

Taboo: The Journal of Culture and Education

Volume 17

Issue 1 *Radical Possibilities: Invited Special Issue*

Article 7

May 2018

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Recommended Citation

Ayers, W., & Ayers, R. (2018). Singing in Dark Times. *Taboo: The Journal of Culture and Education*, 17 (1). <https://doi.org/10.31390/taboo.17.1.07>

Singing in Dark Times

Bill Ayers & Rick Ayers

*In the dark times
Will there also be singing?
Yes, there will also be singing.
About the dark times.
—Bertolt Brecht*

What does it mean to be human today?
Where are we on the clock of the universe?
What does this political and social moment demand of us?
How shall we live?

Betsy DeVos, Secretary of Education in the Donald Trump cabinet (aka the Monster's Ball) is by now quite well known as an opponent of public education in any form whatsoever. She's a self-styled "disruptor" and an avid promoter of for-profit education and privatizing this essential public good; she's campaigned tirelessly in her home state of Michigan to force the public to pay for charter and private schools while bypassing any meaningful public oversight; and she's built businesses and promoted schemes designed to take money from the public treasuries and hand it over to private hands and parochial schools.

Yes, Betsy DeVos is terrible, but she's not quite as unique as one might think; she's not an absolute aberration nor an entirely rare bird; and she did not fly to her current sinecure in Washington out of the blue from her gilded aviary. Rather, Betsy DeVos lies at the end of a well-worn road taken by both major political parties, the capitalist media (liberal and conservative alike—the *New York Times* and the

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Chicago Tribune, MSNBC, NPR and Fox), the financial elite, and the major foundations. She is the natural heir to John King and Arne Duncan, William Bennett, Richard Riley, Rod Paige, and Margaret Spellings; and she is the logical extension of a poisonous idea shared by the powerful for decades: education is not a universal human right nor a public imperative that must be equitably available to all children in a free and democratic society; education is, rather, a commodity (like a car or a washing machine or a hammer) to be bought and sold at the marketplace.

The corporate campaign to undo public education under the seductive rhetoric of “choice” and the broad rubric of “school reform” attempts to topple the very idea of education as a right by pulling down three sturdy pillars upon which public education rests:

1. Educational success, like human development, is dynamic, complex, and multi-faceted, and it cannot be reduced to a single standardized metric;
2. The collective voice of teachers and other educational professionals on matters of educational policy and school practice is necessary and good;
3. The public educational space is a common good, and it is not for sale to private operators.

Undermining any one of these pillars is destructive, and chopping away at all three is potentially catastrophic—and that’s exactly what every Secretary of Education has done since 1980. Betsy DeVos will surely continue the attack, and possibly ramp it up, taking a jackhammer to all three pillars simultaneously in an attempt to topple the temple. Private profit, testing and sorting, teachers as passive clerks in an enterprise that allows them no agency—this is the Holy Trinity Betsy DeVos genuflects before.

But interestingly, while the corporate reformers have wielded the big megaphone, captured major political officials, and commandeered vast resources, in decades of effort they have failed to win the moral or the political argument. They’ve done serious damage, but they’ve been consistently (and sometimes successfully) opposed by teachers, parents, and students. These opponents of corporate encroachments on schools argue that education is a human right, enshrined as Article 26 in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, written into every US state constitution as the right to a free and equitable education for all children. The Supreme Court has upheld this right again and again—in the famous 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision the court noted that “education is perhaps the most important function of state and local governments,” and that it stands as “the very foundation of good citizenship.”

Every educational leader and every school makes lofty claims about their hopes for and intentions regarding their students and their graduates. The aspirational consensus points toward independent learners and critical thinkers, productive people and thoughtful, caring citizens or residents. Overwhelmingly these same schools fail dismally when it comes to delivering on their own high-minded mis-

sion statements—they typically build a school experience that is hierarchical and hyper-individualistic, where “learning” is externally motivated and constantly competitive. They ignore everything we know about authentic learning, including the demonstrable fact that learning and living are twins, for example, and that learning starts naturally at birth with no external rewards or punishments whatsoever needed to get busy on the endless journey to know and to be. They dismiss in practice the key understanding that curiosity, agency, and imagination are our common human heritage and must be nourished and challenged in order to breathe.

Schools develop and promote an unhealthy obsession with obedience, standardization, conformity, and control—especially in those spaces attended by the descendants of enslaved people, Latinx and immigrant children from poor countries, and First Nations youth. Knowing and accepting one’s place on the grand pyramid of winners and losers becomes the core lesson in these places, and as schools develop elaborate schemes for managing the unruly mob, they turn to the familiar technologies of constraint—ID cards, transparent backpacks, uniform dress codes, cameras, armed guards, metal detectors, random searches. The knotted system of rules, the exhaustive machinery of schedules and surveillance, the prison architecture, the laborious programs of regulating, indoctrinating, inspecting, disciplining, censoring, correcting, counting, appraising, assessing and judging, testing and grading—all of it makes these places feel like institutions of punishment rather than sites of enlightenment and liberation, places to recover from rather than experiences to carry forward. We note something even more insidious and destructive than the school-to-prison pipeline for disadvantaged students—schools become transformed in some communities into a school/prison nexus.

