



Edited by Maysoun Sukarieh & Stuart Tannock

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EDUCATORS IN  
GRASSROOTS  
CONTEXTS

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# Radical Educators in Grassroots Contexts

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Edited by Mayssoun Sukarieh and Stuart Tannock

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Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 50 Bedford Square, London, WC1B 3DP, UK  
Bloomsbury Publishing Inc, 1385 Broadway, New York, NY 10018, USA  
Bloomsbury Publishing Ireland, 29 Earlsfort Terrace, Dublin 2, D02 AY28, Ireland

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First published in Great Britain 2026

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A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

A catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

ISBN: HB: 978-1-3505-8361-0  
ePDF: 978-1-3505-8362-7  
eBook: 978-1-3505-8363-4

Typeset by Integra Software Services Pvt. Ltd.

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*This book is dedicated to the loving memory of Fadel Sukarieh,  
Mayssoun's father, a radical educator in his own time.*



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## Contributors

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**Julian Boal** is a leading practitioner, researcher, and teacher of Theatre of the Oppressed, who is based in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Boal has facilitated workshops on Theatre of the Oppressed in countries around the world, worked directly with many of the best-known Theatre of the Oppressed groups—including Jana Sanskriti in India, the Groupe de Théâtre de l'Opprimé in France, and Óprima! in Portugal—and published several books on Theatre of the Oppressed, including most recently, *Theatre of the Oppressed and Its Times*. In 2017, Boal established the Escola de Teatro Popular in Rio with Geo Britto as a school that aims to teach political theatre to social movement activists in Brazil.

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**Munir Fasheh** is one of Palestine's best-known learning theorists and practitioners, who founded the Tamer Institute for Community Education in Ramallah in 1989, a center that is dedicated to creating and promoting nonformal learning environments in Palestine. In 1997, Fasheh founded the Arab Education Forum at Harvard University's Center for Middle Eastern Studies, which extended his work on nonformal education in Palestine across the entire Arab region. Fasheh also participates actively in global networks of theorists, practitioners, and activists who are dedicated to developing transformative spaces of nonformal education that are rooted in local communities as an alternative to the formal education system.

**Manish Jain** is co-founder of Shikshantar: The People's Institute for Re-thinking Education and Development, established in 1998 in Udaipur, India; as well as Swaraj University, set up by Shikshantar in 2010 as a small experimental learning community, also located in Udaipur, based on the principle and practice of self-designed learning. Through his work with these centers, Jain has become known as one of the world's foremost critics of traditional schooling, and as an ardent proponent of unschooling or deschooling.

**Alexia Leclercq** is a community organizer who works for PODER (People Organized in Defense of Earth and Her Resources), an indigenous and Latin-led grassroots environmental justice organization in East Austin, Texas, that Leclercq first joined as an intern while still in school. In the early 2020s, Leclercq gained national recognition as a youth climate activist in the United States as part of a wider phenomenon of youth leading on global environment and climate action. Leclercq has also co-founded a social and environmental justice education nonprofit called Start: Empowerment.

**Chukki Nanjundaswamy** is chair of the Amrita Bhoomi Learning Center in Karnataka, India, a center created in 2002 with the support of the Karnataka

Rajya Raitha Sangha, the Karnataka farmers' movement, initially as a seed bank to save local seed varieties and relaunched in 2014 as a farmer-to-farmer school for teaching agroecology. Amrita Bhoomi serves as an Agroecology School for South Asia for the global La Via Campesina peasant movement, which seeks to restructure the global food system through a campaign of nonviolent resistance to hegemonic models of corporate agriculture, and promotion of an alternative model based on the principle of food sovereignty. **Ram Shree** and **Luca Montanari** both work with the Amrita Bhoomi Agroecology School in Karnataka.

**Sibila Sotomayor Van Rysseghem** and **Daffne Valdés Vargas** are co-founders of Colectivo LASTESIS, an interdisciplinary and feminist collective that was formed in 2018 in Valparaíso, Chile, to spread feminist theses and demands through combining performance, art and music with history, philosophy and social science. In addition to their performances, LASTESIS run workshops, give public lectures and media interviews, and write books and other texts on feminist theory, feminist demands, and methods of using performance to disseminate these widely.

**Maysoun Sukarieh** is a reader in Middle Eastern Studies in the Department of International Development at King's College London.

**Stuart Tannock** is an associate professor in Sociology of Education at the UCL Institute of Education, University College London.

**Kelly Teamey** is a co-founder of the Ecoversities Alliance, which was created in 2015 and has since become one of the most prominent global networks of alternative, radical education, bringing together 260 member organizations from over forty-seven countries in Latin America, North America, Europe, Asia, Africa, and the Pacific region. Since co-founding the Ecoversities Alliance, Teamey taught for a period at the School for International Training (SIT) in Vermont, before relocating to Hawaii, where she helped to set up the Enlivened Cooperative, a worker-owned, eco-social learning organization.

**Coumba Touré** is a feminist storyteller and popular educator, who was born in Mali and is now based in Dakar, Senegal. In the 1990s, Touré worked with the Institute for Popular Education in Mali, which had been founded by Malian popular educator Maria Diarra Keita. In 2009, Touré founded the Invisible

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**Salim Vally** is the National Research Foundation Chair in Community, Adult and Workers' Education at the University of Johannesburg in South Africa. Before entering academia, Vally played a leading role in the South African Students Movement struggle against apartheid in the 1970s and then spent over a decade working in the South African workers' movement as a trade union education officer. Vally is known for his work on radical workers' education in South Africa, and with the late Aziz Choudry, on social movement learning more generally.

**Dmitry Vilensky** is a co-founder of the Chto Delat collective that was formed in 2003 in St. Petersburg, Russia, by a group of artists, critics, philosophers, and writers. In 2013, Chto Delat set up the School of Engaged Art as a radical art education initiative, also based in St. Petersburg. From its origins, the School was repeatedly visited and raided by the police; but following Russia's war on Ukraine in 2022, the School came under increased pressure and ended up closing down, with core members of Chto Delat leaving Russia as political exiles. Vilensky moved to Berlin, Germany, where he and other Chto Delat members launched the School of Emergencies as a transdisciplinary school for artists, writers, researchers, and activists to collectively cultivate models of strategic survivance in the context of war, crisis, and exile.

**Susan Williams** is a popular education who worked at the Highlander Folk School (known subsequently as the Highlander Research and Education Center and recently renamed as Highlander: The Movement School) for over thirty-five years. In addition to working as a popular educator and organizer, Williams also worked during the latter years of her career at Highlander as an archivist, preserving, curating, and sharing with new generations the Center's long, rich history of social movement education.



# Introduction

In a time of social, political, economic, and environmental crisis, there is growing recognition of the need for a radical education for social transformation. Whether confronting climate change, environmental degradation and biodiversity collapse, endemic racism and enduring systems of neo-imperialism and colonialism, genocide in Palestine, broken promises of social mobility and rising economic inequality, political extremism, social fragmentation, and cultural alienation, many now call for a form of education that does not teach us how to fit into the world as it currently exists, to gain skills and knowledge to become good workers in the capitalist marketplace, but rather an education that enables and empowers us to change the world we live in, fosters our radical imagination, and enhances our tools of critique and strategies of collective action, so that we can together create another, more just and sustainable world in the future.

This call has led to a range of initiatives for change led by students and educators, families, and communities within the formal system of schools, colleges, and universities. We see new courses and topics added to the curriculum—on climate, sustainability and living in the Anthropocene, critical race theory, capitalism studies and heterodox economics, alternative models of development and post-development, and so forth. Movements like decolonize the curriculum and Black Lives Matter have argued for sweeping changes throughout the sector and engendered responses from school and university leaderships. Campaigns for educational justice continue to push for greater access, inclusion, and equality for all in formal education, and challenge the inequities and harms of public education under-funding and funding disparities. Student movements, most recently in the wave of Palestine solidarity campus encampments that dramatically swept across the United States and beyond during the spring of 2024, have challenged the sector's complicity in and support for militarism, occupation, apartheid, and genocide.

Such struggles are incredibly important. But in this book, we address these concerns from a different perspective, by trying to listen to and learn from the voices of educators who do much of their work outside of formal education in a range of nonformal, community, or grassroots contexts, in order to develop a theory and practice of education for radical social change. There are several reasons for taking this approach. One is the structural and cultural challenges of working in the formal education system to develop radical education for social change. A second is the historical reality that many of the most effective movements of radical education have started in grassroots, community, and social movement contexts, and only later moved into the formal education system itself. A third is the fact that most of the population is not in formal education; and indeed, many are blocked by lack of credentials, resources, or time from being able to access formal education, even if they wanted to do so.

If there is a need for rapid, radical, and collective learning for social change, then this will need to be done in schools and universities, but beyond them as well. There is, furthermore, the concern that education in nonformal, community, and grassroots contexts continues to be relatively ignored, overlooked, and marginalized, when compared to the vast amount of attention that gets paid to formal education. We believe this is a grave mistake and that the scales need to be reset, so that we can open our eyes, ears, and imagination to what the full extent of learning and education might look like and become inspired and moved to action by the often powerful education for social change that can and must be done beyond the school and outside the university.

## What Is Radical Education?

The conceptual framework we use in this book centers on the idea of radical education. By this, we mean education that is explicitly oriented to supporting collective projects of radically (or substantively) transforming society and the economy, to create a more just, equal, democratic, inclusive, and sustainable world than the one we live in now. Radical education is not a single tradition, but draws on a range of educational approaches, including popular, progressive, feminist, anti-racist, anti-colonialist, democratic, indigenous, labor, and environmental education (Sukarieh and Tannock 2016; Tannock 2021). Radical education overlaps with other commonly used terms, such as critical pedagogy, popular education, and political education. We use the term “radical education” as these other terms often have different meanings and limitations. Critical pedagogy

has tended to be a more school-centered approach and has been criticized for its separation from social movements and collective action (Cho 2013; Tarlau 2014). Popular education, which is one of the most influential forms of radical education around the world, has become strongly associated with Freireian approaches (e.g., Carrillo 2019), but there are forms of radical education that start in places other than the work of Paulo Freire. Political education is a term that is often used in labor, climate, and social movement contexts (Sen 2003). But it tends to be left undefined or poorly defined; what it typically refers to when invoked in these contexts is a particular form of (radical) political education (Tannock 2025).

While there are differences and conflicts among the approaches to radical education, these tend to share a set of core components. First, radical education begins by engaging with the experiences and interests of a particular, usually marginalized or oppressed community. This is what gives radical education its core *raison d'être*: it embraces, in Freireian terms, “a pedagogy which must be forged *with*, not *for* the oppressed” (Freire 2000, p. 48). This is a strategic and principled democratic commitment to grounding education in the experiences and interests of learners, to develop what Johnson (1983, p. 27) refers to as “really useful knowledge” that is “relevant to the experienced problems of life.” Second, radical education seeks to analyze and understand the root causes of the problems afflicting a community, through the study of social, political, and economic theory and history. This is the literal meaning of the term “radical,” which is “to seek (practically or theoretically) to uncover and uproot the roots, foundations, or origins of a problem or a project” (McLaughlin 2012, p. 19); and it is seen as essential for any project seeking substantive change in society. Third, radical education works to develop an alternative vision of how the world could and should be different—what is sometimes referred to as a “pedagogy of hope” (Freire 2004; hooks 2003) or “utopian pedagogy” (Coté, Day and de Peuter 2007). Haiven and Khasnabish (2014, p. 3) describe this as fostering the “radical imagination,” that they define as “the ability to imagine the world, life and social institutions not as they are but as they might otherwise be,” and “the courage and intelligence to recognize that the world can and should be changed.” Finally, radical education seeks to develop practical, strategic steps for action that can start to make changes in society and help get us from here to there. After all, the point of radical education is not just to do “education for education’s sake,” but to engage in education to enhance our collective ability to change the world (Herzing 2020). In practice, different models of radical education may give relatively more emphasis to one or another of these components, and

they often have different ways of addressing and interpreting each of these core components.

To speak of radical education is to focus attention on a particular orientation to education, one that seeks to develop education that enables and empowers educators, learners, their families, and communities to learn together how to transform the world to make it more just than it is today. This is in contrast to mainstream models of education that tend to be more concerned with socialization, social reproduction, or social control. But beyond this core orientation, radical education is necessarily context-dependent and open-ended. There is no set recipe or rule book for pedagogy, curriculum, assessment, educator-learner relationships and identities, or institutional forms. The concern is to begin with the experiences, interests, and needs of learners, and engage with the problems faced by these learners. Similarly, there is no set social theory or political ideology that puts its stamp across all radical education. Certainly, radical education is often linked to socialist, feminist, anti-imperialist, and anti-racist theory, as these are bodies of thinking that have been developed to address and understand some of the core structures that shape inequality and injustice in a patriarchal, racist, and capitalist society. But as a form of liberatory education, as opposed to propaganda, indoctrination or what Freire calls “banking education,” radical education needs to be understood as an open-ended process that invites learners to engage with these and other such ideas, make of them what they will, use (or not use) them, and adapt them to their own historical situations.

The value of focusing on the concept of radical education is that it groups together a rich history of educational projects that are focused on similar, overarching concerns from which we can learn as we seek to develop our own educational endeavors to enable us to confront the social, political, economic, and environmental struggles of our time. The frame of radical education helps to focus our attention on a core set of enduring challenges: not just about developing theoretical critiques and analyses of society and economy, and powerful utopian visions of a better world, as essential as these are; but also how to link these with the concerns of real individuals in local contexts, and mobilize critique and imagination into supporting effective collective action that can achieve substantive change in the world. There is now a small but growing literature on radical education. Moss and Fielding’s (2011) *Radical Education and the Common School* links radical education to progressive traditions of education, while Charkin and Suissa’s (2019) overview of radical education points to examples of homeschooling, anarchist, and libertarian education. Cooper’s (2020) *Workers*

*Education in the Global South: Radical Adult Education at the Crossroads* analyzes the history of radical labor education in the context of South Africa. Tannock's (2021) *Educating for Radical Social Transformation in the Climate Crisis* draws on radical education theory and practice to address the question of how we can develop effective education for fighting the climate crisis. An older, more extensive literature has looked at radical forms of adult and community education (Brookfield and Holst 2011; Foley 2001; Jesson and Newman 2004; Johnson 1983; Lovett 1994). One of the notable features of this literature is that, while it certainly includes a concern with doing radical education in the formal education system, much of it focuses on radical education outside this system, in a range of nonformal, community, social movement, and grassroots contexts.

## The Challenges for Radical Education in the Formal System

Formal education has always been a site of political, social, and cultural contradiction and contestation (Carnoy and Levin 1985; Gounari 2019). This has included not just struggles for access, inclusion, and equality, but fights over pedagogy, curriculum, assessment, and the broader purpose and aims of education. In most schools, colleges, and universities, we can find pockets of not just liberal and progressive but also radical social and political learning, action, and intent. These may be in the form of individual educators and students, collective and organized student and educator groups and unions, or specific classes, programs, extra-curricular activities, seminars, workshops, and designated course readings (e.g., Amsler and Canaan 2015; Cowden and Singh 2013).

Yet, at the same time, formal education can often be a challenging place for effective and sustained radical education projects. The social transformation aims of radical education tend to clash with the core organizing logic of formal schooling, namely its focus on socialization, social reproduction, and social control. Stevenson (2007) writes of this basic contradiction to explain the challenges of bringing effective environmental education into the school. Environmental education, argues Stevenson, “has the revolutionary purpose of transforming the values that underlie our decision making” to help create “a sustainable planet in which all people live with equal human dignity,” while the “intended function” and “traditional purpose” of schooling are “not to promote social change and reconstruction,” but rather to conserve “the existing social order” and reproduce dominant “norms and values” (pp. 144–5). Too

often, rather than radical education traditions transforming the school, they are themselves transformed, disciplined, and domesticated by the structures, practices, norms, and purposes of formal education once they enter its realm (Gruenewald and Manteaw 2007).

Education for radical (or fundamental) social change in the formal system is often viewed as suspect and problematic, more akin to propaganda, ideology, manipulation, or thought control (Harber 1991). Good teaching in this system is commonly framed as “neutral,” “objective,” “apolitical,” “balanced,” and “not taking sides” (Richards 2020). Legally, educators in schools and universities are generally banned from being “political” in the classroom; although, of course, there are questions about how exactly this is interpreted (Adams 2022; McLaverty and Thioune 2022). Radicalism tends to be construed as something to be avoided in the classroom. In the UK’s anti-terrorist Prevent legislation, for example, schools and universities have been given a duty to safeguard their students against “radicalization,” defined as “the act or process of making a person more radical or favouring of extreme or fundamental changes in political, economic or social conditions, institutions or habits of the mind” (Sukarieh and Tannock 2016, p. 30).

While such features have always been part of formal education, the already limited space for doing radical, critical education in schools and universities has diminished even further in recent decades, in the context of neoliberalism and marketization, rising credentialism, and vocationalism. Students and their families now often approach formal education as a route to good jobs and incomes, not to critique or transform society (Fischman and Gardner 2022); rising levels of student debt have only tended to reinforce such orientations, through what Williams (2006) refers to as the “pedagogy of debt.” Many educators and academics, as well as their managers, do not orient to projects of radical, critical education, but act more as “neoliberal subjects”: competitive, individualized, self-interested, and fully enmeshed in bureaucratic systems of measurement and accountability (Brown 2015). Formal education systems are funded and governed by political and economic elites: these elites sometimes seek to intervene directly to pressure schools and universities to suppress and eliminate everything from critical race theory to critique of capitalism, staff and student opposition to occupation, apartheid, ethnic cleansing, and genocide in Palestine (Giroux 2024; Goncalves et al. 2024).

We see these constraints playing out in the recent movement to decolonize education and challenge the ways in which colonialism, empire, and racism are “produced, consecrated, institutionalised and naturalised” across school

and university “classrooms, curricula and campuses” (Bhambra, Gebrial, and Niancioglu 2018, pp. 1, 5). While this movement has been remarkably successful in terms of its take-up by many school and university leaders—to the degree that Moosavi (2020) writes of a “decolonial bandwagon”—many proponents have spoken out about how the term has been co-opted, diluted, and turned into a buzzword, PR brand, or “acceptable institutional jargon” (Gopal 2021, p. 875; Saini 2020; Shringarpure 2020). As Adebisi (2020) complains:

Within a neoliberal university, lazy attempts at decolonisation run a considerable risk of being co-opted for tick-boxing and numbers-based diversity schemes that maintain and entrench the status quo .... Decolonisation is becoming a metaphor for ahistorical and performative attempts at social justice that do the opposite of the aims of decolonisation, i.e., rather than disrupt, these attempts preserve the university structure and reify Whiteness at the academy.

For Le Grange and colleagues (2020), this constitutes a form of “decolonial washing,” akin to the phenomenon of greenwashing. Some ask if decolonization is even possible within formal higher education, arguing that universities are “compromised institutions which remain complicit in ethnocentrism, elitism and exclusion to such an extent that perhaps they should be abandoned altogether” (Moosavi 2020, p. 342; see also Mayorga, Leidecker, and Orr de Guttierrez 2019).

A second reason for arguing that formal education constitutes a limited place for radical education projects is that, historically, most forms of radical education for social change have tended to develop outside the formal system, at least initially. In the US civil rights movement, to take one well-known example, formal education was certainly a central concern in collective efforts to desegregate schools and universities and achieve educational equality. But much of the radical education that drove the movement forward was done outside of formal education, in newly created educational spaces dedicated to social change and fighting structural racism, such as the Highlander Folk School, Citizenship Schools, and Freedom Schools. Myles Horton, the founder of Highlander, explains that “we deliberately chose to do our education outside the school system,” based on the belief that “reform within the system *reinforced* the system, or was co-opted by the system,” and that creating separate educational institutions would provide freedom “to do what we thought was the right thing to do in terms of the goals that we set for ourselves and the people we were working for” (Horton and Freire 1990, pp. 199–200). Charles Cobb, in helping to set up the Mississippi Freedom Schools in 1964, likewise argued that “if we are concerned with breaking the power structure, then we have to be concerned with

building up our own institutions to replace the old, unjust, decadent ones which make up the existing power structure” (Hale 2016, p. 115). Septima Clark, who became Director of Education at the Highlander Folk School, where she helped to create the Citizenship Schools that became central to the rise of the civil rights movement, had previously been fired from her job as a schoolteacher because of her activism with the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) (Payne 1995, p. 72).

This pattern shows up across space and time. Paulo Freire formed his influential approach to popular education at first through developing critical literacy classes with impoverished adult farmworkers in the northeast of Brazil, and later, from a life of exile, once he had been expelled from Brazil by the military dictatorship (Schugurensky 2011). Only later did Freire and others seek to incorporate this approach inside schools and universities. In the UK, the Black Supplementary Schools set up by African-Caribbean community members were not just to support the learning of Black children and youth who were being poorly served and discriminated against by the formal schooling system; they were also embedded within a broader Black Education Movement that mobilized to challenge structural racism in the school system and UK society more generally (George Padmore Institute 2011). Today, we see young climate and environmental student activists learning and mobilizing outside of and in spite of their schools and universities, calling on educational and political leaders to do more to address the climate and environment crisis (Tannock 2021).

A third consideration for the importance of looking beyond formal education when thinking about radical educational projects for social change is that, even with the global spread of mass education, most people are not currently in school or university; and all of us, even the most highly educated and credentialed, spend most of our learning lives not in but outside school. Today, 23 percent of the world’s population—over 1.7 billion people—is students (Blum 2024, p. 20). While this is a remarkably high number and proportion of students, it still means that the majority of the world’s population (77 percent or almost six billion people) is not students and not in school or university. If there is a need for urgent, radical social transformation, and if education is to play a role in facilitating this transformation, then this must include education outside of formal schooling. This is the realm of adult, continuing, nonformal, and community education.

This is one of the reasons why Myles Horton, in setting up the Highlander Folk School, made the decision to focus on adult and not child education. Horton wasn't hostile or prejudiced against children and young people as being important actors for social change; and indeed, he played a role in helping to set up the Mississippi Freedom Schools that catered primarily to African American children and youth (Hale 2007; Perlstein 1990). But while focusing on children and youth as agents of social change can appear empowering and inspiring, Horton argues that if this is not also accompanied by a strong commitment to intergenerational organizing and radical adult education, it can become a way to delay social change and defer social responsibility:

The idea of the Highlander Folk School ... was to try to use adult education as one of the main mechanisms for changing society. I had come to see that it was wrong for adults to always say: "The younger generation is going to change society," and then fix it so that it would be impossible for the young to do just that. I decided that if you're going to do anything about changing society—through education—it was to be with adults.

(Horton 2003, p. 11)

Not only do adults constitute the majority of the population in most countries, they also tend to have far more social, political, and economic power than children or youth do to be able to act collectively and effectively for social change. As most adults have work, family and/or other caring responsibilities, they are often unable to enroll directly in formal programs of education: an education for adults, then, will usually need to be a nonformal, community, or grassroots form of education.

In reflecting on the possibilities for carrying out effective radical education projects within or beyond the formal education system, it is also important to recall Illich's (1970) critique in *Deschooling Society* of the exclusionary nature of schools and universities. Since schooling is organized in a linear and hierarchical way and tends to make extensive claims on the time of students, it is inaccessible to much of the population, who lack the required credentials or time availability required to enroll in formal programs of study. We also need to recognize that decades of privatization and public funding cutbacks to formal education have made it increasingly difficult for many to access this education. In the UK, for example, the decade following the increase of university tuition fees in 2012 saw a rapid collapse of mature and part-time students entering the higher education sector (Butcher 2017; OfS 2020). There are vital education justice battles to be fought to make formal education more accessible to all, by challenging its

credentialism, structure, curriculum, pedagogy, and prohibitively high costs. But, at the same time, there are also reasons for arguing that radical education projects, to be effective and successful, need to be developed not just within formal education but outside it as well. Indeed, the history of the US civil rights movement suggests that developing radical education outside of schools and universities may be essential for building the power, mobilization, and vision that can eventually start to bring about real change within institutions of formal education themselves.

### Education Outside the School: Nonformal, Community, Popular, and Grassroots

Our interest in this book is thus in exploring examples of radical education done largely outside the formal education system of schools, colleges, and universities. This is a space that is often ignored, overlooked, and marginalized in education theory, research, and policy, as education is commonly identified with schooling or formal education only. The very idea of an “educated” person tends to be construed as someone who has gone to school, college, or university, and received grades, diplomas, and certificates as markers of their educational achievements. “Formal education has long been the preferred daughter of educational theorizing while nonformal education has been relegated to the position of an exotic or poor relative,” write Bekerman, Burbules, and Silberman-Keller (2007, p. 2): “For the most part, policymakers ... regard much of non-formal education as supplemental, marginal, or recreational—i.e., not centrally important.” The vast educational space that exists beyond the schooling system is also a messy and confusing terrain that is referred to by a range of different and overlapping terms.

In academic research, a common distinction is often drawn between formal, nonformal, and informal education. In this model, formal education “refers to the institutional ladder that goes from preschool to graduate studies,” as a highly bureaucratic, state-regulated, linear, hierarchical, and credentialized system of organized learning; nonformal education “refers to all organized educational programs that take place outside the formal school system, and are usually short-term and voluntary”; and informal learning constitutes all of the incidental, intentional, and planned learning that occurs in everyday life, “outside the curricula provided by formal and non-formal educational

institutions and programs” (Schugurensky 2000, pp. 1–2). Nonformal education is often defined in contrast or opposition to formal schooling, as alternative, flexible, creative, nonlinear, nonhierarchical, voluntary and learner-driven, community-based, and free from the requirements to have standardized forms of pedagogy, curriculum, assessment, and credentials; as such, it is believed to open up possibilities for and access to kinds of learning and types of learners not well served by formal education (Jackson 2023).

But while the formal-nonformal-informal framework can seem to present a clear and simple mapping out of the broad social field of education, there are problems with the nonformal education concept. One is that this is not a term that is regularly used by educators, learners, and communities engaged in this kind of education: it is thus not a term that is meaningful or sensible for them. Indeed, the term originated in the late 1960s in top-down international development contexts, promoted by analysts working with organizations such as the World Bank, United Nations, and United States Agency for International Development. During the 1970s and 1980s, “nonformal education” was promoted by these groups in response to the failure of the global expansion of formal education to stimulate economic development and build up human capital in the way it had been promised to do (Perraton 2000; Rogers 2005). In Brazil, Catini (2021, p. 3) argues that the concept of nonformal education was mobilized “as a state strategy for converting the political orientation of the education for the popular classes during the Brazilian military dictatorship, eliminating or neutralizing the strength” of popular education approaches that had been developed by Freire and others. This political and ideological history, in itself, is a reason to avoid making extended use of this conceptual framework.

There are other concerns with the concept of nonformal education. It is defined negatively, in terms of what it is not—i.e., formal education—which positions formal education as the primary and central type of education in society. This is strange as nonformal education is actually the historical norm and “has been the most common kind of education for most people around the world until recent history” (Jackson 2023, p. 104). For most of the world’s population—namely, that overwhelming majority of people who are not currently enrolled as students in the formal education system—nonformal (and informal) education remains the most common form of education. As nonformal education is defined in opposition to formal education, it has sometimes been idealized and romanticized by critics of formal education as being inherently liberating, radical, and empowering, “a kind of miracle worker that can crush the imperial

monopoly, elitism, and inequities of the formal education system” (Coombs 1976, p. 281; see also Rogers 2005). But nonformal education refers to a wide variety of educational programs, ranging “from political workshops to tennis courses, second language programs, driving lessons, cooking classes, yoga classes, rehabilitation programs, painting courses, training programs, or professional development” (Schugurensky 2007, p. 164). While nonformal education may sometimes serve radical, liberating, and empowering political agendas, and take on forms strikingly different to what is typically found in the formal education system, it can also be just as “classist, alienating, bureaucratic, ineffective, costly, obsolete, manipulative, stereotyped, unifying ... as the formal [system] can be” (Trilla 2003, as quoted in Catini 2021, p. 2).

Education done outside the school and university system is also sometimes talked about as community education. Fitzsimons (2017, pp. 3–4) defines community education as:

any localised, structured adult learning that happens outside of traditional institutions such as schools and colleges. This can be within specialist adult education centres, in community buildings, literacy support centres, independent community sector organisations, charities, training centres, health centres, in churches, unoccupied social housing, people’s homes and whatever other premises are available to providers and groups.

Smith (2014) suggests that “we can approach community education as ‘education for community within community,’” arguing that it is not just the place or location where it occurs that defines community education, but also that it is intended to serve the needs and interests of a given community. Unlike the strangeness of the term nonformal education, the concept of community education brings together ideas and images that are part of everyday speech and thus recognizable and meaningful to most people.

But beyond this surface-level sense of familiarity, community education also turns out to be something of a difficult and problematic term. Community education is “a bewilderingly broad church,” writes Martin (1992, pp. 189–90), and as a concept, suffers from a “lack of conceptual clarity and theoretical coherence.” “When people talk about community education,” Fitzsimons (2017, p. 38) agrees, “one thing we can be sure of is that not everybody is talking about the same thing.” Community education is sometimes used as a synonym for any kind of adult education; while others use the term to refer to education for children and youth that is “undertaken by minoritised communities to meet their youth’s specific educational needs,” as exemplified by initiatives “such as

Turkish weekend-schools, Hmong after-school projects and full-time Islamic schools” in Europe and North America (Steenwegen, Clycq and Vanhoof 2023, p. 1281).

More substantively, community education is a term used to refer to projects led by formal education, health and social welfare institutions, the state, NGOs, and international aid and development organizations to target groups defined by neighborhood or region, race or ethnicity, faith, gender, age, or class in focused interventions designed to shift behaviors and attitudes or build up predetermined sets of knowledge. Community education here may be understood as “a pragmatic education service designed to target hard-to-reach people, and integrate them into the mainstream, through employment, further education, or rehabilitation,” and/or to address “difficult issues and trends” and “resolve quite intractable social problems” (Connolly 2010, pp. 120, 125). In this sense, community designates the intended audience or area of impact of an educational project. This is very different to other uses of the phrase community education, which are concerned with forms of education that emerge from, are driven by, and serve the needs and interests of particular, often marginalized and oppressed communities. For Munir Fasheh (1990, pp. 32–5), who is profiled in this book, community education is “informed by the real needs in the community,” works to foster “a feeling of self-worth, empowerment, and self-acceptance” among community members, and supports community efforts to transform the “concrete and often oppressive and evil reality” that creates “pain and injustice” in community members’ lives. Fasheh’s understanding of community education is similar to what Lovett (1994) describes as “radical community education,” that is “concerned with collective development and major structural changes in society.”

A key question for understanding community education centers on the notion of community itself. This concept has been widely criticized, with some claiming it is “used so pervasively that it would appear to be nearly meaningless” (Joseph 2007, p. 57). As Williams (2015, p. 40) notes, community is a “warmly persuasive word” that carries positive connotations and is “never to be used unfavourably.” Understood as an “unequivocal good,” it invokes “a sense of belonging, understanding, caring, cooperation, equality” (Joseph 2007, p. 57). In consequence, the word is regularly “deployed by any and everyone pressing any sort of cause,” as a way “to mobilize constituents and validate their cause to a broader public” (Joseph 2002, p. vii). Invocations of community also tend to present communities as being self-evident and “organic, natural, spontaneous occurrences,” characterized internally by shared “identity, unity, communion,

consensus, [and] purity” (Joseph 2002, pp. ix, xxv). As many have pointed out, this can obscure the presence of violence, conflict, exploitation, oppression, injustice, exclusion, racism, and sexism within groups that are being portrayed in this way (Creed 2006; Joseph 2007). While some of the radical education projects we are interested in here take place within clearly defined, pre-existing communities, others are done in settings where there is an absence of any clear sense of community, or indeed, significant conflicts.

The term “popular education” comes closest to being a synonym for the type of education we discuss in this book (Manicom and Walters 2012). While popular education can have a more generic meaning, referring to all “education activities and school provision addressed to the lower classes and individuals forming part of them,” it is typically used to talk about education for radical political purposes (Ferrer 2011, p. 31). Crowther’s (2013) definition is widely used:

Popular education is understood to be popular, as distinct from merely populist, in the sense that it is:

- rooted in the real interests and struggles of ordinary people
- overtly political and critical of the status quo
- committed to progressive social and political change

Such radical forms of popular education may be found throughout history and around the world. Flowers (2004) talks of popular education (in this radical sense) in the examples of working-class education in Europe and North America in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Today, however, the term “popular education” has become closely associated with Latin American traditions of radical education, and in particular, the work of Paulo Freire (Finnegan, Frago and Merrill 2023). If you search for popular education on the internet or a university library database, many of the entries you will find focus on popular education in the Freireian tradition. While Freire is unquestionably one of the most influential sources in shaping radical education, both inside the formal education system and beyond, his work is not the only source; and many of the educators profiled in this book take their political, intellectual, and educational lead from sources other than Freire. In the interest of clarity, we use the term “popular education” here in its currently dominant sense, which is to refer to radical education that comes out of Freireian and other Latin American traditions.

In recent years, a new term has emerged that also overlaps with the types of education covered in this book, which is the concept of social movement

learning. Social movement learning refers to “learning by persons who are part of any social movement,” as well as “learning by persons outside of a social movement as a result of the actions taken or simply by the existence of social movements” (Hall 2006, p. 231). The term serves as a recognition of the ways in which “education is fundamental to social movements, and movements are fundamental to education” (Niesz et al. 2018, p. 3). The concept of social movement learning is not actually focusing on a new form of education, different to what is discussed above; rather, it draws closely on older literatures on popular education and radical forms of community and adult education. Its distinctiveness, as Kuk and Tarlau (2020) suggest, is in linking the insights of this literature with those of a broader literature on social movements. In so doing, it helps to focus attention on the connections between education, collective action, and the possibility of real social change—something that can often get sidelined or lost in more education-focused research and writing (Tarlau 2014).

Directly addressing the question of whether and how education can help lead to powerful and effective collective action for social change and social justice points to the importance, not just of the internal characteristics of any particular education practice, but the links that exist across different kinds and places of education in movement building contexts: between what Langdon (2011, p. 155) writes of as “learning *in* struggle,” “learning *through* struggle,” and “learning *to* struggle”; between incidental and structured (informal and non-formal) learning for members and activists in movement organizations; and between learning done by social movement members and activists, on the one hand, and that of social movement targets, publics, and audiences, on the other (Choudry 2012; Tannock 2023). In this book, some of the radical education practices that are profiled clearly fall into this category of social movement learning; while others are done in contexts that are not—or at least, not yet—seen by either participants or outsiders as being linked to broader, active social movement organizing campaigns or agendas.

While all of these different terms—nonformal education, community education, popular education, and social movement learning—have their value, we choose to speak here of *radical education done in grassroots contexts* as the frame for this book. By this, we refer to radical education that is done largely outside the formal education system of schools and universities; and that is concerned with engaging frontline workers, street-level organizers and activists, locally embedded leaders, and individuals and groups who are directly impacted by the social problems and issues being addressed in any educational project. Grassroots is a term that is recognizable to and often used by the participants in

this kind of education. It is also a term that one finds used regularly and loosely in academic literature on such forms of education. Grassroots education, for example, has been used to refer to Zapatista autonomous education in Mexico (Maldonado-Villalpando et al. 2022), a Freireian-inspired university working with waste pickers and the educational initiatives of the Landless Workers' Movement in Brazil (Gutberlet and Vallin 2024; Tarlau 2015), and indigenous educational activism opposing oil pipeline expansion at Standing Rock in North Dakota, USA (Roumell 2018).

Radical education in grassroots contexts includes but extends beyond Freireian and other Latin American traditions of popular education, as well as social movement learning. By speaking clearly about radical approaches to education in these contexts, we recognize that many types of nonformal, community, or grassroots education are not radical at all, whether in their intent, practice, organization, or outcome. While radical education, as noted earlier, is often constrained by the structural, political, and cultural logics of formal education, this does not mean that all forms of nonformal or community or grassroots education are inherently liberating, empowering, or indeed, radical. Such spaces may, in some times and places, provide freedom and opportunity to carry out sustained and effective radical education projects that are often difficult to carve out in school and university settings; but they can also present similar, or new and different sets of problems to those often found in formal education. Part of the aim of this book, then, is to try to listen and learn from those who have been seeking to develop radical education projects in grassroots contexts to understand the nature and form of this education, and the opportunities and limitations that may be created by the out-of-school contexts in which they work.

## Structure of the Book

Our approach in this book is to listen and learn from radical educators working in grassroots contexts around the world through presenting a collection of conversations with these educators. The reason for developing this book as a set of conversations is that, in line with the principles of radical education, we wanted to start with the voices, perspectives, and experiences of radical educators directly, rather than having these be filtered through our own distanced analysis. While some of the individuals included here have written quite extensively about the educational work they do, others have written only occasionally—or have focused more on the non-educational aspects of their organizing

and activism. Indeed, it is likely a characteristic of this type of (nonformal, community, grassroots) education that much of it often goes unrecorded and unnoted. Further, when conducting research for this book, we found that studies of popular or nonformal or community education often leave the individual educators being studied unnamed and anonymous, as is often the practice in academic research, leaving only the researchers themselves clearly identified. Here, the individuals speaking in this book are not our research subjects, but are our colleagues and co-authors, each contributing to a discussion of what radical education can and should be.

The criteria we used for including radical educators in this book were that these: (1) were educators who had direct involvement in educational practice and were also engaged in developing theory and concepts for the work they were doing; (2) were doing much of their educational work beyond the school, college, and university, in nonformal, grassroots, and community settings; and (3) had some degree of national or international recognition. Some of the individuals included here are well known and established in this field, while others are less known and earlier in their educational careers. While we focus on individuals, all of the work discussed here is collective and embedded in groups, communities, and movements. As Susan Williams reminds us in her conversation, there is a danger of “great man” narratives that can obscure this vital collectivity. One of the values of including conversations with radical educators who are earlier in their careers, such as Alexia Leclercq and Jaz Brisack, is that it makes more visible the key role played by other experienced mentors in developing and helping to make their own work possible.

We sought to have a gender balance in our selection of educators and identify individuals working in different settings around the world. The issue of gender balance was a deliberate decision, as we noted early on that many people who become most celebrated for this kind of work are men, even if many or most radical educators around the world are women. This is something that both Coumba Touré and Susan Williams emphasize in their conversations. Most of the women included here, and some of the men, speak about dealing with sexism, gender stereotyping, and patriarchy with radical social movement spaces. Calling attention to and challenging the persistence in such spaces of male bias, prejudice, and gender-based inequality and injustice is something that has long been done in the field of feminist popular education worldwide (Frehiwot and Benya 2024; Walters 1998). As one of the slogans of the 2018 Chilean feminist uprising, which helped to spawn the work of the feminist

collective LASTESIS profiled in this book, puts it, “La Revolución será feminista o no será”: the revolution will be feminist, or it won’t happen at all (Stipo 2019).

Inevitably, there is a degree of bias in this collection as all conversations were in English; and while some of the individuals were known to us before we started this project, others we identified through searching English language (but also Arabic) academic, activist, and media sources. We sought to include individuals working in different fields of radical education, including labor, environmental, indigenous, feminist, anti-colonialist, liberation, agricultural, theatre, and arts education. Not all of the individuals included here use the term “radical education” to describe their work: but all clearly see themselves as doing education for the aim of facilitating substantive social change, which is how radical education is commonly defined. Our aim is not to be comprehensive, but we hope that the voices included here can inspire others in their own educational practice and thinking, and lead to further projects of searching out and hearing from other radical educators working in grassroots contexts around the world who are not yet widely known, at least to an English-speaking audience.

All of the conversations were done with Maysoun online; we then transcribed and edited each conversation and shared them with speakers for their feedback and approval. We recorded the first conversation in 2018 with Munir Fasheh: this is the only conversation that has been previously published (Sukarieh 2019). Other conversations were done between 2022 and 2025. In the book, each conversation is preceded by a brief introduction that introduces the speaker, their work, organization, and context; situates the speaker within a particular approach to radical education; and highlights key themes in the conversation. Each conversation is inevitably shaped by the timing and context in which it occurred. Some educators focus on the core practices of their work, some on underlying ideas, theories, and principles that drive their work, others on the social and political environments in which their work takes place. Similarly, for some educators, the conversation was a moment to reflect on failures, challenges, and frustrations in their work; while for others, it was an occasion to talk about possibilities and successes. Through these conversations, we thus see not just different types and approaches to radical education, but also the different range of considerations that tend to occupy the hearts and minds of many radical educators.

Rather than group the conversations by region or approach or topic, we have presented the conversations alphabetically, according to the family name of each educator. This means the book does not need to be read linearly, but can be dipped into at any point, according to each reader’s interest. At the

end of the book, we have written a short conclusion that pulls together some of the themes and concerns that cut across this collection of conversations. This includes highlighting the core characteristics that are shared across these examples of radical education. It includes addressing the question of the relationship between formal and grassroots or nonformal education that emerges from these conversations. The argument of this book is not a suggestion that formal education, schools, and universities don't matter or aren't important for fostering radical education practice, but rather that we need to expand our understanding of the ways that formal and grassroots or nonformal education can support radical education projects, whether separately or together. Finally, it also points to the importance of looking beyond local education spaces to consider the social, cultural, and political environments in which radical educators work, which inevitably shape and guide the nature and significance of the transformative learning work each is seeking to do within their own local grassroots spaces.

## Acknowledgment

As noted above, the conversation with Munir Fasheh was published previously as "Decolonizing Education, a View from Palestine: An Interview with Munir Fasheh," Maysoun Sukarieh, *International Studies in Sociology of Education* 28(2), 3 April 2019, and is reprinted here by permission of the publisher (Taylor & Francis Ltd, <http://tandfonline.com>).



# A Journey of Accompaniment

Francisco (Pancho) Argüelles

*The Praxis Project, Colectivo Flatlander, and the National Network for Immigrant and Refugee Rights (NNIRR), Houston, USA*

*Francisco (Pancho) Argüelles is a Senior Director for Network and Power Building at The Praxis Project, an organization that works with partners throughout the United States on popular education and community organizing projects to transform power relationships, effect social change, and achieve “health equity and justice for all communities” (The Praxis Project 2019). Argüelles came to The Praxis Project after working as a popular educator and organizer in the US immigrant rights movement for decades, since arriving in the United States in the mid-1990s. This work has involved serving on the boards of the National Network for Immigrant and Refugee Rights (NNIRR)—where Argüelles helped to create the BRIDGE (Building a Race and Immigration Dialogue in the Global Economy) Curriculum, a popular education toolkit for immigrant rights organizers—and the Highlander Center, that Susan Williams speaks about later in this book.*

*Based in Houston, Texas, Argüelles has helped to create and run a number of organizations that support immigrant rights in the city. This includes the Fe y Justicia Worker Center, which supports day laborers and other low-wage workers, and is a member organization of the National Day Laborer Organizing Network (NDLON); Colectivo Flatlander, a popular education organization that supports immigrant rights organizers across the US South; and the Living Hope Wheelchair Association, a grassroots organization of immigrants with spinal cord injuries. Argüelles is originally from Mexico City, and prior to immigrating to the United States, worked as a popular educator and organizer with indigenous and peasant communities and Guatemalan refugees in Chiapas and Nicaragua.*

*Argüelles’ education and organizing work are grounded in the twin traditions of liberation theology and Freireian popular education, which he first encountered*

through volunteering with a group of Marist Brothers in Chiapas, Mexico, and later developed through his work in Nicaragua. Defined by one of its founding figures, the Peruvian theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez (1988, p. 1), as “a theological reflection born of the experience of shared efforts to abolish the current unjust situation and to build a different society, freer and more human,” liberation theology focuses on “the core concerns of marginalized communities in need of social, political, or economic equality and justice” (Bradley 2016). Freire, whose work derived in part from traditions of Christian humanism, was a strong influence on and later influenced by the development of liberation theology in Latin America (Junker 2015; Schugurensky 2011). Much of Argüelles’ conversation reflects on core ideas, principles, and practices in these traditions. The idea of accompaniment, for example, is central to the work of Gutiérrez, understood as a “highly personal and deeply relational” practice of “walking with—not behind or in front—but beside a real person on his or her own particular journey in his or her own particular place and time, at his or her own particular pace” (Griffin and Block 2013, p. 6). Conscientization, as Argüelles notes, is similarly a central idea in Freireian popular education, which seeks to foster in learners “a deepened consciousness of their situation” that leads them “to apprehend that situation as an historical reality susceptible of transformation” (Freire 2000, p. 85).

Several key themes emerge from Argüelles’ conversation. One is the way in which immigrant communities carry radical educational traditions with them as they cross national borders, and the consequent rich potential of education for social change done in and with immigrant communities across the United States and around the world. Argüelles draws on educational ideas and practices that were learned in the jungles of Chiapas and developed in the fields of Nicaragua to support community organizing projects in the immigrant rights movement on the streets of Houston and elsewhere across America. Stephanie Huezo argues that such phenomena challenge “the hegemonic idea” that knowledge in the global economy flows from the Global North to the Global South, such that the United States “has long considered itself to be the ‘teacher’, whereas Latin American countries are expected to be the ‘students’” (Overmyer 2021). Speaking from a position in Houston, Texas, Argüelles complicates the notion of a homogeneous Global North, suggesting that there is also a vital South-South relationship for movement building and development of powerful forms of radical education that lies between the US South, with its long history of “rebellion and resistance” to structures of racial capitalism, and popular movement struggles across the Global South.

Popular education has been vitally important for organizing projects with immigrant day laborers and other low-wage workers across the United States.

*Organizers and educators have come out to the street corners where day laborers wait for work opportunities in cities across the United States and “used popular education techniques such as theater, music, and the sharing and analysis of personal experiences of oppression as ways for workers to collectively determine new solutions that put them in charge of their own working conditions” (Stern 2021). They have set up worker centers and organizations such as the Institute of Popular Education of Southern California (IDEPSCA) that provide popular education and critical literacy classes for immigrant workers (Dziembowska 2010). In so doing, they have been able to build power and effect change with groups of workers that have long been seen by the US labor movement as being essentially unorganizable (Theodore 2015). As Argüelles notes in his conversation, it is not just that popular education has been vital for supporting organizing among immigrant workers in the United States, but immigrant worker organizing has been “essential to the promotion, practice and establishment of popular education” throughout the country as well.*

*Argüelles’ conversation is a passionate articulation and defense of the importance of using a Freireian, popular education model of community organizing as essential for effecting radical social change and achieving social justice; like others, Argüelles contrasts this with what he sees as a dominant model of community organizing in the United States based on ideas developed by Saul Alinsky. Alinskyite approaches to organizing are characterized by political pragmatism and an emphasis on mobilizing community members to take action and secure achievable campaign wins. For Argüelles, such an approach embraces a theory of social change that the “system works” and can be gradually reformed. Popular education approaches, by contrast, tend to adopt a longer-term, slower process of developing individual relationships and trust, doing political education and ideological analysis, and building social movements that seek to radically transform hegemonic social and economic systems, which it sees as necessary for creating a more just, empowered, and liberated world (Beck and Purcell 2013; Martinson and Su 2012; Sen 2003). In Latin America, Argüelles argues, “mass movements” have been “able to make leaps because they build from below” using forms of popular education, and “the US really needs to change the way it understands social change.”*

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***You once wrote that your engagement with popular education began in the early 1980s with a Christian mission in Chiapas, Mexico, linked with liberation theology. Can you talk about your experiences in Chiapas and the influence of liberation theology on your educational thinking and practice?***

Yes, the theology of liberation is the bedrock for everything I have done afterwards, because it is what Enrique Dussel calls the ethical, political, and spiritual base. The beauty of it is that I was able to learn this by doing, not by sitting in a classroom. I grew up in a middle-class family in Mexico City and for high school I was invited to attend an all-boys school run by the Marist Brothers, a Catholic congregation that focuses on education. It was more of a school for rich kids, but sometimes middle-class children made it in, and in that sense, it was kind of a lonely experience because of the classism, and even some kind of racism in the skin tone in the school. It was an isolating experience; but academically, it was a good school.

At the end of high school, a group of Marists who had this project in Chiapas came to invite students to give one year of service working with them. I was not particularly practicing Catholicism, but it was an opportunity to do service. So, it was a moment of choice, do I live the values that my family have taught me? It is time to do what I have talked about doing. The adventure was also very attractive, so I was like, let's go. The proposal was to be part of a small indigenous community of twenty homes on the side of a mountain. You have to walk three to four hours to get there. There was no electricity or running water. I went to the village to work as a schoolteacher.

That is where I learned the word “accompaniment” of communities, which comes from the pastoral world, where you accompany in the spiritual process. It's a tradition in the theology of liberation. Accompaniment means that you insert yourself in the material, every day, historical conditions of the poor, the uprooted, the marginalized, and from there, you work with them in the process of survival and liberation. That is the preferential place where you find God in history. The basis of the theology of liberation is that you find the historical Jesus working among the poor, and you follow the practice of reaching out to the one who is outside of meaning for the system. They use the work “Anawim”: the Samaritan woman, the people with leprosy, the beggars, the poor who have no meaning for Empire. That's where you find meaning for your faith in their witnessing, which is also an important word for Paulo Freire—witnessing, working with the poor, sharing the risk, and making yourself relevant to their efforts to live with dignity.

So, the Marist Brothers were doing their pastoral work and we were living in the community. I was about eighteen years old, and I taught the little kids, I was the kindergarten and first grade teacher with the little ones from four to eight years old. In the afternoons, I did literacy classes with the adults. I used Freire's literacy method of *palabras generadoras*, generative words, to teach

how to read and write, and we started talking about the history of Mexico and geography. My sister, who was studying pedagogy in the National University, gave me her copy of Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, which I read. That was the launching pad. The most transformative thing was to see this community really acting as a community in the context of great injustice and oppression, living their faith integrated to their everyday life, living in solidarity and their own witnessing, showing this capacity for joy in the middle of great suffering. Then, from talking to the nuns and priests, the Marist Brothers, we also started developing a larger critical thinking about the system and structures of colonialism and imperialism.

All of this was in 1983 to 1984, so it is when the Guatemalan refugees were escaping the genocide from the Guatemalan military dictatorship into the jungle of Chiapas. We started hearing about that extreme oppression. The oppression of the communities where we lived was economic, racist, structural violence and some repression when social organizations would mobilize and the leaders would be taken in; but it wasn't that general oppression that the Guatemalan army, with the help of the United States, was doing in Guatemala. That was humbling and disarming. The Marists had a house in Comitán, half of it was rented to the UN High Commissioner of Refugees, who hosted children who were taken out of the Guatemalan refugee camps because they were suffering from extreme malnutrition, they brought them there to try to help them recover and survive. Some of them did and some of them did not. For me, at nineteen years old, seeing these indigenous kids lying on a mat on the floor under the sun, too weak to stand because they have just been taken out of the jungle, where they were starving because they were running from the massacres, made me start to ask how this came to happen, not just to this person as a victim, but what kind of system produces this? In the theology of liberation, the ethical mandate is to inquire, what is my role regarding this? What can I do about this? This is at the center of my work and that was forty years ago.

***Where did you then develop your popular education practice after this early experience working in Chiapas?***

After Chiapas, I went to study at UNAM, the National Autonomous University of Mexico, where I decided that I wanted to study pedagogy. I learned the technical skills of how to design a curriculum, to reflect about learning theory of how we learn. The truth is that I didn't learn popular education practice in UNAM, because it's an academic space. But I was lucky to have amazing

professors where I learned about Marxism, Gramsci, Giroux, Bourdieu, psychoanalysis, Castoriadis, and Ágnes Heller. At UNAM in the 1980s we had a lot of professors who came as political refugees from Latin America. There were Argentinian professors like Enrique Dussel, who later became this global figure in philosophy, from whom I learned how to read Marx. We had a class on the history of dictatorship in Latin America taught by a political refugee professor from Chile or Peru.

But the beautiful thing was the student strike, because in 1986 to 1987 the neoliberal government wanted to put through a reform to start charging for higher public education. In Mexico, we had a social revolution at the beginning of the twentieth century that created a constitution that says all education that the state provides will be free. So, the students, we said, hell no, we're not going to allow the state to start charging for public education and we shut down the National University for twenty days. That was a profound educational experience about organizing, and we won. It was the first student movement on that scale since 1968, when the government committed a big massacre of students, so it was a big, transformative moment. Those years were when I connected with Marxism—but Marxism, thanks to Dussel, as a methodology of thinking to produce an understanding of what is concrete in an historical context, not so much as a dogma or religion, I never connected to more party-political formations.

During those years, I was also volunteering, and I became involved with solidarity work with Guatemala. This was another space of deepening my political education, especially with some nuns who were in exile from Guatemala. One of these nuns, Raquel Saravia, pushed me forward to get out of my comfort zone, learning through doing and being trusted with responsibilities that were bigger than myself, like helping the Guatemalan refugees organize and start doing that accompaniment. I got involved in the process where representatives from the refugee camps organized to try to return collectively to Guatemala. I would go to Chiapas and help bring them from the camps to San Cristóbal in hiding, because they were not allowed to leave the camps. They would spend a weekend meeting and developing their strategies, and then we would bring them back to the camp.

Without knowing it, this was a profound political education. One transformative moment was to understand that it is all about reflection and action. It is not just reflection without action; it is having that discipline of constant analysis of what is happening in order to act. I was twenty-two or twenty-three, and they were bringing cadres and intellectuals from Guatemala to sit with the refugee camp leaders, and they were doing an analysis of the

correlation of forces in Guatemala in order to talk about their strategies. These were community leaders who were survivors of the genocide, some of them, their villages and families were destroyed. Another transformative educational moment was their capacity to persevere. I was in the presence of *sumud*, this perseverance that the Palestinian people are now teaching us, but it was the Mayan expression of that. Something that got to me was their capacity to laugh and be joyful and hopeful and tender. Despite that they have suffered so much, they didn't become bitter. In this case, I saw that it was rooted in their culture and spirituality. We could have just been talking about the terrible situation in Guatemala and later, we will just be laughing while we are doing the dishes.

Later, after this, I graduated from UNAM and went to Nicaragua to work at the newly formed Universidad Campesina in Estelí. In Nicaragua is where I developed my practice of popular education. I had to develop curriculum and apply the concepts into participatory spaces to learn and do with *campesinos*, many of whom could not really read or write a lot, and some people who at some point were maybe shooting at one another a few years back. At the Campesina University, we were trying to share and teach concrete skills on how you control pests in your field, how you do composting, things that will have an impact on your survival. We had to be real about how people were going to appropriate this technology, which was a landing point. It is one thing to teach something, but another to accompany the process by which people appropriate these ideas and practices, make them their own, in their mind and heart, but also in their hands, to apply them to their own conditions. That notion of owning the content is essential to popular education, and it happens through this accompaniment over time, and that relationship between theory and practice.

***I want to follow up on some of these ideas about popular education. You have described popular education as “the political intention of building a knowledge that turns into collective action for liberation,” and you emphasize the importance both of having a political vision or project in popular education, and linking popular education with an action strategy or organizing process for transforming social structure. Why are political vision and collective action so important to emphasize in popular education?***

It is because the process of better understanding your experience in an historical context allows you to see that your experience is an outcome of specific historical forces. This can lead to resignation, indifference, and cynicism when you see the scale of those forces; or it can lead to a realization that your condition

is connected to the conditions of others, their oppression and their strength, and to the strength of your ancestors. Recognizing the connection to others leads to the realization that only through collective actions can you transform those forces. That is the way it has been throughout history—we float together like ants float during a flood, they come together and make these little islands. Communities survive through our collectivity. It is about understanding the world in order to transform it, not just to find my individual place of salvation.

One of the things at UNAM that I had this critique of was the coffee shop revolutionaries who we came across, who were very radical in their ideologies, but when it was time to do work during the student strike, they were more worried about their ideological purity and being right than actually working and being effective. This separation of intellectual effort from actual doing was very common in the university and it also happens in the NGO world. In popular education, the notion of praxis is the powerful idea of putting theory into action, which transforms the theory, but also collective action transforms reality, and it transforms you as well.

When I went to Nicaragua to work at the Universidad Campesina, it was in the context of the Sandinista Revolution that had just lost the general election in the 1990s and was not in power anymore. It was when I started adding more importance in popular education to the personal transformation process and not separating this from the focus on transforming the larger system and the revolution. I saw that a lot of people in the name of transforming the structures and systems reinforced and repeated a lot of patriarchal, oppressive practices inside the organizing process. So, it was this notion that the popular education process itself produces knowledge, also about yourself, and how you can transform and relate to others in a way that reflects this vision of liberation.

***You have also written that “some people are resistant to popular education because they see it as naïve and unrealistic due to the emphasis on participation and dialogue.” What is the basis for this kind of resistance, how should we understand it, and why is dialogue so vital for the popular education approach?***

Organizing is about relationship building and trust building to create a solid community of action. It is centered on developing the capacity to trust one another, to understand one another, and that comes through sharing stories and time together, working together in specific material spaces and geographies. This notion of accompaniment, from the theology of liberation practice literally means getting off your ass and out of your chair, to go walk in the mountains for

hours to get to these communities. In some way, you are earning the right to be in their presence, earning their trust when they see you arrive, covered in mud and tired to be with them. And that has happened in many other places. You get your body there and you are in the presence of one another.

In the United States, the dominant organizing model is focused on a pragmatic vision of winning campaigns, and here, relationships are often sacrificed. This is the tradition of Saul Alinsky, who wrote a book called *Rules for Radicals*, which is how a lot of unions and networks now organize. It is centered on the outcome of the campaign and securing concrete, pragmatic wins. It is very reformist, it says you need to do gradual transformation to create the conditions for bigger leaps, and it centers on the idea that the United States is a democracy and that the system works. People who can afford that privilege of believing that the system works have been at the front of many organizations, and they have been pushing this theory of change that strategizes connections to the Democratic Party, thinking they are an historical ally, when they are really not. They are part of the hegemonic bloc and are serving multinational capital and reproducing a lot of forms of white supremacy or racialized capitalism. Funders are a big part of the problem, too, because they base their funding on securing campaign wins, not the longer-term process of building collective power.

From a popular movement perspective, there is a different theory of change, one with a more critical viewpoint, that we still have to fight for a transition to democracy. The emphasis is that we are not going to advance unless we develop mass movements that are centered on collective leaders and not individual saviors. For this process, dialogue is central to relationship building and producing knowledge that allows us to understand our condition and come up with strategies for action. This also challenges the notion of the vanguard, who knows better and parachutes in and already has the strategy and theory of change. We talk about the difference between deep organizing and people who reduce organizing to mobilizing, getting people only to go to the protest, to go to the action, to call their legislator, as if that is going to get it done in the current corrupt power system. The construction of collective leadership happens through dialogue and it takes a lot more time.

***Since you immigrated to the United States in the 1990s, you have been centrally involved with the immigrant rights movement, and in particular, the National Network for Immigrant and Refugee Rights (NNIRR). How did you come to be involved with this movement and network, and how have you sought to use popular education as part of your work in this movement?***

I connected with NNIRR through María Jiménez. She passed away in 2020 but was a seminal figure in the immigrant rights movement in the United States, especially on the border. She was a migrant, the daughter of migrants, the granddaughter of migrants in that circle that moves between the United States and northern Mexico. She was a leftist and a feminist, a radical and a visionary strategist. She was an amazing, radical sister that I learned a lot from in terms of how to organize with immigrant communities, because she had been doing it all her life. When I arrived in Houston, I knew I had these popular education tools I could share from my work in Chiapas and Nicaragua, and I was looking for where I could do organizing and popular education. I landed with María, and she immediately gave me a space, opening the doors of her little office to me. She started asking me to support her, mostly as a volunteer. She didn't have a budget, but I come from the tradition in which you do the work because it's your passion, your calling, it's needed. If they can pay you, great, but if not, you still do the work.

I started attending some of the national gatherings of the NNIRR, where immigrants from all over the country came together. I met people from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Haiti who came from the same popular education and liberation theology traditions as me. Then I started to meet sisters, for instance, from the Asian or Muslim communities. That was totally new. I started to know people from the LGBTQ community that for me, as a Mexican leftist, wasn't a space where I had spent time and I had to do a lot of unlearning and developing friendships that were profoundly transformative for the stuff I needed to get rid of in my head and my heart.

A couple of years later, NNIRR launched this project to try to reframe the debate around immigration in the United States from a perspective of global economy, race, gender and also reflecting on the rights of LGBTQ communities. There were more conventional lefties writing articles on this. But then they said we need to turn this into a popular education resource and that is how the BRIDGE Project was born. I was brought into that project along with some others with similar experience, and together we transformed some of the concepts into a popular education curriculum. The BRIDGE Curriculum became a toolbox for organizers for how to reframe conversations around immigration in a way that leads to action, not just to win some debate, but a way that is relevant for the people in your community to understand their own experiences and connect to one another.

