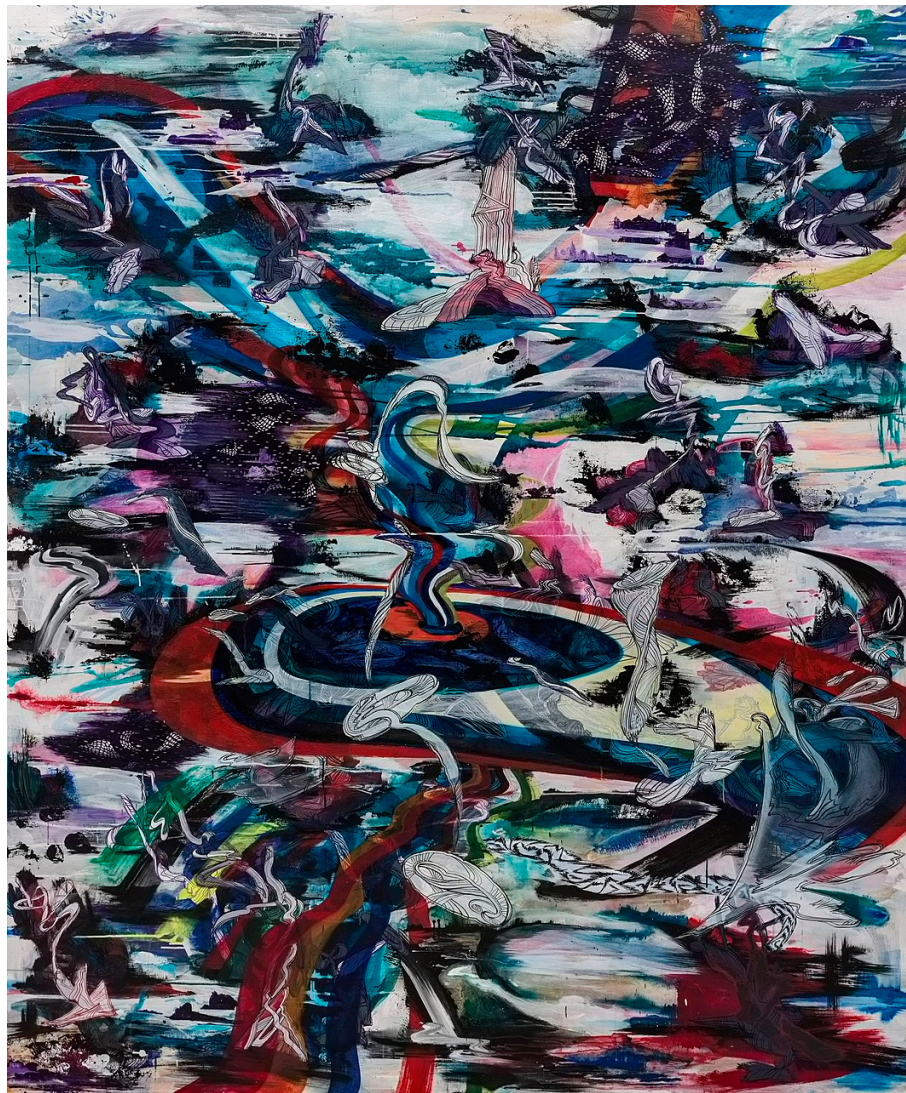


# RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

## On Complicity

by Bethany Ides



SULING WANG, CRYPTIC BUTTERFLY. SOLOMON R. GUGGENHEIM MUSEUM, NEW YORK PURCHASED WITH A SPECIAL INTERNATIONAL DIRECTOR'S COUNCIL FUND IN MEMORY OF ELAINE TURNER COOPER,. © SULING WANG

I used to play a game with students. After reading and discussing the “Docile Bodies” chapter from Michel Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish* documenting the systematic and ubiquitous measurement and management of human movement practiced, produced, and enforced across the major institutions that organize modern life – institutions like hospitals and prisons and schools that condition and order individuation as a requirement for social life under capitalism – I would turn to the class and announce that the remainder of our scheduled meeting would be dedicated to “dismantling the structures of authority” present right there, in that space, right in that moment.<sup>1</sup> This game demanded of students that they not only conceive of their immediate context as changeable, but also hypothesize about latent and emergent hegemonies therein. In order to attempt to dismantle *present* structures of authority, students must consider how *non-apparent* structures may have produced the conditions of the current classroom. Further, they must interrogate these given conditions in order to understand how structures of authority are reproduced, even without consent or conscious corroboration. The game reconfigures the classroom as a socio-political obstacle course. Reading Foucault was just the warm-up.

From outside the doorway, I’d witness some students greet this challenge with delight while others appeared worried that it was somehow a trick. Often, a confident voice would emerge, encouraging everyone to start with the furniture. It is exciting to disrupt the furniture, that which is readily moveable and which no participant has any particular claim to or special feeling for. Keeping in mind my sole caveat, that the classroom remain accessible and fire-safe, students would find ways to reject the classroom’s absorptive qualities, revealing its theatricality. Usually after 20 or 30 minutes of accelerated debate, the entire group would start to look flushed, breathless and wide-eyed. In the heat of heady investigation, every requisite seemed to reveal itself. And yet, there was no resolution; every knot was tied with strands that were themselves braided and snarled, an endless puzzle.

