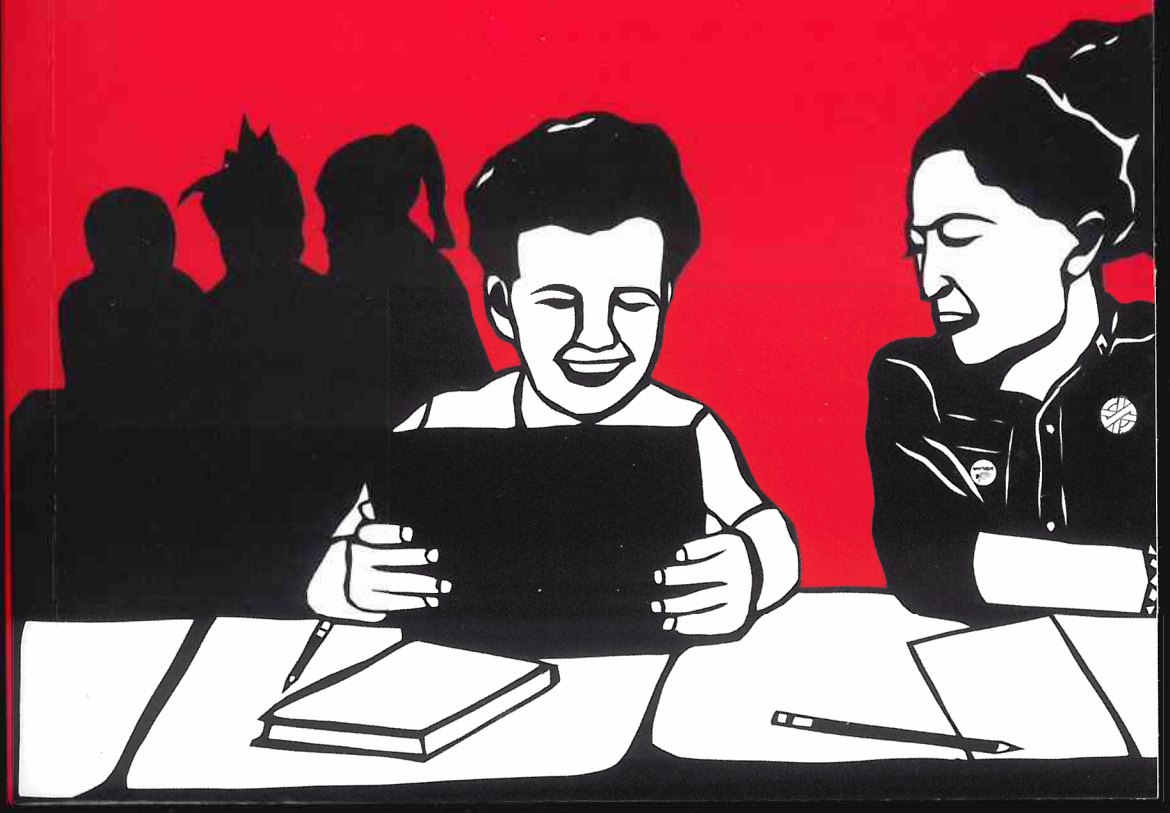
TEACHING RESISTANCE

Radicals, Revolutionaries, and Cultural Subversives in the Classroom

Edited by John Mink



Insurgent Pedagogies: Decolonization Is for All of Us

by Natalie Avalos

Don't look ahead, there's stormy weather
Another roadblock in our way
But if we go, we go together
Our hands are tied here if we stay
Oh, we said our dreams will carry us
And if don't fly we will run
Now we push right past to find out
Or either win what they have lost"
—Santigold, "Disparate Youth"

We hear the word decolonization often in resistance circles, but what does it mean? Some of you may dismiss decolonization as irrelevant to your life, thinking "I'm not a person of color, I haven't been affected or constrained by colonialism." Sorry to break it to you, buddy, but we are *all* reconfigured by colonialism's effects, not just in the U.S. but around the globe. The parallel logics of modern colonialism can be seen readily in twentieth-century U.S. interventionism, such as in El Salvador or Vietnam, but its contemporary expression, contingent on racial hierarchies (where civility or whiteness sits atop as the ideal locus of humanity), religious persecution, and "economic development" have been replicated in places like Tibet, in that instance by China. The strains of empire that transformed the Americas hundreds of years ago have morphed into a global, multinational system of neocolonial players that subjugate less powerful nations through economic bullying. We are still in the throes of colonization in the U.S.