***Susan Williams from the Highlander Center, in her conversation in this book, argues that in the United States popular education is too often mistaken to be about a curriculum, which becomes a crutch for educators, when really it is about other kinds of practices, attitudes, and relationships in education. What is a counterpoint to this argument: how and why can a curriculum be important and useful for popular educators in movement building?***

Curriculum is essential to the practice of popular education because it is about a longer-term process. If you're going to do accompaniment, you need a commitment to a process of working together over time. The curriculum allows you to move through a framework that pulls out the core ethical and political threads that run through that extended process of accompaniment. Also, there are often core hard skills that you want to develop together for your practice and again, for that, you need a curriculum.

A little bit of where I am useful in the movement when working with organizers is that I have some specific techniques or tools or skills that I learned in my college education about how do you go about developing a curriculum, and some considerations about the specificity of creating spaces for collective learning. For instance, right now, we are putting together a leadership development curriculum with the Southeast Immigrant Rights Network that brings together immigrant leaders from all over the South. We're doing a series of trainings to support their development as community leaders and we use a curriculum perspective in terms of seeing how this workshop connects to the previous one, how themes run through from one to the other. The relevance of curriculum is helping you organize your work in this accompaniment.

I think of curriculum as a toolbox. When I went to Nicaragua, I used a couple of popular education books that were produced by the Mexican Institute of Community Education (IMDEC) in the late 1970s and 1980s. These books helped me find exercises and reflect on popular education practice. The BRIDGE Curriculum also became a toolbox here for organizers in the immigrant community. I have had immigrant rights organizers in the United States tell me, Oh, when I was a baby organizer, working with a bail fund for immigrants to get them out of jail. BRIDGE saved me, it helped me navigate that. You bring the tools for people to apply them in their own concrete context. But curriculum is not a recipe.

Opposition to curriculum in popular education arises because it can lead to more formalized spaces that push toward theoretical reflections that don't

go into action. I understand Susan, we go way back. Not to speak for her, but I think that her resistance is that sometimes you get teachers, people who are allies coming from more privileged places, and they think that by reading the curriculum and following the concepts, that is going to be enough. But it is separated from an actual practice and action. So yes, in that sense, curriculum can end up becoming an intellectualization of popular education.

***In Houston, you helped to co-found the Fe y Justicia Worker Center, which supports day laborers and other migrant workers, and is part of the National Day Laborer Organizing Network (NDLON). Can you talk about how and why popular education has been so important for this work of supporting and organizing migrant day laborers, in Houston and across the nation?***

I think that NDLON has been essential to the promotion, practice, and establishment of popular education in the United States over the past twenty years. I first met Pablo Alvarado (co-executive director of NDLON) at one of NNIRR's national conferences. NNIRR wanted us to put together a session about popular education and Pablo, who comes from El Salvador, also comes from this tradition. So, we had a phone call to organize the session. It was interesting, because at the beginning, we were both showing off. We were younger then, with a little of this macho thing of proving, like, who is the most real popular educator? We were checking each other out and there was a little bit of territory marking. But thank God, we were both old enough to say, No, this is a *compañero* who comes from the movement, we can work together. So, we did a session for immigrant rights organizers at the conference where we used popular theater with the participants to reflect on how it is to cross the border and the human rights of immigrants. Since then, we became comrades and have been conspiring on different projects over the years.

The thing with day laborers is that many people will tell them or us that you cannot organize that sector, they are unorganizable. Day laborers wait on street corners for work and they are a very vulnerable population. A lot of times, people have just arrived in the United States, and they need to work to pay their debt to the border smugglers that now costs them thousands and thousands of dollars. Many don't know English. Other day laborers might be coming and going for a long time, and sometimes there is a reason why they are still day laborers. Sometimes they're struggling with some form of addiction or mental health issues, and so they can't get a more stable job. So, the corners are complex spaces. They are also under constant aggression. It has gotten worse in the last

fifteen years, as the street presence of day laborers has become this useful tool to attack whole immigrant communities.

So, being able to organize the corners is a challenge, and again, it brings the concept of accompaniment. These are not people who you're going to bring to your NGO for a class about this or that in English with PowerPoint and academic terms. You need to be there on the corner, sweating with them, earning their trust, and then also making yourself relevant to their survival—which is one thing that has evolved in my understanding of popular education. If you read Freire at a superficial level, it's about conscientization, transforming the conscience, becoming an agent for transformation and revolution by understanding historical forces, blah blah blah. That's part of it. But at the end of the day, if you are coming to people who are struggling to eat or pay rent or buy medicine to attend to their survival, and I don't make myself relevant to that struggle, then I'm just talking and wasting their time. For instance, in the Worker Center in Houston, I want to talk to you about oppression and how I'm going to raise your conscience, and you want to talk to me about this employer who stole your wages, who took you to work and didn't pay you and told you, What are you going to do about it? You're undocumented. Maybe the employer was also Latino. I want to talk to you about class structure and blah, but not asking what am I going to do to help you recover your lost wages or help you pay rent?

In my case, my work with the Worker Center in Houston led me to accompany a group of Mayan indigenous day laborers being harassed by the police in a local town, accompanying their organizing project to the point where we ended up suing the police department and winning with the help of MALDEF [Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund], a national organization, and I became part of a federal lawsuit against the police department, standing in front of the judge in court. Accompaniment takes you places you don't know, and in doing so, you earn the right to keep working alongside people who are fighting for survival. Again, this is essential for anyone who is thinking about popular education. If we're going to accompany people who are fighting for their survival, the question is how can we be relevant to that fight? How can we make spaces to do that with joy and dignity, and so that we don't make it about us and we don't become gatekeepers of the relationship to that community?

***Stephanie Huerdo argues that the example of people like Pablo Alvarado and NDLO, and we could include yourself as well, challenges the hegemonic idea that knowledge flows from the Global North to the Global South. How important***

***is this practice of immigrants bringing with them ideas and knowledge about education and organizing from their home countries, and using these to teach others how to fight for justice in the United States?***

The way I have been thinking about this, especially through my relationship with the Highlander Center, which I have collaborated with for the past twenty-five years, is that we are asking the question of what happens when the Global South engages in dialogue with the US South? The saying in the United States is that as the South goes, so goes the nation. A lot of the deeper forms of rebellion and resistance to racialized capitalism in the United States have been rooted in the South. Through having this opportunity to dialogue about our experiences, we have been able to learn from and transform one another in the way we understand popular education, popular movements, community organizing, and help one another gain perspectives that I think are essential in this historical moment. Because this historical moment we are living through is so overwhelming and paralyzing, the way they flood the zone, throw everything at you to isolate and disempower you.

We need to remember how we got here through resistance, through the power of ancestors, and how there is a horizon of a future that can be better. For instance, Black communities in the US South were practicing popular education before it was called popular education, with people like Septima Clark, Ella Baker, Bernice Johnson, and so many others. Septima Clark was doing her own *palabra generadora* method, teaching people how to read and write so that Black people could register to vote. That was a revolutionary practice, and this form of education could get you killed in the South. We put that in dialogue with the experience of Mexico, Latin America, and the Global South, where popular educators were getting killed, giving their lives for accompanying their people, and that creates a mutual connection of understanding. There is a shared suffering because it's the same imperialist, colonialist, white supremacist system that has been killing people in Africa and Latin America and in the US South and along the border. It's the same system that is serving to accumulate centers of capital that right now are ruling the world and reproducing the same ideological systems to separate us. So that has been very transformative.

***For many years, you have worked with the Living Hope Wheelchair Association, a grassroots organization of immigrants with spinal cord injuries. How did you come to be working with this group, and how does the practice of popular education need to be different for this community?***

Yes, this has been challenging and transformative in many ways, because there is a level of material conditions that forces you to slow down, accept that you're going to move at the pace that people can move, not the pace that my ideology and privilege demand how things should be. If I'm going to accompany this group in their organizing effort it is going to be centered in the capacity their bodies have to be engaged with this work. There is a moment when the pain they are experiencing every day forces you to stop the conversation and say, OK, we're going to go home today. This plan we made, we're going to have to modify it, because half our team is in hospital right now with a urinary tract infection or an ulcer pressure, or because one of our leaders is taking so much pain medication that he's not going to remember anything that we're talking about tomorrow.

This experience has also helped me to land the dimension of embodiment, of how we do our work from our body. It really opened my eyes to think about and confront the dimension of disability injustice and ableism that get in the way of our work, how our social justice movement and our whole society reproduce this ableist approach. This is about what is defined as normal, which builds barriers to participation and access for all of the people who do not fit within this definition. We know that the dominant image of normal is an able-bodied, heterosexual white male with money. That person is going to face a lot less barriers than anyone else. But if you are an undocumented immigrant worker that literally broke his back building this economy, the moment you break your back and your body, according to the system, you have no meaning or value to them. You are disposable. That is the image of the Anawim in the theology of liberation perspective.

Accompanying this group and seeing their capacity for organizing together, their dignity, their capacity for joy, and how they rooted this in a profound sense of spirituality and community have been humbling. It has helped not to get too lost on theory but see this when we say history is about the everyday reproduction of our capacity to survive and resist. One leader, who I ended up having a lot of differences with, also had amazing capacities. One day, we were supposed to have a meeting call, and he was fifteen minutes late for our call. I was starting to get annoyed, like he's not valuing my time, and after all, I'm doing this as a volunteer. I was getting in my head and my ego. Then, we finally talk, and he explains to me that he was late because he fell from his chair and he was alone at home, so he needed to crawl to the front of his house and open the door to see if somebody will walk by who will help him get back in his chair. For me, that was a humbling moment to say, here I am building all of these ideas in my head about how I am accompanying this person's process to organize when

I don't have a clue about what he is facing every day in his condition. I need to get down off my horse and adapt myself to the realities they are facing and work from there. Again, that transforms the way we think about change and what is possible.

***In your work more generally, you often refer to the concept of healing and radical healing. What does this concept mean for you and why is it important in your educational and organizing work?***

When I got to Houston, I was already thinking about healing as a mystery. In December 1997, there was a massacre in Chiapas in the indigenous village of Acteal. A paramilitary group supported by the state government massacred about forty people who were praying. These people were not part of the Zapatista army, they were part of the civil society who were resisting the government and so they were targeted. My wife and I were still engaged with Chiapas, we would go there every break we had, so were in Chiapas a few days after the massacre and were trying to support the humanitarian response efforts.

A couple of months later, there was a pilgrimage from Chiapas to Our Lady of Guadalupe Shrine in Mexico City, which is like the heart of Catholicism in Mexico. The indigenous people wanted to bring their pain and suffering to Our Lady of Guadalupe and denounce what had happened. I was part of the communications team for the pilgrimage, documenting and producing a bulletin for the process. I was moved and touched by the vulnerability of the survivors and the solidarity among the indigenous people, and I was seeing this mystery of how people were healing, making sense of this extreme, inhumane situation of violence and oppression. And it was a mystery. There was something deeper at work that allowed people who have been facing so much violence and suffering to still find the capacity to continue being human, being in community, taking risks, and eliciting solidarity and action in others.

This question of how we heal became central for me during those years and I kept reflecting on it. Back in the United States, I became a volunteer at the Women's Center in Houston, and I asked one of the women there who was a survivor of domestic sexual violence, Miss Cassandra Thomas, how she defined healing. She said healing is recovering power and control because as a survivor of domestic sexual violence you lose control over your body and everyday life, the abuser is all about power and control. So, recovering that is key.

I kept on bringing that reflection through my work in training community organizers all over the US South. We had women who were community leaders come to leadership development trainings, and our conversations about system change and building political power for change kept coming back to their need to have a space to heal from experiences of oppression. With Mónica Hernandez, who has been a popular educator partner from Highlander, we modified our curriculum and adapted the topics we had in our agenda to the needs of the group to make sense of their own experience of suffering and oppression. We saw the healing happening together, the transformation of the compañeras through the workshops from one month to the next, how their understanding of their role in their community and the actions they were taking as community leaders was changing.

So, from these experiences, healing became more central to my understanding; also from my experiences in helping groups navigate internal conflict, which has been one of the most difficult things in my trajectory over these forty years, how much time and energy and pain we induce by navigating and surviving the hurt that we cause one another when we're trying to work together. How often trauma shows up and damages relationships and gets in the way of building collective power? How many times do wounded egos displace the collective goal? Because the most important thing becomes tending to the emotional needs of the wounded ego of a leader, who might be very charismatic. Sometimes it takes time for us to identify what we are dealing with. This constant presence of conflict within our own groups has pushed the need for healing to the center. Also to be aware that we are healing from a colonized intergenerational trauma, not just healing from our own wounds, but the wounds we inherited from our ancestors. And how the source to heal also comes from the fact that we didn't only inherit trauma from our ancestors, we also inherited their strength. That is why I believe that, for adults, profound learning is always a healing experience, both for what we unlearn about ourselves and the world, and also for the new ways we connect to ourselves, others and the world around us.

***You have also written about the idea of accompaniment as a central theme in your work. In our conversation, you have already referred to this idea several times, but is there anything further that you want to say about what the act of accompaniment means to you?***

Yes, after all these years, when myself and others in the United States have been talking about accompaniment for a long time, you now start hearing the concept being used a lot more in different movement spaces. But I am worried that it is becoming just another way of repeating a new concept that has become popular, but it's not connected to the deeper meaning, which is a commitment to displace yourself from your position of privilege and power and safety and go and immerse yourself in the material conditions and territories of people who are oppressed or marginalized or excluded, and then make yourself relevant to their efforts to survive and build power to transform the system. But that comes through investing time to be there physically.

Because right now there is part of a whole generation of organizers and activists in the United States who, through the pandemic and technology, can have the misconception that you can do this accompaniment, and are organizing, just from the virtual and technological sphere, without getting away from your computer and your chair. That's not their fault if they haven't had access to political education experiences that are profoundly transformative.

Accompaniment is a form of solidarity, but we are not the main actor when we do accompaniment. The main actor is the collective, the community, who is organizing to survive, and they are accompanying one another. That is the essential thing of accompaniment. It is not just me as the external, organic intellectual or organizer, I'm going to accompany you as a community and that is the accompaniment. No, the accompaniment is all of us together, accompanying one another. The leaders in that community are the main companions, and accompaniment also transforms me and makes me useful or relevant to the community's efforts in their journey of survival and liberation in very concrete, material conditions. Accompaniment is also about what we learn and unlearn together.

*You have said that “in the United States, a lot of influential people use the rhetoric that they are the voices of the voiceless,” but that these “leaders would have a very hard time embracing leadership and wisdom from below.” You have also been critical of some immigrant rights organizations for assuming “that the system works and that leadership comes from above.” What is your concern about how leadership is understood in the United States in many organizations, and what does it mean to embrace leadership from below?*

The Zapatistas have a different conception of leadership, and also indigenous communities all over the world have this wisdom, this knowledge that leadership

is collective. For the Zapatistas, leadership is to command by obeying, your leadership comes from the relation you have in which you are accountable to this community. If you don't have this relation, then it's not a leadership that is building collective power from below. You can still do some good in terms of shifting narratives, which is a big concept these days. People say, we need to change the narrative. I keep telling them, if you don't change the narrators, you're not going to change the narrative.

I think that the nonprofit industrial complex embraces a theory of change that believes too much in the legislative and political process in the United States, as if it were a real democracy. That is one of the big things that we bring from the Global South. When I got here and I saw the way things operated, I was like, how about talking about the transition to democracy in the United States? You only have two political parties, you don't have direct elections, you have the electoral college, and you keep seeing people who win the popular vote lose the general election. So, it's not a real democracy and it never has been for Black people, native people, people with disabilities, or immigrants. That doesn't mean you don't have democratic spaces. There's freedom of speech. You can protest and don't get killed or disappear, as much as in other countries, at least. But it's not really a democracy, it's a plutocracy. The super rich have control of the system.

When talking about the immigrant rights movement, at some point, the leading organizations in the country were betting all their marbles on an immigration reform that sacrificed the rights of those who were more marginalized, including people at the border. People speaking on behalf of immigrant communities in DC were agreeing to immigration reform that militarized the border and has been causing and will cause deaths on the border every year. They were not accountable to those communities, and they understood leadership in a way that they thought it was OK to do that in order to win a pragmatic victory. They still didn't win, even though the foundations kept throwing millions of dollars at that model, and what happened is that they gave away their principles, and the immigration perspective moved to the extreme right, to the position where we are right now.

One of the few groups to denounce and oppose that was the National Network (NNIRR) and that is why it was also marginalized from funding and is struggling to survive. The principle is that the people directly affected by the material conditions need to be the ones developing and leading the strategies and building the power to make change from below. That power has to build over time, it has to become mass power, like we have seen in Brazil with the

Landless Workers' Movement and the Workers' Party, or in Mexico, even with the limitations of the current situation. You have seen in Latin America mass movements being able to make leaps because they build from below, and the United States really needs to change the way it understands social change.

***You have described popular education as “an act of decolonization” and said that “when you are doing popular education, you are removing the colonial gaze.” What do you mean by this? How and why is decolonization a central concept in your education and organizing work?***

In my workshops on liberation and healing, we talk about getting rid of the colonial gaze. We ask everyone, what is one concrete way in which you're going to shift the way you look at yourself or your community? That gets rid of the way the system tells you who we are and what the problems and solutions are? Again, that is very Fanon. It's Freire, it's Marx on how the ideology of the oppressors makes the world look upside down, so that the oppressors become the victims, the poor rich people who are creating wealth and all the poor people who are taking services. When really it is the opposite, how the rich exploit workers and nature and produce poverty and exclusion.

Getting rid of the colonial gaze is a complex thing that has a cognitive, intellectual dimension; but also a psychological, emotional, and spiritual dimension. It is also an act of healing. It also has a neurological dimension. I grew up in Mexico City in middle-class barrio culture, so I learned some very good values, but I also learned some anti-values in which I would be sexist or homophobic. That was part of what I received from church, from school, from friendships in the neighborhood. When I got to the United States and started having experiences of being in the movement with sisters and brothers who are gay, I needed to heal from that homophobic bullshit that I internalized and that exists in a material way as synapses in my brain. There are synapses that become active when I see a queer person, or if I internalize anti-Blackness or ableism, that get active when I see them and the dominant perspective is inside me. I react in a certain way emotionally to “the other” with my nervous system. Through the process of being together in community and joy and dignity, hearing stories of what queer people go through, their oppression and suffering, but also the capacity they have for resisting, the synapses establish a different connection in my nervous system, and I don't see or react the same way. That transformation is not enough, because then it has to lead to relationships and connections and building power together. But there is that deep, intimate transformation that

happens when we learn to see ourselves, one another and history in a different way. This is part of what Freire calls conscientization.

One essential transformative moment for me was when I was invited to a meeting with the World Council of Churches on feminist pedagogy. There were educators from all over the world. The meeting was convened by Edna Orteza, a Filipina popular educator. Chan Lean Heng, a popular educator from Malaysia, was there too, and the way she opened the space for that meeting was an exercise in which we had an altar in which you put an object that symbolizes why you do this work where you come from. We took time for each person sharing the thing that was being put in the altar. That really changed the way I practice popular education; to lower the emphasis I put on the revolutionary agenda and honor this being in each other's presence, how there is something sacred about being in each other's presence. Our cultures, the non-Western cultures, know that. Capitalism and colonialism disrupted that, because it is like this commodification of the other as an object. So, popular education is about this collective honoring and being in each other's presence. If we manage to do that, a lot of the other stuff that popular education is about also happens: relationships, trust, collective action, a shared agenda for social transformation. But we start honoring each other, and that becomes a healing experience.

The last thing I will say is that from the colonial perspective, we are the problem. I had a brief exchange with this African writer who just passed away, Ngugi wa Thiong'o. He came to Houston for a conference when I was working with the Living Hope Wheelchair Association. I went to talk to him after his presentation and asked, how have you been able not to become bitter? Because right now, I'm feeling very angry and I'm starting to get bitter. Because of all the suffering of my brothers at Living Hope, people kept dying and we had to be there for the funerals. I was getting so angry, also because of the betrayal of the national immigrant rights organizations. He looks at me and says, "Never become a problem to yourself, that is the view of the colonizer." Yes, be a problem for the colonizer, but we shouldn't be a problem to ourselves.

***The news now is full of horrendous stories of the Trump government attacking immigrants and their families across America. What do you see as the role and importance of popular education in this context for building a powerful immigrant rights movement that can fight back effectively against these attacks?***

We recently had a gathering of immigrant rights organizers, activists, and community leaders in the Texas capital, Austin, for an action against the anti-

immigrant laws they are pushing through now. There were about one hundred of us and they asked me to do what they call a grounding. Because during the process of preparing, the organizers, many of them lawyers, were focusing way too much on the head and the policy agenda. My experience with popular education and accompaniment helped me to tell them to stop and acknowledge the wider, deeper context, our emotions, feelings, bodies, anxieties that we bring into the space, and the fact that we are not just talking about abstract, intellectual issues. We are talking about our communities, some of the people are talking about their own lives, they are undocumented, or they have family who are undocumented, who could be detained or deported, or who actually are being detained or deported.

We needed to slow down and open the space so that the whole person can come in, not just the head, and connect to what makes us stronger, our deeper sources of power. All of that is popular education. I did just one thing. While we were waiting for all of the groups to arrive, people were sitting there waiting. We were in a union hall, and I asked for the microphone, and I put it next to my phone and started playing music from the movement. You saw the energy change. You saw people connecting to other things. It's essential that we devise methodologies to face the fear we are in. Because we are not imagining fear like the middle class and rich white people in the United States are being manipulated through fear, through these narratives of dangerous Black people and immigrants. Our communities have real reasons to fear because they have suffered the violence of the state. So, we need to acknowledge the fear and then connect to our sources of courage and hope so that we can transcend the fear.

Popular education is essential to open the space for that connection to happen: first, my personal connection to my own sources of courage and power and hope; and then, from there, through storytelling and sharing, to connect with the hope and courage of others, and how that makes me more powerful. When I listen to a Guatemalan woman who escaped the violence in Guatemala and literally crossed the desert walking, as her faith kept her going, I get my own spirituality strengthened. I listen to her story of how she paid five thousand dollars to cross like that, but she saw a younger woman who couldn't walk anymore, who they were just going to leave in the desert to die. Which is what happens, thousands have died along the Mexico-US border over the past few years. This woman chose to stay with her and signal an immigration officer to come and arrest them so that she could save her life.

There is a dignity, there is a dimension of humanity there that reminds me that we are so much more, and that we are still here. Because throughout history,

there have always been people who are willing and able to do things like this. They are doing it right now in Gaza, and they are doing it right now in the detention centers and raids and rebellions in Los Angeles. All the time, always in history, there are people connected to that dignity. That is why we are here in the twenty-first century with still so many spaces to keep going, because of the fact that there are these historical victories that allow us to be doing this, resisting and creating the conditions for historical victories of the future. The oppressors, whether in Gaza or Texas, are poisoning the future from a rotten place of greed, fear, and lies. We can have radical hope, because we have a memory rooted in community.



# Reimagining Theatre of the Oppressed

Julian Boal

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*Julian Boal is a leading practitioner, researcher, and teacher of Theatre of the Oppressed, based in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Boal has facilitated workshops on Theatre of the Oppressed in countries around the world, worked directly with many of the best-known Theatre of the Oppressed groups—including Jana Sanskriti in India, the Groupe de Théâtre de l’Opprimé in France, and Óprima! in Portugal—and published several books on Theatre of the Oppressed, including most recently, Theatre of the Oppressed and Its Times (Boal 2023). In 2017, Boal established the Escola de Teatro Popular in Rio with Geo Britto, a school “run by social movements for social movements,” that aims to teach political theatre to social movement activists (or militants) “so that they can return to their movements to strengthen the construction of the cultural collectives within those organizations” (Boal 2023, p. 112).*

*A central concern in Boal’s work is seeking to reimagine and (re-)radicalize Theatre of the Oppressed in the contemporary period. Theatre of the Oppressed was developed by Augusto Boal in the 1960s, during a revolutionary era in Latin America. The approach was conceptualized as a system of techniques, games, and exercises that could encourage and enable non-professional actors to “use theater as a tool to raise awareness, debate, mobilize and train for collective action” (Coudray 2023); and was conceived by Boal “as a weapon to fight against dictatorships and centralized political parties” (Sajnnani, Mayor, and Boal 2020, p. 564). However, as Theatre of the Oppressed became popular and spread around the world, the era of revolution in which it had been created disappeared, and the method became “defanged, transformed into merely a body of theatre techniques, largely disconnected from critical theory or political grasp” (Howe, Boal and Soeiro, p. 1). As such, many Theatre of the Oppressed productions became oriented to*

more individualized and therapeutic aims or were used as tools of state-directed social reform projects. Boal, along with his collaborators, is trying to find ways to return to the initial “political orientation” of *Theatre of the Oppressed* as a “tool of struggle,” while recognizing that times have changed, and that to be effective, *Theatre of the Oppressed* needs to be adapted to the neoliberal era in which we now live (Emert, Friedland, and Boal 2011, pp. 179, 180).

Several key themes emerge in Boal’s work and conversation. One is the importance of making close links with social movements for radical education to be effective in helping to support collective projects of social transformation. “It is only when *Theatre of the Oppressed* is associated with a movement that is bigger than itself that it can become radical,” Boal says in the conversation below. Part of this work involves building organic connections with communities and activists engaged in social movement organizing. Part involves adapting *Theatre of the Oppressed* practice to work in different public and social movement spaces, to foster a public form of pedagogy. But part, too, is about recognizing the embedded nature of effective social movement learning. The value and significance of radical education in social movement and other organizing contexts are dependent not just on what is done within a particular classroom or workshop or theatre setting, but on how the learning that occurs in this setting is embedded within a broader movement or organization structure, and connected to other kinds of education and action occurring across the organization, the movement, or the struggle (Choudry 2012). Langdon (2011, p. 149) points to the importance of tracing the “trajectories of learning” in struggle that develop within and across social movements. In his conversation, Boal returns repeatedly to this question of how to trace and foster these kinds of learning trajectories.

A second concern is rethinking some of *Theatre of the Oppressed*’s internal practices. In particular, Boal focuses on the importance of using *Theatre of the Oppressed* to help people to recognize, understand, and ultimately move beyond the contradictions that shape their lives and communities and block their path toward liberation. *Theatre of the Oppressed*, much like Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* that inspired Augusto Boal, tends to use a Manichaeian language of oppressors and oppressed. As Boal has said elsewhere, in political theatre, there is often “an attempt to make allegories in which we represent the capitalist, the racist, the sexist” (Howe 2019, p. 245). Boal is more interested in the contradictions that exist within the capitalist or the worker. As he says in the conversation, the aim is to understand how “the oppressed wants and does not want change.” This is central to a larger educational project that rejects claims that individuals and groups who seem to act against their self-interest—for example, when voting in elections—are stupid

or deluded, and instead recognizes that one of the defining characteristics of the current era is that most of us tend to occupy contradictory social positions that make it difficult to develop clear visions, strategies, and movements for liberation and change. Instead of blaming and stereotyping others who fail to support radical agendas, Boal uses *Theatre of the Oppressed* as a space for fostering empathetic and structural analysis.

Finally, one of the central lessons that Boal insists on drawing from *Theatre of the Oppressed* is the recognition that the content of what is taught is often less important or impactful than the form, institutional structure, and social relationships within which this content exists. Boal sees parallels in *Theatre of the Oppressed* attention to rethinking the form of theatre, and challenging traditional relationships between actors and audience, with the ideas of the Landless Workers' Movement in Brazil that the most important school for political training is to be found not in a textbook or classroom, but in "the very struggle" itself. In this, Boal is highlighting a preoccupation found across many different traditions of radical education, which in other contexts is talked about as the "hidden curriculum," or in the words of John Dewey, "collateral learning" (Tannock 2021). What is essential in effective radical education is to change the forms, institutional structures, and social relationships that constitute the learning environment, so that these support and reinforce the intended lessons of radical education content.

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***Can we start with your father, Augusto Boal, who founded Theatre of the Oppressed, and whose work you are taking forward? How is your work with Theatre of the Oppressed similar or different to that of your father? Are there ways in which you are seeking to develop or transform or rethink Theatre of the Oppressed?***

I learned a lot from my father, obviously. More than a lot. Somehow, I think that I repeat a lot of his, not so much his techniques, but more his gesture. If you look at it, the main stories that my father talks about are stories of his failures, failures he worked hard to make productive. And I, who came after, who was born or started understanding the world in a moment in which the revolutionary horizon was no longer, well, as you know, when the sun goes down, it colors everything in different manners. The absence of this revolutionary horizon also gave different colors to *Theatre of the Oppressed*. So, I started from the failure of *Theatre of the Oppressed* in these present times, and my attempt is to give answers, to show that *Theatre of the Oppressed* is not redundant today, in an age

dominated by neoliberal subjectivity. Therefore, my work follows on from my father, in starting from failures and trying to make these productive. But look at the richness of my father's work. My father continued to invent new methods, because he was not satisfied or fulfilled with the search that he created. He was always trying to readapt his techniques to the world. And in this sense, I look like him a lot, precisely because I don't repeat the techniques. It is because I am different that I am the same. The world is ruled by contradictions.

***When you speak of failures, what are the failures of Theatre of the Oppressed that you are thinking about?***

Well, I must say that I don't think that Theatre of the Oppressed, in and of itself, is a form of radical transformation. I've seen too many times groups that want to reproduce, not transform. First, there are Theatre of the Oppressed people that are blunt sellouts, that are going to talk about important topics, but just because there is a town hall paying them to do it. Also, as the founder of Jana Sanskriti, Sanjoy Ganguly, said to me, it's very easy to do a Forum Theatre in which you speak about a specific issue, like homophobia. In the school, we create a space in which students feel safe in order to go into that space and say, yes, there is patriarchy, there is homophobia in the school, I suffer from it, and so on. Then you shake hands, close the space and go away from that space. Was it enough as a social change? I don't think so. I think that sometimes, people can only do that, and maybe it's useful in itself, but then we need to be harsh in our criticism of ourselves. This is not continuous work that you're doing, it is just a glimpse. Why would this glimpse be any stronger than the routine of oppression, the routine of the cultural industry that they absorb? If you are not there, on the ground and on a daily basis, why should that imply a change? Some people say that I'm going to do a talk, I'm going to do a workshop that's going to last for two hours. It's going to be this amazing performance and then when I leave this place in which I went, the place will be completely transformed because of my talk. I don't see why. I do not understand why.

It is only when Theatre of the Oppressed is associated with a movement that is bigger than itself that it can become radical. That's what I like about it. My father's insight was a recognition of the limitations of theatre, of a certain humbleness of theatre. I don't like it when inside Theatre of the Oppressed, we have groups now that say, you can go on stage to make an intervention, but only if it's sung, only if it's dance, only if it's pantomime, because then you are going to liberate your creative self. I don't like that because I believe the essence of

Theatre of the Oppressed is saying that theatre is not enough: that we need to fill theatre with the knowledge of others, and it's the knowledge of others that's going to complete the theatre. We cannot presume what the knowledge of others is going to sound like, or in which ways they will represent themselves. I don't think that Theatre of the Oppressed in itself is revolutionary. I think it can have a revolutionary use, it can have a radical use, if it is engaged with movements that are bigger than itself, and if it recognizes its limits by recognizing that you need to receive the forms of knowledge of others as they come, and not presume that they need to be artistic, that they need to be this or they need to be that. What they need to be is something that you are not expecting.

***This is part of the reason for you relocating from France to Rio de Janeiro, where in 2017, you started the Escola de Teatro Popular (School of Popular Theatre) with Geo Britto. Can you explain what this school is, how it works, and what it seeks to do?***

Yes, the reason why I moved to Brazil was because we had and we still have stronger social movements than France, where I used to live. We started our school based on our analysis that culture was not being used to its full potential by most of the social movements in Brazil, whether in the youth movement, people's education movement, occupation movement, and so on. The idea was to train activists who would then go back to their movements and reproduce or readapt whatever they learned in the school. So, the school was open only to activists from different social movements.

Culture was used back then, as it still is today, mostly as a tool for diversion: it was going to be the funny moment in the political meeting, a little bit of distraction. Our belief was that culture could be something more important, in the sense that we believe that cultural practice can help to change the mind of the people. In most of these social movements, people join because of something individual. They don't have a house, and they want a house, and therefore they're going to join occupied building movements in order to have a house of their own. They want to enter into the university so they can have a better job. So, they are going to join the people's education movement in order to become university students. But they don't tend to think of problems as something more global, more structural. By the use of culture, the idea is that it's a bet that you can move from your individual interest to a collective interest on a specific issue. So, you understand that is not just you are entering into the university that is going to be the solution, but you need to work in such a way to have better education for

all, and so on. It is based on Brecht's sentence that an activist is an egoist that understands things well. So, that was the first assumption of the school.

The school isn't located in any one building. We are now seven units, and all of those units work in different places with different social movements. So, for instance, we are in Petropolis with a social movement that is just beginning, these activists run what they call a socialist house, and we are part of the activities offered by the socialist house. We are inside the union of teachers here in Brazil, in Rio, and one of the activities offered by the teachers' union is a class by the people's theatre school. We are inside the movement of the street sellers. They have occupied a building, and we have a group inside this occupation. We also do training for trainers—we call them monitores. Social movement activists can apply to join the training, we see which social movements they belong to, which political currents they belong to. Most of the activists are welcome, but not all of them are welcome, because we don't agree with all kinds of politics. Sometimes, we will join people in their movements in different territories and do training inside their organizations so they can become monitores.

***You have spoken about this work as trying to build a “cultural front” as a central part of the work that social movements do. What do you mean by this?***

Yes, we believe that, for example, it wasn't stupid for people hundreds of years ago to look at the earth and to think it was flat. Because, you know, there is a flat line in the horizon, so therefore it's a plane. Or to think that the sun was turning on the earth—because you go out on the street and what you're going to see is that the sun is what turns around the earth. So, it was not stupid. So, also, it's not stupid for people nowadays to think that there is absolutely no solidarity. Because when you go in the street, that's not what you see. It's everyone for themselves. The main emotion that you feel or the main mode of relationships with others is competition. In the world of art or the world of academia, you have always the moment when you are trying to get the grant and then you are working against your peers.

So, there is a need to create cultural spaces where those affects, those modes, are not so strong or are not present, where we can create an anti-hegemonic sociability that is against the market subjectivity that invades all of us. Where you try to have no competition, or not to have the idea that I have to work as fast as I can to produce as much value as I can, or that we need to have immediate results. You can have a world in which people can develop a subjectivity that is

not the one imposed by the wider society in which we live. This is why culture is so important. Otherwise, maybe those same behaviors can enter, since the social movement is not an island, of racing against your peers, seeing others as competitors, transforming your production into commodities, following the rules of the market, and so on.

***One of the best-known social movements in Brazil today is the Landless Workers' Movement. Do you work directly with this movement, and have you been influenced by this movement?***

Yes and no. One thing is the Landless Movement is not so strong in the city of Rio, and in general, they don't work that much in the cities. But at the same time, they were an inspiration, because what we learned from them is that it is the form of the organization that is more important than the content of the teaching, the form of the organization teaches more. When they occupy a land, they organize in such a manner that everyone is responsible for a task, and everyone has the capacity to criticize the tasks done by anyone else. As soon as you join the movement, you enter into a task group. You may have to take care of the food, or the children, or health, or safety, and so on. Who knows how to read and write? I know. Okay, so you are going to teach the children. Who cooks well? Okay, come and we are going to organize the food task group.

As an individual, you are also going to join another kind of circle, which is joined by individuals that belong to all the task groups. So, there will be a circle in which there is one person that is from the education group, one from the food group, the safety group, and then you start to criticize the others in a positive way. People from the safety group, look, we have to spend the night looking out to see if there's going to be police. And when we receive food, it is always cold food. Can you please find a way to have hot food for us in the middle of the night or hot coffee? Okay, we can. People from the education group, you never come to see how we are planting the food that we eat, and we believe that it would be nice for the kids to understand, the need to learn this, it is part of education. So, it's a circle in which you are going both to be able to criticize but also going to be criticized. Then you go back into your task group, and you all make a synthesis of the criticism you have heard.

This is a method of organizing people that is extremely horizontal, there is not a big hierarchy, it is extremely fluid, and it makes people directly co-dependent on each other, without the exchange of commodities or needing to sell your

labor power to get whatever you need. So, it is already a way of living that is apart from the capitalist system. In this sense, we learnt a lot from the Landless Movement by thinking that what is most important is not what we teach to the people, it is what people experience, and culture as a place where you learn in a traditional way. Obviously, when we are talking about an occupation, we are talking twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. When we are talking about art and culture, we are talking about people that we have for two hours, three hours, and so on. So, it's different. But still, this is an inspiration for us.

I have many friends that are organizers from the Landless Movement, and I remember very well when I was in distress about, how should we do political training in the school? I turned to one of them and asked, how do you make a political training in the Landless Movement? He answered me back, look for us, there is a point that is very clear, the first school for political training is the very struggle. The way of struggling must be a way to make political training. The way of organizing is in itself a teaching more powerful than reading Marx, or reading Engels, not that it is bad to read Marx and Engels.

***Part of this engagement with social movement organizing is taking Theatre of the Oppressed out into the streets and other public places, as a form of public pedagogy. How does this change how you need to do this work in these different contexts?***

Yes, we adapt. I like to make theatre a place in which contradictions are expressed, and I like to see it when this is expressed in the way that a character plays out this difficulty. For instance, there's a play I am working in where there is going to be a police officer who is absolutely convinced that the people who are marching are right, and at the same time, this guy is going to beat them up. The question is, how is the actor going to perform that. But obviously, when you do it in the street, you cannot do it the same way, because the subtleties are lost.

We made a play last year with a bunch of teenagers, in which they were representing their mothers. One of them had her kid killed by the police, and at the funeral her boss arrived, she was a domestic employee. The boss asked her, while apologizing a lot, look, I have no one else I can turn to, it's been three days that my kids are at home, and I can no longer work. If I don't work, I'm going to get fired. I'm really sorry, but can you please come back to work? Then the woman that just had one of her kids killed looks at the boss with a furious face and says, yes, tomorrow, I will be there. You can understand she's doing this because she has other kids as well, and if she doesn't work there will no longer

be milk on the table. It's because she is a mother that she could no longer be a mother. I like that kind of acting, because it tells us more about society than making one character very good and one very bad. It shows the contradictions.

But at the same time, when we're in the street, we have to make things bigger. We have to make it clear, as maybe there's someone that's going to pass and will stay just one minute and go back to their work. So, every moment we need to be more. We need to be more assertive on the point of what we are trying to express. There is a larger meaning from doing this on the street. Why? Because you reach more people. But also, in Catalan, they have a saying from people on the left, "el carrer serà sempre nostre," which means the street will always be ours. In view of the militia, the police, all the brutality and violence, we need to manifest that the streets are still ours. So, beside the content of the play that needs to be as well elaborated and performed as it can be, it is also about the presence of groups that say no to a certain state of things, that try to refuse the way things are being done.

Our mayor, Eduardo Paes, was elected with more than 60 percent of the vote and he's the guy that has evicted the most people in the history of Rio de Janeiro. So, we needed to be present on the street saying, no, we don't want that. Now he's going to arm the municipal police, they will have weapons, and we need to go to the street and say, no. There is a quotation from Erwin Piscator's main book on political theatre from a poet who wrote a pacifist book during the First World War. The poet says something like, I offer this book as shelter for ideas without any shelter, as a testimony against my time. So, to be able to testify against your time, to still believe that there will be a day when there will be justice, it is important to constitute this today, the testimonies for the trial that will happen in the future. It is a sign of hope that one day there will be the redemption, one day there will be the revolution.

***You have said that the Escola de Teatro Popular shifted from initially being a "school for militants" to become a "militant school." What do you mean by this?***

At the beginning, the idea for the school was just to receive activists from different social movements. We didn't have a political agenda or movement of our own. The first thing we noticed was that the social movements that sent the most people to us, they didn't live nearby. This is a huge city, and some of them didn't even live in Rio. So, they were not going back to their social movements with the ability to create a base over there, they didn't have the scope or ability, especially at the beginning, to create things in their social movement. Because of

this, it was difficult to raise real interest across these movements in the practice that we were doing. So, we decided, ok, since you aren't able to do that, but here we are twenty or more people together, let's open our doors to more people.

This was the year that started with the killing of Marielle Franco here in Rio and ended up with the election of Jair Bolsonaro as president of Brazil and Wilson Witzel as governor of Rio. There were a lot of people going into the streets in response, there was a lot of action. We decided to open the door and take part in this action. Twenty more people joined us, and we created scenes, we did Invisible Theatre, we participated in marches. We noticed there were a lot of people who had a lot of rage, a lot of will to do things, but they didn't have a space for doing it. So, we decided to become this space, to be not just a space for people that were activists in other movements, but to make it in such a way that this pool itself was going to be a place for creating activists. At the beginning, it was just two people, Geo Britto and myself, teaching the others. After a while, that was a structure that could no longer exist like that, because there were so many people we were meeting that either were from social movements, but they didn't have space to do art and culture in their movement, or they were not from any social movement, but needed a place to stay, a place where they could organize. So, we decided to become this place. Therefore, we were no longer a school for activists, but an activist school with a more precise political agenda of our own.

***You have spoken about the importance of focusing on contradictions in Theatre of the Oppressed, as a key concern for developing powerful organizing and political action. What are these contradictions that you focus on and why are they so important?***

Theatre of the Oppressed from the beginning was contradictory. When you say Theatre of the Oppressed, you are saying that there is another theatre that does not belong to the oppressed. You're saying that there's a theatre that belongs to the oppressor. So, it was creating a contradiction within the field of theatre. Also, we were stating contradictions on the stage that were between the oppressors and the oppressed. But, at a certain moment, I felt that this was not enough. We were not seeing a reality that makes it in such a way that the two poles of these contradictions are also embedded within the contradictions themselves.

For instance, I don't think that capitalists as individuals are necessarily bad, but the capitalist as a class is evil. There is a play by Brecht called *The Exception and the Rule* in which the boss is going to kill his worker. Can you imagine

something worse than killing your worker? From the beginning, the guy is terrible to his worker. They're running in the desert to arrive first to a place that has oil. He wants to become the owner, and so he forces his worker to arrive first. But why does he force him to arrive first? Because there are competitors. If you want to be a capitalist, you need to accept the fact that you will have competitors and you need to do everything in your power to arrive first. Even the capitalist, either they play by the game, or they are out of the game. You cannot be a good capitalist, because you're going to be kicked out of the game if your prices are not competitive. If your ways of producing do not extract the value that is needed, you are going to get kicked out, especially now that most of the people who are CEOs answer to shareholders. There is not one individual who can make choices. It's a system that makes the choices.

On the other side, the oppressed is also embedded with a lot of contradictions. The oppressed wants and does not want to change. They have the courage and do not have the courage to change. We have this contradiction right now, 60 percent of the people of Rio voted for a mayor who evicts people, who beats up the street sellers, who won't raise the teachers' wages. Why is that? Is it because people are stupid, because people deeply want this or are there other reasons? If there are other reasons, let's try to understand them. Let's try to understand why people vote the way they vote. Let's understand their subjectivities and how the subjectivities are created by the concrete situation around them. Let's see them in their contradictions also.

We are living in a time in which now, more than ever in the history of humanity, we are linked to each other by the internet, by technology. You and I are able to talk here online, I don't even know which country you are in right now. We are able to talk at this time through products that were created using different countries, different populations, different forms of knowledge. More than ever, humanity is absolutely connected. But this connection is for something that is absolutely nonhuman, that is the value, the need to create more and more value. These connections are made in order to be able to produce more and more money. And this is absolutely nonhuman. So, these concrete relationship that we are establishing, we are establishing because of something that's absolutely nonconcrete.

That's a contradiction. The contradiction between the boss I have told you about already, the contradiction between the workers. You are in competition with the group of other producers of knowledge that you belong to. This group that is professionally designated as producers of knowledge is in constant competition with each other. Just as you're in competition when you are looking

for an apartment, or you're in competition when you receive a grade in the school. The working class has a lot to gain with their unity as a class, but each worker has a lot to lose in the task of getting this unity. Contradictions are all over. They are present.

When you knock on the door of someone in a slum in which there was just a massacre, and you ask that person to come to the square to manifest against police brutality, that person will appear in front of the door with her baby, and she is going to say, no, I'm not going. She has a lot of things to lose in the fight against police brutality. But equally, not fighting against police brutality might get herself killed. She might be the victim of police brutality the next time. Our world is a world of contradiction. Our world is a world that is embroidered by the vital contradiction that is the contradiction of the commodity, that is a use value and also an exchange value, that has these two things in it that are fighting against each other at all times in a fight that is unsolvable within the system.

***So how can Theatre of the Oppressed help us to work through these contradictions?***

First, by recognizing them. Because most of the time, we do not recognize them. You know, most of the activist theatre uses the image of the hand being raised, the fist being raised. The hand, the fist is a figure that from time to time we need, you know, the fist up front. But at the same time, it is a figure of repression. It is also a figure that tells you, if you are not that person, you are a horrible person. You don't deserve your kid. Or look how close the figure of the hero is nowadays to the figure of the entrepreneur, the person who never gives up, the person who is always fighting, always struggling. The struggle now is for their own survival, but the mould is still of the struggle. The individual struggle is true, it's not going to change the system, but it still is a struggle. That's why in Brazil, we call entrepreneurs that are not entrepreneurs, they are people who are working twelve or fourteen hours a day on a bike to deliver food, we call them warriors. Warriors because they are able to support the war that's outside. We say that with pride and it's a recognition you are a real warrior. It's terrible.

So, the first step would be to be able to recognize these contradictions. But then the second step is to recognize how they work in us, how they make us, how they destroy us. They destroy us and, at the same time, they make us apt to live in the world as it is. But this aptitude is also a destruction. Hopefully, Theatre of the Oppressed can also help to make us understand that the contradiction is always

unstable and always moving. If we understand this movement, maybe we can try to understand better how to make it work in a sense that is beneficial for us.

***You have argued that we need to think of Theatre of the Oppressed as more than just a set of exercises, games, and techniques—for these can be adapted for all kinds of political purposes. What is the core essence or key components of Theatre of the Oppressed that is vital for preserving it as a radical, emancipatory practice?***

One of the things that Theatre of the Oppressed is good for is to understand the power of the form. The form has a constraint. If you want to write a soap opera, there will be constraints. If you want to do a tragedy, there will be a constraint. If you wanted to do a revolutionary James Bond, you won't be able to so, because James Bond, by the form, has constraints that make it not revolutionary. So, what does that mean? It means that the state is a form, the commodity is a form, your academia is a form. When you go inside of it, you will be constrained. It's not enough to have one of us inside. It is not enough to have good intentions when you are inside of it. What is necessary is to transform it.

That's something that was very positive we can learn from my father, in creating Theatre of the Oppressed. It was the idea that we don't need only to change the content, we need to change the relationship, we need to change the forms between the audience and the people on stage. To change only the content is not going to be enough. We need to change the way people relate to each other. That is a lesson of Theatre of the Oppressed that, unfortunately, is being more and more forgotten. Because, more and more, we have this idea of let's have one of us in there. There were people in the United States who were proud that the head of ICE [Immigration and Customs Enforcement] was going to be a guy who is a descendant of Cuban immigrants. I hope that I raise my kid well enough that, if he is proud of something, it is of destroying ICE and not being head of it.

I remember years ago, there was a big debate that were not enough female jokers in Forum Theatre. A woman who I was working with at the time, she had the best answer. She said, I don't care about this. I want more feminist Theatre of the Oppressed groups. When there will be more feminist Theatre of the Oppressed groups, there will be more women jokers as a result. But, in itself, to have more women to be jokers is pointless. To have more Black people on stage, or more LGBTQ people on stage, does not mean that the stage will be more for Black people or more for LGBTQ. We need to address the question; how can we

represent without this being just a delegation of power? There was a woman, Kathleen Cleaver, she was one of the leaders of the Black Panthers in the United States. She once was asked, don't you want to integrate into US society, don't you want to be part of US society? She answered back, it's like you are asking, do you want to enter into a building on fire. I don't want to enter a building on fire. Now, the building is literally on fire. It reminds me of another woman whose name is more well known, Greta Thunberg. She has also spoken about buildings being on fire, and how our solutions right now are like giving a glass of water to people who are in a building on fire. It's important to try to understand the eagerness of people who are willing to join buildings on fire. We know that very soon, there's not going to be anything left, or very little. So, what is the bet?

***You began by talking about the failures of Theatre of the Oppressed. Are there examples where Theatre of the Oppressed has been successful in contributing to collective action and social change, either in your own work or the work of others?***

When my father was a city councilor in Rio, it was through Theatre of the Oppressed that they created the first law of witness protection in Brazil. Before that, the lawyers of the defense could have access to the name and address of the people who were making the accusation. So, you may imagine that when certain witnesses were making accusations here in Brazil, they would very soon disappear. The first law ever in Brazil that was made in order to protect the witness was made through Theatre of the Oppressed. Through Theatre of the Oppressed, there was a change in the legislation for housing for people without shelter in New York. In India, they were able to create a movement with Theatre of the Oppressed that has been going for years and are about 300,000 people strong. We call them Jana Sanskriti and they were able to change a lot of the relationships between patriarchy, between men and women, regarding dowry, regarding forceful marriage, and so on. In Israel and Palestine, the Combatants for Peace, for a small time, were able to bring together former combatants from both sides. These were former Israeli soldiers and former Palestinian freedom fighters who were still freedom fighters, but they felt at that moment that armed struggle was not an option. They had no moral problems in itself against armed struggle, but at that moment, they felt that it was not how they could advance in the fight against the occupation. Together, they were able to create a sense of community through Theatre of the Oppressed.

But, at the same time, I must say that in front of the challenge to fight against the extreme right worldwide, in front of the challenge to fight against the system that is destroying the very possibility of having human life in earth, I think that all of our practices need to be severely criticized in order to be able to address what is at stake. It's very likely that in less than fifty years, Rio is going to be absolutely unlivable, that ten million people who live in Rio will have to move. Many other cities are very likely going to be affected too. Even before that, we are already seeing climatic events that are indicating that we are entering into a new era, and it's just the beginning of the era of catastrophe. If we don't think hard regarding those issues, I think we are missing the point. I don't want to sound too desperate, and I think that the Escola de Teatro Popular is doing good work. But it's a drop of water in a desert—and how valuable is a drop of water in a desert. We need to be extremely critical of what we're doing. I can neither deny the amazing work that many groups around the world are doing, but I can neither feel satisfied and bang my own drum, saying, look how Theatre of the Oppressed is wonderful, when what is at stake is that, within thirty or forty or fifty years, we will have a world that's going to be unlivable, or livable for the very few. If we don't put that in the judgment of our work, we are missing the point.



## Learning to Be a Union Organizer

Jaz Brisack

*Inside Organizer School, Berkeley, USA*

*At the time of our conversation, Jaz Brisack was a Practitioner in Residence at the University of California, Berkeley Labor Center; before this, they were the Organizing Director for Workers United Upstate New York and Vermont, and co-founder of Starbucks Workers United. In 2022, Brisack gained national recognition after they led a successful campaign to organize the first unionized Starbucks outlet in the United States, in Buffalo, New York. This helped to trigger a national wave of union organizing, both at Starbucks and other low-wage service and retail companies across the country: by 2025, over 10,500 workers at more than 500 Starbucks outlets across the United States had voted to unionize with Starbucks Workers United. Prior to their work as a union organizer, Brisack was an undergraduate student at the University of Mississippi and a Rhodes Scholar at Oxford University. Brisack's current project is to develop the Inside Organizer School nationally, a school they helped to co-found in 2018.*

*Brisack's engagement with radical education comes through their commitment to union organizing, so it is the focus on organizing, building power, and making change in the workplace and beyond that drives their engagement with education. As Brisack says in their conversation, while they see all struggles as connected—and they engage directly on issues from abortion rights to Palestine solidarity—they focus on labor organizing as they see this as one of the areas of greatest need, due to the fundamentally undemocratic nature of the workplace, but also a site of great possibility for building collective power from the ground up. In Brisack's approach, there are close parallels with organizing traditions that come out of the US civil rights movement, Alinskyite community organizing approaches, and, of course, labor organizing models (McAlevy 2016; Payne 1995; Schutz and Sandy 2011). Brisack's aim of developing the Inside Organizer School as an*

*independent educational institution that works in collaboration with but outside direct control of trade unions echoes concerns to develop independent working-class education and labor colleges in the United States during the early twentieth century (Altenbaugh 1990).*

*Brisack regularly points to US socialist Eugene Debs as a key starting point and inspiration for their work (Ginger 2007). In this, they differ from other radical educators, who tend to point to figures like Paulo Freire as critical starting points; and it raises the question of the role and importance of having a clear ideological framework for effective radical education and organizing. Ideological development, which is often referred to as “political education” in labor union and community organizing contexts, is essential since, as Sen (2003, p. 354) points out, “it is virtually impossible for an organization to achieve long-term change without a coherent picture of the world and a theory of how change is effected.” Debs’ socialism gives Brisack a clear analysis and direction for understanding the place of labor in society and knowing what needs to be acted upon to make real change happen. At the same time, Brisack emphasizes the need to ground labor organizing in local commitments to real people and communities and warns against purely ideologically driven approaches to education and organizing, done as part of a “prescription for world revolution.” Failure to do this, as Harmony Goldberg warns, can foster “a ‘purity’ orientation” that makes people “not want to work with anybody who doesn’t agree with them on every question,” and can make it “incredibly difficult ... to relate to poor and working-class communities as they really are” (quoted in Engler and Engler 2023).*

*One of the distinctive approaches that Brisack takes to both organizing and education is a commitment to learning through doing, and through taking on the roles and work of the individuals who one is seeking to organize—in this, there is a strong resemblance to the commitment to “accompaniment” that Pancho Argüelles speaks of earlier in the book. When Brisack led the organizing drive at Starbucks in Buffalo, they did so as a union salt, meaning they took on a barista job at Starbucks to organize it. The Inside Organizer School likewise focuses on helping others learn how to organize their workplaces as workers or union salts. The rationale for this approach is the importance and value of learning to stand in the shoes of others, building strong community relationships, understanding directly how things are experienced by workers on the job, and seeking to reduce the gap between community and workplace insiders and outsiders. This is quite different to other (Alinskyite) approaches that maintain a strong divide between organizers*

and community members and leaders. From the point of view of radical education, it highlights the importance of informal learning, learning through doing and direct experience.

Brisack's career trajectory also highlights the importance in radical education of mentoring, as a mode of educational practice that is relational and personalized, developmental, and continuous through time (Feekin and Widenor 2003). Brisack's experience as a student at the University of Mississippi was central to their becoming a labor organizer. But this wasn't through formal classes or curriculum, and indeed, Brisack talks of the hostility of university management to leftist activism on campus. Rather, it was through individual relationships with personally engaged and ideologically sympathetic professors that connections with the world of union organizing were opened up. Likewise, while Brisack's initial experiences of union organizing were of failure, frustration, and limitation, a strong mentoring relationship with a senior union organizer and educator enabled them to frame and understand such setbacks, double down on their commitment to becoming a labor organizer, and led directly to their eventual organizing success at Starbucks.

Finally, Brisack's story highlights key questions of relationships between education and work in the contemporary global economy. The US media has repeatedly focused on Brisack's previous history as a Rhodes Scholar—"Meet the barista and Rhodes Scholar helping to lead the fight to unionize Starbucks" runs a typical headline (Gibson 2022)—a framing that Brisack dislikes. The larger issue that such framings speak to is the emergence of what is sometimes called a "college-educated working class," where a university degree is no longer a ticket to social mobility, and it is far from unusual to have university graduates working in the nation's coffee shops (Scheiber 2022). In such a context, the hegemonic idea that the fundamental role of education should properly be to help one rise up through the social and economic hierarchy in pursuit of individual mobility is increasingly open to critique and questioning. For Brisack, the promise made by Debs that "when I rise it will be with the ranks, and not from the ranks" offers a powerful alternative vision of educational, social, and labor justice. Reflecting on their time at Oxford University, they reject the dominant widening participation frame of focusing on enabling individuals from under-represented backgrounds gain access to elite education and employment spaces. It is not about getting a seat at the table, they argue in their conversation, but challenging the idea that such a table should even exist.

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***Many labor educators and organizers today point to Paulo Freire and popular education as an important starting point. But you often speak of the importance for you of Eugene Debs and the early twentieth-century American socialist movement. What is it about Debs that speaks to you, and what lessons do you take from Debs and this movement for doing labor organizing today?***

Eugene Debs was the first person I ever heard or read talking about solidarity. I grew up in a weird environment in the US South. My mom was a fairly conservative southern Democrat. My dad had immigrated from India. I didn't know that unions really still existed. My mom had taught in private schools and was like, it's ok that we don't have a union because they give us free croissants for breakfast. That was the mentality around me. I'd seen documentaries like *Waiting for "Superman,"* which was funded by the Koch brothers and was opposed to teacher unions.

But, at the time, I was sixteen years old and working in a not very good part-time job at Panera Bread in East Tennessee and seeing my co-workers struggling. The manager bragged that he paid us \$7.50 an hour, so twenty-five cents more than the minimum wage. But it was obviously not enough for people to cover bills and it was not enough for me to save for college.

I came across Debs by chance, because I was deep in a rabbit hole reading about the history of atheism and free thought in the South and the Scopes Monkey Trial. Clarence Darrow was the lawyer who defended the Scopes Monkey Trial teacher, and he also defended Debs. The first thing about Debs that I found on a Google search was his speech to the court when he was going to go to jail for encouraging draft resistance, and his line about "while there is a lower class, I am in it, while there is a criminal element, I am of it, and while there is a soul in prison, I am not free." That was life-changing for me, because it was the first time I had really seen the world in that way, or really understood what solidarity was.

***You have long been involved in a range of different kinds of solidarity activism, from abortion rights to Palestine solidarity to climate justice. What made you decide to focus on labor movement organizing and education as opposed to other kinds of movement work?***

A lot of my experience with organizing started at the University of Mississippi. I was influenced by what one of my mentors said, when I asked him, how do you pick what cause you focus on? He was like, what do you mean? There's only one

cause. I liked that way of thinking about things, as all of these are human rights issues and we're tackling the different parts as best we can to be most effective.

I started working for the UAW [United Auto Workers] on the Nissan organizing campaign and doing abortion clinic defense at the same time, which was because I had got a car and so then I could do both. In terms of Palestine activism, we had a little demonstration on the University of Mississippi campus, and we wrote articles and so forth. We tried to start a Students for Justice in Palestine chapter, but we couldn't get enough students to charter it, who were interested or willing to be public about it, because some of them were international students on visas.

I think I ended up in labor organizing because it seemed like one of the most tangible things that I could do to both make a difference and help people understand their own power in relation to oppressive structures. I think labor organizing is also one of the only places where you can build that kind of power, without needing external funding or forms of support, because of the principle of members paying union dues. I know it is more complicated than that with union investments. The UAW had heavy investments in Israel, and the AFL [American Federation of Labor] makes more money from investment returns than from dues. But in theory, labor has the ability to be self-funding and autonomous.

***You've spoken about the workplace itself as a powerful site for labor education—both in your own experience as a teenage worker during your high school years, and in the experience of your co-workers at Starbucks. What are the most powerful lessons we often learn as workers in the workplace about labor, organizing, and power?***

I think the workplace is the least democratic place, at least in American society. Workers have zero say, and the employment contract is based literally on English common law of master and slave agreements. It is so entrenched that the boss or the owner has the power, and the workers do not. You can be fired at will, which means at the will of your boss, and anything that you want to do is subject to this controlling power. Even things like supposed co-ops can still have very undemocratic power dynamics, without workers really having full control and full say.

I love union organizing because it is the best, most exciting thing that I've ever gotten to do. It is the most fun, equally fun every time, at your first committee meetings, where you are meeting with workers and helping people be like, wait a

second, we can actually do this. We can actually change this and shift the power dynamic back into workers' hands.

***When you were a university student, you interned on the UAW campaign to organize a Nissan factory in Canton, Mississippi. But this campaign ended in failure, and one might think you could become disillusioned about the power of labor from this experience. What lessons did you learn from this UAW campaign and how did you manage to avoid becoming disillusioned?***

I was lucky that I had a mentor, Richard Bensinger, who was working on the Nissan campaign and had been the organizing director for the UAW before that. He was very much not cynical, even when the UAW was descending into its own corruption scandals and making decisions that negatively affected the campaign, including not allowing us to go to a boycott to win the right to organize at Nissan. Richard was always in it for the right reasons. I didn't know a lot about what was actually going on at the time, I only found out by bits and pieces later on. But he was like, you have to earn the right to be cynical. I don't know if I totally agree with that. I think that, in some ways, it's good to go in with your eyes open and know what you're getting yourself into.