This game had an edge to it that might be called either optimistic, or cruel, or both. Even in reflecting on it now, I maintain a certain ambivalence about whether the effort I coaxed out of students in activities such as this was cynical, delusional, impractical, or whether to believe that what I witnessed was a group of people energizing vital and real senses for solidarity, mutuality, and political autonomy. This is the rub of acting complicitly. In order to engender possibilities for change, I must situate my provocations within a system that relentlessly expropriates those changes in order to consolidate authority.

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I picture the word “complicity” as a fibrous mass, a fabric puzzle. Its multiform dimensions can be described in terms that are either/both psychological or physical. It is imposing but also encompassing. It is supposing but also engendering. From the Latin *complicare*, to be complicit is

“to fold together.” Within complicity’s deep creases lay more tangles, snares, riddles, complications. To wrestle with complicity, one quickly becomes confused: *Which tissues are connected to muscle and nerves that are mine and which are beyond my control? Am I stuck, or is this comfort?*

To be complicit within the ethos of a modern educational institution involves becoming accustomed to its terminology and the precepts according to which it derives its significance. Concepts like “directives” and “objectives,” for instance, gain credibility (or “use-value”) within a learning environment when methods of measurement are imposed. These terms bare the traces of accountancy, efficiency, risk-assessment, and quality control. The grid of the accountant’s ledger – of temporal measurement and management systems, of micro-governance in cellular spatial division and surveillance knowledge-power technologies, described by Foucault – is effectively the prototype for every college course. As teachers, we issue and are issued schedules, rubrics, and contracts, each of which is contingent to the other, intimately entangled if not altogether collapsed.

While complicity is not, in itself, a strategy for liberative praxis, it is a mode of attention well suited to struggle. Considering complicity, my focus is sharpened on the ways that all my cumulative years of teaching experience, while helpful, also hinder me. Complicity reminds me of all that is *not* automatically refreshed when I meet a new class of students. Being entrenched as I am (both in the institution that presently employs me as well as in my own conception of myself as a professional whose reputational record cites various institutional employers), my activities are contextualized by its structure, which offers support and reasonable assurance that I am not inventing the need I (try to) meet. I’m interested in the discomfort that arises in me when I state this plainly: that I am motivated in part by a belief that I can become a better and better teacher, because that would mean that I will have masterful proficiency in the ways of the institution. It would be my tool, my instrument, an extension of myself.

I have often tarried over a peculiar phrase that Simone Weil found exciting, that she adapted to explain a kind of political being of total attachment to the world. In letters and notebooks (including selections published as *Gravity and Grace* and *Waiting for God*), Weil mentions this expression she says she learned from workers: “the trade entering the body.” In the case of an apprentice, she writes, “the tool makes you lose one mode of feeling, replaces it by another mode.” This “transference of consciousness” (Weil, 2004, p. 21) allows a person to experience an order and beauty greater than oneself (Weil, 1973, p. 132). For Weil, though, it was irrelevant whether this attachment felt like suffering, injury, or fatigue, because these sensations would affirm that connection regardless. In fact, she remarks that the expression used among workers in the trades had referred specifically to pain. Maybe feeling complicit involves a similar devotion to attention that feels at once exciting and painful.

Could complicity have potential beyond institutional growth or personal professional advancement, I wonder? I want to be imaginative about complicity as a subjunctive resource, for reconceiving a scenario as hypothetical rather than fixed. I think of José Esteban Muñoz’s delicate work

with utopian thinking as a model for this. He suggests the exercise of holding a familiar concept "in a sort of ontologically humble state, under a conceptual grid in which we do not claim to always already know" as a means of staving off "the ossifying effects" that have predominantly appropriated that same concept for oppressive ends (Muñoz, 2009, p. 22). Muñoz argues that neither utopic nor pragmatic thinking is very rational; the former because it resides in idealization, and the latter because its functionality depends too heavily on presently perceivable conditions (Muñoz, 2009, p. 30). Inasmuch as complicity's avowal of entanglement requires tending to both knowable and not-yet-knowable (or "not-yet-conscious," in Muñoz's preferred terminology) complications, perhaps it is dynamically similar to the way "multiple forms of belonging in difference adhere to a belonging in collectivity" (i.e. "utopian possibility") (Muñoz, 2009, p. 20). Which is also to say that, much like Muñoz's utopian thinking and Weil's theory of compassion, complicity is an impulse that can be observed in everyday exchanges. And, these glimpses of elegant agonies are never simple or efficient.

