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Racial Control and Student Labor

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Abstract

The exploitation of labor has occupied a central role in historical analysis of race and racism. But when considering schooling as a site of institutional racism, the exploitation of student labor is seldom taken seriously. This is even more surprising given the extent to which schooling—in particular K–12 public education—is organized around the efficient extraction of student work, and the amount of thought that goes into maximizing productivity, achievement, and success. In this paper, I discuss schooling in two ways: as an institution of racial control and as a structure of labor exploitation. I first review problems with dominant scholarship dealing with economic reproduction in schooling before highlighting the historical dimensions of schooling as a site of racial labor exploitation. Next, I describe the utilities (corporate and social) of student labor in contemporary racial capitalism. Finally, I suggest that looking at schooling as a site of labor exploitation, enables us to locate a "general strike" —that is, the ways in which students of color refuse and disrupt the daily operations of an oppressive structure. Such an analysis encourages teachers to reimagine classroom management to: (a) read student disruption and refusal as a radical and political move toward freedom, and (b) cede the means of production of schooling to the students themselves. This is necessary, I argue, to produce a truly transformational and liberatory educational space.

Keywords: race, schooling, labor, Marxism, social reproduction

> Think of Slavery
> as
> Educational!
>
> —Amiri Baraka, "Y The Link Will Not Always Be 'Missing' #40"

> ...the greater this product, the less is he himself. The alienation of the worker in his product means not only that his labour becomes an object, an external existence, but that it exists outside him, independently, as something alien to him, and that it becomes a power on its own confronting him. It means that the life which he has conferred on the object confronts him as something hostile and alien.

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—Marx, "Estranged Labour"

I take Imamu Amiri Baraka's (2014) call above in three related ways. First, Baraka's poem suggests that the history of slavery is instructional. Chattel slavery, the economic system predicated on the ownership of humans as legal property to be bought, sold, and consumed, represents an enduring archetype of racial oppression that maintains relevance today. Mass incarceration, police violence, and ghettoization are all directly linked to the economic and racial hierarchies established through chattel slavery. Slavery represents a point of origin from which race relations unfold; living, surviving, and resisting in the wake of slavery thus requires attention to the resonance between the plantation and contemporary methods of racial control.

Second, we can think of racial control as pedagogical—something taught, learned, and internalized. During the period of chattel slavery in the United States (U.S.), the white planter class paid a great deal of attention to the question of how best to "educate" enslaved Africans to better serve the white supremacist economy. This education included "seasoning camps," religious instruction, didactic parables, ghost stories, and more. The spectacular violence of the plantation was instructive by design and meant to deter any subversion or revolt by means of example. In other words, enslavement required related *pedagogical* systems to ensure control over the captive workforce.

Third, Baraka's poem can be taken in the context of his ongoing struggles on and around schooling. A staunch advocate for Afrocentric education, Baraka was one of the leaders fighting for community control during the infamous Newark teachers' strike from 1970-1971 (Murphy, 1990). His poem is consistent with this work. Identifying schools as an extension of racial and colonial oppression is common within critical education studies (De Lissovoy, 2012; Sojoyner, 2016; Stovall, 2016), sociology (Blume Oeur, 2018; Patel, 2013), Black studies (Dumas, 2016), and Native studies (Grande, 2004). Indeed, the impulse to characterize schooling as an ongoing form of racial oppression has a deep historical precedent: from Native boarding schools (Adams, 1995; Jacobs, 2009), to industrial schools (Spivey, 1978), to failed desegregation (Bell, 1980; Harris, 1993). Baraka (2014) articulated the oppressive dimensions of racialized schooling in his poem, "The Education of the Air": "Sometimes they will imprison you in paper or words, or sometimes/They will imprison you inside yourself. Where you be screaming but/Cannot hear yourself" (p. 420). In other words, schooling in a white supremacist society can constitute a form of psychological captivity. The student in Baraka's poem is imprisoned by the tools of school (paper or words). Furthermore, the process of education depicted here is one of total alienation, whereby the student no longer knows their body or can hear their own voice. Schooling is thus contextualized in the arsenal of racial/colonial control. I take Baraka's overlapping representation of schooling, slavery, and captivity in three ways: (a) a heuristic for describing racial oppression, (b) a pedagogy of racial supremacy, and (c) an analytic for understanding schooling as a site of oppression and disempowerment.

In this paper, I follow Baraka's framework for understanding schooling and examine public schooling as a site of exploitation and violence through the heuristic of labor. As

Ferguson (2000) explained in her landmark ethnography:

> School is a workplace. ... The work of school is compulsory labor: children must, by law, attend school. They have no control over the materials they work with, what they produce, the nature of the rewards for their exertions and performance. (p. 165)

Ferguson further explained that student engagement with the work of school is almost entirely non-consensual. The lack of agency in the relation between students and that which they produce elicits Karl Marx's configuration of "alienated labor," or workers who do not reap the product of their work. What happens, as Marx (1844/1975) asked generally of labor, when schoolwork becomes "a power on its own confronting" (p. 272) the student?

Schoolwork is typically not understood as a form of" labor" in the Marxian sense. It does not result in the immediate production of commodities or the expropriation of surplus-value. The teacher in the classroom cannot be thought of as a "capitalist" insofar as there is no accumulation, expansion, or self-valorization of capital. Rather, the work performed by students is not for profit (at least not directly) but falls within the sphere of "reproductive labor": the work that constantly reproduces the initial conditions necessary for capitalist expropriation. While schoolwork as such is not a commodity (at least not in an immediate sense), students and educators are actively engaged in the process of (re)producing a workforce; this process is essential to the actual operation of capitalism.

