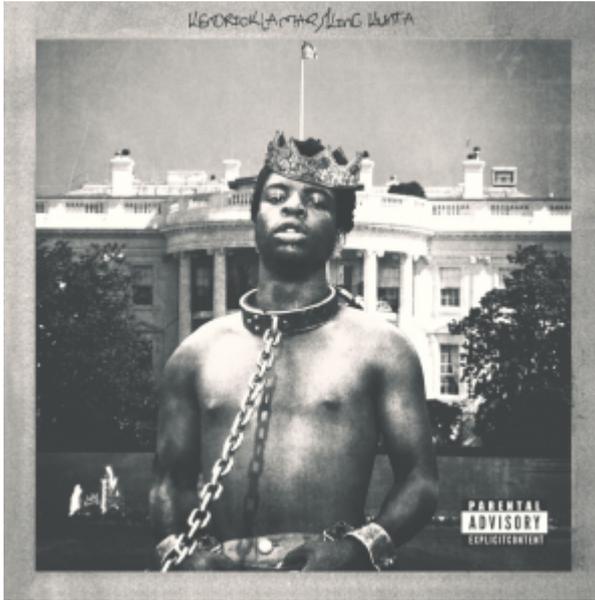


# Variations on a Theme: The Human Knot

written by Mark Gozonsky | September 12, 2016



*"I went runnin' for answers."* – Kendrick Lamar, *To Pimp a Butterfly*

For weeks before the UCLA Early Academic Outreach weekend, my big question was, "Should I bring my subwoofer?" Mid-summer vacation, it was hard to conceive of teaching without visibly throbbing bass. If I did bring my subwoofer, then 30 not-overprivileged high school kids spending a taste-of-college weekend at UCLA and I might really get down. If not, then what? That question kept coming up as I kept turning up the volume on the at-long-last vinyl edition of Kendrick Lamar's *To Pimp a Butterfly*. Its dense snippets of rap, jazz and spoken word sounded fine and finer the louder it got. Yet the responsible teacher deep within me also needed to know: does the funk help teenagers learn?

My sense of things was oh H yeah. At the very least, funk would drown out some of the crap they still have to learn in high school. At most, well, we would have to try it and see what records like *To Pimp a Butterfly* and *Maggot Brain* and *Three Feet High and Rising* might inspire when played in class with volume sufficient to get the uncovered, bare-naked subwoofer cone steadily shuddering.

My untested hypothesis is that blowing out the jams in such a fashion would be memorable and refreshing, and potentially useful in lowering the affective filter, which is teechur tawk for student bitterness, justifiable or otherwise, that creates resistance to learning. Much would then depend on the quality of pedagogy that followed.

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Said pedagogy for the day-and-a-half of teaching was basically to do lots + lots of reading and writing and discussing, all in support of Priority Number One: make academically motivated friends. This was something 30 kids from all

over the still vast swaths of ungentrified LA could do in a weekend to get more college-ready. Making a friend takes 10 seconds, right? You both do something you both like together and Boom: you're friends. So the plan also called for frequently changing Talking Partners and to attempt the Human Knot, the latter to make sure each one of those 15-to-16 year old rising juniors got a chance at the very least to grasp someone else's sweaty palm and hold on for the subsequent gyrations.

My subwoofer is a squat black monolith. I got it at the end of this past school year as my End of School Year gift to self, much as I got a turntable two years ago and amp + speakers last year. The speakers are noble; however, they do not quite do justice to the lower lows. The subwoofer reveals what's down below the murky rumble. The difference is like wearing goggles when swimming. At last you can see into the depth.

Yet after going back and forth and forth and back I decided nah, it was too much hassle to lug in the subwoofer and would also be a gaudy display of material wealth. During the regular school year, kids had gotten up and done a line dance to "Crazy in Love" on the second-to-last day of AP English Language with just my regular-old nothing-special bookshelf speakers. If the spirit was going to move us, it would groove us using the trusty back-up stereo in my garage.

Yet in reality – and here it comes, teaching's best-seat-in-the-house for the difference between good intentions and reality – the back-up stereo didn't work at all, even though worked just fine at me and my wife's last BBQ. Something happened between then (late May of 2016) and the now of this story (July 15-16).

