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Subject: Teaching Toolbox: Abolitionist Teaching

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## **Abolitionist Teaching**

by Joshua Rashon Streeter and Daisy L. Breneman

In the fall of 2020, we (Daisy and Joshua) facilitated a CFI Read & Dialogue group focused on [Dr. Bettina Love's](#) *We Want to Do More than Survive: Abolitionist Teaching and the Pursuit of Educational Reform* (2019). Along with a group of twelve participants, from all over campus, we spent four weeks discussing and grappling with the themes of abolitionist teaching and educational equity. Love states, "This book is about mattering, surviving, resisting, thriving, healing, imagining, freedom, love, and joy: all elements of abolitionist work and teaching" (2). In addition to reading Love's text, the Read & Dialogue group worked to build a professional learning community, provide space to listen and share, and develop action items based on our discussion.

Inspired by our dialogue within the (online) faculty learning community, we here outline and discuss some of key aspects of abolitionist teaching. We invite you to wrestle with these concepts and ideas, recognize educational systems that support structural racism, work in solidarity with marginalized communities, and use "imagination, creativity, refusal, (re)membering, visionary thinking, healing, rebellious spirit, boldness, determination, and subversives... to eradicate injustice in and outside of schools" (Love 2).

In this Toolbox, we each write from our own perspectives, honoring and acknowledging our different identities and positionalities that shape and inform what we are taking away from the book. We do this to hold space for one another and to practice listening. Then, we conclude with a shared perspective. This offers an example of how to sustain dialogue together and collaboratively work towards new knowledge production. Through this exchange, we hope to honor Love's work, without appropriating it. There is no "good person badge" to be earned, but instead authentic recognition of the lived experiences of Brown and Black bodies, confrontation of power imbalances, and insights into how our different responsibilities and relationships to dismantling oppression can work toward liberation.

### **Educational survival and freedom dreaming**

Joshua: Education, for Brown and Black bodies, is seen as an equalizer. However, systems (and the people within the systems) do not recognize the daily fight for [folx](#) living within the system. This fight, as Love puts it, is about survival. The struggle for survival was created and is maintained by the very system we uphold. Multiple policies, practices, and processes make it extremely challenging for Brown and Black bodies to find success in the educational system. In her book, Love notes that the "educational survival complex has become so rationalized and normalized" (101). Building upon the principles of [Freire's](#) radical imagination, Love (2018) suggests that historically "an abolitionists' greatest tool against injustice were their imaginations. Their imaginations fueled resistance" (102). With this in mind, White, Brown,

and Black bodies can come together to “*freedom dream*”: “Freedom dreaming gives teachers a collective space to methodically tear down the educational survival complex and collectively rebuild a school system” (Love 102). How we might work in solidarity to freedom dream, ideally creating a new system that focuses on educational equity?

### **Abolitionist teaching requires constant vigilance and reflection**

Daisy: In this book, Love strongly emphasizes that “understanding where we stand in relations to systems of privilege and oppression, and unlearning the habits and practices that protect those systems, which is lifelong work for all us, without exception” (118). As teachers, colleagues, community members, and humans, we all must engage in continual reflection, education, examination, questioning, challenging, and changing. This is a process, a way of being, not a destination (and definitely not a checklist). Without this kind of self-work, we can do more harm than good, and we can miss a lot. So many times throughout my career, I’ve “busted” myself in moments where I was really missing something or moments where I really screwed up. I *try* to be thoughtful; I *teach* about social justice; I *strive* to be keenly attuned to issues of inequity and injustice and actively make efforts to create equitable and inclusive spaces around me. And, yet, I still make mistakes. All. The. Time. [Now what?](#) We all will make [mistakes](#). So, we attempt to take accountability, work hard to mend the harm created using authentic apologies and other repairs, actively change what we’re doing or saying or thinking, educate others, and keep learning more. This is what abolitionist teaching, and living, offers and requires.

### **Mattering**

Joshua: Focusing on Brown and Black bodies, Love notes that “the very basic idea of mattering is sometimes hard to conceptualize when your country finds you disposable” (2). And, yet, Brown and Black bodies have mattered to communities and families of color for generations. I am reminded of [Amanda Gorman’s recent experience and post](#) that offers a glimpse into a vividly real truth for people of color as they move through the world. In the post, she shares her experience being tailed by a security guard who believed she didn’t belong outside her own apartment building because she “looked suspicious.” Love states, “Mattering has always been the job of Black, Brown, and Indigenous folx since the ‘human hierarchy’ was invented to benefit Whites by rationalizing racist ideas of biological inferiority to ‘those Americans who believe that they are White.’” (7-8). Therefore, we must all work to build a community, a place, and a space where we are willing to “love, protect, and understand” Brown and Black individuals ([Love, 2019](#)). Love reminds us that “demanding the impossible” means that “systems will not be dismantled because we ask, but rather that they will be dismantled because we fight” (7). Centering BIPOC folx and their work, which requires the decentering of Whiteness, helps BIPOC students and faculty know that they matter.

