

RADICAL TEACHER

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Unconditional Care Beyond the Carceral Education State: A Call for Abolitionist Departure

by Margaret Goldman



JACOBA VAN HEEMSKERCK VAN BEEST COMPOSITION, 1921. NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART ONLINE COLLECTION.

Part I. The Story of a Free Space: A Point of Departure and a Site of Return

When Zahra was still a student at F.R.E.E. LA continuation high school, where she and I both now teach, she told me this:

“I was always smart. I never had a problem completing the work. That wasn’t the problem for me. I think it was the focus. That’s why I like F.R.E.E. LA so much— ‘cause it’s people like me. It’s people like me here, but not everyone is like *me*, you know. And especially the teachers— like, they just know. *They know life shows up for everybody.*”

As we talked, a single braid, intent on freeing itself from the others, cascaded over her shoulder and she pushed it back without skipping a beat— her face, her breath, her eyes unchanging.

“In a regular school they don’t really give a fuck,” she continued. “Like, say if your grandma died. They might care for the moment, or say they care, but once it starts affecting your performance? They don’t.” She shook her head slowly, eyes narrowed, pointed towards the floor but looking past it. Looking at something that already happened, something replaying in her head.

“Once it starts affecting your performance, they don’t care at all.”

We had been sitting in my classroom at F.R.E.E. LA High (**F**ighting for the **R**evolution to **E**ducate and **E**mpower **L**os **A**ngeles)—what I’ll call *FREE*, for short—as I was making the transition from ethnographer to teacher/ethnographer. FREE is a continuation high school in Los Angeles, California developed by the Youth Justice Coalition (YJC), a grassroots, abolitionist organization led by system-impacted young people and their communities. As part of their broader movement to end all forms of youth confinement, YJC developed FREE in 2007 as an alternative to both traditional schools and youth lock-up (YJC, 2022). Despite the use and public image of many continuation schools as institutions of confinement or abandonment, FREE is a police-free, punishment-free educational space grounded in principles of transformative justice (TJ), and focused on grassroots movement building and political education. It serves, and was created by, young people who have been pushed out of, barred from, or otherwise refused participation in traditional schooling. After being forced to relocate by the Los Angeles Metropolitan Transportation Authority, which demolished their original home to build a parking garage, YJC took over and is in the process of beautifying a juvenile detention center that they organized to shut down about ten years ago. This is where FREE now lives— where Zahra and I sat in a room with windowless walls aching to be torn down. My broader ethnographic project has looked to this space, and these young people’s

stories and insight, as blueprints for abolitionist experiments in alternative forms of social organization.

More specifically, working from FREE’s ideological positioning of itself as neither an institution of confinement nor an institution of traditional education, I am interested in what it might tell us about abolitionist alternatives to traditional schooling—as an anchor of carceral regimes and a site of anti-black enclosure (Sojoyner, 2016) that reinforces racial State power through its institutional, ideological, and interpersonal terms, conditions, and mandates. As part of a broader interest in the possibilities for creating liberatory educational spaces beyond or outside of the traditional school system, I have aimed to understand the ideological and interpersonal construction of the FREE space: What makes this space different? What makes it *fugitive* (which is not to say without contradictions)? In this paper, I wrestle with students’ repeated theorizations of this difference through the concept of *care*. More specifically, my task in this paper is to think through students’ conceptualizations of care at FREE—how it is experienced, theorized, and embodied in the space—in contrast to the type of care students say they experience in “regular schools.” Things like, “once it starts affecting your performance, they don’t care at all.” My task, as well, is to consider what these conflicting articulations of care mean for abolitionist education.

Data and Theory

My larger 3-year ethnographic study utilizes observational field work, interviews with FREE staff and YJC organizers, and education-focused oral histories of FREE students. FREE’s core staff includes three teachers, an academic counselor, a transformative justice (TJ) counselor, and two peace builders (unarmed South Central community members trained in de-escalation). Of FREE’s ~25 students, all are Black, Latinx, and/or Mexican or Chicanx; most if not all are impacted by overlapping carceral systems of probation, incarceration, immigration, and/or foster care; and all navigate and resist overlapping landscapes of dispossession that are largely space-based. Here, my use of “space” refers to both body and place.¹

While some students are referred directly from traditional high schools or other State agencies (e.g., Child Protective Services), a majority of students hear about FREE from friends, family members, and neighbors. As Lupita—a FREE graduate and now lead coordinator between FREE and YJC— described: “It’s *all by word of mouth*. Because it’s like, ‘Hey you don’t like that school? Forget that school, come to FREE.’ And that’s how *I* found out about the school.” Many students were moved, or moved themselves, between multiple schools in the Los Angeles Unified School District before arriving at FREE. Some attended other alternative (continuation) schools along the way, which they often had to find on their own after leaving or being removed from traditional schooling.