Whiteness does not preclude you from decolonizing projects. If you are descended from European settlers, the social and economic privileges of whiteness contribute to your individual social capital. My constraint and dispossession have directly supported your access to wealth and prosperity. We are deeply linked through these overlapping histories and so share their legacy. Although they shape and constrain us in different ways, the ideological and material structures (racialization, patriarchy, heteronormativity, neoliberalism, the objectification of the earth) produced in their wake act as the foundation of our social life. And, thus, we have a collective responsibility to undo them—*together*.

We can think of decolonization most simply as the undoing of colonialism, not only its structures (see above) but also the amelioration of its effects, like historical trauma and internalized colonialism. In a material context, it can mean deconstructing settler states and redistributing lands back to Indigenous peoples, or even organizing against racist policies. In an affective context, it can mean personal empowerment, healing, and cultural regeneration. These two contexts are contingent—one necessitates and supports the other. Decolonization is the driving theme for many of my classes, meaning my primary pedagogical objective is for students to not only understand specific histories of colonialism, whether in the Americas, Oceania, or Asia, and their correlating structures but also to learn about the many paths of resistance, material (boots on the ground organizing) and immaterial (developing a radical consciousness).

As a religious studies scholar, I emphasize that we cannot decouple the material and immaterial dimensions of life, because they shape one another. Ideas, ethics, and beliefs are a major component of this resistance. We cannot transform our material conditions without deconstructing the ideologies and affective drives that have forged them. We cannot transform our material conditions without naming the multiple forms of our dispossession and claiming our existential rights to live in our full humanity. We are whole beings who have been subjected to ideological/structural violence for generations. Even those of us who have benefitted the most from these injustices are still affected and disfigured by their horror. It will take time and effort to undo this doing. First, we have to understand what we're resisting, why we are resisting it, and what forms of resistance have been effective and why.

My approach to teaching decolonization projects, since they are multiple and diverse, is exploring how at heart they are about transforming our relationships to power. Revolutionary theorist Frantz Fanon noted that colonization estranges the colonized from their own metaphysical worlds—their cosmologies, knowledges, and ways of being. Multiple forces of power (institutional, epistemological, religious) collude over time to produce this estrangement. Decolonial scholar Nelson Maldonado-Torres describes coloniality as a matrix of knowledge, power, and being. Naturally, a decoloniality that addresses these three dimensions of human experience is necessary. I agree with Fanon and Maldonado-Torres that understanding the nature of coloniality is critical to intervention. However, we can't stop there. We need to consider (and celebrate) real and existing solutions. The exploration of power is a generative starting place for understanding *how* to decolonize, because it is often a catalyst for resistance.

Although colonial dispossession of power (material and immaterial) has appeared totalizing, the dispossessed have found creative entry points to take back power. For example, individuals and communities may begin to take back their power by regenerating their ways of being through revitalized religious traditions and other forms of traditional lifeways or by researching their own institutional histories and forming a new locus of governance. The simple but powerful refusal to be complicit in racism or homophobia is a tacit way to take back power. Thinking through these possibilities denaturalizes hierarchies of power, forcing us to consider what more lateral forms of power look like. A framework of decolonization also forces us to see social life as deeply interconnected. When a constellation of social change in line with decolonization is taking place, whether through movements for Native sovereignty or Black Lives Matter, our web of relations is forced to continually shift and accommodate these new rules for living and being. We are forced to consider our relationship to unjust expressions of power and respond in kind. You may think, "Well, that's cool, but how do we negotiate decolonization in our everyday lives?"

