

Otherwise Than Schooling:  
Three Critiques of Secularism, State Power, and US Public Education, 1960-2000

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## **Introduction: Three Critiques of Public Schooling**

Between 1960 and 2000, a wave of resistance rose against American public schooling. Liberal reformers, leftist revolutionaries, countercultural experimenters, evangelical Christians, Black nationalists, and many others pushed for forms of education apart from and beyond the public school. Critiques of public schooling attracted adherents from a wide variety of political positions, despite the hard political lines being drawn in the emerging culture wars of the 1980s. What drew together these disparate groups? What assumptions or goals enabled them to temporarily suspend other political animosities and oppositions in order to collaborate against a common object of derision? What ideas held together the unstable category of “against public schooling,” and what are the implications of their convergences and divergences for thinking about secular state power, the stakes of education, and the grueling task of imagining a more just world?

This thesis addresses these questions by looking at similarities and differences among three distinct bodies of work that critiqued American public schooling during this period: Afrocentric education, particularly the work of Molefi Kete Asante and Mwalimu J. Shujaa; ultraconservative Protestant theories of education, particularly the work of Rousas J. Rushdoony; and the unschooling/deschooling movement, particularly the ideas of Ivan Illich and John C. Holt.<sup>1</sup>

On the surface, these three critiques have little in common—and they did not, for the most part, come into explicit conversation during this period beyond debates over charter schools and voucher programs. A close look, however, reveals that their relationship to one another is

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<sup>1</sup> Unschooling and deschooling have many overlapping principles. For the remainder of this thesis, I will refer to the complex of ideas that both terms encompass with the somewhat awkward—but, it strikes me, necessary—construction “un/deschooling.” Despite the conflation implied by this term, I also frequently parse the differences between these two ideas.

subtle and complex, marked by both clear differences and surprising similarities. All three exerted substantial influence in alternative education circles between the mid-1970s and the mid-1990s, and each lives on in contemporary alternatives to public schooling, particularly in the American homeschooling ecosystem. All three of these critiques also spill far beyond the bounds of education policy, explicitly connecting their critiques of public schooling to larger critiques of American culture, society, and politics. Despite their popular and political influence, however, these critiques have not received substantial scholarly treatment outside of the field of education.

This thesis focuses on how these three critiques mobilize and interrogate categories of the religious and the secular, the cultural and the political, freedom and bondage. Secularism, religion, race, and freedom emerge in this reading as contested concepts in the American political imagination. These categories are central to all three of the critiques I discuss but are mobilized in very different ways. Even as they challenge how state power is exercised through public schooling, these critiques also offer radically different visions of possible alternatives. They sit strangely within received categories, frequently challenge the political imagination, and are difficult to reconcile with a standard right-left binary. They read, in my experience, as alternatively brilliant, frustrating, tantalizing, and horrifying. In short, they are repugnant to both dominant political positions as well as dominant academic modes of inquiry. I engage with this repugnancy to ask why these critiques remain largely illegible to contemporary readers, and what we might be able to learn from them.

In doing so, this thesis looks to American public schooling as a site in which to extend the insights of secular and postsecular studies.<sup>2</sup> This approach rejects a simple binary between

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<sup>2</sup> I have mixed feelings about this term, but my work is certainly aligned with a growing body of work concerned with exploring the epistemological and ontological contours of the secular. In this model, the secular is not simply that which is left over when religion is removed (what Charles Taylor calls the “subtraction story”) but is instead a positively-constituted set of assumptions that set the parameters for what can count as true, the place of the human in

the secular and the religious. Rather, certain forms of religion are understood as compatible with the secular state’s exercise of power—principally those that are confined to private, domestic, interior life. As Peter Coviello writes, explicating Talal Asad’s work, “the secular state only ‘tolerates’ that which does not present itself as a rival claimant, pursuing differing conceptions of the public, the private, the good, the necessary, and much besides.”<sup>3</sup> That is, the knowledge claims of secularism are inherently embroiled in the state’s exercise of power, which includes enforcing a line between what kinds of religious claims are legible in the secular public sphere and which are not. The three critiques that I read use the category of religion to contest the US public school system as a site where the state makes an exclusive claim to power. Through public schools, the internalized assumptions of secularism begin to reveal themselves. All three critiques, that is, rethink the state’s division of the secular public sphere from the private religious sphere in order to contest the enforcement state power through public schooling. This conceptual move binds these critiques together, despite their radical political and epistemological differences.

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the cosmos, the nature of consciousness, and so forth. For the duration of this thesis, I use the word “secular” and its variations to refer to this contested set of ideas that underwrite the lived experience of the dominant Euro-American world—the conceptual water we swim in, so to speak. For the major classic articulation of this understanding of the secular, see Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*. Harvard University Press, 2007. The political dimensions of this body of work emerged initially in studies of encounters between secular and Islamic ways of organizing being and knowledge as well as from subaltern studies in a postcolonial context. On this, see Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity*. Stanford University Press, 2003; Saba Mahmood, *The Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*. Princeton University Press, 2005; Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*. Princeton University Press, 2000. Several scholars have also extended these insights (or elements of these insights) into an Americanist context. See, for instance, Emily Ogden, *Credulity: A Cultural History of US Mesmerism*. Chicago University Press, 2018; Peter Coviello, *Make Yourselves Gods: Mormons and the Unfinished Business of American Secularism*. Chicago University Press, 2019; Charles McCrary, *Sincerely Held: American Secularism and its Believers*. Chicago University Press, 2022; Joseph Blankholm, *The Secular Paradox: On the Religiosity of the Not Religious*. New York University Press, 2022.

<sup>3</sup> Coviello 28.

*Three Critiques, 1960-2000*

By the time John C. Holt appeared on the Phil Donahue Show in 1978, he had already had multiple careers. After stints in the Navy and as a fifth-grade math teacher, he published in 1964 a bestselling liberal-left critique of testing, tracking, and grades. This book, *How Children Fail*, transformed him into a minor celebrity and placed him directly at the center of mainstream conversations about public schools. He followed this up with the similarly successful *How Children Learn* (1967) and *Learning All the Time* (1968). Like his first book, these advocated for expanding the walls of the classroom beyond the school building in order to build more learning into everyday life. But then everything changed for Holt in 1970 when he visited the dissident Catholic priest and social theorist Ivan Illich at his Centro Intercultural de Documentación (CIDOC) in Cuernavaca, Mexico.<sup>4</sup>

Illich was a dissident Catholic priest born in Austria. In early 1961, he migrated to Mexico and became deeply involved in spreading anti-establishment Latin American liberation theology among priests in training.<sup>5</sup> At the same time, he was also writing a large-scale critique of the technological and bureaucratic ordering of modern life, epitomized by the United States. This book was published in 1971 as *Deschooling Society*. During their time together at CIDOC, Illich convinced Holt that the problem was not that schooling didn't go far enough, but that schooling went much too far—to the point where the logic of schooling maliciously permeated all of modern life.<sup>6</sup> Holt took this idea and ran with it. He wrote two books in the mid-1970s sanctioning a radical view of children's rights and advocating for the abolition of the public school. These books, *Escape from Childhood* (1974) and *Instead of Education* (1976), form the

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<sup>4</sup> Milton Gaither, *Homeschooling: An American History*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017: 137-139.

<sup>5</sup> Todd Hartch, *The Prophet of Cuernavaca*. Oxford University Press, 2015: 99-102.

<sup>6</sup> John Holt, *Instead of Education: Ways to Help People Do Things Better*. Boulder, CO: Sentient Publications, 2004 [1976]: 108-109.

heart of my reading of Holt's ideas below. This radical new direction alienated most of his former supporters, and he drifted into relative obscurity. Towards the second half of the decade, however, his work began to attract the attention of a loose network of counterculture families of all political orientations who were already teaching their children at home, outside of the public school system. In 1977, Holt began publishing an informal periodical, *Growing Without Schooling*. It soon became a major hub for people to share stories, resources, and advice from their own experience of educating their children at home. For the first time, homeschooling had a centralized forum, which began to give it a sense of cohesion and identity. The movement quickly gained steam. In 1978, *Time* published a cover story on Holt and homeschooling. Shortly afterward, Holt made his appearance on the Phil Donahue Show alongside a homeschooling family, answering audience questions in a town-hall style meeting. These high-profile appearances turned Holt into the first public face of an organized homeschooling movement.<sup>7</sup>

This nascent movement had a politically-diverse membership: antigovernment leftists, home-grown educational theorists, agrarian hippies, and, of course, conservative Protestants. Challenges to public schools were not new for this last group; concerned parents had mobilized against curricular materials that they perceived as leftist or communist since the 1920s. As fears about "secular humanism" grew in the 1970s, full-blown home education came to be seen by many as a better option than attempting to reform the decaying public schools.<sup>8</sup>

Though the bogeyman of secular humanism became a commonplace in the culture wars of the 1980s, it had been rigorously theorized decades earlier by an obscure theologian named Rousas John Rushdoony. Writing from an ultraconservative Calvinist position that pushed principles of Biblical literalism to their logical extremes, Rushdoony was the leading

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<sup>7</sup> Gaither 139-141. Video of Holt's appearance on Donahue is available on YouTube as of April 10, 2023.

<sup>8</sup> Gaither 115-117.

intellectual of the loose ultraconservative Protestant movement known as Christian Reconstruction. In his nearly 60-year career, his vast output of utterly uncompromising theology provided a set of rigorous ideas and arguments that helped establish the basic contours of conservative evangelical politics in the second half of the twentieth century.<sup>9</sup> Among this relentless intellectual production were three books on US public education: *Intellectual Schizophrenia* (1961), *The Messianic Character of American Education* (1963), and *The Philosophy of the Christian Curriculum* (1981). Though Rushdoony never became as high-profile as Holt within the homeschooling movement, these three texts provided much of the intellectual underpinnings for conservative Christian homeschooling in the 1980s and 1990s.<sup>10</sup> Additionally, in his later career, Rushdoony became personally involved with the legal side of the homeschooling movement, testifying as an expert witness in several homeschooling-related court cases.<sup>11</sup>

In 1983, two conservative Christian lawyers founded the Home School Legal Defense Association (HSLDA) after meeting at a homeschooling convention in California. This organization quickly rose to prominence as the primary legal engine advocating for the right of homeschooling families to teach their children outside of the public school system.<sup>12</sup> As this

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<sup>9</sup> Rushdoony wrote at least 60 books over the course of his life as well as many thousands of articles, opinion pieces, and position papers. In the 1980s, many of Rushdoony's principles, arguments, and theological tenets were watered down to make them more palatable (and accessible) for a larger audience. In many cases, the conclusions he reached became divorced from the arguments he used to arrive there. This problem was compounded by the fact that Rushdoony was a committed postmillennialist while the vast majority of conservative protestants in the US are premillennialists. For an account of the covert-but-crucial influence of Christian Reconstruction on the mainstream religious right, see Julie Ingersoll, *Building God's Kingdom: Inside the World of Christian Reconstruction*. Oxford University Press, 2015.

<sup>10</sup> Gaither 149-156.

<sup>11</sup> Michael McVicar, *Christian Reconstruction: R.J. Rushdoony and American Religious Conservatism*. University of North Carolina Press, 2015: 167-170.

<sup>12</sup> "History of HSLDA: How we got here." *HSLDA*. September 18, 2019. Accessed April 10, 2023, <https://hsllda.org/post/history-of-hsllda>. See also "When home is school: A lobbying group's state-by-state fight against oversight" *Chalkbeat*, May 12, 2022. Accessed April 10, 2023, <https://www.chalkbeat.org/2022/5/12/23067012/homeschool-lobbying-christian>.

organization and others expanded their influence and size, the nascent homeschooling movement became a powerful political force. In this process, its ecumenical origins became overshadowed by the dominance of the religious right.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, by the time John Holt died in 1985, he was already a largely forgotten figure in the overwhelmingly conservative Protestant landscape of American homeschooling.<sup>14</sup>

In the same decades that homeschooling was consolidated as a social, intellectual, and political platform, another group of people also experienced large-scale disillusionment with the US public school system: Black Americans. Faced with the massive failures of court-mandated desegregation efforts, a robust Black intellectual tradition argued that independent Black educational institutions were essential to cultivating race consciousness, political advancement, and cultural authenticity. This movement looked to Black Nationalist rhetoric as well as newly independent nations on the African continent. Its major figures were mostly veterans of radical organizations such as SNCC, Republic of New Africa, and Nation of Islam.<sup>15</sup>

Independent Black institutions popped up on the national scene as early as the late 1960s. The Black Panther Community Schools in Oakland and the Ocean Hill-Brownsville struggle in Brooklyn were some of the first nationally-visible efforts to secure Black community

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<sup>13</sup> See Gaither 161-197 for a detailed account of this transition. Importantly, Gaither notes that the actual success of homeschooling hinged on the thousands—indeed millions—of parents, mostly women, who participated in mass political campaigns while frequently also taking on the additional labor of teaching their children at home. In this, the movement shares much with the form of political organizing that characterized the mass mobilization of political conservatives in Southern California a couple decades earlier. See Lisa McGirr, *Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New American Right*. Princeton University Press, 2015.

<sup>14</sup> Gaither 166-167. Gaither also discusses a third homeschooling “pioneer” (in addition to Holt and Rushdoony): Raymond and Dorothy Moore (see Gaither 142-149). Though they were also conservative Protestants (more precisely, Seventh Day Adventists) and advocated Biblically-focused education, they were much more influential as producers of curriculum materials than as theorists of the movement more broadly. Because of this, they receive no further attention in this thesis. Interesting future work could trace some of the intellectual threads that this thesis explores through their curricular materials. Like Holt, Raymond Moore died as a largely forgotten part of the movement he helped to create.

<sup>15</sup> Russell Rickford, *We Are an African People: Independent Education, Black Power, and the Racial Imagination*. Oxford University Press, 2016: 10-11.



control over schools.<sup>16</sup> In the 1970s, dozens of independent schools were established across the United States, primarily on a Pan African nationalist model that was focused on radical political activism and a deep cultural connection to global African struggles. Many of these schools looked back to Black schooling practices in Jim Crow and before for inspiration, consolidating a long view of the history of Black education in the United States.<sup>17</sup> These schools varied in structure and curriculum, but all were dedicated to educating the next generation of politically-active Black youth.

At the same time, however, these schools faced persistent funding problems, a lack of broad-based popular support, and hostility from local governments and school districts.<sup>18</sup> By the mid-1980s, a new theory of independent Black education—Afrocentrism—had begun to take over from the Pan African nationalist model that drove the independent Black institution movement of the 1970s.<sup>19</sup> In 1980, Molefi Kete Asante provided the first systematic articulation of the idea of Afrocentricity, drawing primarily on Maulana Karenga’s programmatic cultural-nationalist Kawaida theory and Cheikh Anta Diop’s writing on the African origins of all human civilization. Asante’s project was to synthesize a huge swath of Black thought, distilling its common elements into a programmatic plan for global African liberation.<sup>20</sup> This new model, Afrocentrism, was not as strictly separatist as the more Black-nationalist models that had

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<sup>16</sup> Rickford 23-45.

<sup>17</sup> See, for instance, William H. Watkins, “Reclaiming Historical Visions of Quality Schooling: The Legacy of Early 20<sup>th</sup>-Century Black Intellectuals.” *Beyond Desegregation: The Politics of Quality in African American Schooling*. Ed., Mwalimu J. Shujaa. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press, 1996: 5-28.

<sup>18</sup> Rickford 241-246.

<sup>19</sup> Rickford 21. In this essay, I use “Afrocentric” and its variations in a fairly strict sense, meaning only the intellectual movement predominantly theorized by Molefi Kete Asante. Notably, “Afrocentric” does not include all—or even most—predominantly Black institutions. It shares certain intellectual and political concerns with 1970s Pan African nationalism and early Critical Race Theory, but it is also distinct from both of those traditions. I give a very brief history in Section II. See Molefi Kete Asante, *Afrocentricity*. Revised Second Edition. Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1988 [1980]: 1-30 for his account of the movement’s intellectual inheritances. See also Ama Mazama, “The Afrocentric Paradigm.” *The Afrocentric Paradigm*. Ed., Ama Mazama. Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2003: 9-23.

<sup>20</sup> See, for instance, Asante, *Afrocentricity*, 1-30.

preceded it. It centered an expansive idea of African culture as the basis for global Black life, shifting the focus away from radical political action.