Trump. Orlando. Brexit. Zika. And then, "You shot four bullets into him, sir."

Dallas police officers shot dead for revenge. Against this backdrop, my 30 kids in the UCLA Early Academic Outreach Program file in on Friday, July 15, 2016 with no music whatsoever because the sound system is broken.

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Lesson number one is how to pronounce my name: "goes" like what a pedestrian or bicycle or public transportation does on a green light, "on" like an on switch, s-k-y pronounced "skee" as in getting down a snowy mountain the fun way. Then it's everybody standing up in a circle, not in the bolted-down UCLA seats with cramped mini-desks attached. The circle doesn't have to be perfect, just everyone up and facing the middle of the room with no one stuck looking at anyone else's back, by the time I count to ten.

Good. Now I have a question. How are you? Let me give you an example of how you might answer. I'm dandy. OK. I turn to the left and it's fine, fine, great, tired, sleepy, sleepy, fine, great, fine. Everybody's fine, a few are sleepy, one of the counsellors is tremendous, everybody's said something and once you've said something, you belong.

We are going to get collegiate in reading by practicing annotation and discussion; in writing, by quoting sources and revising drafts. We will answer the most pressing question raised by *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation* by Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor (Haymarket Press, 2016) but not right away. We gotta work our way up to it. So first we write about an annoying trend, or something we could experience again as if for the first time, or how we typically celebrate our birthdays. Option 3 is in honor of it being my birthday tomorrow. I write with them, then discuss revision strategies for my quickwrite about the many Boston Crème Pies presented unto me over the now 55 years.

Then we read and talk and write about how humans ruined the oceans. Use a lot less plastic, is my personal takeaway. Their personal takeaways, I hope, also include heightened awareness of ocean pollution, re-acquaintance after five weeks of vacation with reading and writing, and most important, their Talking Partners' names. Make academically motivated friends, I hope to encourage them with Talking Patterns, which we choose by picking the corner of the room that calls out to us the most at the moment. Corner 1 is the Earth Corner, Corner 2 the Sky Corner; 3 is Fire; 4 is Water.

There are eight partners so write down the names of two classmates from your chosen corner and two from each of the other corners. That way you can work with people who are like you and also with people who are not like you. We will rotate at each break in the action from our Nijinsky partner to our Nina Simone partner to our Maria Rebecca Latigo de Hernández partner and on through Jhumpa Lahiri, Richard Diebenkorn, Louise Brooks, Ai Weiwei, and Kendrick.

We got to keep moving, keep moving, a day and a half to make academically motivated friends and learn college-ready reading and writing. There is a nut to it like "To thine own self be true" and "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you" and "There is no God but God" – however, it isn't any of those. It's "Find out what you want to know and share what you discover."

In our drab UCLA classroom in august and inspiring Royce Hall, we are basically writing three Article of the Week essays in a day and a half, with the twist being that you have to quote two classmates and analyze their perspective before you launch into your own interpretation. Also give a reasonably objective summary of the issue before you get into presenting those classmate perspectives so that people can tell you are a reasonable person and know what's going on. And share your position right at the very start, no elaboration necessary, just a clear statement such as "In my opinion, \_\_\_ because \_\_\_."

I give them a multi-paragraph fill-in-the-blank worksheet with the blanks deliberately too tiny to write anything in. If you leave those blanks big enough, kids will fill them in with purest whatever just to make it look like they are working. "In my opinion, oww because my leg" would be the classic of the genre, if there was a genre and it had classics.

These kids are motivated, however. They have come from all over the Southland and are not sitting around smoking or being depressed or skating. One of them

has caught a Pokémon. We have already established that things are mostly fine, end times notwithstanding. We read and talk and write about the ruination of the oceans and do not solve the problem.

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We then read and talk and write about a *New York Times* op-ed by Alain deBotton called "Why You Will Marry the Wrong Person" that came out at the end of May.

