

UCLA

Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies

Title

Black Study, Black Struggle

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/8cj8q196>

Journal

Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies, 40(2)

ISSN

0041-5715

Author

Kelley, Robin D. G.

Publication Date

2018

DOI

10.5070/F7402040947

Copyright Information

Copyright 2018 by the author(s). All rights reserved unless otherwise indicated. Contact the author(s) for any necessary permissions. Learn more at <https://escholarship.org/terms>

Peer reviewed

Black Study, Black Struggle¹

Robin D. G. Kelley

In the fall of 2015, college campuses were engulfed by fires ignited in the streets of Ferguson, Missouri. This is not to say that college students had until then been quiet in the face of police violence against black Americans. Throughout the previous year, it had often been college students who hit the streets, blocked traffic, occupied the halls of justice and malls of America, disrupted political campaign rallies, and risked arrest to protest the torture and suffocation of Eric Garner, the abuse and death of Sandra Bland, the executions of Tamir Rice, Ezell Ford, Tanisha Anderson, Walter Scott, Tony Robinson, Freddie Gray, ad infinitum.

That the fire this time spread from the town to the campus is consistent with historical patterns. The campus revolts of the 1960s, for example, *followed* the Harlem and Watts rebellions, the freedom movement in the South, and the rise of militant organizations in the cities. But the size, speed, intensity, and character of recent student uprisings caught much of the country off guard. Protests against campus racism and the ethics of universities' financial entanglements erupted on nearly ninety campuses, including Brandeis, Yale, Princeton, Brown, Harvard, Claremont McKenna, Smith, Amherst, UCLA, Oberlin, Tufts, and the University of North Carolina, both Chapel Hill and Greensboro. These demonstrations were led largely by black students, as well as coalitions made up of students of color, queer folks, undocumented immigrants, and allied whites.

What I offer here are a few observations and speculations about the movement, its self-conception, and its demands, many of which focus on making the university more hospitable for black students. I am not opposed to this. Nor am I questioning the courageous students who have done more to disrupt university business-as-usual than any movement in the last half-century. Instead I want to draw attention to the contradictory impulses within the movement: the tension between reform and revolution, between desiring to belong and rejecting the university as a cog in the neoliberal order. I want to think about what it means for

black students to seek love from an institution incapable of loving them—of loving anyone, perhaps—and to manifest this yearning by framing their lives largely through a lens of trauma. And I want to think about what it means for black students to choose to follow Stefano Harney and Fred Moten's call to become subversives in the academy, exposing and resisting its labor exploitation, its gentrifying practices, its endowments built on misery, its class privilege often camouflaged in multicultural garb, and its commitments to war and security.

It is fair to say that most black students have minimal interest in joining the current wave of activism. Many are not politically radical, while others feel that they do not yet have the discernment to know if they are. Others fear that an activist past may haunt them in the future, while the majority is simply trying to get through school and join the ranks of professionals. This essay does not attempt to offer such students an invitation to activism, although that would be a worthy project. Rather, I am interested in speaking to those who are already activists, specifically about the ideological fissures in their movement and what these might tell us about the character of contemporary black movements, the future of the university, and what I believe is a crisis of political education. And while crises reveal contradictions, they also signal opportunities.

In particular, I challenge student activists to not cleave their activism from their intellectual lives or mistakenly believe that because the university does not offer them the education they crave, it is beyond their reach. There is a long history of black activists repurposing university resources to instruct themselves and one another—to self-radicalize, in effect. This is not to say that today's student activists should do exactly as was done in the past, but historical models may provide valuable insights for those seeking novel solutions. Moreover, I encourage student activists to carefully consider the language they use to frame their grievances. In particular, I argue that while trauma can be an entrance into activism, it is not in itself a destination and may even trick activists into adopting the language of the neoliberal institutions they are at pains to reject.

