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“Elegant, poetic, funny, *A Feel for Thinking* invites us to reflect on the practice and purpose of study. Combining poignant memoir with lucid analysis of key ideas, this profound little book should be read by organizers and other students of oppositional studies.”

—RUTH WILSON GILMORE, author of *Abolition Geography*

“*A Feel for Thinking* is a gift, a balm against despair, and a meditation on how we struggle to craft more liberatory futures in the wake of the present catastrophe.”

—ROBYN MAYNARD, author of *Policing Black Lives*, co-author of *Rehearsals for Living*, and assistant professor at the University of Toronto

“For the generation being politicized by witnessing genocide and the increasing brutality of the nation-state, this book provides foundational political thinking and feeling upon which to build their activism. Luk’s writing is a heartfelt balm for all of us struggling to meaningfully resist while also working to build a better world.”

—ITRATH SYED, Muslim community activist and instructor in Women’s Studies at Langara College

“*A Feel for Thinking* is an invitation to enter into the internal, epoch-spanning, deeply relational dialogue that is learning. It is also a promise that, should one choose to genuinely engage in the intellectual and emotional labor of learning together, worlds break open, portals to conditions of possibility otherwise reveal themselves. Luk calls us into ourselves and community through study and reminds us, we belong to each other.”

—ORLANDO R. SERRANO, Jr., Head of Pre-K-12 Learning, Center for Restorative History

A Feel for Thinking

Sharon Luk

*Lessons
for a
Political
Education*



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In reverence for one of my favourite Audre Lorde poems,
for each of you

Those Who Can't Do

Like many, I was a kid who loved learning and being taught new things. I also come from a Chinese cultural background, in which scholars are amongst the most respected in the social hierarchy. So, it was difficult as a child to understand the common American wisecrack, *“Those who can’t do, teach.”* Of course, by now I have seen and experienced what the quip is doing: spitting on women and people of colour, who have predominantly done the work. Vilifying social values of service and community to promote rugged individualism and capitalist enterprise. Discrediting the mundane practices of learning to justify ongoing apartheid and deskilling in public education and the latter’s seizure by corporate profiteers. Manufacturing an intellectual culture that sustains totalitarianism, war, and genocide.

I started writing this book to support myself, as much as anyone else, in facing the contradictions of our historical moment and the intensity with which they’ve expressed themselves. In my own daily life, these contradictions play out through my privileges as a tenured research professor at a proverbial college on the hill — sited as the latter end of remote “sea to sky” locations for Metro Vancouver’s big universities to ensure their inaccessibility to most people living here. Each time I trek up the mountain for work, I’m aware of the violences that elite universities enable. There are those that (on some levels) I can

feel but don't directly see or experience, like the development of war technologies deployed somewhere other than these buildings. I'm also aware of the violences that university leaders actively administer or contain on campus. Most of these I also feel, as in a generalizable sense that the land and its peoples suffer from the university's operational practices of extraction and enclosure, whether on the mountain campus or its city satellites. From this broad scope, I also directly see or experience more specific violences, the daily grinds of industrial-scale restructuring to steal the social wealth we all bring to campus and line the pockets of corporate university managers and investors.¹ And then, there are other aspects from which I've been sheltered, such as the physical policing and financial strangleholds imposed on marginalized students and staff, contingent faculty, maintenance workers, and (especially downtown) those trying to access resources like washrooms or a warm chair: systematic practices of social control that have killed people.² And like most institutionalized workplaces, colonial and capitalist planners also intentionally design these spaces to be "riot-proof," such that isolation, a condition of oppression, also becomes routinized in our everyday techniques to survive the constant pressures of the boss's watchful eye.

