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Refusal, Freedom Dreaming, Abolition, and Joy: Revolutionary Change in Higher Education

C. V. Dolan

I am honored and grateful that TVC asked me to write the foreword for this year's journal. The theme, *Rage and Revolution: Change and Reformation in Higher Education*, resonates deeply with me as a UVM HESA alum, a practitioner, a researcher, and an educator. I ponder the influences and power of rage as forces for social change throughout history, the present, and the role of rage in the future. I dare to imagine revolution in the context of higher education, what it would take to demand revolution, and what that radical transformation would look like. I question the use of reform and incrementalism as strategies to bring us to better worlds, and I engage with abolitionist values. Three primary building blocks come to mind when I reflect on this year's theme: refusal and freedom dreaming, abolition, and joy. In this foreword, I hope to depict my primary tactics for revolutionary change in higher education.

Refusal and Freedom Dreaming

Refusal and freedom dreaming work together to form the foundation for radical change. Refusal consists of acknowledging and labeling how and where systems of oppression operate in our institutions. Refusing to take those oppressive realities as routine or normal, this concept encourages people to question why these active decisions are made and who benefits from them. Refusal rejects the ways business as usual hypnotizes potential change-makers into a lull of it's just the way things are. The idea dares us dream of new or better ways of being. Refusal is an intentional turning away from the confines of oppressive thought patterns and a choice to turn towards a justice-based and liberatory praxis despite the undertow, calling us to accept that the systems are too big or persistent to dismantle (Tuck & Yang, 2014).

In practicing refusal, I acknowledge how capitalism, colonialism, white supremacy, cisheteropatriarchy, and other forms of oppression have shaped my realities and capacities to plan change within the contexts of education. Refusal calls me to break those patterns of thinking and to dream and imagine other possibilities beyond the confines of oppression. For example, I begin by recognizing how postsecondary institutions comply with capitalist demands on budget lines or compliance for funding and donations, how they replicate white supremacy by conflating freedom of speech with protecting hateful acts that do not align with institutional mission statements that value equity, or how they persist on stolen Indigenous land without attempt at repairing those relationships. Rather than accepting these realities as how higher education is built to operate, I question the ways in

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which institutional leaders continue to choose to follow these strategies and who benefits from them. By turning away from oppressive influences, I choose a new direction to turn, imagining better futures.

Pairing well with refusal, freedom dreaming sets the stage for envisioning the changes needed in the world. Stemming from the Black radical imagination (Kelley, 2002/2022), freedom dreaming is a consciousness dedicated to solidarity and liberation, a roadmap for revolution. Freedom dreaming reminds me that while the tentacles of systems of oppression are persistent, they are not permanent. Radical change has occurred throughout history, and freedom dreaming intentionally highlights the role of liberatory change in the fight to end slavery in the U.S. The brutal enslavement of Black people has ended in North America (except for the Thirteenth Amendment loophole in the U.S. Constitution (Alexander, 2010)) entirely due to the tireless efforts of enslaved Black people who freed themselves and each other. These revolutionaries fled violence, torture, slavery, and death; sparked revolts; preached abolitionism; developed Underground Railroads; and lobbied lawmakers to create conditions for freedom. Because of their courage and many people's martyrdom, Black people demanded and won their freedom through countless strategies. Freedom dreaming asks: if a structure that persisted for generations, that many people determined was an inevitable way of life due to its endurance in society, could be dismantled, why can't other systems?

Abolition

Abolition responds to the questions freedom dreaming poses. Seeking to radically deconstruct structures and systems steeped in oppression, abolitionists believe in the end of carceral, militaristic, and violent forces in society (e.g., policing, prisons, surveillance, militaries, etc. (Davis, 2003; Kaba, 2021)). Abolitionists espouse many principles, including but not limited to: diverting power and resources from police and other violent structures; uncovering why police serve in their many roles and capacities; questioning what is criminalized; and investing in new ways of living in community where transformative justice can persevere rather than criminal injustice system (Kaba, 2021).

Abolitionists refuse reforms that may intentionally or unintentionally feed new forms of power to these systems. For example, abolitionists do not favor police training, as that allocates new sources of funding to those forces. Rather, abolitionists ask how to eradicate the police by removing the need for them (Kaba, 2021). Consider each of the many roles that police officers play in current U.S. society, and ask if they can be better fulfilled by other services. Instead of police responding to people in crisis or arresting unhoused people for loitering, funding and resources can be diverted toward non-punitive and non-violent services that are trained in and committed to justice and care for those in need. Abolitionists recognize that crime is socially constructed; therefore, it is critical to question and critique what behaviors and experiences are criminalized by laws. Instead of criminalizing the possession and use of drugs, social programs can serve those navigating substance use who seek care. While these issues may seem more broadly societal, I remind us to examine how our institutions of higher education are social microcosms, and how deputized and armed campus police forces persist in addition to strong police ties among our campuses and their local municipalities, counties, states, and federal forces (e.g., Customs and Border Patrol, Immigration and Customs Enforcement, and the Drug Enforcement Agency; Johnson & Dizon, 2021)

