that it springs from the *need* of the other person—his need for belonging in the best of the human family. (19, emphasis in original)

A pedagogy of love demands recognition of every person as one in need of belonging to the best of the human family—love for their own sakes, not just for the sake of those they will go on to serve.

Finally, approaching the educational training of students of privilege as a default requirement—rather than an imperative of the struggle for freedom—is a mistake of great consequence. The struggle against dehumanizing schooling and social practices is really a set of demands for the recognition of equal human worth. The ideology of *unequal* human worth is (re)produced in our elite private schools—where superiority is actively taught and learned—just as it is in our urban and rural public schools where a sense of inferiority is taught and learned, and therefore, both kinds of schools are implicated in our ongoing failure and should be targeted in reform efforts. Part of the struggle for educational justice demands undoing the ideology of superiority, resurrecting the full human being of the privileged by affording them the opportunity to unravel the threads of their own mis-education. The students must learn to challenge their own “dysconsciousness” (King, 1991): an “uncritical habit of mind (including perceptions, attitudes, assumptions, and beliefs) that justifies inequity and exploitation by accepting the given order of things as given” (135). This kind of critical college education—an education designed to address the mis-education peddled in K-12 schooling for the privileged—constitutes justice work, and is required as part of the overall struggle against dehumanizing educational practices.

### **On Context: The People, the Places, and Privileged Identities**

For four years now, I have worked as the director of elementary education teacher certification programs and an instructor for graduate and undergraduate education courses in two private liberal arts schools. I have found since starting graduate work at Harvard that I suddenly have access to these other private, elitist spaces. As Gaztambide-Fernández (with Howard, 2012) explains in detailing how his affiliation granted him research access to a private boarding school for the privileged, “while two years of graduate studies at Harvard are hardly enough make anyone an expert at anything, it is enough for the aura of privilege to be misrecognized as expertise” (294). And though my identity as a Harvard student has not helped me to do this job, I am advantaged by some of my other identities. I am the daughter of Egyptian immigrants who came voluntarily to the States in the 1970’s as middle-class professionals. I identify as Arab-American, a marked population in this political moment, but my skin is light, my family is Coptic Orthodox, I was born in the United States and have full citizenship rights, the dominant language is my primary language, and I was raised and schooled in the middle-class. I find that white students (indeed, white people) approach and interact with me as if I belong in their spaces and share their privileges. My identity has allowed me to witness and experience firsthand the benefits of whiteness, without the sense of “normalness” that usually accompanies the receipt of these advantages. I was conscious of these advantages *as* advantages and, therefore, watched the production of them in my own experiences of schooling with self-conscious awareness.

My students are predominantly affluent, many graduated from private high schools with very restrictive enrollment, and our institution is dominated by white students and faculty. Many, especially those drawn to the work of education, do not fit the quintessential model of the elite college-goer. My students of color, my rural white, low-income, gender non-conforming, religious minority, queer, and international students who do not speak English as their first language, do not consider themselves in keeping with the stereotype of the white male legacy

student clad in cardigan featuring the school crest. These students have not all enjoyed the same advantages and, therefore, often resist their identification as “students of privilege.”

But recent work is giving language to their identities. Adam Howard (2008) conceptualizes of privilege not just as something people *have* through material advantages, but as something people *are*—a dimension of identity they fundamentally embody and share in community with their exclusive peers. Regardless of who they were before arriving at the gates, once they cross the threshold into these highly esteemed institutions they are integrated into the collective identity of privilege, sometimes painfully (Gaztambide-Fernández & Diaquoi, 2010). Therefore, while noting the range and diversity in their actual material advantages, I identify them here as an corps of students of privilege who benefit from the symbolic, institutional, and material capital associated with the institution they attend. They each learn to weave the school crest into their identity; for the majority, this is a seamless addition to the uniforms they donned before arriving.

