

This piece of writing is focused on discussing the education system that perpetuates the different oppressive systems of racism, sexism, homophobia, etc. I hope that this will give a new outlook to the way that we think about education as a whole.

INTRODUCTION

I went to meet one of my friend's parents today, and her mom reached out and touched my necklace. Without asking, she reached out and touched it. I believe this is the same type of permission that the education system has asserted, by touching our minds without consent. We give our minds, bodies and souls to institutions without questioning their aim or intent. I am a black woman from Detroit, as such I have experienced this domineering possessiveness throughout many events in my life unwarranted hair touching, following in stores, and other behaviors of the internalized oppressed mindset. The idea of the oppressed mindset is the notion that explains why people who have been oppressed have become "comfortable" submitting to a greater force or group and the duties that reaffirm that belief. This has challenged me to the extent that, in response, I cut all my hair off, in hopes that I could avoid these overreaches. This of course was just an easy fix to the bigger issue, the problem of colonization, the many legacies of slavery, how white people feel like they can own black bodies. Easy fixes can be fast acting, which is sometimes what is needed despite the fact that they do not address the cause of the problem. We see this in the idea of the "problem tree", we cut the branches off, but can never get to the root of the issue because it is more difficult, and takes more time. Reaching down to the roots is much more impactful and long lasting.

Despite the oppressive nature of the educational system at large, my schooling experience has been privileged. I have had the privilege to reject knowledge. In the book *Teaching to Transgress* written by Bell hooks a black, feminist author. Bell Hooks writes about the challenge of knowledge offered in oppressive circumstances "... as water that contains some dirt. Because you are thirsty you are not too proud to extract the dirt and be nourished by the water" (Hooks, 56). In my educational experience, I have not had to sift through knowledge to extract the dirt. I have two parents that speak the language of oppression and have the ability to code switch, to be respected in oppressive (covertly white) spaces. I say this term because most of all the teachers and students in my elementary school were black, though the people who owned the charter school were white and in complete administrative power. My parents were seen in a way that many other parents couldn't be because of the way that they spoke and the jobs where they work. By virtue of the way racist biases operate, their identities allow them to be listened to and respected in spaces where not all black people may have a voice. Growing up I was aware of how they had power where my peers' parents may not have had a voice. It would be amazing if any of us, no matter how oppressed, could make it out of this system without internalizing any of these messages that we have learned for the majority of our youth. Without being afraid, or thinking that we are less than, and for some, that our life is more valuable. We are fed a lie that this system only hurts the "oppressed". In reality, this system hurts everyone in different ways, many of this hurt evolves into fear.

FEAR

On my mom's birthday, a year and a half ago I got my drivers license. If you have gotten your license you know the feeling when you first start driving, having independence at your fingertips. I would drive almost everyday in the summer, windows down, cruising down the highway listening to Boo'd up by Ella Mai with my hair flying in the wind. One of these summer days my

parents called, asking my older brother and I to get some food from Trader Joe's. We made it to the parking lot, and as I parked I scraped the car next to us. Sitting in the car was an old man immediately he jumped out, slamming his car door and demanded my insurance, while furiously snapping pictures of both of the cars. While I was apologizing, my brother called my parents explaining the situation. Although they weren't particularly upset I still felt responsible and vulnerable to be judged by my friends and family.

When I got home I layed on the living room carpet and cried myself to sleep. My parents told my brother and I to wait till my mom got home to call the person whose car I hit to see if he would file a claim. Once my mom was home she called him, and he said that he wasn't going to file a claim because he goes out of town often and doesn't use the car. During the phone call she made sure to enunciate more than usual, and made sure that the end of her words were sharp. Part of why this situation went the way it did is because my mom can pass for "white" on the phone, and sometimes my brother and I can "pass" for mixed.

In *Teaching to Transgress* by Bell Hooks she says "Deep-seated is the fear that any de-centering of western civilizations, of the white male image is really an act of cultural genocide" (Hook 32). Shortly after the car accident in the Trader Joe's parking lot, I realized that I had internalized the white male image unintentionally. The fear in this was that in order to survive I would have to be perceived as being white enough to "pass". Going to school this message was reaffirmed and I didn't know if there was enough space in the classroom for an array of different perspectives. What is the fear in creating space for this? Why is knowledge power?