The epicenter of recent student activism, the University of Missouri, Columbia, is a two-hour drive from the spot where former Ferguson police officer Darren Wilson ended Michael

Brown's life. In November the activism of a coalition called Concerned Student 1950 (the year "Mizzou" admitted its first black student)—coupled with a hunger-striking graduate student and a threatened strike by the varsity football team—forced the president and chancellor to resign and the university's Board of Curators to acknowledge a long history of campus racism. It was a victory for students of color at Mizzou and elsewhere, who have been fighting deeply entrenched racism for years. Since President Obama took office in 2009, the U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights has received more than a thousand formal complaints of racial harassment at colleges and universities.

While students on various campuses have done everything from addressing racial incidents to criticizing university investments, the national trend is to push for measures that would make campuses more hospitable to students of color: greater diversity, inclusion, safety, and affordability. That means more students, faculty, staff, and administrators of color; "safe spaces" and mental health support; reduced or free tuition; curricular changes; and the renaming of campus buildings and monuments after significant nonwhite figures. Similarly the Obama administration convened a meeting of administrators, faculty, students, and lawyers to promote ways to "foster supportive educational environments." As former Secretary of Education Arne Duncan put it, college should be about "finding a home and a community" and ensuring that campuses are "welcoming places for learning for every student."

Indeed, to some extent campus protests articulated the sense of betrayal and disappointment that many black students felt upon finding that their campuses failed to live up to their PR. Many students had come to the university expecting to find a welcoming place, a nurturing faculty, and protective administration. If they believed this, it was in no small part because university recruiters wanted them to: tours for prospective students, orientations, and slickly produced brochures often rely on metaphors of family and community, highlight campus diversity, and emphasize the sense of belonging that young scholars enjoy.

But while the rebellions succeeded in getting the attention of administrators and trustees, as well as the national media, students endured an awful backlash—including credible death threats—that tested the limits of the family metaphor, which to many now seems both misguided and disingenuous. Conservatives and

liberals alike trivialized their activism, dismissing the protesters as oversensitive whiners whose demands for speech codes, dress codes, and mandatory anti-racist courses threaten the university's integrity and impede critical thought.

The rancor, however, has obscured fundamental differences within the movement. Student's core demands for greater diversity, inclusion, and cultural-competency training converge with their critics' fundamental belief that the university possesses a unique teleology: it is supposed to be an enlightened space free of bias and prejudice, but the pursuit of this promise is hindered by structural racism and patriarchy. Though adherents of this perspective differ in their assessments of the extent to which the university falls short of this ideal, they agree that it is perfectible.

I do not. The fully racialized social and epistemological architecture upon which the modern university is built cannot be radically transformed by "simply" adding darker faces, safer spaces, better training, and a curriculum that acknowledges historical and contemporary oppressions. This is a bit like asking for more black police officers as a strategy to curb state violence. We need more faculty of color, but integration alone is not enough. Likewise, what is the point of providing resources to recruit more students of color without changing admissions criteria and procedures? Why do we stay wedded to standard "achievement" measures instead of, say, open admissions?

A smaller, more radical contingent of protesters is less sanguine about the university's capacity to change. Rejecting the family metaphor, these students understand that universities are not walled off from the "real world" but instead are corporate entities in their own right. These students are not fighting for a "supportive" educational environment, but a liberated one that not only promotes but also models social and economic justice. One such student coalition is the Black Liberation Collective, which has three demands:

- 1) that the numbers of black students and faculty reflect the national percentage of black folks in the country;
- 2) that tuition be free for black and indigenous students;
- 3) that universities divest from prisons and invest in communities.

Likewise the demands from protesters at UNC, Chapel Hill are a model for radical global politics. They include ending ties to

prisons and sweated labor; retraining and disarming campus police; offering free childcare for students, staff, and faculty; and paying a minimum wage of \$25 per hour for workers, with the addendum “that all administrators be compensated at the same rate as workers.” Many will say these are not winnable demands, but winning is not always the point. Unveiling the university’s exploitative practices and its deeply embedded structures of racism, sexism, and class inequality can be profound acts of demystification on their own.