In thinking through the possibilities for forging abolitionist educational spaces, I am guided by Ruth Wilson Gilmore’s theorization of *forgotten places*. Critiquing her own concept of the gulag (2007) to capture California’s

massive prison economy, Gilmore (2008, p. 34) asks: "What concept might get at the kinds of forgotten places that have been *absorbed into* the gulag *yet exceed them*?" In turn, she conceptualizes forgotten places as those beyond the margins of the carceral State, where organized abandonment and the critical consciousness that accompanies it cultivate unique capacities for collective organizing. *Forgotten spaces* helps me think through alternative schools as critical sites of meaning-making positioned slightly beyond or outside the traditional school system, and as spaces inhabited by young people and educators with distinct experiential knowledge of spatial displacement *and* transformation. In my reading, forgottenness signifies not a pathologization of dispossessed/racialized spaces (where space is both body and place), but rather a spatial relationship, and an act of flight, departure, or "stealing away" (Robinson & Robinson, 2017 p. 3). Forgottenness, in other words, is not reducible to abandonment from above; rather, as Lupita's "word of mouth" framing suggests, it refers as well to the ways individuals and groups of individuals *remove themselves* from spaces in which their lives are devalued. Thus, to *exceed* in this context captures a particular type of abolitionist transformation that is distinct from reform, critique, or resistance (Campt, 2017; Hartman, 2021; Harney & Moten, 2013).

Lastly, Gilmore's theorizations have led me to think through complex problems and their solutions spatially, which is always also to say racially. In analyzing the sometimes paradoxical role of alternative schools in processes and structures of dispossession and departure, I've found it most useful to think in terms of a landscape, which allows me also to think about the movement of people, ideas, emotions, relationships, and resources across space(s). Thinking about schooling and carcerality spatially—as a carceral-education landscape—provokes questions about what it means, what it takes, and when it becomes necessary to exceed, rather than reform or resist, that landscape.

Turning now to young people's experiences navigating this landscape, and their perceptions of FREE's attempts to exceed it, I wrestle with conflicting genealogies and possibilities of care—how it structures the landscape as a mechanism of domination, but also its potentialities as a means of departure.

Part II. Care in the Carceral Education Landscape

"Once it starts affecting your performance, they don't care at all."

Using this notion of a landscape, I want to return to Zahra's words and read them alongside another student's, who similarly critiques traditional schooling through the lens of its contradistinction to FREE. Amidst the noise of books being closed and backpacks being zipped, this student, Diego, said: "You know, Miss, they actually help you here at



Carceral Education Landscape
(Image credit: Yasmine Gateau for NPR, 2019)



To exceed: A particular type of abolitionist transformation
(Source: iStock photo)

FREE. In regular schools, once you do a bad thing, they just think you're a bad kid, a fuck up. And then *they don't care about you anymore*. After that, they're not gonna try to help you. They just kick you out."

As reflective of sentiments expressed by multiple students, these students' words capture a core juxtaposition, and a critical point of departure. In particular, Zahra and Diego's summary of the difference between FREE and "regular schools" reflects something that emerges continuously in interviews and conversations with young people in the space. While they express a profound sense of safety and trust in a school that does not rely on police or punishment, when I ask students what makes FREE "different" for them, what I hear most often are things like: "they get it," "they understand" and, especially, "they actually care." The frequent repetition of the phrase "they actually care" demands grappling with this concept and its place in the movement towards abolition.

Initially, this demand concerned me. Alongside its longstanding liberatory genealogies, *care* is also tethered to violent genealogies that have been and remain integral to colonialism, transatlantic slavery, and its many afterlives.

Care has been the fulcrum around which coerced reproductive, social, and other labor has been exploited and extracted (for Black women in particular), and around which violent and enduring gendered-racial ideologies and terms of order have been crafted (Hartman, 2016). Perhaps less visceral but no less violent, neoliberal individualized notions of care have functioned—at best—as an insufficient antidote to, and thus obscuration of, structural issues—a critique others have developed elsewhere (Thompson, 1998). Before thinking through the revolutionary possibilities of care in abolitionist education, I build from Zahra’s, Diego’s, and other students’ theorizations to discuss how a particular iteration of care—what I am calling *conditional care*—functions to sustain and naturalize a perpetually uneven carceral-education landscape.

Theorizing Conditional Care

As Zahra and Diego maintain, FREE students’ experiences leaving or being pushed out of schools, and/or barred from entire districts, reveal that schools (like prisons) function institutionally, ideologically, and inevitably—that is, as a matter of design—through a type of conditional care that polices the traumas of students of color and criminalizes the decisions they make to survive a white supremacist social order. Conditional care captures how, at a structural level and as a structuring principle, care in schools is meted out based on ableist, anti-black, colonial metrics of inclusion that punish any divergence from the perfect white citizen, or what FREE student Kimora calls “the ideal kid.” These are metrics that are difficult for most and impossible for many to meet. Beyond performance, (proximity to) blackness always already places students on or outside the periphery of care, making inclusion a battle of respectability politics and spiritual warfare, and “demand[ing] self-negation as the key to an exam pass” (Willoughby-Herard, 2005). By hinging young people’s worth on *performance*, attendance, and behavior—and proximity to white citizenship—conditional care exploits the ways, in Zahra’s words, “life shows up” for Black and brown young people: ways that are structurally inevitable conditions of racial capitalism, obscured always as individual failures.

As a constituent of racial capitalist schooling and racial capitalism² more broadly, conditional care reserves both choice and chance as structural properties of whiteness. Another student, Beautiful, reflected on FREE being the first space, out of the many schools she had been pushed out of and into, to offer her “more than one chance.” She shared: “FREE is really not like other schools, because [other schools] are like, ‘Okay, well, screw it. *I don’t care about what you got going on.* Shoot, that’s yo problem.’” Finally, conditional care also punishes and abandons young people who willfully refuse to participate or perform in institutions, and according to legal/social contracts, that are predicated on their own death and dispossession. Less important than the reasons for which Beautiful, Zahra, Diego, or any of the other students were displaced between schools is the pattern, the structural inevitability, of the displacement itself, including the way it is justified and naturalized by exclusionary definitions of who is worthy of care.