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Whenever I first meet a group of students, I insist that we focus on the experience of experimenting together, the event we initiate together. We begin writing and reading with intermingled voices, stirring up a flurry of ideas and giggles. We try out tactics that might feel strange, or new – or perhaps somehow not-serious-enough – and often find ourselves engrossed in discussing the stakes of what we're studying together, sometimes even before introducing ourselves. This energy – this urgency – is my workaround, my means of downplaying the drudgery of so many policies and deadlines, slots and grids. I give my courses evocative names like "Adults Playing Kids Playing Adults," "What Makes Sense," and "Para- Co-/Syn-" to demonstrate how we might meaningfully combine whimsy and earnestness in our study. Before I had to teach online (as so many of us adapted to doing, with the onset of the COVID pandemic), I would typically make some quip about how remarkable it was that we all shared a common period of time each week dedicated to our mutual investigations, and – wow, hey, look! – we even have access to this swanky Brooklyn real estate as our "club house." I need for them to know that it's not only possible, but invited, that we make a little ruckus. That this is a heads-up: we are probably going to sing and/or dance together at some point, or maybe leave all of our cell phones in a drawer and go outside to search for four-leaf clovers, and that this *need not be* a simulation of some corporate "team-building" exercise when we do this. Rather, we'll be doing something human together that we may have first learned in dreaming, that requires no training. And finally, I promise students that for as long as I'm able and as long as they'll let me, I will be wholly invested in supporting their writing process. I will enter into the process with them, offering copious feedback and insight as a colleague-mentor in a style that welcomes dynamic interchange... but that I won't grade them.

I tell students what I earnestly believe to be the case: that writing is active, emergent, and regenerative. In writing and in reading, we become capable of "reorienting our geometries of attention" (quoting my favorite turn of phrase from Joan Retallack, 2003). And, this is a renewable opportunity, with innumerable variations. Writing is continually rendering the invisible visible, so it is no wonder, really, that it has so often been considered mystical. Language marks the brink – between knowable and unknowable as well as between self and world. Language is the scene of the encounter and the evidence of it having occurred. I tell students that learning is generative, and that this mystical begetting stems from rupture. A learning process welcomes the new, which also involves reckoning with not-yet-knowing. We learners set forth from the familiar only to find ourselves in a thicket of confusion, disoriented and wondering whether the difficulty was worth the worry, sweat, ache, and toil of the foray. As a teacher, I can prepare students for this difficulty, and support them through the process by validating their feelings of frustration as informative and by helping students sustain focus, but that any apparatus that purports to render the learning process more efficient denies student autonomy; curbs critical engagement; deprives people of the exhilarating *sensation* of change-in-the-making. Things that are new can also feel frustrating in the sense that they are inefficient—that is because they haven't been managed yet. I tell them that things that are as-yet-unmanageable are *definitely* worth being curious about.

I attempt to stave off the introduction to the syllabus until I'm partly convinced that we've awakened our intuitions for sensing mutuality. If we have initiated a tone of informal discussion and enough willingness to withstand the imposition to collectivity that imposes, we might be capable of encountering such a document as at least somewhat ontologically uncertain. In the syllabus, we read the statement on grading that I have printed in place of some neatly categorized division of labor and/or affect with corresponding percentages, indicating each labor/affect's relative value:

Grading is a means of organizing relation that reverberates across so many sectors of our lives. We rate a purchase or service, we assess the value of something in dollars that may have been loved with real tears. A grade is a kind of communicational shorthand between distant educational institutions and/or workplaces. Much in the same way a ship signals to another ship over an ocean—without nuance or context—a basic message is conveyed about a person's record of success. Sometimes very much depends on a single letter or number, and it is too often the case that those who are already subject to conditions of greater precarity (in terms of socio-economic status resulting from systemic racism and colonialism, for example) find the stakes involved disproportionately high.

Typically, a grade is determined either by a pupil being judged in contrast to their peers (by establishing a kind of relative zero-point, then measuring degrees of gradation ascending or descending away from that), or according to a rubric of predetermined objectives describing an abstract expectation for excellence. While

different in their approach, these methods have much in common. Both methods are subject to bias, either by the teacher or by the conventions of correctness that the curriculum espouses. Both methods incentivize “learning the rules” and abiding by those, even if that comes at the cost of a revelatory learning experience. Both methods prioritize the product over the process, which leaves learners more prone to feelings of anxiety than feelings of wonder, enjoyment, and human connection. And, both methods depend on the idea that excellence and failure are fixed standards, suggesting that all learners’ experiences ought to fall somewhere on that quantifiable scale.

What I have found in 17+ years of teaching graduate and undergraduate students at colleges and universities across the country is that grades and learning experiences don’t match very well. I’ve worked with students who dedicated themselves so completely to piecing together a complex puzzle, or who boldly exceeded the parameters of an assignment in such a profound way that they will never forget that class, just as I will never forget their admirable verve. And yet, by the standards of grading, those same students did not always excel. That tells me that something is faulty in the system.

My goal as a teacher is to foster ambition - not carelessly, not heedlessly, but meaningfully. I want to embolden students to organize their own relation, both to the subject and also to each other as collaborative colleagues and interlocutors. With that in mind, I commit my efforts toward developing students’ thinking and writing by offering engaged feedback, posing difficult questions, and facilitating opportunities for students to identify skills they would like to sharpen. In individual meetings, I help students conceive of their work in a continuum of learning. I emphasize improvement based on how something learned in one project is applied to another. And, I ask students to be a part of the process.