By the late 1980s and early 1990s, Afrocentrism had grown into a prominent intellectual movement with scholars extending Afrocentric ideas into a variety of fields. Afrocentric education was most rigorously theorized by Mwalimu J. Shujaa, who edited two volumes of essays (in 1994 and 1996) surveying the state and theory of Afrocentric education in the United States. Though castigated by some for its complicity with charter and voucher school privatization programs, Afrocentrism also helped legitimize the idea of the independent Black school.<sup>21</sup> Indeed, by the early 2000s, several American cities housed financially-viable (and often publicly-funded) schools centered on the idea of Black and/or African culture.<sup>22</sup>

### *Roadmap*

Each of this thesis's sections foregrounds one of these three bodies of critique: Christian Reconstruction, Afrocentrism, and un/deschooling. The goal is to let each critique, in turn, provide a lens through which to read the other two. The result is a form of cyclical reading where each body of critique becomes visible, over the course of the thesis, in the light of each of the other two, like turning a multi-colored prism around in your hand. This structure is designed to maximize the number of different contestations and concordances that can arise around the ideas of religion, race, and freedom.

This thesis makes no claims about what US public schools were *actually* like between 1960 and 2000. The critiques I examine here represent jaded, provincial, and partisan views of

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<sup>21</sup> Rickford 258-262.

<sup>22</sup> James Nelsen, *Educating Milwaukee: How One City's History of Segregation and Struggle Shaped Its Schools*. Wisconsin Historical Society Press, 2015: 167-169.

public schooling. Rather than discussing the actual successes and failures of public schools, I am interested in how public schools functioned as a site of critique of society at large, and what we might learn from the odd intersections among these three bodies of work.

I begin in Section I by foregrounding the work of ultraconservative Calvinist theologian RJ Rushdoony, particularly his notions of presuppositional apologetics and sphere sovereignty. These ideas lay the foundation for a critique of public schooling as an essentially religious activity—a trend that is clearly visible in the un/deschooling and Afrocentric critiques. This foundational move forms the heart of this thesis: all of these critiques simultaneously identify a secular epistemology that constitutes the core of public schooling and name that epistemology (literally or metaphorically) as religious. That is, they contest the neutrality of secular state power by naming it as an essentially religious operation.

Whether used literally or as a structuring metaphor, the language of religion allows these critics to peel back the veneer of neutrality of public schooling. Religion, in these critiques, is a rhetorical and conceptual tool for dissecting the epistemological assumptions of the state. John Holt expresses this in terms that all three bodies of work at hand might subscribe to: “We need to reveal as untrue—as myths, illusions, and lies—the stories and alibis the schools and the educators tell us (and often themselves) to justify themselves and explain their repeated failures.”<sup>23</sup> I argue that all three of the bodies of critique identify the hegemony of the secular as partly constitutive of these stories and alibis. In a world where secularism is the dominant epistemological regime of state power, the language of religion can function as a mythbusting tool.

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<sup>23</sup> Holt, *Instead of Education* 8

In Section II, I center the Afrocentric critique of public schools to focus on ways that race haunts all three critiques as both a buried metaphor and as a site of immense political urgency. I begin by briefly situating the Afrocentric critique within the history of independent Black education, Pan Africanist thought, and African American critiques of post-*Brown* desegregation efforts. I then explore how Afrocentrism embeds its understanding of race within the larger category of culture. Though Afrocentricity has received criticism for this culture-centric analysis, I argue that the Afrocentric category of culture tries to hold together race and religion in a way that offers a unique critique of the connections between white supremacy and secularism in public schooling.

Moving on to the work of Holt, Illich, and Rushdoony, I trace how metaphors of slavery and bondage provide a way for the white authors to elevate the stakes of their critique without explicitly engaging with the question of white supremacy and racial power. I argue that the language of bondage and slavery offers evidence of how the idea of race inflects the white writers' thinking about public schooling, even if they cannot explicitly confront it. Race and religion are bound up together in these critiques. In all three cases, a partially-obscured language of race works suggestively alongside the category of religion to heighten the stakes of these critiques of public schooling.

Given the histories of racial domination in the United States, Black education has always been about much more than gaining a specific set of skills and knowledge. Education has been a site of radical political, ontological, and epistemological contestation for African Americans since the Reconstruction era and even before.<sup>24</sup> Questions of African American

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<sup>24</sup> On this point, see, Rickford, *We Are an African People*; Jarvis Givens, *Fugitive Pedagogy: Carter G. Woodson and the Art of Black Teaching*. Harvard University Press, 2021; Venessa Siddle Walker, *Their Highest Potential: An African American School Community in the Segregated South*. University of North Carolina Press, 1996; Leon Litwack, *Trouble in Mind: Black Southerners in the Age of Jim Crow*. New York: Vintage Books, 1999: 52-113.

schooling are always also questions about the status of Black life within the American state. This thesis shows how, from an Afrocentric perspective, the hegemony of state secularism exercised through public schooling also constitutes an epistemological attack on Blackness, coded as African.<sup>25</sup> Schools are unquestionably a site where the state exerts biopolitical power. Part of my argument is that the Afrocentric critique of public education is attuned to the role of secularism in the exercise of that power.

Section III foregrounds the closely-related ideas of “deschooling” (Ivan Illich) and “unschooling” (John Holt) as a way of discussing how schooling marks an infringement on freedom and rights. “Deschooling” is a term coined by dissident Catholic priest and polyglot liberation theology activist Ivan Illich. This critique takes as its fundamental premise that all of society has been “schooled,” that is, structured according to the logic of the school. In order to maximize individual rights and freedoms, all institutions in society must be stripped of the logic of schooling—that is, deschooled. In a more US-centric context, education writer John C. Holt combined this general call with a deep concern for the rights of children in an approach he called “unschooling.” The unschooling movement sought to provide encouragement, incentives, and resources for parents to remove their children from formal schooling. In the wake of the liberation movements of the 1960s and 70s, Holt saw children as the next frontier for the liberal extension of rights.

I first discuss how Holt and Illich attack schooling as a life-ordering logic that extends far beyond the school building. For them, schooling marks a direct infringement on individual freedom. Though they seek radical social change through their critiques, I argue that their

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<sup>25</sup> My reading of the ontological and epistemological stakes of the Afrocentric critique draws, in part, on work by Sylvia Winter, M. Jacqui Alexander, Denise Ferreira da Silva, and Ashon Crawley. These thinkers (and others) ask important questions about the relationship between bodies, being, and the white supremacist institutions of modernity.

political imagination is deeply limited by their uncritical investment in liberal notions of individual freedom and rights. They push these ideas to their limits, leaving them unable to provide a meaningful account of the authority that underwrites political change. In contrast, the Reconstructionist and Afrocentric critiques offer deeply non-liberal visions of freedom that provide robust accounts of political authority. This section, then, discusses how rights, freedoms, and indeed the human itself are contested sites over which the state exercises power through the discourse of secularism.

Finally, in a brief conclusion, I discuss how sustained engagement with these three critiques might provide the basis for a political pedagogy of justice. In what ways might careful attention to the ideas of a repugnant cultural other expand our political imagination and invite reflection on the relationship among secularism, political action, and political scholarship?

### *The Repugnant Cultural Other*

In her 1991 essay subtitled “The Problem of the Repugnant Cultural Other,” Susan Harding argues that academic inquiry marks certain cultural formations (in her example, 1920s Christian fundamentalists) as repugnantly other. We—left-leaning academics in the humanities—often treat with this repugnant other as nothing more than a cypher for our own dominant vision of how the world is and should be.

Singly and together, modern voices represent fundamentalists and their beliefs as an historical object, a cultural “other,” apart from, even antithetical to, “modernity,” which emerges as the positive term in an escalating string of oppositions between supernatural belief and unbelief, literal and critical, backward and progressive, bigoted and tolerant. Through polarities such as these between “us” and “them,” the modern subject is secured.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Susan Harding, “Representing Fundamentalism: The Problem of the Repugnant Cultural Other.” *Social Research* Vol. 58 No. 2., Summer, 1991: 374

As in the humanities, she suggests, so in the broader American public sphere. It takes little depth of insight to observe that Americans are constantly shoring up our own identities (and beliefs about identity) through a caricatured reading of a repugnant other.

Repugnant does not necessarily equate with abhorrent.<sup>27</sup> Few scholars of race in the United States would say that Afrocentric thought is abhorrent. It is, after all, working towards racial justice, albeit in a way that can be easily critiqued from a modern critical race studies perspective. Afrocentrism's tendency towards African essentialism and its near-unilateral focus on culture as the vehicle for political change sits uneasily in (and is, perhaps, repugnant to) current academic debates in Black studies. Likewise, though many liberals might agree with Holt's early-career critiques of public school's excesses, few would wish to abolish the institution entirely and even fewer would countenance his statements about the inalienable rights of young children to vote, make contracts, and choose their own guardians. Though these ideas are repugnant to contemporary debates among activists and scholars, they do not strike me as abhorrent.

On the Christian Reconstructionist side, however, even the most conservative Christian homeschooling groups tend to downplay their intellectual debt to Rushdoony. And where they do acknowledge it, they carefully obscure the full extent of his writings.<sup>28</sup> His strong theonomic vision imagined a nation-state governed by absolute adherence to Old Testament Biblical Law (where not explicitly contradicted by the New Testament). The consequences of this extend even to death by stoning for most supposed transgressors, including "homosexuals, witches, and

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<sup>27</sup> According to the Oxford English Dictionary, "repugnant" comes from the Latin *repugnans*, with implications of contradiction, inconsistency, and contrariness. Only later (eighteenth century) did it acquire the meaning of "disgust." Comparatively, "abhorrent" comes from the Latin *abhorrens*, with connotations of shuddering at or recoiling from. In this discussion, I lean into the difference between these etymological connotations.

<sup>28</sup> Gaither 151-2; McVicar 209-210

incorrigible children.”<sup>29</sup> As with Asante’s and Holt’s work, the logic here strikes me as repugnant to the intellectual practices and sensibilities of the modern academy. Unlike the others, however, the conclusions that Rushdoony reaches also strike me as abhorrent. That is, his conclusions read as not only epistemologically contrarian but also morally unthinkable. I recoil from them.

But if Rushdoony’s work tells us anything, it’s that a conclusion can be both morally unthinkable and intellectually rigorous. In Rushdoony’s language, he and I begin from radically opposed presuppositions and then move in opposite directions. I stand radically against Rushdoony’s conclusions, but I do find in his thinking a unique and forceful vision of what it means to be a modern subject in a secular state. This strikes me as useful.

If the goal of politically-minded scholarship is to theorize more just forms of life, as academics we must take multiple simultaneous approaches to our intellectual and political others. Direct political action is absolutely essential—and so is biting political critique—but perhaps sustained engagement with repugnant ideas also has political value. This thesis leverages Religious Studies’ general disciplinary respect for the ideas of cultural others, even where the ideas may not seem to deserve that respect.<sup>30</sup> The cultural others that form the heart of this thesis live as modern subjects in the United States, but they read the terms of that modernity very differently than the dominant modes. By resisting the urge to debunk or demolish, I attempt here a form of political engagement that “requires that we do not organize around the premise of a

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<sup>29</sup> McVicar 4.

<sup>30</sup> This is not to obscure the long history of anthropological otherizing that marked Religious Studies work for much of the twentieth century. However, recent ethnographic and anthropological work in Religious Studies has tended to treat with the ideas of its subjects on their own terms. There are certainly exceptions or partial exceptions—mostly in the service of political critique—but there is generally a disciplinary resistance to trampling on that which one’s subjects or interlocutors hold most sacred.



permanent enemy...since these ‘enemies’ are people who need to be recruited for movements for social change.”<sup>31</sup>

This should never be the *only* form of political engagement. But if we lose sight of this approach, Harding reminds us, we risk forgetting

that many modernist presuppositions still operate uncritically within contemporary studies of politics and culture, thwarting scrupulous interpretation and re-representation of some cultural ‘others,’ specifically those deemed inappropriately religious or otherwise problematic or repugnant, and generating a radically parochial imaginary of the margins in which only sanctioned cultural ‘others’ survive.<sup>32</sup>

This thesis, then, makes an attempt at inviting the repugnant (and, indeed, abhorrent) cultural other into the academic conversation—not as a manifestation of epistemological error or political evil—nor as a strictly historical formation—but as a co-theorist. I want to proffer this invitation as an experiment in methodology and as a way of “rearticulating identities and political formations for more liberatory ends.”<sup>33</sup> What unexpected concordances or harmonies might come forward when the repugnant is foregrounded? How might such unexpected connections expand our political imagination and help develop strategies for working towards a more just world?

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<sup>31</sup> Andrea Smith *Unreconciled: From Racial Reconciliation to Racial Justice in Christian Evangelicalism*. Duke University Press, 2019: 7.

<sup>32</sup> Harding 375-6.

<sup>33</sup> Smith 7.

## **I: Schooling, Religion, and Secularism**

On January 7, 1987, Rousas J. Rushdoony took the stand as an expert witness in a Texas civil case, *Leeper v. Arlington ISD*. Rushdoony was testifying for the plaintiffs, a family who sued for the right to homeschool their children. Withstanding a lengthy and increasingly hostile cross-examination, Rushdoony intended to show that the state of Texas had always historically been unable to cover “every square inch” of the state with its public schooling project. By this logic, some level of parental schooling had always been considered an acceptable private alternative to public schooling—and therefore homeschools should be formally considered schools, hence lawful educational institutions. Along the way, however, his answers to the cross-examination took a strange turn.

A: Well, if you don’t have proper motivation in the family then learning is going to fail whether it’s in a state controlled institution or privately controlled situation, and the key factor in the family is faith. If there is religious motivation which governs the family then there is going to be learning, but if you remove that nothing the state does is going to supply it. All the state can supply is coercion and coercion does not work...

Q: Well, the converse you’re thinking about, religious motivation emphasis is that it is not, is it, that if you’re not religious you can’t be motivated? That’s not the converse of what you’re saying, is it?

A: That’s an implication, yes.

Q: That people not religious are not motivated to educate their children?

A: They do not have the same motivation. They very commonly in our culture, unless they are upper-class, and it’s a matter of community pressure, do not have a future orientation...

THE COURT: You say the family is motivated because of religion?

A: Of its faith, whatever it is. It can be ancestral worship, Buddhism, Christianity—

THE COURT: Some form?

A: Yes.<sup>34</sup>

In the middle of a court proceeding treating with the historical definition of a school, the expert witness diverts into a discussion of how familial motivation is essential to all schooling, regardless of where it takes place. And, furthermore, that this familial motivation is *always* essentially religious. It is not hard to imagine the bewilderment of the cross-examiner or, indeed, the presiding judge, who briefly takes over the questioning in a moment of apparent amazement.

Though not exactly legible in the context of a secular courtroom, the links connecting religion, the family, and education were extremely clear for Rushdoony. In fact, the connections among these ideas sit at the very heart of his far-reaching critique of American modernity by way of the public education system. Though we can just glimpse its trace in the *Leeper* trial, Rushdoony's massive and influential body of writing about the American public school offers a polemical, troubling, and complex critique of modernity in the United States. In this section, I begin by tracing the main contours of Rushdoony's critique of public schooling before moving into a discussion of the relationship between religion and schooling in Afrocentrism and the un/deschooling movement. Finally, I conclude by drawing out some threads that connect how these three bodies of work contest secular state power as exercised through compulsory public schooling.

### *Presuppositional Apologetics and Sphere Sovereignty*

Rushdoony's critique of public schools hinges on an idea known as "presuppositional apologetics." He inherited this distinctive form of reasoning from Dutch theologian Cornelius van Til and pushed it well beyond its delimited theological bounds into a rigorous and thorough

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<sup>34</sup> *Leeper v. Arlington I.S.D.* 17-88761-85 (1987): 511-515.

blueprint for organizing life in modernity. In presuppositional apologetics, God’s existence as articulated in the Bible is taken as the assumed basis of all knowledge with no need for additional validation or proof; to attempt to prove God’s existence by any other means subsumes God to a different regime of knowledge. This theological move builds on insights derived from continental philosophy. Van Til, and, later, Rushdoony, built their intellectual platform on the idea that all knowledge rests on some kind of unthought assumptions: “To argue by presupposition is to indicate what are the epistemological and metaphysical principles that underlie and control one’s method.”<sup>35</sup> For Christians who truly believe in an omniscient, omnipotent, inerrant God, van Til argues, there can be no basis of knowledge other than belief in that God. All epistemological and ontological claims must emanate from that certainty.