Thus, within the carceral-education landscape—where there are, so we’re led to believe, “good” schools and “urban” schools and “schools for the bad kids”—conditional care is both necessary for and an outcome of the colonial, white supremacist ideology that certain people are disposable. It is necessary for and an outcome of systems that disappear people, as racialized proxies for social problems, into forgotten spaces (like prisons and alternative schools). As constituent of these ideologies and systems, this conditional care is fundamentally anti-black and rooted in myths of meritocracy, and it binds productivity and performance to *who counts as human*. My argument is that this conditional care is endemic to American schooling. And, that this is not a matter of individual teachers who care or don’t care (although that is certainly important), but rather of the institutional and ideological contexts they operate within. To wrestle with this conditional care is to recognize that relationships structure and are inextricably structured by these contexts, which determine the forms of social organization that are possible.

And wrestling I was, indeed. If conditional care played such a critical role in students’ displacement, then what were the students capturing (or reclaiming) in the repeated assertion that what makes FREE so different is that “they actually care”? Thinking through what might reasonably be conditional care’s antithesis (or antidote)—an unconditional care—requires thinking through *they actually care* on a structural or spatial scale. That is, rather than an emotion or condition or action that occurs (solely) at the individual level. With this as a starting point, I ask: What old-new genealogies, knowledge traditions, and epistemologies are students’ definitions of care connected to? Relatedly, how does *unconditional care* reflect FREE’s broader grounding ideologies, everyday practices, and the social relationships that structure and are structured by the space? Animated by these questions, I take students’ definitions as a starting point (and a set of directions) to understand how care is theorized and embodied in the FREE space, and to consider how FREE’s demonstrations of care might serve as a blueprint for abolitionist departures from the carceral-education landscape.

Part III: Possibilities for Departure: Theorizing Unconditional Care

My intention in the following sections is not to prescribe a precise definition of unconditional care, but rather to think through what students mean by care at FREE. In this project of thinking through, FREE’s origin story and the school’s foundations in abolition and TJ emerged as two points that help articulate how care is theorized and experienced in the space. As I discuss these origins and foundations, I move between discussions of care in vision/theory and care in everyday practice/praxis. Doing so reveals how unconditional care at FREE operates at and across ideological, interpersonal, and spatial scales, in broad movements, formal practices, and seemingly mundane interactions.

In the first section, I examine how unconditional care was envisioned through FREE’s origin story, and how this

vision of care is continually enlivened through practices that refuse the disposability the carceral-education landscape requires. In the second section, I explore how FREE's foundations in abolition and TJ shape their visions and practices of care in ways that allow for new terms of relationality, and thus radically different forms of social organization, to emerge. Reading FREE's care practices alongside longstanding genealogies of care—specifically, abolitionist and Black feminist genealogies—helps identify what is being reclaimed in students' definitions, and illuminates the potentialities for care in abolitionist education in light (and in spite) of its violent iterations.

Section I: Returning to the Origin Story of a Free Space: Care as Spatial Reclamation

What might "they actually care" mean at the structural or spatial scale?

This paper opened with a brief genealogy of FREE and YJC. While their beautification of a former detention center is a powerful metaphor and promise for transforming carceral space, FREE's origin story begins before this—before the forced removal, before the beautification—with a group of people who "lacked resources but not resourcefulness" (Gilmore, 2008). Recounting this history, Tauheedah, a close friend and YJC organizer, shared with me:

"YJC started out in front of a store. Literally at a storefront. And we looked around and realized: all these youth from our community keep getting kicked out. So, we said, *Damn. We should make our own school.*"

And as another YJC organizer elaborated: "That's how the idea and the vision of FREE got started. And YJC stays partnered with the school. And the design, the vision, and the curriculum is geared towards our work, towards abolition, towards understanding and developing the will to end youth incarceration."

Here was the seed. The idea, birthed between the words and breaths of conversation at a South Central storefront. The vision, cultivated and toiled over by a group of people who identified a need in their community, and organized themselves in response to patterns of abandonment and forced displacement. Whereas neoliberal, individualized notions of care are necessarily conditional, FREE's origin story is a lens into thinking about care beyond the scale of the individual. In this story, care is envisioned and embodied in the form of reclaiming, demanding, and *carving out space* as a means of collectively refusing landscapes of domination. Integral to understanding this care, and its potentialities for (the) abolition (of schooling), is who was doing the carving and for whom.

Expanding on FREE's genealogy in interview, Emilio—a YJC organizer with a presence that grounds you and a laugh that shakes the ground—laid the groundwork for this understanding:

What I was really inspired about when I first learned about FREE was that [its] *doors were open* to young

people, regardless of what their system experience has been, what their immigration status is, and the trauma that they've been through in their personal lives and their families and generational trauma. The school was founded...by a group of formerly incarcerated and system-impacted people across LA County that decided we needed a space for the people most impacted, to be able to organize.

Young Black and brown [and] Indigenous youth, particularly from South Central, Inglewood, Watts, Compton areas, were being pushed out of schools and into lock ups, into the war on youth, into oppressive systems...So basically, we're like, *students need a place to go, young people need a place to go. These schools aren't serving our young people. We need to have our own school. And that's basically why, how FREE started* (emphasis added).