But workers were dying in the Nissan plant. Derrick Whiting had died. Other workers had gotten really serious injuries. I talked to a worker who had been exposed to formaldehyde and other chemicals at work and developed lifelong epilepsy. So, I think that even though we lost, I had seen that the struggle for a union was also, in some ways, a literal life and death issue. That made me want to work with unions that were committed to winning the right to organize and would do whatever it took. No union is going to be perfect all of the time, as I later found out. But I think that campaign showed me what unions should do, but also why it was so important.

***Before organizing your Starbucks outlet in Buffalo, you took a job as an organizer with Workers United. You have spoken about the importance of having the material and institutional backing from Workers United for the success of the Starbucks organizing campaign. What role did Workers United play in terms of labor education, helping you and others learn how to organize effectively? Was Workers United the primary place you learned how to organize effectively, or were there other places and people as well?***

I have learned almost everything I know about union organizing from Richard Bensinger. I started working with him on the Nissan campaign when I was

eighteen years old, and I am still working with him now. In 2018, right after we lost the Nissan campaign, we co-founded this organizing training program called the Inside Organizer School, which is what I am working on developing now. The School teaches people how to organize their workplaces from inside, whether they are salts getting jobs to help organize, or they are already working in places and trying to unionize.

I then ended up moving to Buffalo, New York, to work on the SpoT Coffee organizing campaign. Richard had a family emergency, where he had to leave right after three workers were fired in retaliation for trying to organize. So, I was the only person who could stay in Buffalo and help to run the picket line the next day. Two weeks later, Richard was like, oh, you're now the lead organizer on this campaign, you can't leave. I had never agreed to be lead organizer on that campaign. That was very much like being thrown into the fire, and you have to figure out how to do it without actually knowing how to do it. I guess my takeaway there is that I thought that I knew quite a bit about organizing, but it is very different to suddenly be in charge of a campaign where workers have been fired, and now it is weighing upon you to try to win their jobs back. We did do this, but it was a struggle.

The most important thing for me about Workers United is that it's quite a decentralized union. We were working with this little regional office of Workers United based in Rochester, covering upstate New York and Vermont, and that region believed in local autonomy for workers who were organizing. It also believed in putting resources into organizing and holding companies accountable. So, when SpoT Coffee fired workers, the union backed a boycott that had picketing outside the stores, with big rallies that turned away 40 percent of the company's business. Because of that, the company reversed course, stopped fighting the union, and reinstated the workers. We won the union and won a good contract.

Going into the Starbucks campaign, that was the most important thing in terms of working with this union. By that time, I was the organizing director for this little region, which actually meant that it was still just me and Richard. But I had more ability then to plot out the campaign in the way that we wanted it to go. At the beginning, it was the perfect situation between having a union that had enough resources but not having a union that wanted total control. Then, as the campaign got bigger over the next couple of years, the bigger union powers came in and it got a lot messier.

***Your approach in organizing Starbucks was you became a worker at Starbucks. Why was it important for you to work at Starbucks? What did you learn from this experience? Is this a key strategy for you, in terms of breaking down the distinction between labor organizer and worker, or does this depend on the situation?***

I think there are two things, one is practical, and one is personal. The practice issue is that going into an organizing campaign as a worker or a salt is the most effective thing that you can do to preempt a company's anti-union campaign. Right before the pandemic, I was talking to a worker in Buffalo at the university café, and they were talking about organizing around the usual workplace issues, but also around the issue of Starbucks forcing them to serve coffee with a cop. They had these events where they would invite the cops in and try to promote positive relations between the public and the cops. Obviously, a lot of workers did not enjoy these and did not want to serve the cops, but they had no protections in refusing to do so. The worker talked to a bunch of their co-workers very quickly, and unfortunately, word got back to management. They were fired, allegedly for cursing; although if Starbucks fired people for cursing, they would have no more workers, because everyone does this. We couldn't prove that the company knew the worker had been talking union. It was the Trump NLRB [National Labor Relations Board], so it was unlikely that they were going to side with a worker, when there was no obvious proof that they did know.

So, there was no justice for Benny, the fired worker. But it did show that, even if there was worker interest in unionizing, which there was, Starbucks would try to root it out. Whereas if you were inside the workplace, you could build relationships with people and then have more ability to not talk openly about the union until you were ready to start arguing your case. That was the practical side: it would help prevent people getting fired and help keep the campaign timeframe controlled.

The personal side was that I had been working in union organizing since I was eighteen, but I had never organized my own workplace, and I didn't know that experience. I thought that it would be important for me, in terms of helping people do this and asking people to do these things, if I understood what it was actually like. Richard Bensinger had organized his own factory at age twenty-two and then became a salt in other workplaces. Most of the people who had taught me about organizing had been either workers who organized their own workplaces or salts, or both. So, I wanted that experience, I wanted to know what

it was like when I was telling other people, hey, you should get a job and help organize that workplace.

***You have spoken about how the experience of participating in a union organizing or strike campaign is a powerful learning opportunity, one that a person takes with them even as they move onto other jobs. What are the lessons learned from being part of an organizing campaign?***

I think the most interesting things that I learned in the workplace that I hadn't learned outside the workplace were how workplace dynamics play into organizing campaigns. Because it's one thing to be like, ok, you have your natural leaders in the workplace, you identify your leaders, you get them on board. It's another thing to be having a two-hour conversation with your co-worker, who you need to be on board, and going into all these rabbit holes, trying to get them to be, if not openly pro-union, then at least a quiet supporter.

I think that psychologically, too, it's just so interesting to see the effects of the anti-union campaign when you're within the workplace yourself. Starbucks unleashed an extreme anti-union campaign. They brought in the president of Starbucks North America and a team of about 150 to 200 store managers and executives from around the country. These people were stationed in our stores at all times. They were pulling people off the floor into one-on-one conversations, they were having group captive audience meetings. All of it was designed to make the workplace really stressful and play on people's anxieties. They would identify which workers were having specific issues, including mental health struggles, and then tailor their campaign on an individual worker level.

So, it was really manipulative and like psychological warfare. It's one thing to have debriefs or listen to tapes that people have taken of these. But you understand so much more when you're sitting in these meetings yourself and feeling your heart rate rising. It's like, I'm an organizer, I'm prepared, I know what they're going to say, and it's still doing this to me. If you're a worker who doesn't have any background on unions, going into that same environment, it is so intense. Some of it was also comedy gold. They flew in Howard Schultz, the CEO, who gave this captive audience meeting in a hotel ballroom. They had closed every Starbucks store in Buffalo and brought people into this ballroom, and he talked about how great and generous he was, and how he was inspired to give Starbucks workers benefits because Holocaust prisoners had shared their

blankets with each other. It was also a very exciting campaign from the corporate stupidity angle.

***After organizing your Starbucks store, you have supported other workers from around the country in organizing their stores as well. How do you manage to share your own learning about organizing with others to help them be successful? Are there specific activities or ideas or stories that you share that tend to be particularly helpful to help others learn how to do this work?***

The Inside Organizer School has existed since 2018. It's become a bit different now in that it's much more participatory. It features breakout groups and interactive sessions, so that it is less people telling you how to do things and more workshopping actual campaigns and figuring out what you would do in specific situations. But that training program was the foundation for the Starbucks campaign. When we were teaching workers how to help other co-workers at these stores that were reaching out to us to ask how to help people through the organizing process, it was very much a process of here are the steps, here's what you do. You know, how do you have difficult conversations? How do you tell people what the company is going to say in ways that make it less intense and scary when they do say it? How do you make sure that you're listening to everyone's concerns and still helping them to see why the union can solve these things, and why their fears ultimately don't outweigh the benefits or importance of unionizing.

But while you can teach the technical stuff, the most important things are about how do you present as a good co-worker and a caring individual. People who are coming into this just with a political angle aren't going to be able to reach people in the same way as people who are coming into this because they care about people, they care about building relationships, and they care about individuals. You can't come in here being like, I am the vanguard of the revolution, or I am doing this as part of my prescription for world revolution. For example, at my store, the person who I was closest to ended up not being pro-union in the beginning. She came around over the course of the campaign. But it was very important to keep that friendship going, independent of the union, because you can't treat people like they are there to serve a purpose. You have to care about them as people. When we had a strike at Starbucks over Covid safety, someone was crossing the picket line and working during the strike. But they were going through a really tough situation and so we ended up giving them money from our strike fund. Some people were like, oh my god, why would you do that? But you have to care more about people than about any bigger political issue.

***You have mentioned your work of trying to develop the Inside Organizer School that you helped to set up to train non-union workers and salts to unionize their workplaces. What is the idea behind this school, how do you envision it working, and what will this school do on the ground in terms of its day-to-day practice?***

We are trying to make the Inside Organizer School more official now, in terms of having its own structure and its own independence, which is important because we work with a bunch of different unions that don't always get along with each other. We are trying to keep it as a space where our goal is empowering workers to organize with their own autonomy, and in the ways that they want to organize. We focus on how to get people through NLRB union elections and how to get people their first union contracts. But our goal is to empower workers to be able to do that without getting told by unions, no, you can't do this, which unfortunately has happened quite a bit.

In terms of the workshops, our goal is to make these as interactive and participatory as possible, and as relevant to what people are going to be doing as possible. Our students are folks who are either trying to organize their own workplaces or about to get jobs as salts to start organizing campaigns at their workplaces. The idea is both to provide the kind of skills-based training that people need, and to provide a community for people who are doing this. Because the act of getting a job to organize a union is, in some ways, such a weird thing to be doing. Having a community of people who are like, yes, this is an important thing that you can be doing to help to change the world is a very nice aspect, because it can be a bit isolating. It's not the secrecy part and it isn't really about one's co-workers. Most co-workers are like, oh cool, if they find out that you are trying to organize the workplace. It is about the boss, because obviously, if workers are too pro-union, they often get fired if the company can get away with it. Just being able to have a place where people can talk about this openly and be in a shared community is very key, too.

***You talk about developing the Inside Organizer School as an independent organization. In the early twentieth century in the United States, there were independent labor colleges, and in the 1930s, Highlander Folk School played a role in supporting union organizing in the South of the United States—are these inspirations and models for your project, or are there other models that you draw from?***

Yes, definitely Highlander is an inspiration. Our goal is very much to try to make the School a place where people come and experience some kind of recuperation

and then go back out and organize. I once got to go to this tiny camp called Camp Kinderland, which is like a Jewish communist school in the mountains in Massachusetts. Paul Robeson had gone to this camp. They have whole sets of various communist books; it is a very endearing place. The arguments that people were having are very much the kind of argument that I always felt we would be having after the revolution. Like, oh no, this bunkhouse is named for Pablo Neruda, he was terrible, let's rename this bunkhouse. It feels like a beautiful experiment in what leftist democracy could look like after we've solved a lot of the bigger problems. I am interested in learning more about these models. Camp Kinderland is geared toward kids, but I think that, in terms of the retreat style, alongside the actual training, it gets so many things right.

***Alongside your labor organizing work and developing the Inside Organizer School, you have also done a lot of writing—and are now releasing your own book, *Get on the Job and Organize*—as well as interviews and podcasts about your labor organizing experiences. How do you understand the importance of this work in terms of supporting a powerful labor education?***

I think that one of the biggest takeaways of the Starbucks campaign was the fact that people kept seeing this one event and then being like, wait a second, if they can do it, we can do it. That fueled the organizing at Starbucks stores across the country, where workers at stores in places as far away as Knoxville, Tennessee, or Tallahassee, Florida, or Oklahoma City were like, if Buffalo is unionizing, we can do this too. There were even posts on Reddit where Starbucks workers were saying, Buffalo is probably going to lose but then all of us need to organize because they can crush one city, but they can't crush everyone. And we were like, guys, we're going to win, but ok, keep this going.

Outside of the Starbucks campaign, we've also heard from workers at Amazon and Chipotle and Trader Joe's and REI who are like, ok, if Starbucks workers are organizing, we should organize too. So, I think that there is really that potential for people to see themselves in a campaign, and get that this isn't rocket science, if these people are unionizing, everybody can be doing this. That is the goal for me in writing the book to make this demystified and explain how people can organize their own workplaces. I think writing and speaking to the press has more uses, including public pressure campaigns of trying to poke holes in the Starbucks brand or expose what the company is doing. But with the book, my goal is mostly just to help workers understand how we unionized at Starbucks and how they can replicate this themselves.

*While your focus is on labor organizing, you have long maintained a commitment to other social justice struggles. Recently, you gained media attention and criticism for supporting the Palestine liberation struggle through your work with Starbucks Workers United. Why is it important for you as a labor organizer to maintain a focus on these wider social justice struggles, and how is this linked with what you are trying to accomplish through labor education and organizing?*

At the risk of being dogmatic, I would go back to Eugene Debs and the whole premise that an injury to one is an injury to all. Especially for unions based in the United States—and I think this could be extended to unions in all colonial powers—our tax dollars and our labor, in many cases, are participating in and enabling genocide. So, it is, in fact, a working issue on a more literal level, as well as on a solidarity level.

In the Starbucks campaign, we've had organizing committees from the very beginning where solidarity with Palestine was a fundamental part of their organizing. In Albany, New York, there was a worker who had always worn a Palestine solidarity pin. Then, as part of the union busting that Starbucks brought in, the company cracked down on him and tried to make him take it off. Starbucks Workers United, as a union, has taken stances on all kinds of issues, from trans rights to kicking cops out of labor unions in solidarity with Black Lives Matter.

I think for unionized Starbucks workers, me being the person who posted a solidarity with Palestine tweet was totally uncontroversial. I expected the right-wing backlash that we got, but I did not expect the level of hatred that came from the wider union, where people were accusing me of supporting terrorism. I almost got fired over that tweet, it was pretty bad. But Starbucks workers were mostly upset when the tweet was taken down. They organized another statement that was much longer, that explained why Starbucks Workers United was standing in solidarity with Palestine.

By this time, Starbucks the company was retaliating against the union. People were getting death threats called into the stores after Howard Schultz had given a list of unionized stores out to Zionist groups. Starbucks was also suing the union over their logo. So, the new statement went out with a Starbucks Workers United logo with a keffiyeh. On a very ironic level, this is what ended up bringing Starbucks to the bargaining table, and not all the other little actions that the union had authorized—which was in line with what we had always said which was that the only way we're going to win is with a boycott. Obviously,

committing to solidarity with Palestine was the right thing to do, but it also became the thing that brought Starbucks down.

***One of the regularly repeated narratives about your work is you are a Rhodes Scholar who then became a barista at Starbucks. What is it about this story that you think has attracted attention, and why is it important for how we think about education and its relationship to the world of work?***

I will say that I do not like this framing. Obviously, the press loves this framing and so, in some ways, to get more coverage of the Starbucks campaign, it was helpful to let journalists do this. Interestingly, Starbucks itself didn't bat an eye that I had that on my resume when I applied to work as a barista. I was trying to do as little lying as possible, and you could find the information on Google anyways. But my manager was just like, oh, that's nice. Of course, you want to work at Starbucks because that's the job market, right? There are lots of people with all of these degrees working at Starbucks now.

I think it is interesting that companies don't really see workers having college degrees and fellowships and so on as being an issue. Unless they are trying to make it an issue later, like Howard Schultz made me an issue in his Senate testimony when he was claiming I was an outside agitator not a real worker, and that salting is the most nefarious thing you can do. But when you're actually trying to get the Barista job, nobody is like, oh my god, you are overqualified for this. They just see an enthusiastic, warm body, because that's what they are looking for. They are not seeing people as individuals.

***You have written critically about Oxford and the Rhodes Scholarship and the model of elite education they represent. You have also spoken about a line from Eugene Debs that "when I rise, it will be with the ranks and not from the ranks." So much of formal education is about these two things: reproducing privilege and promoting a vision of education justice that is reduced to a project of individual social mobility. What needs to happen for formal education to support the vision of collective advancement and transformation of the power structure that you often talk about?***

I think that education has become so commodified, in terms of both degree requirements and what you are expected to study at university. I have a degree in history. My co-workers' response at Starbucks to learning about this was like, oh, you must not want to make money, if you have a degree in history. It is very much

this transactional think. People weren't like, what are you doing working here? They were like, of course, you're working here, you have a degree in history! So, there is a problem in terms of the curriculum, and also, education can't be run as a profit-driven industry.

The meritocracy element is also so insidious. Because at every Rhodes Scholarship event, and with Oxford University in general, we were always told, you are here for a reason, and you need to put aside the imposter syndrome. I was like, actually, I don't believe in imposter syndrome. You know, instead of talking about imposter syndrome, we should be talking about why this table that you want a seat at shouldn't even exist.

I did not enjoy being at Oxford, I got out as quickly as I could, and the whole time there I was like, I want to be back doing organizing. That said, I did meet some really cool people while there who are doing labor stuff around the world. I met my best friend there, so I can't really say I regret that. But the actual institution was not fun. I think people there really thought about class as an identity, as in I grew up working class and now, I am here at Oxford, rather than class as a relationship to power and the means of production. It's like, ok, you grew up working class, but now you're going to work for McKinsey Consulting, I don't think that really makes you this working-class hero.

I think we might have to overthrow capitalism to truly change education. But there are also good programs around. Like at San Francisco State University, they have know your rights at work classes that are popular across the disciplines. I think these are things that schools can be teaching that are often not taught about, like what rights do people have at work? How do you go about organizing a union if you are in a non-union workplace?

***Despite your criticism of formal education, your undergraduate experience seems to have been more positive, and you were able to learn about labor and social justice organizing and education from your professors. Were you able to learn about labor and social justice because your university was different from other universities? Was this typical of all students at the University of Mississippi, or was this something you had to actively seek out?***

I never had a formal labor studies class while I was at the University of Mississippi. But there was a journalism professor there named Joe Atkins, who was a labor journalist and had also done other forms of political reporting. Joe Atkins was a great, amazing professor, who taught things like radical film classes.

He was covering the UAW Nissan organizing campaign and was how I first met Richard Bensinger. I had reached out to him about being in his class, because I was interested in labor history, and he was like, wait, this is still something you can do now. You do know that your ability to do this did not end in 1920, right? I was like, oh my god, this is so cool.

I guess, in a lot of ways, I was seeking a certain kind of education out as an undergraduate student. But I was lucky that Joe existed, and that there was the Nissan campaign happening at the same time. The overall picture at the University of Mississippi was more complicated. They ended up firing the person who helped me win the Rhodes Scholarship, which I think was politically motivated, as retaliation for having leftists represent the university. But while I was there, there were so many good people as well, like Kiese Laymon, who I had as a creative writing teacher. Also, the individual attention you could get from professors was incredible. Actually, I think it was a much better experience than a place like Oxford, where everybody is so fancy and doing their fancy things. At the University of Mississippi, most professors are like, oh my god, a serious student! Let me clear my office hours for them. So, yeah, I had a great time there.

***Before going to the University of Mississippi as an undergraduate student, you had been homeschooled throughout your life. What has been the impact of homeschooling on your own learning, and should this be considered more widely as an important alternative to education in state schools?***

I think that homeschooling is either extremely difficult or perhaps impossible to do well. And the longer that one homeschools a kid, the truer that becomes. I never had a formal day of schooling in my life until college. My teacher was my mom. While homeschooling allowed me to do a lot of individual pursuit of special interests like labor history, it was also a bit of a cult-like environment and was very isolated. We traveled a lot and lived in a lot of different places. I didn't have a network outside of the home. When I became an atheist, there were huge family tensions, because my mother was very religious. So, yeah, I think it is a very hard thing to do. There are a few exceptions, maybe if somebody is doing a year working in a different country, it could make sense to homeschool your kids while you are there. But I do not recommend homeschooling for general purposes. In the United States, the homeschooling context is usually either super-religious or super-hippie granola, and it is almost always the mom who is the primary teacher. So, it tends to be a bit messy.

***Apart from gaining a labor education from the workplace, from university, from reading, and from the labor movement itself, are there other sources of learning and inspiration that have impacted the labor organizing and education that you do today?***

This is a weird way of thinking about this, but a lot of people who grow up in fundamentalist backgrounds and become leftists transfer some of that early learning. I mean if you grow up genuinely taking a lot of fundamentalist Christian ideas at face value, then it's like, we don't like rich people, you're pretty fucked if you're rich because you're not going to go to heaven. Or it's important to care about other people, and so on.

Of course, that's not what most fundamentalists take away from this. But I think it is a fairly common experience that people who grow up in that environment and then leave, do still take some of those values and ideas into their organizing work. I've had really interesting conversations with people from similar backgrounds who are not trying to be evangelical labor organizers but are aware of the ways that background is influencing them. The first time that somebody told me that this was probably the case with me, I was like, oh my god, no, I'm an atheist, that could never be the case. But obviously, if you grow up taking it very seriously, which I did, then it probably does influence a lot of things. It is common, for example, the IWW [Industrial Workers of the World] history is full of martyrs and psalms and so on. Religion transfers so easily into some of this work.

***Is there anything else that we haven't spoken about yet that you think would be important to add to this conversation?***

I guess one other thing that I would add is that one of the most hopeful things for me about the Starbucks campaign, and I think this is true of a lot of the other organizing campaigns that followed from the Starbucks campaign, is that through these young, Generation Z-led radical organizing efforts, the union is sort of taking on a life of its own. For example, when we put out the original solidarity with Palestine message, people in the wider union told us that Starbucks Workers United doesn't yet have a union contract with the employer. So, therefore, it doesn't have the ability to speak as a local of the union, because it is not independent, and anything it says has to reflect the views of the broader organization. The organized Starbucks workers were like, no, actually, we do have this ability to be self-autonomous and speak collectively as an organization, with

or without a contract. People higher up in the union have said that somebody must be encouraging these workers to organize around Palestine. It's like, no, you teach people how to organize, and then they organize themselves. That's how it works.

## Escaping Education

Gustavo Esteva

*Universidad de la Tierra (Unitierra), Oaxaca, Mexico*

*Gustavo Esteva is an educator, philosopher, and former economist who was the co-founder of the Universidad de la Tierra (also known as Unitierra) in Oaxaca, Mexico, an alternative, autonomous university established in 1999. Created with a coalition of indigenous and non-indigenous community organizations, Unitierra was described by Esteva as “one small space” of a movement to “create a new society,” as the “old society is dying” and “destroying everything, the environment, Mother Earth, culture” (Mandel and Teamey 2016). Unitierra’s mission statement says that it was “born amongst the context of radical reactions against schooling observed in many Indigenous communities,” and it is strongly linked with and influenced by indigenous mobilizations in Mexico and beyond, most notably the Zapatista rebellion that broke out in 1994, a few years before Unitierra was created (McCowan 2021).*

*In addition to his work with Unitierra, Esteva is a leading voice of post-development theory, described by Escobar and Reiter (2023, pp. ix-x) not just as Latin America’s “leading critic of modernization and development,” but “one of those essential thinkers enlightening us on the necessary transitions to an era in which humans finally relearn to coexist with each other and with the planet in a mutually enhancing manner.” Esteva was critical of the social, cultural, and environmental harms inflicted by the modern, Western development paradigm, and saw the spread of schooling and concept of education as a cornerstone of this paradigm. Part of moving beyond the failures of development, Esteva argues, entails a need to “escape education” and move “beyond education” (Esteva 2010; Prakash and Esteva 2008). This conversation with Esteva was recorded in January 2022, a few weeks before Esteva died in March 2022 at the age of eighty-six.*

*In his conversation, Esteva returns to several themes that were central to his life’s work. One is his embrace of the importance of indigenous learning and culture,*

*and appreciation of the fundamentally different worldviews found across different indigenous communities. Esteva's grandmother was Zapotec, and his own life trajectory mirrors his growing critique of Western development models, as he shifted from rejecting his family's indigenous roots as something backward and shameful to embracing these roots as firm ground for learning an alternative, more liberated and autonomous way of being in the world. Esteva points to the importance of indigenous social movements as opening up the possibility of different futures. "I woke up," as "it was impossible to continue sleeping," Esteva (2023a, p. 155) once wrote of the Zapatista uprising, arguing that "the Zapatistas took many of our convictions and beliefs and opened a new path."*

*Esteva was also profoundly impacted by his friendship and encounters with Ivan Illich, again despite having initially dismissed Illich's work as insignificant. From Illich, Esteva was able to develop his fundamental critique of Western models of schooling and education as damaging and harmful, coming to believe that what was needed was not just an alternative, reformed model of schooling and education, but an embrace of learning that was beyond education altogether. Unitierra, though called a university, is not a formal center of education recognized by the state; it has no entrance requirements, no grades, no tests, no curriculum, no credentials or official diplomas, no formally recognized teachers. Instead, it is created on the model of apprenticeship and learning by doing. "Young men and women without any diploma ... can come to us," writes Esteva (2009, p. 7), "they learn whatever they want to learn," "they discover that they need specific skills to do what they want to do," and "after a few months they are usually called to return to the living present of their communities to do there what they have learned" at Unitierra.*

*A central part of moving beyond education for Esteva entails a process of unlearning the ways in which schooling and education construct us to be individuals, disconnected from others around us, our local communities and environments, from Mother Earth. The name of Unitierra was suggested by a Zapotec intellectual, Jaime Martínez Luna, who said "this university should keep its feet on the ground and on the earth" (Ericson and Tan 2020). The central concern is how to live and learn in communities that exist in harmony with their natural environments, in ways that support the well-being of all together. Esteva described himself as a "deprofessionalized intellectual," calling the process of deprofessionalization "a kind of suicide" in which "you need to dissolve your own self, in order to clean it from all the attitudes and behavior associated with the profession" (Esteva 2023b, p. 55); and said he had given up having formal jobs years ago, instead putting his faith in the richness of the learning communities around him. "In my place, every I is a*

we,” Esteva (2009, p. 8) wrote of *Unitierra*: “And thus we live together, in our living present, rooted in our social and cultural soil, nourishing hopes at a time in which all of us ... are creating a whole new world.”

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***You have written about the need to “escape education” and describe your work as being about “abandoning the very idea of education.” What does this mean, and why is it so important?***

One way to start is to say we are abandoning nouns that represent a subordination and dependency. That if we use the word “health” then we need someone to heal us, and we know that the system of health and the notion of health are terrible, but we use the word “health” and then we are dependent on that system. The same with everything. In the case of education, the very moment we use the word “education,” that implies that we are subordinated to someone to educate us—public or private, the parents, anyone that will give us that peculiar thing called education. Instead of using nouns we are using verbs. Instead of “health” we use “healing” and then we are the ones that can heal. If we use “learning” instead of “education,” we are the ones, we have the agency to learn whatever we want to learn.

In *Unitierra*, when someone puts some pressure on us and asks, what kind of pedagogy are you using?, we talk about “baby pedagogy,” because babies learn, we all learn after we are born, we all learn things as difficult as to speak, to walk, and to think without any education. No one is educating us to think, or to speak, or any of those mental and very complex things.

We are trying to abandon an idea that was born with capitalism and implies basically to shape the people in a certain way, to educate means that I know better than you, what you must learn to be is what I think you must be. Education is basically the decision of one of the parties to impose on the other one specific format, one specific way of being. This is more and more, not just one person, not the parents, not the friends, but the whole society, it's no longer the school, it is the whole society that is educating us all the time, trying to shape us in a certain way. That way is a horrible way, that is why we are trying to abandon all forms of education.

***This idea sounds similar to Illich’s idea of deschooling. How has Illich informed your work and how do you situate yourself within the deschooling movement in the Global South?***

These are very important questions. First, Illich himself, ten years after publishing *Deschooling Society*, which was not the title he chose for his book, it was the publisher that put that title, he wrote a piece saying I have been barking up the wrong tree. The question is no longer the school, the question is education at large in the whole of the society. Then it is no longer just the school, it is everywhere you can get education that he was abandoning.

I must tell you that I did not read the book when it was published and Illich was at the peak of his fame. Because for us in the Marxist left in the early 1970s, he was just a reactionary priest. Then we were saying, yes of course, he's criticizing education and health in a capitalist society, they are horrible. In a socialist society, we will have very good education and very good health, as Cuba is already showing us. I had no idea of the ideas of Ivan in the 1970s. But then it was my own transformation, with the help of two other sources. First, I read the late Marx and learned the different kinds of Marxism, I abandoned the Marxist religion that I had already adopted instead of capitalism. Second, I started to think for myself, to work and live with the people at the grassroots, in small communities, basically with indigenous people. I was happy, learning a lot, but I was lost. I did not know where I was, what was happening in the experience. The experience of interacting with indigenous people was important but puzzling for me.

Then, by accident, I met Ivan Illich in 1983. It was fantastic to really know him. I discovered that he had very important ideas to understand what was happening and to understand my experiences. I started to read Illich, and I discovered that I had been for many years in that part, but I could not formulate the theory in the brilliant way in which he formulated it. Perhaps this requires a story. When my first daughter came of school age, I started to look around, this was the 1960s, and I could not find any public or private school to which I can trust my beloved daughter. With some friends, we created an alternative school. In that time, the fashion was they were called activist schools. They were an alternative to conventional schooling and we used Freinet and Waldorf and Montessori. We created very beautiful schools, the children were basically in the garden, they had assemblies to take decisions. We added one year for my daughter, every year for my daughter to continue her studies. But when she ended high school, we closed the school because by that time, twelve years later, we knew that the problem was not the quality of the school, but the school itself. There was something wrong with the school, that in spite of our very beautiful school, still it had some problems. One of the things that obsessed us, and this is still the main point about education, is the curriculum. Because despite we have

alternative education, but we still have for the children to have their diplomas et cetera, we need to follow the curriculum, defined by a few bureaucrats in the Ministry of Education. The idea of the curriculum started to obsess us. Why the curriculum? What is the reason of this curriculum? What is the meaning of this curriculum? Why is the curriculum completely alien to real life, to life today, to what the children want to learn and need to learn in real life? Since then, I started to abandon alternative education and asked myself about education. The question is not just about conventional or alternative education.

So, let me say something, there is nothing in the world more despotic than the classroom. In the classroom, the teacher has the power and he or she is always right. The teacher, too, becomes a slave of the curriculum. If you don't follow the curriculum, you will be fired. You can have some flexibility, they expect your flexibility, they want you to be flexible, but within certain rules, within the basic frame, you cannot abandon the curriculum. Just think for a moment, right now in primary school you have the same curriculum in New York, in a small village of Oaxaca, in China, or everywhere, it's the same basic curriculum. That is absolutely stupid, the children are different, they live in different contexts, for different kind of lives. To have the same curriculum is stupid except if we assume that what the curriculum is basically is not to teach you mathematics or square roots or whatever. The idea is to make you obedient, that is the main lesson in the school. What you learn in school, in all schools, conventional or alternative education, is to say, Yes, sir! Yes, Madam, to obey and to be an individual. When you enter the first class, you are immediately transformed into an individual, you are no longer a "we," you are no longer the "we" that we are when we are born, you become only one individual with a specific name and grades et cetera. It is this specific process that is education.

***What is the relation between deschooling or unlearning and the need to decolonize learning and society?***

Let me clarify the question of unlearning. If we discover what education is, what education does, how it was created with capitalism, that it's very modern, it was created in the last 300 years. We know that we have learned a lot and we have shaped it in that way. When we discover this, the first point is how to unlearn what we learned, because most of what we learned is—I will not use the word colonial for that—it is basically one specific way of being accommodated to the dominant system. Meaning we are, for example, constructed as individuals and we have been convinced that we are individuals, that it is something in human nature, it is not something socially constructed, but something natural. We

need to unlearn that, to abandon that specific education of being an individual. That is not easy for many people, discovering that we can believe that we are individuals, we can behave as individuals, we can do things for the individual we believe we are, but we cannot be individuals as long as we are still humans. We are not seeing nets of relations. To discover that, to unlearn being an individual, it's a very challenging thing. I am talking about a very fundamental point, but we need to unlearn most of the things that we do, most of the things we love to read, but we don't know how reading shapes us as texts, and many people speak as if they were reading a text they have in their minds. We became textual beings by reading, and we were educated in that way of being that is being a textual being. We need to unlearn most of the things that we learned and to begin to learn in freedom with others, other kinds of things that we need in real life and particularly to challenge this terrible dominant system.

I'm talking about this thing of unlearning, and in this process of unlearning we discover that a portion, but just a portion of what was taught, what we were educated, is colonial.

Colonial, meaning when a specific group of cultures and countries dominated the rest and imposed their own way on all the others. It is Illich who mentioned a very important story about the colonial, is when Antonio de Nebrija, the linguist, writes to Queen Elisabeth and tells her, something horrible is happening in your empire, the people are talking like they want, this is not possible. It is as important as discovering America, should be to educate people in how to speak. They should speak in the way you the queen says. Then they created the institution that is the Royal Academy of Language in Spain to teach the people in the whole American continent how to speak, and this implies how to think, what is the right words that you can use. Then colonial seeks to shape people in a certain and specific way, to destroy their own ways of being—not their own ways of learning, not their own ways of storying, not their own ways of doing something, their own ways of being, because depending on the words we use, that is how we experience reality. The intention was to impose on all of us a certain way of being. The whole project failed in the sense that, yes, we speak Spanish, and we don't speak our own native languages, that is true. But in all of America and Latin America, people have different words, different ways to use Spanish. They have transformed the use of Spanish. But still, the damage is there, and we have been shaped by the colonial powers.

Language was the main tool of colonization in the whole world, it is more important than the police and the army. It's more important than the system of government. Many people associate certain forms of colonization with religion,

and of course Spain brought Catholicism, and there was a very serious intent to transform everyone into a Catholic. That was the obsession of the colonial powers in that time. You can see something similar after the reform with the Evangelicals. One day we will describe the damage done by Evangelicals in Latin America. How American priests or people around Latin America are trying to shape the people in a certain way, in the name of religion. But language is more profound than religion, went farther than religion.

***You have drawn a lot on indigenous traditions in your own work. When and how did you start learning and unlearning from these indigenous traditions?***

It is a horror story. My Zapotec grandmother could not enter my house through the front door because she was an Indian. For my mother, like many people of her generation, assumed that the best thing that she could do for us was to radically uproot us from our indigenous ancestry. Then I was racist. I loved my grandmother, but I was educated, I was shaped in a way that I did not see her as a Zapotec, as an Indian. We all were humans, and she was just poor and ignorant and illiterate. She needed to be educated and developed. For many years, I would say for more than thirty years, I was convinced that we all are humans, we are the same kind of thing, and then there are some people that are poor, ignorant, et cetera, that should be developed and educated. I wanted development for myself, for my country, and of course for my grandmother. It was very difficult for me to discover this in my thirties, in the process of decolonizing myself in my interaction with the people. I was already involved with many communities in the 1980s, in the 1970s, but only in 1992, on the occasion of the five hundred years anniversary of the supposed discovery of America, when the so called indigenous people were filming themselves across the whole American continent, it was a very impressive demonstration of cultural affirmation, from Canada to Patagonia, it was really fantastic and there were surprises for many of us. It was suddenly discovering that they were there, they were real, and they were something different. The nineties, that was of course later affirmed by the Zapatista uprising in 1994, but the nineties were for me the discovery that these people are different and have a different rationality. Those years were learning what we have called since then intercultural dialogue, with people like Raimon Panikkar and others, trying to discover what it is to accept the radical otherness of the other.

One point here, a brief story, Illich became Illich because of an intercultural experience. He became a priest because after the nasty experience he suffered

in Austria, he left, he abandoned the idea of having a child and he became a priest in Rome. But in Rome, he wanted to become a scholar, he was interested in theories and history, and when he was offered a brilliant career in Rome, the private secretary of the would-be Pope, he left Rome immediately and went to New York, to learn in Princeton something he was interested in about the Middle Ages. He was interested in learning about Alberto Magnus and the original documents were in Princeton. When he arrived in New York, he was working in New York, he crossed to a neighborhood of Puerto Ricans, and just sitting in a church to meditate, he saw the horror of how the Irish priests were treating the Puerto Ricans. The next day he asked Cardinal Spellman to become the priest of that specific parish, and he started to do something challenging, for there is no more closed universalism than the universalism of the Catholic Church. Catholic means universal. Catholicism implies that you need to be shaped in a certain way, all the people on earth. Then Ivan Illich saw how the Irish priests in New York were shaping the Puerto Ricans in a certain way, and he asked a priest in that parish before Vatican the Second, he started to use Spanish in the mass, to bring music to the church, to do radically different kind of things with the Puerto Ricans, trying to create the beliefs and the religious practices in a different way. It was a radical opening.

This is for me one of the most important points, first to accept a radical otherness of the other, and that implies that if you really think that the other has a different kind of rationality, a different kind of mind, you will not be able to understand him or her in his or her own terms, because you have your own rationality. In a very real sense, intercultural dialogue is impossible. The word "dialogue" means to transcend the logos, to transcend rationality. But how do you talk with someone that belongs to a different planet, that has radically different reason. After many years of trying to learn intercultural dialogue with the sixteen different indigenous peoples of Oaxaca, and with many people coming from outside, Canadians and Japanese and Finnish and many other people, trying to learn how to interact with the other, my conclusion was that the only way to have real intercultural dialogue is to do things together. It is not enough to have the dialogue of knowledge, what we need to have is the dialogue of ways of living, ways of doing things. Doing things together, we can begin something that can be called intercultural dialogue.

All this story means that what I have been learning in the last thirty years, is that they belong to a completely different planet. They never accepted the word "indigenous" or "Indians," the standard classification. They are framing themselves in their own ways that cannot accept the classification. It is not the

same kind of thing to be Mixe or Zapotec. We call them indigenous, but they are not the same classification, they are not the same kind of things, they are different kind of beings. You cannot even speak of the Zapotec people, because the Zapotecs are very different in different parts of Oaxaca or different parts of the world. All the usual classifications, ways of calling, labels that we use to call these people are basically wrong, they do not fit well in how they see the world, how they see who they are. What I have been learning with them is even the word “identity” is not a word that I will use to talk about this. If you are talking about the decolonial exercise, you need to abandon the word “identity.” That is a very stupid word coming from mathematics. In mathematics, in a very abstract way, you can say that one is identical to one. But only in mathematics, only on the board, not in the real world. To classify people, to say that people have an identity, it’s a very colonial way of treating the people. It is how capital wants to see us, as identical individuals that can be used as labor, can be exploited as labor. They want to reduce us to this homogeneous condition, but that is very colonial, it’s one of the worst impositions by the colonial way of being.

***How did your engagement with indigenous ways of learning lead you to set up the Universidad de la Tierra?***

In the 1990s, I was working and living with many of the so-called indigenous people, with Mixes and Zapotecs et cetera, and they created something that they called the Indigenous Forum of Oaxaca, where all the different peoples of Oaxaca came together, and after discussion and reflection, they presented their positions to their society. In 1997, the Indigenous Forum of Oaxaca declared publicly that the school has been the main tool of the state to destroy the indigenous people. That was an historical truth, in the nineteenth century, education was created with the explicit purpose of de-Indianizing the Indians, and they had an immense success. Millions of people entered into the school system as Indians and ended as something else. Nobody knows exactly what it is, but they are no longer Indians. The school can be very effective in destroying and eliminating the indigenous soul, the indigenous way of being. They suffered this, they survived this attack on their own way of being and then they say “Bastards.”

They started to have the experience of closing the schools and kicking out the teachers. You can imagine the scandal, front page in all the papers in Oaxaca, these barbarians, they’re dooming their children to ignorance, this cannot be autonomy, this is unacceptable. All kinds of political and economic pressure were placed on them and many communities were forced to reopen the schools. But some communities persisted, and then an anthropologist, Benjamin

Maldonado, took the decision of teaching a lesson to the parents, and he created some tests to compare children going to the school with those not going to the school, to tell the parents, look what you are doing to your poor children. To his surprise and the surprise of many people, what they discovered is that the children not going to the school were better in every aspect, not only in knowing about the community, about everything in the real world, not only about the fiesta et cetera, but also about reading, writing, arithmetic, geography, or history. Because they have a brother or uncle or someone teaching them what they wanted to learn freely, not in the school. The only thing we could say they did have a problem was that they didn't know how to sing the national anthem. Going to school, they learned that, and every Monday they were honoring the flag. That was the difference, but that created great affirmation of the decision, that they knew they were doing the right thing.

We worked with them, even celebrating this success. But after some time, they came to us and they told us, our young people may want to learn something that we don't know here in the community. And because they don't have a diploma, they will not be able to continue their studies. Then with them and for them, we created Unitierra. Unitierra was one way of hosting indigenous young men and women that wanted to continue studies to learn something that they could not learn in their own communities. That was the beginning of Unitierra. But it's a coalition of indigenous and non-indigenous organizations to learn in a general way. When we started, we adopted the principle of learning that we shared, that is learning by doing what we wanted to learn.

***What was the relationship between the Zapatista movement and the development of Unitierra?***

We can speculate if the movement to build Unitierra would be possible without the Zapatistas. But what we know for sure is that the Zapatistas had an immense impact on these people. Even the governor of Oaxaca was in a panic because he assumed that Zapatismo could proliferate in Oaxaca immediately, because there was this very solid reaction. Let me just mention a fact. In 1996, the Zapatistas convened the National Indian Forum, that will be the first time in history that the indigenous people of the whole country were gathering by themselves, independently, autonomously. We were something like 500 people in San Cristóbal in that meeting on January 3, 1996. Two hundred and seventy of them came from Oaxaca, that is the majority of the people in that meeting. For the negotiations with the government, the Zapatistas invited more than 100 people,

and finally they selected twenty for the direct negotiations with the officers of the government. Of those twenty, seven came from Oaxaca. In the final negotiation, there were only seven advisers of the Zapatistas, and four of them were from Oaxaca. Meaning that the Oaxaca people, the indigenous people of Oaxaca were really involved with the Zapatistas, were close with the Zapatistas, were learning with the Zapatistas, and were part of the movement associated with Zapatismo. Yes, it is very clear that it has a lot of impacts in Oaxaca, the different forms of Zapatismo.

I don't think that the way of learning of the Zapatistas had a real impact on Uniterria or the indigenous people of Oaxaca. It is a different story. Every people has different ways of learning, different traditions of learning. The impact of Zapatismo is the emphasis on autonomy, it is an autonomous movement. The Zapatistas say all the time we need to define autonomously what to do, what not to do. They use the word "school," and they use the word "education" with the Zapatistas. Well, this is not true, they use their own words in the indigenous language, but for us, for the outsiders, they use the word "education" or the word "school." There is not a Zapatista system of education, there is nothing universal for the learning process of the Zapatista children. There is one element in common, that one of the things that they learn, all the Zapatista children learn is the recent story of Zapatismo. Meaning they talk with their parents and the comandantes about the story of how they rose up, how was the insurrection et cetera. But they don't have a common curriculum, they don't have anything like a Zapatista curriculum, they don't have any standards, their schools don't have teachers. There is what they call a promoter of education, that means a young man or woman that comes to the school and discusses with the children what they want to learn. They learn to do together, and they clean the place, and they organize different ways of learning.

We know some concrete cases where there were magnificent, progressive, revolutionary teachers coming to the Zapatistas and offering their knowledge, their training for their schools. The Zapatistas tried and I can mention the communities and the name of the teachers that came and taught in those schools for two or three or four years. Then the Zapatistas told them, Thanks, but no thanks, we don't want that. They rejected the kind of classes and things that these teachers were bringing to them. They wanted to know, they wanted to see, and then after seeing that, they say, no, that's not what we want, that is not our way of learning, we want our children to learn in a different way. It is a different way of learning in different parts of the Zapatista region, in the Zapatista communities. There is not one standard that applies to Oaxaca

and to all the other indigenous regions in Mexico. They have their own ways of learning, we cannot say this is the way that indigenous people learn, there is nothing like that. You cannot say there is a Zapotec way of learning, no, in different parts, in different Zapotec communities, they learn in a different way. That means that learning is clearly rooted in a place, a culture, a tradition, that is a local tradition. That is not a standard, that is not a universal tradition. Here, what I see that they have in common, all of them, is a locality, the importance of a place, how they are rooted in a place, how they have roots in that place. For example, they don't have the notion of property, it is not the ownership of the territory, they have a responsibility for a portion of Mother Earth, and they have a specific relationship with that portion, and that rootedness is a rootedness with a place, a physical place, and the people living in that place.

You are born as a "we." In many of the so-called indigenous communities of Oaxaca, the babies are in the hands of their mother for the first three years of their life. When they celebrate the third birthday, it is a fiesta organized by the community, not by the family. Because they are hosting a new member of the community. From then on, that boy or that girl is behaving like a new member of the community, attending all the activities et cetera, learning by living in the community, in that specific place. Not being taught, it is not someone teaching them how to behave. They learn like all the babies do, they learn by imitating the adults, learn by imitating the parents.

***One of the criticisms sometimes made of alternative education or deschooling or unlearning is that these projects don't actually help poor and marginalized communities, because in our world, individuals need formal education and a diploma in order to be able to get a job. How do you respond to such critiques?***

Yes, they say the diploma is a very important tool to get jobs. Well, that was absolutely true when I entered the first year of university, that was in the 1950s, seventy years ago and we were getting the diploma to get a job. The reality was that when we started the first years of university, they had three jobs were waiting for us. All of us got a job in what we studied, and that was the real world. Well, that is no longer true in the twenty-first century. People know, the students know that there are no jobs waiting for them. The statistics are terrible, the statistics are telling you that in Mexican or American universities perhaps no more than 20 percent of the students will ever be able to work in whatever they studied. You have philosophers or engineers driving a taxi or being waiters in a restaurant. That is the real world.

But there is something else that for me it's a lot more important. In this century, in the last ten years and accelerated by the pandemic, we are seeing the first social movement abandoning jobs. People that have jobs, that can have jobs, different kinds of jobs and they're saying, thanks but no thanks, I don't want the job, I don't want to have a life to find that kind of stupid job and to work forty hours a week, forty years of my life, doing stupid things, I don't want that kind of life. That is the situation in which Unitierra existed. Unitierra does not exist in my time, it existed in the twenty-first century. In the twenty-first century, the attitudes are different.

The second point is that when we started, every young man or woman coming into Unitierra, in the first interview asked, but will I have a diploma? I really need a diploma to get a job etcetera in that tradition. We always say, yes, you will get a beautiful diploma with golden letters et cetera, but that will not be recognised by the Ministry of Education, we don't have any connection. It will be that Unitierra acknowledges that you were here, that is all. They were not very happy with that, even some people said, oh, then I am not interested, and they left. Some people remained at Unitierra and continued their studies. In twenty years, only one student asked for their diploma after concluding their studies, and we set a big party to give him his diploma and we understood why he asked for the diploma, because he came with his immediate family, twenty-seven people and other members of the community. The ceremony was interrupted by the father of Ezekiel, this student, and the father produced a magnificent speech for twenty minutes telling how this diploma was a diploma for the community, was an achievement of the community, that the community has achieved that. For our luck, that guy, Ezekiel, got the next year a national award of conservation because he discovered how to produce water in his village because of the kind of things that he learned with us. The community was appreciating a learning process in which Ezekiel was learning things that were of real interest for their community, and that community celebrated that fact.

But I want to say now, that all the students, the young men and women that have been in Unitierra, don't have jobs. We abandoned the idea of jobs. Many of them interrupted their studies because their communities called them and told them, we know that you now know these kinds of things, and that is very interesting for us, we need that here in the community. Most of our students are now back in their communities. The diploma is a kind of social recognition, but they have the social recognition of their communities that acknowledge that they know something that can be of real value in the community. They have been able

to create an independent way of living in this society, surviving in this society. We still have something that we call capitalist society; we are still exposed to the dominant system. But more and more people like myself can survive in this society without a job.

I abandoned the idea of a job forty years ago; I have not had a job for forty years. That is the same for our students, they have a way of life, they can survive. Part of this includes, of course, producing their own life, living in their own way. Now the principle is adopting more and more the principle of sufficiency. In Oaxaca communities, you can still find an old guy that you will classify immediately as poor, as even miserable. You can talk with him, and he will tell you, I have everything I need to be happy; I don't want more. We are not all of us educated in the idea of having more and more everyday of everything. People are happy having all they want, with the principle of sufficiency to have enough to do what you want. I have more than enough of what I want.

This is the real world; this is the real world for the majority of people on earth forever. This is happening everywhere, and the people now are saying, please, let's think for a minute. When the people were sending their children to the educational system, they assumed that they knew the future for twenty years or thirty years, that in twenty years more, my child will get a diploma and then he or she will have a job and then he or she will have a good life. Now there are no jobs, and then we know we cannot promise to our children that after the diploma they will have a good life with a good job. People are saying, how can my children learn things that can be of use to live in this planet? That is, for example, how I can learn how to produce my own food, because I don't know if I will have money to buy the food in the market, and I know now that the food in the market is toxic, is junk food etc. There is now a global movement for producing your own food.

***Can you tell me how your work has influenced the new global Ecoverstities network, and how the Ecoverstities network has influenced your work?***

Udi Mandel came with us something like seven years ago and he produced a magnificent video of Unitierra. He was doing a collection of visiting different experiences and he spent several months with us, and he produced the best video of Unitierra that we have. Udi was talking with the people, talking with students, talking with different people associated with Unitierra. It is really a very good presentation of who we are. Later, after several of these experiences,

he also visited Manish Jain in India with Swaraj, an alternative way of learning, alternative university. After talking with some of them, he decided to create Ecoversties, and he invited us to be part of Ecoversties, that can be defined basically as alternative universities but not only universities. Ecoversties includes different organizations that are organized to learn in a different way. This is a collection of people that have been working for years in alternative ways of learning. Of course, we learn a lot from each other, there are periodic encounters. I have never been in an encounter of Ecoversties, but people from Unitierra have been there, in Tamera in Portugal, and Costa Rica and different places. They meet and they have fantastic experiences, and they come away very happy from meeting with others and learning how the others are dealing with the usual questions, about how to get funding, how to survive the organization without depending on the agenda of the foundation or whatever. These are practical things as well as discussion of principles.

We are each very different. Some of the people in Ecoversties still believe in the word “education,” not all of them have abandoned it. There are some Ecoversties that are not conventional, I would say they are alternative education, but they are still education. Then there are Ecoversties that are really abandoning the word “education,” and they are alternative ways of learning. We interact, it is not a very intense interaction, but there is an interaction, and they are learning, coming up with a few things that are of interest for all of us. In some cases, we met through Ecoversties with people that become our friends and that are very interesting for us.

There is nothing like a global movement of alternative ways of learning. But I must say immediately, as I told you the story, I have been since the late 1950s and 1960s associated with exploring alternative ways of learning, alternative education first and then escaping education for alternative ways of learning. In my very long experience, I was all the time fascinated with this kind of inspiration, I have never before seen this current level of interest in alternative ways of learning. The pandemic uncovered for the parents the horror of the school and many parents are coming to Unitierra saying, I don't want to do to my children what they are doing in the school. In particular, they started to hate the curriculum, to say what is the kind of thing that they're teaching my children, I don't want them to learn that. How to learn in a different way? There is a new, great, fantastic interest in that kind of thing.

I will call what we are connected with many people that are looking for alternative ways of learning. It is not alternative education. Some people use

the word “alternative,” some people use “different ways of learning,” instead of the formalized ways of learning in an educational system. More and more people are interested in alternative ways, different ways of learning. We are more and more in connection, interrelating, interacting with many people looking for different ways of learning.

## Living Languages of Learning

Munir Fasheh

*Tamer Institute for Community Education, Ramallah, Palestine*

*Munir Fasheh is one of Palestine's best-known learning theorists and practitioners, who founded the Tamer Institute for Community Education in Ramallah in 1989, a center that is dedicated to promoting nonformal learning environments throughout Palestine that foster "critical thinking and transformational learning aimed at raising awareness of the socio-cultural and political forces of oppression." This includes promoting reading, writing, "art, drama and theatre, in order to create opportunities for reflection and self-expression" among Palestinian children and youth (Ramahi 2015, pp. 15–16). Tamer also runs its own publishing unit for producing Palestinian children's books in Arabic. For Fasheh (1990, pp. 32–5), community education is a type of education that is "informed by the real needs in the community," works to foster feelings of "self-worth, empowerment and self-acceptance," and supports collective community efforts to transform oppressive social, cultural, and economic structures.*

*In 1997, Fasheh founded the Arab Education Forum at Harvard University's Center for Middle Eastern Studies, which extended his work in Palestine across the Arab region by seeking "to develop a shared vision related to learning in the Arab world" that "springs out of the inherent knowledge and experiences within Arab societies" (Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung 2015). Fasheh also participates actively in global networks of theorists, practitioners, and activists who are dedicated to developing transformative spaces of nonformal education rooted in local communities as an alternative to the formal education system. In this context, Fasheh has engaged directly with several other individuals featured in this book, including Gustavo Esteva, Manish Jain, and Kelly Teamey.*

*For Fasheh, a central concern is how to mobilize education as part of a wider anti-colonial struggle, where Israeli colonial occupation and oppression continue*

to be an ever-present and defining part of Palestinian life. The Tamer Institute was created during the First Intifada, when Israel had forcibly closed schools and universities in Palestine for months to years at a time (Hussein 2005; Mahshi and Bush 1989). This was a precursor to the Israeli campaign of “scholasticide” in its war on Gaza since October 2023, when it has physically destroyed most schools and universities in Gaza (SAWP 2024). Tamer was part of a wider mobilization in Palestine, as popular neighborhood committees and other groups created nonformal education spaces that kept learning alive despite the closure of schools and universities, linked learning to the wider resistance movement, and embraced alternative approaches that challenged traditional educational models. “Their goal was to Palestinianize the curriculum within a vision of national identity and the national struggle for independence,” writes Hussein (2005, p. 19): “Free from institutional constraints, teachers and students were not focused on exams, grades, or certificates.” The temporary loss of formal education, in other words, helped to foster an explosion in radical and revolutionary educational experimentation across the land (Mahshi and Bush 1989; Palestinian Museum 2024).

While the context of the First Intifada was one of creating nonformal education in a moment when formal education has ceased to function normally, for Fasheh the experience reinforced his growing critique of formal education and the need to liberate learning from the prejudices and traditions of the school system. The history of formal education in Palestine, as elsewhere in the world, was one of control, colonization, and construction of hierarchies of value, in which local, indigenous, and community forms of learning and knowledge are systematically dismissed and suppressed. Fasheh himself had a doctoral degree from Harvard University and taught math and physics at Birzeit University, only later coming to recognize the limitations of the education system in which he had been trained.

In embracing nonformal or community education, Fasheh draws on many rich traditions in Palestine and the wider Arab world. A key influence is Palestinian educator Khalil Sakakini, who set up a democratic, progressive school in Jerusalem in the early twentieth century. Part of Sakakini’s approach was to embed learning in the local landscape, taking students on walking tours of “the country, mountains and hills, valleys and streams” so that students could develop a place-based “knowledge about nature, geography, history and archaeology” (Mo’ed 2025). More generally, Fasheh emphasizes the importance of drawing on concepts from Arab language and culture as the central framework for his educational work. This is about seeking to undo the erasure of colonial occupation and domination in Palestine and the Arab world (Meinzer 2024). But it is also about drawing on the wisdom that Fasheh sees as being embedded in local, everyday community

life. In his conversation, Fasheh argues that “colonization of the mind” takes place through the adoption of official, institutional, colonial languages, and that decolonization must of necessity entail returning to what he calls “living languages, whose meanings stem from people’s actions, interactions, reflections, and efforts to make sense” within community environments. People are like “springs or streams,” Fasheh (2002, p. 49) writes, and the idea of community education “is to enrich each stream and help it join other streams in order to form a ‘river’ ... that irrigates lands and gives life to communities.”

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***Can you start by talking about how your educational work has been shaped by Indigenous, Arab educational traditions?***

The first person who inspired me in relation to learning and moved my imagination in directions that stayed with me until this day was Khalil Sakakini, who in 1896, when he was eighteen years old, wrote a small booklet, *Wearing Someone Else’s Shoes*, in which he reflected on foreign schools in the Jerusalem area, which he felt were robbing children of what they have and replacing that with alien material. Sakakini established a school in 1909 whose motto was “dignifying students not degrading them” and translated that in practice by “no grades, no prizes, no punishment.” He was able to do that because the British had not yet occupied Palestine and imposed their educational system. One conviction in his school was “knowing Palestine by walking,” which was adopted by our principal where we walked every Saturday through villages, hills, and valleys around Ramallah as part of the curriculum. I was lucky my parents sent me to it rather than to an elite foreign school. In addition, Sakakini was rooted in Arab culture and local community. He was immune against illusions such as learning is the result of teaching and that a person’s worth can be measured by a number on a vertical line.

The driving force in life today, including education, is the consumption pattern. The heart of the Arab-Islamic civilization (which included various peoples and cultures) is living in harmony with wisdom (which for several decades has been my guide). I am inspired by the houses of wisdom that flourished in many places from Isfahan in the east to Córdoba in the west, most notably the one in Baghdad. A main difference between living in harmony with wisdom and living in accordance with the dominant ideology today is manifested in how we perceive science. Whereas civilizations prior to the European one perceived it as protecting and living in harmony with nature,

Francis Bacon conceived it as subduing and conquering nature. Whereas in the first, well-being, immune systems, and the spirit of regeneration form the core of health; in the second, medicines and surgeries form the core of medical schools. Whereas ahaali (people-in-community) are the basis of community in the first, citizens form the main constituents in the second. Whereas search is basic in the first, research is basic in the second. Whereas the first moves towards the roots, the second remains among the branches. Whereas mother's tongue (living language) is the language children learn in the first, official language dominates in the second. Whereas the earth soil and the cultural soil should be the main source of learning and nurturing in the first, school subjects decided by the Committee of Ten [a national education commission led by Harvard University President Charles Eliot set up in the United States in the late 1800s to determine guidelines for national high school curriculum] form the basis of learning in the second. Whereas children are fed mother's milk in the first, manufactured milk dominates the second. Textbooks are the jars of plastic language; books that are reflections on life form the bosom of knowledge. Instead of indigenous, I would use "rootedness" to describe learning that is deep, meaningful, and in harmony with the places and cultures from which children are nurtured.

In 1997, I went as a visiting scholar to Harvard's Center for Middle Eastern Studies where I established the Arab Education Forum and directed it for ten years. During those years, I visited twenty-nine countries and worked with individuals, groups, and universities within them. Two countries that were culturally fascinating, Iran and Yemen, and two countries that were relevant to how I situate myself within the deschooling movement, India and Mexico. India amazed me in terms of the richness and diversity of ideas, actions, and ways of living in relation to decolonization. One person in particular I encourage people to read in order to see the roots of much of what we see, observe, and witness is Ivan Illich. His defense of vernacular values and knowledge is worth knowing. One of the main figures in decolonization (especially in relation to mathematics and science) is CK Raju. Reading his writings is revealing for anyone interested in decolonization. Others I met in India who are involved in thought and action in creating spaces that I would label as moving away from schooling and in harmony with wisdom include Manish Jain and Claude Alvares. In Mexico, Gustavo Esteva opened my eyes to worlds that are relevant to me as Palestinian, such as the Zapatista movement in Chiapas, which has gone for several centuries through oppression at various levels but still full of hope and rooted in their lands and cultures.

***How can we pursue decolonization through education in a context that continues to be directly colonial?***

We cannot use the main tool of colonization (education) as a tool for decolonization. Education is, by design, the most effective (but invisible) colonizing tool, which starts with colonizing the mind through official language and academic categories. Education is malignant because we embrace it and strive to adopt it. Here I need to differentiate between technical knowledge and life-knowledge, which is connected to living wisely. Colonization of the mind is accomplished through official institutional languages (in our case, this language uses Arabic letters, but its meanings and references are Western) that occupied the place of living languages, whose meanings stem from life via reflection on experiences. In other words, a colonizing language does not necessarily mean a foreign language. As Macaulay said: the British can rule India by “forming a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern; a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect.” Until 1967, I was one of those persons: Arab in blood and color, but English in taste, opinions, morals, and intellect. My mind was filled with a colonial language that used Arabic letters but Western ideology. This is still true in Palestinian schools and universities. When the World Bank was allowed to enter Palestine, after the Palestinian Authority was installed in 1993–4, the first areas it started working on were: “national” security forces, “national” curriculum, and “national” banks—the first to control bodies, the second to control minds, and the third to own the future. Before 1994, there were two or three small banks in Ramallah, now there are more than thirty! It is the same with universities. Does that reflect an increase in economic and intellectual activity? The main fields students specialize in are finance, IT, and management, which are all connected to consumption.

I would like to stress that the worst form of colonialism (deepest and least visible) is the occupation of an official language in place of living languages, whose meanings stem from people’s actions, interactions, reflections, and efforts to make sense. The occupying language is that of textbooks, vertical evaluation, and words with positive connotations but no denotations, such as the “right to education,” “excellence,” “critical thinking,” “creativity,” “quality education,” and “multiple intelligences.” In contrast, reflective thinking means sharpening one’s meanings, behavior, and understanding. A word which is a darling in academia is “research,” whose meaning and usage are controlled by institutions, experts, and academics. Rumi said 750 years ago, “you are what you search for.”