Spoiler alert – *spoiler alert* – spoiler alert

It calls for trying to understand our spouses as they are instead of as we want them to be. This seems like a teen-relatable topic and also a sneak-peak at where we're heading on race. My source for understanding who people really are vs. who we want them to be as a strategy for combatting racism is James Baldwin in "Letter to My Nephew," where he tells his nephew "You must accept them and accept them with love."

With "them" being whites who cling to believing that blacks are inferior even though they know better. Accepting students with love comes naturally to me, the way other people can dunk or wiggle their earlobes. Everybody's good at something. The struggle for me often involves showing that what I intend as love really is love, not sarcasm.

I let them handle the marriage article as homework and we start back up again on Saturday morning with a big ice cream breakfast. It seemed unfair to go on and on about Boston Crème Pie and not share a treat. One of the students, it turned out to be her birthday too, so there is much much singing and happy birthdaying throughout the day, often led by the counsellor who said he felt tremendous. I like this guy. His name is T.A. as in 1969 Met centerfielder Tommie Agee. He helps me figure out how to play music through the audio/visual deck in the room. This enables us to at long last enjoy "King Kunta" as well as "Atlantis" by Donovan to remind us of the oceans while we are finishing off three tubs of vanilla ice cream with several pints of blueberries and quarts of strawberries because it's the height of berry season and you want to model nutrition as well as love.

Lotta blueberries and strawberries left over, but no ice cream. Not even any for me. Oh well. It's only partially about me. It's mostly about *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation*, an admirable book that feels incomplete. I admire how meticulously it analyzes the causes for institutionalized police brutality against people of color: The War on Drugs, mass incarceration, blaming the victim, false color-blindness in the Age of Obama, indifference to black suffering as epitomized by non-response to Hurricane Katrina, wipeout of black capital from real estate collapse in the Crash of 2008, legitimization of a culture of poverty... that's a partial list of the reasons Taylor explores.

It's like a fingernails-on-chalkboard rendition of "Reasons" by Earth, Wind and Fire. The reasons – shriek – the reasons that we're here – hang head in shame and sorrow. And yet, moping around is for the other kids, the ones who

aren't at UCLA this beautiful summer weekend.

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The first thing to do is read and annotate, any old way you choose it. Write in the margins, do a double-entry journal, look like you're asleep but actually be reading with your head hunched over your lap to make your own zone of privacy. We are not reading the whole thing, only the concise conclusion, which gets right to it:

*Racism in the United States has never been just about abusing Black and Brown people just for the sake of doing so. It has always been a means by which the most powerful white men in the country have justified their rule, made their money, and kept the rest of us at bay (p. 216).*

After a first reading, what I want to hear are the students' questions: words and ideas they wanna clarify, topics they wanna talk about. My UCLA kids come up with five main things, so we huddle in the four corners and also in the middle of the room depending on which topic we want to discuss.

1. *The author's idea of creating a perfect society is unrealistic because even if we did abolish racism other problems would escalate to fill its place.*
2. *Immigration, gender and anti-racism are working class issues.*
3. *Those who are facing oppression need to learn to fight for our rights because if we don't we won't get them.*
4. *Black people are working harder than everyone else and still not getting ahead.*
5. *Why are we categorized by skin color?*

I am in the "why are we categorized by skin color" group. The girl who had asked the question points out first of all, that skin color is an adaptation to environment; and furthermore, since she is religious, that we all have the same blood in the eyes of God.

Another student says categorizing people by skin color is way to generate fear and hatred.

I go ahead and propose that skin color is a means of rationalizing slave-holding. One of the counsellors shares the phrase "*mejorar la raza*" which is used when someone "improves the race" by marrying a light-skinned or white person.

It feels like we were getting somewhere; not solving the problem but grappling with it. As it says a little lower down in the conclusion: "It is the struggle itself that can compel people to push for more." Even though the struggle may not prevail, it may still develop strengths such as the abilities to protest, organize and strategize that can be used further on up the road.

I buy that, but not Taylor's conclusion. She ends with a quote from 1920s Black firebrand C.L.R. James, in which he asserts that anyone who watches "Negroes" dance or pray can see their "hatred of bourgeois society and the

readiness to destroy it.”