This semester, I will work with each student to devise a distinctive grading strategy that both inspires and reflects intellectual rigor and artistic innovation, while also supporting the objectives of the course. Final grades will be determined with input from the student, following ongoing progress check-ins throughout the course.

In my class plan, I will allot at least 15 minutes for more general discussion, leading with questions like: *What’s resonating with you? What’s not? What do you want to challenge, clarify or confirm?* I listen and take notes, seeking language I can reiterate or reframe in follow-up questions. Then, over the course of the next hour or more, I will lead a series of writing and reading prompts, alternating individual and collaborative work, around a series of keywords: risk, order, mutuality, freedom, comfort, responsibility, flexibility, equality, and trust. We’ll explore how these ideas are interrelated and interdependent. We’ll return to our collaborative writing again and again over several weeks; rehashing, re-synthesizing, revising. We’ll annotate shared documents and create poems from phrases we find there. I’ll bring up the subjects of evaluation and support often in

discussion, both during class and in individual conversations, asking students what curiosities or concerns feel more knowable than they maybe did before. My objective is to foreground, rather than ignore, the problem of grading by insisting that we are capable of thinking and acting differently; that we can even sharpen our skills by applying the tools of literary and critical analysis to the problem. I’ll share in our final class meeting how my hopes for the class had always been to practice welcoming complexity as means of enacting heterogeneous community. I’ll ask them to keep this in mind as they become responsible members of other, future communities as well.

By the conclusion of the course, though, I will have submitted a set of grades. These grades are neither mine nor the students’, though both parties are implicated in them just as we are both conscribed by them. It is so tempting to declare that they have nothing to do with us. They represent neither our keenness nor our exhaustion. However, we would be ignoring the legacies of oppression that informed the duties we assume and the tools we are expected to use as teacher and student if we do not address them. In one-on-one conferences with students, we reflect on this conundrum. Often a student will ask me what grade they deserve, and I reply by saying that I don’t believe anyone deserves to be graded. But I do it anyway – in a way, I do. For now, I must because their credits and my paycheck depend on these marks being filed for the record that tally our extracted labor. Every semester, I do not prevent grading from occurring. So far, I have only suggested to students some ways that it might be – temporarily, provisionally – circumvented.

This paradox is not meaningless, however. Because, every semester I become more interested in the difficulties that gain prominence, become more noticeable, perhaps even more potent, by way of circumventing grading and revealing its irrelevance to genuine learning. These difficulties are worth tending to. When these mechanisms for measurement, standardization, and control are deprived of the privilege of transparency; when they are scrutinized as biopolitical technologies; when we open up and talk about these constraints and how they got here, we question their influence on our learning. We reconsider the range of affects that are natural to the act of learning.

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By late-fall of 2020, barely halfway through the first full semester of conducting class solely online, everyone was already inured to the negligible difference between “synchronous” and “asynchronous” instruction, or the fact that both options essentially indicated the same terminal lack of co-presence. Our meetings had been marked and mired by so many colluding forces of alienation. I led the students through a workshop in which we returned to Saidiya Hartman’s prologue to *Lose Your Mother* and Mónica de la Torre’s poem, “How to Look at Mexican Highways,” which they had all just read during the week prior. In small groups, students experimented with placing fragments and passages from these texts into dynamic, poetic

arrangements with fragments and passages from Audre Lorde's "How I Became a Poet" (from *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*). I urged them to "think of it like a jigsaw puzzle left out on a table that everybody has access to, except there is no one 'right' way to solve the puzzle. This is not work you can do all in one sitting or all at the last minute," I reminded, asking them to keep the shared doc open in a tab that they'll return to often throughout the week.

Interspersed within these re-configurations of Lorde, de la Torre, and Hartman, I asked them next to insert their own annotational commentary. As I did not specify any specific stylistic parameters for this, students developed their approaches to writing in this complexly collaborative voice of intermingled valences. Some color-coded the textual voices to distinguish these from their own. Some groups seemed to embrace a more unified poetic tone, while others embraced rupture.

I wanted to engage the past, knowing that its perils and dangers still threatened and that even now lives hung in the balance.

You are not going anywhere

The use of "you" with short imperative sentences slows you down as if you were actually stuck in traffic.

In case someone is waiting for you, you can always explain

the delay later.

Stay there a bit longer; remember no one is waiting for you.

Blame it on the traffic, no one else knows that you chose to walk.

There is a conflict between not going anywhere and walking to see somebody late and "in case someone is waiting for you" and "no one is waiting for you", which made me confused at the first second. Also, the tone de la Torre used in this poem is urging, especially with the numbers through the poem; it feels to me like an order check-list.

purpose to their movement.

Desire is a Federacy.

I don't really understand this sentence in the poem. It feels to me a bit wired to fit in this poem but also perfectly fit in the poem.<sup>2</sup>

I nuzzle against her sweetness, pretending not to hear.