As I consider both the racialized dimensions of Baraka's arguments and the labor-focused arguments of Marx, I situate student labor in the conceptual framework of racial capitalism, an analysis of capitalism that recognizes the necessity and inherency of racialization to the operation of capital. I first examine traditional Marxist accounts of schooling, highlighting the failure to consider the racialization of labor. Furthermore, I discuss the historical dimensions of racialized labor in public schooling, calling attention to schooling as a profitable and productive venture. From this historical background, I articulate contemporary dimensions of labor exploitation and the enduring function of Black youth as sources of profit (both corporate and social). I hold out hope for a democratic, student-centered, community control of education, and point to the myriad ways that freedom and resistance is enacted by students daily. Reframing *classroom* management as a question of *labor* management gives way to the "strike" as an analysis of resistance within schooling. This analysis encourages teachers to move beyond punitive and retributive methods of classroom control and to recognize "misbehavior" in terms of its political meaning. Recognizing student labor for what it is allows educators to cede the means and fruits of production back to the worker, the stakes and scope of which I discuss in the final section.

Race, Schooling, and Reproductive Labor

The U.S. system of schooling has conceptually organized the discourse of "schoolwork" or student labor as an inherently beneficial process. The product of this labor is rearticulated through euphemisms like "achievement," "success," "proficiency," and "mastery," which ultimately disguise the relationship between schooling and capitalism. This characterization of schools comes specifically from the social functionalist brand of

sociology and argues that schools are "socializing institutions designed to provide students with the values and skills necessary for them to function productively in the larger society" (Giroux, 1980, p. 225). However, the social functionalist characterization of schoolwork fundamentally fails to recognize the different ways in which labor is socialized across different schools and populations. As scholars like Henry Giroux (1981), Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis (1976), Michael Apple (1979), Pierre Bourdieu (1986), and Jean Anyon (1980) have emphasized, schools reproduce—however imperfectly (Apple, 1980)—larger economic and cultural conditions, and socialize students into very different economic positions. In other words, human capital is not developed evenly across a student body, but rather follows the larger social and political conditions determining who is deserving of human capital and who is not, thereby reproducing the workforce and the social relations of worker/capitalist.

Jean Anyon (1980), in an ethnographic study of three schools and student bodies of different economic backgrounds, described a "hidden curriculum" of social class as:

> knowledge and skills leading to social power and reward (e.g., medical, legal, managerial) …made available to the advantaged social groups but…withheld from the working classes, to whom a more 'practical' curriculum is offered (e.g., manual skills, clerical knowledge). (p. 67)

This phenomenon occurs for several interconnected reasons including teachers' perceptions of students' abilities, lack of materials or funding, class sizes, and different levels of access to extracurriculars, to name only a few. Kathleen Kesson (2004) described how this hidden curriculum was also racialized, looking at the conditions of a primarily Black school in East Harlem. Indeed, schools serving primarily Black and Brown students often lack playground equipment, science labs and technology, up-to-date textbooks, field trips, basic classroom materials, transportation, and frequently face larger environmental hazards (Fleischman & Franklin, 2017). Kesson asked,

> Are these children being prepared, even in the first grade, for a life of mundane, repetitious labor or for service on the front lines of the military, like so many of their brothers, sisters, mothers, fathers, aunts, uncles and cousins? (p. 59)

My citation of Kesson is not meant to cast any stigma on or devalue low-paying work, nor to glorify managerial positions. Rather, it is to suggest that the material disparities in education spaces are not guided by a particular orientation to vocation but to socialize a structure of the managerial class (exploiter) and the low/no-wage underclass (exploited).

Whereas the concepts of hidden curriculum and social reproduction have been widely articulated as aspects of schooling within the Marxist strand of educational scholarship, there remain two outstanding issues.[2] The first problem is the tendency to frame schooling

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[2] Though it can be taken as a "lowering of expectations," I would argue that technical and vocational education can constitute a more empowering and liberating educational experience, for several reasons. First, placing a higher value on labor refuses the classist hierarchy of manager/managed. Second, technical and vocational education affords practical and material skills to community members—this is necessary for the full realization of any "'community control"' or "'community self-governance"'. Third, it satisfies Carter G. Woodson's (1933/1990) criteria for an empowering education: learning to make a living. Technical and vocational

as a kind of black box of social and economic reproduction. This tendency is especially prevalent in literature on the correspondence theory of reproduction, which posits that schools will merely mirror and reproduce existing social and class structures. These arguments fail to take school as both a site of labor and output and a structuring force upon (rather than an effect of) the means of production. When the labor of students is taken to be mere preparation for "adult" labor, the actual process of alienation is obscured.[i] As Marx (1844/1975) observed, labor is not under the control of the worker, the worker "only feels himself outside his work, and in his work feels outside himself. He feels at home when he is not working, and when he is working, he does not feel at home" (p. 274). Schooling represents an initial point of alienated labor. Students learn to work through working and thus operate under the analytical category of "the worker" in the Marxist worker-capitalist distinction.

The second issue, pertinent to a good deal of Marxist educational scholarship, is the erasure, minimization, essentialization, or oversimplification of the role of race and racism as it relates to class and class struggle (Robinson, 1983). The essentialized categories of "worker/capitalist" in much Marxist literature serve to negate the distinctions in identity between workers, and thus erase forms of domination that are not strictly and reducibly class based. Though Anyon (1980) did not deny the existence of other structures of exploitation, her study reified a raceless idea of class through its exclusive focus on white students. This "race neutral" class analysis has been the cue for a great deal of Marxist critiques of schooling and, indeed, most political Marxism in the U.S. (Du Bois, 1913; Robinson, 1983). Just as some Marxists essentialized class relations to the point of negating other forms of exploitation, it is misleading to address class in schools without thinking of race at the same time—this is true when analyzing monoracial white communities as well (Roediger, 1991).

The culmination of these two conceptual problems has resulted in scholarship that: (a) fails to apply the analytic of labor to school settings, (b) considers labor but only as it pertains to adults, or (c) essentializes categories of worker/capitalist to the point of negating other structural forms of exploitation. Research on the "achievement gap" and School-to-Prison Pipeline (STPP) frequently falls into the first and second categories; even through disrupting disciplinary structures in schools, many scholars fail to address the underlying assumptions that have produced hyper-disciplined institutions—critically, what is "achievement"? Trying to "close disparities in achievement" without questioning the underlying structure of labor occludes the creative and determined ways kids of color refuse and undermine the exploitative conditions of schooling. By failing to consider labor as an analytic applicable to children, this second category does not capture the active means of profit and exploitation that defines economic and social reproduction. In other words, the ways in which "success" and "achievement" are given meaning by "productivity" and "labor" are ignored. The third category—essentializing class and ignoring other power dynamics—is specific to Marxist critiques of schooling and has become less common as Critical Race Theory has grown in popularity, although the early and eclipsing presence of "race neutral" Marxist analysis like that of Bowles and Gintis, Anyon, and Bourdieu has left a lasting effect on sociology and critical pedagogy.