If Taylor wanted to say that destroying bourgeois society is the path to liberation, couldn't she have summoned the rhetoric herself instead of standing behind her incendiary ancestor? That is my wish, but dismissing the finale as a cop-out is like denigrating a 90-yard kick-off return as a failure for not scoring the touchdown. It's not fair to make her do all the work. We have to drive the ball in ourselves.

So I tell the students we have one more question to talk and write about, and it's the one Taylor calls the foremost question on the second-to-last page – “Can we get free in America?”

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It's motivating to some kids when the teacher writes along with the class, so I start out with my favorite draft-starter: “I have no idea what to write, but if I did, I might write \_\_\_\_.” My blank fills with “freedom depends on the status of the least free among us.”

This comes from reading “The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas,” a parable by Ursula Le Guin about a Utopian society based on the suffering of a single youth, kept in a cage underground. The blissful citizens of Omelas are welcome to view the suffering youth. They occasionally interrupt their horseback riding and free love to feel bad about the arrangement for as long as they're down there amid the filth. Once they get back into the sunlight, Utopia kicks back in, except for a very few whose consciences have awakened. They're the ones who walk away.

I want to think of myself as one who would walk away – although the question is, where to go? The answer for me is to school, to teach, but that's not the answer for everyone. There are days when it's not the answer for me, either. I get cranky. I have lame-o lessons. There are days when I want to walk away, not towards social justice, just away.

Fortunately those days are not every day. Today, for example, once I have stated my position clearly at the start, the next step is to summarize the argument of *From #Black Lives Matter to Black Liberation*. Then I have to interview two students in order to report on their perspectives and explore the possibility of their views changing mine.

I ask a couple of students from around the room to repeat the plan. Then everyone has to give a thumbs up if they get it or a thumb sideways if they'd like further clarification. At this point I roam around briefly to let them know the teacher is looking. Most kids are writing; all of them are keen on looking busy enough to avoid being singled out for additional harranguing. The non-writers conspicuously wrinkle their foreheads, knead their chins, or search for the grail within their backpacks. One kid bounces a blue ball. I could take it but what would that leave him with? We have reached the point where we are going to do what we are going to do and now's the time to do it.

I interview my first student, a bouncy girl attracting a little extra of the

room's natural light and then giving it back with her own glow. Shaundra says the question's not that simple. She tells me, "It depends on who the 'we' is and what 'free' means."

"'We' is 'we the people,'" I had ready for her. Shaundra argues it's still not that simple because you could be in the 1% or in poverty; well- or poorly-educated; male or female. Much of your definition of "we" depends on your circumstances of birth. Furthermore, freedom is also not a one-size-fits-all proposition. The ability to express oneself, gain opportunities for growth, and to experience privacy all differ widely according to socioeconomic status.

I agree with her, because whenever I walk from my house to the grocery store, as soon as I get to the end of my block the houses turn into apartments and then into smaller apartments and then into tiny apartments. Outside of the tiny apartments is where you see the most kids, usually playing soccer or pushing scooters.

In Shaundra's opinion, freedom ultimately depends on each individual's initiative. She says, "If people want to learn how to be free, they will go and find out how to make their lives better. If they want to remain stuck, they'll remain stuck. The choice is up to you between having nothing and being up there."

We get into talking about walking away from Omelas, and how I first learned about this story in the book *Inferno: An Anatomy of American Punishment* by Robert Ferguson. He argues that in America we accept rape and torture as the status quo in our prisons because subjecting prisoners to such abuse makes it clear that They are not Us.

Shaundra, who has shown interest all along, now shows special interest. "What about people who do their time and when they get out, can't find a job? They may have changed in prison but no one will give them a chance to prove it, so they go back to crime because it's the only way they know of making money to support their families."

Her vividness gets me thinking more about the necessity of struggle. This kicks in even more strongly after we do the Human Knot, a game taught to me by my eldest-by-two-minutes daughter, who learned it in college. To do the Human Knot, you get groups of about 10 into a circle. Everyone in the circle raises their left hand and joins hands with someone on the other side. Then, the same with the right. Thus clustered and entangled, the group objective becomes to get back into a circle while still holding hands.