I think this the sentence below transitions well in terms of its connotations from "sweetness" to "flowers".

With Flowers growing out of them

With Cactuses growing out of them

\* \* \* \*

Old and New worlds stamped my face

I was the proverbial outsider. My customs belonged to another country

I am a reflection of my Mother's secret poetry as well as her hidden angers

With the thought of being a portion of our parents, our identity is something that has to be built on by the foundation of your parents but something that has to be ours.

Contrast between two areas of childhood memory: beauty in her mother's "secret poetry", anger and fear within her "hidden angers"

I often imagined that the singer Johnny Hartman was my father because we shared the same last name

Interesting connection between the above four excerpts with family, nostalgia, generational trauma, etc.

Our interests are what makes a person, It's what drives our interest.

There is a purpose to their movement

No one is waiting for you.

Through the rails you will see stories unfolding on the street.

"Through the rails" - Rails usually guide or connect a person to the ground. Sort of contrasting the ideal of being free to find one's identity.

Somehow all the cousins knew that Uncle Cyril couldn't lift heavy things because of his "bam-bam-coo"

"...and the intimacy of our physical touching nestled inside of the anxiety/pain like a nutmeg nestled inside its covering of mace."

No one is waiting for you.

I had come to Ghana in search of strangers

Neither blood nor belonging accounted for my presence

In what sense(s) are blood and belonging the same in this context? Does blood (ancestry, family) hold a role in one's belonging here?

The euphemisms of body were equally puzzling

The sensual content of life was masked and cryptic but attended in well-coded phrases.

\* \* \* \*

Stop it

No one is waiting for you.

You're not going anywhere

2.1. Water towers

Look down

[2.1.]It was late spring because my legs felt light and red

colorful and confusing

Pay attention

[2.1.]Who else sported vinyl in the tropics?

If there's too much pollution, look down again.

A melancholia I would never be able to overcome

Brooklyn brogue

My studied speech

Euphemisms of the body

No one else knows

Secret relationship with words

Pretending not to hear

But much more comfortable

Neither blood nor belonging

Disappointment awaited me

They are one plus one, indefinitely.<sup>3</sup>

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This somewhat oblique approach to teaching techniques of close reading and analysis is, as I understand it, intrinsic to the overall project of endeavoring to foreground a struggle with a more pervasive pattern of resignation and disaffection that grading functions to perpetuate. I want to embolden students to enter into a discourse that is essentially social and interdependent, that doesn't revert back to conventions of private property ownership. I teach how canonization operates by conferring value to the few who extract from the many, to dominate narrative authority. Teaching against the grain of grading can entail compiling a curriculum entirely of writers who use she/her or they/them pronouns, the majority of whom are people who would be termed "minorities" by conventional canons, and not fetishizing demography by drawing extra attention to this, but rather offering that these are important texts that will advance our pursuit of the questions posed in the course description: "What must I risk in order to conceive of things differently, and is that risk worthwhile? What must first be considered stable and secure in order for experimentation to happen effectively? Does a willingness to imagine things differently distract from seeing things as they are?"

Back in the Zoom session that functions as a just-barely-usable-enough prosthesis for a class, we have dipped into Yoko Tawada's poly-translational text, "Akzent," and lingered with the pleasant senses for variation that it welcomes. To close this particular class meeting, I proposed a strategy for de-centralized conversation. I said (according to my notes): "As we continue our theme of returning and tracing the roots of a matter in order to figure out how we might do things differently, I want to invite reflection about the kind of belonging that's involved in being a student. How your history informs your understanding of that." Then, I read a series of prompts aloud, and in the chat log students posted their responses in a quiet ruckus:

What characteristics define being a student?

Obey

Humble

Messy-Organized

Balance

Community, shared sense of purpose and belonging, shared challenges relating to work, pressures

Polite

thirst

tutor and taught

"Being a student" is a weird idea, I think, because considering that attending school is a legal necessity, it's almost like "student" has the implication of being a life stage. "Students" in my head, are youths attending school, but this does not require that a student be necessarily "studious".

Expectation

Organized

## When do you feel most like a student?

Intellectual independence

(re)acquiring knowledge

To question

Honest

Leading Leader

learning on my own

Curiosity

When I'm pursuing an interest independently

Peers

Independent in the sense that it was chosen as opposed to assigned.