The courses I teach, and the particular one I focus on here, center on **(re)production**, **(re)formation**, and **(re)imagination**, in that order. We study oppression and privilege as (re)produced in schools; the ways communities are organizing to (re)form the schools we have now (see Warren, Mapp & the Community Organizing for School Reform Project, 2011); and historic and current examples of (re)imagined educational spaces that resurrect human being and center liberation as their purpose (see Brion-Meisels et al., 2010). Rather than talk about schools as either working or broken, good or bad, failing or succeeding, we ask the broader question, *what are we producing in the schools we have now?*

We first study how schools produce:

- a sense of inferiority
- a sense of superiority
- workers and social class hierarchies
- criminals and criminality
- rigid gender norms and binaries
- “disability” and definitions of “normal”
- cultural and linguistic conformity
- bounds of “Americanness”

Midway through the course we transition to the second overarching question: *what do we want our schools to produce? What have various communities sought to produce in their efforts to reimagine schools?*

As the instructor, all the time I am asking myself, *what have our schools produced in these students sitting before me?* Although my overt and stated curriculum is about the (de)humanizing practices and policies of schooling, my more hidden curriculum is aimed at unraveling the dysconsciousness (King, 1991) of these students of privilege—undoing their own K-12 mis-education. To that end, the three lessons that follow constitute the subtext of my course, the curriculum that undergirds my official curriculum. It is this secondary curriculum that I believe embodies a pedagogy of love for pre-service educators of privilege.

### **Lesson #1: You are special, but you are not special.**

In concrete terms, the struggle for educational justice requires that we dismantle those ideologies, discourses, and frames that signal unequal human worth. Perhaps the most obvious of



these frames is that of the “achievement gap,” a deeply etched, visual rank order of human groups. Dominant efforts at school reform in both practice and research—including some of the most well-intentioned like *Brown v. Board*—suffer from the backwards strategy of proving brokenness to justify the need for a fix. That is, we establish people as injured, impaired, or less than, in order to demand a remedy for what ails them—a strategy Eve Tuck (2009) has called a “damage-centered” approach. If a reform effort requires the proof of some kind of person as broken, as less than fully human, then by its very nature it has already failed to meet the foremost criteria demanded by struggle: full human-hood.

When we insist on establishing damage, we reinforce the most pernicious of all the ideologies of unequal human worth: the myth of inferiority (Woodson, 1933; DuBois, 1935; Baldwin, 1963, 1965; O’Connor, 2006). This myth persists throughout time, an ideological justification for the economic imperatives of conquest, slavery, and genocide. Thomas Jefferson (1853), writing in *Notes on the State of Virginia*, prompted the “scientific” investigation into the inferiority of the races that I believe still persists in more subtle forms today: “I advance it therefore as a suspicion only, that the blacks, whether originally a distinct race, or made distinct by time and circumstances, are inferior to the whites in the endowments both of body and mind” (270). Research and reform efforts that insist on the search for pathology in minds, bodies, and communities, continue the “scientific” tradition of this deeply racist myth-making.

The myth of inferiority continues to prevent us from realizing the hope of an educational system created in the image of freedom (O’Connor, 2006). Therefore, it is the first of the ideologies I work to bring to the surface of the minds of students of privilege. While we read the work of Woodson (1933), Baldwin (1963), and DuBois (1935), students are asked to pay close attention to the particular and everyday processes through which these authors argue that inferiority gets inculcated. Sometimes we use the visual to represent and document processes since it forces students to literally draw out what this production might look like. For example, students read in Baldwin’s (1963/1996) *A Talk to Teachers*, where he writes:

The point of all this is that black men were brought here as a source of cheap labor. They were indispensable to the economy. In order to justify the fact that men were treated as though they were animals, the white republic had to brainwash itself into believing that they were, indeed, animals and *deserved* to be treated like animals. Therefore it is almost impossible for any Negro child to discover anything about his actual history. The reason is that this “animal,” once he suspects his own worth, once he starts believing that he is a man, has begun to attack the entire power structure.

In response, one group of students focused on the denial of one’s “actual history,” drawing the following image:



“Our drawing shows the perspective of a black student placed in a white history classroom. The teacher is teaching the students to draw a boat, which may represent white history and the pride of Colonialism. The picture that the students are supposed to copy fails to acknowledge any positive aspect of the Black student’s experience or of African/African-American history. The black student in the back has “drawn” something but he has to erase it, meaning that although he might have brought to school a part of his knowledge of and pride in his own history, he has to erase that to learn a different history that eradicates his own.”