Finally, abolitionists believe in dismantling the current criminal injustice system and prison industrial complex (Davis, 2003). Believing that all individuals have the potential to cause harm and can and will learn to grow and heal, abolitionists favor transformative justice - a call to reframe how we live in community (Kaba, 2021). We humble ourselves when we stop separating *bad people* from *good people* and recognize that *all people can do good things and bad things*. Unfortunately, criminalizing processes favor revenge and punishment over repair and healing for anyone involved in harm. Abolitionists ask what justice and healing looks like and feels like, rather than assuming that a legal process will bring about repair. Philosophically, abolitionists apply these principles unilaterally to any conflicts, in or outside an official legal system. Campus abolitionists ask how institutional leaders can eradicate penalizing policies and practices, divest from strategic financial investments in police partnerships and prison labor companies, and refuse any justifications for carceral practices through fears of risk or liability (Johnson & Dizon, 2021). They also reconsider conduct processes and engage in reparations with historically and presently marginalized communities (e.g., returning Indigenous land, providing free college access to students from Indigenous lineages or are descendants of enslaved Africans). In these ways and many more, abolitionists believe in each individual's input and ideas and develop millions of experiments (Kaba, 2021). Many of these experiments will result in failure, which is an inherent part of the learning process; however there is an emphasis on the critical need for imagination and believing in the vision of a freer world.

Joy

“As a culture worker who belongs to an oppressed people, my job is to make revolution irresistible.” – Toni Cade Bambara (2012)

Freedom dreaming and abolition create capacity for not just deconstruction and refusal, but also creating new, just, liberatory practices in the wake of uprooting oppression. Especially in the face of oppression and violence, joy is a form of resistance and a spark for change. Liberation must include joy, as it will continue to make revolution irresistible. As we envision better worlds, how do we incorporate joy in our process and futures? Ponder what brings you joy and how you cultivate joy for others; then, contemplate how these ideas can be implemented as strategies for institutional change and revolution in higher education.

Many higher education scholars and practitioners define student success and even the goals of higher education differently. While this lack of consensus may create some confusion or conflict, it also creates space for agency in institutional leaders. In my opinion, the lowest bar I can set is that education should be a social good, accessible to all. And when I give myself the permission to dream and imagine education at its best, I see free tuition at all levels; the removal of all carceral systems, policies, and presences in schools; a holistic academic and co-curricular student experience rooted in joy; and a liberated, easeful, and just community. I see community schools, where elders and people of all ages have access to learning and resources; free housing and meals; a place where everyone's basic needs are met, removing any barriers to learning and thriving. What are your freedom dreams for higher education, and how do they incorporate joy

Conclusion

The imagination is an important element in staging change. I try to remember: White Europeans invented colonialism and imperialism, and we continue to live in their imaginations; why can't we live in someone else's imagination? We live in a capitalist, white supremacist, cisheteropatriarchal imagination. What if we lived in Harriet Tubman's imagination? In Sylvia Rivera's and Marsha P. Johnson's? In Audre Lorde's, bell hooks', or Toni Morrison's? Or yours? How can higher education be reimagined to create the conditions for a liberatory educational experience?

Oppression has not always existed; it was invented, and it can be dismantled and ended. If something has a starting point, it can have an ending! Colonialism, white supremacy, and cisheteropatriarchy are not acts of nature or inherently woven into the fabric of humanity and our world. We can refuse to comply with them, abolish them, and usher in new futures with revolutionary change. We can dream of transformative justice, of living in intentional communities of care where everyone's basic needs are met through reciprocity rather than capitalist scarcity.

How can we reconsider higher education outside of the confines of capitalist profits or governmental constraints? If federal, state, and local budgets were redistributed from militaries and police, how can higher education and other social programs be refunded to serve the most marginalized without any predatory measures? What current models, such as tribal colleges and community schools, can we turn to as inspiration for re-envisioning educational institutions as sites for learning, resource distribution and sharing, and liberation for all? What can we learn from these examples about how they measure student success or community impact?

While it can be very overwhelming to consider what it would take to dismantle longstanding and seemingly ever-expansive systems of oppression, I urge us to remember our collective power, even when we seemingly do not hold positions of authority. It may be hypnotizing to try to dismantle systems from the top-down: to try to rise in power or influence and then wield that power for good. However, abolitionists remind us that change happens from the bottom-up: that individuals forming communities that join together build power, creating collectives that can and will change the world. Starting with small experiments in our own communities allows us to experiment and learn what works. This localized approach also allows change to be agile and adaptable, able to meet the varying cultural and regional needs of different groups and areas.

When revolution feels daunting, remember that your voice, relationships, actions, and community interventions can, do, and will spark liberatory change. Your presence in this work matters. Your refusal to accept oppression as permanent, your dreams of better worlds and ways of being, and your joy are revolutionary. Your small, localized impact contributes to the re-imagining of the world. Now, with our rage and revolution, let us continue to consider change needed in higher education.

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