### **Intersectionality and coalition building**

Daisy: Abolitionist teaching centers [anti-racist pedagogy](#) and [critical race theory](#), and it does so with an [intersectional, coalition-building](#) approach. As Audre Lorde noted, “[there is no hierarchy of oppressions](#)”—no one experiences just one identity at a time, and both oppression and liberation are intersectional. In [Pleasure Activism](#), adrienne maree brown notes that while marginalized folks have been conditioned to operate separately and in competition due to scarcity mindsets, we must shift to

abundance mindsets: we are enough, there is enough, and we gain by giving power and resources to others. While sometimes certain exigent issues must be prioritized, especially in times of crisis, we also all lose out if we aren't approaching issues with solidarity, and taking [collective accountability](#) for each other's liberation. Love argues "our schools and our teaching practices do not need to be reimagined; they need to be torn down and replaced with our freedom dreams rooted in participatory democracy and intersectional justice" (123).

### **Confronting Whiteness to move from "ally to conspirator"**

Joshua: As with all anti-racist and anti-bias education, the self or internal work must be done before working to change any larger systems. Love reminds us that allyship can center Whiteness, as it does not always engage in decentering, questioning, or risk-taking. Instead of finding a middle ground or something mutually beneficial, conspiratorship is about "deep personal reflection" before "taking up space in spaces that are trying to build, heal, and tear down" (Love 119). Co-conspirators work within, through, and with brown and Black bodies and decenter themselves (see "[Making the Transition from Ally to Co-Conspirator](#)" and "[Black Lives Matter, Black Power, and the Role of White Allies](#)"). Love states, "White folk cannot be conspirators until they deal with the emotionality of being White. Studying Whiteness, White rage, and violence is a fundamental step to moving from ally to coconspirator" (144). Therefore, a study of Whiteness must be present alongside an investigation into critical race theory, culturally responsive pedagogy, and social justice education.

### **Change happens on all levels**

Daisy: Abolitionist teaching has to happen in our own hearts and minds, and in how we treat others on an interpersonal level, and institutionally, and on a global scale. In [Emergent Strategy](#), adrienne maree brown explores this "strategy for building complex patterns and systems of change through relatively small interactions" and practicing an "adaptive, relational way of being, on our and with others" (2). It's often easy to get overwhelmed and want to opt out: there is no opting out. We're either working toward abolition or we are contributing to oppression. So start right here, right now. Read more about [supporting BIPOC colleagues](#). Today, do something that supports anti-racism in [yourself](#), your [classroom](#), your unit, this campus, the world.

### **Recognition of trauma, importance of care**

Daisy: The violence of lived experience of oppression creates trauma. Love emphasizes that it's important to recognize both trauma and that people are more than their trauma. Higher education is a space designed, historically and on an ongoing basis, to be exclusive, for and by members of dominant groups. Students, faculty, and staff who are marginalized (based on race, gender, sexual orientation, disability, class, religion, or for other reasons) are navigating a space fundamentally not designed for us, which requires resources, resilience, and energy. Abolitionist teaching must [account for trauma](#), must create spaces for care and accountability, and must help reshape and redesign spaces where all matter and belong.

### **Survival and joy**

Joshua and Daisy: It's in the title of the book: *We Want to Do More than Survive*. But, right now, in this dangerous moment, with so many intersecting crises, just survival takes a lot of work. However, we continue to hold space for the seed of something that might be hope. Hope that the pain and exhaustion will yield something better. As Love writes, "The goal must be pursuing freedom at all costs as a collective group of abolitionism-minded people who welcome struggle" (161). As we work toward that goal, it's also essential to embrace "[Black joy](#)"—that while there is trauma (don't get us wrong), there is more than trauma: "embracing Black joy is loving seeing dark people win, thrive, honor their history, and be fully human" (121). As teachers, we need to think about finding moments in the curriculum to celebrate and honor the contributions and gifts of BIPOC individuals, as much as we help all students understand and recognize systemic racism. Additionally, it is our responsibility, as teachers, to uplift, honor, and make space for our Black and Brown students—it is not just about survival. "Knowing that your struggle for freedom is constant but that there is beauty in the camaraderie of creating a just world" (Love 120).

### **Abolitionist teaching happens in relationship**

Joshua and Daisy: This is not a set of practices that we apply in your classrooms or a checklist we can complete. This is a way of approaching this beautiful adventure we call teaching. It is a way of being, in the classroom and in the world, with each other. Love writes that we need to recognize power imbalances in order to create "authentic relationships of solidarity and mutuality" to do this work, which is inherently relational work (118). We write this in collaboration, and in connection with you, with others. We invite you to join us continuing to build coalitions for abolitionist teaching, for liberation.

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To offer feedback about this Toolbox or any others, feel free to use [this anonymous Google form](#) or contact Emily Gravett ([graveteo@jmu.edu](mailto:graveteo@jmu.edu)) directly. For additional information about the CFI's Teaching Toolboxes, including PDFs of past emails, please visit: <https://www.jmu.edu/cfi/teaching/other/teaching-toolbox.shtml>.