Whenever I feel worn down, I try taking to heart Primo Levi's cautionary insight about the effects of fascism on Jewish leftist resistance during World War II, that "we proclaimed ourselves the enemies of Fascism, but actually Fascism had had its effects on us, as on almost all Italians, alienating us and making us superficial, passive, and cynical."³ I started writing this pocket book precisely to struggle through these very tendencies creeping within me, and precisely at a moment in which dominant invocations of suffering endured during the Jewish Holocaust have helped generate another genocide. The multinational corporate and settler project to eliminate Palestinians from their land, commanded by

war criminals on the lam and enacted by state military and civilian groups alike,⁴ has set off a round of daily workplace violences that bridge across the varieties: the wars and genocides enabled far away, those deployed up close, the brutalities I witness, the abstracted ones I experience, and the avalanche of those I dread and can foresee and at times feel utterly powerless to prevent. This latter condition, distinct from solitude, reminds me of what James Baldwin describes as “fearful aloneness.”⁵

Thus, one simple motivation for this book is to validate that I/we are not alone in this fearful aloneness. Yet to validate this, it also becomes necessary to acknowledge that whether we like it or not, we are enlisted in a life-or-death struggle in which powerful people mobilize every resource on Earth to inure us to this pretence of life. Facing this fact requires greater and ongoing reflection. Writing this hence became something I could do, not just to continue the pressing conversations I have with colleagues and students to name the overwhelming mundane things that ail, enrage, terrify us — to triage through budget cuts, layoffs, insults, illnesses, physical threats. It was an opportunity also to open a quieter place we need, even if we can't all afford it, where we can affirm what we're doing here, why we keep fighting to learn, and what we're still hoping to gain from an education. Only such work can maintain that fragile bridge between all the constraints of a classroom, on the one hand, and how some form of classroom learning might still serve to bring us beyond those limits, on the other.

In these past couple years, heightened scrutiny or censorship imposed on classroom curriculum criminalized as “woke,” conjoined with greater surveillance and danger in the classroom space (e.g., mic and camera installations, uninvited and unidentified visitors), have blunted many of our abilities to continue this exact work in the formal classroom space. Every institution is different in this sense — in the degrees and kinds of repression, from general chilling effects to fatal crackdowns.

There are the creeping reforms communicated in mass emails, written in dense legalese to notify us of changes in management structure, workload policy, bloated fees, and emaciated services. New rules set by lawyers, MBAs, and for-hire consultants, people with no background or interest in public education, calling shots regardless of anything guaranteed in collective bargaining agreements. New administrative units called things like “Risk Assessment” or “Institutional Resilience,” with no clear explanation of what they do, who’s in charge, why they need committed resources, or how to reach anyone. There are also the bolder measures: the militarization, martial law, and use of force we are used to seeing in history lessons on Tiananmen Square but not normally considered possible in the “free world.” Regardless, across the varied forms of plunder and windfall, the message to the rest of us is consistent: shut up and do as you’re told ... but look happy!

Such directives from the top impact not only what we teach, but how we teach and what we spend our time as teachers doing. I have never, until now, had university fundraising be a mandatory part of my job description as a scholar, particularly one who primarily reads library books as opposed to constructs nuclear particle accelerators. On a larger scale, the gutting of university and government funds for instructors and course instruction has led to (or was prompted by?) a proliferation of automated online courses, the “cash cows,” whose sole purpose is to enrol thousands of remote students, many likely just hoping a non-degree certification in something fancy-sounding might ward off the worst outcomes of the fearful aloneness. This tuition money seems like pocket change compared to what North American universities were raking in from international students before recent border lockdowns⁶ — particularly in Canada, where, as Davina Bhandar’s research shows, student recruitment from the Global South is dominated by predatory immigration businesses, modelled more

like human trafficking rings than university services.⁷ Nonetheless, income from automation becomes a life raft for choked departments struggling to muster resources to deliver courses that still maintain some semblance of academic expectation, content, and social interaction. And on this micro-scale, in-person course learning agendas have become nothing less than a long “Terms and Conditions” contract everyone scrolls past to find and click the “Agree” button, even when they don’t consent or know what they’re consenting to. Recently, I had a student report me for what they judged as inappropriate curriculum, a more sophisticated way to complain that this bi*chy Asian lady didn’t give them the grade they wanted. My supervisor’s proposed solution, to spare me from more serious reprimand? Put more legal disclaimers in my syllabus, which is already pushing eight pages long.