For some, the academic learning opens up reflection on the self. One student, a young woman of color who attended city public schools until being admitted to a selective private high school, used our educational autobiography final assignment as a space in which to offer her own story of the production of a sense of cultural and racial inferiority. She writes:

I didn’t feel such a loss of self until my first Black History Month at [a private high school for the economic elite]. My friends and I were walking around the school when we saw Valentine’s Day decorations up. I remember walking by feeling as if something was



missing. Then I stopped and looked at my friends and said, “You guys, its Black History Month!” My friends looked at me in horror and said, “we forgot”. We knew if we had been in our inner city schools this would have never happened. I remember in middle school, writing biographies on people of color. Thinking back now, in high school I never wrote or studied anyone of color. The only time I came across my culture was when we read *The Crucible* and we came across Tituba, the Bajan slave, and when we spoke about how Jamaicans were used to build the Panama Canal. In that moment I didn’t feel proud of where I came from, I was embarrassed. Here were two circumstances where people who were from the same place as my parents were mistreated. Based on my education at [the private high school], I wouldn’t have anything good to say about people from the Caribbean. I knew better things about my heritage, but that wasn’t from my [high school]. I was always very proud of my Caribbean heritage, but during that time, for the first and only time, I wasn’t.

I am equally interested in helping these students see that a sense superiority is also produced in schools, and is equally problematic. To that end, we benefit tremendously from reading the recent work of young scholars who document the particular processes by which advantage, elitism, and privilege get produced in educational institutions with highly restrictive enrollment (Howard, 2008; Gaztambide-Fernández, 2009; Howard & Gaztambide-Fernández, 2010; Khan, 2011). These readings resonate with a significant majority of my students.

I challenge students to test my theory that if they spend any randomly chosen day in any educational space, they will witness firsthand examples of the production of inferiority and/or superiority. Their midterm paper requires them to spend a day in any school and write about what they see through the lens of the course texts and discussions. One student visited an elite preparatory high school, and as part of her visit did a critical analysis of their promotional materials. A page of the school’s brochure features a lacrosse player with the all-caps caption: “The Natural.” She offers the following analysis:

[The featured student] may have natural talent but these skills were developed since age six through proper support and resources. However, his access to these assets is never mentioned. His ability is framed as an inherent and intrinsic characteristic. By emphasizing their individual distinctions, students learn to misrecognize the privileges of their collective distinctions and avoid dealing with the social consequences of their status (Gaztambide-Fernández, 2009). To justify these privileges, students turn the mystery of being accepted and included into externalized proof that they are special. Demonstrating that they are “the best of the best” entitles students to claim future privilege.

The production of this seemingly “externalized proof” of specialness is the very thing we are working to undo among the students in the elite college classroom in this first lesson. It is necessary that they understand their advantages as manufactured, unearned, and won at the cost of disadvantaging others. We must help them to see that they are not special.

At the same time, a loving stance requires that we also help them see that they *are* special. A loving pedagogy lets us recalibrate and re-center the actual source of their specialness: not their academic victories or concertedly cultivated talents, but their fundamental humanness. To this end, we create heart maps, adapted from a writing tool for children by Nancie Atwell (2002).

The heart map assignment asks for a pictorial representation and an accompanying text that responds to the following prompt: *When are you your most full self? How do you know you are human? What reminds you that you are a person, living and breathing? How do you know what you are worth? What makes you important, how do you know you are important, and who or what helps you to know?* A pedagogical stance of love insists on coupling the need for honesty about unearned advantage with an insistence on the fundamentally intact humanness of each person of privilege. These students *are* important—*are special*—but their specialness does not stem from their resumé’s or bank accounts. I share one example of a heart map, along with an excerpt from the accompanying written piece, here:

**i carry your heart**

They tell me that atoms are mostly empty space.

In the face of this incomprehensible truth, my sensibilities suggest phantasmagoria: I wonder why it is that we don't fall through each other, our nuclei recklessly colliding in anticipation of union.

I do not dwell in melancholy. I am no Soplades and I am not Poe; no tragic muse nor Annabel Lee will sing in me.

What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up like a raisin in the sun? Or fester like a sore— And then run? Does it stink like rotten meat? Or crust and sugar over— like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags like a heavy load.

Or does it explode?

It might interest you to know, speaking of the plentiful imagery of the world, that I am the sound of rain on the roof.

I also happen to be the shooting star, the evening paper blowing down an alley and the basket of chestnuts on the kitchen table.

I am also the moon in the trees and the blind woman's tea cup. But don't worry, I'm not the bread and the knife. You are still the bread and the knife. You will always be the bread and the knife, not to mention the crystal goblet and—something—the wine.

When I hope, its optimistic combustion leaves my conscious irresistibly crackling with the vocabulary of possibility, and in those moments I brandish my pen boldly.

**( i carry your heart )**

My love, I will do my best not to love you, if that is what you want. I will be happy just to be with you (and not with you); to coexist with your beautiful mind will be enough without calling you "mine."