Let us consider the implications of the statement that "students need a place to go, young people need a place to go." That Black, brown, and Indigenous young people, and young people living in racialized, criminalized geographic spaces—in a county that funds the largest prison system in the world—had nowhere to go.

That no school would take them.

Let us consider the possibility that this is not an anomaly or an aberration, but a structural inevitability of the carceral-education landscape.

It bears restating explicitly: FREE was formed by members of the community in response to the fact that schools across LA County refused to teach their children. In response to the refusal of State institutions to care for youth, community members—many of them formerly incarcerated or system-impacted young people themselves—*created a space outside of* those institutions, for Black and brown young people to *just be*. This demonstration of care in the form of creating, reclaiming, and demanding space is a radical gesture in an anti-black world where young people of color (especially those who are poor, queer, undocumented, and/or disabled) are relentlessly and systematically denied the right to (inhabit) space, the right to exist. Emilio's reflections also begin to sketch out a vision of what is implied in *unconditional*.

FREE's "open doors"—regardless of youths' system experience, immigration status, and personal, familial, and generational trauma—signify an educational space that refuses metrics of exclusion or inclusion contingent on performance, behavior, or proximity to whiteness. More than this, they signify a space premised on not only a tolerance of, but an explicit care for and responsiveness to, the trauma(s), modes of survival, and experiences being criminalized, confined, and surveilled, for which young people are—paradoxically—denied care in schools. These traumas and system-experiences, which serve as grounds for further criminalization in multiple institutional settings, *are* the ways "life shows up" for Black and brown young people. They are "what you got going on" that nobody cares about, and they are direct vestiges of colonialism and slavery, and the present-historical violences of racial capitalism.

Beginning as a recognition, an idea, FREE's origin story culminated in a broad, sweeping refusal of the "strategic abandonment" endemic to racial capitalist carceral regimes, "in which governing bodies carefully eschew responsibility for [social groups] deemed valueless by a logic of racialized criminalization" (Medel, 2017, p. 874). FREE's everyday care practices continually refuse this abandonment, and the disposability it naturalizes, by addressing rather than criminalizing the ways "life shows up," and by repeatedly rejecting the racial hierarchies of humanness on which conditional care, and carceral regimes more broadly, depend.

Origins in Practice: Unconditional Care in the Everyday

As Diego's experiences highlight, who is deemed worthy of care is wrapped up in who is deemed worthy of help. Students marked a process in other schools of being denied requests for help and, simultaneously, how "bad grades" were used as justification for their removal. Their stories elucidate the self-valORIZING locomotion of a landscape that constitutively *produces* "(under)performance" and exploits it as an alibi for disposability. In contrast, in reflecting on their classroom experiences at FREE, students describe a pedagogical praxis of leaving no one behind. Rather than a particular policy, they emphasize everyday practices such as teachers "taking the time" to explain lessons to students who missed class (sometimes for days or weeks at a time) or did not understand the lesson the first time; allowing students to catch up on late work; and eschewing good attendance and performance as metrics of who deserves help. Extending that initial seed, these care practices are informed by a shared *structural* understanding of the ways life, in beauty and in hardship, happens beyond school.

However, what emerged more resoundingly from students' reflections on FREE is a praxis of care that exceeds the classroom, responding to multiple dimensions of young people's lives and the broader landscape(s) they navigate. As one student, Angel, explained:

This school is nice, you know. Like they help you with a lot of things, and they really give you more than one chance. They always go out their way to help with our grades or even if you want a job or anything they'll help you, or with an interview. Or if you wanna get your own money, they help you and everything. And they're against certain things that public schools do—that [public schools] would hate how we do here. You know, cause at regular schools, they're not gonna care about you getting money or whatever. Over there, they would rather let the cops deal with you than fix a problem. And here, they don't have cops in here. They'd rather work things out and fix things, instead of kicking kids out that really need help.

Angel's critique that schools "would rather let the cops deal with you than fix a problem" highlights the shared locomotion between schools and prisons, which use punishment and exile as "all-purpose solutions to social and economic problems" (Gilmore, 2008, p. 32). Schools operate symbiotically within this landscape by *not caring* about those

problems, instead churning *people* into problems—into "bad kids"—who can simply be disappeared. FREE's caring to help students with things like money and job interviews reflects their ongoing commitment to ensuring people's basic needs are met—not only as a precondition for learning and alternative to exile, but as a form of abolitionist care that insurgently refuses the systematic exclusion of racialized, criminalized people from the means of social reproduction (Medel, 2017).

Based on that initial recognition—that the students LA schools refused to teach live in areas most impacted by the economic dispossession racial capitalism requires—Lupita recently used her connections through YJC to organize a job program where young people get paid to come to school. Care about basic needs at FREE also exceeds formal programs, operating organically through the deeper personal relationships young people form within the space. For example, a student recently reached out to me about her housing instability. With that student's permission I contacted Ms. Tracey, FREE's main TJ counselor, who has connections to housing programs in LA, so that we could collectively create a care plan for her.

Another pivotal way FREE responds to the conditions that strategic abandonment creates is by refusing to criminalize the forms of survival it demands. Expanding on his insightful understanding of exile, Angel described another systemic pattern in "regular schools": young people being exiled for protecting themselves.