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education can thus provide students a deeply empowering orientation to the future and their own capability.

The Historical Evolution of Student Labor

Considering race in the calculus of social and economic reproduction is imperative for an accurate representation of the role schooling plays in a white supremacist/capitalist society. Any useful analysis of school-based economic socialization and the nature/performance of student labor must consider the vital relationship between race and labor. Furthermore, it is important to note the peculiarities of anti-Black racism and its relationship to capital and ownership. As Ronald Judy (1994) explained, Black people have historically been reduced to "labor commodities," defined by their value as property and output (p. 223). To consider race requires acknowledging the inherent link between U.S. capitalism and racialized labor in schooling—the way that youth are socialized into a unique scheme and position of labor—and the ways in which race (especially whiteness) has been linked to possession and ownership (Harris, 1993). In this way, it is not sufficient to characterize schools as "preparatories" for an adult world of work. Rather, like the plantation, racial capitalism finds ways to extract children, too, as commodities and laborers.[3] Though I do not offer an exhaustive history, I briefly delineate some of the historical features of labor exploitation in schooling and its relationship to racial capitalism, particularly in the case of Black and Indigenous education.

W. E. B. Du Bois, when formulating his groundbreaking work on racial capitalism, explicitly connected labor exploitation and education. Despite much educational historiography that begins and ends with his publication of the "Talented Tenth" (1903), Du Bois was a brutal critic of the school systems of his time.[ii] Revisiting his initial formulations of education, he would argue later in his life that public education functioned primarily to recreate, maintain, and perpetuate a "caste system" (Pierce, 2017). For Du Bois and subsequent historians, Black education during the period between Emancipation and the end of Reconstruction was a site of contestation: formerly enslaved people began operating their own schools "in places that had not been visited by the Freedmen's Bureau or northern benevolent societies" (Anderson, 1988, p. 7). Anderson (p. 6) observed that, to the surprise of northern philanthropists and politicians, even though schools operated by locals "appreciated northern support, they resisted infringements that threatened to undermine their own initiative and self-reliance" (p. 12). As these schools continued to fall under the control of the federal government and northern philanthropists, the autonomy and cultural development of independent and Black-operated schooling gave way to new modes of exploitation. The "generosity" of Northern industrialists meant the subsumption (and therefore eradication) of those fugitive, educational spaces into a rubric of state-controlled schooling which afforded various opportunities for the exploitation and containment of Black labor (Anderson, 1988; Anderson & Moss, 1999; Givens, 2021; Siddle Walker, 1996). As Damien Schnyder (2012) explained, Northern industrialists did not want to disrupt racial hierarchies, so much as "incorporate the racial order within the

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[3] A similar point has been made regarding reproductive labor by feminist critiques of Marxism. Work performed outside of the immediate sphere of production such as childcare, domestic labor, and biological reproduction (i.e., giving birth) are often disregarded or marginalized in Marxist conceptions of "the worker." By disregarding reproductive labor (or separating it from productive labor) many Marxists are left with a woefully inadequate understanding of capitalism itself, let alone an incapacity to theorize and address gender-based violence, patriarchy, and domestic exploitation (Federici, 2012).

purview of a free labor market system" (p. 107–108).

These Northern efforts led to, in many places, the creation of industrial schools, which taught manual (but always menial) labor, and attempted to educate Black freedmen about their position in a white supremacist government. As Donald Spivey (1978) wrote, "In a sense, the schoolhouse was to replace the stability lost by the institution of slavery" (p. 17). These institutes, spearheaded by the Freedmen's Bureau, Booker T. Washington, Samuel Chapman Armstrong, and Richard Henry Pratt, were designed to provide freedmen with the technical skills necessary to enter the labor market as manual and menial laborers. They emphasized the importance of docility and agricultural labor, complementing and reinforcing the "modified slavery" of sharecropping, debt peonage, and convict leasing (Spivey, 1978, p. 33). The emphasis on efficiency and extraction that accompanied the expansion of Northern U.S. and European models of industrialization had larger consequences on the organization and conceptualization of schooling. As compulsory schooling expanded in scope, schools came to resemble factories in design and organization. Students were divided into manageable groups, bells signaled the start of classes like the start of a shift, and even the physical building was modelled after the work floor (Casey et al., 2013). In this sense, the growth of wage-capitalism merely elaborated new modes of socialization and exploitation to expand, rather than supplant, antebellum racial hierarchies. Beyond a hidden curriculum, it is thus critical to identify the ways in which children of color are used and exploited as sources of profit through schooling.

The educational policy of the Bureau of Indian Affairs operated to similar ends. Sandy Grande (2004) wrote that Indian education was not just about stripping Indigenous peoples of their culture, "but rather, from its very inception, it was a project designed to colonize Indian minds as a means of gaining access to Indian labor, land, and resources" (p. 23). This project of compulsory schooling involved brutal procedures–kidnapping, incarceration, forced labor, sexual, physical, and spiritual violation–exercised upon Indigenous youth. As Margaret Jacobs (2009) explained, child removal was not a milder policy compared with military subjugation or conquest, but "a more nuanced weapon in the arsenal of administrators as they sought to consolidate control and complete the colonization of [I]ndigenous peoples" (p. 149–150). The Bureau schools operated in many ways like factories, utilizing Native child labor to accomplish a variety of commercial tasks. Students were often worked to death in the schools, a consequence of brutal demands for labor and higher rates of disease. At the Carlisle Institute in Pennsylvania, part of the children's work was to carve the headstones for those who died (Richie, 2008). The cumulative effect of exploitation as well as sexual, physical, and spiritual abuse created what many Native people refer to as a "soul wound" that has not been healed (Smith, 2015).

