

The New Harriet Tubmans of the Same Beloved Underground Railroad: Notes for Future Essays Needed in the Present

Shelagh Patterson

REFLECTION ON A PAST SELF IN THE PRESENT

I am sitting in my kitchen. I was supposed to teach in person today. Too tired. Ill. Infected. Not with COVID-19. The root cause is probably the historical knowledge of slavery in my bones activated by state violence. The symptom is a sinus infection that may have just dropped to the chest. This weekend, I hang out with my past self as I try to heal my present self, if we want to approach time as linear.

Last year (2020) I did a whole performance for my Documentarian essay, basking in the gift of time that was the pandemic for some of us. Last year the documentation was the conference so all that josh for the conference went to the essay. This year (2021) was so different because life was busy again and going on all around the conference. And that is something to document—what that looked like being at a virtual conference more than a year into lockdown to help curb the spread of a virus during a global pandemic in the time of the teleport. This year I found being a Documentarian while attending the conference hard because I wanted to put the same amount of energy, focus, and discipline into writing the surveys as I had put last year, but the material realities of my life had changed. I couldn't access a place of vulnerability and argument. I could only delay.

And then something else happened that makes linear time challenging:

A PORTAL THE GENRE OF PUNCTUM

The punctum is a process in Roland Barthes's *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* that Chela Sandoval gives us as a framework in *Methodologies of the Oppressed*, her guide for revolutionary action. For Barthes and Sandoval, the problem with love is the Western narrative. The lovers are thought of in a binary relationship controlled by the narrative of falling in love. When love is reciprocal, you act; when

love is not reciprocal, the lover, to remain “healthy,” must renounce. Barthes, a Westerner himself, interrupts the narrative of falling in love with a third way: acceptance of the pine as another mode of action that Barthes refers to as drifting:

Turning thus from narrative’s comforts and limits, from love’s “Western” modes, Barthes searches for the punctum, he finds what is “obtuse,” he gives himself over, he drifts “on the intractable bliss that beckons” in that place of life that survives outside and between narrative forms, where meanings live in some free, yet marked and wounded space, a site of shifting, morphing meanings that transform to let him in. (Sandoval 143)

The lovers in binary thought create a dialectical relationship. If one is pining, the pined-for is in a place of narrative power. The pine is seen as abject, a subject-position to be avoided. For Barthes, however, the pine has value as it allows us to move beyond a system of freedom and power predicated on the relationship between oppressor and oppressed. When we submit to the pine, we submit to drifting and can learn alternate relationships to power. As Sandoval explains, “[t]he act of falling in love can thus function as a ‘punctum,’ that which breaks through social narratives to permit a bleeding, meanings unanchored and moving away from their traditional moorings . . . it is love that can access and guide our theoretical and political ‘movidas’—revolutionary maneuvers toward decolonized being” (Sandoval 140).

I love the punctum, the drifting, as a process of revolutionary decolonial love. Through the punctum, Sandoval offers us a path to freedom. The punctum is a portal that “can make anything possible” (Sandoval 141).

THE PROBLEM IS THE ABUSIVE STATE

I’m in New Jersey. So, if we’re talking child protection services, which we are, the department has its official name and its vernacular. These two different names also signal how hegemony would want time to be linear while the people who live within the bounds of democratic state bureaucracy use language in more dynamic ways.

Once upon a time, child protective services in New Jersey was called the Division of Youth and Family Services . . . DYFS (pronounced dyfus). DYFS was a horror of Candyman proportions and not all that long ago they overhauled the system and changed their name to

Department of Child Protection and Permanency (DCP&P). However, at least here in Newark, we still call them DYFS, which signals that a name change does not necessarily mean system change.

When I became a foster parent, I had heard wonderful things about the transformation and referred to the agency as DCP&P with naïve bureaucratic pride. The state, however, was a force of violence in my home. They created false narratives and ignored protocol because they were scared of the child's family. I had a connection to the child's family, and the state used my transparency against me. Eight months after the child was placed in my home, she was abruptly removed.

**STATE VIOLENCE IS A PUNCTUM THAT ALLOWS ENTRY
TO A PLACE OF FREEDOM**

I tried to accept that the state thought that they were acting in the best interest of the child, even if it meant ignoring the protocol it created to act in the best interest of a child. I did trust that they had a vision that would result in a permanent placement, but something happened, and their vision didn't work. Maybe that something was the pandemic. I do not know. All I know is that this summer I found out that three years later, the child is still not adopted.