Me and [another FREE student] went to [name of high school]. He got kicked out of [there] too, because he would get there late, and they did random searches or something like that. And he had a knife...because he would walk from school to his house. And he just has it, you know, to *protect himself*. But he had it in his backpack— not even on him, but in his backpack. And they kicked him out for that. He even explained it to them, like "I live far, and I walk home. So, at times I get there late and, you know, people are out doing dumb things, so I want to protect myself." He tells [the Dean] that. The next day, they tell him he's expelled.

In contrast, FREE cares against the contours of the landscape by ensuring that young people have "safe passage." As Ms. Tracey explained to the students during orientation: "If you do feel unsafe and like you need to bring [something] with you, talk to a staff member *that you trust* and we will find an alternative. We can accommodate if you live too far...So that you can find a way to feel safe on the street, and so that we can find a way for you to feel safe here at [FREE]." FREE's peace builders pick up and drop off students at their preferred location in the school van, while teachers/staff also work to create accommodation plans for students who live particularly far.

Finally, beyond simply refusing to criminalize young people, FREE collaborates with YJC's abolitionist legal clinic to support students who do become court involved. Court support includes attending court with the student, helping build their case, posting bail, and gathering materials such as letters of support from teachers. In my experience, letter writers do not ask the facts of the case. Like YJC's support

for the broader South Central community, teachers support students unconditionally based on an abolitionist understanding that young people do not grow in cages; rather, like flowers and all other living beings, they grow in spaces where they are cared for, all the way down to the root.

Of the five students I have written letters for, all have noted that if it weren't for FREE/YJC's legal support they would likely be incarcerated. One student, Trelin, who recently had this outcome with his own case, captured the broader significance of this form of care, and its inherent movement beyond the individual, noting: "Other schools, for sure, are not going to help one of they students get bailed out of jail. And other schools don't help change laws, and change the community. Other schools don't even worry about the community." FREE's court support signifies a particularly radical departure from the terms and conditions of traditional schools that position each individual institutionally, regardless of how much they care, as an agent of the State who must cooperate with the courts in the interest of so-called "safety."

Each of the practices outlined above reflect, and extend, longstanding genealogies of abolitionist care that refuse racialized hierarchies of human life, by unconditionally "[supporting] those made most vulnerable to criminalization" (Kaba, 2017), ensuring people's basic needs are met in the face of strategic abandonment (Medel, 2017), and by repeatedly developing alternatives to the use of criminalization as an "all-purpose solution." Rather than aiming to improve performance or produce more "ideal kids," the intention of these care practices is to disrupt the disposability carceral regimes mark as inevitable, and to show up for each other as a community in the ways the State refuses to.

Thus, FREE's "open doors" are the borderless conduit(s) into a space where young people navigating overlapping landscapes of dispossession are not seen as disposable. As expert wayfinders, what the students are describing in *they actually care* is a space where they know they do not face the threat of removal, where they know they will not be further criminalized or abandoned for the ways they choose or refuse to navigate a social order predicated on their un-survivability. They are theorizing care in the form of creating (a) space where they do not have to be *something* or do *anything* in order to matter—which is to say, they matter unconditionally.

If traditional schooling and all its ideologies—of meritocracy, equality, and access, of mobility and opportunity—function only through disappearance, then what becomes legible are the abolitionist implications of a space created for and *by* those deemed least worthy of care. If it is true that within a carceral-education landscape there must always be (Black, brown, Indigenous, queer, and disabled) young people who have nowhere to go, then what emerges are the implications of a space predicated on an unwavering commitment to caring for those who are disappeared so that the traditional system can function. Rooted in students' theorizations of what it means to "actually care," what FREE's origin story—in vision and everyday practice—exposes, are the possibilities for reimagined educational spaces where no one is left behind. To "actually care" in the world young people desire means that no one needs to be thrown away. It means that young people who refuse to be governed by extractive institutions always have somewhere to go.

As its seed and soil, unconditional care emerges in, structures, and is structured by the space itself. This process can be further understood through FREE's foundations in abolition and TJ, and how these foundations create the contexts in which new forms of social organization can emerge.



By Laura Chow Reeve via VAWnet.org, 2020

Section II: Unconditional Care and the Culture of FREE: Abolition and Transformative Justice

I think the difference with FREE and YJC is being unapologetically abolitionist and transformative justice-based. That's, that's the difference from most county or

city or other nonprofit youth programs. (Emilio, personal communication, 2022)

Whereas restorative justice seeks to reconcile conflict or *restore* relationships, TJ seeks to *transform* the conditions, institutional and ideological systems, and power relationships that make harm inevitable (Kaba et al., 2021). TJ refuses victim/offender binaries, recognizing that harm is cyclical and multiscalar. Building from an understanding of violence as both interpersonal and always also systemic, TJ is not just a response to harm or an alternative to punishment, but an everyday, active transforming of the ways we relate to ourselves, one another, and the earth. And, as opposed to restorative justice, which is increasingly implemented as an “alternative” to punishment in schools and other institutions (including prisons), TJ refers necessarily to “a set of practices that happens *outside* the State” (Hassan, 2020). This difference—a crucial point for distinguishing educational reform from abolitionist departure—is reflected in FREE participants’ visions of TJ as a grounding ideology, rather than an “implemented” policy at FREE.

Ms. Tracey articulated this distinction during one “Warrior Week”: the first week of each trimester when, in addition to team building, students are introduced to (or reminded of) the mission and culture of the school. We had been sitting in what was once a courtroom. Mismatched chairs formed an imperfect circle; students cradled their backpacks between their knees, or hugged them in their laps. From the narrow doorway, you could see freshly painted murals that breathed life into the walls of the school lobby.