I reflect back to enslaved African people in the U.S. and why it was so dangerous for them to be able to read, why learning to read English, or speaking the original language of their home country was forbidden. At first, for people who were enslaved, it was an act of rebellion to learn English and break it up in a way so that the master couldn't understand, often referred to now as ebonics. This is frowned upon in our society because it is connected to being the language that is spoken in the "hood". If you truly "make it out", which is to say escape the poverty and oppression native to the black experience in the U.S., a skill you'll need to have is to be able to code switch, to and from ebonics when in certain situations. Circumstances that arise in a majority white space, or when at an interview, or at work, or when talking to the police. As a black person I code switch so much that eventually I fear that I won't be able to switch back, and that I won't be able to go back to my "hood" or if I do my community members will think that I'm too good to speak ebonics. Though none of this equates to actual knowledge, we continually confuse using "proper english" to intellectual capacity. We have become accustomed and brainwashed to never be content and think that what we have is not good enough so consistently we always end up chasing the "American Dream" and some form of consumerism. In that chase we not only lose some part of ourselves, but also the ability to go back into our community.

When did the switch happen from using knowledge as a passage to freedom, or as a form of rebellion to now thinking of knowledge as something that we must do to get a "good job"? How can the current education system claim to be providing freedom when we begin to get trapped in hundred of thousands of dollars in debt? Have we lost the true definition of freedom? Did we ever have it?

“Fearful of Freedom. Freedom would require them to eject this image and replace it with autonomy and responsibility” (Ferie 47)

In order to switch back to thinking of knowledge as a passage to freedom it would require us to move fearlessly towards something different than what we currently call normal education. We must replace the idea of a college education being freedom, to thinking of learning as being the only path to liberty. Right now, we mistake the classroom with being the only place of learning but I contend that *truly* living life is authentic learning. I am not sure if we ever had the true definition of freedom, but I am convinced that we used to chase freedom at least. Now, we have begun to get complacent in what we know and how we live the chase, and moving towards freedom has become stalled. This complacency is reflected in the comfort of our job and lifestyle without meaningful questioning.

In *Joyful Militancy* the authors Montgomery and Bergman traveled around to interview an array of different people. Throughout our education, the author’s observe “we learn to internalize incessant evaluation by externally imposed standards”(Montgomery and Bergman).

A lot of education is based on unhealthy, toxic competition that mirrors how we will go out and be in the wider world. We strive to get an A on a piece of paper at the end of each semester and this is a determining factor of our worth as human beings. We see who gets the highest numbers on standardized tests and use those numbers to determine how successful or unsuccessful their future will be. In this, there is no time for celebration of the little victories. For example the celebration of when we are able to show compassion without being asked to. The grading system allows us to compare ourselves in toxic ways, within relative standards. It makes it so there is a winner and a loser, and as long as we are the winner, do we stop to think about how the loser feels? This sets us up on a path of unawareness, and unconcern for the people that surround us, like our community members, or family. As a result we see that in our later life we are no longer to exist within a community.

“One can hate the Empire as much as one wants, as long as one continues to work, pay rent, and consume.” (Montgomery and Berman 139)

Though traditional school is something that most of us really do not enjoy doing, we continue to do it because we are taught to endure things even if they no longer serve us. We are told from older generations that “they survived, and so we should too.” We should continue to work, pay rent, and consume. We are told from the school that if we don’t do well, or don’t follow the given path, that we will completely ruin our future. Our parents tell us that we have to do better than they did, meaning get farther in the schooling system than they were able to. We must internalize our hate for the empire.

For people who were able to be first generation college students, knowledge is power and privilege in a different way. It is a different type of privilege because it was something that was so foreign and that they never thought they would have access to. To be able to go back to the

place we call home and say “we made it!” this is a celebration and the goal. Schooling is no longer about learning but, it is merely about survival. To get an A, you have to follow orders, raise your hand, and stand in line. I have a strong belief that if we can begin to build community around learning, and stretch learning outside of the classroom we could prepare students for something other than student loan debt, and a good job. What is the current education system preparing students for? Or what is it preparing *certain* students for?

How can we become empowered to do something different, to use our voices even though for years we have been told to be quiet? Why is it so difficult for us to imagine something other than the system that we have now? These are the questions that I am still trying to seek answers to myself also. Along with you I hope to encourage you to bring your childish imagination to the table in order to dream of something better for yourself, and for the generations yet to come. The longer that we our minds are suppressed the harder it becomes for us to attempt dreaming. To empower ourselves we must completely change the way that we think about learning. We must be willing to take risks and stray away from the “oppressed mindset”. We have been making repairs on the burning building of education for too long.