What one searches for in life is what characterizes that person most: it is one's identity. For us as Arabs to follow "research" and ignore "search" is pitiful; it is a reflection of colonized minds. I hope one day our universities start with the question to incoming students: what are you searching for in your life, so we can work together in nurturing and deepening your passion? The word we use in Arabic for research is *bahth* which is a synonym of search, not research. Search is connected to life, research to institutions.

We ignore words in Arabic, whose meanings stem from life and, instead, adopt words that are related to the dominant ideology, whose meanings and usage are controlled by professionals, experts, and academics—meanings that usually are governed by the values of control and winning. A main word that is ignored or its meaning abused is the word *wisdom* itself; a word that characterized the Arab Islamic civilization at its peak. The criteria of ranking universities in the United States do not even include *wisdom*! There is no excuse for us to ignore it except that our minds are colonized. *Wisdom* embodies a different vision of life, learning, relations, knowledge, source of a person's worth, and the values one does not violate in action. The rupture I see in this regard is due to Europe putting the mind on the throne and imprisoning *wisdom*, which means that the biggest challenge I see is to regain it in our lives.

The first university Arabs built was the House of Wisdom in Baghdad some 1,200 years ago. Why it is ignored and avoided in universities in the Levant can only be explained by the fact that the first knowledge settlement in the region (the American University in Beirut, AUB) ignores it. We don't even dare discuss it. In 2009, I sent to all Palestinian universities a suggestion to establish a small "college" (named "house of wisdom") for ten students only (who want to follow this path) and experiment with the idea and slowly build our vision. The only one who commented on it was Sari Nuseibeh (president of Al-Quds university then). I see AUB as a knowledge settlement because what it does at the knowledge level is similar to what the Israeli settlements that surround Ramallah, where I live, do: both are foreign bodies; both are occupations (one of land, the other of minds); both perceive themselves superior to the people around; they govern the landscape around; they rob what belongs to people (land/knowledges); they decide who can enter and who cannot, with guards at the gates (via official cards and permits); they decide who and what is right and who and what is wrong.

I can't think of something that shattered our sense of worth more than being copies and parrots, where we repeat what we hear or read in "elite" universities.

By doing that, we have dropped Arabic words that have no synonym in English and adopted English words that have no synonym in Arabic—both were distorting. In this sense, I find words such as “healing and unplugging” describe the situation more accurately than decolonization. Decolonization refers to something that is outside; healing refers to something that is defeating us from the inside. The difference exists in the tools we use. Whereas in colonialism we struggle against a danger from outside; in healing we protect, nurture, and strengthen our internal immune systems.

It is worth citing a relevant experience here. When I submitted the first draft of my dissertation to the Committee on Degrees, they said the methodology was not clear. To which I replied: I did not use any methodology; I never used the word in my life; it is something that makes sense to you, but not to me, so please don't impose it on me. I added, I build my knowledge and understanding by reflecting every morning on what I go through the day before and putting an effort to make sense out of it. Then I add what I find meaningful as a result of readings, conversations, and other people's views. They didn't accept that. I had to follow what they dictated and I got my doctorate.

The Western thinker that fascinated me when I was in high school and again in the first level in universities was Bertrand Russell. I bought all his books I could find and read them. What I liked about him in addition to his mathematical thought was his involvement in social and political issues, including the Palestinian dispossession. What I started seeing later, however, was what he was not able to see: he could not see the math that people living in real situations know and practice (such as my mother), and he could not see how math has been a main tool in subjugating people (like using it in measuring the worth of people and countries). The explanation I have is that he was raised by a countess while I was raised by a woman whose knowledge was connected to her fingers, art, beauty, and a real need in life: wearing clothes. Finally, I would like to say something about dominant perceptions of science and religion. Whereas most people feel religions are dogmatic and science is much more open, I believe the opposite to be true. If we ask five priests, or five sheikhs, or five rabbis what does their religion mean to them we would most probably find in each case five different views. If we ask five scientists what does science mean to them, we will probably get answers that are very similar. Dominant science and math are much more dogmatic. Mathematics was a tool connected to justice and harmony; now it is a tool connected to domination and to arrogant and racist feelings.

***Can you explain the importance of the core concepts, such as mujaawarah, that guide your education work?***

My story with education has been moving away/healing from dominant institutional terms and academic categories and, at the same time, regaining words whose meanings stem from reflecting on my experiences and from Arabic language and civilization, which include mujaawarah, yuhsen, muthanna, aafiyah, howiyyah, and ahaali. Such “healing and regaining” was the beginning of my moving along the path of wisdom. I have been using the essence of mujaawarah since 1971 without using the term: I was driven by its spirit rather than its name. I used it in my work as head supervisor of mathematics teaching in West Bank schools during 1973–8 with teachers and students and also in my voluntary work in the community. Then again during 1989–97, when I established and directed Tamer Institute in various projects, especially the reading campaign when Israel closed all schools and universities in the West Bank region. The Palestinian Intifada (uprising) in 1987–91 embodied a most striking example of mujaawarah, where neighborhood committees spread throughout the West Bank and Gaza Strip (without planning or central control), where groups of young men and women met and did what was needed to be done and which they could do. Then again, I used it in my work as director of the Arab Education Forum which I established at Harvard’s Center for Middle Eastern Studies. I describe mujaawarah as the most basic “building block” of community, and as the deepest medium of learning and community work. The worst kind of teaching is when the teacher does not have a single personal reason, story, experience to teach it, and when one’s teaching does not create any pictures in learners’ minds. It is very hard for me to think of a mujaawarah that is not associated with stories. Again, I would like to remind people of the difference between learning technical matters and learning as a biological ability. In short, I worked with it both inside and outside institutions, but its spirit is contrary to institutions. This does not mean institutions are not needed but, rather, to use them wisely in the sense not to rob people of what they can do by themselves.

The words mentioned above have been most inspiring in my learning journey. I will elaborate on two words yuhsen and muthanna and say few words about aafiyah, howiyyah, and ahaali.

Yuhsen and muthanna have no synonym in English. Muthanna forms a good part of the grammatical structure of the Arabic language. The claim that the main philosophical debate is the relationship between the One and the Many (as some European philosophers put it) is not something I felt in my life. Rather, I always

felt I am made up of muthannas. Muthanna refers to a relation between two people that becomes very important in their lives and yet has a life of its own—almost like a common baby. It is neither a legal relationship nor intellectual nor economic nor social, it develops in a free and natural way between the two. It is neither a couple nor dual, although the latter is usually used to refer to it. Each person remains who he or she is, but a relation starts developing between the two which becomes impossible for both to live without feeling it and aware of it. In this sense, it embodies a logic that is different from Aristotle's and Hegel's logics. The other person is a "you" rather than a non-I or a copy of I or forms a higher synthesis with I. It is also different from Descartes' logic: "I think, therefore I am"; the logic of muthanna can be expressed as "YOU are, therefore I am"; my existence depends on my relation with you. That's why I believe that without muthanna, it is difficult to develop a pluralistic attitude in living and perceiving. Without having experiences that embody muthanna, one would consider a place like Boston to be pluralistic. There is cultural diversity in Boston, but it is more like the diversity in a zoo, where each group lives in its own cage. Living in cages or in a "melting pot" of cultures is contrary to the spirit of muthanna. This explains why a person like Samuel Huntington oscillates between conflict and integration; he could only perceive cultures and civilizations in conflict with Western civilization or copies of it. His two books *The Clash of Civilizations* and *Who Are We?* reflect the two possibilities he seems to be able to imagine. The limitation of his mind springs from the lack of muthanna in his language and experience.

I first learned the meaning of pluralism and humility through a very special muthanna in my life: my relationship with my illiterate mother. In addition to pluralism and humility, that muthanna clarified for me the meaning of culture, dialogue, and universal. The fact that my first experience with pluralism was related to mathematics (which is considered universal) had a profound impact on me, it helped me heal from the belief in a single, universal undifferentiated path for learning and progress. My mother's world was harmonious; my world was fragmented. She saw the world like she would see her face in a mirror; I saw the world like looking at my face in a broken mirror: fragmented and every piece out of place. There is a difference between a person believing in universals and one striving to have one's life embody a universe. My mother's life embodied a "universe"; mine claimed to be universal. Stressing that I am "made" of muthannas brings up another word: identity. The word in Arabic used as synonym of identity is *howiyya*, which literally means that the reference to who I am is not I but *howa* (he and she); i.e., who I am is connected to others.

The other word that I would like to elaborate on is *yuhsen*. Since I first read it in 1997, it had a profound impact on me. What a person *yuhsen* is the source of her/his worth; this is the essence of Imam Ali's statement which he articulated 1,400 years ago. According to it, the worth of a person is what s/he *yuhsen* with its various meanings in Arabic (that together constitute the worth of the person). The first meaning refers to how well one does what s/he does; the second to how beautiful and pleasing what one does (sensual and aesthetic dimension); the third refers to how beneficial what one does to the community from the community's perspective; the fourth refers to how much one gives of oneself and not what one brings in from other places; and the fifth meaning refers to how respectful (of people and ideas) the person is in discussions. According to this, a person's worth is not judged by professionals or official bodies, but by the five meanings embedded in the word *yuhsen*. I strongly believe that the world cannot survive if we continue to measure people and cultures along vertical lines that claim to be objective, neutral, and universal. Universalism and fragmentation go hand in hand: every universal claim shatters the inner world within each person and tears apart the social fabric in communities. Terms such as "developing" and "underdeveloped" blind us to the richness and uniqueness in cultures. The belief in a single undifferentiated universal path for progress is in contradiction with pluralism. It is also crucial that we stop starting with needs. When a body gets sick, the healthy part rushes to start healing it. Similarly with cultures and communities: we need to start with the strengths and what is healthy in them. What a culture needs in order to flourish is a space where people live in accordance with their ways, in free associations with each other. As the Zapatistas say: changing traditions in traditional ways, without tearing apart the social fabric in community. No culture is universal; and cultures cannot be fully understood via words and concepts.

The Arabic words that I mention above bring the beauty in Arab culture and invite others to bring the beauty in theirs as part of weaving fabric at various levels. Starting with what is beautiful and inspiring would help cultures flourish freely, and change from within, and support diverse ways of learning. Choosing words from Arabic demonstrates the richness that exists in every culture and, at the same time, shows the limitation of cultures. No culture can encompass the totality of experience or have universal claims about life. Every culture has something to offer and inspire and, at the same time, is limited. That's why I believe that humility is crucial in creating meaningful and mutually nurturing interactions among people and cultures.

We need to heal from universals and arrogance of the mind. The mind needs to be humble and go hand in hand with wisdom. We need to realize that universals are contrary to both humanity and nature. Deepening the “pluriverse” where various worlds enrich and nurture one another should be what we strive for as a vision. One of the few positive aspects of modern technology is that it is increasingly making isolation impossible and making the pluralistic nature in life more obvious. Rumi says, life is like a compass, with one leg fixed and the other wandering. The importance of pluralism arises as a living challenge. The solution to such challenge requires the union of thought and action. In this sense, peoples outside the Western world are more equipped to produce the necessary shift, for most still live in pluralistic communities.

The closest word to *aafiyah* in English is well-being. The word in Arabic is widely used in the Levant. The vision and values of Harvard’s medical school ignore well-being completely. Its vision is more about the cage than about who is in it (the image is taken from Tagore’s short story *The Parrot*). The word *ahaali* (the closest in English would be people-in-community) is contrary to citizens. The main relationship within a community formed by *ahaali* is the one among themselves and with the place, culture, and collective memory whereas the main relationship in a society formed by citizens is with a state and its institutions.

***How do you situate yourself within the deschooling movement in the Global South?***

The *Oxford Living Dictionary* defines deschooling as the action or process of transferring the function of education within a society from conventional schools to non-institutional systems of learning, which are held to allow the student to develop more freely, chiefly in reference to the writings of Ivan Illich.

Two comments: Illich, later in his life, considered *Deschooling Society* to be the book that least represents his thinking. Second comment: it is revealing to mention that there is no synonym in Arabic for education; the word we use—*ta’leem*—is a synonym of teaching, not education. It seems that when Arabs were faced by the word “education” from Europeans, they probably thought that Arabic is lacking. Rather than questioning the word, they looked for a word in Arabic that could match education, they couldn’t find any; they used what they thought to be the closest. That made me think: if education sprang from life, Arabs would have created a word for it. It was created to satisfy a need for building nation-states. In other words, instead of being cautious, Arabs forced the word *ta’leem*, which is connected to life and was not used to refer to licensed

institutions, teachers, national curriculum, and national evaluation. The word for teacher in Arabic is mu'allem, which refers to a person who says what has matured in one's heart and mind, compassionate, wise, and dignified (it is worth mentioning that this word is used to refer to the Palestinian Jesus). In other words, the problem I see is in the word education as much as in schooling. In opposition to both, I stress the word learning and use it as a biological ability. Learning, rather than education and schools, became the focus of my thoughts and actions.

I met both Paulo Freire and Ivan Illich. I had extensive conversations with Freire at various places and times. I also took a short course with him in the summer of 1985 at Boston College. I invited him to visit Birzeit University in Palestine which he accepted with delight. The death of his wife and, then later, his health, prevented that from happening. As for Illich, I met him twice, once by attending a lecture at a conference in San Francisco, and the other during a short visit by him to Birzeit University in 1976. But my deepest knowledge of Illich was through conversations with one of his closest friends: Gustavo Esteva during visits to Oaxaca, Mexico. In short, deschooling was not a main reference for me.

### ***How do you practice deschooling in your own work in Palestine?***

In the early 1970s, I did things that can be referred to as deschooling. For several years, I arranged workshops for teachers in various subjects in relation to creating spaces where education would be more meaningful and relevant. I created various opportunities for students where they learned outside classrooms, such as forming mathematics and science clubs (where students followed questions they had), and producing publications in those two fields in which teachers and students wrote. I was also involved in what we referred to as voluntary work where every Friday and Sunday people (mainly teachers and students) would go to villages, refugee camps, and neighborhoods in towns, and work on what people living in those places felt needed to be done. The main convictions that guided such activities were knowing one's environment (including natural surroundings and communities), and using legs, hands, and fingers as main organs in learning that connects thinking to the reality around.

In 1976, my intellectual learning journey took a sharp turn where I started healing from modern ills and superstitions such as: believing that we can squeeze knowledge into textbooks, claiming it is universal; measuring a person's worth along a vertical line; believing that mathematics needs more intelligence than

raising a child or playing a musical instrument or farming; dealing with learning as an ability that requires teaching rather than a biological ability that needs rich lively environments. What helped me heal from such illusions was reclaiming much of what has been made invisible by educational institutions. I started walking my own path in harmony with a vision centered around wisdom. That path did not need words such as deschooling, competition, multiple intelligences; not even education. A statement by Imam Ali became my guide in healing from a lot of dominant illusions. The statement considers the source of one's worth to be what s/he yuhsen. The source of worth of a storyteller, for example, lies in the fact that what s/he does is done well, beautiful, giving, useful, and respectful. Imam Ali's statement healed me from words such as success, failure, excellence, and evaluation.

It may be worth mentioning a personal story here. When Taamer (my younger son) was in 4th grade, he said that he feels confined and bored in school and wants to get out. I said I had no objection, my conditions were: TV is no substitute; I won't teach him at home from textbooks and instead I would take him once a month to bookshops where he would choose books he likes; and I would buy him anything where he would use his fingers. He asked for a goat to milk! I couldn't get out of it, so I bought him a goat.

***Can you tell us about the intellectual journey that took you from being a university professor of mathematics to the community learning work you do now?***

I would like to start with a statement by Rumi because I consider it to be appropriate to much of what I will say in my response: "Maybe you are searching among the branches for what only appears in the roots." My intellectual journey went through four main phases in the direction from the branches to the roots. In the first phase (until age 26), as a student, I was considered "very smart" (especially in mathematics) and, as a teacher, I was labeled as a "creative and inspiring" teacher of mathematics. In essence, however (which I realized much later), the praise, grades, and jobs which I got belong to the branches, looking at me and at my knowledge as commodities, which blinded me from seeing what was happening at the roots: the fact that I did what was dictated to me, parroting words uttered by teachers or printed in textbooks, without asking questions and without understanding. Yes, I did many things in a creative, inspiring, and attractive way—but these words had meanings during that first phase connected to consumption and the market. I was "selling" mathematics as a commodity in

a way that was pleasing to my customers/students. My performance was useful in the educational market.

An example that I keep mentioning is the mathematics textbook we studied in 9th grade, *General Arithmetic for Schools*, printed in London and imported to Palestine. One chapter was on shares and stocks. I had to solve problems such as: “(1) A man invests 450 pounds in Indian 2% stock at 69. Find, to the nearest penny, how much stock he buys and the income from it; (2) London Brick 8% (1 pound) shares stand at 36s., and Rio Tinto 5% shares stand at 4. Which investment gives the larger yield?” I never owned shares or stocks in my life; in practice, I have no knowledge of what they mean. But I got full grades in all tests! I learned tricks and solved problems in a mechanical way without understanding. My performance in answering questions, both orally and in writing, was exactly what was expected as correct answers. That literally meant that I was an intellectual slave, without realizing it. I did what was dictated to me without question, without knowing why, and without understanding. The problem did not stop there but went deeper: I was made to feel proud of being enslaved, a fact that was invisible to me due to the praise I got through words such as intelligent and studious, and through “good” grades, and later through jobs (where I practiced the same enslaving logic on my students). That was the first phase of my intellectual journey: a proud ignorant intellectual slave; a parrot. During that phase, I experienced education in cages called “classrooms” and was fed ready “knowledge meals” referred to as curriculum, via textbooks designed by professionals and experts who claimed that what they were offering is objective and universal. There is no mention in those textbooks of context and no connection to action, and a student’s worth is measured by numbers on a vertical line, compared to other students!

The second phase was the result of the Israeli Arab War in 1967. At that time, I was teaching mathematics at Birzeit College in Palestine. The war started and ended without anyone among the faculty understanding why what happened, happened and why what didn’t happen, didn’t happen; we felt totally ignorant. That war made me for the first time rethink the education which I acquired and was teaching. I was shaken by how education had no connection to what was happening around us. However, the way I reacted during that phase was to make mathematics much more meaningful and attractive, and I developed ways for that end. I started working against dominant ways of teaching and tried to connect what I was teaching with the world around. That “crusade” lasted for 9 years. In 1976, I was at the peak of my career as a mathematics educator (teaching in two universities and the head supervisor of math instruction in

West Bank schools). In that position, I was looking for examples from life that connect mathematics to life. As an academic, I looked in books and magazines for answers.

All of a sudden, I realized that my illiterate mother (whom I had lived with by that time for thirty-five years and watched her sowing clothes for women) was using mathematics that I could neither understand nor do. I was confused, puzzled, and scared! I could not understand why in those thirty-five years I did not notice what was so obvious! It made me realize the power of symbols, such as words, in making things visible or not. No one referred to what she was doing as mathematics; my mind was stuck with mathematics as something that happens only in educational institutions. In making dresses that fit women bodies, she was both an architect and engineer: designing and making clothes—dealing with the most complicated kind of geometry: women bodies. I was teaching at the time Cartesian geometry where I was telling students that any point can be specified by three coordinates. I studied and taught without context or action. My mother's mathematics was impossible without both. Understanding can only happen through actions in specific context, and reflecting on those actions, and putting an effort to make sense out of them. Unlike Cartesian geometry, my mother dealt with tens of dimensions in the geometry she was working with. In addition to being confused and puzzled, I also felt scared because what would I say to people when they discover that (although I was at the peak of my career as mathematics educator) I couldn't do or understand the mathematics that my illiterate mother was practicing. The first time I dared write about it was in my dissertation in 1984, and the first time I dared publish about it was in 1990, and the first time I dared speak about it in front of people was in 1993 in a conference in South Africa.

Realizing my illiterate mother's mathematics in 1976 was the third phase in my intellectual learning journey. It was a "volcanic earthquake" at the intellectual level. It shook the foundations of what I had acquired at schools and universities and, at the same time, brought with it nurturing "lava" that healed me from modern myths and superstitions, and helped me regain and enrich my inner immune system, especially at the intellectual perceptual level. It was crucial in resisting universal claims and in helping me reclaim other aspects in life which have also been made invisible, such as knowledges that exist in people with no symbols and in cultures labelled as underdeveloped. That discovery helped me unplug myself from education as a reference and focus my attention at the roots, on learning as a biological ability connected to intuitive mind. I realized that education belongs to the branches while learning belongs to roots—almost

synonym to living happening all the time. As John Holt says: birds fly, fish swim, people learn.

The fourth phase in my intellectual learning journey was connected to two happenings: the first Palestinian Intifada (uprising in 1987–91) and reading books written in Arabic between 800 and 1300 AD. During the Intifada, Israel closed schools, universities, as well as other institutions. That closing freed us for several years to do what we please in relation to learning. It deepened within me, as a result of neighborhood committees which sprang spontaneously all around the West Bank and the Gaza Strip (and which I refer to as *mujawarahs*), the conviction that small groups formed by people with no authority inside or from outside, and with deep attentiveness to what is happening around, are the backbone of society; they form a main factor in the immune system at the personal and communal levels. I left Birzeit University in 1989 and started the Tamer Institute for Community Education where learning is considered a biological ability, and where learning environments replaced education. As biological ability, all what learning needs to happen are real, rich, lively, and diverse environments. The other happening in the fourth phase of my intellectual learning journey was reading books written in Arabic some 1,000 years ago. In addition, I visited twenty-nine countries through my work at Harvard for ten years. A common thread among those books and visits was wisdom—totally ignored in our “national” universities! Through those books and visits, I became aware of the tremendous and diverse knowledges that were made invisible by knowledge settlements (European and American schools and universities, followed by Arab ones later). Arab civilization and language, in addition to what I learned from other cultures in my visits, became main references for me in this phase.

In short, my intellectual learning journey (which is contrary to what is referred to as CV) moved me, first, from being a proud slave, to second, believing that all what we needed was to improve education in various ways, to third, realizing my mother’s world that was invisible to me, and finally, to a point (in Rumi’s words) where my life was like a compass with one leg fixed in Palestine, my mother’s world and Arab Islamic-Eastern Christian civilization, and the other leg roaming around the world.

## Declaration of Decolonizing Education

Manish Jain

*Swaraj University, Udaipur, India*

*Manish Jain is co-founder of Shikshantar: The People's Institute for Re-thinking Education and Development, established in 1998 in Udaipur, India, as a center for challenging "the culture of schooling and institutions of thought-control" and reclaiming local control over our "own learning processes and learning ecologies" (Shikshantar 2025); as well as Swaraj University, set up by Shikshantar in 2010 as a small "experimental learning community," also located in Udaipur, based on the principle and practice of "self-designed learning" (Swaraj University 2021). Through his work with these centers, as well as his global work in networks like the Ecoversities Alliance, Jain has become known as one of the world's foremost critics of traditional schooling, which he links with the harms of the modern, Western development paradigm more generally, and as an ardent proponent of unschooling or deschooling. "I believe that modern schooling is one of the greatest crimes against humanity," says Jain (2015), as "it brands millions of innocent children as failures, ... renders many diverse ways of knowing and expressing as invisible" and "forces people into the global economy while destroying their options for other ways of living."*

*One of the starting points for Jain's educational approach is the fact that he himself spent years working at the heart of the international education and development regime he now critiques so forcefully. Jain earned degrees at Brown and Harvard Universities in the United States and worked as an investment banker on Wall Street for Morgan Stanley and with international aid and development organizations including UNESCO, UNICEF, the World Bank, and USAID in Africa and Asia (SIT 2025). In Jain's account, this experience allowed him to see up close the problems and failures of the education and development model that was being promoted by these organizations and corporations. So, he decided to quit*

and move to Udaipur, where his family was from originally, to pursue a personal and collective project of unlearning (Alvares 2020).

Swaraj University is set up as the antithesis to traditional models of formal education. On its webpage, it lists ten different ways that it is “different to mainstream universities” (Swaraj University 2021). This includes a commitment to “no classrooms, no teachers, degrees, curriculum, and exams,” no recognition by the state and no “accreditation from anyone” (Hasija 2017, pp. 1–2). Indeed, Swaraj positions itself as directly resisting credentialism in society, stating that it is “part of the campaign, Healing Ourselves from the Diploma Disease, a national campaign to say NO to degrees and certificates and promote a better evaluation framework such as that which is based on experience and portfolios” (Kothiyal 2017, p. 219). Neusiedl (2021, p. 11) describes Swaraj as “an unschooling model for higher education” and “a semi-structured unschooling space.” Practically, Swaraj functions as a two-year learning program for what it calls “khojis” (or seekers) who feel they have been failed by mainstream schooling and are looking for alternative ways and places to learn. Swaraj supports a small group (usually about 15–20) of khojis each year to put together an individual learning plan that involves processes of self-discovery and expression as well as hands-on learning of skills through apprenticeships with experienced mentors, often focused on sustainable technology and production (Hasija 2017; Kothiyal 2017; Neusiedl 2021).

Swaraj University, and Jain’s educational theory and practice more generally, is deeply rooted in the adaptation and mobilization of local, indigenous cultural traditions in India. The concept of Swaraj, or self-rule, is presented by the university as being inspired “by MK Gandhi, Rabindranath Tagore, Vinoba Bhave, our village grandmothers, tribal communities, [and] ancient wisdom traditions,” and presenting “an invitation to decolonize” and “re-engage with indigenous/alternative worldviews” (Swaraj University 2021). As Jain discusses in his conversation, there is also an engagement with other indigenous cultural traditions, from gift culture to Jugaad (playful improvisation) to spiritual and traditional practices of unlearning that were developed historically within India. For Jain, many of his encounters with such traditions began with his Mewari speaking “village grandmother,” who he describes as the best professor he ever had. Like Gustavo Esteva and Munir Fasheh in this book, Jain sees engaging with traditional, indigenous cultures as a way to undo the erasure of decades of Western colonialist oppression and marginalization, and as rich sources for opening up the possibility of alternative, more just, empowering, and sustainable futures (Hopkins 2018).

***Let's begin with the Declaration of Decolonizing Education that you wrote in 2016. What led you to write that declaration and what does the project of decolonizing education mean to you?***

I was invited to a conference in New York, put on by a network called the Economics of Happiness. I have always felt that academics talk about decolonization in a very limited lens, in language that most people cannot understand or relate to. So, I wrote the Declaration as a little piece to think. I tried to make it simple, with obviously different layers of depth to it, but in simple language so that people could engage with it from their everyday experiences. It's a good way to have conversations with people. A friend translated it into Portuguese in Brazil on a speaking tour I was on, and that got shared around and a lot of great discussions came from that.

Many of the points in the Declaration came from my own personal life experiences. One of the most painful things I have learned was from my own family. I had bought into a narrative which said my grandmother was illiterate, uneducated. My father bought into the same thing, and because of that narrative, I think he was never able to really connect with his own mother. It was such a painful thing all the time, a shame around his mother, around our local language. So, the idea was to try to get people to start to see other ways of knowing, other forms of power that we can access and decolonize ourselves.

This is not easy, it requires a lot of unlearning. For example, I sometimes meet Western feminists who tell me that all women are oppressed in India. But I think that they are unable to see the power that many of these women have, they have incredible amounts of wisdom and creativity that could generate other narratives and alternatives. They are also unable to see how Western feminism has often been hijacked by global corporations, capitalist and nationalist narratives—they themselves may not be as liberated as they think they are, and their version of feminism may feed into a toxic and suffocating global monoculture.

***One of the arguments you make is that people in the Global North in some ways are more colonized than in the Global South, and that the decolonial project is important there too. Can you elaborate on this?***

Yes, a lot of the framing around decolonization lacks a historical context. It focuses on how all over India or Africa or Latin America, many places were colonized by the Europeans. But there were processes of destroying indigenous knowledge within Europe that were happening way before that. I found that two things happen. One is lots of diversity and let's say alternatives that existed

in these places got wiped out in that colonization process. So, talking to friends from Ireland and Scotland, saying about the witches being persecuted and how their own languages were marginalized and lost by the spread of standardized English.

At the same time, the dominant narrative of colonization doesn't recognize that there's all kinds of power that people have in the Global South that hasn't been institutionalized yet. When people ask me, you moved to India, it must be really hard to do all these things, I say, it's way easier to imagine in India possibilities because I see so many other things still living outside of the modern institutional frameworks and categories.

I think it is devastating for people in the Global North not to be able to even nourish their imagination. They are in a deep trap; they start appropriating from other places to try to find some way to come out of modernity and they get accused of cultural appropriation. I have some sympathy for their dilemma, because for us at least we have our own languages and many different cultural traditions to draw different imagination and power and courage from. It opens a space for us to think about ourselves in a different way and how we see the decolonizing project.

***There is a lot of talk about decolonization in the university currently. Do you think it is possible to work effectively on the project of decolonization from within the university?***

In conventional universities? No, I don't think it's possible. That's why you'll find my drill of resigning from many different elite institutional power centers of the world. I visited and explored them for a time and came to the conclusion that it's not possible. There's a saying, if you beat them at their own game, you've lost everything. As I rose up the ranks, I thought I was beating the white man at his game, but I realized I was becoming more dependent on the system, more entrenched in its logic. I and my other "successful" Black and brown friends were made into poster children and used by the system to justify its own existence, to signal that look, we're so liberal and we listen to everybody's perspective. On one level, I think that rather than us playing the game, we are being played all the time in those institutions.

I become so irritated with university people talking about decolonization, because it's just become nonsense, reduced to a checklist, they've coopted the whole thing. There are pockets of resistance. In the Ecoiversities Network, we are interacting with friends who are in mainstream universities. I think there has

to be a reality check, a wake-up call. People say we're changing the university, but they're not really. Even if these conversations enter some of the classrooms, the same hidden curriculum of control is still there: competition, compulsion, commodification, compartmentalization of knowledge, disregard for local living contexts. If academics admit they are in the university because they need the money, that's at least more honest. Stop pretending you are revolutionizing the system with your classes or publications.

I will give you another example. There was this national committee of the government for education in 2005, and a friend of mine was there, and philosophy of education was one of the working groups. She said, why don't you join, it's really fun, we can do a lot of things here. So, I said, let me ask you three questions, can you question the nation state and nationalism and militarism in this? And she's like, No, no, of course we can't do that. I said, can we question science and technology and techno-utopianism in this? She's like, no, no, you can't question any of that in these questions of education. I said, can we question capitalism and unlimited economic growth and the development paradigm? She says, no no we can't question any of that. I said, what philosophy of education are you talking about, is it just some little pedagogical things here or there, or can we question these larger areas ultimately, or work on them to reimagine them. I don't think most of the institutional frames give us the space to really not only question them but work actively on different ways to create those in our own lives.

One of the ways I see colonization is as the scarcity mindset. If you go to a village in India, and you go to some random person's house in that village, they'll welcome you in, they'll sit you down, they'll give you water, they'll ask if you want to eat something, they'll even say sleep here, we'll drop you off tomorrow. But when you have a scarcity mindset, people are always afraid, always cold, inhospitable, really appear greedy. There is little sense of collective trust.

I think part of the deeper colonization that's happening is we're being put in this scarcity mindset all the time, whether it's in the knowledge domain or learning, where schooling creates this scarcity around us all the time, that there's not enough, or we have to keep accumulating knowledge like it's a commodity, or in the areas of how we see wealth or power. Unless we create spaces to come out of this scarcity, I don't think the decolonization agenda can get very far. One example I give for that is musical chairs, musical chairs is one of the most offensive, humiliating games that you force children to play, is to put them in the scarcity mindset, there's only one chair and you have to fight for that, and this

is what life is all about. That goes back to what you're saying, the West is way deeper in that scarcity mindset than we are in the Global South.

***I want to ask you about the journey that took you from living in the West and working in a university, finance organization, and for the United Nations to the community work that you do in India today?***

As a young person, I had this illusion in going to these different centers of power, whether it was Wall Street or Harvard or the UN, that I could change them. Then I started to see how they all fit together. The UN's role was basically to clean up the mess that's created all the time. I tried many experiments when I was in UNESCO to raise questions about other knowledge systems, or thinkers like Gandhi and Tagore, who had different ideas of education, and there was no resonance really and people were very much trapped in this linear mode, like Rostow's Stages of Development. According to this, every community and country had to follow the same development model as dictated by the United States and Europe, if they wanted to progress.

I also started questioning this whole idea of experts, which was something I was very uncomfortable with. People used to say, design a project for these ten million people. I'm like, I don't know those people. I was sent as a Russia and Soviet expert by UNICEF to Azerbaijan and Tajikistan and Georgia to advise them. But I don't know anything about these places, nor about their languages, or really about the Soviet system and what to do with it. They gave me an office next to the Minister of Education in Azerbaijan. I was twenty-five years old, and I had to go and meet her every day. She's like, what should we do about our education? I was like, what do I tell her? At the same time, I was meeting Western consultants in Africa while working with USAID and the World Bank who proposed the same set of standardized solutions to each country.

I was disillusioned and depressed after seeing all that, if we're going to wait on these people to change the game, it's not going to happen with them. It started my own search for something different, I read *Hind Swaraj* by Gandhi, he was describing things I could understand, even though it was written seventy years earlier. So, I resigned from UNESCO and came back to India, just to for my own sanity, I didn't know how it was going to happen or what was going to happen. It was just a leap of faith in some sense.

The way we're trained to work on things and the tools we're using, those are all part of the problem. I became curious to learn what are other tools—whether it's ancient technologies of cooking together or being in silence or

ceremony together or co-creating music and dance—they might open up hidden perceptions, imaginations and relationships in us. How do I start to reengage those and bring those into the way we rebuild community? I was very good at PowerPoint and Excel and writing, but there was nothing backing them. At the end of the day, I didn't really know how to do anything real in the real world.

***How has your educational work been shaped by indigenous education traditions in India? What are some of the inspiring ideas in indigenous that inform your work?***

Remembering and translating indigenous traditions have played a major role in our work, and there are three areas over the last twenty-five years which we've tried to experiment with and explore. I think that fundamental to our work has been to connect to traditional gift culture in all of its forms. This is related to decolonization, which is how can we rebuild and repair the field of radical trust, care, hospitality and kindness, to come out of this paradigm of fear, where you can't trust your neighbors, you can't trust strangers. We are hammered with this continuously, which creates a lot of isolation and loneliness and depression.

I can give you this example, there's a big farmers movement in Delhi going on for the last year. A lot of those farmers are from Punjab, where there is this tradition called the Langar which you find in the Sikh gurudwaras. This is a 5- or 600-year-old tradition or setting up collective kitchens, and anybody can go and eat there, and they take care of everybody, it's collective cooking, collective sharing of food. In Rajasthan, we have a similar tradition, there are some different Sufi shrines and people walk to them, spend a month walking, and all along the way, on the roads you find these pop-up community kitchens, where people feed the travelers, regardless of their caste or class. It's a beautiful tradition, every year I love going there, entering these pop-up kitchens in our neighborhood.

I was talking about the farmers' protest; I spent a couple of days there. The food was run in the Langar spirit. In this radical protest, people are serving you an amazing meal, it's like a food festival is going on. There were forty or fifty stalls there, people are feeding whoever, and in one of the stalls these guys were feeding people milk with almonds in it, which is a drink for the super-rich to have. Anyone coming in, they're giving them a glass of milk with almonds in it. This boy comes and he's not even part of the protest, he's from a nearby neighborhood, and he brings this giant jug with him and hands it to the guy, and without flinching or saying, no, you're not part of this, the guy fills it with milk for him and gives it to him with a big smile. This is the spirit of any future

revolution; this is the abundance revolution. This symbol of milk with badam in it is one of the biggest symbols. These guys were not afraid, they're like we have enough abundance that we can sit here for years and years, we're not afraid, we're not going anywhere. So, coming out of the scarcity mindset is a very powerful thing.

The second area is what I call the Jugaad tradition. This is being corrupted by a lot of your MBA guys in England writing books on Jugaad for corporations now. But this whole tradition is around tying into improvisation, playfulness and prototyping and re-looking at what is our relationship with the material world, in our own creativity and imagination. I think we get so caught up in this whole intellectual thing, we forget that the way out is to be playful. It's not to say that we should take everything lightly, but there needs to be a lightness in all of what we do. Try things, be playful with it, keep experimenting, and things will emerge.

We do a lot of things in the Jugaad spirit, and I think part of that is also to get out of this thing you find in a lot of movements, we have to have the masterplan, the utopian plan, the blueprint. I don't trust anybody who has a utopian plan. Instead, let's just start walking the path and we'll keep Jugaading and figuring it out with each other and creating beautiful things around the way and testing them out and seeing what works and what doesn't work.

People say that zero waste and upcycling is a Western idea. I say, no, our grandmothers were doing all these things. Then a lightbulb goes on for people, and they're like, oh yeah, we've seen this in the village with our grandmother. Like my grandmother would take empty match boxes and fill them with different seeds and make a baby rattle out of them. But it's not just that, it's a symbolic thing of how we engage creatively and playfully with whatever is around us to find our own solutions. Jugaad is a process of re-opening an active dialogue between our senses and hands, tools and materials, and local living contexts. You find this all over, in every indigenous culture in India you will find Jugaad happening, in rural areas as well as in urban slums. We're trying to see if we can rebuild our systems to put Jugaad at the center of our co-creation and design process.

The third area is obviously this area of unlearning, deconditioning. A lot of spiritual traditions in India have a huge element of unlearning as part of them, as they raise fundamental questions around our needs, our desires, our sense of power, the paradigms of ownership and accumulation. In the Jain tradition that I come from, unlearning is one of the most powerful things. Jainism is basically an exploration into the roots of violence and how do we transcend that. It was very influential for Gandhi's thinking as well. One of the things they talk about is

called *aparigraha*, which means non-ownership and non-attachment. The deeper you go down that, it unravels so many of the mental models around ownership which are core to the modernist projects of capitalism and the nation-state. Unlearning is key to opening up foundational questions and assumptions around our ways of perceiving, defining, measuring, relating and communicating.

***Your grandmother has been a major figure in your work, how have her life and ideas influenced you?***

I grew up in the United States, so my grandmother was very far away in the village in India. I would only go to see her for two or three weeks each year. The best memory I have with her was in the kitchen, we had what's called a *chula*, a traditional stove for burning wood. There would be one on the ground, and everybody would sit around it. She would be sitting there like the captain of the ship, blowing in and putting the wood in, making fresh hot rotis. We'd all be sitting there talking and laughing. But I always had difficulty because I could never really understand her, because she was speaking our local language of Mewari. I grew up being told only to speak English, English is the language that matters if you want to be "successful" and "powerful." But there was a connection there without the need for words, and that gave me a feeling of really being at home, it left a deep impression on me.

When my wife and I moved back to India, my grandparents were unwell, so we invited them to come live with us. We thought we were going to be taking care of them, but my grandmother ended up taking care of us in so many ways. We all say we got enrolled in our grandmother's PhD program, our grandmother's university. There were so many things she was opening us up to: gift culture, ancestor relationships and the more than human world. I love to tell stories about her. Once she was having eczema, dry skin. I said, I'll go to the pharmacy and get you something. She said, no, no, I don't need anything from there. She told me to go and get goat shit for her. At that time, I was still on my Harvard UNESCO high horse, so I said, I'm not touching goat shit. But we arranged for it to be brought to our house from people who still had goats, she took it, she put it in oil and boiled it, and she applied it to her skin. The next day, it was all cleared up and I was shocked. Because of her, we started working with traditional healers here who were working with different plant medicines. I had a skepticism about all of this, because I was taught in school that it was "unscientific" and "superstitious." But because of my grandmother, I developed an openness to what they were doing. One of the biggest challenges was how to start to let go of the Western

liberal lenses that I was conditioned with and see things from a very different worldview and perspective. She invited me to understand these local realities on their own terms.

Gustavo Esteva once shared with me this framework of good subject, bad subject, non-subject. Most of my life encounters have been with good subjects or bad subjects, but my grandmother was a non-subject, she did not function according to the logic or reference points of the dominant system. She didn't care about Harvard, she didn't care about the UN, she wasn't impressed with it. It was a big shock to my system initially, how could this be? What is wrong with this lady? Doesn't she know how great I am? But she was like, no, are you a good human being? Are you nice to people? Do you help people? That's all that matters.

From my grandmother, I even learned to break down the definition of tradition, which in the modern world is seen as something static, frozen and in the past, something to be kept in museums. But there is a word in our local language, *parampara*, that means flowing. Tradition is flowing, it's not this static thing that we juxtapose against modernity, this dichotomy that we were given, modern vs. traditional. Traditions are still living now, they're not dead. This all became very real and alive and embodied when I was with my grandmother. The light bulb went on.

Another area she opened up for me was the value of working with the hands. I had so much shame around that and devalued it as I was taught in school that I should use my intelligence for "more important things." But she told me stories about how our house was built in the village, she used to carry the sand and stones to help build it. I was so inspired by that. I didn't even know how to build a house or grow my own food or make my own clothes. I learned a lot about eco-architecture just because of her. Same thing with all these different kinds of healing herbs: she wasn't a trained healer, but most women her age and generation knew how to handle those herbal plants for 80 percent to 90 percent of common illnesses. I felt that I should not only watch her but bring these traditions alive within myself.

I could start to see the deep spiritual value in doing manual work. I had read about this from Gandhi, but it did not fully click until I started living with my grandmother. I had been taught by school and the UN that this was all "drudgery" and should be eliminated. But I started to realize that this menial labor is actually connecting us to spiritual work. I had been exposed to these modern ideas of spirituality, where you sit alone in an ashram and somebody's

doing all the work for you and you're just sitting and meditating. She broke these theories of what does it mean to be on a spiritual path.

***Did this have an influence on your decision not to send your daughter to school? What have you learned from not sending your daughter to school, and how do you situate yourself within the deschooling movement in the Global South?***

My grandmother definitely gave me a lot more courage to not send my daughter to school, seeing how many things she knew, and how wise and intelligent she was. This was not just some crazy hippie dream I have, but there are actually beautiful human beings who exist without schooling. She expanded our imagination about what kinds of opportunities and spaces we wanted to create with our daughter for learning, and for our own unlearning, learning and up-learning journeys.

A lot of homeschooling people still follow a formal curriculum. We never really did that. It was more about spending time with my daughter. She spent a good two years with her friends in the vegetable market, which was near our campus, she would go there every day for three or four hours. There were ten to fifteen vegetable sellers, and she became friends with many of them. My grandmother opened up my imagination to see that letting her play in such spaces was a valuable learning experience. It became part of our vision of what kind of learning web or ecosystem we wanted to co-create and explore together. We tried to build a local community for ourselves and our daughter and break the narrow notion of the nuclear family. A lot of friends practicing unschooling are just living as individual families. We don't think that is a good way to do things. We didn't want to take our kid out of school and then isolate her in the home or in an endless series of hobby classes. There's a saying, it takes a village to raise a child. I flipped that and I said it takes our children to help us raise our villages again. Because of my daughter, we started building this strong community, with many people locally and all over the country. That's been the vision, we never wanted to do this alone, and we've never felt alone in this journey either.

I sometimes use the word deschooling to refer to our larger lifestyle questions and reclaiming control from centralizing monoculture institutions. But in India, I link this more with the idea of Swaraj. Unschooling is more around the pedagogical questions: how do you co-create different kinds of learning environments, how do you think beyond degrees and textbooks and diplomas? Often, unschooling is needed for the parents more than the children. My wife and I had to unschool ourselves as parents in terms of our fear of the future and

tendency to over-plan, our sense of constant comparison and competition with other children, our “grabbing” for knowledge.

But deschooling is questioning larger ideas around institutionalization. When Gandhi talked about modern Western systems, he used a word in Hindi, *Shaitani*, meaning evil or Satanic. I think he was trying to say that these are systems that are trying to destroy our own connections to our inner voice, our own experiences, our own sense of divine being even, and trying to replace these with centralized institutions and authorities who tell us that we’re not capable of doing things without them, this is Satanic basically. For me, the larger questions of deschooling are not just a school or no school question. It really involves questions of economy, politics, healing and spirituality.

***One of the critiques of alternative educational projects is that they are either accessible only to those with considerable wealth, or they are teaching poor people not to believe in the system. But if you don’t believe in the system, you can’t get jobs, then you risk then locking this individual into a continuing life of marginal existence. How do you address these kinds of critiques in your own work?***

There is a part of the critique which I agree with. But there are different kinds of privilege, and there is also the question is how we are using our privilege. Our choice has been to use that privilege to try to build something new and build it not only for my daughter, but something that many other kids, regardless of their economic or caste background, could access as well. One of the most beautiful things is that you see the diversity of people who have come through Shikshantar and Swaraj. My whole family has grown and benefited tremendously from that diversity. My daughter has spent time in indigenous communities, as kids from indigenous neighborhoods come to Shikshantar. She has had friends who were from the slum areas and shelters for street children; and interacts with many local artisans and healers.

We’ve also created several kinds of unschooling centers in government schools. One of the reasons for doing this was because of this critique that unschooling is only for elite communities, I wanted to prove otherwise. We have unschooling centers in three government schools in some of the worst areas of Delhi. We run our own parallel system there from two to six o’clock every day. It’s not compulsory, so any students who would like to come can come. Any other kids from those neighborhoods, any kids who dropped out of school, even homeschooled kids, it’s an open space. We’ve done that in a government school building, using corporate social responsibility money to support these

unschooling centers in these government schools. So, that's an experiment. What is most exciting to see is that these kids are flourishing in those spaces. They get to travel, they get to do all kinds of projects, they get to explore their interests. Our argument is that the design of schooling is flawed, not the kids. If we change the design, they will flourish, they'll do amazing things. I would say they're even more talented and intelligent than many private school students, because they've faced much more difficult challenges in their lives, they've seen a lot of things. Nobody bought them toys, so since they were children, they've been making things from garbage or junk, so they're far more creative. We're trying to create a platform where these kinds of things that have been pushed out by the system, all these qualities, all these skills and relations can actually re-enter.

But these experiments are extremely fragile. I'm not advocating that we could go and do this everywhere and that we're going to fix or change the system and bring a revolution from within the system. I don't believe these spaces can be fixed. What we can do is unleash an underground learning culture so that more learners can see and believe they have better choices than to stay in school. Also, I don't think the revolution is going to come from privileged people. They can support movements with their money, but the real innovative stuff comes from people on the margins. They have real contextual knowledge, real skills and inner creativity, wisdom, resilience, and adaptability.

Much of what we are doing in Swaraj University is tied to our Healing Ourselves from the Diploma Disease Campaign. During our learning programs, if kojis want apprenticeships or internships, I help arrange those for them. We've set up a parallel system, where if one doesn't have a degree, it's okay, we'll arrange opportunities to start as a volunteer with organizations or individuals you are interested in getting experience with. You just have to show them a portfolio of your real-world experiences. The degree requirement in jobs was designed as a barrier, a tool for exclusion and silencing "the other." In the past, liberal friends of mine thought they were doing noble things by supporting the education of a few poor kids and getting them into conventional universities. I told them, you're holding a key, and you gave a few kids a key to the door. But let's break the door now. Or better, let's ignore the door. What if there's no door and we're going to make our own rooms?

***What is the difference between the spaces of the government schools and Swaraj as a community learning environment?***

In Swaraj as a community, we are all co-creating, we have much more autonomy over how we do everything. That's fundamentally the difference. The way we're

working is with the space of the trickster. I would never work in the government schools if they told me you have to do it our way. So, twenty-five years of work has put me in a position where I can tell them, I'm going to do it this way, I'm going to bring in my own team, our pedagogy and our approach. If they say, yes, okay, it's a deal. They were willing to try it out, it's been five years, there are definitely lots of conflict and challenges. But that's been an interesting part of the journey. Government schools have prime locations in these neighborhoods; they have a lot of space. In a lot of these low-income neighborhoods, they're the only ones who have grounds for kids to play. So, let's take the space and use it, as long as we can do what we want to do, that's been our approach so far.

***Another critique of alternative education projects is they can be individualistic and an escape for the few, but they are not inclusive, because you cannot include everyone in this project. How would you respond to this critique?***

For those people who want to argue in defense of a system of public education, if you really care about those kids and communities, you need to redesign the system so it would value those kids, value their community knowledge, value the whole range of experiences they bring, which wouldn't treat them as nothing or all the labels they put on you. I'm showing you a glimpse of how to redesign the system. I'm saying it's possible, here's a way to expand our imagination. If somebody's giving me the time, the space, and the resources, then it can be done. Rather than one monoculture model of education, I believe there should be billions of learning models on the planet. There is a saying that the white teacher who brought the pencil also brought the eraser. So many learning resources and processes have been erased by modern education. We are inviting people to reclaim and regenerate these to build their own models which are relevant to their bioregions and contexts.

The roots of the White Man's Burden are still being played out, whether you come from the Global North or whether you're an urban Indian going into villages. The education system is part of the development model. Right now, there's a massive attack in India to help the tribals, to "civilize" and "educate" the tribals. Why? Because they're the richest communities left on the planet. They have all the minerals, the oil, the things are sitting in their lands. That's when you hear, we need to go and help them. That's the Trojan horse you put in the school system. The two things used to break every kind of community and social movement are the education system and the healthcare system. That's

what is used to attack everybody who is resisting. They set those up and the whole bulldozer comes behind them.

Basically, the entire international development agenda is a way to steal the remaining resources from local communities that have these. There's a statistic that says about \$140 billion goes from the Global North to the Global South each year as development aid, and \$1.3 trillion goes the other way. You're part of this system, the public education system is breaking down their community resources, their resilience, and ability to imagine their own futures, you're taking that all away from them through this model that you're proposing. They're losing their languages, they're losing their connection to their land, their animals, their ancestors. If that's okay with you, then what can I tell you? That's basically what is happening in the name of education inclusion.

***You critique the model of international development and globalization, but you still continue to work globally in developing and sharing your ideas and practices. How does your engagement with globalization differ from the model you rightfully critique?***

When I say globalization, I'm talking about centralizing global institutions, corporations, monocultural frameworks. In our engagement with friends around the world, I don't say I'm part of a global project, I'm not trying to force everyone to follow what I'm saying. We are cultivating the spirit of deep friendship and radical trust to try to unlearn and co-learn together. I use the word "trans-local," which means that we value being connected with our local context and learning from the wisdom of place. At the same time, we seek to engage horizontally with other local contexts around the world to challenge, deepen, and inspire each other in the spirit of inter-cultural dialogue. We have no agenda to try to centralize and globalize everyone into one path. We want thousands of different models to bloom across the planet.

Once I was in Ladakh and interacting with this alternative education project there and the students were saying, we need globalization, how will we ever interact with people? I told them, you don't even know your own history. This was one of the trade centers of the Silk Road. For the last few thousand years, way before modernity and globalization, your ancestors were interacting with people from all over Asia and the world. There are these ancient linkages and connections that people shared, it's not like this only now because of modernity or globalization that people are able to move beyond borders.

That's been my journey so far for the last twenty-seven years. We've got a great group of people of all different backgrounds here in Udaipur who are willing to explore and experiment with things. They give me ideas; I give them ideas. We keep remembering, we keep unlearning, we keep playing and laughing. That's built a beautiful web of trust, optimism, and confidence to keep going in this journey. We travel together not to compete against each other or colonize the other; we travel together to complete each other.

## Learning from Elders in Social Movement Spaces

Alexia Leclercq

*PODER (People Organized in Defense of Earth and Her Resources),  
East Austin, USA*

*In the early 2020s, Alexia Leclercq gained national recognition as a youth climate activist in the United States, as part of a wider phenomenon of youth leading on global environment and climate action that goes back to Severn Cullis-Suzuki speaking at the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro and exploded in the late 2010s with the rise of Greta Thunberg and the Fridays for Future movement (Tannock 2021). Leclercq works as a community organizer for PODER, an indigenous and Latina-led grassroots environmental justice organization in East Austin, Texas, that she first joined as an intern while still in school. She has also co-founded a social and environmental justice education nonprofit called Start: Empowerment.*

*Leclercq stands out from the wider group of youth climate activists in several ways. One is that while youth climate mobilization is often framed as youth leading where older generations have failed—“we children are doing this to wake the adults up,” as Thunberg said of the school strikes for climate campaign (Tannock 2021, p. 169)—Leclercq emphasizes the importance of learning from elders and building powerful intergenerational social movements. This comes from Leclercq’s sense of being grounded in a decades-long environmental justice movement in the United States. Susana Almanza, the co-founder of PODER where Leclercq works, participated in the First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit in Washington, DC in 1991, a historic event where “the disparate strands of the Environmental Justice Movement—civil rights, grassroots anti-toxics, academic, labor, indigenous—were consciously brought together for the first time” (Cole and Foster 2021, p. 31). Almanza helped to write the “17 Principles of Environmental Justice” at the 1991 Summit, that forged “a synthesis of anti-racism and ecological*

sustainability” with “anti-militarist, anti-imperialist, gender-justice politics” and recognition of “the inherent and cultural worth of nonhuman natures,” and has become a defining document for the movement (Pellow 2018, p. 15).

As part of the environmental justice movement, Leclercq insists on foregrounding race and class injustice in her environmental work and criticizes the often apolitical, “follow the science” rhetoric of the mainstream climate movement. Leclercq also stands out for her insistence on placing education at the heart of her environmental activism. She founded an education nonprofit and decided to do a graduate degree in education to develop her practice. As she says in her conversation, it all keeps “coming back to education.”

Several key themes emerge in Leclercq’s conversation. This is an approach to radical education that is rooted in what Payne (1995) calls the “organizing tradition,” that goes back to the US civil rights movement and has been carried forward by the environmental justice as well as other anti-racist, feminist, and working-class movements (Sen 2003). Leclercq speaks of Rosa Parks and the 1956 Montgomery Bus Boycott, pointing out how what is often portrayed in the United States as a story of the power of one individual to change the world was actually embedded in a process of careful, collective planning and strategizing by different community organizing groups. This form of radical education ties education directly to community organizing and focuses on the practical work of building power in local communities through an extended process of building one-to-one relationships, identifying local concerns, and developing strategic actions for social change (Ganz 2024; Schutz and Sandy 2011).

A second theme is the importance of indigenous culture and knowledge in Leclercq’s approach. Leclercq is someone who is as comfortable talking about spirits and ghosts as she is about the practicalities of base building and door knocking in grassroots organizing campaigns. Having immigrated to the United States as a child of a French Taiwanese family, Leclercq speaks of growing up learning from her mother about Buddhist and Hakka-Taiwanese cosmologies. It was this cultural background that drew her to the work of environmental justice organizing and fostered her deep sense of the importance of listening to and learning from elders. Now working in an indigenous led organization in Austin, Leclercq speaks of the “through lines” that connect indigenous cultures around the world, finding commonalities between her own East Asian cultural background and local Lipan Apache cultures in Texas. This sense of connectedness between peoples and between people and the earth is a form of knowledge that, as Leclercq points out, is not only missing from the world of formal schooling, but often actively suppressed.

Finally, Leclercq's story helps to shed light on the shifting relationships that can exist between formal and nonformal education. Leclercq learned little about climate change or the social history of Austin or political analysis in school and was introduced to radical education in the grassroots space of PODER. But with this foundation in hand, Leclercq talks of being able to engage "intentionally" with her undergraduate and graduate studies at university, where she deliberately sought out radical professors and shaped her own individual learning program. The university also gave her time and space for reading and learning that weren't easy to find in the daily toil of grassroots organizing in East Austin. In reflecting on the work done by her education nonprofit, Leclercq also speaks of the importance of working with youth both inside and outside of school (or inside and outside the system more generally). Much of the more radical education she seeks to do with young people can only be done outside the school; yet schools remain important sites to try to work in, as they are where most youth spend much of their time, as dedicated institutions for intentional learning.

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***You started your climate and environmental justice work as an intern at PODER, while you were still in school. How did you come to work with PODER and what did you learn there that you didn't learn in school?***

I did not learn much about climate in school at all. In ninth or tenth grade, climate change was mentioned in one of my classes. But it was very science-specific and polar bears and recycling were the extent to which climate came up in the classrooms. Also in Texas public education, in our science textbooks, if you want to mention climate science, you are supposed to mention the benefits of fossil fuel and the fossil fuel industry, that's written into our state law. So, 99 percent of what I learned about environmental justice was through community spaces, through my mom and through PODER.

I came to work with PODER really randomly. I had reached out to Susana Almanza, she asked me to come to the office, I had no idea what I was getting myself into. She talked with me for two hours and told me about the zoning challenges that were happening in East Austin and how that was impacting environmental and economic issues. I was like, damn, this is cool, I want to volunteer and work with y'all. I think that was a really life changing experience for me, because it allowed me to connect my lived experiences with terminology to understand the world around me and put a word to all these inequalities that you see as a young person in the world. That was the first time I was exposed to

the words environmental justice and environmental racism. I learned about the civil rights movement, what organizing was, and the history of Austin. Because even though I had spent most of my life in Austin, I didn't know about the 1928 master plan, the segregation, all of that history.

I loved learning, but like most kids I know, I was never a big fan of school. I think understanding environmental justice, racial justice, and having this critical analysis of the world, it allowed me to pinpoint, like, oh, I wasn't just a random child that hated school for no reason. Schools don't teach BIPOC [Black, Indigenous, People of Color] histories, don't teach you the tools to dismantle empire, don't teach you how to get free. There were a lot of racial undertones factored into my experience, and I came to understand that we live in these systems, and this is how the system impacts your personal experiences. You see it reflected in an interaction with a teacher, or with other peers, or even the entire school system and the attendance policies that come from this capitalist, colonial system that we live in. I realized how only Western colonial knowledges were valued at school. I remember in elementary school, I had a rough time because I came from such a different cultural household. One example is I didn't know that ghosts were something that people believed in or didn't believe in. For me, they were just normal, a part of our world. I remember in elementary school telling my friends a story and there was a ghost involved, and then everyone was like, ghosts aren't real, you're stupid. And the teacher reinforced that as well. As I got older, I was able to understand there were a lot of cultural differences between my home life and school.

***Now, after going away to university, you've come back to PODER to work as an organizer. What is PODER's approach and what is the work you do there?***

At PODER, we do grassroots organizing, which is a way to go about creating change, grounded in developing the leadership of people that are directly impacted by the issues. It starts with knowing your neighbors, building relationships. I have learned all of this through Susana Almanza, through working with PODER and this approach was born out of the civil rights movement in the 1960s. I often use the 1956 Montgomery Bus Boycott to explain organizing to people, because in the media we're taught the boycott was just about Rosa Parks. But behind the scenes, it was actually months and months of building relationships, having community meetings, creating a strategy where you build power through the bus boycott. Grassroots organizing is about building power to create change. It's really important that it is led by those that are most impacted, that often

also have the solutions and know exactly what their neighborhoods and their communities need. Each of our campaigns comes from what the community members are telling us are the biggest issues, and we work alongside them every step of the way, creating the strategy, deciding if we're trying to write a policy that we're going to pursue, if we're going to protest, all the methods that we use to try to get our end goal. Through grassroots organizing, you're able to get to the root of the issue, and think through how can you work toward systemic change and not just put a band aid, even though sometimes band aids are needed.

I've been leading PODER's Clean Water campaign since 2021. It started off with work we were doing protecting the Colorado River, which passes through Austin, and there's stretches of the river that are heavily polluted because of aggregate mining operations. A lot of the concrete in Texas is made in this area because the soil and sands along the river are useful for making concrete, but Texas has some of the worst aggregate mining regulations in the entire country. When we were building the Colorado River Conservancy, we were doing a lot of door-to-door knocking, ensuring that this is not a traditional conservation project, we wanted this to be led by the communities that live near the river. One of the neighborhoods that I was doing a lot of door knocking in is called Austin's Colony, and everyone was like, hey, the River Conservancy sounds cool, but actually, we don't care. We have this drinking water problem.

So, that's how I first found out about the issue. After a lot of research, we found that the neighborhood is being serviced by a private water company because they're in the extra-territorial jurisdiction and are not officially part of the city of Austin, and don't get access to city water. They're being serviced low-quality water at a high cost, which is in alignment with what's been happening with private water companies around the world. The water has been causing a lot of health issues and is also often discolored. Some of our initial testing has shown hardness, high levels of lead, and arsenic. We're still in our data collection phase, but we know there's an issue. We're also in a rate case, because the water company is trying to increase the cost of the water, even though it is already a lot more expensive than Austin water. What ignited the campaign was the fact that the Tesla Gigafactory is also in this private waters jurisdiction, but they were able to get access to Austin water, so they have high-quality, low-cost water, while the neighboring community does not. Obviously, that's upsetting to see how companies are put over people. It's an ongoing battle and important to our work. Water is life. It's crazy, but so many communities to this day don't have access to clean water. It's a big issue in Texas in a lot of unincorporated areas, and

in the South, in the colonias, there's a lot of communities that don't have access to clean water.