And this is a crux of the challenges of this essay. When time is linear, then this past self in the surveys does not yet know that the child hasn't been adopted. But in reflection, time does not feel linear. The self that wrote the surveys is in an alternate dimension living in a false state-mandated reality. The self who is writing in this essay knows that as fact. The dimension that the self who is writing this essay is in is "within, yet beyond" the control of state mandate (Sandoval 44).

In 2018, I wasn't prepared for the state to add a new layer of trauma on a child in service of their vision because they have the power to do so. I was not prepared for them to sabotage a placement because of their fear, but that I know they did.

When I returned to 2018, through a punctum in 2021, I understand the first thing to do is to retain a lawyer to perform in the dialectic state power demands so that I can remain free.

**THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD PREDATES
ALTHUSSER'S BEYOND**

Part of the cooptation of the Underground Railroad is the singularity of Tubman. There are many names who created the Underground Railroad, we remember but one. So, let's say Tubman is a role that anyone

can inhabit and several do—not just as a stop on the railroad but with an understanding of the network as an ever expanding and changing whole.

Not too long ago, my nephew was talking to his friend Money who's inside; my nephew is outside on a bracelet. My nephew told me how his friend Money said how we need a Harriet Tubman—and me (who drove to the jail and picked up and brought my nephew home and plugged in the monitor in the back-upstairs bedroom to give him more freedom of movement in the backyard than on the front stoop) and him both know that my house is a stop on the underground railroad his mother, Harriet Tubman, envisioned for her kids.

The thing about the present and the problem with linear time can be understood with Jim Crow. Michelle Alexander wrote the book that connects the present prison industrial complex as an extension of Jim Crow, and we all know Jim Crow was a way to write the horrors of slavery into the functions of our democracy.

If we follow the news, child protective services is a myth. The phrase is most associated with family separation—its Jim Crow function, the same function of the slave markets (Roberts 2022). Protecting a child I love who is caught up in the system is a priority.

Slavery is our present. Time is not linear.

THE CCCC/NCTE BLACK CAUCUS IS A HARRIET TUBMAN

Wednesday was the first day of the conference. After Zumba in my bedroom, I went downstairs to my dining room turned pandemic classroom and office to attend “A Black Lives Matter/Critical Race Theory-Based, Culturally Responsive, Antiracist, and Race Radical Literacies LPC Workshop for Black Teachers of Writing and Co-Conspirators.” The workshop was a call to use “This Ain’t Another Statement! This is a Demand for Black Linguistic Justice!” to restructure writing assessment. The demand is a beautiful multimodal manifesto. At its heart, the “Demand” is a critique on the limits of statements and an acknowledgment of the insufficient impact the decades of statements and resolutions have on “widespread systemic change in curricula, pedagogical practices, disciplinary discourses, research, language policies, professional organization, programs, and institutions within and beyond academia!” It starts with detailing the current historical and sociopolitical context “in a pandemic that is disproportionately infecting and killing Black people... [and] ongoing #BlackLivesMatter

protests across the United States in response to anti-Black racist violence and murders.” The second paragraph is a “roll call” (Medina, Bashir, and Lansana 2002) of previous CCCC/NCTE resolutions and positions related to language variety since the 1974 “Students’ Right to Their Own Language” resolution. The third paragraph quotes and hyperlinks the updated CCCC statement on Ebonics to connect the relationship of valuing Black language to valuing Black life.

The rest of the “Demand” lists the demands first as a group, and then each demand is elaborated in its own section. The manifesto ends with a coda that seeks to funnel the energy from the summer’s BLM protest to our academic work. These are the demands of CCCC/NCTE Black Caucus:

1. teachers stop using academic language and standard English as the accepted communicative norm, which reflects White Mainstream English!
2. teachers stop teaching Black students to code-switch! Instead, we must teach Black students about anti-Black linguistic racism and white linguistic supremacy!
3. political discussions and *praxis* center Black Language as teacher-researcher activism for classrooms and communities!
4. teachers develop and teach Black Linguistic Consciousness that works to decolonize the mind (and/or) language, unlearn white supremacy, and unravel anti-Black linguistic racism!
5. Black dispositions are centered in the research and teaching of Black Language!