For Rushdoony, there is no overlap between the presuppositions of Christianity and the presuppositions of the modern world.<sup>36</sup> The presuppositions of the modern state are humanist—they take the human as their source of authority. Though modern humanists claim to discover unifying truths about the world and make claims regarding those truths, Rushdoony argues that such truths aren’t strictly speaking possible without the Christian God as a unifying force that draws all truth into a logical unity with itself. That is, “no fact can be truly known, nor its existence even posited, without the light of Scripture, without the God of the Bible and the revelation therein given.”<sup>37</sup> To claim to discover truths (that derive from the Christian God) while pretending that they emerge from human initiative marks modern thought with a fundamental discontinuity—an “intellectual schizophrenia,” as Rushdoony calls it. The purpose

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<sup>35</sup> Cornelius Van Til, *Apologetics*. Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1976: 61 (qtd. in McVicar 238, n. 75).

<sup>36</sup> See Rousas John Rushdoony, *Intellectual Schizophrenia: Culture, Crisis and Education*. Vallecito, CA: Ross House Books, 2002 [1961]: 107-112; Rousas John Rushdoony, *The Nature of the American System*, Vallecito, CA: Ross House Books, 2001 [1965]: 22-30. He does, however, admit that secular life in the modern United States is deeply indebted to (and apostatically erring from) its Christian inheritance.

<sup>37</sup> Rushdoony, *Intellectual Schizophrenia* 85-6.

of true education, then, is to unify truth claims with the presuppositions on which those truths rest—that is, Christian presuppositions. All other forms of education lead to intellectual schizophrenia.

Why, then, is it the responsibility of the family to provide this form of unifying education? On the one hand, Rushdoony clearly believes that the Christian family is likelier than the secular state to deliver education from the correct presuppositional place. But it also goes beyond that. In Rushdoony's accounting of Biblical society, dominion over life is divided across three spheres: the family, the church, and the state. Each of these entities has more or less absolute dominion over a certain aspect of life, and they betray the explicit law of God when they breach those boundaries.<sup>38</sup> Education is fundamentally a parental responsibility. The church and the Christian school do not in themselves have the authority to educate without parental approval.<sup>39</sup> And certainly the secular state, with its humanist presuppositions, cannot provide meaningful education that resolves the intellectual schizophrenia of modernity.

Since the authority of the human (over God) is that which is sacred in secularism, state education takes as its ultimate authority the *will of the group*—that is, democratic judgment. Children are trained to worship the democratic will of the people, subsuming themselves to the will of the democratic state in an effort to become one with it. Rushdoony reads this as a kind of mysticism: “God, Tao and Brahma have been replaced by the mystical group, and the purpose of education is to develop group experience and sensitivity.”<sup>40</sup> This process of intellectual

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<sup>38</sup> Rushdoony does note in some places that complete separation of these three spheres is not, in practice, possible. But in these cases, he always seems to privilege the authority of parents in this case. For him, the state is the worst offender and is constantly overstepping its boundaries. If a church oversteps its boundary, it is a sign of decay in the church and it has ceded its right to power. The family, for Rushdoony, is truly the fundamental unit of Christianity. Though this idea is in many ways an evangelical commonplace now, it is important to note that for Rushdoony it is a logical consequence of his presuppositional apologetics, not an a priori truth in itself. See *Intellectual Schizophrenia* 130-2.

<sup>39</sup> Rushdoony, *Intellectual Schizophrenia* 97-105.

<sup>40</sup> Rushdoony, *Intellectual Schizophrenia* 90-91.

submission to the collective human will supplants not only submission to God but also the act of learning, defined in the strict sense enumerated above: bringing into line one's truths with one's presuppositions:

Learning...can be heavily emphasized as occasions of state may require, but basic to the learning is the mystical devotion to the new god, the state, whose high priest is the state school. That new god is sometimes seen with a communist face, then again with a democratic countenance, but the mysticism each invokes are but variations of a common heresy.<sup>41</sup>

State education, then, is *also* a fundamentally religious activity.<sup>42</sup> For Rushdoony, “there are no neutral realms.”<sup>43</sup> Christianity and humanism each assume a certain set of incompatible truths. Just as his own epistemology presupposes the existence and infallibility of the Christian God, the modern secular state presupposes the ultimate authority of the human, rendering “humanism as the religion of the ‘public’ or state schools.”<sup>44</sup> Since it proceeds from humanistic presuppositions, Rushdoony reasons, state education is designed to indoctrinate children into the state religion of humanism. The concept of religion starts to spill beyond its academic boundaries.

This move has several important implications. First, far from a simple matter of curriculum and achievement, pedagogy is intimately bound up with God's direct mandate on earth. Second, the process of subject formation is not simply a political process of indoctrinating

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<sup>41</sup> Rushdoony, *Intellectual Schizophrenia* 91.

<sup>42</sup> There seems to be a discrepancy here between Rushdoony's understanding of state education as religious and his argument in the *Leeper* trial that nonreligious parents cannot invest meaningfully in education. But I think there are two distinct definitions of “religious” at work here. In *Intellectual Schizophrenia* and other written works, Rushdoony has time to develop a sophisticated argument over many pages. Thus, he can lay out his terms to suit his purposes, including expanding the definition of religion to include any presuppositional system. In *Leeper*, he had to rely more strategically on ready-to-hand categories to get his point across. For our purposes, we can read his remarks in the trial as using “religion” as shorthand for “Christianity.” His allusions to the other religious forms (Buddhism, ancestor worship) reveal a kind of confusion or incompetence surrounding nonwestern (i.e., racialized) religious formations. More on this in the next section.

<sup>43</sup> Rousas John Rushdoony, *The Roots of Reconstruction*. Vallecito, CA: Ross House Books, 1991: 7

<sup>44</sup> Rushdoony, *Intellectual Schizophrenia* 5

the youth into a particular worship of the state (though it is also that); it is also a process deeply bound up in fundamental epistemological questions. Dealing with these questions badly (i.e., according to secular, statist, and/or humanist logic), Rushdoony argues, creates a fundamental disjunction in the modern person, who inhabits a position of infinite instability. Statism proffers what seems like a radical hope: the promise of ultimate fulfillment as a member of the collective, as a subject of secular law, and as an equal participant in the carousel of human achievement. But actually, this offer is nothing but a mockery, a pale shadow of the sovereignty of God that ultimately denies the individual subject all God-given rights. This shadow takes the form of secular humanism: a presuppositional religious system pretending to be neutral truth.

Rushdoony argues that while humanists refuse to acknowledge that their perspective is not universal, presuppositional apologetics openly acknowledge that there are multiple possible approaches to conceiving of truth premised on different unthought assumptions. Like Talal Asad, Rushdoony is committed to showing that secular liberal modern forms of life (and, consequently, exercises of power) are not self-evidently true but rather the product of a specific set of choices about what to value. As Molly Worthen rightly notes, “presuppositionalists sound strangely postmodern: they deny the possibility of objective, unbiased perception—though not the existence of absolute truth, which belongs to Christians alone.”<sup>45</sup> Rushdoony makes an explicit claim against the secular state by contesting its very secularism.

### *The Afrocentric Idea of Culture*

Though Afrocentrism does not make an explicitly religious critique of US public schooling, it does mobilize an expansive understanding of *culture* that encompasses education,

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<sup>45</sup> Molly Worthen, “The Chalcedon Problem: Rousas John Rushdoony and the Origins of Christian Reconstructionism.” *Church History*, 2008, Vol. 77 No. 2: 405.

spiritual life, and many other facets of being. In the context of schooling, the Afrocentric idea of culture offers a way to nuance and problematize a single-minded focus on desegregation. As sociologists of education Van Dempsey and George Noblit write, “In practice, we seemed to ignore [in desegregation efforts] that there was an African American culture at all.”<sup>46</sup>

Afrocentrism’s solution is to focus firmly on an expansive understanding of African culture as a vehicle for liberatory thought, life, and education.

Afrocentrism has been critiqued for this single-minded focus on culture, especially as compared to the more explicitly political focus of Pan African nationalism that flourished during the 1970s.<sup>47</sup> In some ways, this is undeniable. Afrocentrism understands itself as principally a *consciousness-raising* and *cultural* movement. Its express goal is to inculcate a sense of African identity in Black diasporic people. This identity is reinforced through a persistent investment in culture, broadly conceived. This idea of expansive culture goes back at least to Maulana Karenga, a kind of proto-Afrocentrist, who developed his systematic program of Kawaïda in the late 1960s by adding a cultural component to Black Nationalist politics. Kawaïda “defines culture in the broadest sense to equate it with all the thought and activity of a given people or society, but places stress on the ideological - i.e., the view and value dimension of social life which informs social practice.”<sup>48</sup> In this system, culture is a broad-based concept that spills far beyond the colloquial bounds of culture to include mythology, history, social organization, political organization, creative motif, and ethos.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Van Dempsey and George Noblit, “Cultural Ignorance and School Desegregation: A Community Narrative.” *Beyond Desegregation: The Politics of Quality in African American Schooling*. Ed., Mwalimu J. Shujaa. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press, 1996: 116.

<sup>47</sup> See, for instance, Rickford 249-251.

<sup>48</sup> Maulana Karenga, *Kawaïda Theory: An Introductory Outline*. Inglewood, CA: Kawaïda Publications, 1980: 16-17.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*



Because culture is conceived of so expansively, contestations over culture take on enormous importance: “Culture is the *totality* of a people’s thought and practice and the cultural revolution simply seeks to refine and elevate it in order to maximize and realize our human possibilities. Moreover, our struggle is not simply for food or other material necessities, but for liberation and a higher level of human life.”<sup>50</sup> Here, the expansively cultural is interwoven seamlessly with the political and with the cosmic: the struggle is for *both* liberation and a higher (spiritually marked) level of life.

Molefi Kete Asante later took up Karenga’s understanding of culture in developing his idea of Afrocentricity. Once again, culture forms the heart of the critique—this time driving a programmatic “rise of consciousness.”<sup>51</sup> Also, unlike Karenga’s theory, Asante explicitly links his vision of liberatory African cultural identity to African spirituality, rejecting the idea that Christianity or Islam can provide spiritual resources for Black Americans.<sup>52</sup> It is not always clear exactly what Asante means by this spiritual orientation. I have found little systematic articulation of African religious practice in my survey of the literature. (Africa, in any case, is home to an enormous diversity of religious forms.) Rather, the focus tends to be on supposedly African-derived principles that abstractly connect to systematic ways of thinking and acting ethically and responsibly.<sup>53</sup> Nevertheless, it is undeniable that insofar as all elements of Afrocentrism are infused with an ethos of spirituality, so are its educational efforts. Writing as late as 2003, Ama

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<sup>50</sup> Karenga 22, emphasis in original.

<sup>51</sup> Asante, *Afrocentricity* 29

<sup>52</sup> For instance, Asante, *Afrocentricity* 4, 28, 72

<sup>53</sup> See for instance, the systematized numbered lists that constitute “Nija: The Way” in Asante, *Afrocentricity* 109-120. For other examples, see Joyce Elaine King and Thomasyn Lightfoote Wilson. “BEing the Soul-Freeing Substance: A Legacy of Hope in AfroHumanity.” *Too Much Schooling Too Little Education: A Paradox of Black Life in White Societies*. Ed., Mwalimu J. Shujaa. Trenton, NJ: African World Press, 1994: 274; Agyei Akoto, “Notes on an Afrikan-Centered Pedagogy.” *Too Much Schooling Too Little Education: A Paradox of Black Life in White Societies*. Ed., Mwalimu J. Shujaa. Trenton, NJ: African World Press, 1994: 329. In many ways, it is these exact stylistic flourishes that make Afrocentricity seem like an intellectually repugnant system of thought. My reading self-consciously cuts against this dismissal to try to think rigorously about its formulation of culture.

Mazama suggests that “Afrocentrically-generated knowledge must reflect the primacy of the spiritual, the relationship between the physical and the spiritual, as well as the interconnectedness of all things. The integration of spiritual and physical principles may very well constitute a major challenge in an environment dominated by rationalism and positivism.”<sup>54</sup>

Through the Afrocentric idea of culture, the spiritual is not circumscribed within the category of religion but bleeds across a variety of social spaces. The two dominant ideologies, Eurocentrism and Afrocentrism, compete on a grand scale for individual hearts and minds. In his discussion of Afrocentrism’s fraught relationship with Black Christianity, Asante argues that “a new consciousness would depose the church and institute Afrocentricity as the principal ideology.”<sup>55</sup> Interestingly, here we have an “ideology” replacing the “religious” formation that Black Americans no longer need. This ideology drives and is also driven by the new Afrocentric consciousness. In Asante’s systematic vision of Afrocentrism, the church is limited in what it can do and its sacred space will eventually be occupied by a range of cultural and identity-driven formations. Religion becomes diffuse and diverse. To circumscribe religion within the church alone is a move associated with Eurocentric ways of thinking.<sup>56</sup>

This diffusion of the spiritual into all aspects of everyday life constitutes Afrocentric education’s challenge to the secular boundaries of public schooling. It is not so much the *publicness* of public schooling per se that Afrocentrism takes issue with. In fact, a major faction of the early independent Black schooling movement proposed spreading Pan African ideas through community-controlled Black public schools.<sup>57</sup> Rather, Afrocentrism challenges the

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<sup>54</sup> Mazama 26

<sup>55</sup> Asante, *Afrocentricity* 72

<sup>56</sup> Asante, *Afrocentricity* 2-7

<sup>57</sup> Mwalimu J. Shujaa and Hannibal T. Afrik, “School Desegregation, the Politics of Culture, and the Council of Independent Black Institutions.” *Beyond Desegregation: The Politics of Quality in African American Schooling*. Ed., Mwalimu J. Shujaa. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press, 1996: 257-8. I discuss some of the consequences of this ambivalent relationship to state power in greater depth in Section III.

*presuppositions* of Eurocentric US public schooling and its attendant emphasis on scientific positivism and strictly-policed rationalism. Afrocentric education does not reject the teaching of scientific or technological knowledge, but rather resituates that knowledge with reference to more spiritual ways of knowing.<sup>58</sup> The shift from Eurocentric presuppositions to Afrocentric presuppositions is an epistemological one. The dissemination of Afrocentric knowledge is always already a spiritual act.

There are certain similarities, then, between the Afrocentric idea of culture and Rushdoony's presuppositional argument. In both cases, the dissemination of knowledge through education takes on a religious valence. Whereas for Rushdoony, public schools inculcate students into the religion of humanism, the Afrocentric critique traces how public schools mobilize Eurocentric epistemological presuppositions of secularism and logical positivism to encode racist teaching and keep Black Americans in subjugation (more on this in the next section). For Rushdoony, all knowledge is necessarily generated from the omnipotent Christian God, whereas a kind of diffuse African spiritual orientation marks the condition for knowledge in the Afrocentric critique. But for both, a strictly secular scientific positivism is a limited and contingent form of knowing that pretends to universal truth. The state, in both accounts, uses this pretense as both an end and a means for its exercise of power through education.

### *Illich: Schooling as Church*

Religious language is also prominently foreground in the un/deschooling literature, albeit mostly in a more figurative sense. While Rushdoony and Asante both advocate for a form of spiritual or religious life as a counterbalance against the power of the secular state, Illich and

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<sup>58</sup> Molefi Kete Asante, *Kemet, Afrocentricity and Knowledge*. Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1990: 149-151.

Holt have a much more ambivalent relationship to religion-as-practiced. Despite this ambivalence about religion as a vehicle for breaking down the hegemony of the secular state, Illich frequently has recourse to metaphors of religion in his critique of schooling. These slip in and out of the literal in a way that also blurs a clear line between the religious and the secular.

For Illich, the logic of schooling has permeated society to such an extent that it amounts to a new religious order. The logic of schooling is the logic of assessment and tracking that sets a prefigured expectation for each student based on their socioeconomic status while holding out the illusory promise of advancement. Students “are made to feel guilty if they do not behave according to the predictions of consumer research by getting the grades and certificates that will place them in the job category they have been led to expect.”<sup>59</sup> A mixed sense of obligation and guilt permeates the schooled order for Illich. Compulsory attendance ensures that each student is required to show up and perform their role diligently, but at the same time the system is designed for most poor students to underperform—therefore, the promise is dangled before them, then yanked back—and they are penalized both materially and psychologically for their failure.