Being a student is also being categorized as unskilled, no matter what level of student you are. There's always a slight negative to learning... despite the most positives

Growing connections

Keeping some sort of consistency/routine

## What motivates your curiosity?

passing of time

Personal passions

Emotional impulse. It sort of naturally develops as a result of whatever I'm consuming.

learning helps give me resources to inform someone else

abstract goals

Success

boredom

Recognition

pressures

Achievement

acknowledgement of progress

## What about being a student incentivizes passivity or inhibits self-motivation?

the societally constructed importance of a degree

Wavering risk to reward chances

Fear of failure

Thinking about life after school

Comparison

Peer pressure

expectations of what to gain

expectations in general

the idea that you need to understand at first try

What you want to learn and what you actually learn

I don't think that being told you must study something creates the same sense of urgency as when you want to know. Looking at things you don't care about can feel like wasted time

I wonder if my perception of the word "student" may have been diverted from its initial meanings. I feel being a student should mean being a person that longs for knowing things that are yet unknown to the person itself. But now I just feel like rushing in works and meeting deadlines became the whole purpose of "being a student". I felt like the pressure of work and the consequences comes with it-degree, jobs, has taken the joy and the initial incentive. The by-product of education has replaced the initial meaning of studying.<sup>4</sup>

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What's going on in this exchange? Are these insights evidence that this group of students trust each other and me enough to be reasonably assured that their sentiments of wariness and anxiety will be believed and not held against them? That their expressions of aspiration will be embraced? Are they feeling generally assured that our discourse allows room for *not being* sure? What might these students be holding back? What else might they be willing to posit if they trusted me and each other more, despite being situated as we are within an institutional framework that attempts to depersonalize feelings of trust?

I tend to look for correlations to the problems I'm pondering in everything I see and read and listen to, to an

almost apophenic extent, especially when a semester is in session. I listen to the podcast, *Ear Hustle*, recorded both inside and outside San Quentin State Prison, which is hosted by formerly incarcerated people, currently incarcerated people, and a former volunteer who taught in the prison for several years. Each episode must be approved by the exceedingly friendly sounding Public Information Officer whose warm tone betrays his allegiance to the podcasters as his commentary affirms that he understands himself to be doing good work by being affiliated with the podcast. I think about these various roles – which do I understand myself electing to play within the institution of academia, and how does that conception of myself contrast with how I am interpellated by it? In which instances am I known or knowable as the Information Officer? In which instances do I picture myself as virtuous as a volunteer? When do I act as though my consent were inconsequential, or evade my own complicity in a system by imagining myself as one whose power was as compromised as an archetypal prisoner? And, why do I pretend sometimes *not to know* what it is like to fail a course; or, to meet with the Dean seeking help when a student who wrote a fictional story about me being raped (which he then requested that I read aloud on his behalf in front of the class) was now following me around campus; or, to be denied access to counseling when a friend was murdered by another student; or, to be asked by a professor whether I was aware that someone he understood to be my boyfriend (he was) had submitted a psychotically incoherent tirade about me instead of a final paper? (I wasn't aware, but it didn't surprise me to hear. And, as a professor now myself, I have often wondered how that professor could acknowledge that I was in danger, and yet conveniently, immediately absolve himself of helping me access any help. As a student, I still had no idea that help from sexual violence and abuse was available, let alone mandated under Title IX.)

My own college experiences were traumatic, and perhaps extremely so, but I've been reminded of these memories so many times when similar events occurred in the lives of the students I work with. And yet, I catch myself conveniently assuring myself sometimes, thinking: *Well, I got through it and so will they*. But, what about the traumatic events situated within the educational arena that I have no experiential reference for? I am a white cis-woman who attended only private schools. It is fair for me to evaluate with some certainty, given the makeup of my MFA cohort for instance, that it's very unlikely I would have been admitted into graduate school at all, despite having dropped out of college with no bachelors degree, if I did not present to the world this way and if I did not have the confidence/entitlement-of-privilege that led me to apply for an MFA anyway. I may have *gotten through* not passing a course, but I can't be so sure about students who navigate the system without the benefits that I have. For these, among so many reasons, it's important that I examine how grading operates similarly to policing in terms of who we teachers are "serving" and what we are "protecting" when we act as agents of that system.

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Inasmuch as grading is an administrative obligation, it reflects an entire historical ethos of the state's deployment of rights and conferring of value to that which is legible and usable by it. Grading is a menial task that requires little skill. Instead, it requires a tacit acceptance of criteria for merits and demerits, and an obliging attitude about standardization inherited from British imperial education. It requires that the teacher be amenable to the industry-consciousness that the eminently scalable enterprise of instruction and evaluation perpetuates. The division of skills detailed in a typical grading rubric reflects the same division of labor that so pleased Sir Thomas Bernard when he wrote in 1809 that "the principle in schools and manufactories is the same" (Hager, 1959, p. 166).

Historians Keith Hoskin and Richard Macve observe that while pre-modern techniques for assigning calculable value to human intelligence (and human life) engendered the idea of "book-keeping" on pupils, educational discipline culminated in the elaborate system of rules, punishment, and rewards in the monitorial instruction system designed by Andrew Bell and Joseph Lancaster at the turn of the nineteenth century. "The mark [or grade] is a construct, like examination itself, which seems so self-evident once invented that its prior absence is perplexing," the authors observe (Hoskin & Macve, 1986, p. 126). Although a grade/mark is *not* fundamental to the process of reviewing or testing knowledge, its insertion into the educational sphere would seem to retroactively insist the opposite. Hoskin and Macve suggest that the grade's genesis belongs just as much to the history of business accountancy as it does to education practice. Profitability is activated at this intersection, they argue, and is thereafter disseminated as a principle in both sectors (Hoskin & Macve, 1986, p. 127).

