



Fugitive Practices: Learning in a Settler Colony

Leigh Patel

To cite this article: Leigh Patel (2019) Fugitive Practices: Learning in a Settler Colony, Educational Studies, 55:3, 253-261, DOI: [10.1080/00131946.2019.1605368](https://doi.org/10.1080/00131946.2019.1605368)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131946.2019.1605368>



Published online: 25 Apr 2019.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 683



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



Citing articles: 1 View citing articles [↗](#)

2018 AESA R. FREEMAN BUTTS LECTURE



Fugitive Practices: Learning in a Settler Colony

Leigh Patel

University of Pittsburgh

In this article, I connect the ways that learning is fundamental to life, for human and nonhuman beings. I write this article at a time of crystalline xenophobic backlash, the rise of several totalitarian regimes across the planet, as well as the formation and action from many social movements. I argue that in this moment, it is even more important for education and education studies to distinguish between the achievement-measured desires of a settler state from what learning itself is and how it is intertwined with live and sovereignty. To highlight learning as fugitive practice, I connect the ways that learning has been maintained and protected even when it has been forbidden, foreclosed and seemingly withered through colonialism.

Narratives facilitate structures. The stories that individuals tell about themselves, their people, their nation, other people, and success or failure all have material force in the shape and functions that institutions perform in society. Societal institutions are not merely buildings; they are the structures that shape wellness for few and acceleration to sickness and death (Gilmore, 2007): healthcare, employment, laws, culture, and of course, education.

In most United States history books, the invasion of European settlers, often storied as an *encounter*, is coupled with renditions of how the United States began as small group of colonies established by a small group of people seeking religious freedom. The story continues that after a brief and amicable initial cultural contact with the Wampanoag peoples, Europeans, through treaties with Indigenous peoples, established the nation and expanded it well beyond the Atlantic seaboard. Westward Expansion was accomplished through purported duty and obligation, to tame a wild West and establish trails, railroads that settlers could use to claim their parcel of wild land. The claim for land necessarily involved the removal of wild Native Americans who were wild, in part, because they were of those lands. In the same



FIGURE 1 Gast, J. (1872). American Progress.

history books, slavery is acknowledged as a period of time, an unfortunate time, but then Abraham Lincoln came along, tussled and tossed about how best to save the nation and in that interest ultimately decided to write into law *de jure* freedom for enslaved peoples. This put an end to the Civil war, and then history books proceed through reconstruction, the industrial age, the wave of migrants in the late 1800s, World Wars, perhaps a bit of the 1960s' popular culture,¹ and depending on its print date, the election of the nation's first Black American as President. Throughout this historical narrative of the evolution of the United States, settler colonialism is rarely mentioned, and that absence works to perpetuate its power. In fact, it is possible that students who learn this narrative of European invasion might think that after the first few meetings, the Wampanoag peoples simply retreated from their homelands of centuries.

From a few steps back from this narrative, though, this sequence of events, several things become apparent. First, they are in and of themselves, presented as a sequence, a development and evolution whose ongoing ending is a just and justice-seeking state. Put simply, it is a linear story. And in that linear, chronological story of how the United States came to be a world power, there is the connotation of both an organic and moral-driven unfolding of a powerful nation. Second, progress is a predominant theme throughout this oft-told tale about the United States. In most secondary history textbooks (Patel, 2017), the era of 'Manifest Destiny,' is often accompanied with John Gast's 1872 painting, "American Progress." See Figure 1.

In this painting, which is a landscape of the middle portion of Turtle Island, what strikes most at first glance is the figure of a White young woman, dressed in a flowing white dress, holding a book, enlarged in size, floating above the ground, and looking to the West, as is everyone else in the painting. Below her, literally, on the land, are three groupings, placed in sequential order, all looking westward. First, there are covered wagons, then following just behind are stagecoaches, and then at the right of the painting, what is coming: trains. On the land, there are only White-appearing men. There are no depictions or imprints of Indigenous peoples upon whose land and land-life connections where this apparently divine mission westward took place. Neither is there a hint of the stolen labor from enslaved Black peoples who were legally considered property for much of this nation's history. Finally, there is no whisper in the image of the vital trains whose construction exacted a deadly toll on Chinese migrants who were pivotal in the building of those railways (Takaki, 1987).