***In addition to your work with PODER in East Austin, you have gained national recognition as a young climate activist and have participated in global youth climate action networks. Yet, while others focus on youth leading the climate movement, you always emphasize the importance of learning from our elders and doing intergenerational organizing. Why is this so important?***

In the media, young people doing climate work went viral, especially around 2019 when Greta Thunberg got super popular. Obviously, the climate crisis does impact young people and especially future generations, so that's important to understand. Young people have played a key role in the climate movement, just like in all movements across time. I think about the civil rights movement, or the Black Panther Party. Those kids were in their early 20s. Young people have always been at the forefront of any movement, and especially revolutionary change.

But at the same time, I think because young people went viral for the climate movement, a lot of intergenerational work went unseen. I feel like I'm really lucky, because when I got connected to the environmental justice space, through PODER, I got to meet a lot of our elders in this space, people that wrote the *17 Principles of Environmental Justice* in 1991. A lot of people that have been doing this work since the 1960s, these are the people that created the movement, that are the reason we have certain EPA [Environmental Protection Agency] laws, the reason why there's so much research on environmental racism, the reason why we're here today. It's so important for movements to be intergenerational, because there's so much to learn from our elders. There's no point in us trying to figure things out on our own when there's people that have been doing movement work for sixty years and could just tell us things.

Movement work and grassroots organizing isn't easy. A lot of it is about relationships and with that comes drama: different people, different dynamics, different racist, sexist tensions come up, conflict comes up. Then there's police trying to infiltrate our movements, security concerns. There's a lot of burnout. All these issues that a lot of us deal with, but they're also not new issues that we're dealing with, right? I remember a couple years ago, I was telling Susana Almanza how burnt out we all were, people's health, mental health, physical health, we were really struggling. She was able to guide us through, she was like, you need to go dance, you need to have fun events, you need to bring joy back into the organizing space. You need to move. You need to go to ceremony.

It reminded me this isn't anything new, what we're experiencing. So, we need to be talking to elders, because they've been through these things, and they have different ideas of how to navigate them and can guide us through these different struggles that come up. I was raised with the belief that elders have a lot more wisdom than us. Young people also bring unique creativity to the movement, which is important. But elders have wisdom that is needed, that is accumulated through time, through practice. It's a disservice to have only youth led movements, or only adult or elder spaces. I really do think that we need to have intergenerational spaces, because that's when our movements are the strongest.

I was just recently in New York for Climate Week, and I was talking to my friends, some who have gotten a huge platform when they were only thirteen or fourteen or fifteen, and they shared that sometimes it ends up being older white men making decisions for youth climate activists, and speeches, for example, are written by a media agency. It's easier to manipulate young people. You can easily use them to push for a neoliberal agenda to reinforce the status quo or to just use as inspiration and not challenge any of the existing systems. I think by having a truly intergenerational movement, we can prevent some of that from happening.

***You have also criticized the climate movement for asking people to “just listen to the science” and move “beyond politics.” Instead, you frame your work as focusing on climate and environmental justice and critiquing capitalism and colonialism. Why is this focus so important?***

I don't know if you've gotten a chance to read the *17 Principles of Environmental Justice*, they're a founding document for the environmental justice movement in the United States. They're beautifully written and they encompass how the fight for environmental justice is social justice, economic justice, it's all of it. It's an important document to guide and understand how comprehensive this movement is, and also center justice and decolonization in this work. The mainstream climate space operates under this false idea that if we just reduce emissions, but continue the systems we have today, that will somehow solve the problem. There's this myth that we can continue, especially in the Global North, consuming the way that we do, but just have everything be renewable energies. But this completely misses the root cause of the climate crisis, through the Industrial Revolution and this capitalist system, where the goal of our economy is to accumulate as much profit as possible. In order to accumulate profit, it has to come from somewhere, profit isn't magically created, and it's often through

the exploitation of labor, people, people in the Global South, people of color, and then also exploitation of Mother Earth.

I like to use Tesla as an example, because the Tesla Gigafactory is right in our backyard here in East Austin. The reason why Tesla moved to Texas was because they kept getting sued for environmental violations by the EPA and then for racism as well. They were like, Texas has less regulation, let's settle here. Coming here, they destroyed a lot of land that Lipan Apache elders used to use for gathering plants. When you think about all the minerals in a Tesla car, many are coming from the Congo, where there's literally a genocide going on. If you think through it, you realize that our current economy is very extractive and not sustainable in any shape, way, or form, and is actually the antithesis of a sustainable and just future.

The climate crisis forces us to have to reimagine everything and look toward different local and indigenous communities to learn, how do you live sustainably with the land? How do you build these types of communities, with alternative forms of governance, alternative ways of living that are sustainable? The more that I started reading about these topics, the more I realized that all our struggles are connected. The US military is the world's largest polluter, and I think a lot of mainstream climate groups don't even focus on that, because it's "too political." But everything is political. Who has the right to be alive is political in nature. The climate crisis is an extremely political issue and is intertwined with all other justice movements, and it's important to be radical, which just means getting to the root of the issue, and to center frontline communities' perspectives to understand how colonialism and imperialism brought about the climate crisis and how we need to decolonize in order to get to the solution. It's important to be radical, because there's no other way that we're going to create a just and sustainable future. But I do think it is hard, especially here in the United States.

I feel like the mainstream climate movement is not radical at all. Especially in the past year, we saw how many climate organizations or leaders never spoke up about Palestine, not even once. I had a friend that made this tweet that I absolutely love, saying if the goal of tackling the climate crisis is to fight for life, then you should be speaking about Palestine, because that's the fight for life. Otherwise, climate action is just like gardening or a hobby. In some ways, it is for many people in the mainstream movement, it's just a career move, and it's not something that's deeply personal, or about changing systems, or about protecting life.

***You recently decided to do a Master's degree in education at the Harvard School of Education as a way to develop your climate and environment justice work. Why did you feel that learning more about education was so essential?***

Even though I wasn't technically working in education spaces, education was always a central part of my work. In the organizing and campaigning I was doing, I saw how education shaped people's understanding of the world and their choices of whether to get involved or not get involved. It always just kept coming back to education. The same with base building, you want to build your base to build people power. But what does it take to get more people to join your campaign? It's education and co-creating knowledge. A lot of people don't know the best practices on how to share information. Sometimes, if you're in the movement space for long, you assume that everyone else is on the same page. I would sometimes go to community teachings, and it would be someone lecturing for three hours on dense zoning terms, and all the community members would be like, I have no idea what's going on right now, and people were disengaged. It's important to have good educators and organizers, because then you can actually engage people and get them to understand and connect and become part of the movement. You also realize that is always about co-learning. Frontline communities in particular have so much knowledge to share.

I was very intentional when I was applying for programs, specifically because I wanted to work with specific professors, and I got to work with them. I cannot vouch for the rest of the institution or university, but I was lucky in that my program was very radical. The professor I worked with did her PhD on the Black Panther Party, their community school, and using liberatory pedagogy and youth participatory research, etc. So, it was a cool experience. I also got the time and space to be able to learn more about education and different pedagogies. I love reading, but to be honest, organizing is so much work that a lot of us don't end up reading a lot, or don't end up finding the time to learn as much. I missed that and wanted to intentionally carve out a year for myself to continue learning, because the two years between undergrad and grad school was about constantly putting out fires every day.

***When you were an undergraduate student at NYU you co-founded Start: Empowerment, as "a social and environmental justice education nonprofit that seeks to bridge the gap between education and action." What led you to set up***

***this nonprofit, and what are some of the challenges and strategies for linking education to action successfully?***

I was lucky at NYU in that I did an individualized major and got to take classes with a number of really good radical professors. That was when I got exposed to a lot of critical theory and read books from Angela Davis to Fanon to Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*—that is one of the most fundamental readings when it comes to education. It instantly clicked the first time I read it, and I was like, this, exactly this. Part of creating Start: Empowerment was me and my co-founder talking and realizing we both had access to radical professors that helped us understand the world that we live in. We both were able to make that connection between our lived experiences and the terminology to describe what was happening around us, and it made us empowered to create change. But a lot of other youth of color don't have access to that, it was luck that we did, and a lot of young people I see become discouraged by the world around them, you constantly see hardship around you and oppression, and you don't see the ways to create change. We created Start: Empowerment from wanting other youth of color to have access to that type of education.

It's challenging because the education space doesn't like to get involved in political things. They don't like action. They don't like organizing. They don't like causing trouble. When it's a class project, they're like, if you're wanting to garden or reduce waste, that's great. But if you're trying to change school policies or tackle the fossil fuel industry in your neighborhood, they're like, absolutely not. Once the schools we work with realize that we're a little more radical, or when they realize that students have taken this on their own and are doing other things, the pushback begins. One thing we do want to emphasize is, yes, we're talking about environmental justice, but also students understanding the other justice issues they face. We've had students be like, actually, our attendance policy is oppressive, and disproportionately harms Black and brown students, let's organize and change that. We're like, great, you now have the tools to do so, you can lead that. But the school's like, hold up, what are we doing here?

In that sense, it can be challenging and a lot of traditional climate education organizations don't want to associate with more radical actions. But without action and organizing, you can't create change. We could sit around in the classroom all day, be the smartest people ever, and it would lead nowhere. We've addressed the challenges in different ways. One, we work outside of schools as well. That was important for us to both have programs that are in schools, working with students, because that's where they spend the majority of their

time, but then also having spaces outside of school, and that's where we try to connect everything to action, even though we do that in the classroom as well. But a lot of times, the more radical work happens outside of schools or in after-school settings. Through our curriculum, we always ensure that there's an organizing or project component, we always make sure to connect young people with existing organizers in their communities, in their neighborhoods, to help identify what their local issues are and how to shape a campaign. We've had some cool projects. We had young people work on stopping the North Brooklyn pipeline and successfully halting an Enbridge oil terminal in Corpus Christi.

There's a question of using both inside and outside strategy. There is a quote from Mari Matsuda about how sometimes you need to stand inside a court and use the law to your advantage to try to get justice, and sometimes you need to stand outside of it and scream about how absurd this entire system is. For me, it made sense, because, yes, the master's tools will not dismantle the master's house, but at the same time, we're not going to wake up tomorrow and overhaul the systems that we live in. So, how do we utilize different leverages, like the law, like policy, to minimize harm and advance the different principles that we're fighting for? Sometimes, we get too caught up and only focus on the inside game and forget about what are we trying to build outside of it. How are we challenging the institutions through protests, but also what are we trying to build? How can we create community land trusts? How can we create microgrids and community owned energy systems, water systems, food sovereignty, land back, all these ideas, how do we build that? My friend once said, if capitalism is a sinking ship, no one's gonna jump, but if we build lifeboats, then we can jump. So, I think about the outside game of how do we build those lifeboats? Through my work, I interact a lot with existing political institutions and systems, but I also try to spend time doing the outside work and the community work.

***You have also pointed to the importance of political education for doing this kind of work. What is political education and how can it support climate and environmental justice work?***

Political education is about creating a shared language to understand the systems around us and the world around us, while exploring what we're trying to build and create together. All education is political, whether we like it or not. In Start: Empowerment, we have a political education curriculum that incorporates capitalism, colonialism, abolition, imperialism, all of that. But we do it through a discussion-based approach, we're not even introducing these terms at the

beginning. We might start by sitting down in a circle with a bunch of community members. Let's talk about work. How much do you get paid? How much do you work? How much does your boss get paid? How much is the company making? Do you have to work two jobs to survive? Let's talk about the injustices there and the inequality, and then, step by step, you build up to, this is the capitalist world that we live in, and then people, it clicks, they understand because they're already seeing and experiencing the impacts of it. Political education is important because it allows us to connect lived experiences with this critical thinking and terminology to describe the world around us and allows the communities and the young people we work with to understand these systems and navigate the world and understand themselves and their lived experiences better.

***You've spoken of your own experience growing up with pollution, environmental harms and impacts of climate change. How did these shape your thinking about climate and environmental justice? Do people need to have direct experience of environmental harm in order to be moved to take action on these issues?***

I had a unique childhood in that I moved around quite a few times and lived in very different environments. Because of that, I got to see the differences, like when my grandparents' home was really polluted or experiencing typhoons, earthquakes, floods, versus running around in the woods in France in literally the most beautiful, picturesque scenery you could think of, to then living in the United States, and before that, living in Singapore. Sometimes the air pollution got so bad that the city would shut down for a week. Because I felt like I was in different worlds at times, I noticed the inequalities around me, and I think that definitely shaped like my thinking and how I got into this work.

But, at the same time, I don't think you need to be directly impacted to care about these issues. I think humans and children are empathetic to begin with, and feel empathy for nature, animals, other humans. It makes sense to protect the Earth, to care about these issues, care about other people's suffering. I think through every culture, empathy is a core part of it, through different religions and belief systems. Empathy is something that is developed as a core part of our humanity. I think that this is a movement for all of us, by all of us, and everyone has a role in it. Sadly, though, I also feel that these days, everyone's been impacted some in some capacity by climate change, almost everyone can speak to noticing changes in the climate.

***You speak and write about you mother and how you have learned from her. Is she involved in environmental work as well? How has your family upbringing shaped your thinking about climate and environmental justice work?***

My mom was not involved in this type of work, not on the movement side of it. But I think it was through the stories she told me growing up about the land, about dragons that are the keepers of mountains, about tree spirits that it was always very clear to me about how we as humans are a part of Mother Earth. That was the perspective that led me to movement work. My mom's stories shared different Indigenous-Hakka Taiwanese and Buddhist cosmologies where nature is sentient and respected and not something to exploit. The term environmental justice wasn't something that was brought up during my childhood, but it was more like the cultural aspect of it which then led me to the environmental justice space.

***How similar or different are the ideas and principles you take from indigenous knowledge and culture in Texas in your environmental justice work to those you learned from your mom and your mom's culture?***

For me, that was the one thing that, when I first started working with PODER, made me feel very at home, even though it's a completely different culture. I think a lot of the principles are very similar, from connection to the earth, to the spirit world, and even little things, like the way you respect your elders, practice reciprocity, or the way you interact with other people. There's so many little things where I was like, damn, my boss sounds exactly like my mom. They're saying the same thing.

Traditional ecological knowledge is deeply present in so many traditional and Indigenous cultures across the world. In talking with friends from all over the world, I feel like there's so many through lines. This one's a little unrelated, but it's funny. I was always taught that you can't whistle at night, because it attracts bad spirits. One day, I was talking to three of my friends and randomly mentioning this. My friend who's from Kenya was like, that's the same thing over there. Then my other friend who's from the north of Mexico, was like, that's the same thing for us. It was crazy that, halfway across the world, there's that same idea that you can't whistle a night because it attracts bad spirits. But I feel there's so many things like that, where it's the same through line across cultures. I believe that a lot of traditional cultures hold a lot of wisdom about how we live sustainably, how do we live with the earth, how do we live with each other, how do we create

healthy, peaceful families and communities. We have a lot to learn from these traditional cultures and a lot to reclaim.

***You write about the importance of the environmental justice movement as being a home and safe place for you. How and why is environmental justice still marginalized, and how are racism and sexism still present in the mainstream climate and environmental movement? What needs to happen to get beyond this?***

On a larger level, if you look at funding, I think it's less than 1 percent that goes to BIPOC-led environmental groups. If you look at who has credibility, who has power, who has access to politicians, who has access to resources, it's extremely unequal. A lot of environmental justice movement concerns are still disregarded, especially in the conversation around false solutions. For example, a lot of mainstream environmental groups are super pro-nuclear, and when the Navajo community and different BIPOC-led environmental justice organizations are like, well, what about nuclear waste? Because that's coming into our communities and everyone's dying of cancer. They're like, oh, we don't care. Shut up. Quite literally. Especially in those instances, you see how environmental justice movement voices are shut down.

Or, I think about the pipeline struggles. Line Three (in Minnesota), for example, they were building an oil pipeline on indigenous land, which obviously was a huge problem, leaking pollution and so on. But the mainstream movements never took that on, though this is a primary concern for us. They're like, we have other priorities. Even Tim Waltz [the Governor of Minnesota and Democratic Vice-Presidential candidate in 2024], he's seen as one of the most environmentally friendly politicians. But he called the cops on the Line Three indigenous land defenders. No one brings that up or centers that experience. Or take the *Environmental Justice for All* bill, which we've been trying to push forward to pass for many years now. A lot of what this bill does is to try to prevent the cumulative impacting of environmental harms on communities of color. But a lot of politicians, or even big greens who have a quote unquote good environmental track record are like, this is too radical. We don't want to push for this. We don't want to spend our political capital on issues impacting communities of color, which is frustrating.

I think on a personal level, too, you can see this discrimination. It can be little things, like you're in a conversation and you say something, and everyone disregards it, and a white man says the same thing, and everyone's like, great,

amazing, what an insightful thought. From that to bigger things on a systemic level, like having ideas taken from you, being discredited and directly told that this work only impacts small or minority communities, and therefore it shouldn't be a priority. I think this is still a mindset that, unfortunately, is pretty reoccurring in the mainstream space and movements. The lack of resources, lack of support, still being a huge barrier. Funding is a big one. Just the struggle to have full time staff, and seeing the inequalities in that, because I've seen a big green do maybe half the amount of work that we do, and have five times the amount of funding, and I think that's pretty consistent across different communities where grassroots environmental justice groups are leading the work and doing the work, but are just so under resourced.



## The Seed, the Spade, and the Jail

Chukki Nanjundaswamy,  
Luca Montanari, and Ram Shree

*Amrita Bhoomi Learning Center, Karnataka, India*

*Chukki Nanjundaswamy is chair of the Amrita Bhoomi Learning Center in Karnataka, India, a center created in 2002 with the support of the KRRS (Karnataka Rajya Raitha Sangha), the Karnataka farmers' movement, initially as a seed bank to save and share local seed varieties and relaunched in 2014 as a farmer-to-farmer school for teaching agroecology. Nanjundaswamy speaks of having been born into the farmers' movement in India, as her father, Mahantha Devaru Nanjundaswamy, was the founder of the KRRS in 1980 and led the union for the next two decades: movement politics consequently dominated the family household while she was growing up. Luca Montanari and Ram Shree, who joined the conversation with Nanjundaswamy, both work with the Amrita Bhoomi agroecology school in Karnataka.*

*Since the 1990s, KRRS and subsequently Amrita Bhoomi have been linked with the global La Via Campesina peasant movement, a network of 180 organizations in over eighty countries in Asia, Africa, Europe, and the Americas representing "peasants, landless workers, indigenous people, pastoralists, fishers, migrant farmworkers, small and medium-size farmers, rural women, and peasant youth." La Via Campesina seeks to restructure the global food system through a campaign of nonviolent resistance to hegemonic models of neoliberal, corporate, industrial, and extractivist agriculture, and promotes an alternative model of agriculture and rural development based on the principle of food sovereignty, defined as "the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods and their right to define their food and agriculture systems" (La Via Campesina 2025).*

*To support its work, La Via Campesina has created a global network of schools to teach practices and principles of agroecology, a sustainable model of agriculture that seeks to work in harmony with surrounding natural and social ecosystems. Amrita Bhoomi serves as La Via Campesina Agroecology School for South Asia. Through these networked schools, there have been opportunities for alternative models of pedagogy to spread internationally, such that horizontal, peasant-to-peasant popular education approaches developed in Cuba, for example, have been adopted in other countries, including Amrita Bhoomi in India (McCune, Reardon, and Rosset 2014). However, these agroecology schools have also been spaces for relearning and reconnecting with local, traditional peasant forms of knowledge and practice. Nanjundaswamy thus notes how La Via Campesina principles of agroecology and food sovereignty dovetail with the indigenous Indian concept of Swaraj (Meek and Khadse 2022).*

*At the heart of Amrita Bhoomi's work is a recognition of the importance of linking learning and productive practice with collective organizing and political action. In her conversation, Nanjundaswamy points to the close ties that Amrita Bhoomi has with the organized farmers' movement as the key feature that differentiates the center from other development and education NGOs that populate the landscape in India and elsewhere in the Global South. Amrita Bhoomi is an example of what are sometimes called social movement schools (Niesz et al. 2018). Here the symbol of the jail, as popularized by Indian socialist Ram Manohar Lohia, is used to point to the importance of acts of mass civil disobedience that have been used by KRRS in support of their campaigns and through which members are arrested and imprisoned (Lappé 2022). Over the years, KRRS has burned and uprooted genetically modified seeds in the fields, attacked buildings belonging to multinational food corporations (such as Cargill and KFC), and mobilized mass protests against the World Trade Organization (WTO), General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), and global agribusiness conventions (Khadse and Bhattacharya 2013). As Nanjundaswamy argues, such actions are important not just for building power and shifting policy, but as vital educational events—both the protests themselves, but also through the learning that can happen once members have been arrested and put in jail.*

*At the same time, radical education at Amrita Bhoomi is not solely or even primarily about political action and organizing. Most of the work and learning at the center is technical and vocational in nature, focused on learning how to farm in a more sustainable, environmentally friendly way, through adopting the principles and practice of agroecology. What is radical here is (re)developing the capacity to disengage from the corporate networks of global capitalist agriculture that have led*

to skyrocketing levels of indebtedness and suicide among farmers in India (Meek 2018). As encapsulated by the socialist iconography of Lohia, it is not just civil disobedience and the jail that constitute vital political action, but constructive activity and the spade as well. A central concern of Amrita Bhoomi—and La Via Campesina’s global network of agroecology schools—is thus to foster material practices, technical skills, and agricultural knowledge that are deeply rooted in local cultures and environments. It is significant that Amrita Bhoomi began as a seed bank for local seed varieties, for part of the struggle against capitalist forms of globalization is fighting local, traditional knowledge loss, through the painstaking work of documenting, preserving, archiving, and reviving traditional forms of knowledge around the world.

In analyzing the struggles of rural India, Nanjundaswamy points to formal education as a central part of the problem. Agricultural universities in India were at the heart of driving the Green Revolution, as part of a hegemonic food regime that involved collaboration with “US-based capitalist philanthropic foundations, transnational agribusiness [and] the Indian state,” and promoted a capitalist, industrial model of agriculture involving extensive use of chemical fertilizers, pesticides, and mechanized irrigation systems—the very things KRRS and Amrita Bhoomi are now mobilizing against (Brown 2020, p. 197). This system of formal education was deeply alienated from rural communities, many of whom ended up being displaced, made destitute, and put into acute distress by the transformations it helped to develop and promote in a “modernized” agribusiness system. In this sense, Amrita Bhoomi and other La Via Campesina agroecology schools are seeking to form a counter-hegemonic education that is set directly against the harms all too often inflicted by formal schools and universities.

One of the notable aspects of Amrita Bhoomi, in the context of this book, is that, while it is self-identified as a school or learning center, Nanjundaswamy and others at the center don’t tend to see themselves first and foremost as educators, but as organizers seeking to build a larger social movement, both locally and globally. It is through a commitment to movement building that they have come to focus on education. Rather than being shaped by a commitment to one particular educational approach, education at Amrita Bhoomi has tended to be a more eclectic, experimental, and emergent mix of different pedagogies, that range from traditional, didactic lecturing to large groups, to horizontal farmer-to-farmer popular education models, a heavy emphasis on apprenticeship-style learning by doing, as well as learning through collective organizing and direct action (Khadse et al. 2018; Meek and Khadse 2022). While the center began with a focus on adult learning, it has increasingly sought to develop education on agroecology for

*children and youth as well, setting up an extended one year residential internship program for local rural youth, hosting university students and local government school children on short-term placements and day visits to introduce them to alternative approaches to agriculture and co-producing with local children an illustrated agroecological children's book written in the local language of Kannada.*

*In this conversation, Chukki Nanjundaswamy was joined by Luca Montanari and Ram Shree, also from the Amrita Bhoomi Learning Center. All comments in the text were spoken by Nanjundaswamy, except where otherwise noted.*

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***Can we begin by talking about Amrita Bhoomi: what is Amrita Bhoomi, what does it do in terms of education, and what was the original motivation for setting up this center?***

OK, to talk about Amrita Bhoomi, we have to talk about the farmers' movement, because they are interlinked. The farmers' movement of Karnataka, KRRS (Karnataka Rajya Raitha Sangha), is based on the principles of Mahatma Gandhi and Ram Manohar Lohia, who was an Indian socialist. For the first decade, in the 1980s, our struggle was more focused on establishing self-esteem inside the farming community and fighting local issues like the problem of indebtedness and the whole idea of food producers being second-class citizens. We insisted that we are not second-class citizens since we produce food, and we should have the right to fix our prices and rights over natural resources, and so on. In the second decade, in the 1990s, the economy got opened up for the neoliberal market. This was when they were discussing trade-related intellectual property rights inside the GATT and WTO. That was when KRRS took the initiative of launching something called the Seed Satyagraha, in the same line as the Salt Satyagraha that was led by Gandhi, because seed and salt are both fundamental for our existence and without seed, you cannot produce anything.

As part of the Seed Satyagraha, we wanted to set up our own center for seed conservation, in the hands of the farmers. The whole idea was to work with the traditional knowledge system in agriculture, because the Green Revolution has damaged agriculture to an extent that the generations who were born after the Green Revolution period have no idea about rainfed farming, for example. In India, 60 percent of farming, even today, is done under rainfed conditions, and doing agriculture under rainfed conditions cannot be a blind way of doing it. You have to know which rain, what is the frequency of the rain, what will be the

humidity in the atmosphere, what kind of sowing has to be done. Multinational corporations like Cargill and Syngenta and Bayer and Monsanto started entering into the seed sector, and this was a problem, particularly in the sectors which used rainfed conditions like the sunflower or corn, because their seeds assumed there was irrigation. The farmers' movement here understood the importance of saving our own seeds, which are time-tested and have adapted themselves to different climatic conditions.

So, that is how Amrita Bhoomi started. To start with, it was to work with the traditional knowledge system in agriculture, as well as to work on the conservation of local seeds. It was established in 2002, but the founder, Mahantha Devaru Nanjundaswamy, passed away in 2004 and there was a long gap of no activity. We revived it again in 2014, and at the inauguration we called it the Life School, and it was very much based on the whole idea of popular education. Popular education has long been an integral part of the farmers' movement. In the past and still today, we have held thousands of study camps. Through study camps, the new generation of farmers who are members of the movement learn their rights, as well as the new policies which are being framed at different levels, including the international level, that will go against the farming community itself, so they have an understanding of what's happening at the global level, and what kind of answers we have to find and build at the local level to resist this global onslaught on us.

For me, this is the reason why Amrita Bhoomi is very special. There are many centers. There are many NGOs who are working on alternative education, but they are all in isolation. We don't know how much they are really working with the society, really linked with the society. But Amrita Bhoomi was born out of the farmers' movement, the struggle, so it was not seen as a separate entity. It has an organic link with the social movements. Many important social activists, they keep coming to Amrita Bhoomi. When we inaugurated the Center in 2014, the basic infrastructure that we have for accommodation and a meeting hall and kitchen and so on, we held three days of study camp where many important activists came from all over India, including, for example, an activist and fighter called Medha Patkar.

***The mission and objectives of Amrita Bhoomi focus on fostering autonomy, self-respect, and food sovereignty, which are linked to the principle of Swaraj. Can you explain what these things mean for you, why they are so important, and how the Center seeks to foster these principles among learners?***

For us, Swaraj is the basic principle we are fighting for. We don't celebrate Independence Day, the so-called Independence Day that we have in India on the 15th of August, which was a result of a long battle against the British. But rural India has not achieved any kind of independence, they are still enslaved within the traditional system of caste and gender inequality and nowadays, with the rise of right-wing religion that has entered into the villages of India. Also, the Green Revolution dismantled the whole sustainable ecosystem that we previously had. We have lost the people who used to make pottery, who used to do carpentry, we have lost skills in the villages as everything has been mechanized. The media is playing a negative role in corrupting the minds of the people. I think that is why Swaraj is so important, in terms of deciding what kind of model of development we need, what kind of model of agriculture we need, what kind of model of education we need, and what kind of thinking we need that is suitable for this country, not just copying from the West.

So far, our policymakers have just been copying from the West, and the model of development for them is having big highways and big shopping complexes. This is dividing India into two Indias, the urban India, which is middle class and based on sectors like IT, is totally disconnected from what is happening in the rural part of India. They are becoming totally disconnected from their own minds, totally disconnected from their own hearts. Swaraj means self-autonomy, self-rule. In terms of having our own original thinking, this is very important. So, at the Center, we are experimenting with different models of agroecology, which is based on traditional knowledge of farming, on principles of diversity and symbiosis. We are adopting these principles of natural farming, when it comes to vegetables or rainfed farming, seed conservation, or horticulture. We organize workshops and trainings related to agriculture and agroecology, because we are the South Asian School of Agroecology of La Via Campesina.

***You have also spoken about the importance of Ram Manohar Lohia and his slogan of spade-prison-vote. Who was Lohia, what does this slogan mean and how has his thinking shaped the work you do here?***

Dr. Lohia was part of the freedom movement. He worked with Mahatma Gandhi, but he was the next generation, and he was a strong critic of Nehru's idea of development. He did his doctorate in Germany and he's somebody who analyzed socialism in the Indian context. So, Lohia is somebody who took the essence of Gandhian philosophy and Marxist theory and articulated this to the Indian context. Spade and prison for us have to go hand in hand. Spade,

which represents the constructive work, and prison, which represents breaking the bad laws and the struggle in the street. Otherwise, it's like walking with one leg. The kind of model that we want has to be built by us ourselves and also to stop the injustice, whenever it is required, we have to speak out to oppose this. Both struggle and constructive work are important. Agroecology is both our way of doing agriculture and our understanding of the corporate and capitalist domination of agriculture. This domination impacts the whole of rural life and livelihood, the mindsets of rural young people and so on. How to work on these mindsets, how to build struggles, these are all political issues, but they cannot be held separate from the agroecology work we do.

We can learn a lot from taking political action, more than from theories. That is what the movement has taught us, that when you take an action, you learn. For example, we had a famous action against Kentucky Fried Chicken in 1995. That one action, which happened in the span of three hours, educated thousands of people, both people who took part in the action, as well as those people who came to know about the action through the media. You got to understand the whole impact of the fast-food chain, what may happen to health, the environment, the economy, and the food culture. So, one action can actually shake society more than thousands of lectures could do.

When we are talking about radical education, we need to remember, too, how jails played a role in radical education. In the early 1980s and up until the mid-1990s, we used to have calls for filling up all the jails. One day, there was an historical imprisonment of thousands of people, where all of the prisons of Karnataka were filled, and they did not have any more space left in the prisons. So, they had to convert school playgrounds into prisons. This is just one example. Jail Bharo, which was a strategy used by Gandhi, was totally adopted by the KRRS. People used to go to jail by breaking the bad laws. Inside the jails, during the time we were there, the jails were converted into study camps. The leaders used to train people there. When we had an internal evaluation inside the farmers' movement and we feel that the generation which came after 2000 are not as committed to the movement, one of the reasons for this that the seniors always say is that we stopped going to jail, we stopped taking the study camps.

When you go to jail, you are not free, you can't go out. You are inside the jail and whatever you have to do, it is within the premises. You can't think of your family. So, your focus is there, and you are totally dedicated to what you are learning, and you are there as part of your action. So, there were study camps set up before sending people to jail, to learn about their political rights as political prisoners. The farmers had legal trainings about what are your rights. According

to the Indian Penal Code, as a political prisoner, you have to be given a new mattress and a new blanket and 300 grams of mutton and one egg per day and this kind of thing. These were all part of the legal trainings which the farmers used to get. It was on a mass scale, the study camps were not one-to-one, there were one-to-ten thousand. The study camp is very particular to the Karnataka farmers' movement; other farmers' movements don't have them. The founders of our farmers' movement started a school of socialism to build a politically trained and committed cadre at the beginning, in the 1980s.

***Alongside the importance of Swaraj and the work of Lohia, Amrita Bhoomi has also been influenced by international educational models and traditions, especially from Cuba and South America through your engagement with La Via Campesina. What are these and what have you learned from these traditions?***

Well, we see the world as one entity, as a world without borders. And so, we have been part of international movement spaces since the 1990s, once our enemies got globalized, it was also time for us to get globalized. The anti-globalization movement itself was globalized. That's how I met my life partner, Luca Montanari, who is from Italy and was working with us in the late 1990s in a platform called Peoples' Global Action against the WTO. Now we are part of La Via Campesina, which is a global peasants' movement that is spread over more than ninety-two countries. Inside Via Campesina, we have articulated two major principles to defend the peasantry of the world. One is food sovereignty, and the other is agroecology to achieve food sovereignty. Both are nothing different from Swaraj: the synthesis of food sovereignty and agroecology is what we are speaking of with Swaraj.

Inside the South American and Caribbean peasant organizations, they have many agroecology schools, for example, the MST (Landless Workers' Movement) in Brazil. I think they all started after seeing what happened in Cuba. What we learned from Cuba is their use of a horizontal knowledge sharing system, which takes place between farmers to farmers. This is very important, because it fits inside our argument that farmers are not second-class citizens. We don't need to learn from the so-called agriculture scientists. Agriculture science itself only emerged after the Green Revolution. Before that, there were no agriculture universities. Most of the research which has been done inside the agriculture universities has not been really helpful to the farming community here and has not addressed the real crisis faced by the farming community. Otherwise, we wouldn't have faced so many farmer suicides here. The agriculture universities are funded by

giant corporations, and they are doing the research for them. Why would they do research for the peasantry here? That is why farmer to farmer knowledge sharing is so important. Just two days ago, we had a farmers' delegation from Sri Lanka, and the resource persons who came to train them were all farmers. We did not invite any scientist. Upholding the idea of the farmer himself or farmer herself as a scientist is something we have to do even more strongly.

***What is the importance for you at Amrita Bhoomi in being linked to the global La Via Campesina network? How do the different Via Campesina schools and learning centers interact, learn from one another and work together?***

In Via Campesina, there are different types of schools. One is the agroecology school, which teaches about agricultural practices. Inside Via Campesina, there are also many working collectives. So, there is a working collective on trade and transnational corporations, on biodiversity and seeds and agroecology, and on women's articulation, etc. The agroecology collective organizes international meetings of the agroecology schools. Right now, the collective is working on having a set of guiding principles and common curriculum for all the agroecology schools around the world, but this is still ongoing work. Otherwise, we all follow our own curriculums independently, or our own way of horizontal learning methodology. We also have exchange programs between the schools and between the movements and the organizations in different countries.

For example, I was telling you that a delegation of Sri Lankan farmers is here right now in Karnataka, and they are going around and visiting different farms and learning from different farmers. Similarly, we will be sending a delegation to any other country which is good at a package of practice. In a few months, we are expecting a delegation from South America to India. In two weeks, there is a continental women's political school happening in Thailand, where women activists from La Via Campesina member organizations from across Asia will be participating. So, there are these kinds of learning opportunities within the movement.

***At Amrita Bhoomi, you have spoken about the importance of intergenerational learning. How is this fostered at the Center and why is it so important?***

Intergenerational learning becomes very important because the whole idea of development has taught us just to see forward, and we have forgotten to see backwards. We don't care about our history. It is very important to see backwards and learn from our own history, because most of things are answered in history.

When you see Gandhi, for example, or Lohia in the movement, you don't have to look for different strategies or different ways of fighting, because many times you find you can find answers there. Non-cooperation itself can be such a strong and relevant way of struggle against transnational corporations. So, that's why intergenerational learning, in its broader sense, is important for us. But when it comes to farming technique or technology or the package of practice, as I was telling you before, the generation which was born after the Green Revolution has forgotten about or don't even know about how their own fathers or grandfathers farmed, and how they were not getting trapped inside indebtedness. This is something we have to consciously create by building this bridge between two generations. So, with our new Open Learning Academy, for example, we have a whole program just on intergenerational learning for the youngsters who are in the Academy.

***What is the Open Learning Academy at Amrita Bhoomi? What are its aims, and how does it work?***

**Ram Shree:** So, I am the facilitator of the Open Learning Academy. Before we started the Academy, I was teaching pre-university students in chemistry, my role was to help them get into better universities, so they get better opportunities. But over a period of six or seven years doing this, I realized that the youngsters, once they get into university, they become passive, disconnected from society, disconnected from political issues and disconnected from the soil itself. After coming into contact with Chukki and Luca at Amrita Bhoomi, we realized that there is more important, meaningful work we can do. So, a few years ago, we started this project, the Open Learning Academy. It's a one-year internship for youth from humble and rural backgrounds from different parts of Karnataka, and they live at the center. We ask them to first experience life at Amrita Bhoomi for a month, so they can see what kind of practices and people are here and then, if they like that, they can continue for a year.

The main idea is to make the youngsters more politically aware, awakened citizens, more sensitive to the social issues in our system, and understand how the economy functions, how we need to come out of the existing economic model, which is a growth-based model, in order to address these problems. The youngsters also adapt sustainable practices in their lifestyles. The Academy has its own schedule and program, but it is organically linked with other activities at the Center. They can see the kinds of practices we do here, the environment we create here, they have autonomy to learn and explore the different areas of the

Center, and they learn from their peers. There is discussion and farm work too. At the moment, we have fifteen youngsters on the Academy. Because they feel touched by this, they have a faith about Amrita Bhoomi, they feel they need to learn, and to experience this approach.

***In addition to the intergenerational learning and farmer to farmer learning approaches, Amrita Bhoomi also makes use of more traditional forms of pedagogy, including expert lectures to mass groups of learners. Why do you also use these forms? How effective are these forms of education?***

Yes, until recently, we used to have traditional forms of learning spaces, we used to organize workshops like this. Even today, we organize these kinds of workshops and sometimes it is required. Is it the right way of conducting seminars or workshops? It is not just a monologue. But the section of society that we deal with, these are all hard-working people in the fields, and many of them are still not very aware or educated or updated about the broader forces shaping our community. When we are talking to the farmers, sometimes we have to tell them what's actually going on. You have to have a way of feeding them the information or updating them before involving them in the discussion. Because if you just involve them and open the floor for discussion from the beginning, it is very difficult to get to a conclusion, because at the end of the day, you have to decide your actions. If you don't interpret your whole discussion into an action, then there's no point in having any discussion in a movement, right?

But when we deal with the young people in the Learning Academy, or when we have study camps or training programs, it is all participatory, it is always in a discussion mode. There is always somebody who is facilitating the discussion, who is giving information, but they are also trying to engage the participants of the camps and the training programs, to travel together in the discussion. So, there are both of these approaches that are applied. But yes, just recently, we have also been thinking about adopting more participatory approaches, like adopting theater, for example, into all of our learning processes at the Center.

***You have spoken very critically of the formal education sector. Are there possibilities for working effectively with and within formal schools and universities on the kinds of issues you are focused on—or is formal education a lost cause?***

**Ram Shree:** I think that most of the youngsters who enroll in the premier institutions, if you see them after graduation, what the university trains them to

do is to passively accept the capitalist model and just become a corporate slave. I feel that there is limited scope to do anything differently in these institutions. They do not give freedom to explore one's own individual situation or think about their presence in society. At Amrita Bhoomi, we seek to come out of that passiveness and actively engage the practical sense on an everyday basis, by engaging in producing food for our own consumption, and then cutting down our consumption level, and whatever resources we are accessing, taking responsibility for this. This is an education about how we are engaging with the society, soil, and our surroundings. In this kind of education, in the long run, one can learn one's role, what you can offer to society and what you can learn from society. That's what I feel is the difference between the Life School at Amrita Bhoomi and the premier institutions.

**Chukki Nanjundaswamy:** We do sometimes engage directly with the formal education system. Recently, the Open Learning Academy hosted a group of agriculture graduates for three weeks in Amrita Bhoomi. It was their internship program, and they basically learned about the whole perspective of agroecology, because whatever they learn in their own universities, it is all Green Revolution technology and basically dismantles the faith of doing farming without harming nature. But the students were saying at the end of the internship program that, in three weeks, we learned what we did not learn in three years at the university.

*One of the projects you worked on was putting together the Amrita Bhoomi Book of Illustration on Natural Farming as a way to teach children about the problems of industrial agriculture and the alternatives of agroecology. How did you put this together? What was the idea of using local symbols and folklore in this book? How is this book now being used with children, and how is it being linked to collective action projects with children?*

That started because we had two volunteer environmentalists, activists against climate change, working with us and both were artists. So, we discussed with them about using their art skills to create a small book for children. My son was a very small boy at that time, and he had a group of friends in the Center from the neighboring farms. All of the children have contributed to the book through their small drawings. One has drawn a sun, one has drawn a deer, one has drawn a tree, and so on. The story was actually written by them, and it's a beautiful story. It is written in Kannada, but we wanted to translate it into English. If you want, I can tell you the story.

It is a conversation between the white bird which follows the tractor—the cattle egret—and an earthworm. This bird always goes and eats the insects which are in the soil. One time it is eating an insect, and a very weak earthworm comes along. The egret asked the earthworm, why are you so weak? The worm says people are throwing fertilizer on me in the soil. I have nothing to eat in the soil; I am dying out of hunger. The worm asks the egret, my cousins are in the forest, can you please pass a message to them that I am sick here. So, the egret says, okay, fine, I will pass on your message to your cousins in the forest. The egret flies to the forest, and in the forest, it sees that there are so many cousins, and they're all very healthy and very happy. So, it comes back and tells the earthworm that, in the forest, your cousins are very healthy and very happy. The worm says, yes, that's because they don't use chemicals in the forest. Here they use lots of chemicals, and they are killing my family. There's nothing left here now, it's like a desert. Most of my family members have been killed and I am the only one who has survived.

Then the same bird, the egret, goes back to the forest and asks the worms there what can be done. The worms there talk about the four wheels of natural farming. One is seed treatment called Beejamrutham. In nature, a bird eats a fruit, and the seed comes out through its poop, that is seed treatment. Artificially, when you do farming, you have to do the same treatment through something called Beejamrutham, with cow dung and cow urine and limestone and so on. Then mulching the land is very important. Another one is Jeevamrutham, which is inoculant for the soil. It's a microbial culture, where you mix cow dung and urine and some brown sugar and some protein from legume powder and so on. These are all from the four principles which are being taught. Then the worms talk about how corporate agriculture is killing farming and the farmers, but if you do natural farming, the whole community is happy. The book is called the story of the soil.

We produced the book for several years and distributed it to many children, because there are many children who come from the government schools to Amrita Bhoomi to learn about natural farming. Now, we are also thinking of developing some programs for the urban kids. Because urban kids at the moment just go to the resorts and have fun, but instead they could come to us and learn for a couple of days.

***This children's book is written in the local language in Karnataka. You've also spoken about how you believe it is important to raise children in their mother***

***tongue and not just in Western, colonial languages. Can you talk about the importance of language in doing social justice education and organizing?***

Well, we are losing our seeds the way we are losing our traditional knowledge. We are also losing our mother tongues. We are losing our languages just because they are not colonial, just because they are not internationalized languages. But I speak a language which is fifteen hundred years old. Kannada is one of the oldest languages of the world and I admire it. I admire the richness of the vocabulary. I admire the connection of the vocabulary with its soil, with its roots. Every word has a very deep meaning. If we don't use it, if we stop using it, just because the colonial languages are useful to survive in international society, it's like a way of losing yourself. If you have grown up eating local food, then all of a sudden, just to switch over to eating sandwiches is not possible.

I felt that I couldn't speak to my son in English, for example, it was not enough for me to pass on my emotions. So, I kept my language with him, and my husband, Luca, kept Italian with him. My son has become bilingual, plus he speaks Hindi and English because of the wider society. Language is something which builds our personality.

***One of the central concerns of social justice education at the moment has focused on calls to decolonize education. Does the issue of decolonization have meaning or relevance for your work, and if so, how and why is it important?***

Decolonization has to happen every moment of your life. If you are colonized, first of all, it should start from your mind. I think our minds are being colonized, and we have been made to believe that speaking English is superior, and having a capitalist way of life is superior, and being white is superior. All these things have to be broken and have to be dismantled, and we have to start feeling proud of who we are now. We need to feel proud about being dark skinned, eating local food, coming from such an old civilization which has passed the test of time. At the same time, we have to be very careful about not building our own arrogance. We don't want to become another supremacist, and there is a very thin line in between here. That's why we have to have a global perspective, but one that is locally rooted.

***Much of radical education and organizing continues to be dominated by men. What is your experience doing this work as a woman? How is gender important? How do you promote feminist perspectives and women's agendas in the education you do at Amrita Bhoomi?***

Yes, inside the farming and agrarian movement, there aren't many women, especially at the leadership. I am here because I had the privilege of being born to one of the tall leaders of India. I was born into the movement, and I was brought up inside the movement, so I never had any question of doing any other kind of work, because I believe that the work I am doing now is the most important work. The way we address gender equality is first by insisting that we should get women inside the movement spaces and the leadership spaces. This has been our struggle inside.

When I started inside the movement, I was the only youth and woman, a young woman of 23 years old, and I had to deal with men in their fifties and sixties and from very patriarchal mindsets and backgrounds. They dealt with me because I was the daughter of their leader. But if I was just an ordinary young girl, perhaps they would have asked me to just shut up. Since I had that privilege, I have used that privilege to the best by insisting that they send their daughters and wives to the movement and to our meetings, which is a cultural shock for them. They say, but women are too busy at home. I said, yes fine, one day you can also cook.

So, slowly, changes are happening, and we are seeing more and more women coming into political spaces, mostly young women, which was not the case during my father's period. I remember once, on the stage here, there were ninety-nine men and one woman representing the whole women's sector. We said, sorry, we are not a sector. They started saying there's a state president who is a man, and there is a woman who is the president for the women's wing. I said, okay, we are the president for the women's wing, then you are the president for the men's wing, not more than this.

***You mention being born into the movement and your father, of course, was the founder of the farmers' movement in Karnataka, the KRRS. Can you talk about how your family background has shaped your approach to education and organizing work?***

My family means the movement. We didn't have much personal space where we discussed personal issues, family life was dominated by the discussions of the movement, whatever was happening inside the organization or at meetings. It was filled with political discussion. My father was against the caste system. He happened to be born into one of the so-called upper castes, but he refused to identify himself as part of that caste. He always said that he was a member of the casteless society. He married my mother, and my mother was a non-vegetarian.

She ate chicken and fish and so on. My father was a vegetarian, but he wanted to break the whole idea of vegetarianism, so we ate some meat once in a while at home.

The principles and the values that my father believed in were practiced at home. That is why it came to us, because it was practiced in day-to-day life, how resources had to be respected, how you should not be wasting resources, how to reuse your resources, or how to be, for example, non-religious but just be helpful and be there for needy people and so on. Since the family atmosphere was like that, for me, the other society, mainstream society, was always something I had to learn about. I still don't know about many religious practices, for example. I have observed people, but we never practiced religion at home, we never worshipped any god or goddesses.

***Luca, is there anything that you want to add to what Chukki and Ram have been talking about here?***

**Luca Montanari:** Yes, briefly, I have a couple of thoughts from listening to this interesting conversation. One thing is that the founder of the KRRS, Mahantha Devaru Nanjundaswamy, the father of Chukki, was a professor, and is known as Professor Nanjundaswamy. He was a university professor, so has always been an educator, he has always been a teaching person, and he converted this attitude of explaining things and sharing knowledge into political action. That is why, for the KRRS, education has always been so important, because its founder was an educator, and he was educating the masses and the members of the organization. He was also educating the media. Senior journalists now remember that the press conferences of the professor were like learning spaces for them. Or sometimes, he was organizing explanations about policies as a training for politicians. Politicians, too, they remember now that this law was explained so well by the professor. So, this educative character of the movement was very strong because of this reason.

Another thing I want to say is that the struggle for the Professor and the movement from the beginning was to educate people to embrace a different idea of themselves, so they had to understand that they were not to be underrated. When they were meeting a politician, they had the right to sit on a chair. They didn't have to stand in front of the bureaucrat sitting on a chair. This self-esteem was an education process. I think this is the challenge we are still facing today, but something has changed. In some ways, it has gotten worse. Because in the 1980s, farmers were facing social discrimination, but economically, they were

maybe better than now. Since those years, poverty has increased everywhere, including in the rural sector.

But at the same time, the economic system and the political system that has impoverished people and is pushing them out of agriculture and into the cities, it is not working anymore, it is in crisis. So, the propaganda is also facing problems. For example, in the year of the pandemics, the system collapsed because of Covid. At that point, it was clear the importance of agriculture, agriculture is the primary sector, it is the root of everything. While everything else stopped, agriculture was allowed to continue, farmers still went to work in the fields because it was needed. Or, with the war in Ukraine with Russia, it stopped the international trade of food. Ukraine is the granary of half the nations in Africa, many countries were shaken by this crisis, millions of people were without bread, without wheat, without basic food. In international trade, it was assumed it is always possible to find something outside your country: don't worry, just apply the market system and everything will go well. This is a clear example that this doesn't work all the time, it is not continuously assured.

When the crisis is so systemic, when there are so many basic needs going unmet, this cannot just be covered up with some propaganda. So, I think that in this struggle to educate the people, and especially the rural people, to self-awareness of their importance, and to build a sense of pride in being a farmer or being a peasant, there are examples which are very handy and very easy to use, that everybody can understand. Because it is the experience of everybody, and they are very apparent. We have the tools to fight the propaganda because the system is more and more going into crisis. We need to be able to capture the evidence of this crisis and use it to build this self-awareness among the rural people.



## Translating Feminist Theory to Everyday Experience

Sibila Sotomayor Van Rysseghem and Daffne Valdés Vargas

*Colectivo LASTESIS, Valparaíso, Chile*

*Colectivo LASTESIS is an “interdisciplinary and feminist collective from Valparaíso, Chile” formed in 2018 by Sibila Sotomayor Van Rysseghem, Daffne Valdés Vargas, and others to spread “feminist theses and demands through performance and video performance, combining performing, sound, graphic and visual arts with history, philosophy and social sciences” (LASTESIS 2024). In 2019, in the context of an eruption of mass social protest across Chile, a performance by LASTESIS called A Rapist in Your Path, that addressed the problem of rape culture, state violence, and sexual violence against protestors, went viral, not just in Chile but globally. From an initial performance on the streets of Valparaíso, A Rapist in Your Path went on to be performed in over 400 locations in more than fifty countries around the world; performance videos were also widely shared on social media (Liinason 2024). This success helped to give LASTESIS an international platform: in 2020, LASTESIS was named in Time’s annual 100 most influential people of the year list. In addition to their performances, LASTESIS run workshops, give public lectures and media interviews, and write books and other texts on feminist theory, feminist demands, and methods of using performance to disseminate these widely.*

*At the heart of LASTESIS’ work is a concern with the challenge of feminist pedagogy: in particular, how to make feminist theory, analysis, and demands accessible and compelling to those who might not otherwise encounter or engage with them. LASTESIS draw less on the traditions of feminist popular education that are widespread in Latin America, and more on models of feminist public pedagogy, understood as those “grassroots and collective educative processes” that “women and their allies have taken up in the public sphere,” using “visual and interactive installations, dance, drama, protest, demonstrations, dialogues, and other forms of*

*face-to-face or mediated exchange” that seek out “public engagement and response” in pursuit of “a project of justice and social transformation” (Dentith, O’Malley and Brady 2014, p. 27; see also Sandlin, O’Malley and Burdick 2011). Feminist praxis shapes not just the content of LASTESIS’ work, but the way they organize themselves as a collective, as well as their methods of production and performance. LASTESIS are responding directly to both a general concern and personal experience of formal educational failure. While feminist theory and analysis are essential to making sense of and acting on the world, LASTESIS argues it has too often become isolated and inaccessible, framed as being narrowly academic; and even within the university, limited primarily to women’s and gender studies programs.*

*LASTESIS was incubated by mass social movement activity in twenty-first-century Chile. The collective came out of the 2018 Chilean feminist wave of protests, and their work gained widespread attention during the Chilean social uprisings of 2019. In this, the example of LASTESIS highlights the ways in which radical education has vital and organic connections with wider social and political environments. The performances of LASTESIS and others were key components of Chilean feminist and social movement action and demands; at the same time, they were framed and nourished by these broader movement contexts (Ashley 2022; Gonzalez 2021). These performances can thus be seen as a form of what is now often called social movement learning (Niesz et al. 2018). In their conversation, Sotomayor and Valdés are keenly aware of the importance of the opening and closing of political windows of opportunity for the work they do, echoing comments made by others in this book, such as Dimitry Vilensky and Julian Boal.*

*In contrast to other approaches to radical education that focus on educating and mobilizing distinct local communities, the public pedagogy of LASTESIS aims to engage wider audiences by working in a variety of public spaces. The street becomes central here. Form also shifts, as performances need to be short, concise, and compelling in order to attract attention and elicit responses from passers-by; education also needs to be open-ended, as much depends on what public audiences choose to do with LASTESIS performances they witness in transit. In their book, *Set Fear on Fire*, LASTESIS (2023, pp. 27–8) argue for “the transformative power of art and performance” and “academic feminism taken to the streets.” “No one will ever be able to absorb all the information in the world before they die,” LASTESIS write: “What we need is to do something with the information available to us now, to stimulate other minds and unleash an unstoppable domino effect” (p. 28). Public street performances are also more directly part of a feminist political project of reclaiming streets and public spaces that all too often have been made dangerous, uncomfortable, and unwelcoming for women.*

LASTESIS describe their approach as a collage methodology, which seeks to make complex theories accessible and memorable through translating these into a range of different media and engaging with the full range of different senses, using artistic design, theatre, dance, video, spoken word, and poetry. A key principle here is of repetition: repetition in seeking to represent the same idea across different media all at the same time; but repetition as well in creating performances that are simple for non-professionals to learn and repeat in any kind of public space, in order to create movement slogans, chants, symbols and statements that can be echoed across space, time and populations. Though LASTESIS address serious and difficult issues of rape and violence against women, as well as the complicity of states and broader social structures in perpetuating such violence, they are committed to an ethos of joy, pleasure, and playfulness. This is born of an argument for not revictimizing the victims of sexual violence through their performances, an insistence on the right to joy and play and creativity for all, as well as a recognition of the importance of such elements for engaging and pulling in participants and audiences. LASTESIS' approach finds broader echoes across many different strands of radical education. The goal of Highlander Folk School, for example, was "first to enliven and then to enlighten," and the school made use of group singing, as this "was believed to bring people out of the 'silences of their individuality,'" for "if people can sing with total strangers, they can move more easily into shared social causes, united and working side by side" (Williams and Mullett 2016, p. 106).

Finally, the work of LASTESIS highlights some of the tensions in the relationship between formal and nonformal education. Sotomayor and Valdés are academics who teach at the Universidad de Valparaíso; yet they maintain a strict division between the two worlds of education they inhabit, as they observe how their feminist and activist work with LASTESIS remains, at best, not fully welcomed on the campus where they are formally employed. The genesis of the LASTESIS collective was a response to concerns about the limitations of formal education as a site for supporting feminist theory and action. At the same time, these two spheres clearly influence one another through the work of LASTESIS, Sotomayor and Valdés: the feminist theory that LASTESIS seeks to translate through performance into everyday experience tends largely to be created within the academic sphere; while LASTESIS practices and principles similarly seep back into the classroom spaces that Sotomayor and Valdés work to construct in their academic day jobs at the Universidad de Valparaíso.

In this conversation, Daffne Valdés spoke in Spanish, with Sibila Sotomayor translating. All comments in the text are spoken by Sotomayor, but in the collective

*spirit of LASTESIS, the content combines the contributions of both Sotomayor and Valdés together.*

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***Let's start by talking about Colectivo LASTESIS. What led you to make the decision to form the collective, and how did you decide on the central aims and approach that you wanted to take?***

We started with this project in 2018. The year before, we were already thinking about how can we create feminist performances based in feminist theories. We were very interested in these ideas, and at that moment, it wasn't something that you could read in schools or in universities. It was something that only if you are very interested in feminist theory, you're going to find it and read it. It's still like this until this day, it has changed a little bit, now you can see in some universities, in some courses you can talk about this stuff. But in that time for us, in our experience here in Chile, it was something that was completely outside of institutional educational spaces. It was something that was very much on the ground, in the margins, moving around.

So, we were interested in trying to take these ideas and translate them into performances, so we can spread them to other people who are maybe not going to be interested in going to read the book. We realized that it's not so many people who are interested in these ideas. But for us, why these ideas are important, it's because it is a way to understand and see the world differently, to relate to each other differently, and it's a tool to fight against violence, gender violence, but also all types of violence. For us, it was very clear, we need this. Since we are performing artists, what made sense for us was to take these ideas and translate them into performances, into different languages of sound, music, visuals, everything. So that people can take even one little thing, and then this is going to stay with them, and it's going to make them reflect about it.

There is a very pedagogical part of our work, but also a very artistic part of the work, because we are also artists and creators. The two of us studied theatre together, we were raised in theatre, we are trained actors. In our collective, we invite in other people as well. So, we invited two people from fashion design and design history, more related to visual arts, so we can collaborate. For us, a key question is how can we find this relationship between something that is very direct, so these ideas are very clear, but also how can we expand it into metaphors, into poetry, into other things? We started with that aim in the beginning of 2018, as a collective, and it is still our aim until this day. Maybe the

only thing that has changed is the increased visibility of our work. Everything is connected, this aim that combines the idea of spreading ideas and spreading demands, feminist demands, but also to be affected by the artistic part of the work.

***You often talk about the feminist theorists, such as Silvia Federici and Rita Segato, who influence your work. But were there models and inspirations for your work as a collective, for the kinds of activist art and performance that you seek to do? Were there other groups or individuals who you learn from or draw upon?***

Yes, we have influences from many different places. One is a theatre director from Chile, Manuela Infante, even if what she does is super different from what we do, it is still an imprint for us. We get a lot of inspiration from spoken word performance and from music, people like Laurie Anderson. We are not musicians, but from music we take this idea of kind of being like a band that performs. We were inspired by a band from Spain that doesn't exist anymore called Las Bistecs. In Chile, the history of spoken word performance is strongly related with feminist movements and also with queer movements. We learn from the political aspect of music, but also sometimes it is the style, the way that they do it, or the question that they ask themselves about theatre, about music, like all the possibilities that these languages can bring us.

***While your performance pieces are often brief and have a feeling about them of immediacy and spontaneity, you have said that behind them is an extended and careful process of research and development—how does this work? How do you decide on the topic and approach for each piece you create?***

Our approach is something we call collage methodology. That generally starts from the theory or thesis of someone we have read. We articulate it or combine it with a political demand made in the context of something that is happening right now. The first thing we do is that we study that theory, and we try to make a synthesis of it. We translate it into the different languages that we may use for this piece, that can be body, sound, visuals. Also, many times for some pieces, there's also this moment of collaborative work, like how we share it with other people, and we create something collaboratively.

The structure is not linear but it's like a collage. So, we take one piece, another one, we put it here, here, here, we make a collage. We glue it together with music, because for us, in almost everything that we do, we create a song, and this song is

always the mega-synthesis of the synthesis. Music is a way to transmit the theory, like a big resumé, because it's more catchy, you know.

***You have spoken about how choreography is a central part of your approach, working with and experiencing through our individual bodies and as a collective body. How and why is this kind of body work so important for the kind of learning, activism, and transformation you are seeking to foster?***

First, since we are performing artists and trained as actors, we work with our bodies, the base of everything we do is our body, because of our profession. So, for us, it always made a lot of sense that even if we're going to combine these different languages, even if we're going to try to do this interdisciplinary performance that translates this idea, in the end, the base of it is our own bodies. Because performance, by definition, is actions through the body. This idea of the body is also very important because it's connected to talking about feminist theory in a feminist way. We developed our collage methodology because we were trying to find a feminist methodology, where with everything that you're seeing, there's not a hierarchy between one thing or another. People are going to choose what they're going to take with them or give more importance to. But for us, there's not a hierarchy, because hierarchies are patriarchal. The idea instead is to think about making a rhizome, where the bodies are the base of every little thing that is moving around.

Also, this is a way to reclaim our own bodies that are actually the subjects of the violences that we are denouncing. It's the idea that your body, since you were born, has been carrying all these violences that go through you, and then they stay with you, like it's inscribing your body with violence. So, how can we create the other possibility of saying that our body is also our first tool of resistance. It is our first territory of oppression, but it's also our first tool of resistance and fighting.

For us, it's very important to understand the body not only as an individual body, but also a collective body. I take my body and put it in the service for the collective, even if I am not forgetting or leaving behind my own violence or my own experiences. Because when you're trying to denounce violence, when you're trying to do activism through the arts and through your body, the experience of one is the experience of all of us. The idea, then, is how we can create through performance a collective body. To do this, it is not necessary to be a trained actor or dancer, everyone can do it. That's why, when we make these open calls to create something together and perform, everyone can come. It is for women and

queer people, just come and that's enough, we don't need more tools than that. We already have our bodies, and we will work with what we have.

