

Broken Branches

A philosophical introduction to the social
reproductions of oppression from an
intersectional feminist perspective

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Acknowledgements

*To the pedagogy that is born from broken ground.
To our healing, to our restoration, to our transformation.*

For Rosie & Ashley

We will always be ART

Introduction

The inspiration for this book stems from the classic song by Billie Holiday, *Strange Fruit*. It became clear to me from the song's simple, blatant and visceral lyrics- that those of us within a United States community context have become complicit and complacent to socially manufactured tragedy. We acquiesce to digesting our social ills as we navigate the oppressive spaces we design. We distract ourselves with the enamoration of arbitrary and manufactured beauty. The egregious dynamics that are at play within our society operate on a continuum and are consistently normalized and accepted.

We witness the battering, the bruising, and the stringing up of bodies hanging from proverbial poplar trees. Do we see that the dynamics of oppression are informed by what we socially plant? Do we realize that oppression is conditioned and not organic? Does our neurocognition assist us in interrupting the inoculation of who we have become? Does our metacognition see beyond our created landscapes and realize what socio-political dynamics exists as by-products on the periphery of our inhabited environments?

Our very being, our value, and our positionality is contingent upon adherence to systemic oppression given birth to from Western hetero-patriarchal white supremacist concepts of power and marginalization. Literature has failed to philosophize more in depth on how or why we as "citizens", intergenerationally become complicit in perpetuating and sustaining the dichotomy of the de jure and de facto definitions and applications of freedom.

The structural belt needed to maintain the status quo of inequity hinges on our complicity *as well as* our approval. From every song of nationalism, every policy seen as a stride towards equality while whitewashing equity, every microinvalidation, every aggression-macro and micro- that exists in the spaces we inhabit, we are faced with the relative truths of our epistemology as well as ontology.

This book was written to challenge the rhetoric of the past, but to also contribute to the emerging narratives of sustainable transformational justice at the convergence of multiple schools of thought. Transformation is the operative term used rather than the word "restorative". Transformative justice recognizes that a system built on exclusion can never be restored to a glory that failed to ever exist beyond propaganda.

When I reference the idea of “strange fruit”, there is a paradigm that exists between “black bodies swinging from poplar trees with blood on the root”¹, that we see prevalently today. In my own interpretation as an adolescent, my hope was that the blood of our ancestors dripping on the root, would plant seeds to a new future. A better future. However, the historical precedence of shared power belonging only to hegemonic groups has nurtured a society that would rather carry out abhorrent practices than share power equitably.

This book’s use of the phrase “broken branches” refers to how our society is not thriving, but is instead being broken in on an intergenerational level. Broken branches refer to the weight and consequences of maintaining and participating in marginalization and pain. The fruit from our broken branches are the products of our individual and socialized preconceptions being enacted in public as well as private spaces. It is strange to believe that these fruits have flourished, but that... they have. This book seeks to confront those fruits of interaction, induction, indoctrination, policy, practice, institutions, and biopolitics.

Ultimately, the goal if this book is to come to see ourselves as metaphorical arborists, so that the seeds that we plant are cultivated and nurtured with proactive care. No longer can we stand to have our mind’s broken –in. Our limbs require justice to thrive. Else, we all shall continue to perish in our humanity, walking the earth, contributing nothing to our vitality and contributing solely to our demise. Inhabiting the earth as the nefarious undead.

This book explores race, gender, sexuality, ability, capitalism, and institutions - specifically education and media. This book seeks to explore and extrapolate upon theory, popular education, intersectional justice lens analysis and the emotional and mental turmoil that is invisibilized within our communities. This book also explores the intra- community conflict that arises when we explore narratives and waves of social justice. This book seeks to ensure that the ways in which we advocate for solidarity don't reproduce and mirror the oppressions by which we have been navigating through all our lives simply because these past dynamics of seeking justice are all we know. This book was written to serve as a push to step further into innovation and work through complex conversations. The analysis that presents itself in the following chapters seek to

¹ Holiday, Billie. *Strange Fruit*

shift away from a narrative that normalizes the accepted benignity of generationally compounded iniquity and inequity. It must also be articulated that every piece of literature has a scope. Therefore, this book cannot nor does it claim to house an exhaustive examination, analysis, or critique on all things plaguing our society or the maladaptive responses to its faults that continue its operation. There's going to be gaps, but that's what expressed limitation and implications for further study and exploration are meant to acknowledge and fill in the future.