Manifest destiny, westward expansion, in this painting and through the messaging in much of codified curricula, is a narrative that holds tremendous structural force. Without factually accurate recanting of the ways that European invasion began a time, still ongoing, of theft of land, death, and sickness, much is left malignantly silent. Students don't learn that upon first encounter, European settlers wrote with admiration about the Wampanoag peoples but then rewrote them as savages to be tamed through Christianity and European knowledge (Dunbar-Ortiz, 2014). Beyond this example, there are further specifics of the claiming of property and redistributing it to White men, often as parcels for agriculture, and sometimes in the form of land grant universities (Patel, *forthcoming*). With this multipronged attempt to emaciate and erase Indigeneity peoples and cultures absent from history curricula, the narrative of manifest destiny fills in the explanatory gap. The perpetuation of the myth that race is biological categorically served the purposes of rendering Black, Indigenous, and other people of color as belonging to groups that were less than human (Feagin, 2010; Mignolo, 2012; Wynter, 2003). Codified into laws and through de facto practice, Black and migrant peoples were counted, in the former case, as chattel, and both were exploited as dispensable labor. Indigenous peoples, who were harder for settlers to classify into a single race, were deemed savage and best served through removal (Dunbar-Ortiz, 2014).

In specific moments and structures of society, this narrative of linear progress and hierarchies of humanness, because it is so widely held, retold, and reinstated, has had material effects. In various societal institutions, vestiges and active settler practices permeate into material consequences. Studies show that doctors routinely underestimate the amount of pain that Black patients are experiencing (Wandner, Scipio, Hirsh, Torres, & Robinson, 2012). Enclosure for profit continues as an economic strategy through both incarceration and the prison-school nexus (Gilmore, 2007; Meiners, 2013). Schools and education are no exception. In fact, schools are one of the primary vehicles through which this malignant narrative is maintained and perpetuation. Children are schooled to believe that, although a sad consequence, Indigenous people mostly died from illness and the squirmish here and there. They learn that slavery was bad, but it is over. They learn that the Civil Right movement ended the Jim Crow era, also bad and unfortunate. But now, everything is better. They are taught this by a teacher force that remains overwhelmingly White, female, and middle to upper-middle class (Sleeter, 2017).

SETTLER COLONIALISM AND EDUCATION

The core concept and organizing principle of settler colonialism is erase to replace (Veracini, 2011). Erase Indigenous peoples so that settlers can claim the land. Erase land as living entity and replace it with a definition of property to be owned and resources to be mined. Settler colonialism is found throughout many societal institutions, including the genetic scientific calculations of Indigeneity (Tallbear, 2013) that discount tribal affiliations, the aforementioned ahistorical accounts of the United States, and through the removal of Indigenous children and their placement into boarding schools. In fact, the disappearance of Indigenous women continues today as a palpable, although rarely reported, phenomenon today (Razack, 2016).

Settler colonialism has also treated Black peoples as chattel, for both free labor and increased property. In fact, myriad examples abound about both the prestigious education institutions that were built by enslaved Black peoples (Wilder, 2014) and the ways that universities took part in the practice of owning and selling slaves (Anderson & Span, 2016).

However, there are also important subtleties to the ways that settler colonialism has shaped epistemology, what counts as knowledge, and educational policy and practice. The simple fact that the still widely used term of achievement, and of course the gap between racialized groups, refracts that ways that property is discussed more than land. Even in environmental concern circles, land is rarely connected to a sense of its own power and how human beings have had many forms of spiritual connections to land, water, and air (Kawagley, 2006). Similarly, when achievement is upheld, rather than learning, it brings with it a toolkit of measurements, remediation programs, expulsions, and meritocratic explanations of who achieves and how. No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top, versions one and two, all mimic linearity while pursuing and lauding individualized achievement.

LEARNING AS FUGITIVE

I aver that educators have much to learn about learning itself and that much of that learning must come from beyond brick and mortar schools. I ask the reader to consider how often learning has been undertaken in this settler society as an act of fugitivity. In the recent film, *Black Panther* (Coogler & Cole, 2018), one of the main characters, upon capture in the kingdom of Wakanda, refuses the Black Panther's offer to stay in Wakanda. Killmonger, the character who had fought to seize ruling power, rebukes the offer, saying that he would rather die like his ancestors, at the bottom of the ocean than to be kept in chains. Killmonger's description of enslaved Black Africans' who jumped overboard from slave ships can, indeed, be considered a form of fugitivity. In fact, along with the many enslaved peoples that Harriet Tubman guided to abolition territory, it is perhaps one of the most quintessential definitions of fugitive. This nation enacted not one but two Fugitive Slave Acts (1850, 1872), which legally obligated people in the United States, including the free states, to return escaped enslaved peoples to their purported owners. Fugitives, in those government acts, were tied closely to property and criminality.