Many of us in the underground music scene were intuitively resistant to normative social structures and expressions. For me, and likely many of you, I remember feeling distrustful of social norms that appeared to be rooted in unjust relations of power, whether this was traditional gender roles, racial hierarchies, or even normative beauty

standards. I found myself reveling in social critique. It was a way for me to take back power. This critique motivated me to learn more about these structures of oppression and eventually understand them as complex expressions of empire. But after a while (years) of criticizing these structures, I found myself longing to believe in something, for a kind of social analysis that could both deconstruct and construct and maybe even instruct. I was drawn to working as a scholar because it provided me with unique opportunities to be critical but also generative.

As an educator, I am invested in helping students develop their critical voices, which is fundamental, but also to explore solutions to social problems. Why is this important? Because we need direction. Colonization has stripped many of us of our ethical and political systems and left us with a hollowed out social world that has exchanged consumerism for ethics and meaning. We need alternative visions for living and being. And we need to remind ourselves it is possible to live in a different kind of world. To remind ourselves that we have so much more power than we realize. To remind ourselves of the possibilities beyond all those oppressive structures shaping our lives, such as misogyny and racism, when they seem totalizing. To recognize that we have internalized these structures in ways that may take us a lifetime to unravel and to be gentle with ourselves when we feel defeated by our own shortcomings (not being "aware enough," not having "the right analysis," etc.). To recognize that needing community (and direction) doesn't make us flawed, it makes us human.

Yes, I love me some good social critique. Here, here, y'all woke boo boos around the world that can break down the problematic power relations in any given situation. We need these critiques. But we can get stuck there. Our love of critique may be rooted in our natural inclination to scratch beneath the surface, to act as dialecticians, seeking the antithesis of the thesis. But we often struggle with synthesizing our new insights into a coherent worldview that allows us to step into a better future. In other words, we *need* to understand what is wrong in order to fix it, but what is right? One of the problems we face teaching radical forms of resistance is that we can never come up with perfectly objective solutions. One community's decolonization is going to look different than another's. An individual's relationship to power, depending on their social position, will determine how they *decolonize*. We often have to feel our way through particular scenarios of injustice in order

to understand our options for resolution. This is highly contextual and a lot of work. But teaching students to both critique and be generative allows us to see that this is not only possible but that the macro structures constraining our lives are replicated in the micro relations of our everyday lives.

We may not be able to eliminate racism as a structure in our everyday, *but* we can recognize and challenge our internalized assumptions about others—and ourselves—enabling us to build stronger, happier communities. We may not able to eliminate the settler state overnight, *but* we can work toward building functional communities from the bottom up. The fact that we intuitively seek to improve our social world is a sign that we want to live better, more equitable lives. We *want* to live in peace and harmony across difference, akin to what Mohawk scholar Taiaiake Alfred refers to in a context of Native sovereignty as peaceful coexistence. It just feels better. Many of us in this struggle are idealists who envision the big picture of a better world. But sometimes we lose track of the trees for the forest. We forget that when we transform the micro relations in our everyday lives—relationships with our families, coworkers, friends, partners, etc.—we are actively transforming our social world.

DECOLONIAL PEDAGOGIES: SETTLER COLONIALISM, KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION, AND ANTIRACISM

As scholars and educators, it is critical for us to explore the racialized perceptions of non-Western peoples, as well as trace how these peoples continue to be structurally dispossessed as a result. As a Chicana of Apache descent, I feel obligated to use decolonial approaches to pedagogy. A decolonial approach understands world politics through the lens of its overlapping colonial histories. It recognizes that power and resources in a contemporary moment have been thoroughly shaped by ongoing colonial projects around the world. In addition, it makes legible the racial hierarchies that we continue to be constrained by and the correlated hierarchies of knowledge systems/worldviews.

In my classes, I provide a basic literacy of Native American and Indigenous religious traditions that simultaneously evaluates the lenses we use to understand them. These knowledge systems were, until fairly recently, perceived by anthropologists and scholars of religion as failed epistemology, the primitive musings of less complex societies.