BANKING SYSTEM

In the book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, author Paulo Freire, a Brazilian educator and philosopher says of the aim of schools “Worse yet it turns them into containers, into receptacles to be filled by the teacher” (Freire, 72).

The banking system of education is the current system that the majority of schools use, this system believes that students are empty vessels that need to be filled with the knowledge of the teacher. In this system, the teacher has something that the student wants and needs, this system does not account for the prior knowledge that students come in with. This poses a danger because it is essentially an erasure and devaluing of what the students have learned from living, from family, from culture. It is an attempt to standardize, because it would be too difficult to hold space for the individualism of children.

A way to counter this system is to rotate who the “banker” is so that it isn’t the same person always being the one to provide the community with “knowledge”. In this we would have to completely rethink the way in which we “teach”, doing so would require humility, and maybe loss of a bit of ego. This ego would be lost because we would recognize that we cannot as an individual hold all of the answers. We would have to welcome that like many things in life there are many answers and many sides to the story, a lot of the time we won’t have one answer, or maybe no answer at all. To go against the banking system we must encourage conversations about topics and allow what we think of as truth to be picked apart.

It must be scary being a teacher in this day and age, to know that the way that knowledge used to be thought of is changing. Something that was once a solid, non-changing thing and is now becoming more like water, something that moves, and changes as we start to gain a better understanding of learning. It must be scary to feel like your job is threatened by the people that you teach. The original intent of the system was to teach people so that one day they would become as great or greater than you.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF WHO WE ARE

Is it possible to acknowledge who we are as a passage to who we are becoming, and when I say becoming, I mean to step into our greatest potential. Many of our greatest fear is our own power. Poet Marianne Williamson writes,

“Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate.
Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure.
It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us.”

I tried really hard to think of a story about a time where I had to acknowledge a part of myself. How one moment was the key for me to step into my greatness. As I began to think I realized that from the moment I was born I had to know who I am in this world purely just to survive. I had to be aware of my blackness, and where I put it, and how I wore it, and kept it, and loved it. I had to do this not as much for myself but because my parents wanted me to live, they wanted me to live through the police stops, or the following around in stores. I had only dolls that resembled me growing up, with curls that hugged the comb as I tried to pull it through, just like my own hair. Though when going to school I was taught contradictory of what my home taught me, though I loved those curls, the school taught me that straight blonde hair was better, maybe unintentionally. In school, most of the heroes in American history were majority white. In my household, my parents who are my heroes are black. It was a consistent wrestling and trying to figure out who to believe with schooling.

The act of acknowledgement alone is not enough, along with the acknowledgement must come action.

Contradictory to what school teaches us, I believe that if we have a better understanding of who we are and where we come from we will be able to fight in a more compassionate, loving way for the things that we believe in. When I say loving I understand that usually this burden to fight “lovingly” is put on those who have been oppressed for far too long as a way to silence. Often times this pattern can be observed as part of an oppressive regime, “... oppressed people are expected to stay in oppressive relationships and their refusal is dismissed as counterproductive” (Montgomery, Bergman 125). As a counter to this we have to treat youth as individual unique beings and consider who they are as we strive to teach successfully.

COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS

As my art portion of final project I decided that there was no way for me to embody what it means to build community, to be seen, and to learn in a visual art piece. The only way that I could think of to build community was to just do it myself. I decided that I wanted to host an event where I invited local and Oxbow community members to a comfortable space to have meaningful conversations about different topics. The biggest thing that I wanted to do is make sure that everyone could feel “seen”. Going on into that endeavor was more difficult than I thought it would be, I fought with my own internalized boundaries, and fought not compare my work to what other people were doing. I cried, and I yelled, and I danced, and I ranted. One of the most difficult things about bringing something like a strong communal learning space into existence is that it was hard for me to explain to other people, and many times the explanation of my project would be followed by “Well, okay... So, what are you gonna do for the art portion?”