Reflective Statement

I am a firm believer in the notion that *nothing* is unbiased. I identify as a queer trans* person of color (QTPOC) assigned female at birth, with invisible disabilities from Montgomery, Alabama. I am a child of a single mother and a child of two parents from rural areas within the State of Alabama. You can't exist there and not pay attention—well I guess you could, but I refused to. I have an M.A. in Urban Affairs from Norfolk State University— a Historically Black College and University, and a B.S. in Interpersonal and Public Communication from Mississippi College, a Southern Baptist Christian College. I have worked in academia as well as non-profit. Through the experiences of my life, I thought it imperative to prepare a manuscript that encompasses the phenomena of the strange fruit and broken branches I've witnessed but rarely seen in literature. I want to explicitly state that, though our lives influence our perspective, these themes do not represent or reflect *just* my experiences, they are not unique. This *could* be considered a piece of “radical” postmodern feminist literature, only if we define the term radical as the amplification of marginalized voices. This manuscript is only radical if we define radical as the presentation of a different narrative juxtaposed to hegemonic ideologies that have colonized the narrative for centuries. Most times it is horribly difficult and usually impossible to *prove* an -ism or a phobia to those that perpetuate them. We tango in feminism, critical race theory, and in society with what claims are legitimate. However, how many narratives or studies must be conducted to “prove” the impacts of oppression and have societal members actively participate in healing these wounds? We find ourselves continuously defending our humanity or trying to live through and prove our disenfranchisement. We understand that those that have to approve or validate our narrative's legitimacy are the hegemonic groups that are not impacted by

and commonly perpetuate or benefit from those very oppressions uplifted and brought to the fore of conversations.

Overall, this book's audience should be everyone. This book is aimed to start or continue conversations from a foundation of intentional explicitness. I hope you enjoy reading it, as much as I enjoyed writing it.

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Chapter 4

The Institutions of Influence: Education and the Media

We talked a bit before about spheres of influence throughout the preceding chapters. However, we need to invest further into exploring the institutions that dictate the way our society is introduced to, processes, and digests information. The way we encode and decode information is informed by the environmental microcosms. These microcosms consist of our own Venn diagrammatic interconnected communities, the dynamics therein, and the way we critically process transmitted information in an introspective and constructive manner. Two of the most influential institutions in our society to date that have the ability to disseminate information are education and media. From these institutions, we delve deeper into how the mechanisms of biolegitimacy²⁰³ extend from theory to socio-political practice.

In the *Talented Tenth*, W.E.B. Dubois states that “A university is a human invention for the transmission of knowledge and culture from generation to generation, through the training of quick minds and pure hearts”²⁰⁴. Though the Dubois’ quote speaks from the context of post-secondary education, the idea of knowledge transmission rings true for all formal and informal models of education. This is true if epistemology is not destroyed, but valued and strengthened. However, our socialization, through various stages of development, has already begun to engrain itself into our ontology. This engraining process is seen in the way that we see the world, make meaning from the different contexts we find our bodies within, and in the way we see ourselves. The expectation that we all are introduced to education in a space whose purpose is to transmit knowledge with an a priori of pure *anything* is presumptuous at

²⁰³ Lemke, Thomas, Monica J. Casper, and Lisa Jean Moore. *Biopolitics: An advanced introduction*. NYU Press, 2011.

²⁰⁴ Du Bois, William Edward Burghardt. *The talented tenth*. James Pott and Company, 1903.

best. Society impacts the ways we digest information and act accordingly from the meaning we've assigned to particular social dynamics happens far before we enter a school. Another pivotal set of questions that arises are: Who writes the syllabus? Who sets the goals? Who constructs the rubrics of learning? Who decides on the canon of information or knowledge extended within those walls of a school? And if it is not an inclusive and informed collective, then how is it that we determine if they hold the competencies to make these decisions that dictate such an integral part of our lives. It is understood that by the time one, who has the ability to do so, reaches college – educators hold academic freedom²⁰⁵. Through primary and secondary school, educators are instructed to follow fine lines of what should be taught to ensure their safety in job security and the matriculation of their pupils. It is equally problematic that professors have the ability to exercise academic freedom in a way that continues to indoctrinate students to their biases that align to oppressive navigation through life rather than intellectual inquiry. What do we deem pertinent and what do we deem inconsequential? How is Aristotle more important than Frantz Fanon? How is pre-calculus more important than fiscal literacy in a capitalistic society where stocks rule our sustenance based security? Why is it that we don't constructively piece together the usefulness of geometry with architecture? Why do we value the term architecture more than carpentry? Why is it that, we learn ahistorical Western European History, but ethnic studies is never integrated in the overall scope of our collective historical epistemology? How are the wars we participated in, and the colonized erasure based narrative of our negative participation, more important than the domestic terrorism we allow to persist due to white supremacy within our borders? The ways in which educational institutions have ruled out certain pieces of content of what goes into our educational funnel, sheds light on how it disenfranchises those without privilege. We leave minimal space for introspection, interruption and critical thought all the while creating a vast landscape for those who go through the steps of educational processes. Educational institutions depend more on recitation and neoliberalism than comprehension because that path leads to the mere *possibility* or social mobility. This creates decreased hope in the notion of gaining freedom