However, fugitivity has also had a strong connection to learning, throughout the history of this settler nation and other places of colonization. When enslaved peoples were outlawed from being literate, the teaching of the alphabet and literacy continued, secreted away through many means, including the poetic action of an adult tracing the letters of the alphabet onto the palm of a child. In her exhaustive and robustly researched book on the educational leadership of Horace Tate, Vanessa Siddle Walker (2018) presents a comprehensive history of the explicit and furtive tactics that Tate and other leaders used to create quality education for Black children in the South. As just one example from this stunningly exhaustive text, Siddle Walker explains one of the lessons that Tate received from his mother, that he must repay the sacrifices she had made under the heel of misogynoir through helping Black children. In an interview conducted by an unknown interlocutor, Tate recanted a message that his mother told him to learn and keep.

The new mother, as she looks at the head of the babe in her arms, whispers in her heart: “My child, may you seek the truth. And if anything I teach you be false, may you throw it away from you and go on to a richer truth and a greater knowledge than I have ever known. If you become a man of thought and learning, may you never fail with your right hand to tear down what your left hand has built up through years of thought and study if you see it not to be founded on that which is [true]. ... Die poor, unknown, unloved, a failure perhaps. But close your eyes to nothing which seems to be the truth (pp. 140-141).

In the space of this article, I cannot do justice to the deep ways that Tate heeded this advice through heavy lifting of organizing, explicit partnerships, covert collaborations, and ongoing political education. He did this, of course, not a sole individual, but as a driven leader who thought and practiced for the education that Black children deserved but would never receive in a nation that then, and still now, emaciates them through lack of resources, teachers who do not see them as fully human, and perhaps even more profoundly, that does not treat knowledge and learning as servant to change and assessment, as the quote so eloquently advises. On the contrary, Black, Indigenous, and people of color are told regularly through their surroundings, through the Eurocentric curricula of schools and universities, that they are lesser or that they do not even exist, and inaccurate histories are presented as impermeable truth, strengthened through each false reprinting.

And yet, learning has, I argue, never yielded fully to this settler project of colonization of the mind. From the lessons taught within homes to social movements that used explicit direct action, political and self-determined education has regularly involved careful study as part of the project of changing the opportunities to literally learn and live for children of the darker nations. Ruby Sales, a revered icon of the Civil Rights movement and an activist who uses spiritually grounded practices, spoke of her involvement with learning as a fugitive practice (personal interview, Sales, 2017):

In systems like the Southern fascist education system, it's incorrect to assume that there's one system. Without understanding that there's a counterculture and the counterculture functions very differently than the dominating culture. And so, that within this counterculture of education that I grew up in, we say that it was a long train running towards excellence. And right in the glare

of the most brilliant fascist Southern apartheid, Black people engaged in the community project that began in 1863 immediately after emancipation where Black men met in southern Alabama. Where they placed the utmost endeavor to educate the youth for advancement of the race, for the preservation of rights and liberties. And those three aspects make up what I call, no matter where you are, it universalizes what projects that happen in counter cultures. That there's a correlation between educating the youth which represents continuity, stability, and the future. That project was the engine of black counter culture of education (personal communication).

Sales' words correlate closely with the generational responsibility and dedication to learning in the face of overt oppression. Her experiences also speak to the ways that fugitive learning, or in her words counterculture education, is essential to the formation of ongoing struggles for life and liberties.

In fact, social movements have regularly involved education, particularly political education. Kelley's *Freedom Dreams* is a historical analysis of the ways that Black empowerment movements have done their political work, and that the work often, if not always, involved political education. In a 2016 essay, Kelley further explained,

Black studies was conceived not just outside the university but in *opposition* to a Eurocentric university culture with ties to corporate and military power. Having emerged from mass revolt, insurgent black studies scholars developed institutional models based in, but largely independent of, the academy. (para 22)

Black studies, ethnic studies, and women's and gender studies departments were largely formed out of the campus protests in the mid to late 1960s. However, as Ferguson (2012) noted, these same programs, because of their visibility and dependency on the larger corporate-like university structure, have ironically become co-opted into places of, at best, symbolic representation of diversity, and at worst, places where faculty and students receive the least amount of funding and support.