Illich’s overwhelming enemy is the bureaucratized, technocratic, consumption-driven order that regulates human life in modernity, a “myth of unending consumption that now takes the place of belief in life everlasting.”<sup>60</sup> This form of technocratic power is located both in the government and in private industry. Its source, he argues, is a logic of schooling that permeates all of society. Illich consistently characterizes this technocratic authority as a kind of governing religion:

School now seems eminently suited to be the World Church of our decaying culture. No institution could better veil from its participants the deep discrepancy between social principles and social reality in today’s world. Secular, scientific, and death-denying, it is of a piece with the modern mood. Its

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<sup>59</sup> Ivan Illich, *Deschooling Society*. London: Marion Boyars, 2022 [1971]:41.

<sup>60</sup> Illich, *Deschooling Society* 43.

classical, critical veneer makes it appear pluralist if not anti religious. Its curriculum both defines a science and is itself defined by so-called scientific research.<sup>61</sup>

Here again we see the paradox that Rushdoony outlined of a secular institution that is also fundamentally religious. Whereas for Rushdoony, it is the fact that the public school proceeds from humanist presuppositions that makes it religious, for Illich it is the totality of its social control, and particularly its ability to veil its own arbitrariness. Illich offers no vision of a differently-religious counterproposal to the schooled logic of the state. If the logic of schooling were to disappear, they argue, human beings could flourish in unmitigated secular freedom. As I argue in Section III, however, he and Holt overcommit to an idealized understanding of secular liberal freedom that ultimately vacates their platform of any political authority. In contrast, Rushdoony very much proceeds from his own presuppositional position to argue for a new epistemological order in which God is the focal point of all knowledge. No truth can be known without God. For Illich, no life can be expressed without unfettered freedom of a very secular kind, which the state forecloses in its exertion of religious power.

It is precisely through naming the secular state as religious that Illich's critique contests its neutrality.

The American university has become the final stage of the most all-encompassing initiation rite the world has ever known. No society in history has been able to survive without ritual or myth, but ours is the first which has needed such a dull, protracted, destructive, and expensive initiation into its own myth. The contemporary world civilization is also the first one which has found it necessary to rationalize its fundamental initiation ritual in the name of education.<sup>62</sup>

The exercise of state power through schooling validates the religious authority of the state, ritualistically inducting children into its epistemology (and, in the process, separating out the rich

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Illich, *Deschooling Society* 38.

from the poor, reinforcing hierarchy). What is at hand, then, is not so much an explicit assessment of religious forms of being but rather religion as a ready-to-hand set of symbols for explicating the stakes of schooling as a way of bureaucratically and technocratically organizing life in modernity.

Beyond a mere rhetorical move, this language makes specific claims about the nature of secular state power. Like Rushdoony, Illich leans into theological language as a way of identifying the veneer of neutrality that secularism offers the state (the United States, specifically). And like the Afrocentrists, he mobilizes a very fluid understanding of religion that is not tied to a particular orthodoxy, but which permeates multiple facets of social life. He also differs radically from both of them through his lack of investment in a lived form of spiritual life. For him, the failure of secular schooling is that it is not truly secular. After removing the illusory church of schooled logic, he wants to set in its place a truly neutral secularism premised on individual freedom and universal rights. As we will see in Section III, this is something that neither Rushdoony nor the Afrocentrists could countenance. For Rushdoony, any system that does not take the Christian God as its ultimate authority inherently errs. For the Afrocentrists, this language of rights and freedoms always already presupposes a secular Eurocentric epistemology.

### *The Religion of the Secular School*

Taking these critiques together, we can start to sketch out some of the contestable spaces in public schooling. Rushdoony's presuppositional apologetics call to our attention the extent to which the secular regime is also premised on humanistic assumptions about the world and how truth is generated within it. Asante and Karenga further discuss how these assumptions reinforce

a provincially European understanding of the world. This is true both in a basic curricular sense and in a larger epistemological and ontological sense of how schools construct being, knowledge, and truth. In particular, Asante notes that a kind of diffuse African spirituality is an essential component of any Afrocentric effort at contesting this Eurocentric order. Finally, Illich uses religious metaphors to direct our attention to the extent and nature of religiously-expressed secular state authority as well as the totalizing system (schools, tracking, testing, certificates, etc.) by which disparities of wealth and class are generationally and geopolitically maintained.

An overwhelming sense of the failed promise of secular schooling also runs through all three critiques. All feel deeply failed by the system. For Rushdoony, secular schooling is a historical betrayal of what he sees as orthodox Christian principles. For the Afrocentrists, the maintenance of Eurocentric assumptions in schooling upholds systems of cultural domination, even post-*Brown*. For the un/deschooling writers, the technocratic social order snatches away the promise of freedom in maintaining its hierarchical divisions.

In all three cases, the language of religion makes schooling legible as a site of secular hegemony. Though these critiques disagree on the precise nature of that hegemony (humanistic, Eurocentric, technocratic), all agree that schooling (and, by extension, the secular state) is not a neutral conveyor of information but rather a political project driven by historically-contingent values. Together, these critiques attempt to provincialize the secularist claims of the state.

This body of critique, that is, works to deepen and extend postsecular studies' insights into the historical contingency of secularism and the secular state. If colonial and postcolonial peoples have found innumerable ways of contesting the hegemony of the secular state, so have groups internal to the West. These critiques show that since at least the 1960s, public schooling has come under attack as an institution that is *both* secular (humanist, technocratic, positivist,

Eurocentric) *and* religious (presuppositional, authoritarian, epistemologically-partisan, ritualistic, mystical). From extremely different political and epistemological positions, these critiques intentionally blur the lines between categories of religion and secular in order to unmask the supposed neutrality of public schooling.

This is only part of the picture, however. For in all three critiques, the paradox of secular schooling as religious is also bound up with a largely repressed need to engage with ideas of race. Indeed, returning to the *Leeper* trial transcript that opened this section, we can now fill in some of the content elided by the second ellipsis:

THE COURT: Let me ask you this, doctor, about an ethnic group, a new ethnic group in this country and that is the orientals [sic], at least in this part of the country. Would you say that it appears that they have a very strong motivation for education?

A: Yes

THE COURT: Would you say that is based on religion or a desire to become part of the community in which they live and succeed in that community?

A: It is both. These Asiatics have a strong family system. I—

THE COURT: But that is not religion, though?

A: Yes, because it does involve ancestor worship. It involves Confucianism and Buddhism...And I see the same kind of discipline among these newer Asiatics [sic] immigrants. This is why they are excelling wherever they are and are very quickly becoming rich because there is motivation, there is discipline that is family governed, and that historically is the most powerful impetus in a society. Carle Zimmerman, the Harvard sociologist, and his three volumes on *Family and Civilization*, I think, has shown how nothing can replace the family as the motivating force in society.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> *Leeper* 513-514



At one of the only moments in the entire testimony that Rushdoony's presuppositional apologetics enter into the courtroom, there is also one of the only turns towards a racial other. Why do these two ideas seem to inextricably lead to one another in the trial transcript? What do race and religion have in common in the context of critiques of public schooling? In the next section, I foreground the Afrocentric critique as a way of exploring these questions.

## II: Schooling, Race, and Culture

In the summer of 1987, a group of Black parents, educators, and activists in Milwaukee proposed that a brand-new public school district be created in the heart of the city. The proposed New North Division District would remove over 9,000 students from the existing Milwaukee Public Schools—over 97% of them Black—and enroll them in a brand-new public school district in which “the power and responsibility would be focused on the parents, children, and educators within the district.”<sup>64</sup> As the group’s manifesto announced, “ENOUGH IS ENOUGH!! This MADNESS must stop!!”<sup>65</sup>

Debate exploded over the sheer audacity and imagination of the proposal. Over three decades after the hard-fought victory of 1954’s *Brown v. Board of Education*, Black parents and educators were now arguing that Black students would be best served in what amounted to a fully segregated school district, funded largely by government money. Camps of support and opposition to this proposal were not clearly drawn along racial lines. Neighboring majority-Black high schools in central Milwaukee stood staunchly on opposite sides of the debate, as did the city’s two Black newspapers.<sup>66</sup> And many white suburbanites were just as split. For a brief moment, Black nationalists and conservative white evangelicals stood side by side.<sup>67</sup> In the depths of the culture wars, the proposal temporarily suspended inherited political categories—or, rather, the inherited political categories could not adequately capture the ideas at this intersection of race and education.

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<sup>64</sup> “A Manifesto for New Directions in the Education of Black Children in the City of Milwaukee.” Reprinted in Derrick Bell, “The Case for a Separate Black School System.” *The Urban League Review* vol. 11, no. 1, Winter 1987-1988: 144.

<sup>65</sup> “A Manifesto...” 142.

<sup>66</sup> Jack Dougherty, *More Than One Struggle: The Evolution of Black School Reform in Milwaukee*. University of North Carolina Press, 2004: 178-184; Barbara Miner, *Lessons from the Heartland: A Turbulent Half-Century of Public Education in an Iconic American City*. New York: The New Press, 2013: 136.

<sup>67</sup> Miner 134-137

Relatively lost among these debates was an important historical fact: independent Black schools never went away after *Brown*. The 1987 Manifesto, radical and strange as it seemed to Milwaukeeans at the time, was deeply situated within a longer history of community-governed independent Black education, which included a thoroughgoing critique of mainstream public schooling.

In this section, I give a brief history of Black independent schooling before homing in on one particular vein of this tradition: Afrocentric education. I explicate the Afrocentric idea of culture as an expansive category that holds together ideas of race, religion, and political liberation. I then explore how Afrocentric scholars use the idea of culture to critique public schooling as a site of racial encounter and racial consciousness. Then, moving to the work of Rushdoony, Holt, and Illich, I find that despite an overall blindness to questions of race, anxieties and uncertainties around race become visible through the use of slavery and bondage as recurring metaphors. I close by suggesting that, in the thoroughgoing critiques of schooling and society that I read here, racialized language operates alongside religious critique as a way of elevating the stakes of the authors' attack on the American nation-state's exercise of power through public schooling.

### *Introduction to Independent Black Schooling*

During legalized segregation under Jim Crow, Black educators—most notably Carter G. Woodson—asked how schooling could work towards Black liberation within white supremacist American society.<sup>68</sup> This became an urgent question in the aftermath of de jure segregation. Despite the unmissable fact of material inequities between Black schools and white schools

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<sup>68</sup> See Givens, especially 93-158.

under Jim Crow, scholars have also noted that segregated schools offered unique opportunities for Black communities to build resilience, political consciousness, mutual support networks, and rigorous educational offerings.<sup>69</sup> While the push for integration represented in many ways a legal and moral triumph, it also required certain sacrifices. In a wide-ranging review of Afrocentric challenges to desegregation efforts, legal scholar Drake D. Hill writes that “when African Americans began to separate from their own cultural traditions and assimilate into the dominant culture, they lost a degree of cultural identity and unity.”<sup>70</sup> What was the best way to ensure Black students’ success in majority-white institutions rife with racial animosity? One response was to challenge the terms of this question itself, rejecting desegregation as the primary goal.

Though independent Black schools never educated a numerically large number of children in the United States, they nevertheless carried (and continue to carry) significant ideological weight. Historian Russell Rickford has described this as “the tenacious belief that African Americans must be educated to recognize and develop the subordinate nation to which they belong by right of birth.”<sup>71</sup>

The most immediate predecessors of Afrocentric schooling were the Pan African nationalist schools of the late 1960s and 1970s.<sup>72</sup> Advocates of Pan African nationalism imagined a unified African identity for all Black people worldwide. This identity would then form the basis of a global diasporic nation with its own separatist institutions. These institutions would result from and continue to develop a high-level structural critique of white supremacist

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<sup>69</sup> See for instance Walker, *Their Highest Potential*; Van Dempsey and George Noblit, “Cultural Ignorance and School Desegregation: A Community Narrative.”

<sup>70</sup> Drake D. Hill, “Afrocentric Movements in Education: Examining Equity, Culture, and Power relations in the Public Schools.” *Hastings Constitutional Law Quarterly* vol. 20, no. 3, Spring 1993: 682.

<sup>71</sup> Rickford 4. “Subordinate nation” here refers to a nation of Black people kept in an oppressed (subordinate) position by the dominant white majority. Some Pan African nationalist schools were based on the “cadre model,” in which a small group of properly-educated youth would be at the forefront of the political and cultural movement that would eventually overthrow the existing order. See also Rickford 132-133.

<sup>72</sup> Rickford 2-3.

capitalism. For some strains of Pan African Nationalism, this critique was driven by Marxist theories of political economy and direct-action revolution. Other strains privileged supposedly traditional African cultural formations and values, such as speaking Swahili, adopting African-sounding names, dressing in dashikis, and celebrating an ideal of African communalism.<sup>73</sup>

Yet Pan-African Nationalism had fundamental instabilities—including an unresolved tension between Marxist and non-Marxist commitments, a deeply patriarchal vision of society, and an overly romanticized idealization of the African continent—that led to its fracturing and decline in the mid-1970s and into the 1980s.<sup>74</sup> At that time, Afrocentric education began to replace Pan-African Nationalism as the predominant theory of independent Black schooling. This model moved away from a critique of political economy and towards a culture-driven approach that emphasized elements of African language, cosmology, and epistemology.<sup>75</sup> Critics of the movement alleged that this process of personal identification with Africa represented a “[turn] inward, embracing a conservative politics of identity” in which “the critiques of political economy that had expanded the vision of Pan African nationalism dwindled.”<sup>76</sup> That is, Afrocentrism was concerned more with individual transformation, the construction of a culturally-informed identity, and the merger of African values with capitalist institutions.<sup>77</sup>

In opposition to this criticism, scholarly advocates of Afrocentrism emphasize that Afrocentrism’s cultural focus provides a capacious understanding of politics that intervenes simultaneously on political, ontological, and epistemological levels. Despite its detractors,

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<sup>73</sup> See Rickford 100-167. Many elements of this later trend became part of the capacious Afrocentric project by the mid to late 1980s.

<sup>74</sup> See Rickford 219-252 for a detailed account of this process. Rickford also identifies Karenga’s *Kawaida Theory* as falling into several of these traps while also focusing on culture over politics (124-125).

<sup>75</sup> Molefi Kete Asante, “The Afrocentric Idea in Education” *Journal of Negro Education* vol. 60 no. 2, Spring 1991: 170-180; Kmt G. Shockley, “Literatures and Definitions: Toward Understanding Africentric Education.” *The Journal of Negro Education* vol. 76, no. 2, Spring 2007: 103-117.

<sup>76</sup> Rickford 249.

<sup>77</sup> Rickford 256-258.

Afrocentrism saw itself as the direct descendent of the original independent Black institution movement. The Council of Independent Black Institutions (CIBI) was founded in 1972, with the purpose of “be[ing] the political vehicle through which a qualitatively different people is produced.”<sup>78</sup> According to Afrocentric education theorist Mwalimu J. Shujaa, this organization marked a major historical shift in African American education because it represented the first “clearly organized resistance against the European-centered cultural hegemony and intellectual control that shrouded school desegregation.”<sup>79</sup> Additionally, it provided an intellectual and pragmatic impetus for Black educators, students, and schools to “deconstruct European views of the world while reclaiming, recovering, and reconstructing an African worldview, and, most important, to codify this process in their curricula.”<sup>80</sup> Afrocentric education ultimately seeks to enact a cultural and psychological shift that frees Black parents and students from an investment in white-defined achievement, allowing them to create independent schooling options that better match Black educational goals.<sup>81</sup> The Afrocentric idea of culture connects the realities of racial power to more abstract questions of truth and being, providing a flexible framework for theorizing how Eurocentric epistemology is weaponized against Black life through public education.

### *Afrocentric Culture, Race, and Critiques of Public Schooling*

As noted in Section I, Afrocentric culture holds together several different kinds of formations: everything from language and dress to religion to political economy to the very

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<sup>78</sup> CIBI Statement of Purpose (1972), quoted in Shujaa and Afrik 259

<sup>79</sup> Shujaa and Afrik 260.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Mwalimu J. Shujaa, “Afrocentric Transformation and Parental Choice in African American Independent Schools.” *Journal of Negro Education* vol 61 no. 2, spring 1992: 148-159; Mwalimu J. Shujaa, “Education and Schooling: You Can Have One Without the Other.” *The Afrocentric Paradigm*. Ed., Ama Mazama. Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2003: 245-264.

myths, narratives, and symbols that constitute a people's peoplehood. In the Afrocentric critique of public schools, culture becomes the container that unstably holds together ideas of religion, race, and freedom.