In recounting the direction of recent educational trends, I don’t mean to imply some kind of nostalgia for the good ol’ days of formal learning or teaching. Each of us, to different degrees, can probably recount crushing childhood experiences we’ve had with teachers and other school authorities. Or perhaps those times we read something in a textbook that put a heel on the necks of our ancestors. Or perhaps just the creeping day in, day out of terror as we faced another day in a place that hated us and showed it. And though I didn’t grow up with the daily lesson often including active shooter drills, habituating traumatized kids to “run, hide, fight,” as an adult I’ve taught in these conditions. Within this overall disaster, then, it’s clearer that “those who can’t do, teach” is a logic tied to more systematic and ongoing efforts to alienate us from any curiosity about the world we live in or purposeful activity to investigate how it works. And while it’s thus mayhem to say that teaching or learning is not a profound *doing*, people train us to believe this precisely because they don’t want us to do it. This little book begins with these premises. And if we can resituate teaching and learning as

vital forms of doing (and not just as events we sit through, bored or afraid while waiting to do, waiting to live), it becomes easier to ask questions about what teaching and learning, as two sides of the same coin, actually entail. What are we doing when we study anything, if it's true that — just like all the processes that allow us to wake each morning — thinking doesn't just “happen” by itself?

As an interdisciplinary scholar who teaches in university classrooms, most of what I do with students involves reading, writing, and talking: tedious work to stretch our imaginations about seemingly fathomless problems. In my courses, these are the primary ways I've trained skills of critical thinking to help save our own lives (though by no means are these the *only* ways to do it, just the strongest ones in my skill set). The idea is that, by practising our capacities to engage language and create meaning in social life, gradually — akin to mindfulness or prayer — we are doing it all the time. On the one hand, I completely understand the perspective that in a world that the rich loot in broad daylight and kill before our very eyes (and then spend all their resources gloating about it), reading and writing seem not only a humiliating response but a luxury only elites can afford. And I agree with the criticism that studying, in itself, can't prevent or save us from these atrocities. Nevertheless, on the other hand and quite simply: I'm still convinced that critical literacy can make a difference, even if (and *because*) machines can now do all the technical work for us. For this basic reason, I continue to try and practise these skills and empower others to do the same, grounded in lived examples of how and why the politics of knowledge matter. And as our pathways to learning through formal and higher education continue to contract, at least for the extended now, this book aims to share or socialize the most important lessons I learned in university and, as these opportunities seem to be disappearing before us, to encourage people to keep finding other means to study.

Those Who Won't Do

Until recently, I've had the rare and fortunate experience of spending most of my time in higher education learning and working in departments that privilege the worldviews of Black, Indigenous, feminist, immigrant, refugee, working-class, queer, and minoritized communities of colour. Likewise, I've been surrounded and supported by mentors, colleagues, and students from these backgrounds. I've also been in academia long enough to have seen and survived several swings of the political pendulum, in which administrators varyingly instrumentalize "diversity" as either a boon or threat to the moral and market economies. I've had the fortune of getting hired when predominantly white institutions accept certain incentives to be more inclusive, and I spend most of my time in my jobs trying to maintain shared livelihoods and space that university administrators are hellbent on foreclosing. And while I'd intended here to summarize further tipping points in current battles over higher education, in the period between the North American sponsorship of Israel's genocide in Gaza since late 2023 up to the formal seizure of US state apparatuses by the "far right of a special type"⁸ in 2025, such a task has quickly devolved not only into an impossibility but a fool's errand. The point is: if you are reading this, you already know that things are bad (e.g., the kidnappings, the coups, the book-burning⁹) and the badness is crossing over more thresholds.