But still, a common thread runs through both the more modest and more radical critics of universities. Both demand that universities change in ways that we cannot expect them to change. The first group asks universities to deliver on their promise to be post-racial havens, but that will not happen in a surrounding sea of white supremacy. The second sees universities as the leading edge in a socially revolutionary fight. While I share the transformative aims of the latter, I think that universities are not up to the task. Certainly universities can and will become more diverse and marginally more welcoming for black students, but as institutions they will never be engines of social transformation. Such a task is ultimately the work of political education and activism. By definition it takes place outside the university.

Fugitive Study

Black studies was conceived not just outside the university but in opposition to a Eurocentric university culture with ties to corporate and military power. Having emerged from mass revolt, insurgent black studies scholars developed institutional models based in, but largely independent of, the academy. In later decades, these institutions were—with varying degrees of eagerness—incorporated into the university proper in response to pressure to embrace multiculturalism.

In 1969 Vincent Harding, Stephen Henderson, Abdul Alkalimat, A. B. Spellman, Larry Rushing, and Council Taylor founded the Institute of the Black World (IBW) at Atlanta University in order to mobilize the “collective scholarship” of black intellectuals to confront racism and colonialism, here and abroad. Black students, artists, and activists at the University of Chicago founded the Communiversity, offering courses in African history and Marxist political economy to community members on Chicago’s South

Side. Less than two decades later, the United Coalition Against Racism, a student organization at the University of Michigan, established the Ella Baker – Nelson Mandela Center for Anti-Racist Education (BMC). The center was never conceived as a safe space for students of color but rather as a resource for anti-racist struggles “dedicated to the principle of thinking in order to act.” The BMC offered leadership training, sponsored cultural and educational events, provided rare anti-racist literature, and served as a radical place for study and critical engagement open to everyone, especially nonuniversity working-class residents.

In fact, it was during a talk held at IBW that the Guyanese historian Walter Rodney, some six years before he was martyred, urged radical black scholars to become “guerrilla intellectuals.” By this he meant freeing ourselves from the “Babylonian captivity” of bourgeois society, moving beyond disciplinary imperatives, and “grounding” with the people so as to engage, act, and think collectively in terms of social movements. Recently, Rodney’s notion of the guerrilla intellectual has been resuscitated and transformed in Stefano Harney and Fred Moten’s *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study*.

Harney and Moten disavow the very idea that the university is, or can ever be, an enlightened place, by which I mean a place that would actively seek to disrupt the reproduction of our culture’s classed, racialized, nationalized, gendered, moneyed, and militarized stratifications. Instead they argue that the university is dedicated to professionalization, order, scientific efficiency, counterinsurgency, and war—wars on terror, sovereign nations, communism, drugs, and gangs. The authors advocate refuge in and sabotage from the undercommons, a subaltern, subversive way of being in but not of the university. The undercommons is a fugitive network where a commitment to abolition and collectivity prevails over a university culture bent on creating socially isolated individuals whose academic skepticism and claims of objectivity leave the world-as-it-is intact.

Unlike Rodney’s guerrilla intellectuals, Harney and Moten’s guerrillas are not preparing to strike, planning to seize power, contesting the university (or the state; the difference isn’t always clear)—at least not on the terms they have set. To do so would be to recognize the university and its legitimacy and to be invested in its regimes of professionalization. Instead Harney and Moten

argue that the university's power over our lives is illusory. It lulls us into believing that politics—to lobby for access to, or control over, such institutions—is our only salvation. The book is a clarion call to *think* together, to plan together in undisciplined assembly. When *The Undercommons* hit the Internet—first as a 2008 essay and then as a 2013 collection of essays—it spread like wildfire among the PhD precariat and radical-thinking graduate students. For many young scholars cobbling together a life adjuncting, Harney and Moten's critique of the university spoke an essential truth: "It cannot be denied that the university is a place of refuge, and it cannot be accepted that the university is a place of enlightenment. In the face of these conditions one can only sneak into the university and steal what one can."