“The idea of transformative justice is to create change,” she began. “We are not a regular school. The *foundation* of this school, your high school, is transformative justice—which means that our goals, our missions, our *relationships are all formulated to create change*. We do not call the police here. We do not use court ‘justice,’ though we will support you if you get court involved. Calling on the police for us is like calling on the devil. What we do here is have conversations, learn how to talk when we’re angry, or learn how to talk after we cool down. Oftentimes, the courts and schools miss something, or *they just don’t care* to ask. I promise you we’ll ask what happened from your perspective” (emphasis added).

Ms. Tracey’s voice created soft waves of movement in the windowless room. After a short pause, she continued. “This is how I explain TJ love to young people,” she said. “We are not talking about romantic love. I’m talking about loving people just because they are humans. I love you because you are human. How can I work with you because you are human? Support you because you are human? TJ has compassion for what you’re going through.”

Merging her own embodied theories of TJ with a long genealogy of the tradition, Ms. Tracey captures the elements of a space whose foundation—and forms of social organization—depart from the nexus between the courts and schools, which she theorizes as bound through their demonstrations of conditional care. She explains how what

grounds these alternative forms of social organization is not only a type of radical love but, necessarily, radically alternative conceptions of what it means to be human: what it means to be worthy of care and healing, beyond and outside of anything you have done in the past or might produce in the future, or how well you can perform.

These broader interpersonal and ideological commitments of the space, as grounded in TJ, deepen a theorization of unconditional care beyond the individual, and connect students’ definitions with Black feminist genealogies of care.³ Black feminist thought has grappled with the centrality of care to colonial formations and, at the same time, its potentialities as “an antidote to violence” (Hartman, 2017). Black feminists have done the work to distinguish white feminist care—as care rooted in individualism, performed by or through the State, and in or through privatized conceptions of family—from care as (a) communal practice that builds towards something other. Including but beyond “other mothering” (Collins, 1987), Black feminist care is a deeply political framework and praxis rooted in a fundamental commitment to sabotaging present-historical structures of racial capitalism (Neely & Lopez, 2022; Nash; 2018; Sharpe, 2016)—not just the material conditions it creates, as the prior section discussed, but its terms of relationality. As opposed to individualism, as a violent mode of being and moving through the world, Black feminist care is rooted in the formation, transformation, and reorganization of *relationships*—as alternative modes of being (in community), and as antidotes to the anti-black and anti-relational project(s) of modernity (Gumbs, 2021).

This Black feminist commitment to interdependence has long envisioned and prefigured the conditions in which communal care, safety, and accountability can occur beyond the violence of carceral regimes, and explicitly challenges the exclusionary, carceral roots of white feminist care. Exemplified by the 1994 Violence Against Women Act—which “earmarked unprecedented federal funding” to “protect” victims of sexual/domestic violence through more policing, prosecution, cages, and criminalization—white feminists’ demands for “care” *through* the State has been integral to the expansion of the US prison regime (Thuma, 2019, p. 7). In contrast, both Black feminist and abolitionist genealogies of care recognize criminalization as itself a form of gendered-racial State violence inextricable from interpersonal violence (Thuma, 2019), and critique the ways carceral regimes destabilize communities by leaving the roots of harm intact, and by severing the interdependency that truly keeps communities safe. This severing occurs not only through displacement, but also through the ways carceral-capitalist logics—of fear, individualism, and disposability—shape the ways we relate to one another at intimate scales. Black feminist care asks how we can move together in new ways that uproot (the many roots of) existing carceral structures, detoxify the soil, and make the space for other worlds to flourish (Gumbs, 2021).

Ms. Tracey’s articulations of TJ as a grounding ideology of the space echo these genealogies of care in her emphasis on “relationships formulated to create change,” and in the explicit connections she draws between these relationships and FREE’s unwavering refusal to call on the police. Though her emphasis on “communicating” rather than punishing

may seem mundane, it signifies more than just an alternative to discipline. Rather, it signifies the potentialities of fugitive educational spaces, rooted in unconditional care, to exceed the terms of relationality and forms of social organization that structure and are structured by carceral logics and anti-black enclosures.

The dialogue initiated by Ms. Tracey above went on to discuss teachers' and students' experiences learning the culture of TJ, specifically through "circles:" a practice of convening in conversation, or a series of conversations, to address the root(s) of harm or conflict and collectively construct next steps so that all members' humanity is honored. While TJ is not reducible to circles, they are a meaningful lens into unconditional care for two reasons.

First, FREE's use of circles in response to conflict is another pivotal juxtaposition students draw between FREE and other schools. For many students, conflict was weaponized by prior schools as justification for their disposability, through precisely the processes of conditional care Ms. Tracey described. Second, circles are one way in which the broad theories of care articulated above—and the alternative visions of relationality and humanness they prefigure—are mobilized in practice. Rather than a singular practice, however, circles reflect and reverberate a broader praxis of care and communication that moves through and across relationships, to create a spatial context in which new forms of accountability, safety, and interdependency unfold.

Embodied Foundations: Unconditional Care in/as Praxis

Student Emani's experiences in circles artfully weave together these threads. Some weeks after the collective Warrior Week conversation described above, Emani and I had this conversation in interview:

Margaret: How do other schools deal with conflict?

Emani: Suspension.