I, probably like many of you, was taught racial slavery was a thing of the distant past. But like some of us, I’ve come to realize time is not linear and the historical moment of slavery continues to be a hegemonic force in our own present. Octavia Butler in *Kindred* creates that temporal framework when her protagonist lives two intertwined lives in two different temporal dimensions—one in our contemporary moment and one in our historical moment of slavery. The way time works is that both dimensions are our present, and Butler creates a framework to hold that reality. The moment the state swept in and removed a child from my home suddenly with just a half-hour notice, I felt my ancestral knowledge in my bones of the commonplace of family separation. Similarly, Michelle Alexander helps us see slavery as a present presence in our contemporary prison industrial complex,

which she argues is a new Jim Crow. Jim Crow is a set of legislation to continue the disenfranchisement and economic exploitation of Black workers through systemic anti-Black racial violence. If we accept prisons as Jim Crow, then as we pull out our lenses to see the larger bureaucratic support of Jim Crow, our schools are another location of Jim Crow bureaucracy, where the system is designed for some schools to be a pipeline for prisons. That's what's so important about these demands for Black Linguistic Justice. The demands tackle institutional change on a root level—our language—and exhort us to make our classrooms, programs, and even institutions part of the Underground Railroad that my nephew's friend Money is calling for.

FOLDS

This sense of time's folds, which may be challenging for some to feel in relation to our contemporary moment of racial slavery in the United States, may be more accessible through a discussion of Bump Halbritter's presentation on the prerecorded panel with live Q&A "Uncommon Places: The Recording Studio as Compositional Space" that I attended in my bedroom right after Zumba on Saturday afternoon. Halbritter presented on different performances of the Sting song, "I Burn for You." While Halbritter organized his discussion using a linear chronology of the different performances of the song (starting with the earliest and ending with the most recent), what we begin to understand is that the way we hear the earlier versions changes through a knowledge of all the different temporal folds—so the time of the song, whichever version you hear, contains multiple moments in a linear chronology. The earliest version contains the most recent version and vice versa.

So, if something happened this summer for me that returns me to 2018, then when I reflect on my surveys from April 2021, I am looking at a future self—but I would say the self in the surveys from April 2021 is in a different dimension because of the punctum of state violence.

In the summer of 2018, I surrendered to the power of the state to create peace around a child who I love with all my heart. She called me Mommy. In the summer of 2021, I found out the vision the state had for her safety failed.

The dimension of advocating for a child, whom I love as my daughter and who loved me as her mommy, against the vision of the state that desires us separated brings the affective history of chattel slavery held in my bones (Henay 2021) to the forefront.

This is how the Jim Crow state functions: to continue the trauma of family separation as an attack on Black life of the magnitude of lynchings by police and a thriving school-to-prison pipeline.

MARY PRINCE DESCRIBES THE SLAVE MARKET

Oh dear! I cannot bear to think of that day,—it is too much.—It recalls the great grief that filled my heart, and the woeful thoughts that passed to and fro through my mind, whilst listening to the pitiful words of my poor mother, weeping for the loss of her children. I wish I could find words to tell you all I then felt and suffered. The great God above alone knows the thoughts of the poor slave's heart, and the bitter pains which follow such separations as these. All that we love taken away from us—Oh, it is sad, sad! and sore to be borne!—I got no sleep that night for thinking of the morrow; and dear Miss Betsey was scarcely less distressed. She could not bear to part with her old playmates, and she cried sore and would not be pacified.

— Mary Prince

In a similar style to Butler's *Kindred*, the television show *Siempre Bruja* also has slavery in the present. The portals are jewelry and sleep. *Westworld* does a similar folding that disrupts linear notions of time, the portal being technology. I have not yet read *The Handmaid's Tale*, but I did see all but the most recent season on streaming television. I appreciate the protagonist as a model for patience and long-game strategy for rescuing her daughter. I feel like I need that level of attention, discipline, and focus—I'm holding a dimensional reality under attack by the slavocracy of the new Jim Crow government that weaves the violence of slavery into bureaucratic praxis.

I know I am parenting differently this summer than I was this past spring because the feeling of doing everything wrong quiets in a reflection on the immense trust I have in processes of love and patience worthy of traveling an underground railroad. Trauma, a punctum, collapses linear time. Love is drifting. I am drifting.

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