Contrast this with black student protesters who appeal to the university to "repair a broken community," to make students "feel safe, accepted, supported and like they belong," and to remedy their sense of alienation through "intense 'inclusion and belonging' training for all levels of students, staff, faculty, and administration." Why black students might seek belonging and inclusion over refuge is understandable, given their expressed sense of alienation and isolation, combined with the university's liberal use of the family metaphor. It also explains why students are asking the university to implement curriculum changes—namely, the creation of cultural-competency courses, more diverse course reading lists, and classes dedicated to the study of race, gender, sexuality, and social justice. They not only acknowledge the university's magisterium in all things academic, but they also desperately wish to change the campus culture, to make this bounded world less hostile and less racist.

But granting the university so much authority over our reading choices, and emphasizing a respect for difference over a critique of power, comes at a cost. Students not only come to see the curriculum as an oppressor that delimits their interrogation of the world, but they also come to see racism largely in personal terms.

The Personal Is Not Always Political

Second only to a desire for increased diversity, better mental health services were a chief priority for student protesters. Activists framed their concerns and grievances in the language of

personal trauma. We shouldn't be surprised. While *every* generation of black Americans has experienced unrelenting violence, this is the first one compelled to *witness* virtually all of it, to endure the snuffing out of black lives in real time, looped over and over again, until the next murder knocks it off the news. We are also talking about a generation that has lived through two of the longest wars in U.S. history, raised on a culture of spectacle where horrific acts of violence are readily available on their smartphones. What Henry Giroux insightfully identifies as an addiction does nothing to inure or desensitize young people to violence. On the contrary, it anchors violence in their collective consciousness, produces fear and paranoia—wrapped elegantly in thrill—and shrouds the many ways capitalism, militarism, and racism are killing black and brown people.

So one can easily see why the language of trauma might appeal to black students. Trauma is real; it is no joke. Mental health services and counseling are urgently needed. But reading black experience through trauma can easily slip into thinking of ourselves as victims and objects rather than agents, subjected to centuries of gratuitous violence that have structured and overdetermined our very being. In the argot of our day, “bodies”—vulnerable and threatening bodies—increasingly stand in for actual people with names, experiences, dreams, and desires. I suspect that the popularity of Ta-Nehisi Coates's *Between the World and Me* (2015), especially among black college students, rests on his singular emphasis on fear, trauma, and the black body. He writes:

In America, it is traditional to destroy the black body—it is heritage. Enslavement was not merely the antiseptic borrowing of labor—it is not so easy to get a human being to commit their body against its own elemental interest. And so enslavement must be casual wrath and random manglings, the gashing of heads and brains blown out over the river as the body seeks to escape. It must be rape so regular as to be industrial. . . . The spirit and soul are the body and brain, which are destructible—that is precisely why they are so precious. And the soul did not escape. The spirit did not steal away on gospel wings.

Coates implies that the person *is* the brain, and the brain just another organ to be crushed with the rest of the body's parts. Earlier in the book, he makes the startling declaration that enslaved people "knew nothing but chains." I do not deny the violence Coates so eloquently describes here, and I am sympathetic to his atheistic skepticism. But what sustained enslaved African people was a *memory of freedom*, dreams of seizing it, and conspiracies to enact it—fugitive planning, if you will. If we reduce the enslaved to mere fungible bodies, we cannot possibly understand *how* they created families, communities, sociality; how they fled and loved and worshiped and defended themselves; how they created the world's first social democracy.

Moreover, to identify anti-black violence as heritage may be true in a general sense, but it obscures the dialectic that produced and reproduced the violence of a regime dependent on black *life* for its profitability. It was, after all, the resisting black body that needed "correction." Violence was used not only to break bodies but to discipline *people* who refused enslavement. And the impulse to resist is neither involuntary nor solitary. It is a choice made in community, made possible by community, and informed by memory, tradition, and witness. If Africans were entirely compliant and docile, there would have been no need for vast expenditures on corrections, security, and violence. Resistance is our heritage.