Cultural anthropologist Marilyn Strathern describes a larger pattern of "the conflation of measures and targets" in higher education. Markers of academic quality are essentially self-referential. An institution assesses its own assessment procedures according to the degree to which one model conforms to the aim of its predecessor. The exercise of the audit is ubiquitous in academic culture, Strathern observes. Diverse and conflicting aims may be "the engine of intellect," but the modern educational institution demands over-simplified consensus in order to function, precisely *because* it is in the business of standards, and standards must be unified in order to be operable. Within such a system, external agency preempts internal agency. Strathern imagines producing insights that can only be excavated "when the context is right" – "delayed reaction comprehension" – so as to subvert the ever-present expectation to immediately quantify and qualify one's intellectual labor (Strathern, 1996).

Within a culture of quality standards and standardization, the threat of failure is ever-present for all involved. Any teacher who has promised herself that she will never again submit to the needless humiliation of reviewing course evaluation scores already knows that "constant examination and constant marking together maintain and maximise value from the present into the future, while they maintain and maximise disciplined work and workers along

the same continuum" (Hoskin & Macve, 1986, p. 129). The teacher is under no illusion that her pedagogical practice might be meaningfully improved from the information implied in these numeric ratings. Rather, these outgrowths of constant examination's constant acceleration make clear that there is constant demand to render her efforts reducible and calculable. So, the teacher learns to adapt to the constant noise of "quality control" as she also earnestly attempts to attune herself more attentively to the qualities of learning processes. In order to interrogate the technologies for consolidating and expropriating knowledge-power that teachers and students are both subject to, she must imagine these structures as potentially dismantle-able. She must conceive of her efforts as hypothetical at the same time that she considers them practical. This sense of precarious complicity is animated in the cognitive dissonance between the rhetoric and the reality of private, for-profit education. It is borne of resistance, of complaint, and synthesized by the acknowledgement that, as Sara Ahmed put it, "to locate a problem is to become the location of a problem" (Ahmed, 2017).

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When, in 2019, multidisciplinary scholar and writer Stefano Harney gave his entire class of 169 business students "A"s, Singapore Management University recognized this data as "bogus." Harney said that he was in a position to do so because, having already been informed that his contract would not be renewed, he did not fear further consequences from the school (Koay, 2019, referencing original article in *The Straits Times*). While I'm not suggesting his actions were heroic, they certainly function to expose another aspect to this biopolitical technology, which is authenticity. It is so easy to become inured to the assumption that an accredited educational institution represents an implicit social good, and further, that it is itself a purveyor of legitimacy! But these grounds for Harney's termination ("bogus" grades) serve to remind how pervasive that subtextual dictum really is. The university's declaration establishes that an *authentic* grade authenticates calculable performance, reproduces individuation. More interestingly, the grade's authenticity would also seem to be proprietary to the institution, the product that must not be tampered with. We employees of the academic industrial complex need not ask the institution exciting questions like "*what counts as a grade?*" because we already know that what counts is the counting.

We guard access to value much more so than knowledge. Inasmuch as "organizations can be considered as modes of attention," as Sara Ahmed suggests – that "what is attended to can be thought of as what is valued, [meaning that] attention is how something comes into view (and other things do not)" – it becomes clear how important this power to authenticate is to the way an educational institution arbitrates what is perceivable (Ahmed, 2012, p. 30). Systems of so-called "un-grading" that mandate students perform calculation procedures on their own learning (i.e. "grade themselves") only serve to obscure

disciplinary structures from view. Just as institutionalized diversity work has historically operated by way of a similar optic corrective, by "generating the 'right image,'" as Ahmed puts it, to replace the wrong one, the effect is to make grading seem more palatable. It is a stopgap with disastrous implications. For students, a simulation of empowerment is temporarily achieved by reifying the authoritarian role of the accountant as the student is made to temporarily assume this role, even though no real autonomy has occurred. This is the same method that has been deployed in institutional diversity work, to "change perceptions of whiteness" such that it "exists but is no longer perceived" (Ahmed, 2012, p. 34). The reframing has not altered either the viability of the technology nor its effect. Ahmed notes that "inhabiting whiteness (...) can be a survival strategy to learn how to not see it, to learn not to see how you are not reflected back by what is around" (Ahmed, 2012, p. 35). This is not the same as being somehow inured to whiteness or other similar methods of hegemonic authentication. We may be officially and unofficially constantly alerted to the institution's voracious attentiveness, but we cannot concede our own experience of being affected by it.

Harney and his frequent collaborator, Fred Moten, have recently been revisiting their influential 2013 book, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study*, in online lectures and discussions. "Radical complicity," they argue, is necessary in acknowledging the "increasing number of unseen accomplices" working cooperatively within the academic environment. In radical complicity, Harney explains, "we know that we can only leave together, because whatever wealth we have, whatever means of production we have, we only hold those in common" (Moten and Harney, 2020).