This tendency brings me back to the advice that Tate said he held closely throughout his life: Be watchful of what is happening to what you have built, and be willing to destroy it if it no longer is serving the purpose of creating knowledge and educating oppressed peoples. From a view of knowledge as static, narratives that create settler structures for the purpose of ownership, the anchors are dominion and well-being and wealth for a select few, and rich, sickness and death for many more, millions more. I state this settler logic again here to underscore the dedication found in many iterations of fugitive learning as an enactment of life, as cognizant and tactically resistant to the colonizing bondage of body and mind, and essential to projects of respect for all living beings.

FUGITIVE LEARNING AND YOUNG PEOPLE

It is not a new finding that many, if not most social movements have been initiated and emboldened by young people, people in their teens and early twenties. The current social movement that we are in, closely tied to the Black Lives Matter movement, is no exception to

that pattern. And as in the past, protests that started in the streets and in communities then percolated on college campuses. Since 2015, campuses have been electrified with and by students' protests that range in what their demands are. Die-ins, marches, refusals to participate in athletic and academic activities—all these actions and more have been part of the groundswell of campus activism, the largest and most impactful since the 1960s.

Youth and activism are not unfamiliar companions. Gillen noted,

The great majority of fugitive slaves were young, roughly seventy-five percent between the ages of thirteen and twenty-nine. Insurgent slaves would not tolerate political arrangements that left them enslaved, and eventually forced those arrangements to change. Similarly, young people today—whether recognized as political agents or not—defy educational arrangements that lock them into second-class citizenship. (Gillen, 2014, p. 27)

In recent years, the Dreamers movement, as well as the Undocuqueer movement, have made information, research, and legal advice publicly available (United We Dream, 2019). There is no doubt that a great deal of internal political education occurred before this outward public pedagogy could take place. For every march that happens, some political education and planning has taken place, and often, included study and learning as part of those planning processes. Further, literacy as knowledge production as fugitive practice often occurred in public spaces that simply were not considered by the projects of colonization and indoctrination. Gospel literacy is a form of political and spiritual education that Lathan (2013) wrote about, highlighting the ways that Black gospel literacy has had a long-standing and enduring articulation of Black cultural survivance and joy in relation to and differing from secular civil rights.

In the aforementioned 2016 essay by Kelley (2016), he expresses caution that today's young activists are not engaged in the political study that is so important for political struggle. In my own interviews of several civil rights leaders, this same concern was also echoed. And yet, we can also see evidence of political research and tactics in the work of the Black Youth Project's *We Charge Genocide* (Cohen, 2010), and the Dreamers toolkits (United We Dream, 2019). In fact, one of the challenges that is faced by generations as they pass along knowledge in furtive ways, is to do so with the understanding that historical, political, and cultural contexts change and will, in turn, change how fugitive political education and learning are shaped.

EDUCATIONAL STUDIES AND FUGITIVE LEARNING

In a time when privatization has been creeping steadily throughout every level of formal education, it may serve researchers of education itself to consider how learning differs from achievement, particularly personalized achievement over others. In fact, I propose that this is an imperative moment, with the dissolution of public schools, continued attacks on teachers unions, and standardization of curricula, for educators to disambiguate achievement from learning. In looking at social movements and the furtive, generational work to create quality

education for children seen to be lesser from the view of colonialism, it is vital that teachers embrace what learning actually is, and what it requires.

This is, by no means, a sweeping statement that endeavors to seek learning when it has been forbidden has been without punishment or pain. In fact, the university-based readers of this article need look no further than the current compromises to academic freedom to know that knowledge and knowledge production are always political. Therefore, when learning is engaged as fugitive act, out of necessity, it should at once call educators to attention to disambiguate learning from achievement and to not romanticize the risks so many have taken over the centuries to learn as an act of defiance and futurity.

Returning to the quote that Tate held continuously throughout his life, one interpretation is that one cannot become so attached to what one is building, in side passages and the undercommons (Harney & Moten, 2013) for the purposes of equity and justice that one is not aware when it is likely simultaneously being corrupted and co-opted by larger vectors of oppression. In this sense, educational studies, although at risk in so many institutions of higher education due to a neoliberal winnowing of what counts as knowledge, has a tremendous role to play. Educational studies scholars can bring in the history, the contextual accuracy of settler state desires, and raise up the authentic and purposeful learning that has been passed from generation to generation. It is within this field that questions of what counts as learning and for whom are essential, even core questions. The fugitive practices of learning have much to teach us in the pursuit of those inquiries.