And resistance is our healing. Through collective struggle, we alter our circumstances; contain, escape, or possibly eviscerate the *source* of trauma; recover our bodies; reclaim and redeem our dead; and make ourselves whole. It is difficult to see this in a world where words such as *trauma*, *PTSD*, *micro-aggression*, and *triggers* have virtually replaced *oppression*, *repression*, and *subjugation*. Naomi Wallace, a brilliant playwright whose work explores trauma in the context of race, sexuality, class, war, and empire, muses:

Mainstream America is less threatened by the 'trauma' theory because it doesn't place economic justice at its core and takes the focus out of the realm of justice and into psychology; out of the streets, communities, into the singular experience (even if experienced in common) of the individual.

Similarly, George Lipsitz observes that emphasizing "interiority," personal pain, and feeling elevates "the cultivation of

sympathy over the creation of social justice.” This is partly why demands for reparations to address historical and ongoing racism are so antithetical to modern liberalism.

Managing trauma does not require dismantling structural racism, which is why university administrators focus on avoiding triggers rather than implementing zero-tolerance policies for racism or sexual assault. Buildings will be renamed and safe spaces for people of color will be created out of a sliver of university real estate, but proposals to eliminate tuition and forgive student debt for the descendants of the dispossessed and the enslaved will be derided as absurd. This is also why diversity and cultural-competency training are the most popular strategies for addressing campus racism. As if racism were a manifestation of our “incompetent” handling of “difference.” If we cannot love the other, we can at least learn to hear, respect, understand, and “tolerate” her. Cultural competency also means reckoning with white privilege, coming to terms with unconscious bias and the myriad ways white folks benefit from current racial arrangements. Powerful as this might be, the solution to racism still is shifted to the realm of self-help and human resources, resting on self-improvement or the hiring of a consultant or trainer to help us reach our goal.

Cultural-competency training, greater diversity, and demands for multicultural curricula represent both a resistance to and manifestation of our current “postracial” moment. In *Are We All Postracial Yet?* (2015), David Theo Goldberg correctly sees post-racialism as a neoliberal revision of multicultural discourse, whose proposed remedies to address racism would in fact resuscitate late-century multiculturalism. But why hold on to the policies and promises of multiculturalism and diversity, especially since they have done nothing to dislodge white supremacy? Indeed I want to suggest that the triumph of multiculturalism marked a defeat for a radical anti-racist vision. True, multiculturalism emerged in response to struggles waged by the Black Freedom movement and other oppressed groups in the 1960s and ’70s. But the programmatic adoption of diversity, inclusion, and multiculturalism vampirized the energy of a radical movement that began by demanding the *complete transformation* of the social order and the eradication of all forms of racial, gender, sexual, and class hierarchy.

The point of liberal multiculturalism was not to address the historical legacies of racism, dispossession, and injustice but rather to bring some people into the fold of a “society no longer seen as racially unjust.” What did it bring us? Black elected officials and black CEOs who helped manage the greatest transfer of wealth to the rich and oversee the continued erosion of the welfare state; the displacement, deportation, and deterioration of black and brown communities; mass incarceration; and planetary war. We talk about breaking glass ceilings in corporate America while building more jail cells for the rest. The triumph of liberal multiculturalism also meant a shift from a radical anti-capitalist critique to a politics of recognition. This means, for example, that we now embrace the right of same-sex couples to marry so long as they do not challenge the institution itself, which is still modeled upon the exchanging of property; likewise we accept the right of people of color, women, and queer people to serve in the military, killing and torturing around the world.

At the same time, contemporary calls for cultural competence and tolerance reflect neoliberal logic by emphasizing individual responsibility and suffering, shifting race from the public sphere to the psyche. The postracial, Goldberg writes, “renders individuals solely accountable for their own actions and expressions, not for their group’s.” Tolerance in its multicultural guise, as Wendy Brown taught us, is the liberal answer to managing difference but with no corresponding transformation in the conditions that, in the first place, marked certain bodies as suspicious, deviant, abject, or illegible. Tolerance, therefore, depoliticizes genuine struggles for justice and power:

Depoliticization involves construing inequality, subordination, marginalization, and social conflict, which all require political analysis and political solutions, as personal and individual, on the one hand, or as natural, religious, or cultural on the other. Tolerance works along both vectors of depoliticization—it personalizes and it naturalizes or culturalizes—and sometimes it intertwines them.