***You also describe trying to engage with feminist ideas through multiple forms and senses, as text, dramaturgy, sound, textile. You talk of giving ideas body and rhythm and color and sound. How does this work, to translate theory into these different senses and media, and why is this so important to do?***

A lot of our work is based on repetition. Like, what are you going to hear? It's kind of saying the same thing that you're watching. Through repetition, everything is telling you one idea, one synthesis. So that it is very clear, that's the way that we try to engage with the theory. Because we think that not everyone can relate with the words, for example, I can hear you say something, but it doesn't connect. But maybe if the beat has a certain quality that makes me feel something, that is trying to take me to that place, then maybe I'm going to arrive to that place, even if with the word, I didn't really connect. That is our aim. It can work, and sometimes it cannot work.

***In developing your performances, you focus on creating choreography and text that are easy to learn and reproduce, so that others can quickly perform these themselves. This might be contrasted from an alternative approach of teaching a general approach—for example, like we might find in popular education or Theatre of the Oppressed—where people learn a set of methods or techniques but put in their own words and texts. What is the reason for seeking to have wide reproduction of the same, repeated words and movements as a form of political learning and activism? Is this like the power of chants or slogans that unify a movement?***

We actually do both of these approaches. So, we run a lot of workshops, all the time, where we share our work methodology and people create something with this methodology. It depends on what we are doing. Because with some of our performances, it's like come and you learn it, or you learn it at home and then you come and do it. The idea is that we're going to create collectiveness very fast, because it's something related to time. It's not the same as when we go and create something together, that's going to take more time. But if we can just say, let's meet at this point and we'll do this performance, people just learn the stuff and do it. It's responding to different goals and different contexts. But we like sharing our methodology, and people will create something with it. In our workshops, for example, we talk about choreography itself, and then we create collaborative

choreographies during the workshop, we do it together, everyone is going to propose a movement and then we're going to combine them together. So, it's not really that we have chosen one way, rather we do both, and it depends on the context and what we need.

***You have spoken of your performances as being centrally about reclaiming public spaces and the streets. In some cases, your work has deliberately sought to barricade the streets, even if temporarily. Why does this matter, and how is the public space element of this work so important? How does this create a particular form of public or civic education?***

Our aim is to spread ideas in as many places as possible and with as many people as we can. So, public spaces are probably where it is easier to address more people, because it will include people who are not necessarily going to go see a performance in a theatre venue. It's like you're just going to be passing by. We use all the places and spaces that we can. Sometimes, it is also in theatre venues, it's not only in the streets. We perform in places that are not usually thought of as performance venues, like a techno party or a market or a university campus. Then you get to be with people who sometimes, maybe some of them has some prior notion about these ideas and these demands, but also other people, that this is the first time that they are hearing something like this. That's the same reason why public digital space is also a space that for us is very important to spread our ideas, through videos of our performances.

The idea of a broader public space is also something that for us is very important to understand. Because, in the end, we know that it's not really public, like the street is not really public. It actually has privatized rules, because depending on who you are or how you look, there are dangers that you can suffer in this public space, like what times you can be there or no. Performance is a way to reclaim this space, that we have always been told is a public space, when in practice, it very often is not a public space.

***You have also emphasized the importance of having fun, being playful, enjoying the performances you do, despite the difficult subjects and serious political claims. What is the role that these things—play, fun, joy—play in political education and action and why are they so important?***

For us, it's a way of saying that if we are going to address violence, we don't need to represent or re-enact violence. There is no need to expose ourselves to being re-victimized by issues, because it is difficult talking about violence, for example,

with *A Rapist in Your Path*, talking about sexual violence. It's complicated, it's very triggering. For all of us, not only for people that are seeing this, but also for people like us who are performing, the idea is to reclaim a joyful way of addressing these horrible issues that affect us in our everyday life. Because we always say we have the right also to enjoy ourselves, we have the right to create a little bit of a party ambience together, like we are singing together, we are dancing together. The idea is that, collectively, we are addressing this issue, and we can enjoy ourselves while we are doing it.

But it's not because it's joyful that it's going to be superficial. It's still trying to address a very difficult subject. Sometimes people have spoken about our work like it's a very light thing, you know, you and your little choreographies and your little dances, you little girls. And it's like, no no no. What we are doing is combining a joyful way to address a complicated and profound matter. What we are saying is that we also think that sometimes through language, it can be violent too. Some people put us in this category of pacifist intervention. But for us, this is not a pacifist intervention. It's not binary, either you are burning something or you're dancing. For us, we are making fire with our bodies, we are doing both things together.

Is this effective? It depends. Sometimes, people that maybe are not used to this idea of protesting on the street, they suddenly see this, and it becomes a possibility for protesting. This is what happened with *A Rapist in Your Path*. In Chile, after we did the performance, a group of middle-aged women in their forties up organized themselves and performed *A Rapist in Your Path* in a public space. A lot of people have told us, I went with mum, I went with my grandmother. You know, people that are not usually on the street protesting, through this, found a way to go to the street again. In that sense, we think this can be effective. But in other sense, probably no, because sometimes this is seen as being more superficial.

***You are explicitly interested in developing activist forms of art for social change. Your performances themselves are deliberately brief, often only fifteen minutes long. How do these brief moments link up with broader, longer term social change? What is the importance of engaging with wider social movements for art to be able to lead to real change in the world?***

You have to choose your fights, your battles. And the battle that we chose is like spreading propaganda. We think of what we do as making a flyer, a pamphlet, a three-dimensional pamphlet with body and sound and so on. That's why it needs

to be brief and concrete, it needs to send a direct message that needs to be easy to understand and easy to remember. Of course, to really achieve social change, we need more steps to go forward. Social change is based on the battles of many, many people taking all these steps that we need for social change. For us, we are there in the flyer, in the pamphlet, maybe a first step or second step, you know, at the beginning of the steps.

We always say that what we do is a call for action. It gives you a little push, and then you will see, what are you going to do with it? Maybe you will do nothing. Maybe you will do something. Maybe you're going to go and talk about it with a friend, and that's already something. We really believe in micro-political strategies for social change. It's weird for us being put in a position of you're representing a movement, you're a leader of a feminist movement. That's not very feminist. We can really relate with something that Rita Segato said, which is that as feminists, we don't want power. We don't want institutional power. It's not a place that we want to be to change things, our strategy is completely different. We believe that people need to make decision themselves; to have a choice, it's not about us putting this onto them.

***During the period you have been working in Chile, there have been wild swings in the sense of possibility of real, fundamental change happening, with the work on developing a new constitution and so on. How important are these broader political windows of opportunity that open up and shut down for the kind of activist art that you seek to do?***

Yes, if the big social and political uprising that we lived through in Chile in 2019 didn't happen, our work and also our lives would be totally different. Our work probably would never have spread and gone viral in the way it did. Because we never intended for it to happen in this way. We are not from the capital of our country; we live in Valparaíso. We didn't work in mainstream theatre festival venues, we were in the underground scene, it was a very local thing. When we did this performance, it was with the same aim and the same goal, to interrupt the public space for the people who are passing by and that's all. That's when it was going to end.

So, of course, it is all connected, especially for activism. One year before, in 2018, Chile also had a big feminist uprising. We came from this feminist uprising. Then we had the social political uprising in 2019, so as you say, it was a window, it seemed like a really big window, and of course, it affected our work, and not only us, but all the feminist and activist artists and organizations that

are trained on how to do thing and translate art into a broader political agenda and changes in the laws.

Right now, we are living in quite the opposite situation. The window is closed, super closed, and then they put cement on it so you can't open it again. Maybe we will open it in like thirty years from now. But we are in a moment that is completely different from the time when we started as a collective. But we, and all the feminist movements, organizations, artists and so on, are still working, and still doing stuff like we have always done. In the end, it doesn't matter if the window is closed, we are still going to be there, resistant and existing. It's not like we are bye bye; it's just that maybe we're more invisible now. But that is the story of feminist movements, of micro-politics.

***One of your best-known performance pieces, at least in the Global North, is A Rapist in Your Path (Un Violador en tu Camino), that has been performed all over the world since you first launched it in 2019. Can you talk about both how that particular piece came together, and what are some of its most important impacts and consequences?***

In 2019, we had been working on this performance about sexual violence, all year long, and then in October, that's the moment when this big social, political uprising happened. In that moment, it is like life stops. Everything that we used to do ended in Chile, and we went to the streets to protest. In the context of protest, there were many denouncements made about political sexual violence, and that's when we decided to take the piece we'd been working on all year and make an open call so that other people can come and do the performance with us. The song was already addressing the issue of sexual violence as a systemic, not an individual issue. But this performance, in particular, we wanted to focus on sexual political violence. That's when we also mixed it up a little bit, adding, for example, a part of the anthem of the police in our country as a parody.

We decided to do the performance on the streets in our city, in three different places in the city where a lot of people pass by, as a denouncement against this type of violence, the sexual political violence committed by the police and others. In the context of the wider protests, all of us were thinking about how society works, for example, the constitution, the laws of the country. Many of us who were participating in the struggles had the feeling that feminist issues were being put to the side. We do think that because of this performance, not only this performance, but others as well, and in particular, the viralization of this performance, how the media started talking about this performance and it

spread on the internet, it was one little way to try to make the feminist issues connected to all of the other social issues and not something separate.

***In addition to performances, you run workshops, sometimes over several days. How are these done? Is the focus on learning feminist theory or how to do art activism or some combination? Is there a link in these workshops to direct public performance and political claims making?***

Our workshops focus on feminist ideas, but also feminist ways to address social demands. For us, spreading our methodology, the collage methodology, is very important because it is like giving you some tools, a little box of tools that maybe you can use, or maybe not, or maybe they can inspire you to create your own methodology, or think about another way to address something. Some of these workshops can last a few days, but sometimes it is just a two-hour workshop, we do it super-fast, going a bit through writing exercises, visual exercises, body exercises, it is amazing what you can create even in just two hours. You don't need much.

Sometimes people are scared to create something, it's this idea that only artists can do this. For us, it's like no no, this is a tool that all of us can do. The essence of this is very do it yourself. Like, for example, for us, it was this way with music. We're not musicians, but we could see, from the beginning of our work, that our performance needed a bit of rhythm, so we learned how to do it because we needed it. It doesn't have to be technically perfect. Since we are both professors, for many years now we have taught in our university here, it's like we have this other part of us that is about being educators. When we do these workshops, we mix these two parts of us, the activists and artists, but also the educators.

***You also regularly do academic and media interviews and conversations like this one, and in 2021, you wrote and published your book, Set Fear on Fire. What is the role and importance of these kind of speaking and writing engagements for the education and activism that you are seeking to do with your work?***

Yes, we like writing books but also doing a lot of public lectures and talks, as a way to spread these feminist ideas and artistic possibilities. It really connects with what we do, it's just another way to do it. We have done other books; we made an anthology and wrote another book that is not translated into English. In Spanish, it is called *Polifonías Feministas*. We take our collage methodology

and translate it into writing a book or making a video. There is such urgency to address these matters in every place. A lot of people ask us, but why are you going to publish a book with this big publishing house? Why don't you do it independently? For us, it was like, yes, of course, we could publish independently. But if our aim is to spread these ideas, and this publishing house is telling us we want to publish your book, we will do it, we don't care. It's not about the money; it is about the spreading of ideas. Every platform that we have been given, we take it. We always say, if people invite us to a place, we're going to go, because we need to be in as many places as we can. Many times, we have also invited ourselves to many places as well!

***You have spoken about some of the problems and contradictions but also importance of translating your work and struggle into English and also navigating the relationships between the Global North and South. How do you see the importance and challenges in terms of political education and activism through engaging with audiences in the Global North and using English in some of your work?***

When we have been in the Global North, we have learned that the way people there address issues like violence, and the way they understand it too, is often very different from the way that we see it and understand it and fight against it here in the Global South. We have this feeling that in the Global North, there is a lot of struggle regarding naming things, like naming violence as it is. We have also seen that, many times, the people that mobilize to address the problem of violence in the Global North, are actually migrants. They are not people who are from those places.

Of course, our culture, our education, our way of thinking is very influenced by the culture of the Global North, Western culture. But we think that the Global North also needs to be influenced by and learn about the ways that here in the Global South we address these issues. Here in Chile, in particular, there's a lot of influence from the United States. We were a colony of Spain, but culturally, we're still very colonized by the United States.

In Chile and Latin America, for many years, there's been this idea that feminism as a concept came from the Global North. As a practice, it was always here in the Global South. Feminism is not only theories, it is practices, it is ways of doing, and these feminist practices have been here since before colonization. So, the idea is to reclaim this, we talk a lot about decolonial feminism. People

say feminism is an imperialist influence, but we say, no no no. This is something we've been doing here for centuries; these are our practices too. As a collective, what we try to do is combine the work of Judith Butler, for example, and connect it with something that Ochy Curiel, a Dominican feminist, is saying, and with what Rita Segato is saying, and how this can be connected with our own experiences, what we embody here in Chile. Because, in the end, feminism works as a collaborative network, there are feminisms everywhere, even if some things are not called feminism.

***One of our interests in this book is the relationship between formal education and nonformal and informal places and ways of learning. You have said that you didn't access feminist theory in schools but had to seek it out yourselves—is this still the situation in Chile? Where did this learning begin for you—through family, friends, movements?***

It was only our shared interest that led us to reading feminist texts, along with influence from family and friends to go and start reading this. I remember that we started as a collective based on a book by Silvia Federici called *Caliban and the Witch*. It was a book that we both had, but it wasn't the original book, it was a photocopied text that we bought in an independent market. That's pretty much how a lot of people got into reading feminism. Now there are more PDFs and information online that are free to access, which is good, but it's the same way basically as how we started reading this work.

In 2017, when we started, you didn't access feminist texts in most university courses. I'm not talking about gender studies, of course, in programs of gender studies, you are going to read feminist works. I'm talking about programs that have nothing to do with gender studies. Like where we work, it's a theatre school, and how can we take feminist points of view regarding what we are doing, our artistic practice or performance. I think we are still learning and reading feminist theory in the same way, based on our own interests. It is changing a bit now, I think people can read feminist works now in university courses that are not about gender studies, you usually have at least one author like this on the syllabus. But in our time as students, we were only reading white European men. Public libraries, too, now have more feminist books that have been published recently, but that is also something new.

***At the same time, there is this sense that feminism is academic and inaccessible to many, and even that people come to see feminism as being for academics not for everyone. How are we to understand how this has happened?***

Yes, now there is this idea about feminism, but it's important to remember that when people started addressing these issues in universities, they were making a revolution. When Donna Haraway started talking about these ideas in science and biology, that was a revolutionary way of thinking, it was about transforming these academic spaces that have always been patriarchal and colonial spaces. We work in universities, but we know that universities have their base in patriarchal and colonial structures. So, it's kind of a way to glitch it, to try to do things another way even when we know the structure is always going to be the same. Maybe now we have this idea that it's so academic, but actually, in the beginning, it was a revolution, it was a way of putting something different in a very masculine and white place.

For us, it is very clear that feminism is not just an academic concern, even if that has been an important point of origin for feminist theories. Generally, people address these issues and develop theories about it because there is an urgency to name things. Feminist theory is a way to name things, that's all, feminist theory doesn't come from somewhere else. No, it comes from our own embodied experiences. When people spread this idea that feminism is not for everyone, it's only for academics, this is a way to domesticate feminism. It's not going to be so dangerous if I put it in this little box. Feminism doesn't belong just to academia; it is embedded in practices everywhere that have been around for centuries. Feminist theory is just a way to name these practices and experiences.

***Are there possibilities and challenges of working with and in schools and universities on radical and feminist education projects for change? Is this something that you are seeking to do, and if so, how? Or do you keep the political activist work you do with LASTESIS separate from jobs you have in the university?***

Sadly, no. We don't have much space to do this work at the university. It's funny, because a lot of people ask us this, and they say you should be so happy you are working in universities. But they kind of hate us there because we are feminists. In the end, even if it's people working in theatre or the arts, these are still patriarchal spaces, and they don't like people coming in and disrupting the way that people do things. We do have strategies of doing this inside our own classrooms in a more subtle way, so bringing LASTESIS into the classroom is about bringing in another way of relating to one another. Like trying to make the classroom a safe space, and not this space where people are scared of the teacher and the professor. Because that is something that is still happening to

this day, everywhere, and we think that is not good. The classroom should be a place to spread and discuss knowledge, or to share experiences, it should not be a place for violence. So, for us, there is an activist part of being in a classroom in a university, for sure, and trying to bring in a feminist point of view. It is not only about bringing in feminist texts and theories, but also feminist ways of doing education.

***You have spoken about the importance not just of learning but unlearning—and specifically, unlearning the effects and inheritances of patriarchal structure and society on our bodies, habits, thinking, lives. Can you talk about what you mean by this, and how we need to go about this practice of unlearning?***

It is difficult to address this issue, but probably the easiest way to understand is to recognize that the structure, how we structure things in artistic pieces, or how we understand things, because we learn these in a specific way, is a patriarchal way. Like creating narratives that are linear, for example. For us, it has been a lot about unlearning the way that we have learned to do and create stuff and try to create it in another way that is not hierarchical, not vertical.

The fact of working in a collaborative way with people that are not trained artists or actors or dancers is also a strategy of unlearning the way to do these things. People assume that only trained artists can do this. But we say no, and that's a way to unlearn, for example. Also, the way that we relate to each other, the way we live in society, spreading these ideas is about spreading a different point of view that gives you a change to live and experience life in another way. For us, it is about a feminist eye and feminist experience and that means unlearning, because we all grow up with this patriarchal and colonial and neoliberal foundation that is inside every one of us. It is very much a work in our everyday life to unlearn things, as well as in our creative work and our activist work.

***You position your work as being about art and activism and dissemination of feminist theory. Do you also think of this as a form of radical education or education for social change? Are there educational thinkers or practitioners or models that influence your approach?***

We see what we do as a way of education, there is a strong pedagogical aspect of our work. But we are not so connected to the concept of radical education, it is probably just because we are ignorant that we don't use the concept! We do know that many things we do have common points with what Augusto Boal does with Theatre of the Oppressed, for example, and other practitioners. We

know that we haven't invented anything, it's just that we don't ourselves call it radical education.

***Finally, what are your future plans and aims for the LASTESIS collective? Are you hoping to continue the kinds of work and education you have been doing and are there things you are hoping to rethink and change and do differently?***

Right now we have a project that we premiered last year, and we are touring with, that is called *Canciones para Cocinar*, or *Songs for Cooking*. It's like a band thing, but also about spreading and addressing as many feminist issues and theories that today we want to talk about. We go song by song, but these songs are sometimes a song and sometimes more like a poem, like spoken word. That's one project. The other one is a new project that we are just starting now, it's called *Acción Nebulosa: Antifascist Performative Research Laboratory*. It's about creating performative research on antifascist ways to address the rise of fascism everywhere. We are calling this a laboratory, which means it works as a workshop run by a small group of five people who are already addressing these issues and are concerned about fascism and its threat to groups with specific identities. We have just launched a pilot version from this laboratory, it's only with one performer named Organa Feminazi, she's a trans activist performer from Valparaíso, our city, who addresses these issues in her own work, and so now we are working together. It's collaborative methodology, collaborative work, it is still about feminist issues, but we have added the adjective of antifascist because it is so urgent now to work on this.



## Learning to Leave, Leaving to Learn

Kelly Teamey

*Ecoversities Alliance, Hawaii, USA*

*Kelly Teamey is a co-founder of the Ecoversities Alliance, which was created in 2015 and has since become one of the most prominent global networks of alternative, radical education, bringing together 260 member organizations from over forty-seven countries in Latin America, North America, Europe, Asia, Africa, and the Pacific region (Mandel, Teamey, and Amaro 2024). The Alliance describes itself as “a community of learning practitioners from around the world committed to re-imagining higher education to cultivate human and ecological flourishing in response to the critical challenges of our times” (Ecoversities 2018); and it sponsors regular international and regional gatherings, “residency exchanges and learning journeys, publication outputs, and collaborative projects” (Mandel, Teamey and Amaro 2024, p. 64). The global challenges or crises that the Ecoversities Alliance seeks to tackle include “hatred, violence, monoculture, extractivism, overconsumption, and exploitation,” as well as “various colonial, post-colonial and/or neo-liberal forms of oppression” (Mandel, Amaro and Teamey 2021, pp. 1, 4).*

*The Ecoversities Alliance was born out of the Enlivened Learning research tour that Teamey and her partner Udi Mandel undertook in 2012. For a year, the two embarked on a journey across the globe to “(re/un)learn” from what they called a “silent revolution,” through which “social and ecological movements and indigenous communities” were developing alternative and radical approaches to higher education that sought to tackle the crises of our time (Parr 2013). Since co-founding the Ecoversities Alliance, Teamey taught for a period at the School for International Training (SIT) in Vermont, before relocating to Hawaii, where she helped to set up the Enlivened Cooperative, a worker-owned, eco-social learning organization. Teamey is originally from rural southern Oregon, where she grew*

*up before leaving for university, eventually completing a PhD at King's College London, and working as an academic at the University of Bath in the UK.*

*One of the most striking themes in Teamey's conversation, as well as her broader life story, is the decision to leave in pursuit of learning, and the ways in which transformative learning often heralds an experience of separation and departure. Teamey and Mandel were working as academics in the UK but became frustrated by their experience of the formal higher education system. As they later observed, "there is often an alienation of self and purpose as mainstream academia ... pushes us to remove our hearts and our minds from our work" (Mandel, Amaro and Teamey 2021, p. 4). In 2012, the pair took the decision to quit their academic careers to pursue their interests in radical, alternative forms of education outside this system: this is what led to the creation of the Enlivened Learning project and Ecovercities Alliance. This decision is embedded in a broader pattern of leaving and learning. In her conversation, Teamey reflects on the experience of leaving behind her rural community in Oregon to pursue higher education; since establishing Ecovercities, Teamey has also made a decision to step back from the Alliance to focus on other learning projects. There is a close connection between education and physical and social movement: as Teamey points out, we need to recognize how learning can shift people away from their home communities, and leaving can be essential for opening up new pathways of learning.*

*Teamey's conversation focuses on the differences and similarities, connections and gaps between formal and nonformal spaces of education, as she argues against a Black and white, either/or interpretation of these two different modes of education. While critical of formal education, Teamey reflects on how much she was able to learn from her PhD, which in the UK system, entailed a considerable degree of free, independent study. She also notes how for low income, rural youth, universities, for all their faults, can still be essential spaces for encountering new and different ideas; alternative spaces of radical education might be more empowering and liberating in principle, but they are also sparser on the ground and harder for many to locate, connect with, and benefit from. Now a mother herself, Teamey discusses the difficulties of choosing educational spaces for her children, rejecting mainstream schooling but also the option of unschooling and homeschooling, while settling (for now) on a local, Hawaiian influenced Waldorf school as offering something in between.*

*In the past, Teamey has spoken and written very positively about the Ecovercities Alliance, which she has described as a "knowledge movement" that "engages not only in critiquing and resisting our broken education systems, but also in*

*cultivating new stories, practices and possibilities that reconnect and regenerate learning in local ecological and cultural ecosystems” (Mandel, Amaro and Teamey 2021, p. 6). However, when we spoke with Teamey, she was taking a partial break from the Alliance and reflecting on some of the limitations and frustrations with this alternative space of radical education. These include concern with machismo, patriarchy, and gender politics; the challenges of money, grants, and finance; and a concern with the sometimes reductionist, essentialist, anti-intellectual stances of some Alliance members, who tend to paint formal education as inherently bad, and nonformal education as inherently good. Teamey offers a refreshing and honest reminder that spaces of radical, nonformal education are not panaceas or utopias, but can recreate many of the same problems that are often found in formal education, as well foster new problems of their own.*

*Ecoversities tend to celebrate and romanticize indigenous education and culture, and its members often tell powerful stories of the importance of listening to and learning from one’s elders and respecting and returning to traditional ways of doing things. Teamey points out that, for herself, growing up in a white, rural, lower-income, and conservative community in the western United States, such framings can be problematic. Teamey’s home community was not deeply connected with the local land in the way that many indigenous communities are, nor was it connected with local indigenous communities in the area. The community also harbored conservative viewpoints that Teamey was happy to escape from by moving away, initially to pursue formal higher education and subsequently to engage in nonformal spaces of radical education. The dominance of identity politics in many radical, alternative educational spaces, in the Ecoversities Alliance and beyond, continues to present questions and challenges for those such as Teamey, who are white, Western, and without any personal links in their family past to indigenous, non-Western backgrounds.*

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***Since you and Udi Mandel decided to give up your university jobs, the concept of enlivened learning has been central to your work, both with the Enlivened Learning research project that you ran and now the Enlivened Cooperative you work with in Hawaii. What does this concept mean to you, and why is it so important?***

*I think we were feeling, not dead, but like there’s a soullessness in formal academia. There was something about the escalation of my time and energy towards this non-aliveness. And realizing more and more that the knowledge we were all learning*

was also dead knowledge. So, what is the opposite of that? What does it mean to feel alive and enlivened and inspired? What does it mean to learn in that kind of environment? How can that be co-created? I still don't see the term as defined; it's an evolving concept. In essence, it is about prioritizing relationships in learning, prioritizing a connection to place and having that speak to you rather than the other way around. It's the opposite of feeling disconnected and lifeless in our learning.

***You also speak about the process of unlearning as part of the Enlivened Learning project; and in the context of deciding to leave formal higher education, you have spoken about the related idea of de-professionalization. What do these concepts of unlearning and de-professionalization mean to you?***

Unlearning, on a simpler level, is re-examining the truths or norms that we've all been exposed to in our upbringing, whether it's family education, formal education, other forms of education. The area of Oregon that I'm from is 85 percent Republican voting, so I was surrounded by that very conservative way of understanding the world. Having that as a background, unlearning is basically questioning things you think you know. When I teach, I feel that my task is to try and create moments of opening space for students to re-examine what we think we know as the truth, whether that is through examples, or case studies or reading or going out and doing things firsthand.

I love the idea of deprofessionalization, that's a term that Gustavo Esteva introduced me to, that I'm a recovering academic, since stepping out of my previous academic career. I was invited a few years ago to an informal conversation in Cambridge, it was women only, engaging with educational activism. But I immediately noticed that all the other folks there were still in the academic world and were only speaking in academic jargon. I was like, Can we just get out of that? Can we have a conversation about what we're interested in? Can we have that heart conversation and not just a mind conversation? That was part of the deprofessionalizing process to get out of the academic literacy norm that I had to adapt to while being in the academic world.

***Does anything remain that you think is useful from your professional training and formal education, since you completed a PhD and went through the entire process? Or did you have to unlearn everything from these years?***

Actually, the PhD for me was wonderful, the best learning experience I had up to that point. I think it was because I did it in the UK and it was before it became more industrialized, and you had to complete it in three to four years. I took six

and a half years, it was entirely self-directed, which I had never done before. I didn't have exams, I was creating my own questions, I was reading what I wanted. I found that really empowering. But, at the same time, the more I learned, the more I realized that I don't know how I'm going to fit into this system afterwards. And that's been the case ever since. I remember sitting down after I completed my fieldwork and trying to do something with all the richness of what I had learned, I didn't feel that a dissertation was ever going to do that any justice. I wanted to quit. Not because it was hard work, but more like an existential why am I doing this?

I love that I finished the PhD in the end, in the sense that if I want to use that title and credential, I can walk in that world. Not that I want to be in that world all of the time, but it's important if you want to do things in our current society. I appreciate having that in those moments, when I feel like if I want to press an issue to have some form of legitimacy.

If you have an outlet at the university, it can really help. One thing we did with a few colleagues when I was working at the University of Bath we called the AAA Club, the Amateur Academic Adventurers Club, and we met up once a month, or once every other week, and we bought crackers, cheese and wine or juice or whatever. We just sat together; we were not allowed to complain about work. We could only talk about our ideas. It was awesome. It was very simple but so rewarding.

At the same time, when I was working in the university, I didn't have much hope when I was in it. As a teacher, I did still have spaces where I could do what I wanted. I took my students to different things; we joined Occupy Wall Street, and we went out there and occupied in Bath. So, there were opportunities for engaging in more real-world situations. But nobody gives a damn if you do it. It depends on the person who's teaching whether they want to create those types of communities of practice with others. Every time I've tried to be more radical in the university, it definitely has not responded positively. I remember reading Gustavo Esteva's description of his work evolution, where he was kicked out of multiple jobs. And he's like, I celebrate this! But I don't know, I've had that experience now, and it doesn't feel good. Part of me is grateful that I've been thrown out of places before, because it's opened up new worlds. But it's painful, and it's confusing in terms of where you land and how you land.

***In 2015, you and Udi Mandel helped to found the global Ecoverstities Alliance. What led you to decide to set up the Ecoverstities Alliance? Why is global work in a network like the Ecoverstities Alliance important?***

It's really about solidarity. The whole reason Ecoversities emerged is because, when Udi and I did our yearlong Enlivened Learning journey around the world, after leaving our jobs at the university, literally all the places we were visiting wanted to know about the previous places we were visiting. There was a unanimous sense of, we don't have time to find out what is being done elsewhere, it takes so much effort and work to sustain what it is we're doing here, in waging the struggle against military, government, corporations, everything. We want to meet others doing this kind of educational work, we want that kind of community, we want those friendships, those types of relationships. That's how the whole idea was born.

At the same time, it was a real struggle to do this from the start. Our first gathering, which we ended up doing in Portugal, was an unconference to bring all these people together. Then there was this whole battle of who's going to facilitate and how, and it became an identity politics thing, like, how do we perceive and organize time? How do you organize yourself? How do you facilitate in a space like this? Nobody could do that well, there was all this tension around how to do that. Do we organize in a story-telling style without any kind of endpoint? Which is cool. But we only have an hour for this. People came out of that week, some were traumatized, but everybody was like, we learned so much. It still is resonating for us, years later, because we haven't ever had an experience like that, because it wasn't a formalized encounter.

After that, we tried to co-create a structure for our global encounters. But then people showed up and said, we can't have a structure. I don't think any of these approaches are right or wrong, it's just interesting to see how difficult it is. In terms of facilitation, I didn't see anyone who could do this very well. Some of these people are expert facilitators, and then you put them in a room of folks like this, and they have no idea what to do. Because it's such a unique kind of a situation, which I think has been the whole point. There have been amazing relationships, lifelong friendships, that have come out of all of these encounters. They're very short, but because of the depth at which they've gone every single time then, there are these amazing connections that have been created.

***For those of us who are still in formal universities, what possibilities do you see for doing and supporting this kind of Enlivened Learning? Or have you lost all hope with formal education?***

I look at it through different capacities. If I'm in the United States and I'm thinking about rural areas where kids are in public high schools that are exposed

to very little, and then they end up going to a university, they're going to be exposed to new thinking, and they probably wouldn't have that opportunity if they didn't do something like that. In most countries in the world, you need that. Unfortunately, that's one of the only places you can get that, unless you happen to run into some kind of informal education group randomly or hear about it and then join it. There's a lot of amazing alternative, radical learning spaces all over the world. But how do people even hear about these? People hear about the university system, and then they may be introduced somewhere to something else and may want to learn in some of those spaces. But the university system is a much easier, more straightforward transition, even though it's fraught with so many wrongs. Especially from where I'm from, university opened me to all sorts of things I never would have seen otherwise.

***There is currently a lot of talk about “decolonizing the university.” How do you think about the importance of decolonizing education, and is this even possible within formal university structures?***

While there is space for decolonizing work in the classroom, it's still restricted. Decolonizing the university is impossible under the current institutional and leadership structures, the top-down hierarchy. The university is filled with inequality, in terms of pay, in terms of time, in terms of everything. You can still have spaces of resistance; those are important. As long as you can handle the mental health pressures. But even in the spaces that are enlivened and enlightened, there is still the struggle of ego. I found this within the Ecoversities Alliance. At the end of the day, we all are responsible for our own kind of ego and power that we put into spaces like that.

I'm living in Hawaii now, and some of the work we are doing is definitely about processes of decolonizing. Our friend Kū Kahakalau here that we came to work with argues that it's about bringing together more ancient knowledge systems alongside the best of “modern” knowledge systems, it's not one or the other, there's no purism. Nor should there be, Decolonizing doesn't mean the past is better. One thing I love about what the Zapatistas have done is that women within that movement were like, we need some changes for us in traditional ways. There's no utopian culture anywhere, it's a long-term process, decolonizing has to always continue.

I remember having conversations with folks in South Asia questioning that because you're an Indian scholar, therefore, you are post-colonial. But you're from the elite class, what does that mean? I found this wonderful book while I was in India, written by someone from the Dalit community, it was one of the only

ethnographic accounts from a Dalit person about their educational experience. Where does colonialism begin and end? Where does post-colonialism?

One of the things we did at SIT (School for International Training) in Vermont, Udi and I, was design this new sustainable development and regenerative practice MA. We purposely put multiple knowledge systems together at the same time. First, we had the students taking monitoring and evaluation, straight up mainstream, but with more of a participatory edge. Then we had another course called learning in place, using a Hawaiian indigenous perspective, Na Kilo, where you go and observe in the same place with all of your senses, and you learn how to observe the land, the space of what's going on, you start asking different questions, making relationships. It's literally a no technology, just sitting and observing form of monitoring. Then we had another class on regenerative design. We had the students learning in these three classes at the same time, which were essentially about the same thing, but from very different viewpoints, different worldviews or cosmologies. For me, that was one form of decolonizing, in the sense that we did not say, this is the right form of knowing. They're all partialities of something and gaining those skills of being able to identify the values and challenges of these different knowledge systems is one way of beginning to engage with that. It was really difficult. Especially in the learning in place class, the students were like, What am I doing? You want me to just go sit somewhere for two hours? For the first three weeks, they all rebelled. Then, by week eight, they were like, Oh, my God, I'm seeing things I've never seen before, in my home places that I've been to my entire life. That was the whole point of it, to legitimize that as much as any monitoring evaluation thing they would have to know for any kind of job in international development.

But the institution has to allow this to actually happen. At the end of the day, it didn't work out for us. I mean, our institution didn't want that kind of learning. Usually in development studies, you have one section at the very end of the class that tries to bring all of the indigenous approaches—like, mainstream approaches to development for 90 percent of the class, then 10 percent was for all the other knowledge systems. We wanted to literally, equally divide a third of our teaching on mainstream knowledge, another stream on more marginalized knowledges, and then another third on more indigenous knowledge systems, with each being treated as equal.

***You have written about growing up in rural Oregon. How central has this been to your educational journey?***

I ended up going to one of the most elite colleges in the United States, not because of my academics, but because I was recruited to do athletics. I went on full financial loans; I'm one of those Americans that will owe student loans until I die. I don't know many people in that context who grew up in a place like I did, that's actually really rare. When I hear about rural issues, I can speak from growing up in that and not just because I've read it in a book. In the current nonprofit work I'm doing here in Hawaii, I'm supporting the food system, and they're dealing with similar issues as where I grew up. Suddenly, all that stuff is coming back to me in ways that it wouldn't have otherwise.

When I've been working on situations where you have people who are going to lose their livelihood for environmental reasons, I can see where they are coming from, in a way I wouldn't have been able to otherwise. A lot of people got put out of work, who were loggers, foresters, because there were new laws put into place on regulation of the nation's forests. I'm like, thank God, we really needed that. But, on the other hand, I get the trauma that comes with climate change, too. So, I guess it brings about a different form of empathy that I can engage with, from my own background.

At the same time, I don't know how to talk to people on the far-right. People I grew up with love Donald Trump. I don't even know how to begin these conversations; everything is so aggressive. Coming from where I do is both a blessing and a curse. It's a curse, because I've left all of that, I've gone on a journey that's never really brought me back to that. Whereas people I grew up with are still there, and they've never left. And they've kind of deepened in that place, which is beautiful. I'm just a forever nomad, in lots of ways. It's been really, really challenging. Even with members of my own family, to just try to figure out how to engage in that space. It's been profoundly difficult.

***Many of the people you work with in the Ecoverstities Alliance, like Gustavo Esteva, Manish Jain, and Munir Fasheh, center their work on indigenous education traditions, and embrace their own indigeneity. How do you engage with indigenous education coming from rural Oregon?***

Growing up in the place I did, I didn't learn any of the native languages from that place. Indigenous languages speak the place into being, everything's constructed as a communal orientation with the world. My understanding of some of the biggest issues we face globally is about that disconnect, that lack of, of enlivenment of the world in which we live. Indigenous knowledge systems are all different. Every group has their own practices and histories. But there are shared values,

like connection with place and seeing the nonhuman world as family and having a worldview that's interconnected. So that, for me, has been the primary interest is how you can bring that mode of thinking not only into your sense of your own self in the world, but where your community is in the world, and the decisions that are made. Here in Hawaii, I'm learning the Hawaiian language here and I love that my kids are learning it too. When we arrived, my youngest had just turned three. So, her only memories are here, and she's learning Hawaiian in school. It's going to just be another language that she's learning growing up. I love that it's about this place, it's not an imposed, colonizing language.

***Many of the leading figures in the Ecoversities Alliance are men. What is your experience of being a woman in these alternative educational spaces that still seem often to be a male-dominated practice?***

There have been moments in our Alliance, where I'm like, I don't have time, I have to be with the kids, so we've had that, and we end up getting into gender conversations about whose time is more important. I'm a mother, which is an entirely different role in the world, I have these other parts of my life that are now central in my life, so it's definitely been an issue. I think there's also statements made in alternative education spaces about gender roles and mothering that are very essentializing, from a male gaze. The man can just go do what he wants, and the women and his wife usually is at home with the children. They talk about their appreciation for what their mothers and grandmothers have done within the household and the family that they haven't had to do.

Manish Jain and Munir Fasheh speak of having mothers and grandmothers who didn't have formal literacy skills, of being educated to think that these skills are all that mattered, and then realizing the amount of knowledge that these women had and highlighting this knowledge as a key part of the decolonizing process. But in the world that I grew up in, it's a very different relationship that you have with your mother and grandmother. I had really beautiful relationships with them. There were certain things I learned from them, but I also see them as quite close minded. So, I'm really happy that I've been able to get out of some of that, too!

***You have written that one of the key steps in leaving the university is not just writing and teaching about alternative traditions, but intertwining theory and practice, which you have done with the creation of the Ecoversities Alliance. How has this shaped your understanding of these different educational spaces?***

Ecoversities has tried to not be institutionalized, but of course it's in a way institutionalized and actually, for me, part of the shortcomings within the Alliance right now is that there is a pretense that it's not institutionalized, whereas it very much is becoming so. Ecoversities is an amazing collection of individuals and communities and cultural practices. There's a lot of learning that's gone on in there, some painful, most not. But I have stepped back a little bit from my involvement with Ecoversities over the last couple of years. One of the reasons is that I think there's a real anti-intellectualism in the Alliance, this rejection of theory. It's another form of fundamentalism, which I don't think is a good thing. For example, there is sometimes a total rejection of the university. I don't think any flat-out fundamentalist rejection of anything is the right way forward. These are some of the conflicts that are present, which is not necessarily a bad thing. But, for the moment, several of us who felt it was getting more contentious decided we need a little break.

***One of the common critiques of alternative educational projects is that either they are only accessible to those of considerable wealth, or that they are working only with the poor and marginalized, and risk locking these individuals into a continuing life of marginal existence. How do you address these kinds of critiques in your own work?***

I have a huge critique of this, and a huge concern about this. It started when I was looking at what quality education meant in Pakistan, and I visited different types of informal educational projects across the country. One of the most interesting schools I went to was for marginalized girls, they were bringing girls from slum areas into the school, paying for the whole thing. It was a very holistic educational environment. But what happened is the girls got out of the school and couldn't go back to their communities, because they weren't really accepted anymore. If there's a kind of transformation through education, that disconnects you or alienates you from your community. Paulo Freire's writing around this I appreciate, there is this loneliness, this alienation. Because you have to have some community and if this disengages you from your own community, towards another community, there's always this darkness, this uprootedness. I've definitely experienced this for myself, too, because it's like, where do I fit in? Who is my community? Because I'm questioning the one I was in before, but then we still have connections, and I feel it's very confusing. What do you do with that? Can you then enter into the market economy? Can you get a job?

***Can you talk about your current work with the Enlivened Cooperative in Hawaii, and how this is moving your ideas about education forward?***

We created the Enlivened Cooperative in an institutional framework that ethically makes sense for us. It was designed so that it could be a platform space that people could bring projects in, including people from the wider Ecoversities Alliance. We've been designing a series of learning journeys. We started a program connecting learners in Arizona, the Yucatan and Hawaii, both indigenous and non-indigenous, with the idea of doing a rotation in each of these places, learning from one another, deeply place based and experiential. But we got stuck. It always goes back to the issue of how can you make enough money to survive while you're doing the things you want to do? So, we're still trying to figure out what that means. We've applied for a few grants, but we haven't been successful yet.

***You talk about the importance of place-based learning. What is the significance of being based in Hawaii for the work you are doing?***

I'm currently working with a nonprofit that does all sorts of 'āina-based (place-based) conservation, education and agricultural work. 'Āina is the Hawaiian word for the land and the sea at the same time, it encompasses the place that you live—"that which feeds." I've been hired to work with folks who have created agricultural cooperatives or are trying to start cooperatives and working with them to figure out how to do that. Also supporting farmers who are doing regenerative approaches of agriculture. Right now, Hawaii imports 90 percent of its food, and we could probably be growing 90 percent of our foods. So, what changes have to be made within the system?

***You have decided to send your own children to a Waldorf school. Why Waldorf? And how does this compare with the different formal and alternative educational spaces you have experienced?***

Well, I was asking myself, do I unschool my children? Do I homeschool? Do I just not school? I don't know. It's really hard as a parent, and then you see your kid needing some social connections. Our oldest child is very social, extroverted, very kinesthetic, very creative, but he's not an academically minded kid. We pulled him out of a kindergarten we put him in because it just didn't work. He cried; he hated being there. But I still didn't think I should just be at home with him all day. There was no homeschooling kind of community in our

area. Then we found this little school. It's Waldorf, but it's very localized, so it's not like coming from only this only European Waldorf perspective.

It's incredibly outdoors focused. He loves being there. He has the same teacher until year eight. It's less than half of the price of normal Waldorf schools, but we can still barely afford it. But both of my children are just thriving. I definitely didn't have anything like that growing up. I don't really remember anything from my elementary school. Waldorf delays reading until they're seven. We read my son books when he was younger, but he never read by himself, and then when he started, he loves reading. Waldorf focuses on oral memory until that time; the orientation is around storytelling. He's learning Japanese, he's learning Hawaiian. He has his own origami business. He and his friends sit and crochet during recess. Like that's cool, the boys sitting crocheting. They're not allowed to do video games at the school, they can't talk about technology, they don't do any computers at all in the school, because they figure the kids will get that at home.

We all have these short lives, where we're trying to make all these decisions for ourselves and our families. Waldorf is one step away from a regular schooling situation. But what I like about that, is that I think one thing that schooling does tend very predominantly to take away is a sense of who you are in the world. All schooling does to some degree, but I think the holism of a school like Waldorf can at least begin to provide a celebration of who you are as an individual, not in a totally individualistic sense, but it just gives you more capacity of feeling okay about who you are. That, to me, is what we need to do with kids, for any learning environment we provide, is not becoming individualistic, but becoming confident and happy with who you are, while at the same time understanding the importance of how you are interdependent with the human and more-than-human world.



## Storytelling for Liberation

Coumba Touré

*Invisible Giants, Kuumbati & Africans Rising, Dakar, Senegal*

*Coumba Touré is a feminist storyteller and popular educator, who was born in Ségou in south-central Mali and is now based in Dakar, Senegal. In the 1990s, Touré worked with the Institute for Popular Education in Mali, which had been founded by Malian popular educator Maria Diarra Keita, after Keita had become disillusioned by the Western models of education and development that dominated the country. While with the Institute, Touré was involved in creating and running popular education programs for women and children (Touré 2008). Since then, Touré has used storytelling and popular education in support of movement building work in a range of contexts. This includes writing, publishing, and promoting stories for children in indigenous (Wolof, Bambara) and colonial (French, English) languages, first with the Falia artist collective and production house founded by the Senegalese children's author Fatou Ndiaye Sow, and recently with Kuumbati, a children's literature publishing house that Touré herself founded and directs. In 2009, Touré founded the Invisible Giants project that documents and celebrates the work of Black women activists who work for social change in their communities throughout Africa and the African diaspora. Touré has long been committed to Pan-Africanist movement building, playing leading roles in organizations such as Africans Rising and TrustAfrica. As part of her Pan-Africanist work of building connections across a "global Africa," Touré has developed longstanding relationships with civil rights activists in the United States, notably Faya Rose Touré, who founded the annual Bridge Crossing Jubilee in Selma to commemorate the Selma to Montgomery civil rights marches in 1965 in support of the US Voting Rights Act.*

*In her conversation, Touré focuses on the power and importance of storytelling for liberation and movement building. Storytelling is powerful, Touré argues, because both individuals and communities are "made of stories." Effective, rooted*

social change work is guided and driven by recognizing, as Touré puts it, “the link and the dot” that connect people’s stories together. This concern with storytelling lies at the heart of a range of approaches to radical education across the world. We find similar claims made by Marshall Ganz (2024, p. 26) in the United States, writing of how storytelling is central to the work of community organizing, as it is “how we can speak the language of the heart,” “create the experience of values,” and “communicate why I care, why we care, and why we must choose to act now.” Storytelling is central to indigenous education and culture. In Canada, Mississauga Nishnaabeg writer and educator Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (2011, p. 33) writes of storytelling as a “process of remembering, visioning and creating a just reality,” “a lens through which we can envision our way out of cognitive imperialism,” and a way to reinforce “the web of relationships that stitch our communities together.” Storytelling is also central to popular education where, as Dorine Plantenga (2012, p. 33) writes, it can help to create “a shared social narrative ... that both gives meaning to events at an individual level and inspires collective learning and understanding.”

Touré also highlights the importance of feminist analysis and women’s work at the heart of radical education and organizing. “I am a feminist,” Touré once said, “because I believe it’s the ideology where I find almost everything that I need in terms of challenging power and making it possible for everyone to be what they choose to be and how they choose to be” (Benson 2020, p. 114). Touré’s *Invisible Giants* project, which was inspired by the work of Faya Rose Touré in Alabama in commemorating the work of women activists in the US civil rights movement, seeks to challenge the invisibility and devaluing of women’s social change work that Touré argues is a malady at the heart of all movements. We found this as we were doing research for this book: while women make up a large proportion and perhaps a majority, of radical and popular educators, it is often men who become widely known in the field. Megan Boler (1999, pp. 109, 111) points out how “Freire’s methods of conscientization are widely embraced as liberatory and sound,” while similar feminist consciousness-raising pedagogies are often denigrated and placed under “erasure.” Charles Payne (1995) likewise writes of how histories of the US civil rights movement often focus on spectacular, short-term public events starring male leaders like Martin Luther King Jr., while overlooking the importance of the “organizing tradition,” the slow, undramatic work of building relationships and fostering bottom-up change in local communities done by women like Ella Baker and Septima Clark.

Finally, Touré’s conversation focuses on the importance of building connections through popular education as a path to liberation. This is the work of drawing

*connections between individual experiences in a local community in Mali, and between the struggles of Black communities throughout Africa and the global African diaspora. It is the work of linking and learning from liberation struggles across the world: the civil rights movement, anti-apartheid movement, and decolonization movement. It is the work of tying the struggle to decolonize education with the project of decolonizing wealth, governance, and international relations at the same time. It is also the work of making connections between different traditions of radical and popular education. Touré points out that while popular education in Mali and Senegal has been influenced by Freire, it is about much more than just Freire. Maria Diarra Keita, founder of the Institute for Popular Education, was committed to developing a popular education approach that drew on Freireian principles as well as “an indigenous African point of view” and “African oral tradition” (Ashoka 1993), an approach that characterizes the development of popular education throughout African more generally (Strong and Nafziger 2021).*

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***I want to start by asking you about the stories you write for children. You have said that writing children’s books is one of the most important areas of education and social justice work you do. Why is children’s literature so important for you?***

First of all, I like writing, and I came to writing early on as someone who was a voracious reader. I used to read a lot and in reading, I was able to grow, to travel, to see things. Reading took me out of the limited space of my life. When I was growing up, you know, my parents were not particularly rich, I didn’t have access to many things, I couldn’t go to many places. But reading was, for me, a way of being able to dream and to experience things without having to have them physically. As I read, even as a very young person, I can remember being in primary school thinking, when I grow up, I want to be a writer. Then I came across a book, it was very simple stories, but it was written by children, and it made me realize that, oh, I don’t have to wait to grow up to write, I can write now. So, I started writing poetry when I was twelve or thirteen, making my own little books and considering myself as a writer.

Later, when I started working as a young person, I was working at the Institute for Popular Education in Mali. One of the experiments we did there was to create an alternative school. The Institute was doing programs with women, but at a certain point, some of the women that were on the

popular education program said, listen, we're doing all this program about awareness and conscientization, but the school our children are going to is not helpful, it's not teaching them what they need to learn. So, we need a school, a different type of school. School in Mali is in French, so people learn to read and write in a language that they don't understand. We were saying that people, especially children, need to learn in a language that they understand. Then we said we want to change how teachers act with children. We don't want the teachers to be the center of education, but people who are learning to be the center. As you try to do that, you don't have any materials. All the schoolbooks were in French. All the texts were gender biased and racist and violent, and you don't want to use that material when you are trying to teach something different.

I was engaged in the creation of that experimental school and what it meant was that I was pushed into writing for children first, not because I'm a writer or I want to be published, but because I'm trying to create material that I can use in a popular education setting. I started writing texts so that that we can learn to read and write, but not just texts that say anything, it has to have meaning. Because, in the tradition of popular education, the words and the content have to have a meaning. This is how I came to writing for children. It's about producing texts that are meaningful, that make you think, that allow you to grow. It's also about producing texts that take us outside the type of text that will make you doubt yourself as a Black person, that will make you think you're less as a woman, that will replicate the injustice in the surrounding violence that is around you. That is why I think what I do in writing for children is the most important thing. Of course, I got published afterwards, I met somebody who wanted to publish one of the things I wrote. But what brought me to it is the wanting to propose something different.

Many of the things that I wrote for my popular education work were never published. I just write it, I type it, we print it, we use it for the class. There's a lot of things that were just produced but never published. I got into publishing when I met a woman who is a publisher of children's books in Senegal, who read one of my texts and said, oh, this is great, we need to publish it. She published one of my stories, I didn't even want to be published, we had a whole fight about that. But she was older, and she passed away. Before she passed, she asked me to help her publish and continue this work. So, I started to publish some of my work as a way of honoring her thing. Now I have several books published, not many, but around ten children's books.

***More generally, you have often pointed to the importance of storytelling in social movement organizing work. What is it about storytelling that is so powerful in this type of work?***

Storytelling is powerful because, as people, we are made of stories. As individuals, we have many stories that make us who we are, but also communities have stories. Hearing each other's stories helps us build new stories. For example, with the popular education model we used in Mali, when you sit down with a group of women, and each of them tells their story from the same community, and they say, my name is and I was born and I went to school or I didn't go to school, and I got married or I didn't get married, or I had a baby or I didn't have a child or my child died, or whatever the story is, when you take the time for people to sit together and witness each other's stories, then a story gets built of that community. Because all of a sudden you realize, how come each of these women lost a child? Or, how come everyone had this or that? You start understanding the story of that community. You start understanding that, ok, there is something in this community that is taking away these women's children. There is something in this community that makes the women drop out of school. It goes away from the individual story to become a collective story, and this is what teaches you about what you need to work on, about what is the social issue that this group or this community can work on together. It is from the stories and the recognition of the link and the dot between the stories that will help the profound work of social change. Because if you don't know the story, you can start from anywhere. When you start from people's stories, when the work starts from where they are, it is stronger, it is more rooted, it is more powerful, and people are more committed to it. So, that is, for me, the importance of storytelling in social justice work.

***You are often described as a popular educator, and this focus on storytelling is a core part of your popular education work. What does it mean to be a popular educator in Mali and Senegal? Is this a Freireian tradition of popular education or does it have other roots?***

There is a mix of traditions, I would say. Yes, there is the Paulo Freire tradition, because Maria Diarra, who is the founder of the Institute for Popular Education in Mali, got a lot of inspiration from Freire, and she did a lot of work with us and some of the young people using that tradition. But I think for us, even though we didn't learn the theory of Paulo Freire directly, we didn't know him or meet him,

we inherited ideas from his practice and also, we used our local and traditional ways of education. Because storytelling is an educational tool that is common in traditional ways in our communities in Africa. People used to sit, and somebody would tell a story, even if it's fiction, it is fiction to address reality. It might be about animals and people talking and doing things together, but it is about what is going on in the house during the day that the grandmother is imagining the story and creating things to educate the children. So, we take from the Freireian tradition, and we take from the traditional roots of our own surroundings.

For example, in the celebrations we do in the Invisible Giants program we borrow from local traditions. Traditionally, people have weddings, they have baptisms, they have ways of celebrating that if we take it and transpose it into an educational space, it can also give something new and important. Because, if somebody is celebrated because they are generous, somebody is celebrated because they pay attention to other people, somebody is celebrated because they are giving and sharing, somebody is celebrated because they bring people together, they help each other understand each other, they build unity and so on, then this is a way of educating others. Because, as you lift up and celebrate that person, you are showing also your values and ideals. What are we? What are we striving for? Where do we want to be? Because now the truth is that we are in an environment where people are often celebrated for having a big car, or because they have money. When you celebrate someone, then people will look at this and think, oh wow, this person is important because they care for other people. So, it's a different way of educating people. I'm not sitting them down and telling them you have to care for people, or you have to do this, but we're bringing in models and we're shifting ways of looking at things in people.

***One of the early articles you wrote about popular education was included in a book that was edited by Matt Hern, called "Everywhere All the Time: A New Deschooling Reader." Do you situate yourself in the deschooling tradition? How do you think about your popular education work in relation to the school and the formal education system?***

I think for me, being in West Africa, and especially working in Mali in a village setting, it was very visible that schooling in that setting is almost like a violent institution. Because in that village, you bring children to a school, and you force them to learn in a language they don't understand. You put them in a setting where, many times, they are being physically abused by the teachers. And you start formatting and building a kind of person who is trained to repeat, to recite,

not to think, not to have critical views, somebody who is trained to accept. It is a problem, and it has to be challenged.

So, of course, we do what we can to change the school, to change the language, to train the teachers to do this and do that. But it is so profoundly rooted in the violence of the institution that you have to also create something else. Most of the people who survive that type of school, it's because they had next to them other spaces of education that helped them to develop their critical thinking. So, there are parallel fights. I think when people can, they have to get out of that system, and they have to create their own educational spaces. When they cannot do this, they have to challenge the system they are in and try to put something else in place. It is also our duty to push, at the level of our government, to force them to relook at the education system and propose something different. Again, it's also about the violence of the mass model of education, that tells us that every child should have the same thing in school. It's not true. People are different and opportunities should be given to those who do not fit the model, they have to have the right to do something different with their education.

***Yes, you have spoken before about the oppressiveness of formal education. Is this something that you see as persisting or has this changed at all over time? Is this different in a place like Mali or Senegal, as compared to the United States or the UK? Or is this the same everywhere?***

I think that in a colonized setting, it is just more visible because the signs are clear, the issue of the language and other things. But even in a non-colonial system, it can be oppressive too if you're putting the children into a school and the curriculum is not teaching them to think, but to repeat so that they can fit. Basically, it's a mass production of people who think the same way, and people have to be strong enough to get out of it. I know that there's been a lot of progress in curriculum building, where people now are helping children learn in a different way, building critical thinking into the curriculum and so on, which is what is needed, and being supportive of children's different talents and what they want to do. So, yes, to me, there is hope and there is the possibility of creating the type of learning that is needed in school.

But I have to be conscious of what we are doing in education, and analyze what are we giving to children, all the way to the university. What are we asking of them? What are they learning? Are they learning to think, to create, to produce something useful? Or are they learning to be part of a system where they can help that system work? They don't have to think. It doesn't matter. If you're

scientists, you just learn to do things so that you can be one piece of the puzzle of the people who will make the next atomic bomb. It doesn't matter. You just do the work. You don't have to think. You are skilled. You are trained. You know what to do with computers. You do the job, and you get paid. You don't have to think about it. There is a part of schooling that is oppressive to the individual and the community, but there's another part of it that serves a purpose. What is school for? What is the content for? Are we learning to question what we are doing and what we are producing, and think about what is our gift to our community? How do we build a better world than what we are learning for? Are we learning, whether it's in linguistics or science or anything, how to work towards building a just society? If so, then it's different. But when the aims of learning are not taken into account, then we need to ask the question about the oppressive nature of schooling.

***You have said in the past that you are “unapologetically feminist” and that you were “called a feminist before you understood what it meant.” How is feminism important for your social justice work, especially in the field of popular or radical education, where so many of those who are widely recognized as being leaders end up being men?***

This is true, you are right. That's why I am saying the name of Maria Diarra from Mali, who started the Institute for Popular Education there. I have to say the name of Faya Rose Touré, who is in Selma, Alabama, she has also been a big educator, using music with so many young people. That is why I celebrate Invisible Giants. There is also Deborah Fredo, who co-founded the Institute for Popular Education in Mali.

The way I look at this is when you look for people doing things, when women do things, it's taken for granted, it's normal. Like cooking. You wake up, you cook every day. You cook for the family, everybody eats, it's no problem. You get no stars for that, no credit. But when men are cooking, they become chefs. They have their names in the newspapers. Most of the women I know in Senegal, they cook every single day, and they cook great food with anything, whether they have money or don't have money. They are designers of food. They create something out of nothing. But there's so many of them, none of them will make it into the headline of a story or on the web. It's the same thing in art and storytelling. You know, we do storytelling, the grandmothers, the mothers, they do the storytelling in the house. Every day. They do it for free. Or, music, it's the same thing. When we organize our ceremonies and weddings, there are women

who are some of the best singers you will ever hear in the world. You know them in your village. They sing in the ceremonies. They do these things. But when you start looking for the best singers in Senegal or Africa, you find men. If you look for storytellers that are professional storytellers that you would invite to a conference, that you would pay, you'll find men. I don't know if it's because of capitalist society or Western ways of looking at things, but when things become important or valuable, when it becomes expertise, when it's something that hits a certain threshold, women disappear, and it becomes a man thing.

It's the same thing in popular education. There are a lot of women doing popular education, helping, teaching, supporting, and doing it in very simple ways. But they are not the most visible. And that, to me, is why I am a feminist. It's that gender divide that invisibilizes women, that undervalues women, that gives importance to men who do the same thing that we do, but they can be paid for it. They can be recognized for it because they are men. It is not only around the popular education, it's around storytelling, it's around art, it's around everything. The way women are not seen or not valued is what takes away their capacity, their visibility and their recognition. This is why popular education needs to be feminist popular education. Because popular education is about education for social change and equality, and therefore it has to address gender issues. Again, when you start with stories, when you do popular education, where you start around consciousness and listen to people's stories, you see that there's something fundamental that needs to change in gender relationships and in how women are treated in every movement. That must change.

***One of the challenges in radical or popular education is this question of change—of how to link education with activism and movement building, to make sure that our learning doesn't just stay in classrooms or workshops but helps to shape efforts to change our world. How do we help younger generations actively learn how to change the world around them?***

It's about practice that saves us. Theory is important, but you have to have some practice, even if it is small. It doesn't have to be big or deep, but if you have students and you're learning about something, just have a little bit of something that you try, that you practice and work on, that you can do. I started this early, when I was still a student myself. In the vacation time, we lived out in a rural district, and we had some classes that we would do for some of the students who didn't have much, so I was teaching English to those students. It's nothing big, but it's practicing and being in connection with people, which

is what teaches you and tells you what is needed. Any social justice education needs to be connected to practice—and not practice as in, I’m going to go and visit this program. No, practice as in something that also is important to you and touches you. Because people start from where they are. People can do mentorship and help somebody younger. They can work with the group that exists in their community. They can work within their own family and figure out how to change things. But you need a practice to feed the theory and test it and challenge it and change it, if needs be.

For myself, for example, I do the practice of storytelling. When I go to a school or in my community, or even with my own children, the practice is storytelling. I’m challenged when I organize it, when I do it: What language do you use? What story do you tell? Can you keep the children’s attention? Do they like what you’re doing? Do they hear it or not? It pushes you to create better. Practice nourishes the theory. If you’re working in a university setting and you are working on theories of popular education, it is important that the students look at their own situation, their own surroundings, their own world, and see what they can do to change things. Is it a local community? Is it a community online? Is it a group of women? Is it a group of young people? Is it a group of people who are immigrants? Is it a group of people who have certain health issues? It doesn’t matter. What is important is to be involved in trying to figure out what to do.