Margaret: Like right away?

Emani: I got into a fight after school one time and I was *not* the cause of the fight. The girl hit me first and I tried to defend myself... they suspended me for two days.

Margaret: There was no conversation?

Emani: No

Margaret: So what do they do here?

Emani: It's a circle. You don't get suspended. I feel like they teach you to actually deal with your fuckin' problems and not just distance you from that person you got into a conflict with, and then come back to school with that grudge two days later, you know?

Margaret: Right. So you think that works? The circles work?

Emani: Me and [another student at FREE] we were not on the best terms when I got here. We was bumping

heads, arguing, stuff like that. But once she got here things changed. Once we had the circle things became more open, we heard each other's side and after that, you know, after a few days things aren't just great but...It gets better. One morning it's "good morning," or "oh, what's up?" you know, "you're in the same circle I'm in," I'm not even uncomfortable to walk up to her or...There's not animosity anymore. They do a lot of things different that I will say I've never had in a different schooling.

Not caring about the root of a problem leaves those roots intact, creates "distance," and makes it easier—in schools, in court rooms, and in intimate relationships—to throw people away. At FREE, unconditional care occurs in the form of creating the space, through circles, to *ask why* (brown, 2017), to hear all sides and have all sides hear each other. Emani's reflections highlight how doing so not only precludes the need for exile, refuses disposability, and prevents unaddressed conflict from festering—but, critically, generates new forms of understanding and new relationships *across difference*. Presciently, Emani frames circles not as a singular fix or "alternative" to suspension, but rather as an ongoing, untimed, and nonlinear praxis of learning to coexist. Like Emani, many students speak about circles through their rippling, pedagogical effects: as a process of learning "how to deal with our problems" in ways that foster connection, and of *unlearning* the anti-relational curriculum of carceral regimes that, in Beautiful's words, "don't nobody *care* so why just *not* talk about it."

Indicating the pervasiveness of this anti-relational curriculum, in the Warrior Week conversation above, students and teachers alike shared how difficult it was to learn to communicate, and learn to trust—not only trust each other, but a broader, more ontological trust: that people deserve another chance, and that people (including ourselves) are capable of transformation which, as Emani captured, might not happen in two hours or two days. This trust implies a fundamental recognition of *everyone's* humanity that unravels the exclusive definitions of personhood undergirding conditional care and Western epistemologies more broadly.

Circles are one practice through which these terms of relationality become woven, over time, into the very foundation of the space. As one method of holding people accountable, they perform the relational and epistemological work of Black feminist and abolitionist care, which discard hierarchies of humanness, refute "the false and damaging binaries we use to talk about [criminalized] people, like violent/non-violent and innocent/guilty" (Kaba, 2017), and seek the abolition of carcerality as it extends into our daily lives. Indeed, abolitionist care conceptualizes non-carceral forms of accountability as, in fact, one of the most radical ways we can care for one another. To hold someone accountable for the harm they caused, rather than throw them away for it, *is* to recognize their inherent value as a human being and their capacity to learn, heal, and grow. It is a demonstration of care that inherently extends beyond the individual, plunging down to the root to seek communal transformation.

Beyond circles, FREE's emphasis on trust, communication, and non-carceral accountability—as critical, relational dimensions of unconditional care—is cultivated through a broader everyday commitment to forging authentic connections, unraveling hierarchical relationships, and continuously centering support, safety, and healing over punishment. Through seemingly mundane interactions, practiced repeatedly and in collaboration, carceral forms of social organization are unlearned and uprooted, making way for an ecosystem of care that operates at the spatial scale.

Ecosystems and Curriculums of Unconditional Care

In Ms. Tracey's words, the goal of TJ is "not about correcting youth behavior," but rather *continuously* "learning the students as a community, and what they need" through everyday interactions. For example, if a student is having a rough day, staff will inform other staff (e.g., through group text) to give that student more grace and understanding, or will ask the teacher/staff with whom they have the deepest connection to go check on them. Sometimes what students need is to vent, sometimes times to eat, and other times to simply *be* in the space without being pressured to do work. By leaning on each other, and by continually moving from a place of communication and caring to ask "why," deeper forms of trust and accountability are generated—not just in the wake of conflict, but a general accountability to self, other, and the space.

Further, rather than typical power dynamics wherein "what the teacher (or cop, or judge, or adult) says goes," accountability and communication at FREE disrupt the hierarchal teacher-student relationships endemic to carceral schooling. As Ms. Tracey accurately describes, "if a student has a problem with one teacher or staff, they are *safe* to go to another staff and bring it up and resolve the issue." While students can call teachers into circle, staff also hold each other accountable in meetings and informal conversations on students' behalf. As one student, Calyfornia, recently told me in interview, FREE is not different from other schools because it is perfect; it is different because they *actually care* about how the students feel.

Bringing us full circle, this repeated emphasis on transforming carceral relationships echoes longstanding Black feminist and abolitionist commitments to building communal

networks of care (e.g., mutual aid) as a means of departure from the State. As everyday praxis, the trust and communication cultivated by/through unconditional care at FREE enables the revolutionary



Participatory defenses campaigns as abolitionist care practice

Image from campaign to Free Joan Little (1974); Source: *USPrisonculture.com*

work of understanding what safety looks like beyond punishment—what it looks like for calling on the police to become obsolete—and how we can collectively support each other in meeting those standards. Rather than a singular alternative to discipline, this vision of unconditional care demands a new relational curriculum: an ongoing process of relearning new (or reclaiming old) ways of existing together (Gumbs, 2021).