As we have seen, Afrocentrism's critique of public schooling explicitly attacks the public schools as an exercise of state power:

The schooling process is designed to provide an ample supply of people who are loyal to the nation-state and who have learned the skills needed to perform the work that is necessary to maintain the dominance of the Euro-American elite in its social order.<sup>82</sup>

Shujaa here explicitly ties the exercise of state power to its racialized assumptions. It is a way, in Rushdoonian terms, of challenging the state's presuppositions—its assumptions of Euro-American dominance. In the first section, we explored challenges to how public education uses the secular to code itself as neutral. The Afrocentric critique highlights the extent to which this weaponization of secularism is also bound up with whiteness. As Molefi Kete Asante writes, “almost all the experiences discussed in American classrooms are approached from the standpoint of White perspectives and history.”<sup>83</sup> This in itself is not a new claim. As noted above, Carter G. Woodson was making this observation and working vigorously against it in the first half of the twentieth century. But starting with this basic attack on the non-neutrality of Eurocentric state education allows Afrocentrists to theorize a complex relationship among race, nation, culture, and schooling.

Each of these ideas bleeds into and supports the other in the Afrocentrist critique: “Our positioning relative to the European-American elite demands that we develop the infrastructure within our cultural nation to support the education of all of our people with or without holding

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<sup>82</sup> Shujaa, *Too Much Schooling Too Little Education: A Paradox of Black Life in White Societies*. Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1994: 10

<sup>83</sup> Asante, “The Afrocentric Idea in Education” 171.

state power.”<sup>84</sup> “Cultural nation” is a curious construction that does several things at once. First, it foregrounds the connection between the cultural and the political. Over against accusations that Afrocentrism ignores real-world political challenges, this construction aligns the Afrocentric idea of culture with the politically-driven Pan African nationalist idea of a global African nation.

Race is not foregrounded here. Rather, it is a supplementary aspect of the larger concerns of culture and nation. Like race, the spiritual is also embedded in both of these terms. As we saw in Section I, a diffuse spirituality is also an integral part of Afrocentric life, education, culture, and nation. Both race and religion always circle back around and point at the central idea of culture.

This construction risks burying the reality of racial violence beneath a veneer of cultural identity. This tendency is reinforced through phrases that read as problematically anodyne to a twenty-first century academic eye.<sup>85</sup> Yet it is important to see the ontological stakes of the Afrocentric critique, not reduce it to mere neoliberal multiculturalism.<sup>86</sup> Afrocentrism confronts questions of race and domination from a fundamentally ontological and epistemological perspective. As a mass movement, this is almost inevitably destined for a kind of class elitism. But in mobilizing a critique of racism through an assertion of cultural nationhood, Afrocentrism binds closely together notions of race and religion. The two become compressed (alongside all kinds of other formations) within a broad notion of culture as a political tool.

This complex of ideas is uniquely suited to addressing the scope and scale of public education. Public education is a site where nationalism, state power, and civic responsibility are

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<sup>84</sup> Shujaa, *Too Much Schooling* 11. I address the “with or without holding state power” part of this quote in Section III.

<sup>85</sup> The language of Afrocentric arguments are part of what makes them repugnant to modern sensibilities. To take one example, “The world view we speak of can only be transmitted through a process of education strategically guided by an African-American cultural orientation and an understanding of how societal power relations are maintained” (Shujaa, *Too Much Schooling* 16). “World view,” “strategically guided,” “cultural orientation,” and “societal power relations” all reek slightly of neoliberalism from the 2023 vantage point.

<sup>86</sup> Geoffrey Jahwara Giddings, “Infusion of Afrocentric Content into the School Curriculum.” *Journal of Black Studies* vol. 31 no. 4, March 2001: 466.



insistently religiously coded and racialized. Whiteness reduplicates itself through the idea of the secular. Afrocentric education contests the ontological erasure of Blackness on both racial and religious fronts: a spiritual essence of African culture, broadly defined, makes Blackness visible and viable through educational spaces that proclaim Black cultural nationhood within the white supremacist state. Afrocentrism proposes a system of education that inducts Black Americans into a new national religion, fundamentally separate from the hegemonic secularism of the Eurocentric public school.

If the Afrocentric idea of culture offers a total picture of Black ontology as simultaneously racial, national, and spiritual, it also offers a pragmatic form of resistance to the failures of post-*Brown* desegregation efforts that maintains both the ontological and the practical firmly in view. These pragmatics are visible in the founding of CIBI in 1972, which “look[ed] theoretically and practically at a strategy for quality African American education and schooling that differs from school desegregation and its ideological assumptions.”<sup>87</sup> In the CIBI model, the assumption is not that Black children will be best served by white institutions but by Black institutions that can provide for the generational transmission of African culture apart from the instruments of dominant state power.

This critique of desegregation partially overlaps with Critical Race Theory writing from around the same period, particularly the work of Derrick Bell.<sup>88</sup> While Bell’s legalistic frame

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<sup>87</sup> Shujaa and Afrik 265

<sup>88</sup> See Derrick Bell, “Serving Two Masters: Integration Ideals and Client Interests in School Desegregation Litigation.” *Critical Race Theory: The Key Writings that Formed the Movement*. Ed., Kimberlé Crenshaw, Neil Gotanda, Gary Peller, and Kendall Thomas. New York: The New Press, 1999: 5-19 for a discussion of the competing claims of community members and national civil rights organizations. “*Brown v. Board of Education* and the Interest Convergence Dilemma” discusses how civil rights advances tend to happen only when they converge with dominant interests—in effect, civil rights achievements (including desegregation) tend to reify rather than challenge the fundamental legal regime of which they are a part.

astutely discusses the complex competing interests at play—and their available legal recourses—the Afrocentric model undertakes a multi-pronged assessment that connects logistics to biopolitics to spirituality. The creation of Independent Black Institutions asserts an ontological independence of spiritual-but-humanist Blackness from secular-but-religious Eurocentric white supremacy, but it also removes physical bodies from the coercive mechanisms of desegregation.<sup>89</sup> Through developing physical institutions, Afrocentrism not only theorizes alternatives to desegregation but also contests the biopolitical system of forced busing.

The conceptual apparatus of culture in Afrocentrism slides easily from the ontological to the pragmatic.<sup>90</sup> This relationship mobilizes a deep-seated structural critique of the racist paternalism of whiteness—as well as its biopolitical exercise of power—as experienced in single-minded desegregation efforts. Afrocentric culture names this exercise of power as emerging out of a simultaneously racial and religious epistemology that pathologizes Black communities. This claim includes a strong material and pragmatic component: if you put resources in the hands of the Black community, they will build successful institutions. But it is also a kind of ontological claim about Blackness: a claim for Black life as valued, vibrant, powerful, and capable of building national and cultural self-sufficiency through independent institutions.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> I want to note here that Afrocentric education does not seek to just invert the hierarchy and place Africa on top. Rather, Afrocentric scholars argue that African epistemologies are uniquely capable of fostering cooperation and equity in pluralism. So while the focus is obviously on Black—and specifically African American—experiences, the theoretical model tries to point to a wider, pluralistic world. See Asante, *Kemet, Afrocentricity and Knowledge* v.

<sup>90</sup> On this point, see Shujaa, *Too Much Schooling* 18. Three of the nodes in this chart lead to choices that reify the existing system. Only by carefully making all four choices correctly will Black communities see the need to build new institutions that build new expectations that lead to a new social order.

<sup>91</sup> One limitation of Afrocentric thought comes out fairly clearly in this discussion, which is its focus on Black community uplift over forcing white supremacist society to reckon with itself. This is a fundamentally separatist instinct inherited from the Pan African nationalist movement. An ungenerous reading of this can easily map it onto neoliberal ideals of bootstrap culture and marketplace-driven racial uplift. A generous reading, however, treats this separatist instinct as a kind of proto-Afropessimism where the totality of antiblack violence (i.e., Eurocentrism) is so overwhelming that there is nothing to be gained from direct assault on the system.

*Slavery as metaphor*

If Afrocentrism's racial critique is inseparable from its critique of the secularism of public schooling, how are the racial stakes of schooling dealt with in the Reconstructionist and un/deschooling critiques? Holt, Illich, and Rushdoony all wrote about US public schools during a period of massive public debate around the relationship between race and education, but race remains largely suppressed in their critiques of public schooling. Nevertheless, all three also have recourse to racialized metaphors, particularly those of slavery or bondage, that offer a glimpse or trace of the barely-concealed racial logics that structure their thinking. In this section, I argue that these metaphors haunt these writers' critiques as an attempt to elevate the stakes of their arguments. In Holt's and Illich's case, these metaphors make painfully clear their investment in a liberal colorblind ideology. For Rushdoony, on the other hand, they highlight the extent to which much of his thinking is inflected around an active suppression of histories of racial domination.

Rushdoony writes that "the most basic slavery is sin."<sup>92</sup> From this basic premise, he elaborates extensively on a system of literal (to him) slavery enacted by public schooling. This form of slavery has nothing to do with racial chattel slavery. Instead, the modern form of slavery emerges from the statist control of the free market that emerged in the aftermath of the Civil War: "From a very limited system of privately owned slaves, the entire United States has, from the Civil war era on, gone into debt-money slavery to the 'Money Trust,' so that the fact that its very monetary wealth is debt-money is itself a sign of bondage."<sup>93</sup> This is more than a form of

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<sup>92</sup> Rushdoony, *Roots of Reconstruction* 422.

<sup>93</sup> Rushdoony, *The Nature of the American System* 52.

colorblindness or ignorance of race but reads rather as an intentional obfuscation of the horrors of plantation slavery.

He doubles down on this in a position paper on slavery, which begins with the expansive claim that “Europe has seen over the centuries the most sustained enslavement and also the systematic harvesting by slavers...It has also seen the greatest freedom. Europe has moved from a casual acceptance of slavery to a world-wide war against it.”<sup>94</sup> He goes on to argue that “the reason for this has been [Europe’s] Christianization.”<sup>95</sup> He collapses the plantation slave economy (sustained chattel enslavement) into older Roman, Islamic, and Viking forms (systematic harvesting by slavers, prisoners of war, etc.). At the same time, he ties the Christianization of Europe to the demise of slavery, ignoring the fact that the birth of Protestantism (i.e., true Christianity in Rushdoony’s mind) coincided almost exactly with the beginning of the transatlantic slave trade (1510-1530). To further complicate this periodization, he claims two paragraphs later that “the world today is moving rapidly into slavery.”<sup>96</sup> If we take “today” to mean a modernity that includes the dominance of the humanist state, then this period, as we have just seen, began with the debt-money system implemented during and after the Civil War. That is, modern slavery began just after the end of de jure racial chattel slavery in the United States. For Rushdoony, then, a regime called “slavery” exists only during the periods that are not defined by the middle passage, plantation economy, and chattel enslavement of Black people. As he notes, “The Civil War was a triumph for the religion of humanity,” meaning the humanistic regime.<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> Rushdoony, *Roots of Reconstruction* 422

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> Rushdoony, *The Nature of the American System* 89.

Rushdoony's understanding of slavery exists in a nearly perfect inverse relationship with the historical reality of racial slavery. Slavery, for him, did not exist when a more orthodox Protestantism was dominant in the Anglophone world, and it began to exist again once Protestantism began to decouple from the state. His chronology is haunted by racial slavery. It inhabits the ghost of Rushdoony's reactionary account of ascendant Protestantism. They overlap precisely in his historical accounting—to the point where it is not difficult to read Rushdoony's understanding of "slavery" as any condition with less-than-perfect white supremacist domination of nonwhite populations.

In his attack on humanism—which lies at the heart of his critique of public schooling—Rushdoony remaps the history of racial chattel slavery onto his vision of an ascendant Protestantism. In his account, humanism is “the source of the greatest actual and potential slavery history has yet known. By its agnostic secularism, it has become the fountainhead of tyranny.”<sup>98</sup> This erasure of the violence of racial slavery is clearly both repugnant and abhorrent. And yet this reading raises some interesting implications for the limits of efforts to critique the secular. First, though it seems like he actively wants to obscure histories of racial violence, he inadvertently ends up irrevocably coupling racial domination with religious domination. The two terms cannot be separated from one another in Rushdoony's accounting. This leads him to a self-imposed blindness in which he accuses the secular state of enslaving, which precludes an active system of racial domination. He wants to leverage the greatest possible critique of the contemporary secular state while also ignoring a primary exertion of state power in the US: racial domination. His use of enslavement metaphors alongside his denial of racial domination leads him to contour his historical argument around the ghost of chattel slavery. Despite his

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<sup>98</sup> Rushdoony, *Intellectual Schizophrenia* 112

absolute reluctance to explicitly engage with racial domination, Rushdoony cannot escape the imbrication of race and religion in his critique of modernity.

Where Rushdoony pushes his presuppositional logic into abhorrent historical revisionism, the un/deschooling movement reduplicates a conception of liberal racial utopia. Holt, in particular, yearns for a world in which identity categories do not stand in the way of individual freedom:

The best and only really good place for do-ers would be a society that does not yet exist. In that society all people, of whatever age, sex, race, etc., could have work to do which was varied and interesting, which challenged and rewarded their skill and intelligence, which they could do well and take pride in doing well, over which they could exercise some control, and whose ends and purposes they could understand and respect.<sup>99</sup>

Each item in this list takes as its reference point the individual subject—free to choose and act unfettered in a society that places no restrictions on their individual “do-ing.” But even as Holt pushes his critique of public schooling to some very strange limits, he replicates a liberal colorblind logic that became the legal norm post-*Brown*. In this account, race is treated as a fixed and stable biological category that must be ignored or overcome in order to allow the full individual expression within. In a Critical Race Theory articulation, this definition of race “recogniz[es] that biological definitions of race lead to racism; acknowledging only a unitary definition of race, it then concludes that recognizing race leads to racism.”<sup>100</sup> That is, the failure to recognize that race is a distinctive category through which power is exercised—a “master

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<sup>99</sup> Holt, *Instead of Education* 6.

<sup>100</sup> Jayne Chong-Soon Lee, “Navigating the Topology of Race.” *Critical Race Theory: The Key Writings that Formed the Movement*. Ed., Kimberlé Crenshaw, Neil Gotanda, Gary Peller, and Kendall Thomas. New York: The New Press, 1999: 445.

category” in Michael Omi and Howard Winant’s classic construction—ensures that racial power will get reduplicated through white supremacist categories that are coded as neutral.<sup>101</sup>

Though Holt and Illich each recognize that certain people are disadvantaged by the contemporary regime, they fall short of naming race as a vector of power independent of other socioeconomic factors. In fact, they often collapse the racial category into the concept of poverty as such.<sup>102</sup> Despite this, they frequently fall back on metaphors of enslavement to describe the condition in which people—all people—are held by the logic of schooling.

Illich, for instance, writes that “school enslaves more profoundly [than other institutions] and more systematically, since only school is credited with the principal function of forming critical judgment, and, paradoxically, tries to do so by making learning about oneself, about others, and about nature depend on a prepackaged process. School touches us so intimately that none of us can expect to be liberated from it by something else.”<sup>103</sup> Here, the enslavement he discusses is the totalizing enslavement of the technocratic order: a system that prepackages life in a way that radically circumscribes individual freedom. By reaching for the metaphor of slavery, Illich leaves minimal space to differentiate among different racial forms of domination. Slavery, in this mode, is a single act of domination perpetuated on modern subjects by the very system of bureaucracy.

Holt is focused much more on the institution of the school and the rights of the child (as opposed to a society-wide critique). His commitment to children’s rights has an ambivalent relationship to antiracist efforts. He relates an anecdote in which a Black woman asks why he

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<sup>101</sup> Michael Omi and Howard Winant. *Racial Formation in the United States*. 3<sup>rd</sup> edition. London: Routledge, 2015: 106-109.

<sup>102</sup> See Illich, *Deschooling Society* 4, for instance, where Illich begins by identifying “the black and even the migrant” as the (semi-willing) recipient of professional services designed to combat poverty. He critiques this form of care, then immediately generalizes into “The poor in the United States.” There is an elision here of race as an independently-viable category of analysis.