While they are frequently discussed as separate state actions, these attacks on Black and Native cultural autonomy were enacted on the same basis. Schooling, as a racial project, was a strategy of co-opting vulnerable youth with the intention of creating forced and enforced servitude under the guise of a post-racial drive to assimilate (Marquez, 2019). Central to this racializing/colonial schooling was the drive to both erase oppositional cultural knowledge and ways of living (and thereby extend imperial—rather than Indigenous—subjecthood) and continue the division of populations by means of

racialization (Brown, 2016). In other words, the culture and individuality of colonized people were to be subsumed but not to the point of negating or absolving racial difference. This logic paradoxically required Indigenous peoples to abandon a unique claim to land, culture, and nationhood, while still maintaining a sufficient difference from whiteness in order to justify ongoing exploitation. Borrowing language from J. D. C. Atkins' 1887 Annual Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, assimilationist policy was designed to convince colonial subjects of their status as non-citizen, nonhuman, "embryo citizens" (Prucha, 2000, p. 174). Thus, as an assimilationist policy, the forced labor of these boarding schools/industrial schools pushed to "integrate" Black and Native youth into their designated place in the white economy on the bottom rung of the socioeconomic ladder.

The transition away from this violent labor exploitation took place in the early and mid-twentieth century. Changes in the larger economic structure, according to some, rendered Black labor superfluous to the extraction of profit and maintenance of economic elites. Judy (1994), for instance, situated Black people in "the killing fields," or "the place of non-work for complete consumption of needless workers" (p. 212). William Darity Jr. (1983) similarly predicted that technological advancements would render Black workers a superfluous "underclass," risking their elimination from society as a whole. From this perspective, schooling becomes a means of holding or warehousing Black youth.

However, these critiques risk essentializing complex and often contradictory changes. Even Darity noted that Black labor must retain some value, even as surplus, until all production only requires machines. What goes unmentioned, however, is that the transmutation of surplus labor into a commodity is profitable in and of itself; mass incarceration has proved just how profitable confinement can be. Consider, for instance, the vast industries of prison labor, prison telecommunications, construction, and security technology which derive massive wealth from incarceration. Understanding the economic socialization of Black and Brown youth and how it benefits the managerial class means dealing with this antagonism: on the one hand, the direct exploitation of Black and Brown people as labor has been historically central; on the other hand, the diminishing value of that labor leads to the emergence of industries of confinement and commodification. This logic is also visible through profit structures surrounding education.

The Laboring Student

Labor and Alienation

Prior to considering the actual profit structures constructed around and dependent upon student labor, it is important to delineate the characteristics of labor and its alienation in a capitalist economy. I argue that student labor is, in a Marxian sense, simultaneously *concrete* and *abstract*. In discussing this dual character of student labor, I indicate how this labor is "alienated" in the four main ways identified by Marx (1844/1975): (a) the alienation of the worker from the product, (b) the alienation of the worker from the process, (c) the workers from each other, and (d) the workers from their "species-essence."

Labor possesses, as Marx (1867/1976) argued in the first volume of *Capital*, a dual character. On the one hand, labor is performed to create some useful thing or outcome: the satisfaction of human needs. In the context of education, this consists of the actual

intellectual work required for a student to acquire knowledge and skills, which, at least in theory, offers some benefit. This aspect of labor, its production of something useful, Marx termed "concrete labor." On the other hand, labor (in a capitalist economy) also constitutes economically valuable worktime. The labor performed by the worker manifests abstractly in the value of a commodity that can be sold or purchased. Marx called this "abstract labor" insofar as value congeals in a product in ways that are not immediately tangible, but realizable only through the exchange of commodities. Thus, the worker is constantly doing two things: first, work which produces a concretely useful outcome and, second, work which manifests socially as *value* in a capitalist economy.

How does this dual character of labor relate to the work performed by students? First, consider labor in its concrete aspect. Students must generally perform some level of mental exertion to learn. Learning is widely regarded as inherently beneficial to the student. In all societies, humans must relate and respond to their environment through diverse and adaptive cognitive processes: to learn, in some senses, is to be alive (or at least responsive to one's environment). Of course, the cognitive necessity of learning for human fulfillment does not imply that everything one learns is beneficial, yet this is often uncritically assumed. Therefore, according to educators and policymakers, the use-value of learning math, English, science, and history is self-evident. Yet would anyone maintain that *everything* a student learns directly benefits them? The answer is most certainly "no." In almost any school, one will find students criticizing the relevance of the curriculum to daily life.

In this situation we encounter the first form of alienation Marx (1844/1975) discussed: the estrangement of the worker from the product. In the context of racial capitalism, this form of alienation takes on an explicitly racial character. Walter Rodney's (2018) discussion of the colonial education system in Africa offers us a powerful example. According to Rodney, the colonial system of schooling severed learning from its social context. Students in French colonies would learn that "'the Gauls, *our* [emphasis added] ancestors, had blue eyes', and they would be convinced that 'Napoleon was *our* [emphasis added] greatest general'" (p. 301). This alienation manifested in more subtle ways as well: in colonial agriculture classes, students were not taught about indigenous trees which provided the traditional basis for community survival, but instead were taught about European ornamental flowers. Rodney's critique of the coloniality of education—similar to what Woodson (1933/1990) called "mis-education," what Zitkála-Ša (1921/2023) called "long-lasting death" ("An Indian Teacher Among Indians," section IV), and what José Carlos Mariátegui (1971) described as "foreign elements, unadapted to local conditions […] superimposed on public education" (p. 77)—is really an identification of a problem of labor. The educational labor performed in schools has been violently severed from its social and cultural context. Students are thus alienated from the product of their own intellectual labor, learning itself.

At the same time, students are alienated from the *process* of labor. Students, like wage laborers, are alienated from their own education from the moment that they are legally compelled to attend school. Those who engage in school willingly and enthusiastically do so in spite of, not because of, the fact that they have no choice. The labor of school is compulsory. Students are not encouraged (nor typically permitted) to spontaneously create meaning; they are expected to follow directions. In a significant sense, schooling is about

learning obedience. Students learn to line up, read carefully, make marks heavy and dark, follow bells, use the bathroom at designated times, and so forth. I am not arguing that all structure in education is bad or oppressive. What I am suggesting is that students enter the educational process on nonconsensual and highly unequal terms. What results is often a general alienation from the process of schooling itself. From these first two points, we could say that not all work done in schools results in alienation. Rather, when the *content* and *nature* of the work is severed from the sociocultural context and the individual student and intellectual labor is no longer a process of meaning-making and discovery, the process and result is alienation.