Categorized as "animism," their views were framed as childish, superstitious, and clear evidence they lacked the rationality to govern themselves or lay legitimate claims to their own lands. Indigenous peoples in the Americas were understood to be not only without reason but also, according to Nelson Maldonado-Torres, without true religion, which became the central reason their full humanity was suspect. Did they know the Christian God? Did they even have souls? Settler colonial projects relied upon these ideologies to justify Indigenous enslavement, genocide, and dispossession. These ideologies produced legal structures like the Doctrine of Discovery, a series of papal bulls that declared lands not inhabited by Christians open to seizure by right of "discovery" (theft), which became one of the most enduring tools of Indigenous dispossession. By acquainting students with a genealogy of settler rationale, they are better able to understand how the mysterious sleight of hand of seizure was largely ideological but also squarely religious.

One of the reasons I pursued academia was to develop the social capital and expertise to teach others about how racism and Indigenous dispossession operate around the world. Given the rise in white nationalism in recent years, I am hyperaware of how dangerous teaching about white supremacy can be not only to my career but also, as a woman of color, to my personal safety. However, as a light-skinned Chicana, my Native features are less threatening to students/faculty, so I am sometimes (not always) perceived more favorably. As a junior scholar, I use this modicum of power and privilege to center Indigenous epistemologies in order to counter the legacy of Indigenous erasure and gross misunderstanding in the academy. Keeping this in mind, I take a two-pronged approach in the classroom. First, introduce the religious tradition, allow students to dismiss it as a curiosity (not all will but some might), and then provide them with the intellectual framework to understand why the Western world systematically dismissed Indigenous knowledge—in other words, unpack the politics of this perception as a strategy of settler colonial power; one that has become so naturalized, it is assumed by most in the U.S.

Some Native peoples in the Americas refer to this land base as Turtle Island, remarking that it rests on the back of a turtle; as others have said elsewhere, it is turtles all the way down. We can think of a decolonial pedagogy as denaturalizing all the way down. Critical pedagogies

explain how power works as a diffuse network of ideologies and institutions. Power is not just brute force or coercion. Reframing critical and antiracist analytics with a settler colonial lens helps us understand how coloniality operates all around us; how power is rooted in perceptions of the world, in "natural laws" and the social hierarchies they produce. Part of the goal is to denaturalize assumptions embedded in Western epistemology that position Indigenous knowledge—and by proxy Indigenous peoples' claims to land—as illegitimate. In the process, students begin to recognize how the institutions we take for granted as inevitable, such as the U.S. and Mexican states, are socially constructed. They are also better able to see how racialization and power continue to shape the politics between them. Once students understand that the misreadings of non-Western religious traditions and peoples operated as a strategy for dispossession, they begin to question their own biases. They may even be eager to explore the possibility that these traditions have something legitimate to tell us not just about inner life but also about the complex nature of reality.

THE DECOLONIAL CLASSROOM: MAKING POWER VISIBLE

The goal of many of my courses on Native American and Indigenous religious traditions is to understand contemporary Indigenous life in relation to colonial histories. I employ both decolonial and Indigenist approaches to these ends. As noted above, a decolonial approach makes the mechanisms of colonial power visible. It denaturalizes our assumptions about Indigenous peoples and their religious traditions. For example, in my course Global Indigeneities: Religion and Resistance, we explore contemporary Indigenous movements for sovereignty and environmental stewardship in the Americas, Oceania, and Asia. Initial readings provide a broad theoretical framework for understanding the unique but often parallel strategies of settler colonialism, the religious traditions of the Indigenous communities dispossessed, followed by regional examples of resistance movements. Since there is so little popular media on these movements and peoples, students are often surprised to learn about their histories and continued resistance but also about how these peoples are often struggling to protect precious resources in order to feed and sustain their communities amid violent overdevelopment. Once students have the basic theoretical tools to understand racialization, missionization, scientism, natural law, and

criminalization of Indigenous peoples/religion as mechanisms of settler colonialism, they are better prepared to understand Indigenous stewardship movements as a profound expression of sovereignty.