You may write me down in history With your litter, twisted lies, You may trod me in the very dirt But still, like dust, I'll rise.

Does my sassiness upset you? Why are you beset with gloom? 'Cause I walk like I've got oil wells Pumping in my living room.

Just like moons and like suns, With the certainty of tides, Just like hopes springing high, Still I'll rise.

pity this busy monster, manunkind, not. Progress is a comfortable disease: your victim (death and life safely beyond) plays with the bigness of his littleness —electrons defy one razorblade into a mountainrange, lenses extend unwish through curving wherenin till unwish returns on its unself. A world of made is not a world of born --- pity poor flesh and trees, poor stars and stones, but never this fine specimen of hypermagical ultraomnipotence. We doctors know a hopeless case if --- listen: there's a hell of a good universe next door; let's go

what's wholly marvelous my Darling is that you & I are more than you & I (be ca us e It's we)

As an imperfect actor on the stage Who with his fear is put beside his part, Or some fierce thing replete with too much rage, Whose strength's abundance weakens his own heart, So I, for fear of trust, forget to say The perfect ceremony of love's rite, And in mine own love's strength seem to decay, O'charged with burden of mine own love's might, O, let my books be then the eloquence And dumb presagers of my speaking breast, Who plead for love, and look for recompense More than that tongue that more hath more expressed. O, learn to read what silent love hath writ, To hear with eyes belongs to love's fine wit.

I decided to place on my heart a photo of a rugby scrum. I play and love rugby, and the scrum is the epitome of human trust. Without every person in the scrum pushing with one hundred percent of everything they have, the scrum will collapse and risk injury. Our life and limb literally depends on holding ourselves to our teammates and driving forward. It is also one of the places that I feel most empowered. Rugby is one of the chances that I have to feel strong. The feeling of being a driving force behind success is an incredible one. In this vein, I also included the “POW!” most often seen in comic books as a sound effect for a particularly effective punch. While I’m not a violent person off of the pitch, I do pride myself on my strength, both physically and emotionally. I pride myself on being the person that others can depend on, and I am happy when I can serve as the support system for the ones that I love. I have a bit of a superhero complex. I chose to add Captain America’s shield, because Captain America is the kind of superhero that I would like to be. His only weapons are his strength and his shield.

We do these maps in the first week of the semester as we are just coming to learn and love one another, and I find that they go a great distance in connecting me to my students and reminding me of how worthy they are of my deep care and commitment. In their hearts I get to see their sisters and mothers, their favorite places and foods, their multiple and intersecting identities, their passions and commitments. I get to hear the voices of their most human selves as they talk about the things they are proud of, grieving, inspired by, ashamed of. The maps are also a useful pedagogical tool because in them I can sometimes identify openings for teaching and learning; in the above example, for instance, I see that I could use the rugby scrum as a metaphor to support the learner in understanding the idea of solidarity and collective action.

In short, this first lesson is about saying to students that their specialness is not contingent on their talents, academics, current or future economic status; rather, it is an unconditional and automatic fact of their humanness. In this way, they get to be exactly as special as every other human being—no more, no less. I consider this a loving way to begin dismantling the inferiority-superiority binary that so terribly obstructs the struggle for educational justice.

### **Lesson #2: They don’t want to be you, they want to be their best them.**

For students who match the cultural style, values, and norms of our schools, and have been rewarded by this match, it can be difficult to see schools as non-neutral spaces that reward white middle-class ways of being. They often believe that poorly resourced schools are the source of educational inequality, and therefore prize the kinds of programs and reform efforts that bring young people out of their own community schools and into supposedly “better” private, independent, or charter schools.

I draw on history to help students see that many of these so-called better schools—divorced from communities as they are—often actively devalue the stories, traditions, and cultural codes of young people from non-dominant groups. Because history allows us some distance, students of privilege often feel safer to engage. Further, examples from the past can help make today’s normalized, invisible harm more readily visible.

To take an example, to teach about processes of deculturalization—defined as the “educational process of destroying a people’s culture and replacing it with a new culture” (Spring, 2009, p. 8)—we examine the Indian Boarding School movement that lasted from about 1870-1917, in which American Indian children were removed from their homes to attend schools that enacted efforts at cultural genocide. Students were stripped of their traditional dress, their tribal languages, their religious beliefs, sometimes as early as 4 years old. While the leaders of this movement used a discourse of uplift and betterment to claim that the schools were a way to “civilize” these Native children, the underlying desire was—of course—economic. In its efforts at conquest and the theft of Indian land, the U.S. government invoked the myth of inferiority to claim that Native people were not worthy of their own rule, and used education as a tool for destroying the cultural identity, pride, and self-worth of the Indian child. We look at haunting before and after images of children from these schools to see their physical transformation to forced whiteness.