Most of the time, I think it is better if you yourself as a learner are committed to the issue, because it’s a starting point. It’s not the end, but it teaches you the steps of how to be active. So, if you’re a migrant student and you’re learning popular education, well, you better be able to at least pull together people from your migrant community and sit down with them. It is hard. You invite them, but they don’t come. So, you try again and figure out what it is that will work. What language do you use? What space will you do it in? What will you do until it finally works? That process is what teaches you to how to education for change. If you have a certain disability, you bring your community together to work on issues that affect you. The great thing is that I found out that there are patterns of how you work to make change happen that are not tied to the subject or the content of what you’re working on. There are ways of organizing. You learn how to organize, and once you’ve learned it in one setting, and in one way, you can use those tools in a different setting. It doesn’t have to be your issue or your own connection anymore. But, starting from what you need is a good thing.

***One of the causes that you have been very committed to is Pan-African movement building. What is the importance of this work for you, and how does education and learning play a role in this movement building work?***

Yes, it is the same thing as with the feminist movement and the importance of having feminist views and theory in how we work. For me, the Pan-African view is central to my work. When I say Pan-African, it is about Africa and also Africans outside of Africa, global Africa, from the time of enslavement, but also current migrations. It is about building connections, making sure that people build solidarity among each other, and educating people to know about each other and to understand about each other. Because there is a gap that is created when people are separated, and we are separated and divided in so many ways. First of all, on the continent itself, we are separated by languages, separated by political boundaries, separated by different views of the world and what we want. We are separated also across generations, for the people who have been taken to Brazil or the United States or somewhere else since enslavement, separated by history, because nobody came back to tell people what happened to the others, or nobody went there to tell people what happened here. So, there is a huge gap that Pan-Africanism needs to fill for people to understand each other, to remember each other. Pan-Africanism is that work of rebuilding and rekindling the connections between people.

***You have spoken in the part about the importance for you of coming to the United States and learning from civil rights activists there—is this part of this Pan-African movement building you are talking about here?***

Yes, coming to the United States and traveling in the south of the United States, and going to Brazil and being in Bahia, this taught me that, wow, there is so much that we still have in common. And there's so little that we know about each other's struggles, how people struggled here in the United States, how people are still struggling here in the United States, and in Brazil and other places, while Black. It is a very important education that people who are African on the continent need to know, but also people outside of Africa. Black people outside of Africa do not know the stories or the history of what happened to Africans on the continent. What is colonization? What happened with the wars? There is important knowledge about each other that needs to be developed. The Black link needs to be strengthened, and by learning and understanding the stories here, it helps me also to understand the stories back home. It helps me even in the social justice struggle.

I can give you a very simple example. When I came the first time to the United States in 1996, we were with a group from Mali and we went to Selma, Alabama. We met with a lot of people, artists, academics and so on. But something that was very striking to me, we met with Black farmers, and we had brought with us farmers from Mali. I was in my role of translator to explain what this particular group of Black farmers in the south of the United States that we went to visit were telling us about their work around organic farming. Now picture me, just twenty years old or something like that, trying to translate organic farming to farmers from Mali. What word do I use? What are you doing?

We can feel and hear in their voices that what these farmers in the United States are doing is something new and important. But then we realize that this new organic farming is what the farmers in Mali already do in their traditional farming practice. Except in Mali, the farmers are receiving a lot of pressure not to do their traditional farming anymore, to use pesticides so they can be developed. They are told they are so backwards, that's why they are not making much money, they are responsible for our country not being developed, because they are so resistant. And now in the United States, we meet farmers who are trying to reclaim these traditions and have a soil that is not full of pesticides. So, you see how important the connection is, to be able to see and know, at least for those farmers from Mali, that they were not doing something backwards. It is so important for us to learn about each other and know about each other's struggle and be in solidarity with each other. Liberation struggles always gets inspiration from different places: the civil rights movement, anti-apartheid movement, decolonization movement, it's all connected. People learn from each other and grow from each other, and we have to do it today as we did it in the past.

***You mention the decolonization movement. In the past, you have about the importance of using indigenous or local languages and knowledge as a core part of decolonizing education. Is there widespread support in Senegal and Mali for this kind of decolonizing project?***

We are struggling. We're struggling because you need to look at the purpose of education systems, which at the moment are about training people to get certain diplomas and certain skills, and people are rewarded. You become important if you can produce certain things. So, everybody is moving towards that. The more you are in the system, and you can prove that you are important, you have PhDs and other degrees, the better you are considered, maybe the more money you make, and the less you are concerned about the community. Also,

this liberates you from hard work, from having to be a farmer, or having to clean your house because now you have enough money to pay someone else to do that for you. I think this is the pull of colonial education. Because yes, everybody wants their children and their people to get to a better place. So, we fight against that. Even in Senegal or Mali, the education system is still about getting away from ourselves in so many ways.

So, I think we are a long way from changing all of that. Decolonizing education goes with decolonizing many other things. It goes with decolonizing wealth. Because if people are worried about not being wealthy enough, why would they choose to decolonize education here? We have to decolonize wealth. We have to decolonize international relationships. We have to decolonize governance, who has a say and on what. It's all connected. All of those things need to be decolonized for it to make sense to decolonize education. But we have to start where we are, even though we know it's not going to happen right away. It doesn't stop us from starting to decolonize education, to change all the content, while understanding that should lead us also to other forms of decolonization and participating in those struggles as well. A real movement of decolonization has to touch all sectors. And, of course, education needs to do its part.

Right now, if you propose a school and then you say, let's put it in the local language. All the parents will say, no, what would my child do with the local language? I want them to have something else. But, of course, for the poor people and for people who don't speak French or English, it makes sense at least to start with the local language, so that at least you're not completely evicted, because we have such a poor education system where most people who are poor will get to be a dropout. At least, by starting with the local language, it gives you a chance to get somewhere. As soon as you can read, you can write, you can drop the local language, and you can continue in other languages and find your way out. So, for now, the local language is used in education, and it is important, as long as it helps you get by, to be more integrated in the system. But, after that, you don't need it anymore. The problem is, it is more than a language, it's also about ways of thinking, different views of life, values, understanding justice, human dignity and so on. How do we make sure that is a central part of education?

***Finally, I want to ask you about the importance of listening and learning from people doing organizing and social justice work but who don't attract lots of media and public attention. You've been involved in a project about celebrating***

***Invisible Giants. Can you talk about the motivation for this, how this works, and why this matters?***

The inspiration for Invisible Giants came from when I went to Alabama, to Selma, and witnessed the Voting Rights Jubilee, where people come back from the civil rights movement, to tell stories of the civil rights movement, what they've done, how they've organized, how they did it, what happened. Because, for us today, we look at that moment in the past, and we see there were marches, and there were speeches by Martin Luther King. But, behind that, behind everything that is seen or known, there was just the simple organizing, everyday organizing, of people, including a lot of women whose names are not known or talked about. Faya Rose Touré was the first one who organized something to recognize women from the civil rights movement, people who came and said, I was there that day, on that march. I hid people in my house, under my bed. I did this. People who cooked and brought food to the church, and people who invited other people to come to the Voting Rights Marches in Selma in 1965 and got beaten. All of these were women whose name is nowhere. And I said, wow, as a feminist, knowing about the story of the civil rights movement, but not knowing about these women who I was now meeting physically, I felt robbed. I felt like, why? Why don't I know that these women did all this work for the civil rights movement? How come their names never got to me or to anybody that I know?

So, that is why I decided to continue celebrating with Invisible Giants. But I didn't look to the past, I was looking at the present. I am saying, what I'm doing right now is celebrating and documenting stories of Invisible Giants today, so that tomorrow, in the future, twenty years from now, or in one hundred or two hundred years, nobody can say they don't know who were the women who made things happen, who made change happen for our movements, whether it's on environmental issues or gender rights, or whatever it is. I'm looking at people who are doing the work today, who are very low key, but they're doing important work and making big changes in people's lives and documenting their stories and also thanking them. Because I think many of the women who did this in the past, they never got a chance for somebody to say, thank you for what you did. They just did it.

With Invisible Giants, we celebrate these women, and what we do is write their bios, we organize a party, and we tell their stories, and we ask people to come and be witness and tell us stories about them. It's incredible, the kinds of things that come out. I think a lot of the time for some of those women, maybe if they die, somebody will tell some of their stories, or she did this or that. But nobody

witnessed together to tell the story, and it's amazing, because these stories are the stories that make our lives and our communities. It's just erased. It's not talked about. One of my projects right now is to write more books for children that tell the stories of the Invisible Giants and produce these for children to read about. Because they really are such beautiful stories.



# From People's Education to Pedagogies of Possibility

Salim Vally

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*Salim Vally is the National Research Foundation Chair in Community, Adult and Workers' Education at the University of Johannesburg in South Africa. But Vally took an unusual route into higher education, referring to himself in his conversation as an "incidental academic." After playing a leading role in the South African Students Movement struggle against apartheid during the 1970s, Vally spent over a decade working in the South African workers' movement as an education officer for a trade union representing retail, distribution, and hospitality workers. It was only later, following a period of union retrenchment that saw many radical educators and activists pushed out of the movement, that Vally left to pursue graduate studies and become a university professor. Vally is known for his work on radical workers' education in South Africa, and with the late Aziz Choudry, on social movement learning more generally. Beyond the university, Vally is widely known as a public intellectual and human rights activist, and has long been involved in the global Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions campaign in support of the Palestinian liberation struggle.*

*Vally's work has been important in bringing a central focus on labor education and workers' education as a vital tradition of radical education, something that is often overlooked and marginalized today (Vally 2007, 2020; Vally, wa Bofelo, and Treat 2013). In this, he is part of a group of South African educators, scholars and activists documenting and analyzing radical workers' education in their country (Allais 2021; Cooper 2020; Cooper and Hamilton 2020; Orr 2021). Much of this writing has had an historical, almost nostalgic frame, recognizing the decline of radical workers' education in South Africa after the end of (formal)*

*apartheid—when it was increasingly displaced by neoliberal, vocational models of skills-based learning for individual worker advancement—trying to recover its most important contributions, practices and principles, and arguing for the need to develop a new form of radical workers’ education in the future. While the context of South Africa is unique, these discussions have much to offer radical educators elsewhere, as there has been a parallel decline in radical and independent workers’ education in countries such as the UK and the United States as well (Dolgon and Roth 2021; Seal 2017).*

Vally has also helped to develop the field of social movement learning that explores the importance of social movements in fostering forms of radical education for social change and liberation, through the construction of deliberate, organized spaces for learning as well as incidental and informal learning that happens through participation in movement actions and campaigns. In his 2018 book with Aziz Choudry, *Reflections on Knowledge, Learning and Social Movements: History’s Schools*, Vally argues for the need to overcome “historical and social amnesia” about social movements from the past, and learn the “thread and texture of what it takes to bring about social change, with all of its tensions and contradictions,” that can allow activists to “reflect, prepare the ground, plant seeds and grow vibrant movements and politics of resistance” in the present and future (Choudry and Vally 2018, pp. 9, 15). A follow-up book, *The University and Social Justice: Struggles Across the Globe*, focuses on the impact on social change of activist struggles in higher education in the current period—with contributions written by frontline participants in staff and student movements on university campuses around the world. The book argues for the importance of taking “a sympathetic, but unromantic view of social movements,” recognizing how “within activist networks and social movements, there is a rich history of processes and practices combining informal ... learning with more programmatic political education” (Choudry and Vally 2020, p. 5).

One of the overarching themes that comes out of Vally’s reflections on education is the central importance of national liberation struggle in shaping the nature and impact of radical education. Radical education played a major role in the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa, through worker, community, and youth education; but conversely, the presence of this national struggle provided a key frame and fuel for the vitality of radical education. People’s education, which Vally discusses in the conversation, was developed as a rallying cry—“People’s Education for People’s Power”—and organizing campaign following the mid-1980s student boycotts of the apartheid-era Bantu Education system, as “an educational

strategy and a political strategy” through which “people will be mobilized and organized towards the goal of a non-racial democratic South Africa” (Walters and Kruss 1988, p. 21). This involved reflections on “the kind of education that can contribute to liberation,” and led to demands for democratic control over education, development of alternative curriculum and pedagogy, and the “building of national organizations of teachers, students and academics” committed to the struggle against apartheid (Walters and Kruss 1988, pp. 18, 23). Once this struggle subsided, it became harder to sustain such radical education traditions, as these became coopted and displaced by more liberal and apolitical forms of education. The formal (and false) promises of equality and liberty in the post-apartheid state in some ways provide a more difficult terrain on which to push for radical change through education. Indeed, for many, there was a sense, at least initially, that people’s education could be “discarded, ... having served its provisional utility” (Randall 1993, p. 43).

A second theme, central to this book, is the relationship between formal and nonformal education. Vally, like others during this period in South Africa, started out working in nonformal (workers’) education and only later moved into formal (university) education. In the workers’ movement, Vally and other union educators and activists sought to challenge the higher status and value that are attached to formal education and argued for recognition of the nonschooled knowledge and skills that workers and community members develop through experience. Later, in the university, Vally and others with a similar trajectory seek to draw on their nonformal education experience to rethink and rework what gets done in formal education but also try to adopt a position that straddles the divide between formal and nonformal, academic and community or workers’ education, acting both within the university context and outside, in grassroots and movement settings. Salma Ismail (2012, p. 177) at the University of Cape Town writes of the “challenges and strategies of holding onto critical transformative educational practices” as a feminist popular educator working within a neoliberal university; while Astrid von Kotze (2005, p. 54) at the University of KwaZulu-Natal similarly reflects on how “living and working as an activist-academic with one foot in popular education, the other in the world of the academy” requires an ability to “dodge and dive competing agendas and expectations in order to find that space that allows us to live with integrity, contributing to the struggle for social justice, and along with others, becoming more fully human in the process.”

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***One of the concepts that appears often in your writing is the idea of people's education. What is people's education, why is this an important concept, and what role has it played in South Africa?***

In the struggle against apartheid, people in communities, schools, universities, and civil society generally, who were opposed to apartheid education, in all its manifestations, came together. There was a lot of creativity and vibrancy. This involved workers as well as academics and student organizations and they formed a coordinating committee that was initially called the National Education Crisis Committee. It was a crisis because there was a boycott of schools. There was a view amongst some sections of the liberation movement to make the system ungovernable, which included schools. There were other tendencies in the liberation movement, particularly left tendencies, who felt that we shouldn't surrender those education spaces, the formal spaces, and they should be seen as a site of struggle. So, one grouping, the dominant grouping aligned to the ANC [African National Congress] and their student organizations used the slogan, "liberation first, education after," whereas many of us used the slogan, "education for liberation."

In that context, there were lots of debates and arguments. It was the beginning of this coordination of disparate attempts throughout the country, in all sectors, to create an alternative education system in the course of the struggle. Some people call it an education movement, others say it was a political movement. At that time, in the late 1970s and early 1980s, in the trade union movement, you had a very vibrant worker education movement, influenced by Paulo Freire. We were experimenting all the time in the union movement. I was the education officer in one of the unions. You also had a mushrooming of literacy organizations, also deeply influenced by Freire. There was the Black Consciousness Movement, who distributed *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* soon after its appearance in English, even though it was illegal. It was banned in South Africa, but they made hundreds of mimeograph copies and distributed it. Just weeks before Steve Biko was killed, he was in discussions with people who met Freire overseas in Geneva. So Freirean views of the purpose of education were very rich in the liberation movements.

Then we also had groups like SACHED (South African Committee for Higher Education). Some of my own comrades were involved, like the late Neville Alexander, who was the Cape Town director of the SACHED Trust. John Samuels was the national director. Enver Motlala was the director of the other province in the coastal conference on the Indian Ocean in Durban, now called KwaZulu Natal. They had a very elaborate network around the country, they

were well structured. They had bridging courses for activists, who lost schooling but wanted to get into university, they formed a college. They had relations with schools throughout the country. It wasn't easy because of state repression. They played a big role in this National Education Crisis Committee too.

And so, people's education embraced all these alternatives. It wasn't just formal, it was also nonformal and informal education. I wrote my master's thesis on worker education, which showed the educational role of strikes and occupations, and how people learn not just through formal education. Munir Fasheh wrote an article, where he talks about his mum's mathematics, and we had a similar phenomenon, where you had "innumerate people," who were street vendors, who were able to make very complex calculations without a formal understanding of arithmetic or maths. So, that's what we witnessed here as well. All of this is about people's education.

***You have also written about the importance of social movements as vital places for learning. Why do we as educators need to pay close attention to social movements? What are the ways in which social movements shape learning for social change?***

Well, to continue, because it will logically lead me to answer your question, is that we had a very strong worker education movement, particularly in the mid to late 1980s and early 1990s. The union movement was also very strong. We managed to get the new government, the democratic government after 1994, to institute a whole range of policy reforms, which allowed, for example, workers with the knowledge and the skills to continue their studies in formal institutions, universities, colleges, etc. That was called the recognition of prior learning. Worker education went through a number of changes, which were linked to the transition in South Africa, but also a changing emphasis on education. During the struggle against apartheid, worker education was political, it had to do with collective progress, it was linked to struggle. When the liberation movement started negotiating with the government, more and more, worker education became for individual career advancement. It was aimed at providing the labor market requirements of business. The critical consciousness, the political side of that worker education was denuded. This also coincided with changes in the global political economy, with neoliberalism, casualization, and precarious work, and this had an effect on the union movement in many different ways. The union movement became weaker and many of the members were retrenched.

This was linked at the same time to a greater hierarchy in the union movement, where the leadership started earning much, much more than what we earned. They started instituting practices which were anathema to many of us, which were the antithesis of a class-conscious union movement. They embarked on things like setting up investment companies using workers' money. Some worker leaders became very rich, with the result as well of undemocratic behavior and corruption. Now, all of those factors weakened the workers' movement, and it had an impact on workers' education. The aim of workers' education became more and more conventional, it was linked to a tripartite arrangement with state, business and labor. We have what is called the Sector Education and Training Authorities in every industry, where the bosses are levied a certain amount every year, and those Training Authorities became very wealthy. They provide training for workers which are called learnerships, which basically are just technical in orientation, and it was a far cry from the class conscious, progressive, liberatory education we had before.

So, the center of gravity of radical education then shifted to community organizations. In 1996, two years after the democratic change, the government moved away from a broadly social democratic program called the Reconstruction and Development Program to GEAR, which is an acronym for Growth, Employment and Redistribution Strategy. There was no growth, not even jobless growth, unemployment continued to rise, and there was no redistribution. Well, I suppose there was redistribution of wealth to the elite, but not the redistribution that was touted or envisaged. So that was a neoliberal, macroeconomic strategy. In fact, it was, as we say, a homegrown structural adjustment program. After this GEAR policy was unveiled, there was once again a lot of militant political activity, many organizations were formed, the Landless People's Movement, the Anti-Privatization Forum, the Treatment Action Campaign for, you know, against pharmaceutical companies for access to anti-retroviral drugs. There were many movements around who linked up with each other and who had a left orientation.

Now this was significant because it came after 1994, where many organizations that had fought against apartheid were dissolved, many members went into government. So, there was a period of a number of years where there was nothing happening. In these new groups, there is a lot of the kind of education for liberation that existed in the past. It's not as huge and as vibrant. Those of us in formal academic spaces have been trying to support and strengthen and learn from those organizations. One of the challenges comes from a kind of narrow identity politics that is very harmful. It is so important to make common

cause across the employed, unemployed, rural, urban, working class, migrant workers, and citizens of a country. All of these different issues are very real. There was a time when people talked about social unionism, in other words, unions must take up issues in the community, such as health care and education. Unions too often focus on a single issue, without making common cause with other movements, sticking to workplace issues, bread and butter issues they talk about. It's a real challenge to break that. In South Africa, we've been attempting to, in a number of unions and social movements, getting together in what they call the working-class summits. Every year they have a summit with bringing all these groups together, in order to have a common program of action. We've had a few national stay aways, not very big. But that is the idea to create that unity in action, a united front. Of course, some see things very narrowly and others understand the importance of alliances.

***You have written that you take a sympathetic but unromanticized view of social movements. What does this mean, in particular, when thinking about learning and education in social movements?***

There are various issues here. One is that it's a very difficult environment we work in. For example, 75 percent of young people in South Africa eke out an existence around survivalist enterprise. From eighteen years to twenty-four years, 75 percent are not in universities, they're not in technical training, they're not employed. They are treated as completely alienated and disposable. Gender is a vitally important area. There is gender-based violence, one of the pathologies that is a consequence of the political economy. There's toxic male masculinity, patriarchy generally. And this exhibits itself in movements. People are also fed the ideology of "you can pull yourselves up by your bootstraps." You know, I was reading somewhere where people say, when people don't have boots, where are the bootstraps? But it's this individualistic ethic, that you have to blame yourself for not working, we don't have apartheid any longer, so what's your problem? You have nobody to blame but yourself, you hear that all the time. Linked to that is also this consumerist ethic, this conspicuous consumption of the elite with their fancy cars and big mansions, a lot of it from corruption, actually. Young people are fed this ideology that you are a success if you make it in terms of wealth, and the latest gadgets or cars.

In that environment, it's when we say we don't want to romanticize it, it's not easy, you have to deal with all of these issues. But there is another aspect to what we were arguing is that there's also immense experience and wisdom and

knowledge. There is this arrogance of university-based researchers or academics, but also generally, the elite, that we have to bring knowledge to the people on the ground. So, being very sensitive to and conscious of this patronizing, condescending view of the poor and of communities, but at the same time, not to be romantic about the difficulties. It's always a tension; it's always a struggle. But the majority of academics do not even acknowledge these issues, a lot of it is extractivist research or charity.

***This sounds connected to your arguments of the importance of informal and incidental learning in movements for social change. Why is this form of learning so important?***

Yes, there's a blurring of lines, it's sometimes not very neat between formal, nonformal, informal and incidental and popular education. I'm very clear on the role of incidental or informal education because I saw it in practice during my twelve years as a trade unionist. It's those moments of strikes, pickets, and protests that are deeply educational moments. Informal and nonformal education are normally seen as education without qualifications or certifications. There is very deep wisdom, scientific knowledge even, without people having formal qualifications.

In South Africa, for the past thirty years, the orthodoxy around creating employment through investment in companies and formal wage labor has been a dismal failure, unemployment has increased. What happens is that people look to get formal qualifications in order to get employed. Now we have the phenomenon of unemployed graduates. What they tell you about supply side and demand side, you know, the emphasis is on education institutions not providing the skills. For people, to be "agile" is the favorite word they use in order to get employment, they are too much in the humanities and social sciences, they need to be more engineers and artisans, etc. But they don't focus on the demand side, where are the jobs? You know, there's an investment sat right here. The rich get richer, and it's not productive. It's financialization. It's speculation. The bourgeoisie is the kind of bourgeoisie that Frantz Fanon talked about, they send their money overseas, they live luxuriously, set up large tax shelters, they don't create productive jobs.

In communities, we've argued that people can have the knowledge, even skills, without needing certificates or qualifications. Qualifications don't make you more competent. We've seen that in our own history. Under apartheid, the government apartheid regime called it job reservation. There were a lot of jobs

that were just reserved for white people. You would have this phenomenon that Black workers understood the job, did the job, weren't paid for it, but couldn't get the qualifications because they were not supposed to do it. And you have these white graduates from technical colleges, Technikons, universities, who come to the workplace, and it was these Black workers who were paid a fraction of the amount of money, but who had to train these white graduates of universities.

That's why we had this recognition of prior learning. They learned on the job. With the progress of technology, it changes constantly. The best way to learn the skills required by the new economy is on the job. You can learn the basics, of course, from formal institutions. We argued for the importance of recognizing nonformal learning. Implementation is another issue. I just spent a few days at a conference talking about precisely this. We were talking about food gardens, you know, the problem of hunger is very real. People are unemployed, we have social security in a welfare system, but it's a pittance, perhaps it keeps people from starving, but it doesn't fill everybody's stomach. Food gardens are where people can have the knowledge of growing their own food to take back to the community and survive on the basis of that, through cooperatives, and various other ways of managing work in the community.

***Another issue you focus on is the importance of history and radical education and learning for social change—both in terms of activists learning from history and avoiding the problem of what you call historical amnesia. Why do you place such importance on history in your work? What is the importance of creating and learning from archives in radical education?***

Well, let's talk about education we've had in the past, incredible movements based on resistance through education, we had the people's education movement, we had "education with production." We had the adult education movement around literacy and numeracy. We've had workers' education, and all of these movements had an epistemology of changing society and resisting the conventional, orthodox ways of education, deeply influenced by Paulo Freire and critical pedagogy, more broadly. It shows that there are other ways of doing things, there are other ways of building a new society. It's not just the model we've inherited from colonialism and apartheid. The critical consciousness, critique of banking education, learning from doing, the kind of critical reflections, the relationship between the educator and the educated, the need for dialogical ways of education. All of this speaks to the past, except in a few areas in the present. It also shows that what those movements in our not-too-distant past, in our

history, were able to achieve—also, alternative education in schools in a number of provinces. So, history is very important for that reason.

There are other reasons as well. You know, it speaks to the situation we are in today in our country around poverty, inequality and unemployment. It didn't just happen naturally. There were particular social forces involved, there were power relations that developed. There wasn't real, fundamental change with the ending of apartheid, we didn't have a revolution. Looking at history speaks to the processes that unfolded in such a way to get us to the position we are in today. Through history, we can discover that there are different classes: there is the bourgeoisie, and it's not wealth that they acquired just through dint of hard work or being clever. But it was really because of the historical processes of apartheid, colonialism, and slavery. For all those reasons, and many more, history is vital.

In some of our work, we've written about people's education, and why that is still relevant and why we don't have it today. And why our formal education system, while they might have coopted some of the language, which is what they did in 1994, in terms of substance, in terms of content, it's very different. In the book I edited with Aziz Choudry, *Reflections on Knowledge, Learning and Social Movements: History's Schools*, we wanted to look at some of these movements and their worth, and the importance of remembering what they've done, while some of the actors are actually still alive. That memory for the present generation and future generations is vital. We have a really good poet and writer, Don Mattera, who died recently. He has a title of one of his novels, where he talks about forced removals and his own education. He used to be a gangster in a street gang and then he became politically conscious. The title of that book is called *Memory is the Weapon*. So, in that sense again, history is vital.

***In your recent writing, you talk about forging a new pedagogy of possibility. Is this connected to this story of loss and decline that you have witnessed with the movements of the 1970s and 1980s in South Africa? How can we build a future vision of radical education from this history?***

Yes, the idea is about drawing on the vision of yesterday and the reality of today to forge a future pedagogy of possibility. Our famous educators from the past in this country, some of them were killed: Steve Biko and Ruth First were assassinated. But all of them, regardless of which liberation movement they came from, saw education as liberating, not as maintaining the status quo. They had a particular vision around education for society. The social movements and political organizations they were allied to play a very big role in creating a particular

atmosphere of solidarity, emphasizing the importance of knowledge, study, and the purpose of education, which wasn't an instrumental purpose. That's what we have now with human capital theory. It was a broad view of education for liberation, in all its aspects, where song and dance and music and poetry and literature and language played a role, not just those subjects and disciplines that have a purchase in the marketplace. Even those subjects of the natural sciences can be a powerful tool, if they are used not for profit, but for meeting community needs.

The reality we have today is far removed from that vision of yesterday. We face so many problems in the education system and in society. Education today is separated from the social, economic, political and psychosocial. In the vision we had, there was a direct link and dialectic between all of those aspects. Now it's a very different dialectic, with just education and the economy. I mean, they call us economic determinists! But we try and show that, actually, they are the economic determinists, because they expect education to deliver for economic growth. Education is not the panacea, though of course, it's indispensable, it's critical.

So, forging a pedagogy of possibility is to speak to that vision. There were serious attempts, post 1994, to do things differently, to speak to our pasts. Some were involved in "education with production." The division between technical education and academic education, it's got a long history throughout the world. What they tried to do is combine the two, while we were struggling against apartheid. It's the whole thing about execution and conception: the bosses are the ones with the brains, so they think they are the thinkers, and the workers work with their hands, so they are the doers, they must just execute the decisions made elsewhere. I think it's really essential, it's combining the head and the hand, and some people say the heart as well. What I am trying to do is to give examples of the attempts made by those people involved in those movements, to get the new government to accept these ideas and support them. Another example is that of Neville Alexander, who talked about spatial apartheid. Because to a great extent, we still have the apartheid cities and towns, and we need a way of schooling to break those divisions, which will also tackle the redistribution of resources, including teachers, and also address questions of racism, etc. Forging a pedagogy of possibility is about speaking to the very deep alienation that many people feel now, the anomie, the feeling of helplessness. I call on educators to reinstall a sense of possibility, by speaking to our past, speaking to those movements, but also supporting people today who are attempting to do things differently.

***Is the pedagogy of possibility connected to the creation of a new imaginary of what we want from the world? Is this part of freeing education from the language of market fundamentalism that we have all been fed for the past thirty years?***

That's absolutely part of the debate of forging a pedagogy of possibility. There is a quotation from Toni Morrison that speaks about the violence of language—language that “renders the suffering of millions mute,” that “locks creative people into cages of inferiority and hopelessness,” that “laps vulnerabilities” and blocks “new knowledge” and the “mutual exchange of ideas.” That quotation speaks exactly to what is happening today. In our faculty board meetings in our University Senate, they constantly talk about the rate of return on investments, about clients and stakeholders. All that language is from business. As our institutions are more and more corporatized, that becomes the common sense, in the Gramscian sense of the phrase. So, counterhegemonic work and challenging that language is vital and important.

But there is another thing about the dichotomy today between the market and the state, or private enterprise, as they call it, or the free market, which isn't free. Nationalization is also a problematic dichotomy. It made sense to us many years ago, but today we've seen how state actors have undermined people's confidence in politicians, because of the corruption. This is also what happened in so-called socialist countries, with this bureaucratization and people in the state apparatus become a new elite. Issues such as climate catastrophe, issues of national borders, and nation states with migration, which is going to increase more and more for various reasons, has to make us rethink what we didn't consider previously. While I give these examples of history, there are also new developments, which we have to be absolutely cognizant of, and which must feature in the pedagogy of possibility. Building on that history, but with new issues, is the whole metaphor of forging. I had this image of an anvil, with obviously the hammer, but also the anvil resting on the solid evidence that we have from history.

***Something that many of us are struggling with is how you move between the spaces of nonformal education and your involvement with social movements and the workers' movement, which are outside the university, while also being based in the university itself. How do you see the relationship between these two different educational spaces?***

It's a tension, it's not easy. It's a constant struggle for a number of reasons, because the academy increasingly is very demanding—the kind of performance

management, bureaucracy, you have to deal with the workload, which increases all the time. You must be lean and mean, you need to bring in money, you need to have a certain number of publications, otherwise you perish—publications in high impact journals, which are refereed. You know the story; it's increasingly what academics are facing globally. Some people call it academic capitalism. So, you're not left with a lot of time to devote to the organizations you are committed to outside of the ivory tower, outside of the university gates. That requires time, it requires building confidence and trust, because of what has happened to these communities. You don't get instant results, but also the knowledge that is produced, the advances made, are often not recognized in the university, it doesn't help in your own career as an academic.

I am, to a great extent, an incidental academic to start with. It happened without any preordained trajectory, I was poached from the union movement, at a time when at that particular interstice, it became very difficult for some of us on the left to remain in the union movement. We were being purged, because we didn't go along with the corporatization, the investment companies, the undemocratic decision-making. So, the university was a kind of refuge for me initially. It was easier about twenty years ago than it is now. The demands are very different today.

I was recently asked by the head of the Teaching and Learning Department at our university to give a master class. She said, Salim, you are an academic, but you are also an activist, and therefore, you need to show people that academia can be good for activists. My instincts were saying, no, don't get involved in this. But then I thought, let me do this. My concern is the false divide between scholarship and activism. This is the understanding of activism, that it doesn't have scholarship. It's not worthy. For some reason, it's just advocacy, as some people call it. My view is that real scholarship is activism, and activism without scholarship will only reinforce the status quo.

These are the quandaries and dilemmas, there is no simple answer. All I can say is that it's a struggle and a lot of the work is around the exigencies, the real urgency of getting involved. It's something we do. It's not so much pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will, but it's understanding that the contradictions in society are such that things are going to change, and they might change for the worse. Therefore, it becomes even more essential for us, to use this American phrase, to step up to the plate, those of us who can. For particular historical reasons, it's not too easy for the university to get rid of me. They tried during the Fees Must Fall Movement. It doesn't mean that they won't succeed, but I'm old now. A lot of young academics face this dilemma and it's very, very real. The

university demands you to be obsequious, and not to be critical or challenge some of the decisions from above. So, it is a little difficult, but for those of us who can speak, as Edward Said says in his *Representations of the Intellectual*, we need to do what we can do.

The reason I said that things might change for the worse is that with neoliberalism, it doesn't provide the answers. Liberals, not just conservatives, but liberals around the world, whether it's the Democratic Party in the United States, or the Workers Party in Brazil, they are the non-fulfilment of what they're trying to do, and this gives rise to the Bolsonaros and the Trumps. Here in South Africa, we have a similar phenomenon. The evangelical rightwing churches are a huge source of reaction, whether it's targeting women or reproductive rights, or LGBTI, or Islamophobia or pro-Israel. They work together with the traditional leadership, the chiefs and opportunistic politicians who want the popular vote. Xenophobia is something they latch on to as well. So, it might go even more right wing, and therefore, it becomes even more necessary for those of us in some of these spaces to challenge their hegemony, to support and strengthen counterhegemonic movements, to link struggles and write about them.

***This brings me to the question about the movement in universities now to decolonize the university. Decolonization has become a buzzword in the university. But what does it mean to speak of “decolonizing” in the neoliberal university? Is this even possible?***

Well, the short answer is that decolonization properly understood is not possible under the neoliberal regime at the university, under corporatization. It's exactly what you say, we've gone through a number of buzzwords. Initially, it was transformation. After apartheid, the whole focus was about transformation, from apartheid education to the new democratic order. But, of course, transformation became very superficial. It was just about representation, which is not unimportant, but it was superficial. Today, many of the universities are no longer white as they were not too long ago, both in terms of staffing and the student demography. But the new leadership has taken on the old way of doing things. So, for us, it hasn't been meaningful transformation. We've critiqued the understanding of transformation, which isn't radical or deep, but is what we call a tick box exercise, in terms of numbers.

Then we had the Fees Must Fall Movement, which questioned everything, the methodology, the kind of influences, the purpose of higher education, the privatization. But also, decolonization featured prominently in this movement.

So, the new buzzword was decolonization, the university leadership embraced it. But can you have decolonization when the university runs along corporate lines? Those are the questions we raised, and we show that you can't. Now, the most recent buzzword is university community engagement. I was asked to give a talk by the Council of Higher Education on reimagining community university relations, I was saying let it not become another buzzword, like transformation, like decolonization. Community engagement has become the fashion, but what people mean by it is very different from what we are talking about in the past.

The university has this amazing facility to coopt language and render it impotent in various ways. But what it also does is it creates spaces to speak against the grain, to challenge some of these things, to show why it is superficial that you just have black faces for white, or women for men. You think that is transformation, not that those issues are unimportant, they certainly are. But I've seen just as many Black people behave as badly as white people, in power relations and upholding neoliberalism today. I think that if we see these institutions as sites of struggle, there's always a chink in the armor and we try to find ways of making ourselves heard. You can't do this as individuals, you need organizations, you need a collective. It's difficult, of course, as we all know, because of the demands, and because of the individualism and careerism. It's not an easy struggle. I think the other thing is to make common cause with workers on campus and students. There are a number of campaigns. So, predating the Fees Must Fall campaign, we had the campaign of insourcing workers who were outsourced. That was important because workers and students and some academics made common cause. I think that is also important. But it's also to find ways for movements outside the university gates to put pressure on the university administration, management and the politicians.

***I want to ask finally about the importance of indigenous forms of education in the radical education tradition. Many radical educators today focus on indigenous education, but you start instead with workers' education and emphasize the importance of class in thinking about radical education. Why is class so important, and how does this affect how we should think about indigenous education?***

The phrase that comes to mind is racial capitalism, which I think is much more appropriate to discuss South Africa, both pre-1994 and post-1994. The idea here is that apartheid laws and racism were the scaffolding through which economic inequality was built. Most of the racial apartheid laws had economic

meaning, whether it was the Bantustans or homeland system, which became reservoirs of cheap labor and the way to divide the working class, but also to avoid bosses having to pay the social wage. Workers were recruited as a form of super exploited labor. It was the best way of capital accumulation in a short space of time for a minority of people, because it also dealt with the issue of controls. The pass laws, for instance, had a similar role of controlling and dividing labor.

The idea of racial capitalism goes back to Walter Rodney and CLR James, that you can't see imperialism in just racial terms alone, and the class issue and capital accumulation is vital. But you can't think of class without racism, either. Both are mistakes. It doesn't mean that all instances of racism, or racial prejudice and bigotry can be reduced to issues of class. But I'm saying, in terms of the way society developed, in a structural way, racism played that particular role. Sometimes, because of this process, racism had a life of its own. But if one doesn't see the bigger picture, you can make serious errors of tactics and organization.

There are people who just focus on race. But I always give the example of South Africa today, which has a Black majority government, 85 percent of the population is Black, but we still have capitalism, and we still have poverty, and for me, that is racism as well. Some of the Black youth today say, why do you tell us about these old dead white men like Karl Marx? But they love Amilcar Cabral and Samora Machel and Walter Rodney, and I say, well, you know, they were Marxists. Our Marxism started off, not by Western academic Marxists, it was the people who were the Che Guevaras and the Ho Chi Mins and Angela Davis's and Leila Khaled's and that's how we were anti-apartheid. We were anti-white, given our existential situation, but when we were tortured by Black policemen, or beaten over the head by Black policemen, or today when we have a really corrupt neoliberal agency, the South African Communist Party in government, you know, we understand the importance of class and capitalism as well.

This was always our understanding, unlike the ANC and the SACP [South African Communist Party]. They argued for their famous two stage theory of revolution: we'll first get rid of the apartheid regime, the white minority regime, and then we'll think of another system, and we agree with socialism, but that shouldn't be the issue now. Thirty years later, we're still stuck with the first stage. So, when you talk about racial capitalism, what we argued, in the Black Consciousness Movement and left organizations, was that you can't fight against apartheid and racism separately from capitalism, and racism will persist if we have a capitalist society, given our history and the forces at work.

Coming back to your question about indigenous education, in the context of things like the climate crisis, the attraction of a lot of indigenous knowledge for people who consider themselves Marxist—particularly there is a lot of advances on that in South America, where people have linked up with indigenous struggles and indigenous groups—is they see that in their philosophy, the idea is to live in balance with nature, that nature has rights, that they are the guardians of nature. That's a powerful understanding. It makes us humble, we don't have all the answers, certainly. Therefore, I think we need to incorporate this going forward in forging the pedagogy of possibility. The whole question of ecopedagogy is important, and we can draw on the wisdom of indigenous knowledge and indigenous society. We had a talk last week, from our new director, June Bam, who has written a brilliant book called *Ausi Told Me*. Ausi are female knowledge bearers in indigenous societies. We also had a seminar by a colleague of ours in Cape Town, who have a major struggle at a place called Two Rivers, land that for the indigenous community has significance for them spiritually, but where Amazon is building their corporate headquarters. It's a huge struggle and the Cape Town municipality has sided with Amazon, there is the whole question of they bring in jobs. The indigenous community is divided, as some people have been bought off by the company, and gangsters have become involved, and people have been threatened. So, what I'm saying is that it's not in isolation, and in some countries more so than others. In Brazil, the number of indigenous people that are killed standing against the cattle industry and the loggers and so on. So, you know, I think there's a lot for us to rethink, reimagine, incorporate in our praxis going forward, and ally with those movements, fighting those struggles.



# Art, Education, and Collectivity in a Time of Catastrophe

Dmitry Vilensky

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*Dmitry Vilensky is a co-founder of the Chto Delat collective that was formed in 2003 in St. Petersburg, Russia, by a group of artists, critics, philosophers, and writers “with the goal of merging political theory, art and activism” (Chto Delat 2024a). In 2013, Chto Delat set up the School of Engaged Art as “a radical art education initiative to establish a community of creative workers who use art language as a tool for the transformation of society based on the values of justice and equality” (Visible 2025). From its origins, the School was politically engaged and was repeatedly visited and raided by the police; but following Russia’s war on Ukraine in 2022, the School came under increased state pressure and ended up closing down, with the core members of Chto Delat leaving Russia as political exiles, scattering to different parts of the world (Vacarro 2023). Vilensky moved to Berlin, Germany, where he applied for political asylum. In Germany, he and other Chto Delat members launched the School of Emergencies as “a transdisciplinary school for artists, writers, researchers and activists ... to create a situated and engaged knowledge which enable ... participants to collectively rethink and cultivate new models of tactical and strategic survivance in the hard days of crisis, wars and lost futures” (Chto Delat 2024b).*

*Vilensky and Chto Delat are part of a broader tradition of using art for radical education and political organizing (Desai 2020). Popular educators have long used the creative arts as tools for building social movements and organizing within local communities (Barndt 2011). But the School of Engaged Art focused more on a different project of developing a community of artists who engaged with political questions through their artistic work and linked their art production and identity*

as artists to agendas of radical social change. For Vilensky, this requires education in art theory, history, and practice, but also in other fields ranging from philosophy to political economy to sociology. There is a politics of artistic form, both in the sense of art imagining and bringing into being alternative realities, but also in terms of censored forms of art in authoritarian states, such that the commitment to producing certain forms of art becomes, in and of itself, the subversive act of a dissident artist (Baigell and Baigell 1995). In founding the School of Engaged Art, Chto Delat were inspired and influenced by previous models: including UNOVIS in Vitebsk during the 1920s, a collective of politically committed art teachers and students who sought to bring “art into the streets and into everyday revolutionary life” in the early days of the Russian Revolution (Rouhan 2020); and the residential, democratic Black Mountain College in North Carolina that ran from the 1930s through 1950s, and placed artistic production at the center of its educational practice (Muir 2024).

In Vilensky’s conversation, four key themes emerge. One that stands out immediately is the relationship of radical education to broader, national and global social and political contexts, in terms of what becomes possible, impossible or difficult to accomplish—this is a theme that finds echoes in Salim Vally’s discussion of radical education in South Africa during the apartheid and post-apartheid eras, and Julian Boal’s reflections on the differences of doing Theatre of the Oppressed in the 1960s as opposed to the current, neoliberal era. Partly, this concern is shaped by Vilensky’s situation of speaking from a position of political exile, as a refugee in a country where he has been uprooted and dislocated, and has no strong ties to local social, political, and cultural contexts. But Vilensky also speaks of the varying degrees of repression that Chto Delat and the School of Engaged Art experienced in Russia, and how, at times, the challenge of doing engaged art in an authoritarian state actually helped to focus, fuel, and direct the work of radical education. What Vilensky calls a level of “reasonable risk” can bring a sense of “adrenaline, closeness, intimacy.”

Speaking from a place of exile and after the School of Engaged Art had been forcibly shut down, it is understandable that Vilensky focuses in his conversation on the limits of radical education and action, and how we can navigate times of catastrophe and emergency. Vilensky’s argument that radical educators and activists can focus too much on utopian hope and vision, and not enough on pessimism and despair, is an important reminder that at the heart of what are often called utopian pedagogies is precisely this balancing of a “pedagogy of hope” with a “pedagogy of fear” (Papastephanou 2016); or in Freire’s (1985) words, a “dramatic

unity of denunciation and annunciation.” In the context of early twenty-first-century Russia, Vilensky argues that sweeping social and political change is often just not possible, and radical education and action are better focused on creating subaltern counter-publics or autonomous spaces of prefigurative practice. Again, one can find such arguments elsewhere in the field of radical education, as in the distinction drawn by Myles Horton (1990) and other US civil rights movement activists between “organizational periods,” which are not about causing social change but preparing for times when social change is possible, which Horton calls “social movement periods.”

In reflecting on the differences of working in the Russian and western (German) national contexts, Vilensky draws attention to the varying significance of formal and nonformal education modes. One of the motivations for Chto Delat in setting up the School of Engaged Art was the lack of formal art academies in Russia that focused on teaching contemporary, modernist, and critical approaches to art. The lack of such formal institutions was, on the one hand, limiting and disabling; but, on the other, it created both the need and space to develop things nonformally, in grassroots, community contexts. In Germany, despite supposedly greater freedoms, Vilensky argues that the highly institutionalized environment and expanded possibilities for learning and doing different kinds of art in formal academies suppress or remove the need and opportunity for doing such work in nonformal, grassroots spaces. Formalization of art education is not just a gain, but also a limitation. Vilensky’s reflections are a useful reminder that the social relationships between the formal and nonformal spheres of education vary across time and space.

Finally, what comes across throughout Vilensky’s conversation is a deep commitment to the importance of fostering rich democratic practice in radical education spaces. This shows up, of course, in the constitution of Chto Delat as a collective, the focus of the School of Engaged Art on developing collaborative rather than individual art and performance projects, as well as experiments with different forms of communal living and activity. But it is also a concern with fostering the democratic habit of engaging in debate and disagreement, and resisting the tendency that Vilensky sees in contemporary society of shutting down dialogue when disagreements and differences arise. It is a commitment to finding ways of experiencing collective, democratic life in an embodied way, through body exercises and physical activities. “Any form of emancipatory politics must come from collective problematization of ways how people can get together,” Vilensky argues (Jandric 2017); the problem in Russia is the need “to compensate for a lack of general knowledge and practice of inclusive process in society” (Angelotti 2017).

*The formation of Chto Delat and the School of Engaged Art constitute efforts to use radical art and education to foster such knowledge and practice.*

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***Can we begin by talking about the School of Engaged Art that you and the Chto Delat collective created in St. Petersburg over a decade ago in 2013. What led you to want to create a school and what were the central aims for this school?***

You have to understand that Chto Delat is a collective of artists who have worked together now for more than twenty years. In 2013, it was a certain moment for us, when it was really important to share our knowledge with others. This was quite traditional, because most artists have a certain kind of educational position. But we decided to establish our own school, because there was an absence of any real kind of contemporary art education institution in Russia. Also, we saw that the main value of our artistic work is educational value or transformative value. We are not so much into the market; we are not so much into having institutional careers. But for us, when we did a book, when we did a film, when we did a play, we were always thinking that people can watch it and learn something from it. Of course, they also have to enjoy it, and it should be inspiring. That's why our motto was, after Brecht, entertain, educate, inspire. We are quite serious about the entertaining function, that art should be entertaining, otherwise people don't really get it. Then it should be inspiring for you to transform yourself and it should be educational.

I wouldn't say that we were original in setting up our school, as so many artists before us and after us have also done this. What is original is that we operate as a collective, an artistic union. The School also helped to bring all of the group together, because we as artists are only a small part of the collective, most of our collective are philosophers, sociologists, poets, and so on, and in the framework of the school, we could come together and teach together. So, that was helpful in bringing us closer. We ran modules on the history of modernist art, aesthetics, body studies, critical and poetical writings, and English for artists, alongside practical seminars. We met with students one week in a month for an intense period, combining modules and seminars, guest speakers and public events. But the School was not a place for learning about whatever is considered good in contemporary art. Instead, we asked our students to take a position in a world where the main battle is the fight over ideological tendencies. We called it a School, but it was more like a crash-course in leftist approaches to art and pedagogy.

The School of Engaged Art was funded by the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation and some other foundations. Luxemburg was special because it is a political foundation, they don't fund artistic projects. But, because it was about education, we managed to find a common language, as the Germans understand a romantic tradition of *politische Bildung*, educating civic society, educating people through aesthetic experience. Nobody gets into politics by default, people need to read a book, sing a song, watch a film, and then they start to say, aha, this may be politics, I would like to be part of it. Art plays an incredibly important role in political subjectivation. It's pretty much the core of leftist politics. It's a call for justice and how you bring justice into the aesthetic experience, bring something which was not present and give it a voice or create a situation when it becomes important. Art is always a gesture of negation and a call for the world to be otherwise. Art is essential for human becoming.

So, we started the school. But at the same time, the war with Ukraine started in 2014 and that's why the school was permanently in an emergency situation. Because it was not like things were normal. You couldn't plan anything. It was sanctions from the very beginning, the deterioration of the economy, a kind of lost generation. It was really hard years and then after that, we had five years of Covid.

***What is the idea of “engaged art”? Does this come from a particular tradition, or is this a concept that you developed yourselves?***

We use the term engaged art in quite a specific way. Because we need to be careful about words with their different nuances. Usually, people talk about socially engaged art. We didn't say socially engaged; we say engaged art. We are much more into the concept of radical autonomy and creating a certain kind of change by escaping the social and problematizing the school as a counter public sphere. Because civic society in Russia in those days was a fucking conservative society, so you really need to withdraw and regroup. For example, in Russia, you can't organize LGBTQ+ events openly, you have to hide. It doesn't mean you don't do them, because it's your friends, your comrades. But at the same time, it's not like we can just do this openly with everyone, by going into society or doing social projects with the local residents. If you do, they might kill you. So, for us, dissident nature was important. We engaged with politics, with many hot issues, but I wouldn't call it social investment. Social engagement can only come when there is a certain balance in society, I would say 30 or 40 percent support. Let's say gender issues are fine to talk about, then you can work with Big

Society. But when you are in a situation where less than 10 percent supports the issue, then you're completely in another situation. Then you should really build spaces for regrouping, for raising consciousness, but in a smaller group.

***What were some of the models and inspiration for the School of Engaged Art? You have written about UNOVIS in Vitebsk and Black Mountain College as starting points—what did you take from these earlier models? Were there models and inspirations other than these two examples?***

For us, the school was about peer-to-peer or artist-to-artist practice. Also, there was a focus on transgenerational learning, because when we started, we were already in the situation of kind of acting like parents to the younger people. We have a few pillars, one is very important, the principle of collectivity. We are not making individual studio practice, we are not interested in this. We always wanted to form a collective and teach collective to collective. A second pillar is that we implemented a lot of body knowledge or embodied knowledge, a lot collective, performative practices. These are central to building a certain kind of trust that is important for us when we actually build our politics. We need to build basic trust and solidarity in this work.

We followed the good old traditions of one generation of artists trying to inspire younger generations with their own beliefs, fears, hopes, and poetics. The confidential circles that existed around dissident artists in the Soviet Union and Eastern world, in Czechoslovakia or Estonia were inspiring to us. UNOVIS was also quite interesting, because it was a school during war time, when they started in 1919, it was during the Russian Civil War. Also, the relationships in UNOVIS between Marc Chagall and Kazimir Malevich and the younger generation were special. Black Mountain College was a model because it was established in part by emigrants from Europe, who brought to the United States a new vision of art and the contemporary situation when the United States was still super provincial and very limited.

***Many of the modules you ran at the school focused on the theory, history and practice of art. But you have also spoken of how many in Russia have lost the language of grassroots politics, democratic process and everyday political engagement. How did you seek to do a form of political education in the School with students?***

It is about dealing with the shifting political situation right now. I became fascinated with Franco Bifo Berardi and his idea of quitting or deserting in his

book, *Quit Everything*. We can complain about the collapse of democracy, which is true, but we don't really understand how this collapse has happened through incredible historical pressures, and why the rise of new fascism creates deep anthropological change. People are coming into a new situation of cognition, a new epistemological situation, and Bifo suggests that in this situation, we have to withdraw. I was a bit skeptical, because I always thought that there should be a dialectic between withdrawing and engagement. But at the same time, you have to be super confident in the Russian situation to seek to collaborate with Putinist institutions and be part of that broken society. It's the same with how capitalism penetrates all of society. So, this is why we share with our students our understanding of how the act of hiding is a political act. You hide, and at the same time, you develop your own values, your own kind of vision, subjectivity, a new type of relations. This is the point, and I would call it politics.

In current debates, many people say, oh, you should go out into the street, you have to practice, you have to kick out Putin and the FSB [Federal Security Service] and all the military, you have to be brave. But then people understand very early on that you can't do it like that, it's impossible, whether in Russia or Syria or Turkey or Lebanon. You have to create something else, and actually, there are some limits. Of course, you still feel excited when you see people protesting in the streets. Oh my god, wow, there are thousands of them! But then what? Then, nothing. People say, Free Palestine, Free Palestine, we are in Berkeley for Free Palestine. Great, guys. And then what? What do you mean by this? Then you have the same opposition with very limited and stupid ideas, it is the collapse of any form of social and traditional democratic politics. Now we have the culmination of the Trump election in the United States, the Netanyahu's madness in Israel, a deep madness and suicidal madness, and the madness of Putin and madness everywhere. So, people try to do a little bit to keep them sane, it doesn't change much but helps certain ideas to survive.

***What are some of the pedagogical approaches you used in the School? You have spoken about doing body practices or exercises and learning plays with the students—what are these, where do they come from, and why are they important?***

Traditionally in school, what you do is you sit, you listen to lectures or do exercises or painting or something like this. But for us, discursive practice should be embodied, it should come from your body. Your body should speak a lot, how you move, how you touch your neighbor. That's why it was a very

strong accent, about 25 percent of the time was dedicated to body practices. They come from modern dance, conceptual post-performance, and so on, we invited many guest teachers and practitioners. Also, this has a certain relation to healing, because most of the young generation are really psychologically broken, so they need this.

With the learning plays, we come from the Brecht tradition and also draw on Augusto Boal's Forum Theatre. For us, what was interesting about this is how you can do a kind of case study, you can involve a lot of research and at the same time creating narratives, because art is pretty much about telling stories and also about the corporeal behavior, how you stay in this space, how you communicate with other people. The learning play is something which you play live, it can be bigger scale or small scale, something which you do quickly or that you need maybe one semester to develop. Sometimes, we combined this with learning films. We did a play, but we did it for the camera, as we understand that the public comes into the composition. With the learning film, you can have a bigger outreach. With a learning play, only the community around you can join. But with a film, you have another dimension of audience, you can put it on the internet, you can have seminar based around it, film is a very special medium where people can learn a lot.

***Much of the School's emphasis was on forms of collective learning and practice and communal living and engagement. Why are these so important, and how do they differ from the individualized forms of learning and practice we often encounter elsewhere in education and art?***

Exactly this, it is a crucial difference. Our program wasn't focused on developing the individual projects of our students. Instead, we were trying to build new forms of collective work, to create knowledge in order to conceive ideas of possible new communities. At the same time, we never say that collective practice is easier. And here comes the problem, because people, particularly in their heavy mental state, are very unlikely to do something which is demanding, and collectivity is demanding. It's about agonism, different forms of confrontation and conflict. For our generation and many collectives, we say this is very productive, it is how new things are created. But if you are in a big mental state, sometimes it's difficult. That's why collectives fall apart. They find they are depressed and can't stand it anymore.

Right now, we have a new politics of dialogue. You know, when you encounter something which is not acceptable for you or maybe strange, you simply cancel

this. In my time, it was more about confrontational dialogue. I disagree with you, that's why we need to talk right now. Today, the position is, I disagree with you, that's why we don't talk. This is radically different. Because for us, it was super interesting. Ok, you hate my war? Talk. You disagree with my article? Let's talk. Oh, you don't like my mom? Ok, thank you. This is very much a pedagogical problem, because I definitely see now in our process of discussion and critique, it's very limited. I know that I can't go as far as I should because there are all of these new protocols around sensitivity. I can't say, no, I don't like this and here is why. It has to come through very gentle questioning, can I ask you about this and this and this?

Many artists create different kinds of temporary collectives, especially if they are in film or theatre, when they perform. But true collectives are quite different, they need duration. Many artistic collectives are one project collectives, and after that, they disappear. Despite all of the pressure we faced, we managed to spread the activity of our graduates all over the city, in different cities and everywhere. They built self-organized spaces, kinds of companies, apartment shows, they were still really well connected together in a collective way.

***Part of the context for creating the School of Engaged Art was the state of formal art schools in Russia, which you have described as being horribly conservative. The situation is different in places like the UK. But at the same time, you write of unease and concern with the "academization" of art education. What is the advantage or disadvantage of doing art education in formal vs nonformal, community, grassroots contexts? What should be the ideal here?***

Yes, the local situation in Russia was that there was no art education in the Western sense of contemporary art, meaning critical procedure and modernism. That kind of canon was absent, there were no art academies for this. That's why there developed the late Soviet tradition of confidential circles of dissident artists, of people coming together who shared these interests. Most of the art schools in Russia were a kind of craft school, how to paint realistic paintings, or how to work with marble or clay or whatever. It is completely different from what you have in the Western world.

There was a split in Russia between the Western canon and a kind of socialist realism canon. After the Soviet era, there was an attempt to implement more of the Western canon of art production, modernism, critique and also research. But it didn't work because the whole institution continued to be controlled by a very conservative older generation. Sometimes, they said, we don't want to copy

the Western canon because it is a form of colonization. But our own canon then became incredibly conservative in reaction. It's about church, it's about religion, it's about family values. There is no abstraction, it is realistic. I have nothing against realism, I'm also for realism, but it was a conservative version of realism.

In this context, doing contemporary art education informally was organic, because formal art education simply did not exist. Even very modest approaches to contemporary art were kind of criminalized. This was the case in the Soviet time, and somehow it continues now. So, then it was natural to do something informally outside of formal institutions. And this brings lots of benefits, because you can have amazing participants.

Now, after we have moved to the West, to Germany, I feel that here there is no space for extra-institutional education. For example, we started our School of Emergencies, that is mostly oriented towards a community of political refugees, as for us, it was important to bring them into connection with the local situation. It can be Serbia, it can be Armenia, it can be Stockholm, it can be Berlin, but wherever it is, we wanted to overcome the ghettoization. Because most of the émigré communities, they mix with each other, they go to the same café or bar or clubs. But after two years of trying to do this, we discovered that it is impossible. Partly, it is because they don't have time, there is a second level of exploitation they are dealing with. When you are a fresh migrant, you are very busy dealing with many things, learning the language, the economy, living conditions, your mental state. It is much more complicated than before. But also, people don't use this space because they integrate instead into institutions here. For example, many of our ex-students from Russia right now have become students in German art academies.

So, the whole possibility of building the kind of informal school that we used to do in St. Petersburg is gone. I'm talking right now from the German perspective, but I think it is the same in the UK, a little bit in the United States, in Scandinavia, there is no extra-institutional space for kids who want to be engaged with art and politics. All the kids are involved in education, they are all busy. They go to good universities, which have very good professors, people with very interesting art and political practices. You can go and study with them in a proper academy and get a stipend and open up possibilities and have a wonderful infrastructure. You build your career going to bachelor's degree, master's, PhD, have a gallery. You can write applications every day. But, at the same time, as compared to Russia and maybe Iran and other places, it is a heavily institutionalized landscape, so it is very complicated

to participate in this kind of market. There is no space really for our kind of informal education in this so-called Western space.

***The School of Engaged Art ran in St. Petersburg for about nine or ten years. Looking back now, what do you see as its most important accomplishments and legacies? What did you learn from running this school?***

Before we were forced to emigrate to Germany, our response would have been much more cheerful, a kind of optimistic report. Wow, look what we have done! Actually, on the Chto Delat website, there are reflections on our accomplishments and all of our graduates. But now, you can see how ephemeral it all is. Now, everything is gone. Eighty to ninety percent of our graduates have left Russia. Some of them are in Armenia, some in Georgia, some in Israel, some in Turkey, some in Scandinavia, some in Argentina. It's gone, the whole community has ceased to exist, and we couldn't find the foundations to reassemble. We were trying to do this with the School of Emergencies, but it hasn't worked.

Right now, outside of the formal, professional sphere of work, the School has created quite good personal connections. So, people, wherever they travel, they have a couch to stay with someone. When they are in the same place, they have friends and connections. In this sense, yes, it is still a kind of community in which we can help each other, and we are always trying to help our former students in their new life. But professionally speaking, it is like a legacy or something in the past, which is now encapsulated, as the things that we were doing, for example, in St. Petersburg in 2017. There is an online archive, there are memoirs and memories. But as a feasible material outcome, it is all gone.

We can reflect on the School of Engaged Art as an already closed period. Like historians, we can say it's done, but can we talk about any influence of the former participants in the School, or the general vision of the School on other communities? Because you and I are talking now about the School; and just today, I opened my emails and we have been invited to Sophia, Bulgaria to do a version of our School of Emergencies with their community. So, there are certain kinds of after-effects. In recent days, I have been in a very low mood. Maybe in a few months, I will feel differently. I think that maybe we need a few more years to see the influence or effect of our collective activity. We still don't know how the life trajectories will unfold with our graduates. At the moment, it is just two years into exile, it is a very short time period to navigate to be able to start something new.