An Indigenist approach to pedagogy means deferring to Native peoples as the foremost experts of their own experience and knowledge systems. It can be implemented by using critical readings by Native scholars or those that center the voices and views of Indigenous peoples. Native-centered narratives often provide a more nuanced and tribally specific framework to understand sacred and interdependent relationships with land and spiritual power. Teaching these ideas is a layered and cumulative process. Students are sometimes reluctant to take the religious views of Indigenous peoples seriously. For instance, when Indigenous peoples frame plants, particularly medicinal plants, not only as persons but also teachers and relatives that provide the people with moral instructions, students are sceptical. Westerners have been trained to view the land as inert matter. This assumed materialism prevents us from seeing the natural relationships that exist all around us. Native-centered readings provide grounded examples that resist overly mystical interpretations of these relationships. For instance, Lakota scholar Vine Deloria Jr. often discussed the Three Sisters—corn, beans, and squash—who are recognized by many tribes within U.S. borders to have a familial relationship that necessitates these sister plants be grown together. Empirical study has confirmed that their co-planting produces a natural nitrogen cycle that fertilizes the soil, preventing depletion. As students consider the ethical instructions provided by these three sisters, they better conceptualize what Indigenous peoples mean when they say they live in an interdependent relationship to the land and one another. Students' curiosity to consider realities that differ from their own compels discussion, even if they remain sceptical.

We then use regional examples to explore how overlapping histories of settler colonialism produce environmental crises. By posing questions like "What is Indigenous stewardship? What might earth justice look like?" early on, we can later ask, "What does it mean to understand the land—and its inhabitants—as sovereign?" Here, the objective is to understand how Indigenous philosophies of land/living serve as the political foundation for challenging settler dispossession. When Indigenous peoples continue to assert the land's sentience, they are critiquing the dominant assumptions that it is inert, a position

that has historically been used to justify its exploitation. I structure regional examples to include readings on the specific social-political history of the people, their religious worldviews, and their movements for sovereignty. For instance, a unit on Native North America may focus on Lakota water protectors at Standing Rock. The first class reading will explore Lakota/Dakota religion/political history with the U.S., while the second reading will include a short ethnographic vignette and/or collection of news stories on the #NoDAPL movement at Standing Rock. The aim of class discussions is to understand both these unique religious lifeways and how they ethically inform Indigenous fights for survival.

I generally reserve five to fifteen minutes of class time for short documentaries, YouTube clips, and other forms of media about these environmental struggles in order to make the voices of those involved salient. If you're interested in doing any critical, decolonial pedagogy, centering the voices of those you're discussing and learning about is key. For instance, I might show a clip of *Mni Wiconi: The Stand at Standing Rock*, a short documentary made by Divided Films that interviews Standing Rock Sioux Tribal Chairman David Archambault II and other members of the Standing Rock Sioux tribe on the fight for #NoDAPL.[1] Presenting clips in class humanizes discussions that threaten to become too abstract by providing additional context for their human stakes. It is often the first time a student has actually seen and heard a Native person, which can be powerfully instructive. Students often remark in their writing or in person that they are most affected by these first-person testimonies, often expressing disgust, shock, or even outrage that Indigenous dispossession continues so egregiously within the U.S. and beyond.

EMBRACING ETHICS AND POSITIONALITY

At heart, my courses are about ethics, understanding Indigenous ethics—right relationships to land and community. When we take the time to think about the ethics of Others, it provides us with a space to consider our own—what kinds of responsibilities do we have to the land and one another? What kind of collective values do we need to assert right now? I've remarked to students (and colleagues) that we can learn

1 *Mni Wiconi: The Stand at Standing Rock* (New York: Divided Films, 2016), accessed June 10, 2019, https://standwithstandingrock.net/mni-wiconi/.