We also study quotations from leaders at the time to try to understand how such an atrocity could have been justified and made legitimate. Some selections of these include:

The only chance of saving any of this race will be by taking their children, at a very early age, and educating them in our habits, in a situation removed from the contagion of Indian pursuits.- *William Tudor, Letters on the Eastern States*

I trust and believe we are acting for their greatest good. - *U.S. President Thomas Jefferson, Address to Congress, 1801*

Teaching an Indian youth in his own barbarous dialect is a detriment to him... the English language which is good enough for a white man or a black man ought to be good enough for the red man. - *The U.S. Commissioner on Indian Affairs Annual Report, 1887*

After considering these attitudes, which the educators-in-training find terribly offensive, we watch a short TV documentary lauding a no-excuses charter school in Houston, Texas. The school is praised for “saving” kids from the “gang culture” of their neighborhood. It is celebrated for its obscenely long school day, with kids leaving their communities by 6 AM for a 7 AM start, and not returning home until well after 6 PM. A young Mexican-American male is featured who initially refused to follow the rigid code of conduct but who comes around enough to claim that the school saved him from the fate of juvenile detention. The film features a moment in which one of the students, an 8<sup>th</sup> grader of color, is accepted into a boarding high school in the Northeast for the economic elite, almost 2000 miles from home. Everyone unproblematically celebrates her accomplishment. The school’s assistant principal says the student’s life will change; she is “on her way to becoming a better person.”

We watch the video with the Indian boarding school quotes in hand, juxtaposing those early attitudes that so easily offended us with the apparently more subtle racism in the discourse that surrounds the charter school. A school they might have previously lauded now begs for a more critical analysis of aspects of deculturalization. Students come to see that when teachers call their students lazy and apathetic, critique their families for not valuing education, judge their neighborhoods to be uncivilized and a place from which to escape, they are echoing the deep-seated racism of earlier days and they are reifying the perpetual myth of inferiority. They come to see that these educators wish to “civilize” non-dominant cultural codes into white middle-class ways of being, speaking, dressing, behaving. They become more critical of school reform efforts that mirror wolves in sheep’s clothing.

In this way, they come to understand that young people from non-dominant groups don’t want to imitate or get acculturated into white, elitist ways of being, despite our efforts to code those ways of being as “normal,” neutral, necessary, or desirable. Rather, they want the opportunity to be their best selves with their own cultural codes intact.