The third form of alienation Marx identified is the alienation of workers from each other. For wage laborers, this involves pitting workers against each other in competition for higher wages. This division of labor is further accomplished through racialization. In consequence, this produces a false consciousness whereby workers willfully subscribe to ruling-class ideology. Students, too, must compete with one another. The entire process of grading is gradation. Students fight for a place in a rigorously defined social hierarchy; this hierarchy then corresponds to college admissions and job placement, helping to mediate the reproduction of social class. Between schools and within them, students performing the same labor are alienated from one another.

Alienation from others leads to the fourth form of alienation: what Marx (1844/1975) termed alienation from one's "species-essence." Learning, as a form of labor, is an essential way in which humans relate to their environment. It is a constitutive aspect of our humanity (what Marx called our "species-essence"). Our relationships with our peers and our teachers are formative and essential aspects of our humanity. In this regard, the non-relationality and anti-sociality of contemporary schooling goes against the very basis of our humanity.

What, then, is the function of student labor in a capitalist mode of production? As concrete labor, it may, if only incidentally, provide a benefit to the student. However, how does student labor also function as abstract labor, or economically valuable worktime? Clearly, there is no immediate product: classwork and quizzes cannot be sold at market. How, then, does student labor relate to capitalist exploitation? We can respond in two ways: first, the industries that have emerged as a result of the neoliberalization and monetization of public education; second, the social and ideological utility of schooling in maintaining racial capitalist class structures. We can take each of these in turn.

Corporate Profit

The transition from industrial capitalism into more nuanced forms of neoliberalism towards the end of the twentieth century induced shifts in the means and profits of student labor. State assessments and metrics organized around student performance (i.e., labor) now largely determine the funding structure of schools (Behrent, 2016; Ross & Gibson, 2007) and the salaries and job stability for teachers, administrators, and district officials (Ravitch, 2010). Though the material fruits of student labor are no longer as visible as during the period of industrial schooling, teachers and administrators still have a direct incentive to extract student labor as efficiently as possible to increase performance metrics. Homework, exams, quizzes, and worksheets can help students perform better on

standardized tests. If standardized tests have deep economic implications (for companies, districts, administrators, and teachers), then we can understand the work of students as the individual parts in an assembly line. The final product is a student that can be evaluated, measured, and tiered. Thus, the labor of students is not so much a metaphor as it is a literal source of profit and material reward. Put another way, contemporary schooling bases profit structures on the efficiency of reproductive labor rather than the use of child labor to produce commodities.

Though students no longer labor on behalf of private enterprises, as was the case in industrial schooling, private companies still benefit immensely from these testing apparatuses. The introduction of standardized assessments and metrics brought into existence a broad industry of educational testing. The Pearson Corporation alone makes over $9 billion a year in textbook sales and large testing corporations make billions more (Pierce, 2018). Value-Added Measures, originally designed to measure yields and efficiency for genetically engineered crops, are now regularly applied to student/teacher performance as "the nation's top educational reform tool" (Pierce, p. 99). Pierce asked,

> In other words, are we comfortable equating the "value" of rows of [genetically engineered] corn or soy with children sitting in desk rows in Chicago? More alarming is the fact that even to be able to ask this question means that we as a society have arrived at a moment in history when a major research and development question for industrial agriculture corporations also makes sense when asked about the educational population in the United States. (p. 99–100).

The structure of privatized assessment complicates the application of a labor analytic to students. In this structure, students are imagined not just as laborers, but simultaneously the planted and harvested crops. In this sense, the modes of production are altered such that the alienated worker becomes a commodity and product. Schooling thus involves the use of human machinery (in this case, students) to both *produce* and *be* commodities.[4]

In addition to the expansion of privatized testing, the expansion of charter schools has represented a primary method of converting children of color into enterprise. Pioneered as a form of "school choice," charter schools aggravate different aspects of labor control by incorporating private sector capital. "Charterization" typically involves for-profit educational companies that create or operate existing public schools under a charter, allowing some flexibility in operation and avoidance of public oversight that traditional public schools cannot. Charters typically receive per-pupil funding and may also receive considerable donations from a variety of neoliberal philanthropist actors if they are able to show that their models are "competitive" in the school-marketplace. These schools, much like testing companies, embody the base characteristic of capitalist accumulation—schools become the literal means of production through which managerial classes can invest and reinvest. Kristen Buras (2011) described it precisely as,

> a revivified Reconstruction-era blueprint for how to capitalize on public education and line the pockets of white entrepreneurs (and their black allies) who care less about working-class schoolchildren and their grandmothers and much more about

[4] The "Talented Tenth" was the idea that an educated and elite ten percent of the Black population would become race leaders and drive social change.

obtaining public and private monies and an array of lucrative contracts. (p. 303)

Responding to aggravated demands for labor output and academic performance, charters have historically (though often unofficially) discriminated against students with disabilities and multilingual learners. For students with disabilities and multilingual students that are admitted, many charters are shown to have exacerbated rates of discipline like suspension, detention, and in-school suspension (ISS; Zubrzycki et al., 2013). Though sparse, the extant data suggests that urban charters in general are more restrictive and disciplinary spaces (Stahl, 2020; Waitoller et al., 2019). Finally, the charter school exacerbates the alienation of teacher labor. In many cities, charter networks have used mass firings to purge experienced, unionized, and well-salaried teachers from the district, replacing them with inexperienced teachers from networks like Teach For America (Buras, 2011). In this sense, many forms of community/teacher involvement and labor protection are shattered by privatization.