so much from the moral breakdown of our political landscape. We can see it as an opportunity to see through the political performances, witness the most depraved human activity. Take stock. Then, collectively, choose to do something totally different. Lift our voices. Express dissent. Discontent. Our classrooms are the incubators for these discussions. I provide an intellectual framework that is part philosophy and part anthropological survey, with decolonial critiques constituting their creamy center. Religious studies as a discipline has the flexibility to take an interdisciplinary approach to questions of meaning, the sacred, and ultimate concern. As we learn to use new antiracist analytics, we can better consider how religious lifeworlds intersect with material horrors in the present in positive and negative ways. My particular goal for the course described above is for students to learn enough about Indigenous stewardship that they better understand the overarching relationship between contemporary expressions of neocolonialism/neoliberalism and environmental destruction. When they do, they may begin to advocate for intersectional forms of justice that center the well-being of the land, as they see how their own health and well-being are dependent on it.

One of my overarching goals as an educator is to seriously disrupt the stigma around Indigenous knowledge as "primitive" and irrational. I've noticed that when I'm teaching about Buddhism, students are often enamored by its reference to interdependence, an idea rooted in dependent arising, a philosophical framework that describes all phenomena as interconnected. My guess is that racialization works differently here. Our Orientalist conditioning allows us to consume the worldviews of the East as "exotic" and enchanting, while still viable. Students are sometimes more dismissive of similar concepts rooted in Native America and other Indigenous communities, because the stigma of their views as failed epistemology is more pronounced. If we want students to understand racism as structural, we have to make these epistemological assumptions legible. We have to illuminate how these perceptions structure the very way we think about the world and the Other. When students can deeply conceptualize how Others have become so deeply ontologically and structurally dispossessed through these assumptions, they can change the way they relate to the greater world.

An important exercise in making power visible is to teach about power from your own position. Complicate your positionality and

relation to power to your students. This will model both how they can think about their own positionality and why it matters to do so. I will occasionally assign a short paper that asks them to think about their own relationship to power, access to resources, upward mobility, etc. by asking them to think deeply about the place(s) they've lived. When we think about the layers of the places we know and take for granted as "ours," we are confronted with not only each place's history of Indigenous dispossession but also its degree of violence. That violence still reverberates in the minds and hearts of the communities that exist at its margins. This assignment is called a "Decolonial Autobiography." I've adapted it from multiple sources, and it essentially asks students to answer the following questions in six hundred words:

> Think about the land that you were born into. Imagine the land itself has many layers. What is its history? Who were its first inhabitants or peoples? Or even the many inhabitants that coexisted there? What is its colonial history? What is your position in relation to this colonial history? How do you and your family fit in this picture? When did they arrive to this land (if known)? From where? Where do you live know? What is this place's history? What is your relationship to the colonial relations of power in this land?

While teaching about settler colonialism and white supremacy is dangerous in these times, I find that many students, at least the many I recently taught at an elite small liberal arts college in the Northeast, are hungry for this contextualization, for these analytics. They are bearing witness to a chaotic and violent world and want to know why and how it came to be this way. Many are quite relieved to receive the tools to better understand it. When they do, they are better equipped to reenvision it entirely.

BEING GENERATIVE: REENVISIONING A BETTER WORLD

My *ultimate* goal in the classroom is to cultivate a space where students learn how power operates but also about how marginalized peoples take their power back, how they empower themselves through their ethics and religious lifeways. In the process, students may reflect on their own relationships to and possibilities for power. College students, even in their first couple of years, can easily become disillusioned and

overwhelmed by the injustice they witness around them. They often feel powerless in the face of structural violence. They think that it is inevitable and will continue to eat and destroy everything in its path. They, like many in the U.S., feel powerless to affect change. Most of us have become estranged from the many processes of social change and equity making. Students don't see just how much power they actually have. Part of my job is to help them see their own power. To disrupt. To deconstruct. To reconstruct our social world. Teaching about relations of power can and should be linked to how we as individuals have power to effect change. The "on the ground" narratives that make up a good portion of class material instruct on multiple levels. They provide examples of effective organizing, resistance, and, sometimes, remarkable change. They challenge the illusion that these structures are totalizing and inevitable by revealing that they're actually teetering, waiting to fall.