²⁰⁵ Schrecker, Ellen. The lost soul of higher education: Corporatization, the assault on academic freedom, and the end of the American university. The New Press, 2010.

through education and heightens the cognizance of one's own subjugation to systemic manipulation.

Schools, in a traditional sense and as an educational institution, are at best a place of indoctrination, a filter, and its policies demand you be present on the conveyer belt. Not for your own wellbeing but for your utility in perpetuating a manufactured culture. What other institution demands your active participation through the three first stages of your psycho-social development?²⁰⁶ The institution of education has a unique ability to mold minds and deem what "appropriateness" is. The power given to educational institutions also criminalize through truancy and behavior policies. These policies are pushed to be more applicable to marginalized communities, categorize value, socialize and reify social politics. The institution of education scaffolds the importance of particular occupations, and set barriers in place for social mobility access under the disguise of freedom. This disguise uses the philosophical idea of what education is *meant* to be rather than the *actuality* of what it really is- a systematic gate²⁰⁷. The educational system is more concerned with what one can contribute. These contributions are expected to feed into automated forms of structural demands for assimilation, the culture and capitulation, and control. This control exists under implicitly informed consent and institutional betrayal²⁰⁸. This betrayal is interested in refusing to deconstruct its oppressive functionality. Institutional control ignores the possibility that we can learn from everything rather than a set scope of curriculum and that there is validity in other forms or components of knowledge transmission. Even though we did build curriculum with a scope- why is it that we do not transmit knowledge to ensure that we are capable of meeting our basic needs. Why have not ensured that we were able to function in the social and economic climate of where we live? How is it that, we don't teach agriculture, carpentry, and art in ways that are valued and more than an elective. Why are these aforementioned skills understood to be the work of the "less than" or seen as a simple spectacle for consumption? Is it that we are

²⁰⁶ Greene, David. "Gatekeepers: the role of adult education practitioners and programs in social control." *Journal for Critical Education Policy Studies* 5, no. 2 (2007): 411-437.

²⁰⁷ Fishel, Andrew, and Janice Pottker. "National Politics and Sex Discrimination in Education." (1977).

²⁰⁸ Smith, Carly Parnitzke, and Jennifer J. Freyd. "Institutional betrayal." *American Psychologist* 69, no. 6 (2014): 575.

advanced enough to not *have* to learn the importance and possibilities of these skills and forms of expression? Is this educational value system mechanically in place to ensure that some people stay “in their place”? By not being extended the opportunity to build on educational competencies in ways that assist people in understanding how to function outside the parameters of the governmental and economic systems we limit ourselves. With these limitations in place we dilute the trajectory of our prosperity. In this, we also fail to have the space to deconstruct the educational system that limits us.

We have participated in a trend of excluding bodies from our educational system. We construct a narrative wherein it appears as if access is granted. We behave as if the country is giving the marginalized a gift. This gift comes at a price of institutional perpetration of historical marginalized dynamics. The access granted is undeniably conditional with expectations of complying with implicit forms of marginalization that align to the explicit policies seemingly de-commissioned. Access to education is not necessarily a gift, and should not be a tool of ensuring that generations adhere to a particular ontology, yet it is. You cannot pilfer rights from a people, give them access to an institution after you have perfected it as a tool of oppression and manipulation and then call it a gift. A “gift” that demands compliance amongst the oppressed and creates such an untouchable privileged class of a few that they rarely, if ever, have the opportunity to see that something is disjointed. Disjointed, in how they prevail in comparison to others in degrees that cannot be explained away by meritocracy. The institution of education is designed in a way wherein we cannot see whose backs had to be broken in so that it’s mobility and comfort (socially or politically) was possible or more possible than most. The institution of education continues to perfect its craft. With each body that is allowed or denied entry, we rationalize oppression with its evolving script in pseudo legitimizing ways. These rationalizations are fed by social stereotypes set in place that encourage people to participate in complicity. To participate in looking for paradigms of behaviors with marginalized communities to those stereotypes. This is done so without the privileged questioning how their behaviors align to these stereotypes that are given legitimacy for particular groups but not for privileged groups at all. This practice is a contributing factor to how we dehumanize and value one’s legitimacy as a human being. This practice holds the marginalized to superhuman expectations while holding others to standards to which these same rubrics are not applicable without explicit question or explanation. We