Part of the danger of charterization is the uncertain and mutable political quality. The label of "charter" is capacious enough to cover corporate takeovers and charter management organizations, as well as schools oriented around critical pedagogy and social justice. In some cases, charter schools have been operated under community-centered, bilingual, multicultural, Afrocentric, or even Black Nationalist frameworks (Shujaa, 1992). For this reason, many people have held out hope for the potential of "school choice" as a means of escape from the violence of traditional public schools. The sustainability of neoliberalism, however, rests precisely on the illusion of choice. In other words, certain radical "options" exist to shift focus away from the overall exploitative conditions of charters, as well as their efforts to defund public schools. While the logic of neoliberalism may provide (limited) options of radical education to nurture this optimism, the regulatory processes and market forces underwriting charterization often prevent any significant community control. Instead, the result is a means of private profit from the control of youth of color (Rickford, 2016; Todd-Breland, 2018).

Social Profit

Beyond direct profits for private testing companies and charter management organizations, the labor of students is broadly conducive to the maintenance of racial capitalism. The first utility is the socialization of white supremacist ideology, which is central (though not unique) to public schooling. Although critical educators certainly hold out hope for a culturally relevant (Ladson-Billings, 1992) or culturally sustaining curriculum (Paris, 2012; Paris & Alim, 2014), in most schools, curriculum reflects the orientation of dominant power structures. This has been the case historically. The historian and educator Carter G. Woodson described the complete exclusion of Black people, culture, and history from curriculum as early as 1933. He named the subsequent process "mis-education" (Woodson, 1933/1990). Mis-education, he argued, put Black people in service of white supremacy and capitalism, rather than Black communities and liberation. The estrangement of youth of color from the curriculum signals a collective investment in the maintenance of white supremacy and capitalism by producing and socializing labor antipodal to the needs of the workers themselves. Creating a culturally sustaining

curriculum could alternatively be framed as returning more of the means and products of labor to the students themselves—in other words, students reap the fruits of their own (school)work.

Another social utility of school labor is the production of a criminal class. The traditional account of criminality and imprisonment in the Marxist tradition describes the role as an oppressive means of managing "surplus labor" (Ruscha & Kirchheimer, 1939). The state incurs the burden of underemployment and structural unemployment through incarceration. Prisons then mediate and condition the motion of capital as a secondary effect. Incarceration, in other words, follows the market and must be shouldered by the state. The rapid expansion of the prison population in the U.S. following the late 1960s functioned as a means of managing surplus (Gilmore, 2007). Ruth Wilson Gilmore discussed surplus financial capital, surplus land, relative surplus population, and surplus state capacity as factors that motivated the development of mass incarceration as a means of heading off a crisis of overaccumulation. However, the traditional Marxist account, which holds that incarceration is an aftereffect of the market, fails to consider the ways in which prisons may drive capitalism as primary (and not secondary) factors. James Manos (2015) suggested that, given the legacy of convict leasing and prison labor in the U.S., racial imprisonment is by no means a secondary effect of capital, but "perhaps even the driving [motor] of capitalism" (p. 49). In other words, while incarceration certainly mediates surplus, the very process of creating a criminal class is an act of production, and thus a source of tremendous profit.

The ambiguity between student, worker, and commodity in the increasingly metricized and neoliberalized scheme of schooling suggests a connection with mass incarceration. Both institutions have disinvested from the question of justice and human well-being, while supposedly underwriting them both. Specifically, the economic socialization of racialized youth makes possible what Gilmore (2007) has termed, "the prison fix" (p. 87): the ever-increasing deployment of prisons and imprisonment to provide economic stimulus, manage surplus (rural and urban) labor, and provide hyper-exploitable workers. The labor of students and the racialized economic socialization baked into U.S. schooling points to the continued devaluation of Black youth as an unfolding legacy of chattel slavery as well as a defining feature of capitalism. In this sense, the hidden curriculum of economic socialization necessarily engages deeper practices of racial exploitation. Schools are not just the coercive preparatories for adult labor, but themselves embody the ambiguity between worker and commodity inherent to plantation slavery and descendant systems of oppression.

As a part of this commodification and exploitation, schools employ vast and complex systems to label students. To think of school is to think of labels. Grades, systems, and scales are all used to evaluate and label work to compel efficiency, as would a supervisor during a performance evaluation, as well as create complex and multi-year databases to track students. Students are then characterized along whatever vocabulary is considered district appropriate: proficient, advanced, remedial, average, and so on. All these terms are based on the fundamental necessity of schools to evaluate and manage student output. Taking a closer look at assessments, both private tests like those of Pearson and the College Board as well as many small-scale in-class assessments, have consistently revealed racial and cultural bias (Grodsky et al., 2008; Knoester & Au, 2014). Grading and standardized

testing are thus implicated as part of a larger biopolitical scheme; the labels deployed by educational institutions reflect a larger process of racial gradation that aids in the social construction of white supremacy.

The continued and increased deployment of grades and evaluations reflect a policy architecture designed to demonstrate white superiority rather than expose the political project of white supremacy (Stern, 2015). This is evident in the early usage of standardized testing. Early speculations and elaborations of scientific racism were codified as racial typologies whose superiority and inferiority were 'proven' through seemingly objective, standardized measures. From the 1900s onward, this was accomplished through the deployment of cognitive tests which sought to demonstrate the biological inferiority of non-white races. Hundreds of standardized tests (famously, IQ testing) were developed by eugenicists and deployed to justify various policies including forced sterilization, deportation drives, immigration, and institutionalization. These tests had a vast impact not just on the maintenance of white supremacy, but on the discourses used to approach anti-racist movements as well. These allegedly objective measures of race and achievement guided subsequent attempts to frame racism as a biological or cultural deficiency suffered by non-whites, rather than an active process of exploitation and violence. Government reports like Daniel Patrick Moynihan's (1965) *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* or James Coleman's (1966) *Equality of Educational Opportunity* report, as well as best-selling books like Charles Murray and Richard J. Herrnstein's (1994) *The Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life* all attempt to demonstrate pathological, cultural, or biological problems which explain the disparate outcomes in racial achievement (Aggarwal, 2016; Bell, 1997). The discourse explaining racial disparities in "achievement" largely attempts to enumerate cultural deficiencies in communities of color, rather than expose a larger structure of racial oppression.