We are at the precipice of deep change. Our relationships to one another, to gender, to the land, to power are all changing. We are recognizing that we cannot remain stagnant. That we are not static. We are changeable and emergent. When I say emergent, I mean that our potential for new ways of being is far beyond what we currently know. We as a collective people, human and other than human, are shifting in dynamic ways. The we that we were is no longer. We are currently being revealed to ourselves, but in often unorthodox ways. You may ask: How do you teach being emergent or fluid ways of being? By teaching students that we can *know* through our bodies as well as our minds. We can feel who we are as much as we can know who we are. Learning about non-Western Others and Indigenous and even Eastern epistemologies provides us with a space to reconsider our relationship to knowing itself. To peace and conflict. It provides us with new roadmaps to think about our own internal processes of violence and struggle. To contend with our own hatred and envy. When we deepen our relationship to our own minds and hearts, when we listen to what our bodies tell us about what we really feel. Our fear. Our loneliness. Our shame. We gain an opportunity to accept ourselves in all our human frailty on a very deep level. Radical acceptance. This is the entry point to a better world. To resolving the zero-sum violence among us.

Part of what we are learning is how to be in the world in a nonviolent way. How do we share power? How do we share resources? How do we live ethically? The irony of living in a secular, religiously plural

society is that religion becomes interiorized. It has become part of the personal and private sphere. We can believe whatever we wish in the privacy of our own homes. We can choose to attend any number of religious institutions or events. But we no longer have a common set of ethics. We have no coherent moral center. Our most vocal voices on the religious front most often veil the most hateful racist and sexist bigotry, so we've become disillusioned about religion, we've lost hope that we can act morally, that we can act with integrity. *But* when we are seriously faced with the worst expressions of inhumanity on our political stage, as we are now, we are forced to make a decision. Will we be cynical and believe that we really are the Hobbesian beasts that would live brutishly to protect our own interests, or will we see the "helpers," those that choose to work together to solve problems? Who will I be in this arena of chaos? Who will I choose to align myself with? What will I choose to do in the face of injustice? What are the stakes of standing up to hate and bigotry? How does it make you feel in your body to work for goodness in the world, to work toward bettering yourself and your community? How does it feel in your body when you choose to dedicate your life or set an intention to live with honesty and integrity? These questions are part of a radical pedagogy, because we need to radically rethink how we live. We need to evaluate the very core of our relationship to life and living. When we do, we will, collectively, manifest a better world.

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"Special education" is an umbrella term used in United States public schools to refer to programs and services that support students who fall under a range of categories outside what the state and administration consider the "mainstream" of the student population. In practice, this primarily means students with institutionally recognized physical and/or mental disabilities, diagnosed learning challenges such as ADHD and/or autism spectrum conditions, and other non-neurotypical students who cope with a variety of behavioral and emotional disorders—with the latter category of students coming disproportionately from backgrounds of poverty and systemic, often racial, oppression.

As anyone who grew up attending public schools knows, "special ed" has long been used as a bigoted insult/ableist joke among students not in these programs, as well as a slur that can be directed toward students who fall under that official classification. Part of this is due to the near total separation that "mainstream" and "special education" students used to have in typical public school settings, including physically separate classrooms and counseling facilities. In very recent years, one thing that has improved this situation and helped students to see each other as equal human beings has been the implementation of fairly radical new policies of integrating special education students into the broader school population. These policies are sometimes referred to as "mainstreaming"—an assimilationist term radical teachers tend to not care for much at all—or "special education inclusion," which is much closer to the policies' goals and recognizant of the importance and existence of diversity within the "mainstream" student body.

This chapter is by **Stephen Raser**, a special education teacher who is deeply invested in the radical, proud inclusion of his students into the greater student body. It was originally written in December 2017 and updated in August 2018. It now includes a detailed description of Stephen's professional practice at the day-to-day level, particularly in the beginning of the school year, bringing transparency to a still developing process in the education system that has proven absolutely vital to myriad marginalized people.