But how can we embrace our students and acknowledge their pain while remaining wary of a culture that reduces structural oppression to misunderstanding and psychology?

Love, Study, Struggle

Taped inside the top drawer of my desk is a small scrap of paper with three words scrawled across it: “Love, Study, Struggle.” It serves as a daily reminder of what I am supposed to be doing. Black study and resistance must begin with love. James Baldwin understood love-as-agency probably better than anyone. For him it meant to love ourselves as black *people*; it meant making love the motivation for making revolution; it meant envisioning a society where everyone is embraced, where there is no oppression, where every life is valued—even those who may once have been our oppressors. It *did not* mean seeking white people’s love and acceptance or seeking belonging in the world created by our oppressor. In *The Fire Next Time* (1963), he is unequivocal: “I do not know many Negroes who are eager to be ‘accepted’ by white people, still less to be loved by them; they, the blacks, simply don’t wish to be beaten over the head by the whites every instant of our brief passage on this planet.” But here is the catch: if we are committed to genuine freedom, we have no choice but to love all. To love all is to fight relentlessly to end exploitation and oppression everywhere, even on behalf of those who think they hate us. This was Baldwin’s point—perhaps his most misunderstood and reviled point.

To love this way requires relentless struggle, deep study, and critique. Limiting our ambit to suffering, resistance, and achievement is not enough. We must go to the root—the historical, political, social, cultural, ideological, material, economic root—of oppression in order to understand its negation, the prospect of our liberation. Going to the root illuminates what is hidden from us, largely because most structures of oppression and all of their various entanglements are simply not visible and not felt. For example, if we argue that state violence is merely a manifestation of anti-blackness because that is what we *see and feel*, we are left with no theory of the state and have no way of understanding racialized police violence in places such as Atlanta and Detroit, where most cops are black, unless we turn to some metaphysical explanation.

For my generation, the formal classroom was never the space for deep critique precisely because it was not a place of love. The classroom was—and still is—a performative space,

where faculty and students compete with each other. Through study groups, we created our own intellectual communities held together by principle and love, though the specters of sectarianism, ego, and just-plain childishness blurred our vision and threatened our camaraderie. Still, the political study group was our lifeblood—both on and off campus. We lived by Karl Marx's pithy 1844 statement:

But if the designing of the future and the proclamation of ready-made solutions for all time is not our affair, then we realize all the more clearly what we have to accomplish in the present—I am speaking of a ruthless criticism of everything existing, ruthless in two senses: The criticism must not be afraid of its own conclusions, nor of conflict with the powers that be.

Study groups introduced me to C. L. R. James, Frantz Fanon, Walter Rodney, Barbara Smith, Angela Davis, Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, Vladimir Lenin, Chancellor Williams, George E. M. James, Shulamith Firestone, Kwame Nkrumah, Kwame Turé, Rosa Luxemburg, Antonio Gramsci, Chinweizu Ibekwe, Amílcar Cabral, and others. These texts were our sources of social critique and weapons in our class war on the bourgeois canon. As self-styled activist-intellectuals, it never occurred to us to *refuse* to read a text simply because it validated the racism, sexism, free-market ideology, and bourgeois liberalism against which we railed. Nothing was off limits. On the contrary, delving into these works only sharpened our critical faculties.

Love and study cannot exist without struggle, and struggle cannot occur solely inside the refuge we call the university. Being grounded in the world we wish to make is fundamental. As I argued in *Freedom Dreams* nearly fifteen years ago, “Social movements generate new knowledge, new theories, new questions. The most radical ideas often grow out of a concrete intellectual engagement with the problems of aggrieved populations confronting systems of oppression.” Ironically I wrote these words with my students in mind, many of whom were involved in campus struggles, feeling a bit rudderless but believing that the only way to make themselves into authentic activists was to leave the books and radical theories at home or in their dorms. The undercommons offers students a valuable model of study that takes for

granted the indivisibility of thought and struggle, not unlike its antecedent, the Mississippi Freedom Schools.