Up against the repressive, authoritarian forces that use schools to colonize and coerce oppressed communities, resistance typically takes the form of a demand for freedom. From the first free schools built by Black-led states in the Reconstruction era to the cry for “Freedom Now!” in the 60’s, to the campaigns for “Black Lives Matter,” open immigration, community control, an end to patriarchy—students and teachers and families consistently hold forth the goal of education for free people.

Education for free people—public education—is powered by a particularly precious if vulnerable ideal: *every human being is of infinite and incalculable value*, each a work in progress and a force in motion, each a unique intellectual, emotional, physical, spiritual, moral, and creative force, each of us born equal in dignity and rights, each endowed with reason and conscience and agency, each deserving a dedicated place in a community of solidarity as well as a vital sense of brotherhood and sisterhood, recognition and respect. School people who embrace that basic ethic and spirit struggle to resist the sorting of students into winners and losers as well as the relentless deficit-oriented labeling of youth, and recognize that the fullest development of each individual—given the tremendous range of ability and the delicious stew of race, ethnicity, points of origin, and background—is the necessary condition

for the full development of the entire community, and, conversely, that the fullest development of all is essential for the full development of each.

Free people strive and scuffle to find ways to refuse obedience and conformity in favor of initiative, questioning, courage, audacity, imagination, creativity, inventiveness, and empathy. These are the arts of liberty and these are qualities that cannot be delivered in top-down ways, but must be modeled and nourished, fought for and defended, and mostly practiced again and again and again.

Free students struggle to become major actors in constructing their own educations, transforming themselves from objects of a regime of “discipline and punish” into active agents, authors, and artists of their own lives; they demand that education become decoupled from the inadequate and illegitimate “meritocracy model,” and that the public good become understood more fundamentally. And certainly for those who have been invaded by the US or internally colonized, education for freedom means the struggle for self-determination—outside of and beyond the narrow framing of the federal and state authorities. And for those who have grown up in a bubble of privilege and oblivion, meaningful education means learning to join a world beyond and after empire, to work in solidarity and deep internationalism. There is ultimately greater satisfaction in uniting with humanity and the future than in losing one’s soul to protect the toys and trinkets of our parasitic economy.

Instead of schooling-as-credentialing, sorting, gate keeping, and controlling, education for freedom enables students to become smarter and more aware, more able to work effectively in community and across communities, and more capable of imagining a better world that is possible and working to make it so. This can mean building alternative and insurgent classrooms and schools and community spaces as small-scale models of a society driven by norms of equality and reciprocity, a sense of shared community in which people care about and for one another, mutual respect, recognition of differences including distinct capacities and interests and needs, shared wealth, cooperation, attempts to account for and correct all disadvantages, and so on – everybody in, nobody out. These spaces can focus on what we know we need rather than what we are told we must endure. Action-oriented, child-centered teaching engages and motivates students, and it can also enliven and fire teachers and other adults as well. Everyone can learn to embrace the deeper, always generative discipline of getting things done collectively and learning *from* rather than *about* life.

Imagination “ignites the slow fuse of possibility,” as Emily Dickinson says, and it remains an indispensable weapon in the hands of the powerless. Yes, the powerful—the casino capitalists and the predatory financiers, the banksters and their hedge-fund homies—control the massive military-industrial complex, the media and the sophisticated surveillance systems, the prison cells, and the organized propaganda, and these are on constant display as if to remind us every minute that there is no hope of a world without the instruments of death and oppression, while we have only our minds, our desires, and our dreams—and each other. And, yes,

in a traditional conflict we are finished before we start, but it's also true that there's no power on earth stronger than the imagination unleashed and the collective human soul on fire. In an irregular struggle that pits our free imaginations against the stillborn and stunted imaginations of the war-makers, the profiteers, and the mercenaries, we can win.

More process than product, more stance than conclusion, engaging the imagination involves the dynamic work of mapping the world as it really is and then purposely stepping outside and leaning toward a possible world. We ignite that fuse. For the descendants of captured and enslaved people, for Latinx children and First-Nations youth, for the poor and oppressed who, as James Baldwin, Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, and Ta-Nehisi Coates point out, are already condemned, labeled disposable, and marked for extermination, the imagination is a means of survival, and hope is an essential vehicle for the fights that will necessarily come—hope that things can change because they must; imagining a better world because the status quo is itself an act of violence.