Even today, this discursive blame of cultural deficiencies is reflected in the term "achievement gap," which attempts to describe the failure to achieve on the part of racial minorities rather than an orchestrated and deeply historical underdevelopment of non-white communities. The concept of a "gap" has continually reinforced and replicated these initial bio-racial projects of white supremacy. As Ujja Aggarwal (2016) wrote, this "ideological architecture … tells us that irrespective of the resources at hand, the isolation of economically poor children of color will replicate the conditions of their own misery" (p. 139). In this sense, testing reflects not just a method of management, but a utility to whiteness itself: the continued reproduction of white supremacy by sanitized, statistical, and "objective" evidence. As Du Bois (1935) indicated, the defining feature and product of chattel slavery was not just labor output, but a cultural context that structured and fractured labor by race and caste—that paid, in essence, a "public and psychological wage" (p. 700). In this sense, tests exemplify a form of cultural labor that underwrites the continuation and reproduction of white supremacy. The racial management of labor (re)produces white supremacy itself as a desirable form of capital, not just as a condition under which exploitation is made possible. Put simply, testing and its corollary disparities evidence a fundamental mechanism through which the value of whiteness can be continually restated and reaffirmed.

Here, Marx's (1844/1975) claim that the object of labor "becomes a power on its own

confronting [the worker]" comes to the fore (p. 272). The labor performed in schools is qualified and objectified, transmuted into a fictive testimony to the superiority of whiteness. Work—or more accurately, the perception that a student has *failed* to work—functions as a justificatory mechanism for the maintenance of white supremacy. Color-evasive or post-racial onlookers can point to ongoing exploitation and violence and justify it by the apparent failure of children to learn. Thus, white supremacy cloaks itself in its own mythos, making invisible the material structures at its very core.

Charter schools, privatized testing, and the ideology of schooling as an enterprise are enabled by the idea that schooling holds some innate value, and that student labor is not uncompensated but is compensation in and of itself. Interestingly, identical arguments were made of plantation slavery: advocates of slavery deployed paternalistic language which cast the enslaved as completely dependent on their owners, medical language which contended that hard work was necessary for the vitalization of African blood, and the popular contention that the enslaved were better treated than their white indentured or industrial counterparts (Cartwright, 1851; Faust, 1982; Phillips, 1918). It follows that, if the *prima facie* assumption of schoolwork as inherently valuable is not accepted, the conditions under which students labor become clearly exploitative. Ultimately, as Ned and Constance Sublette (2016) clearly indicated, "The history of slavery is a study in euphemisms" (p. 19). The concepts of schoolwork, achievement, success, failure, proficiency, mastery, accountability, grades, and tracking all function as plantocratic euphemisms concealing deeper mechanisms of coerced labor and socialization for and under racial capitalism. While "labor," "output," and "productivity" are the conceptual underpinning of schooling, the actual "work" is reframed. These euphemisms serve not only to disguise the viciousness of labor exploitation but also presuppose those children who refuse the conditions of labor as flawed or somehow lesser.

"The General Strike"

If schools, teachers, and students become legible through an optic of labor, then strategies complicating, recognizing, and understanding resistance become visible through this same lens. The foundational history defining and understanding African Americans as hyper-exploited labor came with Du Bois' (1935) *Black Reconstruction in America*. Du Bois generated a markedly different (and historically controversial) explanation and understanding of the Civil War's outcome and trajectory. According to Du Bois, it was not heroism or economic prowess by the North that led to victory, but the brave acts of sabotage, flight, malingering, and revolt on the part of Black southerners that crippled the slaveholding South. Du Bois wrote,

> As soon [...] as it became clear that the Union armies would not or could not return fugitive slaves, and that the masters with all their fume and fury were uncertain of victory, the slave entered upon a general strike against slavery by the same methods that he had used during the period of the fugitive slave. He ran away to the first place of safety and offered his services to the Federal Army. So that in this way it was really true that he served his former master and served the emancipating army; and it was also true that this withdrawal and bestowal of his labor decided the war. (p. 57)

While Du Bois' arguments were shunned by historians and ignored as radical, his thesis has largely been vindicated since and is considered foundational in both understanding the course of the Civil War and for characterizing a scheme of resistance that would anchor 20th century liberation movements. Du Bois placed Black labor and its refusal at the center, noting the complex dynamics of racial class consciousness in resistance under American capitalism. While the dimensions of flight and fugitivity in "the general strike" warrant serious attention for understanding contemporary schooling (Sojoyner, 2017), my intention is to explore and call attention to work stoppage as a radical action toward racial liberation.

However, as with Marx, a narrow definition of labor can occlude different methods of resistance and insurgency. Saidiya Hartman (2016) noted the problem of Du Bois' narrow understanding of labor; the work of Black women under (and after) slavery generally exceeded industrial or agricultural labor as narrowly centered in Du Bois' work, and included reproduction, child-rearing, and domestic work. Hartman suggested that "the general strike" should be expanded to accommodate different aspects of Black labor. We might ask a similar question regarding schooling: where does the student fit into the general strike? "What is the text of [their] insurgency and the genre of [their] refusal?" (Hartman, 2016, p. 171). How do racialization and gender transform the student's strike?

Students refuse the conditions of labor on a daily basis. It is visible in attempts to derail classes, distract classmates, hold side conversations, pull out phones, and so forth. These routine behaviors of apathy and disinterest may not be a lack of engagement, but a method of *disengagement*—a refusal of the conditions of labor set out. Savannah Shange (2019) termed this concept "willful defiance" (p. 15). Sometimes this behavior is entirely unrelated to the classroom itself, but rather to student desire (e.g., wanting to talk to a friend). Yet in rejecting and violating the conditions of schooling a kind of errant political space is visible. As Angela Valenzuela (2010) argued, the performance of apathy is a distinct political manifestation in opposition to the routinized expectations of labor experienced by students. The socialization of authority, power, and control produces what Noah De Lissovoy (2012) called "a curriculum that is doubly hidden" (p. 477), that is, a pedagogy of resistance and disruption that exists among and between students in opposition to the managerial structure of schooling.[5]