The Mississippi Freedom Schools, initially launched by the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee as part of the 1964 Freedom Summer, were intended to create “an educational experience for students which will make it possible for them to challenge the myths of our society, to perceive more clearly its realities and to find alternatives, and ultimately, new directions for action.” The curriculum included traditional subjects that publicly funded black schools did not offer, but they were never designed to be simply *better* versions of the traditional liberal education model. Rather, students examined power along the axes of race and class. Students and teachers worked together to reveal how ruling whites profited from Jim Crow, and they included in their analysis the precarious position of poor whites. Rural black kids of all ages learned to distinguish between “Material Things and Soul Things,” developing a trenchant critique of materialism. The freedom schools challenged the myth that the civil rights movement was just about claiming a place in mainstream society. They didn’t want equal opportunity in a burning house; they wanted to build a new house.

Perhaps one of the best historical models of radical, collective, grounded intellectual work was launched by black feminists Patricia Robinson, Patricia Haden, and Donna Middleton, working with community residents of Mt. Vernon, New York, many of whom were unemployed, low-wage workers, welfare mothers, and children. Together, they organized and read as a community—from elders to children. They saw education as a vehicle for collective transformation and an incubator of knowledge, not a path to upward mobility and material wealth. Influenced by Frantz Fanon, they interrogated and critiqued racism, sexism, slavery, and capitalism, emphasizing the ways in which racism produced a kind of psychosis among poor black people. Their study and activism culminated in a collectively written, independently published book called *Lessons from the Damned* (1973). It is a remarkable book, with essays by adults as well as children—some as young as twelve, who developed trenchant criticisms of public school teachers and the education system.

Although they acknowledged the unavoidability of addressing trauma, they understood that one’s activism could not stop

there. In a section titled “The Revolt of Poor Black Women,” the authors insisted that a genuine revolution requires the overthrow of capitalism, the elimination of male supremacy, and the transformation of self. Revolution, they argued, is supposed to usher in a brand new beginning; it is driven by the power of freed imagination, not the dead weight of the past. As Robinson, Haden, and Middleton wrote, “All revolutionaries, regardless of sex, are the smashers of myths and the destroyers of illusion. They have always died and lived again to build new myths. They dare to dream of a utopia, a new kind of synthesis and equilibrium.”

At UCLA, where I teach, these same insights are taking a new form. A group of graduate students launched their version of the undercommons in January 2016. Based on the Freedom School model, UCLA’s undercommons holds weekly outdoor meetings featuring activists from groups such as Black Lives Matter, Critical Resistance, and the L.A. Poverty Department. Faculty and students lead discussions. These events have drawn as many as 150 students, and the community continues to grow. The primary organizers—Thabisile Griffin, Marques Vestal, Olufemi O. Taiwo, Sa Whitley, and Shamell Bell—are all doctoral students who see the university as a site of contestation, a place of refuge, and a space for collective work. Their vision is radical and radically ambitious: they are abolitionists committed to dismantling prisons and redirecting their funding to education and the repair of inequality. Their ultimate goal is to create in the present a future that overthrows the logic of neoliberalism.

These students are demonstrating how we might remake the world. They are ruthless in their criticism and fearless in the face of the powers that be. They model what it means to think through crisis, to fight for the eradication of oppression in all its forms, whether it directly affects us or not. They are *in* the university but not *of* the university. They work to understand and advance the movements in the streets, seeking to eliminate racism and state violence, preserve black life, defend the rights of the marginalized (from undocumented immigrants to transfolk), and challenge the current order that has brought us so much misery. And they do this work not without criticism and self-criticism, not by pandering to popular trends or powerful people, a cult of celebrity or Twitter, and not by telling lies, claiming easy answers, or avoiding the ideas that challenge us all.

Notes

¹ This essay was first published in the *Boston Review*, on March 07, 2016. We reprint it here with the author's permission.