<sup>103</sup> Illich, *Deschooling Society* 47.

doesn't focus on other oppressed groups besides children. Holt characterizes her question as inquiring specifically about "the problems of black people in America (and perhaps elsewhere)."<sup>104</sup> Holt's answer is curiously evasive and anodyne all at once. He doesn't advocate for the political primacy of children's rights but centers himself and his own experiences in the reasons he gives. He acts and thinks as a subject in a colorblind liberal utopia.

Tellingly, metaphors of slavery do not only function negatively—as a way of describing the desperation of the current condition—but also positively—in articulating a project for overturning that order. In *Instead of Education*, Holt proposes the astonishing idea of "a new Underground Railroad, to help children escape from S-schools."<sup>105</sup> The Children's Underground Railroad collapses the idea of racial chattel slavery directly into the abolition of the school, figuring children as enslaved and the school as the enslaver. Rather than using this construction as a way to meaningfully engage with the history of slavery and racial domination, Holt instead mobilizes this idea as a stakes-raising metaphor, suggesting any system of individuals working together towards a liberatory cause. He appropriates the scale of the slavery abolition movement while vacating it of its racial content, affirming a colorblind approach to modern rights and freedoms. Far from a real-world relation of power, race and racism become wells of metaphor that help elevate the rhetorical stakes of his critique. The movement he proposes—in which children are given a chance to grow up, learn, and take ownership of their lives outside of schools—would become its own rhetorically equal emancipation project.

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<sup>104</sup> John Holt, *Escape from Childhood* New York: EP Dutton & Co., 1974: 20. Her question, as related by Holt, is "Why not take first things first?" Notably, he leaves aside the possibility that she was inquiring about sexism or about sexism against Black women specifically. C.f. Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics." *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 1989, Iss. 1, Article 8: 139-167.

<sup>105</sup> Holt, *Instead of Education* 218. More on the term "S-schools" in Section III.



Incredibly, this rhetorical equivalence of slavery and schooling was perhaps the most successful and influential of all of Holt's ideas. His offhand mention of the Children's Underground Railroad in *Instead of Education* prompted a few homeschooling families to reach out to him after its publication in 1976. He saw in this unorganized niche subculture the opportunity to further his larger children's emancipation project and began organizing and networking among them. Just one year later, he launched his magazine, *Growing Without Schooling*, which provided the first centralized instrument for homeschoolers to share stories and suggestions, meaningfully building the movement's coherence and self-consciousness.<sup>106</sup>

Afrocentric writers are, understandably, much more sparing with the language of slavery and bondage, though Haki Madhubuti can still write of "a growing number of people with enslaved minds enclosed in short-circuited memories."<sup>107</sup> Beyond a reluctance to metaphorize traumatic histories of violence and suffering, Afrocentric writers simply do not need to have recourse to those metaphors to elevate the rhetorical stakes of their critique. The expansive idea of Afrocentric culture already does the important work of mobilizing racial critiques alongside the religious critiques of secular state education.

In contrast, race remains largely an occluded idea at the center of Rushdoony's, Illich's, and Holt's work, visible mainly by the trace of its erasure. By actively suppressing the racial term—or refusing to grapple with it—Holt, Illich, and Rushdoony in fact reduplicate the racial logic of public schooling against their intentions. Rushdoony's obfuscation of the racial term also takes place under the guise of his investment in free-market capitalism. He elides the racial

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<sup>106</sup> Gaither 139-140.

<sup>107</sup> Haji R. Madhubuti, "Cultural Work: Planting New Trees with New Seeds." *Too Much Schooling Too Little Education: A Paradox of Black Life in White Societies*. Ed., Mwalimu J. Shujaa. Trenton, NJ: African World Press, 1994: 2

slavery with economic slavery: this metaphor is essential for his understanding of the conditions of life under humanist statism, but he wants to resurrect capitalist economic systems while disavowing humanist epistemological claims.

For Holt and Illich, on the other hand, it is their investment in the idea of liberal freedom and human rights that obfuscates their ability to see the specific differential effects of race and racism on experiences of schooling. By advocating for the elimination of barriers to exercising underlying universal rights, they fail to recognize that the state power is expressed differentially against different people—and, in fact, is always driven by both racial and religious logics.

Even amid these failures however, racialized language continues to peek through. Like Illich's religious metaphors addressed in Section I, racial language becomes reduced to a rhetorical strategy for theorizing the limits of secular state power exercised through public schooling. As long as race remains relegated to the level of metaphor, there exists a hard limit the radicality of Rushdoony's, Holt's, and Illich's critiques. For, taking the Afrocentric model as a starting point, we can see how expressions of racial domination cannot be fully separated from exercises of secular power. In attempting to raise the stakes of their critiques, these thinkers have recourse to metaphors of racial domination but cannot circumvent the imaginative limitations of whiteness to fully engage with their implications.

### **III: Schooling, Rights, and Freedom**

In *Instead of Education*, John Holt distinguishes between two types of institutions: S-schools and s-schools. Nearly every institution we would ordinarily consider a “school” would qualify as a S-school in Holt’s estimation. These are “schools for educators, which get and hold their students by the threat of jail or uselessness or poverty.”<sup>108</sup> By contrast, s-schools “help people explore the world as they choose.”<sup>109</sup> These are entirely voluntary organizations where each learner—of any age—has a chance to pursue their own interests and curiosities without any threat of coercion or penalty.

Over the course of the text, we get discussions of many different schools, educational organizations, learning exchanges, and so forth. Two stand out.

In a chapter entitled “One of the best S-schools,” Holt discusses a “little school” in Denmark called Ny Lilleskole. This school has no curriculum, no tracking, no testing, no grades. Attendance is taken, but there is no concern and no punishment when students are absent. The school provides a number of resources to students and lets them freely choose among them. Children’s labor is not harnessed towards arbitrary outputs that supposedly prove to parents how much they have learned. All this, according to Holt, has an almost magical palliative effect on children by allowing them to express themselves and explore their interests without fear of repercussion. Simply, “this school is a human community,” but, according to Holt, it is still a S-school.<sup>110</sup> Though it is not a public school, it receives some government funding and is beholden to certain licensing requirements.<sup>111</sup> But more importantly, despite all its freedoms, it still sits in

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<sup>108</sup> Holt, *Instead of Education* 19.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

<sup>110</sup> Holt, *Instead of Education* 130.

<sup>111</sup> Holt is keen to praise the Danish government for this law that allows parents to set up an independent school that operates more or less however they choose, but also emphasizes that this type of school is extremely rare in Denmark and effectively unthinkable in the United States or United Kingdom because of deeply-entrenched laws and attitudes around schools.

the social space vacated by conventional schooling, recreating the logic of schooling as an activity that children need.

By contrast, in his discussion of Ivan Illich's language school in Cuernavaca, Mexico (CIDOC), Holt emphasizes that it is "very demanding, intensive, formal, and tightly organized....Students must attend all classes. A student who misses even one or two must persuade the director to allow him to continue in the school."<sup>112</sup> This seems as far as possible from the Ny Lilleskole model of total freedom, and yet CIDOC qualifies for Holt as a s-school. Why? Because it consists of people wishing to learn a skill voluntarily entering into an agreement with people willing to teach that skill. There is no compulsion, no ranking, no grades—no outcomes beyond the simple fact of learning to speak Spanish quickly and efficiently. When students enter into this voluntary contract, they agree to be held accountable to this extremely strict set of standards. And perhaps most importantly, there is no pretense that the instructors can exercise authority over the students beyond the immediate task of training them to speak Spanish correctly. These instructors are, in Holt's parlance, t-teachers, not T-teachers.

According to Illich's academic biographer, a kind of political confusion haunted the intellectual atmosphere at CIDOC. Some students, expecting a hub of radical politics, were disappointed in the institution's failure to directly engage with the structurally-embedded poverty and systematic government repression in its own backyard. Others, seeking inspiration for their school reform efforts, were confounded to find an organization that was clearly a school itself contesting the very existence of schools. One student found it "'funny, perhaps pathetic,' that CIDOC provoked the same feelings traditional schools did."<sup>113</sup> Some complained about a preponderance of rules, though according to one student, the organization only had three formal

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<sup>112</sup> Holt, *Instead of Education* 21-22.

<sup>113</sup> Hartch 119, quoting English teacher Jack Fields.

rules.<sup>114</sup> As a school and as a political activity, CIDOC remained largely illegible within an American political binary, consistently confounding the expectations of its visiting students. How could this school that looked and acted so much like a school propose the abolition not only of all schools but of all schooled logic in society? What ideas underwrote the vision of education attempted at CIDOC?

In this section, I approach these questions by examining the nature, extent, and limitations of Illich's and Holt's ideas about freedom. I begin by arguing that Illich and Holt mobilize a readily recognizable liberal understanding of freedom in ways that end up pushing liberal logics to their breaking point. Writing at the limits of liberalism, the un/deschooling critique casts into sharp relief the problem of ultimate political authority that has historically accompanied the secular exercise of liberal state power. Then, I discuss the ways that Christian Reconstruction and Afrocentrism each attempt to offer a very different understanding of freedom that evades this problem of political authority. I focus particularly on how the idea of humanism appears as foil and objective in each of these authors' discussion of sovereignty, law, and justice. Together, our three critiques sketch out a suite of possible relationships among the discourses of freedom, rights, secularism, and state power.

### *Un/deschooling and freedom*

Freedom for Holt and Illich is freedom of the individual from unwanted coercion. For both, an individual is free when they can exercise equal choice to others in a field unencumbered

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<sup>114</sup> "1. Those who come to conduct a seminar ought not collect money from the participants before at least two hours' exposure to the contents of the seminar and the methods of inquiry to be used; 2. Participants out gather without the prior intent of engaging in subversive activity, although if this is a consequence of a seminar, Illich doesn't find fault with it; 3. Participants are asked not to engage in 'behavior which the gardeners consider lewd' or that would be disruptive of others' inquiry." (Hartch 120).

by restrictions—mutually self-interested actors, essentially.<sup>115</sup> For both (though, as we will see, in slightly different ways), the modern state limits this freedom by mandating by law a bureaucratized and coercive ordering of human life. The school is the primary institution that upholds this social order.

As I discussed in Section I, Illich’s critique of schooling proceeds from the premise that the school “inevitably polarizes a society” by sorting people into semi-permanent “castes” that correspond to degrees of wealth and poverty.<sup>116</sup> Those of higher status have access to more credentials (that is, certificates and degrees), which then reinforce that status. Those who are denied the credentials are also denied the status. The dominant function of schooling, according to Illich, is to entrench and systematize this social and economic gap between rich and poor, privileged and dispossessed. Additionally, just as it sorts people within a society, this logic of schooling also sorts the nations of the world into hierarchical tiers of success.<sup>117</sup>

The institution of the school is the principal enforcer of this broader social logic. It exercises power perniciously and effectively through the system of mandatory attendance, enforced by the threat of state power (fines, imprisonment, separation of children from parents).<sup>118</sup> The state coerces people into the institution of the school as a way of indoctrinating them into the technocratic world and upholding the polarization of society.

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<sup>115</sup> For a discussion of the idea of “mutually self-interested,” see John Rawls, “Justice as Fairness.” *The Philosophical Review* vol. 67 no. 2, April 1958: 169-174. In this section, I somewhat oversimplify the liberal understanding of freedom. But I mean this mostly as a placeholder for the dominant definition of freedom in a US context rather than as a technical description of liberal political theory.

<sup>116</sup> Illich, *Deschooling Society* 10.

<sup>117</sup> Illich, *Deschooling Society* 6-7.

<sup>118</sup> Though, notably, Illich explicitly says that “the risks of revolt against school are unforeseeable, but they are not as horrible as those of a revolution starting in any other major institution” (*Deschooling Society* 49).

Fundamentally, for Illich, this system restricts the exercise of individual liberty. As noted in section one, the state's exercise of power over the individual is figured as a form of religious power:

“The totally destructive and constantly progressive nature of obligatory instruction will fulfill its ultimate logic unless we begin to liberate ourselves right now from our pedagogical hubris, our belief that man can do what God cannot, namely, manipulate others for their own salvation”<sup>119</sup>

Through obligatory public education, the state claims for itself a power greater than that of God. The logic of the state equates socioeconomic mobility with salvation—resurrection from an oppressed tier of society into a privileged one—and promises this salvation through schooling. However, the state that promises liberation from this order also engineers this order through bureaucratic institutions, and especially the school. The state, with its monopoly on legitimate violence, is both enforcer of the problem and guarantor of this promise. It promises that the school will free the student from want, indignity, and shame while simultaneously constructing the very conditions of inequity through that same institution.

Over and against this, Illich's goal is to “create institutions which serve personal, creative, and autonomous interaction and the emergence of values which cannot be substantially controlled by technocrats.”<sup>120</sup> The only response to the coercive power of state institutions is to build institutions that foster individual autonomy. But what are the terms of this freedom? And what sorts of institutions might enable it?

In the first case, freedom for Illich is exactly coterminous with “the disestablishment of the school in the broadest sense and the collective guarantee of freedom for education.”<sup>121</sup> This freedom has two sides: one negative (disestablishment) and one positive (guarantee). The

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<sup>119</sup> Illich, *Deschooling Society* 50.

<sup>120</sup> Illich, *Deschooling Society* 2.

<sup>121</sup> Illich, *After Deschooling, What?* London: Writers and Readers Publishing Cooperative, 1973: 47.

negative argument is structured through two guiding metaphors. The first is the capitalistic transmutation of knowledge into credentials: “By turning knowledge into a commodity, we have learned to deal with it as private property. The principle of private property is now used as the major rationale for declaring certain facts off limits to people without the proper pedigree.”<sup>122</sup> Schools make knowledge something that is only accessible to certain individuals—a form of private property whose ownership is hierarchically distributed according to the system of credentialing. Illich calls schools a “false public utility”—a bureaucratically-produced system that gives the illusion of open access while maintaining a strict hierarchy of users.<sup>123</sup> The privatization of knowledge, then, is irrevocably linked with the state’s exercise of power through the public school.

Intertwining with this capitalistic metaphor is a religious one. Recall that for Illich, the state’s exercise of power is fundamentally religious in its monolithic totality. The same process that turns knowledge into private property also transmutes knowledge into something *sacred*. Illich argues that “deschooling will be only a displacement of responsibility to other kinds of administration so long as teaching and learning remain sacred activities separate and estranged from fulfilling life” (48). Here, the sacred is figured as something that inhibits the free exercise of pursuing a fulfilling life. The sacred is “separate and estranged,” managed by a priestly class of educators and obfuscating the free expression of human life.

If the exercise of state power is religious and capitalistic—and schooled knowledge is sacred and commodified—then liberated knowledge and free life is secular and communal. For

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<sup>122</sup> Illich, *After Deschooling, What?* 50.

<sup>123</sup> See Illich, *Deschooling Society* 57-64. Another example of a false public utility is the highway system, which discriminates for one single kind of use (rapid transportation in private vehicles) that is unavailable to many people. Systems such as the postal system and telephone system, on the other hand, are much more economically accessible, and they do not regulate as radically the kinds of uses they are put to. A public good like a sidewalk or public park has, in theory, an even lower barrier to entry (though of course these spaces are differentially accessible in the US based on race, class, and other factors).



Illich, the terms of the positive guarantee of freedom fall naturally out of this negative restriction of it—“the construction of institutional arrangements that are the inverse of school.”<sup>124</sup> In direct contradistinction to the religious exertion of state coercion in upholding a bureaucratized hierarchy of secrets, he imagines a free and open marketplace of individuals exchanging knowledge, information, and ideas in an ecosystem of complete consent. Knowledge is sought for its own sake—or perhaps towards a specific personal end. But knowledge is never commodified into certificates that are prerequisites for opening certain doors. For Illich, “deschooling must be the secularization of teaching and learning.”<sup>125</sup> Again, an economy of religion and secularism here works as a kind of metonym for the exercise of state power and individual resistance to it. That is, if the state’s exercise of power is religious (i.e., monolithic and totalizing), then the individual’s exercise of autonomy is necessarily secular.