Hope is a collective antidote to cynicism and despair. It is the capacity to notice or invent alternatives, and then to do something about it, to get busy in projects of repair. Choosing hopefulness—or having hope imposed simply because the alternative is exploitation and extermination—is holding out the possibility of change. Hope is never a matter of sitting down and waiting patiently; hope is nourished in action, and it assumes that we are—each and all of us—incomplete as human beings. Of course we live in dark times, and some of us inhabit even darker places, and yes, we act mostly in the dark. But we are never freer than when we refuse to see the situation or the world before us as the absolute end of the matter.

Dark times indeed: the word fascism has become an electrifying political pejorative, stripped of substance, and so historically freighted and so overused and misused that the word can seem wildly inappropriate if one hopes to speak plainly. But “fascism” does have a precise meaning beyond the optics of swastikas and jack-booted SS men. Fascism is not consigned to a particular place or a specific moment—Europe in the mid-Twentieth Century, for example. Fascism is sometimes, but not necessarily, the result of a coup or a military putsch, and yet the most notorious fascist regime in history came to power through a legal and democratic process. It's long been said that if fascism ever came to America it would come with a familiar face wrapped in an American flag.

So, let's talk a moment about fascism.

Simply put, fascism is a right-wing form of government that unites the state and big business with more and more centralized power. Fascism opposes liberal democracy, Marxism, socialism, and anarchism, and attempts to forge national unity under an autocratic leader with a totalitarian program advocating stability and law and order, claiming all of this is necessary in order to defend the homeland, and to respond effectively to economic instability. Fascist states attempt to mobilize a mass base through deliberately constructed fear and hatred as they prepare for armed

conflict and permanent war by appealing to patriotic nationalism and militarizing all aspects of society.

Fascism arises in capitalist countries in response to loss of or challenge to their colonial holdings. And fascist violence is simply colonial methods (round-ups, exterminations, registration) brought home to the mother country. In other words, the oppressed and colonized have been experiencing fascism, or its core practices, as a constant.

Fascists agitate “popular” movements in the streets, apparently spontaneous but in reality well-funded and highly organized, based on bigotry, intolerance, and the threat of violence, all of it fueled by the demonization of targeted, distinct racial, religious, or gendered vulnerable populations and the creation of convenient sacrificial scapegoats who are repeatedly blamed for every social or economic problem people experience. Fascist regimes promote disdain for the arts, for intellectual life, for reason and evidence, as well as deep contempt for the necessary back and forth of serious argument or discussion.

That’s fascism.

An authentic and effective opposition cannot be led by the Democrats because a bipartisan effort got us to this spot: permanent war, austerity, privatization, trade unions, destroyed, mass incarceration, income inequality, hyper-segregation, the take-down of public schools, and more. Donald Trump ran an explicitly fascist campaign, and no one should now be surprised that he’s moving quickly to promote a fascist program and consolidate a fascist government. The Trump project of these years is to implement fascism and what we do or fail to do now can be decisive. The fight-back is inspiring—but we must keep organizing, gathering, staying mobilized, joining hands and rising up.

So, we must build the opposition, unite all who can be united, and offer an alternative to both neoliberalism and fascism. The US empire is in a steady and irreversible decline, a moment of great danger and real possibility.

Trump’s inauguration speech is a textbook of the whining of the privileged. Here are the richest, the most coddled, the most comfortable people on earth finding a way to name themselves as victims. His version of “America first” depicts the country as damaged—“American carnage”—and in need of radical restoration; claiming legitimacy exclusively from the people who voted for him; stating that he alone stands above the corrupt political class and has a mandate to sweep the slate clean and start over; warning his is a law and order regime, and anyone who disrespects the police or questions their legitimacy is “on notice.”

We must announce through our lives and our work and our play that a new world is in the making. We can construct spaces of liberating education inside and outside of schools, places where fascism is discussed and exposed and where resistance is developed. We can create a community of agitators and transform this corner of the world into a place that we want to inhabit. The government can declare all kinds of people who have been forced to move here—forced by the destruction of

their economies and the imperial wars—as illegal. But we can declare them legal in our space. Vast liberated spaces, in parallel universes of resistance, have always existed—millions of undocumented workers, millions of others who participate in the underground economy—and will only expand.

Schools have always been sites of contention, of struggle over the kind of world we want to live in. There were no good old days. Families, kids, teachers, communities have always had to struggle. We can identify ourselves as citizens of a country that does not yet exist and has no map, and become that new nation's pioneers and cartographers—and through our cooperative actions bring a more assertive and vibrant public into being.

We can always do something—and something is where we begin. The tools are everywhere—humor and art, games and stories, protest and spectacle, the quiet, patient intervention and the angry and urgent thrust—and the rhythm is always the same: we open our eyes and look unblinkingly at the immense and dynamic world we find before us; we allow ourselves to be astonished by the beauty and horrified at the suffering all around us; we organize ourselves, link hands with others, dive in, speak up, and act out; we doubt that our efforts have made the important difference we'd hoped for, and so we rethink, recalibrate, look again, and dive in once more. The days of the regime are numbered.