Video recordings of conversations with Moten and Harney – public conversations with each other or separately, which seem to be part of the writing and thinking process for the collaborators – have become touchstones in the discussions I have with teachers and students, people I meet within the educational institutional sphere. There is one video of Fred Moten visiting the Woodbine experimental hub and mutual aid collective in Queens in 2018 that I have watched so many times that I can almost recite it. I've transcribed long sections of it, starting and stopping the streaming player, slowing down the rate of information so I can crawl into its interstices. In it, Moten insists that complicity "that *can go either way*, is the point." I try to write through this, to intersperse my reading of his lines with annotations and remarks written with my own collaborator, in the same way I asked the students to do.

In conversation, tending to shifts and response,  
and there's a different valence,

all the ways we find ourselves reoriented by desire to understand, to happen upon that peculiarity as it is happening to us.

even though the university is all fucked up and you know it, *you found your own*

*individual way through this shit* that allows you *not to be* complicit. Well, what we been thinking – and Stefano, especially – is like, *no*, that desire

for some kind of individualized avoidance of complicity is false.

How do we feel when we feel like "school?"

*my capacity to literally own the conditions of my labor and set those conditions are under such duress, and now I'm just going through the motions, I hate it*

I could say, "transform the transformer,"

a mode of *being-with* people in some sort of condition of sharing that *can go either way*, is the point.

How, justice has always been "transformative," just not in any sort of egalitarian or positivist, let alone liberative, sense.

I could write, "decolonize the colonializer,"

some individualized flight

but then I am only writing words as if their meaning were conferred by abstract images, dislocated from social histories.

the study of what people call alienation.

Neutralize the neutralizer,

alienation that manifests itself in that moment of:

Frictionless the frictionless.

I heard Fred Moten talking about how alienation probably always precedes our recognition of it. How in retrospect, we notice that it was present in the very same kernel

that the initial impetus to teach/aid/cooperate came from.

How, that ambition to learn together in some kind of radical way was always bound up with the

inevitable romanticism of radicality. How radicality feels urgent, and how

easy it is to become recklessly compelled by that feeling of suddenly being impervious to whatever might seem unsurpassable to everyone else. Radicality has a way of making us

feel so gloriously exceptional.

Because none of this shit is livable.

To amplify the "we all" that can't be abandoned

To un-use: a prospective pedagogy that actively resists reproducing means/methods of valuation.

In fact, it's better to just deepen the fucking complicity.

To become porous, which is to say social, moving, mingling, shifting, intuitive, abductive, continuous.

and figure out how to do this shit different, OK? (Ideas & Rafiei, 2022, with Moten, 2018).

\* \* \* \*

What I've been figuring out about fostering a learning community in a way that intensifies a possible condition of *immeasurability* is that it is *necessarily* complex and inefficient. It requires a willingness to not make sense, or to resist the probable, which can often feel absurd. I keep Isabelle Stengers's warning in mind, about acting in accordance with "the irresistible nature of unbounded capitalism as if that were our immutable destiny" (Stengers, 2017). I try to remind myself that whatever sense is made by doing things differently may not yet be noticeable within the atmosphere of this pervasive ideology. When coercive tactics are suspended, the emphasis shifts from product to process. Though I give reasons for why there are benefits to a class staying together at about the same pace, reading texts with the expectation that others are reading them too, work is not always submitted "on time." Without impersonal rules to enforce this, motivation can occur more relationally. If I notice a student is participating with less vim, I'll write them an email to say that I believe that the work they're doing is deeply meaningful, and that I anticipate it being a joy to read when I get to do that. I must also remind myself that this is possible, this joy. I have taken to avoiding a "pro/con" style of identifying a text's usability or an author's worth by instead asking (myself or others): what kind of pleasure does this present, what kind of difficulty? I frame matters as "puzzles," in part to remind myself to be patient.

The truth is that I am in no rush for the puzzle of grading to be solved because I worry that attempting to do so too convincingly or proficiently would be ultimately just as convenient. Occasionally a colleague asks what I would prefer, and I have trouble describing the picture in my mind. It is fibrous and multiform. It is outdoors, with games and rituals and reams of literature to nestle into. It happens in real-time.

## NOTES

1. I am grateful to David Buuck, who first taught me the general parameters for this "game" and whose phrasing I borrow here.
2. Here, it is likely that the student intended the word "weird"; however I'm interested in how the imagery of circuitry introduced by the word "wired" illuminates correlations between "federation" and the poem's own assemblage that a reader might not have otherwise

insinuated. If this line is wired to fit the poem, is it the reader's desire to defer to the poem's authority that necessitates this fix? And, what other desires are supplanted as a result?

3. These are samples of collaborative texts collectively composed by small groups of 3 - 4 students during the week of October 6 - 13, 2020. Lines from works by Mónica de la Torre, Saidiya Hartman, and Audre Lorde are shown collaged, interspersed with lines by students. My guiding prompt for this activity asked that students set the passages from the texts and their own annotations to the texts "into conversation with each other."
4. I have removed the names of the student contributors to this chat log generated during a class conducted online over the Zoom platform, October 13, 2020. Spaces between remarks indicate separate contributors.

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