Illich’s argument is tightly bound by these metaphors, but unstably so. In some places, Illich seems to argue that education as an exercise of state power is not merely “religious” in its totalizing power but is also precisely that which sets the conditions of possibility for religion in modernity. In one such moment, Illich claims that “school is radically divisive in a similar way” to Durkheim’s model of the sacred and the profane:

The very existence of obligatory schools divides any society into two realms: some time spans and processes and treatments and professions are “academic” or “pedagogic,” and others are not. The power of school thus to divide social reality has no boundaries: education becomes unworldly and the world becomes noneducational.<sup>126</sup>

Here, the school itself (in its very existence) divides world into two spheres: the worldly and the otherworldly, the profane and the sacred. The sacred is aligned with what the state names as the

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<sup>124</sup> Illich, *After Deschooling, What?* 47.

<sup>125</sup> Illich, *After Deschooling, What?* 48.

<sup>126</sup> Illich, *Deschooling Society* 24. For Durkheim’s original formulation, see Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. Transl. Carol Cosman. Oxford University Press, 2001: 36-40.

highest good: education through obligatory public schooling. The profane, by contrast, is marked by the complete absence of the possibility of education. It is also the space where the possibility of freedom exists, freedom from obligatory attendance to the school. But a person cannot take advantage of that freedom without some means of bringing education into the world, of crossing the nearly-unbridgeable gulf between the sacred and the profane. For Illich, this is not only a crossing but a destruction of the sacred itself. The titular call is to *deschool* society. That is, freedom is only possible through the secularization of knowledge, the movement of education from the space of the sacred to the space of the profane. This secularization can only happen through the elimination of the school, which is the principal engine of sacredness in the world.

But in the Durkheimian formula, the sacred and the profane are both infinitely opposed to one another and infinitely imbricated in one another. Each owes its very existence to its opposition with the other: “The sacred thing is, par excellence, that which the profane must not and cannot touch with impunity.”<sup>127</sup> Illich’s understanding of freedom as the secularization of knowledge is, in fact, made possible by the existence of the school. The school is that which, by turning knowledge into a sacred commodity, also brings into existence the secular space in which Illich understands freedom. There is no “free from state power” without the existence of state power, no secular without the sacred. In seeking to abolish the sacred—by collapsing it unceremoniously into the profane through the secularization of knowledge—Illich in fact abolishes the very conditions by which his understanding of secular freedom can exist. As the state’s religious exercise of power through the school becomes less of a metaphor and more of an organizing principle of life, the idea of liberal freedom becomes vacated of its content and its

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<sup>127</sup> Durkheim 39.

grounding. Without an exercise of power to push against, it becomes abstracted away from any source of authority, just as the sacred cannot be named apart from its contrast with the profane.

Like Illich, Holt argues that individual freedom is constricted by the expression of state power through mandatory schooling. And like Illich, he also believes that this is part of a conscious and intentional exercise of state power: “S-schools are not failing. They are doing what most people want them to do, and doing it very well. They know their true social tasks, functions, purposes, and they are carrying them out.”<sup>128</sup> But he diverges from Illich in his reluctance to rely on religious metaphors. Freedom for him is enabled not by an appeal to secularization but by a straightforward rights discourse.

For Holt, the “do-er” names the class of person who has unrestricted freedom to pursue their interests to the maximum extent. By forcing students to learn a specific curriculum and meet the expectations of authority figures, schools restrict a do-er’s ability to do. As with Illich, this freedom is largely individualistic, characterized by a lack of restrictions on an individual’s ability to make choices that affect their life. It is this distinction that marks the difference between S-schools and s-schools that opened this section. S-schools have some mandatory or coercive element and are built for “educators” while s-schools are marked by free choice and are built for do-ers.<sup>129</sup>

For Holt, all people are naturally do-ers, and it is the state’s infringement on the rights of children through the act of schooling that turns them into people getting “educated.”<sup>130</sup> Like Illich, the coercive nature of the school backed up by state power is at the heart of this

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<sup>128</sup> Holt, *Instead of Education* 157.

<sup>129</sup> Holt, *Instead of Education* 18-19.

<sup>130</sup> Holt, *Instead of Education* 6-7.

infringement. As a solution, Holt advocates that “the rights, privileges, duties, responsibilities of adult citizens be made *available* to any young person, of whatever age, who wants to make use of them.”<sup>131</sup> These include the right to work, to privacy, to financial independence, to travel freely, to make and enter into contracts, to own property, and to choose their own parents and guardians, among others.<sup>132</sup> Each of these rights, Holt acknowledges, are “linked to and depend on other kinds of change, in law, custom, attitudes.”<sup>133</sup> Rights, then, don’t exist in a vacuum but rely on authoritative legal and cultural powers to normalize and enforce them.

In many ways, this proposal simply extends the liberal model of the gradual extension of rights. Holt acknowledges that societies that have not previously extended rights “to adult women or to members of racial or other minority groups” are not likely to countenance the extension of such rights to children.<sup>134</sup> Yet he invests in these specific rights the power to guarantee children’s—and, by extension, society’s—freedom from the unjust oppression of life-ordering institutions.

By focusing on a group frequently perceived as the most vulnerable—children—Holt tries to pose a more substantial challenge to society’s basic organization. He asks what a society would have to look like in order to make these rights safely available to children. What else would have to change? This would certainly require a substantial rethinking of the very fabric of civic society and political life.

Holt’s rights discourse, then, uses the category of liberal rights to try to imagine a world beyond the horizon of a strictly liberal political imagination. In doing so, the liberal categories he mobilizes begin to destabilize. What *would* have to change in the United States to make it so that

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<sup>131</sup> Holt, *Escape from Childhood* 18 (emphasis in original).

<sup>132</sup> See Holt, *Escape from Childhood* 18-19 for a full list.

<sup>133</sup> Holt, *Escape from Childhood* 19.

<sup>134</sup> Holt, *Escape from Childhood* 20.

children could safely enter into contracts and work? What forms of exploitation would have to be eliminated? What working conditions would have to change? While Illich critiques schooling as a logic that has permeated all of society, Holt critiques schooling as a violent and repressive solution to the societal question of how to treat children. Eliminating the school forces a reckoning with how liberal systems perpetuate injustice. By creating conditions where the most vulnerable citizens—children—can flourish freely in society, we will necessarily build more just ways of being and thinking together.

This is a radical line of questioning, but Holt’s ultimate investment in liberal rights discourse ultimately reifies the very state power that he seeks to undermine. As Lisa Cacho reminds us, rights as a legal construct always hinges on a reification of state power: “Complying with the ‘rule of law’ will always legitimate the state’s authority to create and enforce law; doing so, however, will not ensure that justice, empowerment, or equality will be the result.”<sup>135</sup> By framing the terms of children’s liberation around “rights” to apply to children, he demands that the state act on behalf of children whose rights are being violated.<sup>136</sup> But, according to his logic, this requires trust in the secular state’s ability to guarantee the freedom of all subjects—something that the logic of schooling specifically forecloses. Holt thus seems to want it both ways. Through a discourse of rights, he places his faith in the very state that exercises unjust power over children. He seeks to abolish the authority of schooling by appealing to the authority that underwrites the logic of schooling.

Ultimately, both Illich and Holt mobilize a model of individual freedom that imagines a fundamentally neutral ground left over after state interference is taken away. In this neutral

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<sup>135</sup> Lisa Marie Cacho, *Social Death: Racialized Rightlessness and the Criminalization of the Unprotected*. New York University Press, 2012: 142

<sup>136</sup> Holt, *Escape from Childhood* 150.

ground, the individual is free to express their personal choice in equal proportion with others in a kind of Rawlsian liberal utopia. In seeking to abolish the school as the means to secure this freedom, Illich and Holt run up against a question of ultimate political authority. Both seek to abolish the power of the state while also relying on state power to authorize their basic understandings of rights and freedom. Their arguments permit no basis for the authority of these categories. They become vacated concepts, supported, like financial markets, on mutual agreement and pure trust.

By falling into this tension (insisting upon the universality of rights and freedoms while also vacating the possibility of granting them substantive authority), Holt and Illich unwittingly condense and intensify in their work a fundamental problem of secular liberal political authority. With no divine authorization, what licenses the power of the secular state? The problem of what ultimate authority underwrites the interrelated power of concepts such as law, rights, and freedom is a central feature of the modern political order.<sup>137</sup> The assumptions of liberalism, however, do not have a monopoly on discussions of political authority. In fact, as we turn back to the Christian Reconstructionist and Afrocentric critiques of public schooling, we can begin to trace two very different ways of resolving this problem. Both contest the same categories of freedom, law, state, and the human, but they imagine these categories very differently from Holt and Illich. If the un/deschooling platform seeks a radical overthrow of the present order but remain trapped by their liberal commitments, the other two critiques feel no such qualms.

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<sup>137</sup> For an account of the problem in political theory, see Leslie Green, *The Authority of the State*. Oxford University Press, 1990. For a historical account of this problem as it arose in tensions among divine authority, common law, and parliamentary statutes, see Paul Halliday, *Habeas Corpus: From England to Empire*. Harvard University Press, 2010. For a discussion of the ways that this problem was inflected by colonization and race (and, indeed, co-theorized by enslaved and free Black subjects in a colonial context), see Laurent Dubois, *A Colony of Citizens: Revolution & Slave Emancipation in the French Caribbean, 1787-1804*. University of North Carolina Press, 2004. For a discussion of how question plays out in the modern international liberal political order, and especially in the tensions between transitional justice and peacebuilding efforts, see Dustin N. Sharp, *Rethinking Transitional Justice for the Twenty-First Century: Beyond the End of History*. Cambridge University Press, 2018.

That these visions are both deeply modern and deeply non-liberal is part of their repugnancy. They sit uneasily within dominant channels of thought. But it is precisely this abstruseness, this orthogonality to both liberal traditions and their dominant challengers—broadly: Marxism, Poststructuralism, Critical Ethnic Studies, etc.—that suggests their utility in expanding our political imagination. Ultimately, I suggest, it is their accounts of political authority that might most effectively open up new ways of thinking about allyship and justice.

*Rushdoony: Freedom as Law*

Rushdoony resolves the problem of political authority by appealing directly to the ultimate authority of the Biblical God. This authority is expressed principally through Biblical law, as revealed in the Old Testament and then partially emended by the New. The law is the most direct expression with God's sovereignty for Rushdoony. It licenses his understanding of freedom, and it drives his critique of the way that the public school system constricts freedom.

Recall that for Rushdoony, all thought begins from the presupposition of God's ultimate sovereignty as revealed in the Bible. There is never any question about political authority since, like all things, it proceeds from the sovereignty of God. It is in reference to God's ultimate authority and not the authority of human beings that all truth, facts, life, and life have meaning. Likewise with freedom.<sup>138</sup> An individual's freedom is entirely defined according to their obligation to this infinitely free God. For Rushdoony, the infinite difference in power between God and the individual is what authorizes the possibility of freedom. For the individual, "freedom...is real only because of God's eternal decree, and it is never real except in terms of

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<sup>138</sup> Rushdoony, *Christianity and the State* 141.

limitation and responsibility.”<sup>139</sup> Freedom is nothing more and nothing less than the ability to exist in God’s created world according to God’s Biblically-revealed God’s law.

The category of rights is effectively meaningless in this framework. In a world where all truth is premised on presuppositions of God’s sovereignty, there needs not be any category that determines the possibilities and promises of human life other than Biblical law. All things are fully predestined in this world. Discussions of rights not only reify state power, as discussed above, but they also presume to elevate human thriving above the predestined law of God. Far from possessing inalienable rights as a marker of their intrinsic value, people only have value at all for Rushdoony insofar as they fulfill their responsibilities and obligations to upholding God’s law on earth.

The modern state (religious in its presuppositional adherence to humanism) claims sovereignty by first placing the authority of human beings above the authority of God—the classic move of humanism, in Rushdoony’s account. Then, the state uses systems of representative governance to claim that only it can legitimately exercise this power—it represents the will of the people, which is above that of God.<sup>140</sup> This, in Rushdoony’s critique, is the source of the state’s monopoly on legitimate violence. In claiming this monopoly, the state transgresses the God-ordained political economy of sphere sovereignty, in which the family, the church, and the state each exert a certain amount of God-derived power in specific fields.<sup>141</sup> The state thus secures its monopoly on power:

In Biblical theology, the absolute freedom of God is a basic premise: God cannot be controlled or governed by anything outside of Himself. This is the premise of humanistic doctrines of the state: the absolute freedom of the state.<sup>142</sup>

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<sup>139</sup> Rushdoony, *Intellectual Schizophrenia* 122.

<sup>140</sup> Rushdoony, *Intellectual Schizophrenia* 63.

<sup>141</sup> See, for instance, Rushdoony, *Intellectual Schizophrenia* 131-2.

<sup>142</sup> Rushdoony, *Christianity and the State* 141.



Of course, the state can never limit the actual freedom of God, but it does appropriate a pale shadow of God's sovereignty in order to legitimize its worldly exercise of power. The state then disguises this appropriation through the public school, inducting children into a humanist epistemological regime that denies the divine source of all truth. This denial effectively disconnects people from the source of truth and freedom, God's law. At the same time, the state's monopoly on power also restricts the ability of families and churches to exercise their own Biblically-ordained authority in their respective spheres. It is by limiting the ability of individuals to exercise their authority through the family and the church that the state infringes on freedom.

Clearly, we're thinking in a register here that is very different from the un/deschooling understanding of freedom. For Rushdoony, there is no neutral space where the individual can exert their agency, no legible understanding of inalienable rights. Meaningful individual choice has no referent other than God's Biblically-revealed law. Yet despite these massive differences, both critiques seek to identify ways that the state systematically exerts power through public schooling to uphold an epistemological order and also reinforce the state's monopoly on violence. Both also conceive of this exertion of power as a fundamental restriction of freedom, though, as we've seen, very different kinds of freedom. Finally, as noted before, both critiques dedicate enormous attention to the intersection of secular epistemology, state power, and human freedom as a site of contestation.

Additionally, both radically fail to reckon with histories of slavery, colonialism, and racial domination. Turning now to the Afrocentric critique, we can add this third vector of power in order to nuance the binary model of state power vs. freedom, differentially conceived.

*Afrocentrism: Freedom as sovereignty of place*

Afrocentric theorists mobilize a third very different vision of human freedom as the driving motivation of their critique: freedom from Eurocentric cultural categories. The basis of this freedom is African cultural nationhood. As Ama Mazama summarizes, this idea of cultural nationhood provides a systematic alternative to “our, usually unconscious, adoption of the Western worldview and perspective and their attendant cultural framework.”<sup>143</sup> Mazama goes on to list some of the sites where the Afrocentric critique seeks to intervene:

How many of us have really paused to seriously examine and challenge such ideas as ‘the need for democracy’, ‘planning’, ‘progress’, ‘the nation-state as the best form of political and social organization’, to name only a few? Our failure to recognize the roots of such ideas in the European cultural ethos has led us, willingly or unwillingly, to agree to footnote status in the White Man’s Book.<sup>144</sup>

In this list, political categories sit alongside epistemological ones. But what is at issue is not so much the *content* of each of these categories as the value system that marks them as unquestionable goods. That value system, “the European cultural ethos,” names the primary limitation on African freedom. Unlike Holt, Illich, and Rushdoony, then, the direct exertion of state violence is not the main inhibitor of freedom. Instead, it is a set of cultural values—a much more expansive construction that includes within it both systems of governance and epistemological constructs. In contrast to Eurocentric culture, Mazama argues, Africans demand a vision of African freedom born out of African ideas and categories. Mazama calls this the “epistemological centeredness” of the “African cultural experience.”<sup>145</sup>

With its insistent focus on Africa, the Afrocentric understanding of freedom hinges on *place*. This sense of place is not mere nostalgia. Rather, it offers a kind of flexible authoritative

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<sup>143</sup> Mazama 4.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid.

<sup>145</sup> Mazama 5.

frame for seeking freedom across political, epistemological, and ontological levels: “Our place is the constantly presenting and re-presenting context, the evolving presentation context, the perspective.”<sup>146</sup> Africa, in this approach, functions as a kind of complex, ever-shifting node that orients the Afrocentrist to the idea of place. Afrocentric knowledge is only possible with respect to the African continent. Africa in this construction is a site of constant interplay between complexity and unity. It is multiply political, epistemological, ontological, and cultural. But it is also marked by an internal unity—an essential Africanness that is evidenced by the various programmatic value systems that emerge in Afrocentric writing. Afrocentrism “sees knowledge of this ‘place’ as perspective as a fundamental rule of intellectual inquiry because its content is a self-conscious obliteration of the subject/object duality and the enthronement of an African wholism.”<sup>147</sup> Africa—as the site that enables epistemological orientation to place instead of subject—is the source of political *and* epistemological authority. It is that which makes liberatory political futures thinkable by providing the basis from which truth claims can be made.