While this happens at FREE, in part, through formal trainings and orientations (like Warrior Week), it mostly occurs, in Ms. Tracey's words, by "supporting each other in the moment, *learning in real time*." My own un/learning, for example, has occurred by participating in circles and by leaning on folks with greater knowledge about TJ for advice as situations arise. For both teachers and students, this process requires turning inward: it requires evaluating the ways we perpetuate the logics of disposability in our everyday lives and intimate relationships; the ways we conflate individualized punishment with care and safety; and the ways deeply engrained assumptions and habits structure whose voices we deem valid, and whose lives we deem worthy of care. This opens broader points about the potentialities of unconditional care in abolitionist education, and for educators hoping to embody FREE's model in other schools.

Questions of Scope and Scale

The formulations of care discussed throughout this paper cannot simply be adopted as policy alternatives that respond to student behavior in new ways. Rather, they must be understood and practiced in ways that aim to restructure the very foundation of educational space, including (and perhaps especially) the relationships among students and teachers in and outside the classroom, and between educational spaces and the broader, uneven landscapes they exist within. As adrienne maree brown writes, "what we practice at the small scale sets the patterns for the whole system" (2017, p. 53). Rather than models implemented from the top-down, the potentialities for unconditional care in abolitionist education lie in, and must begin with, deep internal and interpersonal transformations that ripple outward. By prefiguring at the smallest scale the world we want to see, as abolitionists and Black feminists long have, educators and students can work collaboratively to question: What are the institutional, ideological, and interpersonal

mandates, terms, and conditions that preclude unconditional care in the specific contexts we are in? Which can be transformed at broader scales (such as school-wide policies), and which demand departure into fugitive spaces—classrooms, study groups, afterschool collectives—that exceed even as they are absorbed into the carceral-education State?

Part IV. Conclusions and Contradictions

As mentioned, this work is always unfolding and never without contradictions. Abolition is not a project of perfection, nor does it try to be; it is one of experimentation, of (honoring and learning from) process, and of working through (and understanding) *tensions* as part of the conditions of possibility for transformation. Departure from the State is complicated by many things, not the least of which is access to resources.

A primary example is ADA. Even while rejecting attendance as a metric for care and belonging, FREE's need for State funding for its own survivability means that those metrics must still be navigated—and, precisely *because* they reject attendance as a metric for care and belonging, access to resources is a barrier that at times creates gaps between what FREE would like, and is actually able, to offer. To fill in these gaps, as Section I discussed, FREE leans on its connections to YJC and other local organizations (some of which are non-profits), staff pool personal resources, and FREE/YJC continue their fight to redirect resources away from youth confinement and towards youth development in LA County. While this too entangles them, in various ways, to the State, their long-term abolitionist vision is that these entanglements, in Emilio's words, will "shift and transform, as more people are willing to take the deep dive...and be like, we don't need these systems to be able to sustain ourselves; we just need the resources to do it."

That said, departure does not by any means occur as a "clean break" at FREE. But what FREE's demonstrations of care do, are open important questions *about* departure. These questions echo what Christina Sharpe asks (us to do) as part of *wake work*. She writes:

I want, too, to distinguish what I am calling and calling for as care from state-imposed regimes of surveillance. How can we think (and rethink and rethink) care laterally, in the register of the intramural, in a different relation than that of the violence of the state? (2016; p. 20).

Using students' definitions as a map, I've aimed in this paper to read FREE as a blueprint for rethinking care "in a different relation than that of the violence of the state." In heeding their demands, it became clear that what students were capturing is not necessarily new, but rather a reclamation, a continuation, and a particular demonstration of longstanding articulations of care that exceed the State and the (always conditional) site of the individual. To reclaim or re-create these old-new genealogies is to reclaim a radical re-definition and re-vision of *who counts as human*. In their most radical potentials, these old-new genealogies might approach a decolonial care, like a decolonial love (Maldonado-Torres, 2021), as a "practice rooted outside

modernity," rooted in "the well-being of other human beings," and rooted against the "*individual* as the basis of liberal democracy."⁴ Wise theorists as they are, students' juxtapositions of these conflicting genealogies of care raise complex questions—around the limitations of reform and the possibilities for abolition, around what demands *departure* and *what is possible from within*—that educators, community members, and scholars must "think (and rethink and rethink)" collectively, collaboratively, and in ongoing conversation.

Notes

1. Likewise, "space-based" dispossession refers to forms of dispossession structurally concentrated in geographic *places*, like neighborhoods, that are also racialized (e.g., food deserts or hyper-surveillance); and to processes—like being pushed out of schools or banned from entire districts—that dictate which *bodies* are allowed to occupy, and move freely through, space.
2. All capitalism is racial capitalism, meaning capitalism requires racism (Gilmore, 2020). Understanding *racial differentiation* as central to the maintenance of global capital makes clear how people's value (e.g., who is worthy of care), and relative "vulnerability to premature death" (Gilmore, 2007), are determined by race, where race is a structure of power (Kelley, 2017), rather than an identity. Gender and race are mutually constitutive structures of power.
3. Black feminist genealogies of care are far from homogenous, and it would be impossible to describe them comprehensively in this paper.
4. I thank Dr. George Barganier for this language, which he shared in conversation in a study group as part of his personal reflections on decolonial love.

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