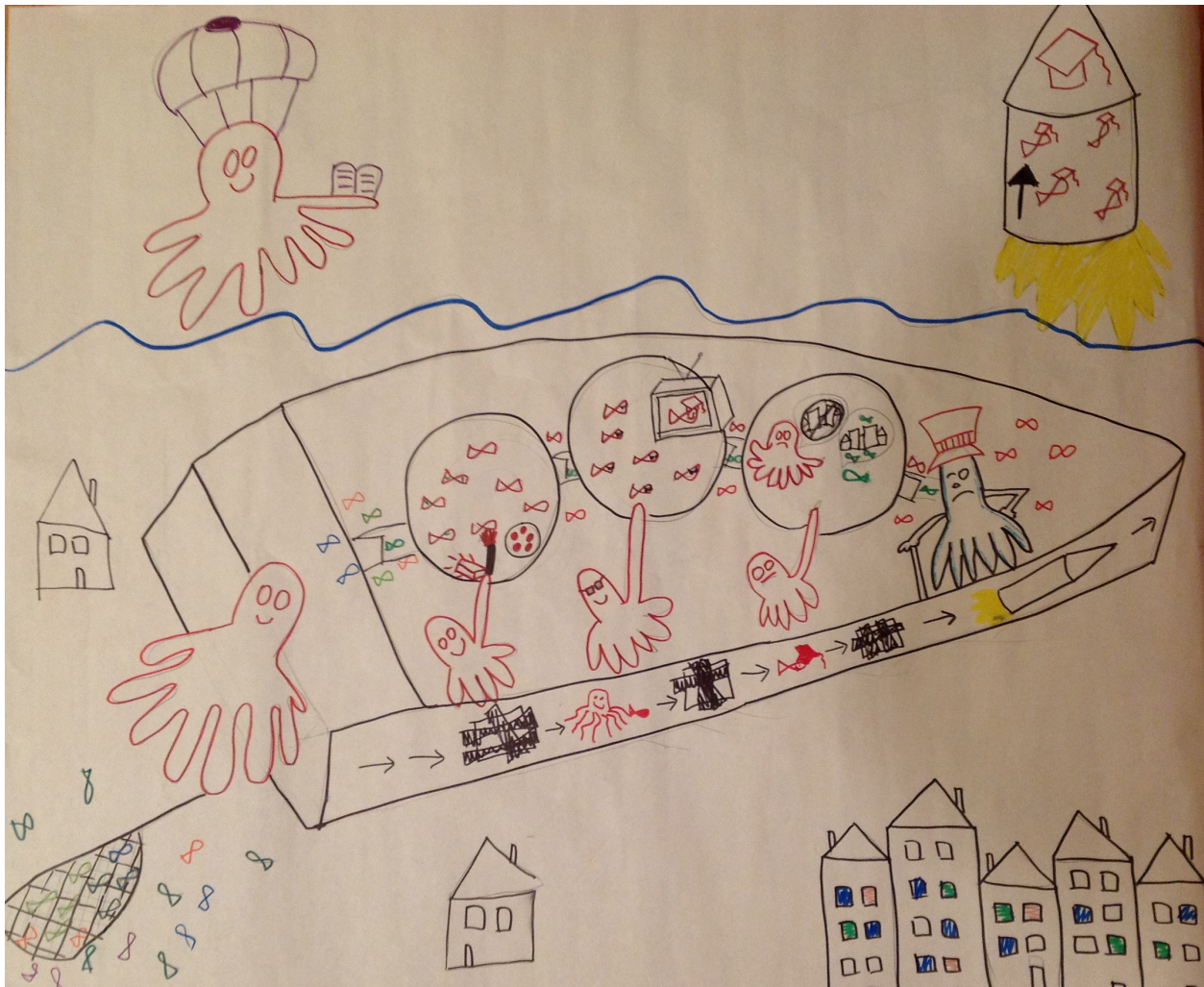
I ask students to write two reflection papers throughout the semester, using the popular professional development stem of “I used to think... but now I think...” (Elmore, 2011). One of my students writes about deculturalization in the context of her home country of China:

When people ask me where I went to high school, I say my school’s name followed by one more description: “the one with the Tibetan class”. Without exception, they exclaim, “wow that’s so cool”, and they were even more surprised when I told them the college admission results. We all appreciated that the school gave these Tibetan students a whole new life and a successful future. Now, however, I think there is a false notion of superiority and we Han people use this perception to legitimize the [curriculum], which actually deculturalizes



Tibetan students...Because we believe in our cultural superiority, we design the “Tibetan class” in a way of deculturalization instead of integration. For example, the class removes Tibetan students from their families and thus isolates them from the language and customs of their own. We can imagine that for Tibetan students to adjust to Han schools, they have to use their classmates’ desirable language, customs, and manner of thinking. The more they make themselves match the culture of Han teachers and students, the more they will be valued in school. Thus in the process of adjustment, their culture is eradicated.

This same student went on to work in a small group on a visual representation of the particular ways in which schools deculturalize students:



The image takes place in the ocean which represents the community that the school is located in and that the students come from. In the top left, there is a picture of an octopus, which represents teachers. The teacher is parachuting in because she is not from the community and does not have a deep understanding of the community the students come from. There is an octopus at the left part of the boat who is catching a few fish randomly to put into this school, but leaving most behind. The boat represents the “lifeboat” model where schools perceive themselves as saving students and perceive the students’ communities negatively as a space from

which to be rescued. The fish come in as all different colors, which represents the diversity of cultures and experiences the students have from their home communities. Once the fish enter the school, they go through three hoops: the first where they are all painted the same color to become homogeneous, the second where they are watching a TV of a graduating fish and being taught to want to be like that fish, and the third where a fish is trying to talk to a teacher about its community and the teacher won't let it. At the end of the hoops, there is a rocket ship where the fish are sent out of the community and told not to return because of the negative image they've been taught about their own homes. Between each of the hoops there are trapdoors that the school lets fish who don't conform fall through. On the side of the boat is the image the school portrays to the outside: that the octopi save the fish, that the fish are “successful” and graduate once they have conformed, and that they are then sent out of the community to somewhere “better.” The windows of the boat are boarded up so the students and the community can't see each other.