demand excellence within a system that limits a marginalized person's trajectory and demand adherence to its dynamics without question. All the while, others are extended the opportunity to express themselves freely and make human mistakes. This difference shows clear indications of disproportionality that we still fail to acknowledge. Disproportionalities that have impacted how policies are practiced within educational institutions and how behavior is rationalized or penalized depending on the social "markers" of one's body. A marginalized person's steps outside of adherence to a system solidifies expectation of their body value. But we only practice this with marginalized groups of people and fail to ever question why the same standards don't apply in institutions reaching far beyond just that of educational systems. We often assign different adjectives to similar actions and refuse to admit for whom specific words apply or explore by demographic trends of disproportionate applicability to an extent that we actually do anything to alter that outcome. The saying that "words will never hurt you" is simply untrue. Words perpetuate oppression in theory, throughout time, and within space without pause if no one interrupts their dynamics. We find ways to rationalize murder with created terms such as "influenza"²⁰⁹. But we can't seem to rationalize the intergenerational impacts of lack of access for a marginalized person to break any level or categorization of a law. Specifying the ways we are, as a society, informed by the disproportionate treatment from a larger context is crucial. Emotional, behavioral, and mental healthcare for privileged bodies are topics spoken about in a humanizing manner. When these health issues are discussed concerning marginalized, they are met with disciplinary actions. These actions are ones of violence, control, or categorization that leads into special education placement. These actions are taken without exploring the root of the problem (if one is present) and working through it with a developing child. We have to stop saying we don't see marginalized bodies. If we pretend we can't see who someone is it makes it absolutely impossible to see the disparity you contribute to. Forced ignorance doesn't help anyone just because it makes you comfortable.

Access to formal education came with the expectation of mental and behavioral compliance for marginalized communities. Understanding that veering out of absolute compliance came with the

²⁰⁹ MacMullan, Terrance. "Facing up to Ignorance and Privilege: Philosophy of Whiteness as Public Intellectualism." *Philosophy Compass* 10, no. 9 (2015): 646-660.

threat of falling into another institution; the criminal system. Being subjected to the criminal justice system or the oppressive dynamics of the institution of education ensured that the government had control regardless over a people's bodies. Through the practice of the "New Jim Crow"²¹⁰ and free prison/slave labor, the nation made clear that they would capitalize off of the body of the marginalized. This capitalization is pursued regardless of the institution the marginalized were a part of. The pipeline to the criminal justice system has always been fearfully palatable to those whose bodies have always been criminalized and disposed of²¹¹. This either/or practice of body filing exhibited the fixed value system and degrees of biolegitmacy we hold for the marginalized. There exist in a thin line between ostensible freedom within school systems and that of a school to prison pipeline that leads to an actual cage. This cage is one of stripped rights and minimal autonomy, being such a short stone's throw away from the intergenerational trauma of chains and dehumanization that never dissipated. This dynamic and inter-institutional relationship remained as a threat that this government has never paused to act on.

It's no surprise that the criminal and educational system work in partnership to ensure that it controls our society and who gets to function within it. These systems seek to break people in, to break them down, until they accept that all of their mind and body will never belong to them. This sense of belonging is unachievable unless one is willing to literally die to fight for the chance of self-authorship. This dynamic depletes access to resources to build one's self back up in a strategic way and continues to evolve towards the dissolution of our humanity's possibility.

Access based on documentation status, no matter how many individual institution policy amendments, still proves to be a federal problem regarding financial aid or unquestioned access to a higher education institution. Statements of equity and inclusivity don't matter if we don't act on them. Much like how test fee waivers for those of lower income, Pell grants and in-state tuition doesn't ameliorate the overall problem of testing or charging for it²¹².

²¹⁰ Alexander, Michelle. "The New Jim Crow." *Ohio St. J. Crim. L.* 9 (2011): 7.

²¹¹ Kim, Catherine Y., Daniel J. Losen, and Damon T. Hewitt. *The school-to-prison pipeline: Structuring legal reform*. NYU Press, 2010.

²¹² McNeil, Linda. *Contradictions of school reform: Educational costs of standardized testing*. Routledge, 2002.

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