Each group suggests, implores, writhes; steps under and over bridged arms; occasionally crawls through tunnels of leg – sometimes making things better, sometimes making things worse. No one ever stops trying. The students writhe for five, six, seven minutes with no group ever restoring an unbroken circle. When a mist of palm-sweat settles over us, I call time and we debrief in an oval blob.

"Did we struggle?" I ask.

"Yes."

"Did we solve the problem?"

"No."

"Even though we didn't solve the problem, did we gain anything from struggling?"

Oh H yeah. Among the answers everyone says at once, the following stand out:

- *Cooperation.*
- *Teamwork.*
- *Listening.*
- *We got to know each other better.*

Back in class I interview another kid, the only one whom everyone applauded when we went around in a circle sharing an important detail from Taylor and our response to it. Basically he says we will inevitably be disappointed in seeking justice for individual acts of police brutality; what's needed is to get deeper into the causes and solve those. He's right. Shaundra's right. Ursula Le Guin is right. There is no one single answer. As my friend Laura's mom said long ago when Laura had chronic debilitating back pain, there is unlikely to be one cure-all. More likely is a series of five percent cures that eventually add up to feeling better. Another discovery Laura shared, 25 years later, is her recommendation to read *From #Black Lives Matter to Black Liberation*.

To end our session we make zines, which you always have to tell people is pronounced "z-e-e-n-z." These are accordion zines made by folding a piece of 8-1/2 by 11 paper into eighths, cutting the folded paper in half lengthwise, and then taping the two strips together. This is a pattern I got from the magazine *Illustoria* where my youngest-by-two-minutes daughter works.

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The theme of our zines is "What I Learned at UCLA." I ask the kid who was bouncing the blue ball. He says, "We had a lot of fun and talked a lot and touched each others' sweaty palms."

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After class, outside parking structure two, below the fragrant pines, I see someone sprawled face down and motionless on the otherwise pristine sidewalk. Behold: the least fortunate among us. I can't actually determine gender, only humanity. Their hair is matted and the backs of their hands and exposed ankles looked pink and raw. Their head is resting on a muslin tote bag patterned with colorbursts. Passed out street people are common downtown where I work during the regular school year, but rare in midsummer on the

UCLA campus. After all the day's theorizing, I can't walk away.

While dialing 911, I see the least fortunate person breathing, but that's a pretty low standard for doing unto others. "They were breathing last time I saw them" doesn't satisfy the requirements of conscience. I wait for paramedics on a bench in front of lot number two and gaze up at pine trees. The person breathes. I breathe. We have that in common. The air is pine-scented.

Eventually two campus police officers cruise up in their patrol car. We have a businesslike transaction, establishing that I'm the one who called. They say they'll check on the situation and that is going to have to be good enough. We are not going solve homelessness today any more than we are going to unruin the oceans. First aid says hang around until the more prepared caregiver arrives, so my work here is done. By the time I exit the garage, heading for birthday dinner, anticipating abundant ice cream, the campus police are gone and our fellow human is still on the sidewalk, still alone, but making an effort to get up, like someone trying to do one more pushup than they have the strength for, trying to summon the strength.

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*Music can hold enormous power in memories and experiences, transporting us instantly to an age, location, or person. What sonic joys, mysteries, disbelief, and clarity have you experienced? Identify songs of influence in your life and explore them like variations on a theme, melding syntax and song structure, recalling the seriousness or levity that accompanies. Whether it's an account of when a specific song first entered your life, the process of learning to play a song, teaching someone a song, experiencing the same song in different places as it weaves through your life, unbelievable radio timing, sharing songs with those in need, tracking the passing down of songs, creative song analysis, music as politics, etc, I am interested in those ineffable moments and welcoming submissions of your own variations on a theme, as drawn from your life's soundtrack. Please email submissions to [meganentropy@gmail.com](mailto:meganentropy@gmail.com) and keep an eye out for others' [Variations](#).*

*\*\*("song" is a broad phrase: could be a pop song, a traditional tune, a symphony, commercial jingles, a hummed lullaby, 2<sup>nd</sup> grade recorder class horror stories, etc)\*\**