NOTE

1. It is telling to note that *popular culture* does not appear as a term in most United States History books until 1960s are introduced. Popular culture included texts before this, as an example the postcards of lynchings that circulated in the late 1800' and early to mid 1900's. White supremacy long had its own popular culture texts and spectacle performances.

REFERENCES

- Anderson, J. D., & Span, C. M. (2016). History of education in the news: The legacy of slavery, racism, and contemporary black activism on campus. *History of Education Quarterly*, 56(04), 646–656. doi:10.1111/hoeq.12214
- Cohen, C. J. (2010). *Democracy remixed: Black youth and the future of American politics*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Coogler, R., & Cole, J. R. (2018). *Black Panther*. Marvel.
- Dunbar-Ortiz, R. (2014). *An indigenous peoples' history of the United States* (Vol. 3). Boston, MA: Beacon Press.
- Feagin, J. R. (2010). *Racist America: Roots, current realities, and future reparations*. Abington, UK: Routledge.
- Ferguson, R. A. (2012). *The reorder of things: The university and its pedagogies of minority difference*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Gast, J. (1872). *American Progress*. Los Angeles, CA: Autry National Center.
- Gillen, J. (2014). *Educating for insurgency: The roles of young people in schools of poverty*. Chico, CA: Ak Press.
- Gilmore, R. W. (2007). *Golden gulag: Prisons, surplus, crisis, and opposition in globalizing California* (Vol. 21). Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Harney, S., & Moten, F. (2013). *The undercommons: Fugitive planning and black study*.
- Kawagley, A. O. (2006). *A Yupiaq worldview: A pathway to ecology and spirit*. Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press.

- Kelley, R. D. (2016). *Black study, Black struggle*. The Boston Review. Retrieved December 12, 2016 from: <http://bostonreview.net/forum/robin-d-g-kelley-black-study-black-struggle#.Vt3LJJUMJN.twitter>
- Lathan, R. E. (2013). Testimony as a sponsor of literacy: Bernice Robinson and South Carolina Sea Island Citizenship Program's literacy activism. *Literacy, Economy, and Power: Writing Research Ten Years After Literacy in American Lives*, 30–44.
- Meiners, E. (2013). Schooling the carceral state: Challenging the school-to-prison pipeline. *Why Prisons*, 261–277.
- Mignolo, W. D. (2012). *Local histories/global designs: Coloniality, subaltern knowledges, and border thinking*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Patel, L. (forthcoming). *To study is to struggle: Higher education and settler colonialism*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.
- Patel, L. (2017). The ink of citizenship. *Curriculum Inquiry*, 47(1), 62–68. doi:10.1080/03626784.2016.1254503
- Razack, S. H. (2016). Sexualized violence and colonialism: reflections on the inquiry into missing and murdered indigenous women.
- Sales, R. (2017). Interview December 6, 2017.
- Sleeter, C. E. (2017). Critical race theory and the whiteness of teacher education. *Urban Education*, 52(2), 155–169. doi:10.1177/0042085916668957
- Takaki, R. T. (1987). *From Different Shores: Perspectives on Race and Ethnicity in America*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- TallBear, K. (2013). Native American DNA: Tribal belonging and the false promise of genetic science.
- United We Dream. (2019). *Toolkits & Resources*. Accessed February 1, 2019: <https://unitedwedream.org/tools/toolkits/>
- Veracini, L. (2011). Introducing: Settler colonial studies. *Settler Colonial Studies*, 1(1), 1–12. doi:10.1080/2201473X.2011.10648799
- Wandner, L. D., Scipio, C. D., Hirsh, A. T., Torres, C. A., & Robinson, M. E. (2012). The perception of pain in others: How gender, race, and age influence pain expectations. *The Journal of Pain*, 13(3), 220–227. doi:10.1016/j.jpain.2011.10.014
- Wilder, C. S. (2014). *Ebony and ivy: Race, slavery, and the troubled history of America's universities*. New York, NY: Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Wynter, S. (2003). Unsettling the coloniality of being/power/truth/freedom: Towards the human, after man, its overrepresentation—An argument. *CR: The New Centennial Review*, 3(3), 257–337. doi:10.1353/ncr.2004.0015
- Walker, V. S. (2018). The lost education of Horace Tate: Uncovering the hidden heroes who fought for justice in schools.