To create the physical space that I wanted I decided to sew pillows that people could sit on, on the ground, this idea was inspired by Ethiopian culture, and how at many of the restaurants they offer ground seating with a comfy seating area. Next, I knew that I wanted to offer some type of food, and I loved the idea of breaking bread, because it was the symbol of community. Instead of buying some bread from the store I asked a teacher if they could help me make some bread. Bread was harder than I expected, I compared the bread making process to having a baby. Through the bread making process, people offered to pitch in and help and before I realized it there were five people around me, laughing and chatting while making bread. This was making community through making bread. Later that day I picked kale with yet another person who offered to help, and ran around campus with a different person who offered to help me make salad dressing.

The day of the event I decided to root myself in gratitude for all the people who helped me get to the point, I realized that without the village none of what I was doing would’ve been possible. I thought the event was very successful, together through intergenerational, race, and sexuality barriers we engaged in conversation about what own on educational experience through addressing different parts of our identity.

After the event I sent out anonymous surveys and here are some of the response that I got:

Me: Did you learn anything new from the event? If so, what did you learn?

Anonymous answer 3: I learned that a sense of acceptance and belonging facilitate new insight. I learned that intergenerational discourse provides insight that is not reached in a more homogeneous group. I also learned a lot about the people in the room. I was reminded that experience forms deeper memories. I was reminded that food builds bridges.

Anonymous answer 4: It was later realised the depth of questions. Was curious about most folks reaction to process. They seemed nervous. A need to "do it right." Also realised the gentle, very gentle presentation was effective to reveal the deep revelations from participants. Again realised all that later. As I shared with you before.

Me: Is there anything you wish we would've talked about/done?

Anonymous answer 2: I would have liked to have talked about what possible solutions there are to change the educational system for the better. For example, I personally think that nothing we do to change the educational system will work unless we, as a community and a nation, change our perceptions and actions towards racism and/or poverty.

Of course, due to time constraints, that kind of discussion would have been another session or two.

Me: Is there any other constructive criticism/comments that you'd like to add?

Anonymous answer 1: I will never forget my surprise at the beautiful loaves of bread. As you fed us, you shared your spirit and invited us to share ours, cradling them together in a circle of your hand-sewn pillows. Ancient symbols made substantive, now a permanent treasured memory of mine.

CONCLUSION

When I was in second grade I would constantly be moved from table to table for being too talkative. Each new table that I got moved to, in the matter of minutes I'd become friends with the people and begin talking again. Never did this teacher pose ways new ways for me to engage in the class, or try to teach me the value in listening. In an interview by Carla Bergman and Nick Montgomery a child, Lilah Joy Bergman a nine year old said, "I don't need to be empowered by adults; I need them to stop having power over me." Through that experience in elementary school I realized that not only did this system have power over my physical body but over my voice and control over where I had to be, and what I could say, and when. That is why I feel like it is crucial to create a space where on the other side of the fear and pain we can have activists who feel empowered to share their voice.

After elementary school, my parents decided to pull me out of traditional brick school and begin homeschooling my brother and I. For all of middle school we did online classes with a lot of extracurriculars to keep up busy and engaged in our community. In 11th grade, my brother decided to return back to a traditional school. For me homeschooling was a good fit, and allowed me to dig deeper into what I was interested in. At the end of 10th grade I applied to a semester school for the fall of my Junior year, I got accepted and was headed off to Wisconsin, after getting back from that school I knew that I needed to be surrounded by a community that was grounded in learning, and new experiences. So, I went to another semester program in Maine, then after that one I came here to Oxbow.

A common thread that I have seen at all of the semester schools that I have attended and all of the books that I read in preparation to write this paper is the idea of community being the basis for a strong learning environment.

*"Love doesn't just sit there, like a stone. It has to be made like bread; remade all the time, made new."
(Bergman, Montgomery, 216)*

In my project I decided that by making bread I could create a space where in order for it to work it would require something bigger than myself. Many hands supported me and creating this community. As I made bread over and over, and took care of it I laughed , and had conversations. I reminded myself to look up and see every single person that surrounded me as I began this endeavour. Growing up in Detroit, I gained the skills necessary to go out into the wider world and build community, I am surrounded by a village that my parents helped create. They realized the value because we are stronger together than apart. I have attempted to be as compassionate, loving, and fearless as I possibly can. If the village has taught me anything it has been that I must constantly move towards freedom, and for me at this current time in my life that means to chase after learning, and life, and stars, and dreams. Freedom to me looks like the questioning of a lot of the things that we call normal. I know to become free I must not only free myself but the people around me, and the people who oppress me. Freedom is one of the hardest, most painful acts that one can attempt.

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