To offer a counterexample of deculturalization, we study the Mexican-American ethnic studies program in Tucson, Arizona (see [saveethnicstudies.org](http://saveethnicstudies.org)), and watch the documentary about it, *Precious Knowledge*, as a case study in how bringing the history and cultural traditions of young people to the forefront of their education results in positive educational outcomes. We also read narratives written by young folks of color that are explicitly about how their cultural knowledge and pride was a resource they leveraged to persist through school (Vásquez, 2009; Hernández, 2009). Students are asked to circle back to the questions asked of Freedom School students in 1964: *what does the majority culture have that we want? What do they have that we don't want? What do we have that we want to keep?*

In our discussions about the extraordinary pain so many young people endure by hiding or downplaying parts of their identity in order to “succeed,” and how liberating it can be to enjoy an educational experience that welcomes one's full personhood, my students of privilege can reflect on the aspects of their own identities they have had to hide. Many have had to sacrifice parts of themselves to meet the social, cultural, and academic expectations of their parents, teachers, and elite peers. In this way this lesson constitutes an act of love as it actively resists the dehumanizing practices of elite schooling that insist on ranking people according to their wealth, possessions, and accomplishments. In a closing reflection, one student writes, “growing up I let others define me, and what I learned was that others do not know what makes me human. They left me feeling hollow and empty. I've been learning to define my importance and what makes me human on my own terms.” Similarly, another student writes:

There is and has been a separation between what I learn that nurtures my academic self, and the self that has been marginalized, hurt, and traumatized by academics—my childself, my creativity, my kindness. My love for myself. My education was not humanizing or liberating in that it did not often, or did not with purpose, give me tools to left me love myself, give me space to love myself, or give me the tools and space to learn to give love to others. Pressure to be an academic elite has for so long divorced me from nourishing myself, knowing myself, or loving myself. The high school honors track and [this institution] evokes elitism and competition between students. There is a way of measuring success: it is getting the best GPA, the best internship, the best grad school. I believed for so long that these were the measures of a successful life. I loathed myself, truly and deeply, when I got a bad grade, or did not measure up against the ruler in my head. I realize now that there is only one

measure of a successful life: to be happy, and to love yourself, and to share that love with others.

As this young person learns to voice her identity above and apart from that of an “academic elite,” she begins the long process of awakening her consciousness to the harm school has done her. It is a loving lesson because it returns her to the place of her own human being before the pressure of elitism taught her to measure her worth by academic accolades. This return may prevent her from going on in any assumption that “good” schools are schools like her own, that her future students should want to be like her instead of wanting to be their best them. In this way, teaching students of privilege to critically examine their own educational autobiography constitutes an act of love.

### **Lesson #3: Tú eres mi otro yo.**

Curtis Acosta (with Mir, 2012), a language arts teacher in the Mexican-American studies (MAS) program in Tucson, starts his class each day by reciting a poem by Chicano playwright Luís Valdez:

**Tú eres mi otro yo.** / You are my other me.  
**Si te hago daño a ti,** / If I do harm to you,  
**Me hago daño a mi mismo.** / I do harm to myself.  
**Si te amo y respeto,** / If I love and respect you,  
**Me amo y respeto yo.** / I love and respect myself.

The spirit of In Lak’Ech echoes Dr. King’s conception of agape as a love that reflects the interrelation of all of humanity. It also captures Freire’s (1970/2000) argument that, “dehumanization, which marks not only those whose humanity has been stolen, but also (though in a different way) those who have stolen it, is a *distortion* of becoming more fully human (44, emphasis in original).

Understanding that harm to one is harm to all is critical to fostering solidarity. Diane Goodman (2001) is specific in her treatment of the costs of oppression to people of dominant groups. She details the psychological, social, intellectual, moral and spiritual, material, and physical costs of oppression to privileged groups—ranging from a sense of guilt, pain, and fear, to a distorted view of other people’s and one’s own culture and history, isolation from people who are different, and diminished mental health. We may also learn of these costs by having students read Fanon (1963), who documented in painful detail the physical and psychological trauma suffered not just by the colonized, but also by the colonizers who remained haunted by the atrocity of their own acts.