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[5] The political resistance to school labor enacted by students daily is typically not recognized as such, and commonly misdiagnosed. Rather than viewing student resistance as a political move that invites and demands the reorientation of the classroom space (the means, materials, and nature of the work) to better meet student needs, it is depoliticized by a series of reductive maneuvers: "misbehavior," "disobedience," "noncompliance," "disruption," "laziness," which serve to individualize, classify, and void of content any action contrary to the normative and prescriptive space of schooling. Furthermore, resistance to conditions of exploitation is often medicalized (and medicated). The poignantly named "oppositional defiant disorder" and "emotionally disturbed" are examples of labels used to brand and separate students who resist the alienation of work. This tendency to pathologize and medicalize Black resistance is seen as early as the 1850s. Samuel Cartwright, a Southern physician, published his 1851 study, "Report on the Diseases and Physical Peculiarities of the Negro Race." In it, he formed two primary diagnoses: *drapetomania*, or the disease that caused the enslaved to run away; and *dysaesthesia aethiopica* or "rascality," which more specifically caused the enslaved to destroy farm equipment. While Cartwright's literal diagnosis is not used today, the function still exists—by individualizing and pathologizing errant political behavior as psychologically flawed, the integrity of an oppressive system is upheld, no matter the scope and magnitude of resistance. Through its disavowal as a political act, the scope

All apathy, refusal, or disengagement is not political in nature. Nor do these orientations mean the same thing for all students. The disengagement of an economically privileged student who can afford a private tutor or, perhaps, does not need or plan to work at all is qualitatively different than the disengagement of racialized students combating a curriculum of rote, racist instruction. However, there is a great deal at stake in the refusal of students to participate and the decision to actively disrupt the schooling process. Principally, it confirms the basic fact that children, like all humans, strive to do something meaningful. In the process of articulating dissatisfaction, students are constantly and rigorously articulating a program and vision for their own cognitive freedom. The realization of that vision is the dis-alienation of educational labor itself: the free pursuit of meaning, the expansion and flourishing of human capacity, and the liberation of social relations from the strictures of racial capitalism. Students, in other words, are calling for sovereignty, empowerment, freedom, and dignity.

This type of action is, of course, limited. First, students are up against an apparatus that thrives off their disengagement. If students refuse to participate in a rigged system, this does not do away with the system, but may in fact confirm its most pernicious hypotheses. I knew a high school student who, though she attended school every day, refused to attend math class for over a month as a result of fundamental disagreements over the method and means of instruction, which she saw as hostile and hierarchical. Predictably, this did not result in any systemic change or dialogue in that math class; she failed the class and repeated the grade. While her action was political, its success required recognition as such and a willingness on the part of the teacher, school, and/or district to recognize and address legitimate grievances on the part of the student, who in this instance was a striking worker.

Furthermore, students are children and children do not always have the experience, expertise, or confidence to enact meaningful *mass* action. In any given school, one can often hear a student say, "I hate it here." It is less common to hear students articulate precisely what they would like to see change and less likely still to see them organize other students to enact such a change. This is not meant as a criticism or dismissal of the revolutionary potential of students—quite the opposite. There is a failure on the part of adults and school systems to encourage a radical and revolutionary imagination on the part of children and a failure to give them the tools, time, and support to pursue their own liberation.

In this regard, a more liberatory approach to classroom instruction would take students as agents, rather than passive recipients of knowledge (Freire, 2014). One constituent aspect of this involves treating refusal, resistance, and disruption in relation to the means, nature, and rewards of student labor. Rather than seeking to break, punish, or dissuade students who resist the conditions of schooling, educators must engage with the political content of refusal, apathy, and disengagement. What does the student want? What can the school do so that they feel the work is rewarding? What needs to change so that a sustainable relationship is possible? In many cases, this may involve helping the student draft a program for what they would like to change. This is not to trick students into

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and significance of what might be called "the general strike" of students is not readily apparent. And yet, student resistance persists.

thinking they have agency but to actually build student capacity and power. Teachers, to an extent, must decide whether they will be managers or workers. When students walk out, will they join them? When students create petitions, will they sign them? While teachers fight to preserve and expand their rights to collectively bargain, will they fight for similar rights for students *within* the school? My argument is not for any singular, specific program or utopian vision for schools. Rather, I am arguing that adults committed to transforming schools and dismantling capitalism must take the words, actions, and demands of children and students seriously.

Conclusion

Returning to Baraka's opening poem, I hold out hope for schooling to be a site of empowerment and transformation. This requires recognizing and dismantling the dynamics of profit and exploitation that underwrite contemporary schooling including, but moving beyond, charters and high-stakes testing. Such a transformation must address the very orientation of economic hierarchy and the structuring discourse of (school)work. Classical Marxist analyses of schooling have failed to develop compelling theories in which race is a constituent principle of the organization of political economy. The history of racial capitalism and schooling demonstrates the extent of this oversight: from boarding schools to industrial schools to contemporary schoolwork and testing, school remains a site for the simultaneous production of laborers and a site of labor itself. Educators are positioned to value children as students rather than as people. How are students that disrupt or skip class discussed behind closed doors? What about their families? Does the educator still appreciate them when they are off task? When they refuse the task itself?

Creating a more empowering and transformational space calls for considering school as a site of labor. When students refuse the conditions set before them, a profound political space opens. What does the student want? What are their needs? How can the class better serve their needs? What changes are necessary so that their work is made *for* them? So that they control the means and products of their own work? This political space is an insurgency that invites contemplation, discussion, and transformation.

What does it look like when students take control of their own education? Research into Youth Participatory Action Research (Cammarota & Fine, 2008; López, 2020), place-based learning (Friedel, 2011), and culturally sustaining pedagogy (Paris, 2012; Paris & Alim, 2014) offer promising routes forward. Reframing this question as a matter of labor opens the insurgent space of student refusal for closer examination. The ubiquity of disruption, refusal, anger, "bad behavior," malingering, "noncompliance," calls attention to the scale and depth of the general strike in schooling. Schooling relies on terms such as "failure" to make political sense of this general strike. Yet as Jack Halberstam (2011) wrote in *The Queer Art of Failure*: "Under certain circumstances failing, losing, forgetting, unmaking, undoing, unbecoming, not knowing may in fact offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world" (p. 2–3). Reading the insurgency of children in educational spaces yields profound insights for imagining and creating a radically different world.

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