Afrocentrism thus offers an expansive understanding of freedom located in a cultural sovereignty authorized by the African continent. This valorization of the continent simultaneously recognizes and suppresses histories of colonial domination and white supremacy. The phrase “European cultural ethos” certainly suggests a historically unequal relation of power between Afrocentric and Eurocentric ideas—and therefore Africa and Europe as political sites. But it also obscures the actual histories of domination and colonialism in a euphemistic construction (“European cultural ethos”). Additionally, Mazama’s passive phrasing (“has led us—willingly or unwillingly”) suggests that Africans have been complicit in their own

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<sup>146</sup> Asante, *Kemet, Afrocentricity and Knowledge* 5.

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid.*

domination by failing to recognize the ways that they have been tricked into adopting European ideas and categories as their own.

But remember that the fundamental unit of analysis is *place*, not *subject*. Even where Africans have been complicit with European domination, it is not a failure of the individual but a failure of the nation, rooted in its epistemological ties to Africa. African cultural nationhood takes responsibility for the formation of the individual. Indeed, if not presented with an adequately robust alternative, what choice does the African American have other than to adopt the Eurocentric system of thought that dominates their world?

Though the individual subject is the responsibility of the African cultural nation, they also have substantial power. Afrocentric writing theorizes an Afrocentric humanism that is neither the liberal humanism evinced by Holt and Illich, nor a total subsuming of the human to divine law, as in Rushdoony. Like Afrocentric culture in general, Afrocentric humanism has several capacious tenets:

1. The divine image of humans;
2. The perfectibility of humans;
3. The teachability of humans;
4. The free will of humans;
5. The essentiality of moral social practice in human development<sup>148</sup>

On the one hand, humans are epistemologically and ontologically at the center of this system. But this is not a strictly secular formulation, either. The human is still subject to forces and powers—both social and spiritual—that originate outside the self. This is far beyond what Sylvia

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<sup>148</sup> Carol D. Lee, “African-Centered Pedagogy: Complexities and Possibilities.” *Too Much Schooling Too Little Education: A Paradox of Black Life in White Societies*. Ed., Mwalimu J. Shujaa. Trenton, NJ: African World Press, 1994: 296-7. This list is adapted from the work of Maulana Karenga.

Wynter has critiqued as “biocentric monohumanism”—the hegemonic European tendency to construct the human as a strictly biological being.<sup>149</sup>

This capacious humanism also becomes a way of negotiating histories of colonial domination and white supremacy. The Afrocentric critique understands itself as covering the same political and epistemological ground as the category of race without risking reifying racial power dynamics.<sup>150</sup> Afrocentrism’s political strategy falls out of the sense of autonomous cultural nationhood, which insists that it avoid Eurocentric categories as much as possible. Indeed, this is why schools and schooling are so essential. And also why Afrocentric thought can tolerate independent Afrocentric schools, parallel Afrocentric schools, and even Afrocentric public schools. The quest for cultural nationhood is separate from—and sees itself as unaccountable to—the dominant exercise of power.

There is no need, in the Afrocentric model, to directly challenge the exercise of state power. There is very little discussion of law or rights because those categories imply, as we have seen, the authority of the nation-state that nominally governs the territory in which the Afrocentric cultural nation-within-a-nation exists. Because the African cultural nation proceeds from Afrocentric ideas, it automatically operates in a political and epistemological space illegible to the dominant logic of the state, even if it exists within the geopolitical territory of a Eurocentric state. The Afrocentric cultural nation may be beholden to the bureaucratic processes

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<sup>149</sup> Wynter, Sylvia and Katherine McKittrick. “Unparalleled Catastrophe for Our Species? Or, to Give Humanness a Different Future: Conversations.” *Sylvia Wynter: On Being Human as Praxis*. Ed., Katherine McKittrick. Duke University Press, 2015: 33-39.

<sup>150</sup> Afrocentrism here risks falling into the trap of colorblindness—a rhetoric and logic appropriated by conservative judiciary in the 1980s and 1990s. But at the same time, the Afrocentric counterargument would be that in its insistent focus on Africa, it can propose a form of race-neutrality that, because it is rooted in African epistemological and ontological principles—i.e., presuppositions—it cannot lead to racially repressive conclusions. Additionally, the very fact that it roots itself in African epistemological and ontological principles means that race—like rights—is not a visible analytic category for Afrocentric thought. Strictly speaking, racialized subjects are illegible to Afrocentric thought. Rather, it can only see subjects that are incorporated into (or excluded from) the cultural nation.

and laws of the Eurocentric state in which it is located, but this relationship is strictly logistical and never ontological or epistemological. While Afrocentrism may not contest the governance of the secular (Eurocentric) state, it seeks to remain radically outside its ontological and epistemological regime.

Like Rushdoony and the un/deschooling theorists, then, Afrocentrism also critiques public schooling as a way of arguing for a specific understanding of freedom. Where Holt and Illich seek a liberal space of unfettered free choice and Rushdoony seeks total submission of the individual to God's law, Afrocentrism offers a complex humanism that valorizes human capabilities while also subsuming it to a cosmological order premised on a relationship with the idea of Africa. The creation of Afrocentric institutions opens up the possibility of freedom for African Americans within the Eurocentric state by connecting individuals and communities back to the epistemological, ontological and political resources of the continent.

Unlike the other two critiques, however, the focus is much less on the explicit power of the state. In fact, the Afrocentric cultural nation-within-a-nation is seen as having conceptual power that, in some ways, transcends even the state's monopoly on violence. Because of this disinterest in state power, ideas of rights and law are also notably absent from this critique. Assuredly, they also form part of the expansive Afrocentric idea of culture, but, like race, they take a back seat to epistemological and ontological questions of values authorized by a connection with place as opposed to the subject.

By now, I hope it is clear that all of these critiques are about much more than simply what is taught in schools and how children are educated. For these theorists, schooling is also the

preeminent site where processes of subject formation, expressions of state power, and epistemological claims about reality all intersect.

Together, these three understandings of freedom begin to offer a set of imaginative visions for what life might look like apart from the hegemony of public schooling. These visions are unstable, erratic, and sometimes deeply problematic. But they also work to expand the contours of our political thinking beyond a fixed investment in categories of rights and freedom as liberal political goods. In the brief concluding section that follows, I reflect on some of the pedagogical implications of this work.

### **Conclusion: The Pedagogy of the Repugnant Other**

Unlike the thinkers I engage with here, I believe that schools should continue to exist and that, though wracked with challenges, public education is a basic good that should continue to be funded and promoted. It will be clear to most readers that I have purposely suppressed in the preceding sections many ready-to-hand critiques that might be leveled against our three bodies of work. A deeply heteropatriarchal blindness of these writers to matters of gender and sexuality is perhaps only the most obvious. My attempt to explicate the Afrocentric idea of culture as meaningful racial critique will surely have also met with the scorn of many serious contemporary scholars of race. As, perhaps, will my reading of liberal freedom in the un/deschooling critique for scholars of political theory or my reading of Rushdoony's presuppositional apologetics for scholars of conservative Christian theology. There are assuredly many other possible challenges that readers will hopefully have filled in for themselves.

This is precisely the point: to give voice to the repugnant cultural other as a way of nuancing and shaping our thinking about matters of justice. This thesis has sought to elicit the reader's affective, intellectual, and political reactions to the repugnant other in order to leverage them into a way of expanding our disciplinary and political imaginations. In 1991, Susan Harding critiqued the way that scholars unthinkingly reproduced modernist assumptions in writing about the *Scopes* trial. I argue that this problem lingers in both academic and political discourse. In attending to the repugnant cultural other, we might find forms of reading and thinking that productively work alongside other forms of politically-driven scholarship to theorize more just forms of life. This is, essentially, a pedagogical exercise.

All three of the critiques we have been engaging with actively seek more just forms of life, according to own their interpretations and assumptions about the world. Reading them



across and against one another has revealed some surprising overlapping sites. All three name public schooling as essentially marked by the secular state's exertion of religiously-tinged power. In all three, the logic of secularism cannot be fully disentangled from the logic of race. And all three also center schooling as a site where fundamental questions of human freedom are contested.

Beginning with these three concordances, however, we arrive at very different conclusions. The un/deschooling critique seeks unfettered expression of individual freedom through the abolition of the school as an institution. Writing from the position of presuppositional apologetics, Rushdoony seeks a world in which God's law is the ultimate authority through which the family and the church order human life. Finally, the Afrocentric critique foregrounds a relationship to place as a way of granting authority to both the human and the spiritual. The individual's relationship to their own ancestral Africanness becomes the source simultaneously of political authority, epistemological certainty, and ontological priority. These are three utopic normative claims. Justice looks different to everyone.

How, then, can we balance the search for a totalizing system of justice against its innumerable provincial and partisan manifestations? This thesis suggests that one possible answer might be by identifying new sites of contestation. Indeed, all three of the critiques in this thesis identify similar sites and ideas where they contest state power in search of justice. The category of "against public schooling" is not necessarily held together by a set of political ends, but by a set of strategies and means.

For instance, all three of these critiques contest state power in order to promote the sovereignty of the local. They each offer a vision of freedom that shifts political authority from the technocratized secular state into the church, the cultural nation, the individual. Though I

reject all three of these programmatic platforms, I do think that questions of local autonomy deserve more thought and attention. At the very least, identifying this common thread among the three critiques establishes a site where a conversation might begin. What other kinds of sites might be contestable? And what kinds of alliances might be lurking just below the assumptions of our dominant political categories?

Public schools have always been sites of racial violence, of uncritical reduplication of liberal norms, of indoctrination into a culture of state power. As Republican lawmakers police Black history and queer life in public schools with increasing vitriol, we can choose to situate our contemporary political efforts in a longer history of contestations over social, cultural, and political power through schooling. Certainly, we should be fighting strongly against these efforts. But what do we risk when we reify a vision of “neutral public schooling” over and against which these new challenges are aberrations? Rather than treat schools as neutral conveyors of knowledge, what do we gain in our contemporary political struggles by naming them as state-mandated enforcers of a certain epistemological regime? What does a politics in favor of trans kids and Black history gain when it sheds the need to wed itself to the secular? What presuppositions can come out more openly? What forms of justice may become articulable?

By attending to the voices of repugnant cultural others, we might begin to spot what real ontological and epistemological differences look like, as opposed to differences manufactured and instrumentalized for political ends. This is an exercise in balancing political urgency with gracious understanding. This will look different for each person and with each object. But if our political imagination is richer, then maybe we can find new ways to think, act, and write politically that don't reinforce dominant political categories. Can we discuss the ontological and epistemological stakes of political claims, going far enough along the road of intellectual (and

moral) abstraction that we can find some things to actually, meaningfully, agree upon? This thesis suggests that yes, it is a possibility.

By opening up this possibility, this thesis also offers an opportunity to revisit our understanding of the American public sphere. Talal Asad writes:

If the adherents of a religion enter the public sphere, can their entry leave the preexisting discursive structure intact? The public sphere is not an empty space for carrying out debates. It is constituted by the sensibilities—memories and aspirations, fears and hopes—of speakers and listeners. And also by the manner in which they exist (and are made to exist) for each other, and by their propensity to act or react in distinctive ways. Thus the introduction of new discourses may result in the disruption of established assumptions structuring debates in the public sphere. More strongly: they may *have* to disrupt existing assumptions to be heard. Far from having to prove to existing authority that it is no threat to dominant values, a religion that enters political debate *on its own terms* may on the contrary have to threaten the authority of existing assumptions.<sup>151</sup>

In the twenty years since these words were written, certain forms of religious and pseudo-religious logic have increasingly entered the American public sphere. Though Christian Reconstruction is perhaps not yet mainstream, there is no doubt that conservative Protestantism—and, in the case of the US Supreme Court, Catholicism—is increasingly visible as a basis for public politics in a way that is unfamiliar and uncomfortable for most liberals. Things become even more complicated when we add to the mix the many disturbing contemporary forms of “conspirituality.”<sup>152</sup> The dominant liberal reaction to all of this is to demand a return to the secularization of the public sphere.

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<sup>151</sup> Asad 185, emphasis in original.

<sup>152</sup> Charlotte Ward and Prof. David Voas, “The Emergence of Conspirituality.” *Journal of Contemporary Religion* vol. 26 no. 1, 2012: 103-121. I use this word here to mainly refer to the complex of Christian and New Age ideas that run through, for instance, QAnon. Fascinatingly, Charlotte Ward has since faced accusations of herself writing material under a pseudonym in support of harmful and racist religiously-tinged conspiracy beliefs. See Derek Beres, Matthew Remski, and Julian Marc Walker, “The Red-Pilled ‘Academic’ Who Named Our Podcast.” *Conspirituality* (podcast), October 6, 2022, accessed April 12, 2023, <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/123-the-red-pilled-academic-who-named-our-podcast/id1515827446?i=1000581850393>.

By attending here to the repugnant other, we are invited to instead ask what it means for the public sphere to be secular. Or indeed, if it has ever been something that we can fully call secular. Instead of rejecting the resurgence of religious logic into the public sphere, we can use religion's increased visibility as an opportunity to interrogate how we have constructed ideas of the religious and the secular in the public sphere. There is no doubt that political positions masquerading under the guise of conservative Christianity have done much harm in the United States. But the opposite of conservative Christianity is not neutral secularism—in fact, no such thing exists. As we have seen, secular logics can come with substantial unwanted—and, indeed, unseen—baggage. Instead of falling back on an unthought secularism that risks reifying whiteness, vacating political authority, and disconnecting us from the stakes of truth claims, we can instead expand our sense of how and where the religious and the secular are constructed and contested. The changing nature of the American public sphere presents an opportunity for a new commitment to justice that is unencumbered by its ties to the secular as a governing ideology. By shedding ourselves of the need to take sides in a binary opposition of bad religion vs. good secularism, we might begin to think more clearly about shaping our own presuppositions towards politically useful ends.

Secularism clings to liberalism and humanism as if it were in danger of being swept away by the barely-repressed tide of religious belief. But scientific inquiry will not disappear if we stop claiming that public schools should be neutrally secular. Nor, I dare say, will the still-unfulfilled promise of liberal governance's goods. By clinging to the secular, progressive politics fails to meaningfully confront and contest its own hegemonic assumptions. In tracing the contours and complexities of three repugnant others, I have tried to show one place in which the limits and logics of the secular are contestable and contested in the United States. This reading, I

hope, might help us clarify and expand the parameters of our political imaginations. Schooling by its very nature builds from specific presuppositions to inculcate specific values. It can never be a neutral activity. The question, then, is which presuppositions, which values.

In order to explore further in this direction, we must refuse to condense those repugnant others to a single data point. This is a gesture of radical empathy that allows those we resent to participate in a more expansive process of listening and theorizing. For Harding, this is much more than an abstract question.

Political judgment and will are not neutralized by understanding fundamentalism as one of modernism's "others." In fact, our sense of political choice is sharpened by deconstructing the totalizing opposition between "us" and "them," because who "we" are no longer depends on notions that assume we already know who "they" are. We—situated, implicated, and self-reflexive—can then come up with more nuanced, complicated, partial, and local readings of who they are and what they are doing and therefore design more effective political strategies to oppose directly the specific positions and policies they advocate.<sup>153</sup>

This is the basis for this thesis's methodological intervention, rooted in the hope for a political pedagogy of care and understanding. If we think of public schooling as a religious exercise, how much more important does it become to teach rigorous histories of race and racism? To engage seriously in a moral and spiritual reckoning with the past? Does problematizing the idea of rights and freedom change how discussions of the American system can take place—even within the public school?

Along with Harding, my goal is to nuance a secular-liberal political imagination premised on "pluralism, moral relativism, and tolerance of diversity."<sup>154</sup> Meaningful interrogation of these concepts requires thinking along different spectra, of decoupling ideas that have been inexorably

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<sup>153</sup> Harding 393.

<sup>154</sup> Ibid.

linked in academic conversations and political discourse. The goal is to imagine a more just world. But in order to actually constitute this world, we must do the hard work of understanding.

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