Learning that we are all inextricably connected—that our own humanity depends on the recognition of humanness in others—is the pre-condition for solidarity. Once educators-in-training understand that their own freedom is contingent upon the condition of everyone’s freedom, solidarity in the struggle for educational justice becomes possible.

We use the Mississippi Freedom Summer volunteers like Gail Falk as a case study in solidarity. Reading aloud their letters home to friends and family (Martínez, 2007), we create a concept map to document the emotions, sacrifices, and challenges of these young people. Then

we ask ourselves how, if at all, educators today—college graduates who are overwhelmingly white and middle-class—experience the risks and hardship associated with solidarity as they work in schools and communities of color. Students begin to re-imagine the role of the teacher as an active participant in struggle. In a reflection paper, one writes:

I used to think that the only role of educators is to teach children, but now I know that it is to fight alongside them... I learned that as educators, we must realize that we are just as responsible for the struggle against undeserved suffering as the students are. We must open up to, empathize with, and above all, love our students, for they are our children, and “their pain is our pain.” (Duncan-Andrade, 2009; p. 240) Finally, we must fight hand in hand for the liberation and humanization of our children and ourselves, not as spectators, but as insiders.

But words are easier than action, and the disposition and skills required for solidarity are hard-won with students of privilege. As Freire (1970/2000) tells us, “conversion to the people requires a profound rebirth” (61). It requires a fundamental change in identity. We are asking students to trade their proud identities as scholars, winners, and bosses, for the singular identity required by the struggle for freedom: equal allies in human being. Long trained in leadership, we ask them to learn to simply walk alongside.

To begin to give shape to this new identity, we create a lexicon for it—a language that might replace and displace the mainstream discourse of schooling-for-capitalism. Reading examples of educational projects and spaces designed by communities in the spirit of collective liberation (Brion-Meisels et al., 2010), we draft mission statements from the point of view of those projects—naming their goals, values, and purposes. To that generated language we add the writing students provided with their heart maps, the explanations of the things that characterize their individual humanness. From these words we generate a collective word cloud that serves as our new lexicon for education for liberation. The words remind us of what matters.





Our K-12 schools—particularly for the economic elite—prize leadership, promote competition, value the individual over the community, and celebrate “getting ahead.” These are lessons designed in the image of capitalism for those who enjoy its spoils, and they teach students of privilege that wealth is to be hoarded and that unearned, undeserved advantages are to be maximized and celebrated. Un-teaching these deeply etched lessons—by emphasizing that harm to one is harm to all—is not just an academic or cognitive exercise but, rather, constitutes an act of love.

**A Final Lesson: They don’t need your help. You need their love.**

Students of privilege need to be freed from the crippling ideology of educational work as a helping profession in which the task is to use some imagined superior set of resources and intellect to rescue the “disadvantaged.” Such an ideology thrives on the myth of inferiority and hinders the struggle for freedom—which demands, first, the recognition of equal human worth; and second, recognition that these “disadvantaged” are our collective salvation. We know that “it is only the oppressed who, by freeing themselves, can free their oppressors... only power that springs from the weakness of the oppressed will be sufficiently strong to free both,” (Freire, 1970/2000, p. 44). This nation’s collective hope is in the hands of those young people who we most insist on underserving and undervaluing (Gillen, 2009).

Because our humanness is intertwined, when a young person demands to be recognized as a full human being with full rights, that young person acts powerfully on behalf of all by insisting on the sanctity of human being. For this reason, the struggle for freedom itself constitutes and requires a fierce love for all, including the oppressor. This is the reason for

Baldwin’s (1963, p. 10-11) impassioned plea to his teenage nephew—his challenge to him, his appeal.

You must accept them and accept them with love, for these innocent people have no other hope. They are in effect still trapped in a history which they do not understand and until they understand it, they cannot be released from it ... But these men are your brothers, your lost younger brothers, and if the word “integration” means anything, this is what it means: that we, with love, shall force our brothers to see themselves as they are, to cease fleeing from reality and begin to change it.

It will be hard, but you come from sturdy, peasant stock, men who picked cotton and dammed rivers and built railroads, and, in the teeth of the most terrifying odds, achieved an unassailable and monumental dignity. You come from a long line of great poets, some of the greatest poets since Homer. One of them said, *the very time I thought I was lost, My dungeon shook and my chains fell off.*

You know, and I know, that the country is celebrating one hundred years of freedom one hundred years too soon. We cannot be free until they are free. God bless you, and Godspeed.

Your uncle,  
James

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