***Are there things that you might have done differently with the School of Engaged Art, knowing what you know now?***

Given our current situation, I would definitely try to run the School more internationally. For us, at the time, it was important to start the school in Russia and in Russian. Because, in parallel, we also had a lot of temporary education projects internationally, where we teach in English, as a kind of lingua franca of our industry. It's ok. But for us, it was a great pleasure to teach in our mother tongue. It is much more nuanced than what you get in translations. I would say that with our online archive of the School of Engaged Art, we have only maybe 10 percent of the texts in English, and 90 percent is in Russian. So, it is difficult for outsiders to reach. But we were happy about it, because we said, crap, we as a collective, as artists, we have enough of an international presence, and it's nice to be a little bit apart. We also had a lot of speculation against the colonialism of the English language, and we wanted to do something more. But now, I think this was a mistake. If I could go back, I would try to have better balance with the international side of the School, to have more in English, to develop more cooperation with international schools elsewhere. We decided, ok, we are here in St. Petersburg, and we are fine. But, you know, we were not fine at all.

Another thing maybe, I would dream that we had much more professionalism in a good sense. We always lacked resources, but at the same time, we lacked fundraising. Sometimes, people were too lazy, too easy, we moved from one site to another. We didn't manage to create a proper kind of institutional base, which would maybe have helped in the future. We weren't badly organized, but we improvised many things. Yeah, but at the same time, then it would be a different story. Maybe our legacy is also coming from that informality, that easiness. You could come in at eleven at night and drink vodka together in the school, which was also nice, instead of sitting down at the computer and writing out one funding application after another.

***In 2022, you were forced to close the School of Engaged Art and leave Russia to come to Berlin. Can you talk about this experience? Was this directly linked to work you were doing at the school?***

Yes, we closed the School shortly after the full-scale invasion by Russia of Ukraine in February 2022. We immediately stopped what we were doing and ran the School in a more clandestine way. There was a lot of protest activity during those first few months, it was very dangerous. People were getting arrested every day, and that's why we understood that it was impossible to continue. It was

not even our decision really. Actually, we were in a very good shape before the war started. We had our best course intake, a large program, and we had even reached a kind of self-sustainability. We managed to find a new composition. The School started to work from the morning hours until late in the day; before that, we were always kind of an evening school, and that was quite amazing. But then, everything collapsed completely.

***Even when you started the School of Engaged Art in 2013, Russia was a hostile public space for critical, radical perspectives and actions. What challenges and possibilities for doing radical education and art effectively exist in repressive national political situations? What changed in Russia over this decade that made it impossible to continue this work?***

Let's come to terms with what we mean here by radical. I would suggest a modest understanding. For me, radical means something which is not really welcomed in the wider society. If you do something in the West, whatever you do, mostly you can hope that it will be supported by society. In a repressive society, it's the opposite. If you do even conventional things, like LGBTQ issues, which are very much welcomed in the West, in Russia, it is dangerous. You can't simply do it openly, because it can have consequences, some repression. That's why we call it a repressive society.

But with repression, it depends on the level. When we started out, it was not so heavy. But right now, you can get put in jail for a serious amount of time. There are comparative degrees of Russia being repressive and authoritative. When we were operating and rousing during the period from 2013 to 2022, there was a lot of free space. You could do what I was talking about before, deserting, quitting, withdrawing from society and creating your own counter public space. It was what Bifo in Italy talks about as spaces for social autonomy. It was endangered autonomy, because you could be punished for something. But at the same time, it was a kind of reasonable risk to live that life.

Of course, before 2022, we were visited many times by the police. But compared to now, it was innocent, I was not afraid of what they could do. They shut our place down. Ok. They shut it once, they shut it twice. Ok, we found a new place, no problem. We found a better place. In this situation, that was what was radical. It was important. It was an interesting experiment of creating social, artistic autonomy inside of a repressive society, and this autonomy could have different kinds of implementation. It could be artistic work, films, theatre, street actions, participation in political events, in unions and things like that. Actually,

maybe you also get addicted to this, because when you work under the pressure of that form of reasonable risk, you feel a certain kind of adrenaline, closeness, intimacy. So, that's an advantage. That was the social autonomy that was possible for us then. After 2022, I would say that 95 percent of this autonomy is gone. Maybe 5 percent is still there.

At the same time, what is important is not so much a number, but the feeling of you growing or shrinking. When we started, even before we set up the School of Engaged Art, we knew that our community was super minor, very tiny, maybe one hundred people, and we were excluded from many situations. But in that period until 2022, what we experienced was different to many Western comrades, because our community was growing. It was fifty at the School, then seventy, one hundred, one hundred and fifty, two hundred, three hundred. It's a tiny number, but you have the feeling of growing. When we started, we had maybe two places to meet with comrades. After ten years, we had twelve places. Wow, you feel much more encouraged to continue. I know many people in the West where, at the same time, the feeling was of shrinking. It was ten places. Then the financial cuts come, and it is down to five places.

***In 2022, you created a new school, the School of Emergencies, as a transdisciplinary school for artists, writers, researchers, and activists. What is this new school, what are its aims, and how does it work in practice?***

I think partly this is a kind of path; we developed on our website this idea of a School of Emergencies. It is not a school in the sense of the School of Engaged Art as a permanent activity. It is more of a temporary project, which we realize mostly in the places where there are currently a lot of political refugees from Russia. The idea is to bring them together and establish links with local communities, also to share that refugee background with other refugee communities. Because it is a temporary project, it works differently. As I said before, we were trying to something more permanent in Germany, but very soon, we understood that is impossible. The maximum that we can do is develop the School in collaboration with local academies.

***In this new School of Emergencies, you ask the questions “what should we learn in and from desperate, helpless and absurd situations,” what kind of knowledge can be produced in disasters and emergencies, and how can we “cultivate new models of tactical and strategic survivance” in crisis. This, of course, is a situation facing many now, in Palestine, Lebanon, and the United States***

***following the Trump victory and elsewhere. How do we need to rethink and reshape our practice of radical education and art in this situation?***

I don't have answers. For me, I can only share my concerns and reservations. I think we are still too much into the positive mood of creating utopia and radicality, which is nice and maybe important. You know, like many of us, I have this nice idea of anarchism in a regional sense. No nations, the state is the configuration of communes which live peacefully together. It's super simple, it's our vision of the future. But in reality, nobody knows how to reach it when everyone will try to kill each other simply for using their own words. Imagining is very easy: collectivize everything, make it all a commons, no private property. But I think right now we should work more with despair, with that kind of negativity, that you can't change most things, but you have to do something. I have a problem with the continuation of that activist mode.

For us, it's about regrouping, survival, and maybe what is radical now is survivance, that combination of your survival and resistance in one word, that comes from the US indigenous tradition. In post-catastrophe scenarios, it is very hard. I know many people work with them, what to do in the moment of apocalypse. We don't know which knowledge could be possible. The problem is that collapse happens in different ways. The collapse which is happening in Ukrainian cities is not the collapse which is happening in Gaza, and the collapse which is happening in Gaza it not the collapse which is happening in the United States, and the collapse which is happening in the United States is not the collapse which is happening in Israel. It is so many collapses, and it is hard to prepare.

The one important thing to understand is that life is changing radically, and you need to be prepared. One thing to do is to build really strong communities, local communities but with international relationships and empathy. Because those who have communities, they manage, we are always helping people in our networked community collect money they need. It is also important to stop thinking as a kind of doxa. Because traditional theories are collapsing too, the way they understand the geopolitical situation is completely wrong, I am talking about so-called progressive ways of thinking. Communication, too, is becoming more and more fractured and fragmented. People don't want to get into dialogue, just cancel, cancel, cancel. We need a new hybrid political thinking that is missing now. Maybe it's impossible, maybe it's too late, I don't know.

***The School of Engaged Art and School of Emergencies come out of a long history of pedagogical experimentation in your collective. Much of this has focused***

***on practices of mutual learning and self-education. What is the importance of these practices? How did you seek to develop these? Do you see this as part of a broader deschooling movement?***

It is funny you mention deschooling. Deschooling is a kind of practice of people who are already overschooled, they know they need to deschool themselves. There is also the sense of deschooling as a colonial metaphor, when you get rid of colonial forms of schooling, the penetration of your body and your mind with toxic ideas.

With self-education and mutual learning, it's pretty simple. There are all kinds of self-taught learning, all kinds of mutual learning exchanges, there is no need to make this overly complex. But for us, with the School of Engaged Art, we decided to use the problematic term of the school, with a fluidity of meaning that is in the idea of school. Our idea of school was as a kind of discipline. Because we think that in activism or political organizations and social movements, we need organizations that create certain protocols and relationships. These can be horizontal or diagonal; our approach was one we always called a diagonal mixture of governance, not too horizontal, but not vertical.

This, for us, was about creating the possibility to learn something. Because sometimes it is nice to speak about unlearning and deschooling, but at the same time, in our particular situation in Russia, we lacked formal institutions of learning art and politics. That is the big difference. We have young artists who don't know anything about the basic knowledge of history of contemporary art. They lacked a cognitive apparatus for connecting things together from different fields and disciplines, so they can create stories through art that can inspire others and bring people into a situation of transformation and transformative thinking.

Our aim in learning at the School was about transformative thinking, so you are not repeating the doxa. Because that is a big problem now, I see most people just repeating the same doxa, especially in academia, knowledge becomes doxa. It's not interesting anymore. They already know everything before we even start to talk. They know who is right and who is wrong. To develop transformative thinking, we need to obtain knowledge from different disciplines and use it in heretical ways. In our work at the School, we sought to marry poetry and sociology, choreography and activism, art history and militant research, queer studies and drama theory, political economy and the sublime, artists' labor rights and romantic visions of art's mission.

*You have said that the name of your collective, Chto Delat, is inspired by a novel by Nikolai Chernyshevsky, What Is to Be Done? and this novel is about self-organization and education of the self and is a vital starting point for thinking about the possibilities of radical education. What are the ideas you take from this work and how does it help us think about the possibilities of radical education?*

It was a long time ago that we drew from this novel for the name of our group. The novel is about the self-organization of workers and feminist cells inside Russia at the beginning of capitalist development, in the mid-eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. What is particularly interesting about this story is how they created a form of sustainability, through a great combination of political agitation and education. But we always return to this novel because what was important about it is that it became a best seller in Russia. Every educated person in Russia who could read, read it. It was an amazing influence of a radically revolutionary book on society. It doesn't happen very often. So, that is why Chernyshevsky was really super interesting to us as a symbol of what is important and good and possible when you start to think about radical education.



## Coming to Highlander

Susan Williams

*Highlander: The Movement School, Tennessee, USA*

*Susan Williams is a popular educator who worked at the Highlander Folk School (known subsequently as the Highlander Research and Education Center and recently renamed as Highlander: The Movement School) for over thirty-five years. A Tennessee native who grew up close to Highlander in the eastern part of the state, Williams first came to Highlander in 1989, after a decade of working for Save Our Cumberland Mountains, a community organizing group in Tennessee focused on social, economic, and environmental justice. After years of working as a popular educator and organizer—Williams insists on the organic connection between educating and organizing—Williams worked until recently as an archivist at Highlander, preserving, curating, and sharing with new generations the Center’s long, rich history of social movement education.*

*Highlander Folk School is one of the most well-known and influential centers of popular and radical education in the United States. The school was established by Myles Horton in 1932 as a residential adult education center dedicated to the aim of creating “a genuine democratic society through radical social, economic, political, and cultural change,” and to use “education as one of the means to changing society” (Horton 2003, p. 34). Highlander is best known for being at the heart of two of the most important social movements in the United States during the twentieth century: the wave of industrial union organizing in the US South in the 1930s, and the civil rights movement in the 1950s and 1960s. Septima Clark, who helped to create the Citizenship Schools that were pivotal to the rise of the civil rights movement, was Director of Education at Highlander in the 1950s; and Rosa Parks came to Highlander in the summer of 1955 for a workshop on social change, shortly before helping to launch the successful Montgomery Bus Boycott later that year (Payne 1995; Preskill 2021; Slate 2022).*

*Williams' conversation reaches back to these early periods of Highlander's work, as she reflects on the importance of being able to learn from the radical education projects and successes of the past. In this, Williams echoes the concerns of Salim Vally in this book, as both seek to overcome what Fielding and Moss (2011, p. 66) describe as the "contemporary educational condition" of "historical amnesia," by reconnecting with "the thinking and practice, the commitment and struggles, of our predecessors who have imagined and sought to embody an education with many of the features of radical education." But Williams also shines a light on the lesser known, more recent social movement work of Highlander over the past decades, when the school has been heavily involved with environmental justice, labor justice, immigrant rights, and cross-border solidarity education and organizing, much of this in response to the regional impacts of the establishment of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in the early 1990s and concomitant rise of a hegemonic neoliberal model of globalization during this time (Williams 2014).*

*As Williams reflects on her long career working at Highlander, three key themes stand out. One is Williams' emphasis on the collective nature of the work done by social movement schools such as Highlander and the important role played by many women over the decades in developing and carrying out this work. Williams points out how the tendency to render such collective women's work invisible, in favor of individualistic "great man" narratives that link Highlander solely to the founding figurehead of Myles Horton, is not only sexist but profoundly disabling for movement building. "The women of Highlander," as McDermott (2009, pp. 156–7) argues, "were instrumental in creating Highlander's organizational structure and in shaping its mission over the years," developing Highlander's "educational methodology" and "building Highlander's legacy," and yet at the same time, they "are not part of its myth."*

*Williams also notes how many accounts of the popular education approach—such as the well-known "popular education spiral" (Arnold et al. 1991; Gilbert 2022)—tend to begin with the start of a popular education workshop and leave out the vital preparation work that needs to happen ahead of time—work that, not coincidentally, often tends to be done by women. This work, which Williams refers to as "the call," concerns the planning, outreach and invitations to bring the right group of participants together for a popular education gathering, the welcome that greets participants as they arrive and supports them throughout their time at the Center. Such hospitality work, Williams argues, can be just as if not more important to the success of a popular education gathering as anything that happens within the workshops (Brooks 2017; McDermott 2009; Williams and Mullett 2016).*

Similarly, Williams suggests that many misunderstand what constitutes the core elements of the popular education approach as developed by centers like Highlander, as they tend to grasp onto surface level phenomena of having a particular curriculum or pedagogy. But it is what lies “underneath” that really matters, argues Williams. Popular education “should not be reduced to a mere set of rules or a prescribed checklist to follow” and it is not a “magical template or set-in stone” method (Williams and Mullett 2016, p. 100). Rather, it is about “the way we bring people together and have people respect each other and learn from each other” (Williams 2008). In this, Williams echoes the words of Highlander’s founder, Myles Horton, who once said “I’m less interested in methodology or techniques than I am in a process that involves the total person, involves vision, involves total realities.” “Techniques are something you use and discard,” says Horton (2003, pp. xiii, 178), “let’s minimize our loyalty to institutions that do not serve the needs of people.”

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***You have been at Highlander for many years. What brought you to Highlander initially, and what is it about Highlander that has led you to remain there for so long?***

When I was twenty-three, I graduated from college with a degree in biology and didn’t know what I wanted to do. I grew up in Oak Ridge, Tennessee, which is full of scientists in this town created during the Second World War to help build atomic bombs. So, science was what we were all programmed to do to succeed. But I knew I didn’t want to get more degrees to be a scientist. I started working in a restaurant and ended up working with a group called Save Our Cumberland Mountains (SOCM). I’m from East Tennessee, and SOCM organized local communities affected by the devastation of strip mining for coal in the Tennessee mountains. I didn’t really know anything about being an organizer, but I thought this sounded a lot more interesting than working in a restaurant or going to graduate school.

My first project with SOCM was helping with an Appalachian landownership study, which was a participatory research project that Highlander was helping to guide. The first time I visited Highlander was in 1979. I had never heard of it before, even though it was only fifty miles from where I lived. I was really intimidated because I was so new and the people there came from all of these Appalachian groups fighting for justice, who knew so much more than I did. We worked together to do this landownership study, to better understand who

controlled the land in the region and what the impacts were on land devastation, loss of our tax base and the well-being of local communities and workers. Teams from each state fanned out to spend the summer in local courthouses to gather data—by hand!—and came together afterward to share information and ideas.

This experience served as a deep introduction to the Cumberland Mountain region in Tennessee, and I worked with SOCM chapters for the next ten years. I learned a lot about popular education and organizing in counties across East Tennessee. I came to many Highlander workshops during that time related to issues we were facing—strip mining for coal, synthetic fuels facilities, toxic waste disposal issues, as well as for SOCM retreats and research skills and leadership training programs. In 1989, I applied for a job with Highlander to work on economic and environmental issues, the idea of sustainability, that people shouldn't have to choose between a good environment and a good economy. That was important to me, because I realized that a lot of what we had been working on in Appalachia, there was always another bad idea, a strip-mine, a toxic waste dump, a synthetic fuels plant that local politicians and businessmen promoted for jobs. Other choices later were prisons, immigrant detention centers, call centers, and casinos. We worked with groups to fight so many destructive proposals but also searched for more sustainable and community-controlled choices.

I came to Highlander with ten years of on-the-ground experience working with people and communities. At the time, I thought of myself as a community organizer, but I didn't know what popular education meant. But now, after having been at Highlander for a long time, I know that the organizing we did at SOCM was a process with both popular education and organizing. We had members at SOCM, and our job was to help meet them, learn from them and recruit them to join collectively to strategize what they wanted to do about their issue and have them decide what actions they wanted to take—with the idea that people directly affected should be central to finding solutions. This was a very Highlander popular education approach. That's why when I talk about popular education and organizing, I say the best thing we can do is to have those concepts be integrated back together. In the United States, there has often been a division between popular education and organizing that has harmed our ability to organize and form movements.

I came to Highlander in 1989; I thought I'd work there just a couple of years. But, surprisingly even to myself, I've been there thirty-six years and just retired. I'm from this part of the country, so it is my home. But I think, more importantly, what an incredible experience it was to work at a place where people come to

tackle really important and hard issues, and you learn their stories, and you learn about what they are doing. And you try to share that back with other people. Being able to do that kind of work to help people try to change the world, I just feel so blessed or lucky. I have changed jobs multiple times in Highlander, so in more recent times, I've been more dedicated to the library and archival work and less education. I was just reading Manish Jain's piece about unlearning education. I feel that was what I've been doing all along here, because I was trained in elitist scientific thinking, and I had to overcome what was put into my head in college and school. I'm grateful for that, and I'm still unlearning and learning.

***You have spoken and written about the importance of outreach, welcome, and hospitality, all these things that happen before the more organized work of education and learning together happens. Why are these so essential, and what are the things we need to think about here?***

I started talking more about this because when I came to Highlander, I wanted to know more about what they meant by education. So, I started reading about popular education. I saw this picture of the popular education spiral in *Educating for a Change*, which is a book from the Doris Marshall Institute in Canada, which for me was very informative. When I saw that book, I realized that I did know something about this. This is what I did as a community organizer with SOCM. I often share this spiral with people because it rings a bell with them, because it's what people would do naturally if they just gathered up to talk about a problem.

But I realized, the spiral just starts with the point at which people gather, and it doesn't talk about all the work ahead of time. There's a good article by Mike Clark, who was Director at Highlander in the 1970s, and he talks about "the call." It's about all the work ahead of time that helps a workshop happen. He says 50 percent of the work is ahead of the workshop, but that was all invisible in the writing about the popular education. My own experience organizing with SOCM and Highlander was that how you are contacted, how you enter a space and are greeted and welcomed made a big difference. You need to invite people, give them directions, tell them what to bring and work to make them comfortable. It's like somebody coming into your home. What do you do when people come to your home if it is a place of education for social justice?

When I first came to Highlander I was welcomed by Candie Carawan. I was new and shy, I didn't know anything, I hadn't done all these things these other people had done, but people came to me and made me feel like I belonged there

and made sure I was comfortable and encouraged me to speak. In terms of outreach, it's important ahead of time to find the people that make sense to come to a workshop, because often it would be around an issue. Sometimes you had to do very targeted outreach, finding people, letting them know what Highlander was, we had some advantage because a lot of people had heard of Highlander. Seeing what people would want to talk about during a workshop. Being able to craft an agenda with information from the people that you hope will come. Then there's all the logistical stuff, like travel details, directions, language needs, finding out when they will arrive, the things that make people feel like they know what they're coming to. Then when people get there, it helps to greet people when they come, show them their room and where we will meet and eat, seeing if they need food or a cup of tea or whatever else they need. It makes people feel they're somewhere where it's considered important that they're there, so that when you bring people into a room, they're more relaxed and ready to build relationships with people they don't know.

A lot of this unseen work in Highlander's history was done by the women. Zilphia Horton was Myles Horton's first wife, and she came and did cultural work, and she did a lot of welcoming, as did Septima Clark. That isn't what is written about or talked about, but it helps create better conditions for doing what you're trying to do, and it's a lot of work to do it well. It's important to talk about it, because people don't land in a Highlander workshop randomly. One thing about Highlander is people have a lot of expectations about what's going to happen there. So, sometimes they're disappointed, because they're expecting some amazing experience, and sometimes people fight and it's kind of uncomfortable. You might not like everybody in the room or maybe you have a big disagreement or start experiencing unexpected, triggered emotions. People come with different experiences of oppression and privilege, and it is critical to acknowledge and navigate these through the workshops. We sit in a circle, and we all have a chance to talk, often we do a cultural sharing where people come with a picture, song, story, dance or some other item that shares something about their culture. You always need some kind of introduction and then make sure to encourage people to talk to each other and interact with other in pairs, small groups and during the breaks and at meals and not just during the workshop time. There are times to share ideas, experiences, brainstorm, but also to laugh, eat, sing and dance. Highlander works to build relationships between people, so they stay in touch afterwards, without us being in the middle. Those webs of relationships really matter over time and space into the future.

We do workshops that are fifteen to twenty-five people mostly, so the idea is that you do something that multiplies out, that participants have enough time to talk and learn, and then go back home and share this information, these ideas and skills more widely, with other groups. Or even that people start working together in a bigger force. It's really important for people to know who's in the room and know something about each other in order to take that step.

One of the things that has changed so much is we often have less time for the things that I think are important, which is people being in space and talking with each other and figuring out strategies and sharing information. This is a way to do education and organizing that provides the powerful connections and relationships with people that hold you through time. When I was working for SOCM, we also were building community and connections, so people who felt attacked and isolated fighting a strip mine found other people like them, other places, and it made them feel like they were part of something, and it wasn't just them alone. We would sing and have food, and we would work to get people to know each other. I think all that is important for how people can take on big issues and make headway.

***While there has often been a reluctance to identify a specific Highlander method, can you talk about the general approach to education and organizing that Highlander takes in its work?***

This is a common question of how to help people learn about how we do our work here, so that they can do it too. Because you don't just have to be at Highlander to do this, you can do this work somewhere else as well. People do organizing and popular education all around the world, even if the terms and languages are different. A couple of key philosophies are important. One is that everyone is a teacher and a learner, and it requires collective work to create change. Another is that people directly affected by issues need to be central to strategizing what should be done and what needs to change.

Trying to make more visible what this requires is important. But what often happens is that we develop curriculum, and a curriculum is not popular education necessarily, but curriculum becomes the mode that people think of as doing popular education. We need to think more about the skills that are underneath. You can have an agenda, but maybe the group needs to do something else, or maybe it's not really what they want to do, so how do you adapt to a group? Or how do you make sure there's space for new ideas to come up? I feel like, in the United States, a curriculum can become a crutch that

constrains the education process. I've thought about what are the things that are underneath that are important, no matter what processes you're doing, how do people learn what's underneath a curriculum. Because you can train people to do a curriculum, but that's not training to be a popular educator. It's the skills and energy and curiosity underneath the curriculum, which I feel like I learned being an organizer.

We've been working to demystify our methodologies so that people feel like that can build on these. But it is important to understand that our methodologies are not separate, they work together. We name them to make them more visible but that can also risk siloing the work. Popular education, cultural organizing, participatory action research, intergenerational organizing, language justice, land justice—all these should be considered and used to build social movements. One thing I say to all the education staff I've ever worked with comes from the book, *Educating for a Change*. In there, they talk about planning an agenda and cutting it in half, so that there's enough time for people to talk to each other. This is one of the most important pieces of advice I know. It's hard to not just keep cramming more information into an agenda. But providing space and chances for interaction is so important, ensuring there is free space, over meals, walking, talking late into the night, this is where some of the most important things can happen.

***Much of your work at Highlander has focused on labor education. What are the approaches you take, what works well and not so well, and how does this compare with the broader field of labor education in the United States today?***

The work I've done with labor started when I came to Highlander in 1989. I was supporting a new coalition called the Tennessee Industrial Renewal Network (TIRN), that was labor unions and community and faith groups. In particular, the Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union, which was interested in having educational experiences along with organizing with their workers. This was when a lot of factories were closing and moving in the apparel and textile world, first to Mexico and then around the world. In becoming part of that work, I was drawn into a world of people who were doing popular economic education, demystifying the economy. We were working with factory workers, we did workshops on dealing with plant closings, it was trying to figure out what a strategy could be to deal with what turned out to be very large global issues, which we didn't know at the time, but found out pretty quickly. And then trying to help people, because what happened when a factory closed is

that people who had these relationships for decades, suddenly lose their work communities as well as their jobs.

We were working with groups all across the United States, trying to figure out how do we demystify these global economic issues for people. There were people from the Center for Popular Economics, this radical education program in Western Massachusetts, and the American Friends Service Committee and Project South. For me, this was important, because I had never studied economics. But because I came to Highlander, I had the idea that I could understand things without taking classes in it. So, we were all learning together about what was going on and trying to figure out what to do.

In the early 1990s, we were trying to build a fight against NAFTA, the North American Free Trade Agreement, that wasn't xenophobic. We were working with local communities and trying to help people understand what it was. We did a globalization workshop. We brought people together and they talked about the ways they were being affected by these changes in the economy. We shared some information about NAFTA, which was in the process of being negotiated. We had someone come and do some participatory sessions with us around global things like the World Bank and the IMF [International Monetary Fund], because people in the United States don't understand these other apparatuses that are global. We started developing relationships with Mexican and Canadian groups and building a more international view. Our workshops were both people bringing their own experiences but also bringing information to people that was harder to access and trying to think about strategy. For me, economic education is about helping people understand and also think about what they could do, not overwhelm people with this totally scary thing. That was important to make people feel like, oh, yeah, we can understand the economy. For factory workers, they were in the middle of it. They knew a lot about it, and a lot of what we learned was from them, because they were paying attention, and they saw the shifts in the economy and had very clear experiences of that.

I did that with TIRN, and we did a lot of workshops, sometimes it was with labor union locals, sometimes with union district meetings, and sometimes it was the church groups. Later, I did labor education with a group called the United Association for Labor Education that have these women's summer schools. We hosted three or four of those in Highlander and that was fun. There were women from across different labor unions, and they got to meet each other. It was always great energy and wonderful. We would have different sessions on things that were helpful to people around labor.

One thing I would say about the labor unions in the United States that I think was a big mistake and was always puzzling to me, is they separated their organizing and education departments. It is an outcome of the business union model. They would be in these organizing campaigns and that's a perfect time to do education and build leadership. But instead, the education work was done separately. Over the years, as union resources got smaller, the education departments became much smaller. There's very few labor educators in the southern US now. Labor unions also used to send out newsletters that had all kinds of information that was helpful about current things happening. I feel like unions had more capacity to do more of that education, but that's become less now. There's a recent wave of labor organizing now in the United States, and I'm curious, is there labor education? Do people think consciously about the education needs of an organizing campaign, and how to help people share information to learn more and move further steps ahead to get to the root of the problem?

I did some education sessions with a homecare workers union in California a few years ago, it's extraordinary work, and they organize. They've organized to affect what the state does with homecare, this is interesting, because they're very dispersed, each on their own in their home. They lobbied for a fund for education and have a big education fund. They can provide both strategic issue organizing, and can provide computers and training of all kinds, trying to figure out how to help support what the homecare workers need. We did some work to help the union staff learn more about popular education, and how to do it in a more participatory way. But in general, with labor education, there are fewer and fewer people doing it in the United States. This kind of education and coalition building is needed now in the United States to help people put together what the hell's going on, and not just be totally overwhelmed all the time with just all this chatter that comes at us.

***You have talked about the importance of worker-to-worker exchanges as a vital part of labor education and organizing. How do these work, and why are they so important?***

Highlander has always had very important international connections. I think this has helped Highlander people learn more about popular education and participatory research from other parts of the world. So, people at Highlander had a sense of why it was important for people in the United States to interact with people from other places, to get a better grip about what was going on.

When I came to Highlander and there was this idea that because factories were moving to the maquila zone of Mexico, which wasn't very far, that we should do some worker exchanges. The union supported that. So, we gathered up people that were from industries that were moving directly there, and we took this trip to Mexico with workers from four or five different factories. That trip was particularly important because it was right at a critical moment when NAFTA was being negotiated in secret, and nobody was talking about it. But we learned about NAFTA when we went down there.

When we came back, we tried to share what we had learned. On that exchange we had a television crew with us. We took their footage, and we made a little video called *From the Mountains to the Maquiladoras*. It was very basic, it wasn't fancy, but people used it a lot in classes and in groups to share more about what was happening with workers. We also had a slideshow that we did, and we would take that around and show people to talk about NAFTA. Going to Mexico on this trip changed all of us in incredible ways, in terms of our ability to understand something about Mexico, which became important because of the large numbers of immigrants that came after NAFTA and understand better the role of corporations in this world and why free trade was important in concrete ways, impacting people's lives.

TIRN continued to do worker-to-worker exchanges through many years, partly working to try to keep a more international view about these issues and not become so xenophobic, which was a tendency from the more fascist right wing to blame people from Mexico that jobs are going there. It also meant that we had relationships with different groups in Mexico. And we brought people from Canada, because NAFTA was Canada, the United States, and Mexico. We became part of an international network and that was important for us. Usually, international relationships are based in Washington or California, but we were like, no, we need to be part of this, too. These worker-to-worker exchanges were important for continuing to provide this education to people in Tennessee about what this dynamic was between the United States and Mexico as it developed. You know, this was what continued after NAFTA passed. It's about the importance of people talking to each other. We had to have interpreters, so that the experience of trying to have a popular education space in multiple languages, which led us to work on interpretation and what we now call language justice. How do you make a space across language, because there was not much capacity to do progressive liberatory education with interpretation.

The other thing about doing the worker-to-worker exchanges was it was the workers we took to Mexico that first started noticing that there were new

communities of people coming from Mexico into this part of the world. Up in Morristown, which is an industrial town, people from Mexico were being recruited to come work in especially the chicken plants. Suddenly, in the parks, which usually softball was the sport that people played in Morristown, there were all these people playing soccer. You could go to the grocery store, and there would suddenly be brands from Mexico and a Mexican food section. It was the workers that first got us thinking that something's changed, something's happening, and we need to pay attention, so that became a lot of work around immigration. The worker-to-worker exchanges became exchanges within our region, between Black and brown and white people to try to interrupt the divisive conversation about immigration and immigrant rights in the region.

***You mention doing popular economics education with workers. Why is this so important to do, and how can we do this effectively with broad audiences, as part of organizing campaigns?***

I think one thing that is important is to figure out what the connection is of an economic issue to people's experience and bringing people's experience into the room. Why would people care? So, it's not just theoretical. We need to remember that we should learn from our own experience, because it's so easy to think about something and look at your computer and the internet for answers. No, think about what your experience is about this. I do feel like having people remember that they have some autonomous knowledge that is helpful in these situations is quite important. One of the things that Highlander did was have people talk about their economic history. What did their grandparents do? What did their parents do? What did they do? What are the kids doing? It's a way to show economic trends over time. I feel like when we were working on these trade issues, with NAFTA, GATT, and the World Trade Organization, it was hard to get the people with more knowledge to help do the interpretation for why it mattered to people locally, what it actually means. I felt like I was an interpreter, to talk to people in Tennessee about how these trade issues connected to them on the ground.

You also need to give people ideas of things they could do. There's not a good reason to do economics education unless you think there are things people can do. Not that you're going to win, but that there's a way to fight and struggle and make this more visible. With NAFTA, we didn't win, but we did make it way more visible, they wanted to do it secretly and quietly. The other thing is trying to share what are examples of alternatives that people can create, that can

stand against the economic system. So, we started doing more work around the solidarity economy, because there are examples of things that people all around the world, but also in our region, have been doing for decades, resisting and building a different future.

Here's the thing I realized about economics in the United States. It is kind of a religion, this free trade. I kept calling people and asking, it doesn't make any sense to keep saying that people in Tennessee are going to benefit from this, can you please tell me why we would benefit? The traditional economists would say, well, for example, there's a whitewater canoe factory in Tennessee, so maybe they'll start selling those in Mexico. I'm thinking, we're not going to sell whitewater canoes to Mexico. One, they don't have a lot of water. And it's not a tradition for people in Mexico. It's based on faulty assumptions; it really is a snake oil show. So, that's another reason for needing to do popular economics education. Traditional economics has so much power over our governance system. That's why it's even more important to try to pull its arguments apart.

Two things were helpful to me in developing this work. One is this woman, Luvernel Clark, who was a factory worker for a company that was sending jobs to Mexico. She was a leader in TIRN, and she told me I needed to start reading the business page in the newspaper, because that's where the economics news is. I started reading the business page, and it was totally true, that was the best tip I ever had. Because that's where the economic news shows up. They call it business as if it's not related to you, but only to business. We also formed this loose network called the Economic Literacy Action Network. We would get together and help each other think about how we talk about what are different ways to do education around these issues, we created a little global toolkit sampler of examples. We were trying to help each other. That was something that happened in the 1990s, a kind of a peer group from across the country that could help build our skills at this. That was, for me, a big support.

***More recently you have been involved in developing the archives at Highlander. What is the importance of archival work for popular education and social movement organizing? What can and should we be learning from archival history for doing powerful education and organizing today?***

I think there are things to be learned and inspiration to get from the archive. I remember when I first came to Highlander, it was amazing to see the Citizenship Schools curriculums and hear the stories of things people did in very difficult situations, labor organizing in the 1930s, working on civil rights, at any time.

Trying to share that history and help people find their own histories in their local places of resistance and struggle, because there has been a lot of struggle and resistance everywhere. It can inspire you to find those stories from your community. I feel like Highlander is a reservoir of this history. In a lot of communities, these stories aren't told. Learning more about what people have done and how they did it, not that you do it the same way exactly, but just getting ideas about it. Also, a lot of the issues that we work on now, what happens now is based on a whole trajectory of things that happened that led us to where we are, and I think that's helpful to learn about, in terms of race, economics, social issues, environmental issues, that people often don't know about what happened before.

One of the things we're trying to do now is more documentation of some of the issues we worked on and sharing some of the pieces of work we did, and, pointing people to archival materials, or videos or poems or songs, that help them step into that and learn more. Because a lot of that history is in my brain and other people's brains, and it is very invisible what Highlander has done for the last forty or fifty years, there's been less documentation of it. It's important to share some of that context and those resources. I learned a lot from other people about how to design a workshop and that's true for older materials and newer materials. I always say that nothing I do is brand new but is based on something I learned from someone else. I do feel like there's a way to share the way we do education, that can help all of us and it is sort of a public good, this type of education, and the more we share it, the better.

***Are there particular stories of what you have learned from the Highlander archives?***

Well, when I first came to Highlander, I hadn't thought about cultural work in relation to popular education and organizing. At SOCM, we did a lot of singing and we'd be writing songs. But I remember when I first had my office in the archive, and there was a set of dissertations, and I pulled one out that talked about the drama workshops back in the 1930s and 1940s, where they would bring people in, they would write plays based on labor sessions, and often they would take those to labor union locals, or there's also people writing their own stories. I didn't think of myself as somebody who knew about cultural work, but reading about how the cultural stuff was woven into organizing was helpful to me, because I realized we have lots of skills about this. We just need to think about how culture can both bring people together and hit people's hearts but also share stories and ideas.

Similarly, when I learned about the Citizenship Schools that happened in the 1950s, where Black people were training Black people to read and write, to be able to pass literacy tests to be able to vote, it was a program that started locally and multiplied out, and that's an incredible story. I remember looking at the curriculums for those that Septima Clark had written. The issue was important, but what was also important was how they did it so that it multiplied out. They started training teachers across the South, and the teachers weren't always proper teachers, like Bernice Robinson, the first teacher at the Citizenship Schools was a hairdresser. It had a big multiplier effect and then there was a step of helping build leadership beyond the literacy schools. To me, it was a good example of thinking longer term, and how do you build over time, because this took a lot of years, and multiplying out so that the work at Highlander, our job is not just some people coming and having some amazing experience, but, it's so they will go back and do something that will add and hopefully multiply out.

When we developed our popular economics education program, we drew from the Citizenship Schools. We tried to write up workshops so that other people could do them, whether they were economists or not. We were trying to help other people feel like they can also talk about economics, we don't have to be afraid of it, we can figure it out, we can share the stuff. Being able to see curriculums from the Citizenship Schools, you can picture how people did them, and then you think, I could do this, like learning skills and ideas but also inspiration because it was an incredible program. It was kind of miraculous because these people were adults, they were working during the day, they had very little time to do this. They would learn to read and write, and they would be able to pass these literacy tests to vote. To me, that's kind of a miraculous story, I think there was an element of amazingness to me in these stories of what people do.

***Highlander was set up deliberately to do education for social change outside of the formal education system. Do you think it is possible today to do this kind of education in schools and universities? Are there ways in which Highlander engages directly with the formal education system?***

One of the things I've seen is that there used to be more people within colleges and universities in the United States doing more progressive adult education. But with neoliberalism and defunding of public education, that sphere came to be vocational education, and more liberatory education has been pushed out. In general, I feel like the spaces within colleges and universities and schools in the United States are harder and smaller for being able to do more liberatory

education. The huge student debt load is also important, because university students have a lot of debt in the United States, and that makes it harder for students to think about what they can do, when they need to pay off their debts. I've had experience of going to classes to talk, and sometimes it's hard to get the students to talk, because that is not their experience of what they do in a classroom. I've been so sad about it, because I thought people like to talk to each other, but they're trying to do what they're supposed to do in a classroom.

At the same time, there are always people that find ways to find cracks and do what they can within them inside the system. There's a woman, Margo Okazawa-Rey, she's been bringing students from smaller colleges in the United States to Highlander for a workshop, usually around their spring break, to get exposed to Highlander methodologies. She's been doing that for ten years and it gives students a chance to learn something that is not contained in their university. We've had great students do projects with us as interns. One time we did this class with somebody from the University of Tennessee, she did a class about Highlander, so we got to share stuff about Highlander over this whole semester. So, I think there are ways people are trying to expose their students to some of these ideas that will mostly lie outside the university. Another woman who just died, Fran Ansley, did amazing work. She was a law professor. But she worked with TIRN, too, and did a lot of support for immigrant rights. But the university didn't think of that as part of her job. So, I think there are definitely people in universities that do this kind of work, but I don't think there's much university or college support for it.

There's also been a lot of labor organizing in universities, by adjunct professors, by office and clerical workers, by graduate students. For example, there's a group in Knoxville, they are now part of the Communication Workers, but they were the United Campus Workers, they formed a union when they weren't allowed to have an official union and existed for twenty years and have done amazing work within the university. As universities become more neoliberal, people were not paid enough, there's all these adjunct positions, and there's more labor organizing. Teachers, too, there's been a lot of teachers organizing in the United States, as there's been terrible attacks on teachers and education programs. So, there is a lot of resistance that shows up now in the education system, and people can learn from each other about their resistance. I think that's one of the challenges is how do you share the stories of how people organize, which is as important as what the issue is. It would be great to have more of that knowledge circulated. In the United States, there's a group called Labor Notes that does a huge conference each year, hundreds and hundreds of people come to it now.

They're more radical than a lot of labor unions. That's been a good space to help support organizing within all kinds of institutions.

***I want to ask you about the role that women have played at Highlander and in popular education more generally, and the importance of gender and feminist politics in doing this kind of work.***

Well, in the United States we often talk about just the leaders, who are mostly men: Martin Luther King, as if he represents the civil rights movement, and people will talk about Myles Horton as representing Highlander. I didn't even really know Myles Horton; he was just this iconic figurehead. Helping people get past that, to recognize that it's not just about a person, but it's about all kinds of people, is important. At Highlander, there was a woman named Zilla Hawes, who was there in the very early days. Mary Lawrence Elkuss, she came and did a lot of labor education and trained a lot of labor educators. Zilphia Horton, people think of her as a cultural worker, but she did culture work and education and welcoming. Septima Clark was here, Helen Lewis and Candie Carawan. In more recent years, there's been Tufara Waller Muhammad, Mónica Hernandez, Salimah Muhammad, Elandria Williams, and me. There's always been a lot of women at Highlander. But in the United States, we don't tell organizing or institutional stories very collectively. What does it take to do this work, it's not just about one person who's amazing, but it's about people working together to do this together. When I do a workshop, I never do it by myself, because there's people cooking and there's people making the space nice, and there's usually somebody helping facilitate. I think it is important that in the story of Highlander, we try to tell it more collectively.

I learned a lot at Highlander from both men and women, such as John Gaventa, Helen Lewis, and Candie Carawan. The group I worked with at SOCM had more women than men involved. The good work I did with TIRN always had more women than men. I feel like women have not been seen as much but have always been pivotal in this work. That's why talking about the welcoming and hosting function is important, because that's a lot of what women do that's invisible. It's just like the nurturing work that women do.

You know, people used to ask, was Highlander part of the women's movement, and I would say, well, I've always worked with a lot of women, but they don't identify themselves as part of the women's movement, because the women's movement tended to be more in other parts of the country, not where I was. I always felt that I was part of the women's movement, but not in the way

people asked me the question. Because it was women taking charge, organizing and taking charge. A lot of them had never done anything like that before, so it changed their lives and many of them went on to do this for a long time. Workshops at Highlander were almost always more women than men, and maybe that's because women have more capacity to think of this gathering with people and talking with people as a good idea, as opposed to just taking action without education and organizing.

## Conclusion

Radical education, as Jessica Gerrard (2014, p. 8) observes in her historical study of Socialist Sunday Schools and Black Saturday Schools in twentieth-century Britain, follows a “thread” that “is defined as much by the common purpose to challenge injustice and inequality, as it is by the diverse interpretations and enactments of this purpose.” Others have made similar observations. Linda Cooper (2020, pp. 18, 175, 180), writing of radical worker education in South Africa, points to its core and defining “transformative purpose” and “commitment to social justice,” while noting the often “fierce contestation over the precise form that social transformation should take,” as well as the “richness and complexity” of the “different forms of knowledge” generated in radical worker education spaces. To speak of radical education is to speak of education that is oriented to the project of empowering learners to learn how to transform the world to make it more just than it is today. As such, it tends to be characterized by a set of core components: starting with the concerns and experiences of a particular, usually marginalized or oppressed community; developing an analysis of the root causes of problems afflicting that community; fostering a utopian vision of how the world could and should be different; and developing practical, strategic steps for action that can help to move us from here to there. But beyond this core orientation, there is no set recipe or rule book for doing radical education.

In this collection, our concern has been with radical education done in grassroots contexts, while recognizing that radical education takes place—and needs to take place—in formal education settings as well. Here, we reflect on what this collection of conversations with grassroots radical educators working around the world, in very different settings and divergent concerns and agendas, might tell us about radical education in grassroots contexts more generally. We focus on three questions: What are some of the common approaches to radical education that may be found across these different settings? What are the relationships that emerge between radical education done in grassroots contexts

and formal educational institutions such as schools and universities? Finally, what is the significance of the interactions between local radical educational practices and broader social, political, and economic environments, whether at a regional, national, or international level?

### Common Approaches to Radical Education in Grassroots Contexts

Across the different voices heard in this book, there are a number of common themes that become apparent in answer to the question of how one goes about doing radical education. One starting point for many radical educators is a reaction against the problems, limitations, and failures of formal education and the school, and a search for alternative, transformative, often oppositional ways of fostering learning that are genuinely empowering and liberating for learners. This is seen most clearly in the conversations of Gustavo Esteva, Munir Fasheh, Manish Jain, and Kelly Teamey, who are all affiliated to some degree with global deschooling movements and have been influenced by Ivan Illich's critique of schooling and education. But it is also apparent elsewhere throughout the book, from Coumba Touré's condemnation of French colonialist schooling in Mali to Alexia Leclercq's coming to consciousness of why she never liked school as a young person growing up in Austin, Texas, to the reactions of Sibila Sotomayor, Daffne Valdés, and Colectivo LASTESIS against the failings of the university in Valparaíso, Chile. This starting point provides a clarity of purpose and focus in thinking through carefully the details of what an empowering, enabling, and transformative learning experience should look like.

For other radical educators, the starting point is more a concern with how to organize and build power within particular communities or locations in order to effectively address the problems that afflict these places that raises a concern with the forms of education than can best support agendas of building power, engaging communities, and effecting social change. We see this especially in the conversations of Francisco (Pancho) Argüelles, Jaz Brisack, Alexia Leclercq, Chukki Nanjundaswamy, Salim Vally, and Susan Williams. The kinds of organizing traditions that these educators draw upon vary: some are situated in traditions of labor organizing, some in community, environmental justice and civil rights movement organizing, some in peasant and farmworker organizing; and most have been influenced, at some point, by Freireian and other Latin American approaches to popular education. This kind of starting point sharpens

a concern with questions of how to link education with the projects of building power and taking collective action for change, and the kinds of educational approaches that are most useful and impactful for supporting such organizing projects.

Another group of radical educators—notably Julian Boal, Coumba Touré, Dmitry Vilensky and Sibila Sotomayor and Daffne Valdés with Colectivo LASTESIS—begin with a concern of how to use different forms of media and artistic expression and representation in service of transformative social justice learning projects. This may include theatre, film, performance art, dance, storytelling, social media, the visual arts, and so on. The insight is recognizing the powerful political potential of the arts. “Art plays an incredibly important role in political subjectivation” and is at “the core of leftist politics,” as Vilensky argues in his conversation. “Storytelling is powerful because, as people, we are made of stories,” observes Touré: it is “the recognition of the link and the dot between the stories that will help the profound work of social change.” This holistic engagement with a range of arts and media is central to the understanding of most radical educators that transformative learning is not just a cognitive endeavor, but engages the head, heart, and hands together. In this collection, we see similar concerns echoed in the centrality of “cultural work” in the popular education approach of the Highlander Folk School (Williams) or the mobilization of folklore and children’s art in support of agroecology learning projects with Amrita Bhoomi in Karnataka (Nanjundaswamy).

In other words, while radical educators have different starting points in the work they do, we can also see processes of convergence, overlap, borrowing, and adaptation between these different groups. There are other common themes that are apparent here as well. Many of the radical educators included here turn to local, traditional or indigenous forms of culture and education in their work. This is done in the search for rich, alternative sources of wisdom, insight and vision about different ways of being in the world, as a way to engage effectively with different communities, and quite often, as part of a broader anti-colonial or decolonization project that seeks to counter the repression, marginalization, and erasure of other cultures and viewpoints by centuries of Western imperialism, colonialism, and models of modernization and development. All of the radical educators here have either created alternative institutional spaces for doing radical education or joined alternative spaces that have been created by others (or both). Many of these use the words of university (Swaraj University, Unitierra) or school (Inside Organizer School, School of Engaged Art, Escola de Teatro Popular). “We call Unitierra a university to laugh at the official system and to

play with its symbols,” writes Esteva (2009, p. 8). Likewise, in India, Swaraj University uses “the word ‘university’ to challenge the notion of what a university has come to mean” (Hasija 2017, p. 1). Others refer to their institutional spaces as collectives, alliances, coalitions, or centers. But there is a clear recognition that having alternative, grassroots, nonformal spaces for learning beyond the formal education system is something that matters.

Finally, an approach that is probably under-recognized in discussions of radical education is the embrace of forms of vocational and technical education as central for radical education projects. Sometimes, vocational and technical education has been portrayed as antithetical to radical education agendas, which tend to be seen as being more aligned with liberal arts and humanistic approaches to education (Apple 2013). This firm embrace of vocationalism is probably seen most clearly here in Nanjundaswamy’s discussion of Amrita Bhoomi, where learning the techniques of agroecology is understood to be central to the radical project of collective liberation from the current hegemony of corporate industrial models of agriculture and rural development worldwide. This is evoked by Nanjundaswamy’s deployment of Lohia’s socialist iconography of the spade, symbolizing the importance of constructive activity to all projects of political empowerment and liberation. But this model can be seen elsewhere in this book as well. It is central to the apprenticeships in local, traditional, and sustainable forms of knowledge and production that are at the heart of the work being done by the Tamer Institute in Palestine (Fasheh), Swaraj University in India (Jain), and Unitierra in Mexico (Esteva). It can also be seen in the project of the School of Engaged Art, as discussed by Dmitry Vilensky, of developing a community of artists in Russia who link their artistic production and identity as artists to agendas of radical social change. It can be seen, too, in the Inside Organizer School being developed by Brisack, with its central concern of helping workers and labor activists learn how to become effective (inside) union organizers.

## Relationships with Formal Education

Though this book focuses on radical education done in grassroots contexts and also profiles some of the foremost representatives of today’s global deschooling movement, this is not a deschooling book. In fact, what emerges powerfully from this collection of conversations is the importance and rich diversity of

relationships that exist between formal and nonformal or grassroots spaces in the field of radical education. Lines between formal and nonformal or grassroots radical education can often become blurred, while their connections are complex, multi-dimensional and multi-directional.

Salim Vally, Sibila Sotomayor, and Daffne Valdés all hold university positions at the same time as they engage in radical education projects in grassroots spaces outside the university. In his own words, Vally is an “incidental academic” who developed his educational theory and practice within grassroots spaces in the radical student movement in South Africa, and later, in the trade union movement. The university provided Vally with a place of refuge at a moment of crisis when radical educators were being pushed out of the workers’ movement during a period of neoliberal retrenchment. Vally, Sotomayor, and Valdés, like others who occupy similar bridging positions between the worlds of formal and radical grassroots education, speak variously of: the impossibility of doing substantive radical education within the university, especially when compared with other, grassroots educational spaces; the importance of using university positions, resources, and spaces to support radical education in grassroots contexts outside the university; and the small spaces available for reforming at least some elements of education done in the university, drawing on lessons learned from their engagements with radical education projects and movements in external, grassroots contexts.

The stories of Jaz Brisack and Alexia Leclercq, conversely, shine an important light on how the university, even in its neoliberal form, can still offer opportunities for students to seek out and learn from radical educators, peers, and programs, to connect them with radical grassroots education projects outside the university, or support them in developing such projects through their university studies. A key part of this is the ability of students such as Brisack and Leclercq to intentionally shape their own educational engagements with the university: Brisack entered university from a lifetime of homeschooling, during which they had honed a practice of self-directed learning; while Leclercq was shaped by her internship experiences working with PODER, lessons learned from her own mother at home, as well as experiences of racism and alienation during her time in compulsory schooling in Texas. What becomes clear from these stories is that even if radical educators like Vally, Sotomayor, and Valdés constitute an isolated and marginalized minority in the neoliberal university, their presence can nonetheless be vitally important.

Kelly Teamey's conversation offers an important reminder of the contradictory significance of the contemporary university for many students. Teamey is someone who decided that she needed to leave her own academic career to pursue her interests in radical grassroots education; and this was due to her extreme sense of frustration with the "soullessness" and "lifelessness" that she experienced while working as an educator in the university. Yet, at the same time, Teamey still recognizes how universities, even in their diminished capacity in the neoliberal era, can offer vital opportunities for many students to encounter new ideas and perspectives they wouldn't learn elsewhere—especially for students such as herself, coming from working-class, rural, or conservative backgrounds. Radical grassroots education, even though it may often be extraordinary, is thin on the ground and difficult to locate and access for most people around the world. Teamey also reflects on how her own PhD experience within the British higher education system was actually a time of extraordinary freedom and promise; and she vehemently rejects dichotomous positions that frame formal education as being all bad, or grassroots or nonformal education as inherently good.

As Susan Williams points out in her conversation, academic staff and teacher unions and movements constitute important betwixt and between educational spaces, as they are simultaneously based in and oriented to formal education spaces, while also developing their own grassroots, nonformal educational spaces as part of the organizing and mobilizing work they do with their own members, key decision makers, and broader publics (Ewing 2025). Much the same may be said about student groups, student unions, and student movements (Choudry and Vally 2020)—and indeed, Williams also speaks of groups of university students coming to Highlander to learn about its approach to popular education and organizing and visiting university classes to meet with students on campus. Similarly, Chukki Nanjundaswamy tells of a new three-week internship program at Amrita Bhoomi that hosts university students from an agricultural university to educate them about the agroecology approach that they don't learn about in their formal education studies. Both Pancho Argüelles and Salim Vally were activists in national student uprisings, in Mexico and South Africa respectively, that were formative experiences for developing their radical educational practice; and the people's education movement that Vally speaks of in the fight against apartheid in South Africa was one led by academic, teacher, and student unions alike.

Dmitry Vilensky and Munir Fasheh point to scenarios in which formal education ceases to exist or operates in a vastly limited capacity. "Deschooling is

a kind of practice of people who are already over schooled,” as Vilensky observes in his conversation. In Russia, the problem that confronted Vilensky and the *Chto Delat* collective, by contrast, was the complete lack of formal art academies focused on teaching contemporary, modernist, and critical approaches to art. One of the motivations for creating the (nonformal) School of Engaged Art was thus to address this vacuum or absence. In this context, the lack of relevant formal institutions was limiting and disabling; and, at the same time, it created the need and space to develop radical art education nonformally, in grassroots contexts. Similarly, Fasheh notes how the Tamer Institute for Community Education was born out of necessity during the First Intifada, when Israel forcibly closed schools and universities in Palestine for months to years at a time. This enforced closure helped foster an explosion of radical and revolutionary educational experimentation throughout Palestine, of which the Tamer Institute was one part. But this does not mean that the closure of formal education in Palestine through Israeli occupation and oppression should be seen as a good or positive development, even allowing for Fasheh’s strong critiques of the failures and limitations of the formal education system. Rather, the opportunity to experience formal education needs to be understood as contradictory, just like the relationships that often exist between formal schooling and nonformal, grassroots spaces of radical educational endeavor.

Even those who most strongly reject schooling and formal education still generally have ties with such spaces. This is not only through the fact that they, like most of the individuals who feature in this book, have themselves experienced university, and sometimes, graduate or professional level education. Gustavo Esteva, Munir Fasheh, and Manish Jain have engaged extensively and regularly throughout their careers with university students and academics as part of promoting their visions of what radical grassroots education or learning should look like. As Esteva observes in his conversation, many participants in the *Ecoversities Alliance*, which was co-founded by Kelly Teamey and has become one of the most prominent networks of radical educators worldwide, are engaged in alternative education projects within the formal education sector, while others are based in nonformal learning spaces outside the sector. Similarly, Jain, despite being one of the most forceful critics of formal education around—labelling modern schooling as “one of the greatest crimes against humanity” (Jain 2015)—speaks in his conversation of going into state schools in India to set up “deschooling centers.” Part of the motivation for doing this is to share the educational experimentation at *Swaraj* with low-income communities, most of whom would not otherwise have access to such experiences. Herein lies another

vision for the possible relationship between formal and radical grassroots education, where grassroots education spaces constitute vital places for radical education innovation, which can then be imported into and ultimately transform the space of formal education itself. This vision, of course, has a long trajectory, perhaps best exemplified by the career and work of Paulo Freire, that began in the field of adult, community, and nonformal education and only later became concerned with rethinking, reworking—and radicalizing—education in the formal system as well (Carnoy and Tarlau 2019).

### The Significance of Wider Social, Political, and Economic Environments

“We can speculate,” Gustavo Esteva says in his conversation, about whether “the movement to build Unitierra would be possible without the Zapatistas,” before going on to describe the many ways in which the Zapatista uprising impacted not just the founding of Unitierra, but broader shifts in educational practices and attitudes among local communities in Oaxaca and beyond. One of the key considerations that radical educators point to throughout this book is the importance of the relationships between grassroots radical education spaces and the broader social, political, and economic environments in which these spaces operate. Munir Fasheh thus points to the importance of the First Intifada in Palestine for impacting his own thinking about education, as well as that of many others, and for the creation of the Tamer Institute. Salim Vally describes the centrality of the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa for the development of the people’s education movement in that country. Julian Boal points to how Theatre of the Oppressed was created in and molded by revolutionary movements in Latin America. Sibila Sotomayor and Daffne Valdés note how Colectivo LASTESIS was born of mass social movement activism in Chile in the early twenty-first century.

The relationship between radical education, social movements and regional, national or global political windows of opportunity goes in both directions: social movements and periods of mobilization help to create spaces for radical education to develop and act as conduits for any wider impacts that radical education might have on fundamental social transformation; at the same time, radical education plays a key role in helping to create and guide social movements, and sometimes, to open up and drive broader periods

of mass mobilization and change. Most of the radical educators featured in this book show a keen awareness of the importance not just of the internal characteristics of their own educational practices, but the links they forge with wider movements as well. “There are many NGOs who are working on alternative education” in India, says Chukki Nanjundaswamy, but they are “in isolation.” What makes Amrita Bhoomi “very special” for Nanjundaswamy is that it “was born out of the farmers’ movement, the struggle,” and “has an organic link with the social movements” in the country. Julian Boal decided to set up the Escola de Teatro Popular in Brazil because of the opportunity to work collaboratively with the many social movements that are very active there. Pancho Argüelles’ educational work is situated with a national immigrant rights movement in the United States; and Argüelles speaks of how popular education work has both helped to facilitate—but also been mobilized and energized by—organizing projects among immigrant workers throughout the country. Alexia Leclercq sees herself not just as working for PODER and Start: Empowerment, as the local organizations through which she does her grassroots education and organizing work, but as an integral part of a generations-long environmental justice movement that links environment and climate concerns with the fight for race and class justice.

Radical educators in this book also point to the impacts of periods of authoritarianism and repression on their education and organizing work. This is most apparent in the conversation with Dmitry Vilensky, as he talks about the experience of having to shut down the School of Engaged Art in St. Petersburg and leave Russia to apply for political asylum in Germany. But it shows up elsewhere as well. Julian Boal begins his conversation by reflecting on the consequences for his engagement with Theatre of the Oppressed of having been “born or started understanding the world in a moment in which the revolutionary horizon was no longer.” Pancho Argüelles’ engagement with popular education and liberation theology was shaped by the fight against genocide in Guatemala in the 1980s, and subsequently, by struggle against anti-immigrant repression in the United States during the early twenty-first century. Authoritarianism and repression can have contradictory implications for the flourishing of radical education. Vilensky notes how in Russia, prior to 2022, state repression actually helped to fuel radical education projects, though these were compelled to focus less on projects of mass social or political transformation, and more on building subterranean counter-publics as spaces of social autonomy. Salim Vally likewise notes how the apartheid state in South Africa in some ways made it easier to foster radical

education projects than the multi-racial, neoliberal, and formally post-apartheid state that came after. Sibila Sotomayor and Daffne Valdés note that, though the political window of opportunity in Chile within which Colectivo LASTESIS was born has been closed, “in the end, it doesn’t matter if the window is closed, we are still going to be there, resistant and existing,” but “it’s just maybe that we’re more invisible” for a while.

Finally, woven in throughout these conversations is a deep recognition among the radical educators gathered here of the central importance to their work of international solidarity. “It’s really about solidarity,” as Kelly Teamey says, in response to a question about how and why the Ecoversities Alliance was created as a global network of radical educators. “We have been part of international movement spaces since the 1990s,” Chukki Nanjundaswamy observes of Amrita Bhoomi and the farmers movement in Karnataka: “once our enemies got globalized, it was also time for us to get globalized.” Susan Williams talks of organizing cross-border worker-to-worker exchanges during Highlander’s work on the campaign against NAFTA, and points to these exchanges as vital for fostering “a more international view” of global trade and immigration that isn’t xenophobic or fascist. Coumba Touré reflects on the fundamental place in her work of Pan-Africanism, as being “about building connections, making sure that people build solidarity among each other, and educating people to know about each other and to understand about each other.” Jaz Brisack embraces US socialist Eugene Debs as the cornerstone for their labor organizing work, because “Debs was the first person I ever heard or read talking about solidarity,” and “that was life changing for me.” Pancho Argüelles’ work in the US immigrant rights movement centers on fostering forms of cross-border solidarity; and his core commitment to the practice of accompaniment is, as he notes, a “form of solidarity” with different communities “in their journey of survival and liberation.” In this sense, then, radical education, at least as it appears here, might be seen as embodying what Hunt-Hendrix and Taylor (2024, p. xiii) call for as the “conscious cultivation” of “transformative solidarity,” understood as “the recognition of our inherent interconnectedness, an attempt to build bonds of commonality across our differences,” “an ethos and spur to action rooted in the acknowledgement that our lives are intertwined,” and “a way of connecting with others: forging new communities, developing shared visions, and building power to push for social change.”

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