My current academic position is the partial result of a 2021 legal settlement to recognize and redress ongoing racial and gendered exclusion in Canadian higher education as a human rights violation.¹⁰ Much of my experience in this new job has thrown me right back to my childhood in the eighties and nineties, attending an Irish Catholic elementary school in my sleepy middle-class San Francisco neighbourhood: where the head pastor was charged with sixteen counts of felony sexual abuse (unsuccessfully prosecuted due to statute

of limitations) and eventually convicted for embezzlement of parish funds.¹¹ The altar boys from my class who held Monsignor's train spent their days graffitiing racist threats around town, groping girls without our consent, and bloodying Black and Arab boys in the community. All these activities were passively accepted or actively protected by dominant parish families that included the San Francisco chief of police at that time, and this is how I learned pretty early and plainly that *these* were the children of "the community," not the rest of us. From then to now and across these contexts, any problem — even those that management will recognize as big and complicated — consistently finds its solution in changing the expectations or behaviours of specific individuals who, as my goodwilled senior colleague recently advised me, need help learning how to communicate ourselves better to "this" audience. I look back on sad twelve-year-old me and think, God knows how hard I tried!

Since my tween years, I've grown less gutted by a desire to be liked — although it's telling that "this audience" treats me in my middle age the same way they did in my adolescence. In a way, this is generally everything one needs to know about how liberals incorporate social justice demands or language to describe their practices that remain subjugating in their existence. They take a first step to acknowledge that a situation just won't do, and then they charitably extend instructions, and maybe even marginal resources, for individual self-improvement so that there is no more situation. In other words: *you* just won't do, but they'll help fix you so that you might succeed in their world.

And these are the "nice" ones.

I chose ethnic studies as one of my undergraduate majors, and I ultimately returned to it in my masters, doctorate, and tenure-track job searches simply because I couldn't stay motivated in school otherwise, even knowing the crucial opportunities that a higher degree could

afford. For all the valid critiques of the discipline that have emerged, the plain fact of it at that time was enough for me — that it attracted students of colour into a prospective learning community, with aims to challenge and transform racism so that we could, together, honour our own needs, promises, and living traditions. That was all I needed to know to sign up. Eventually, as my formal role changed from student to professor, I began designing curriculum with that same struggling adolescent self in mind: what did I yearn to know in those times, and how could I now either reproduce or create ways to get those intellectual needs and desires met? Over the years, as students in my classes have chosen to write about various self-selected topics for their course assignments, it's still overwhelming sometimes when I see those needs still festering in the experiences of working-class and/or students of colour today. And it genuinely hurts whenever I see those needs take the form of shame (as opposed to, say, anger or bravado).

A lot has changed, though, in the past two decades since I've been teaching in university classrooms, starting as a teaching assistant. Across the various moderate-liberal research universities I've worked at and their different profiles and cultures, the gradual movement from covert to overt assaults on labour rights, democratic gains, and intellectual freedoms have damaged a collective capacity to make connections of all kinds. The dismantling of public and higher education has certainly not happened overnight; in the classroom, I've experienced it inch by inch, as it's grown more intractable each year to transform the pre-arrangement of classroom relations as either a corporate or colonial managerial ladder (for the unassuming) or a customer service platform (for the entitled). At the same time, the current wave of political repression, combined with the advent of large language models, or AI, has clearly thrown me and fellow educators into a deepening crisis regarding our work — even more devastating than the COVID pandemic, insofar as effects of the

latter remain as well. (Colleagues and I have joked bitterly about the day that higher education will primarily consist of bots reacting to other bots, with the tuition-payer simply making sure the internet stays on and all bills are paid on time to Comcast, Amazon, and Microsoft. Evidence suggests we are well into the sunrise of this day, although what we do now helps determine what can still happen next.)

So, what keeps us going in times bursting with dread and through such vicious blowbacks on who can make their way through higher education and on what we can learn here? Each term — and counterbalancing upticks in student exhaustion, indifference, and consumer complaints — a shifting threshold of students reach out and let me know that our class has enriched or transformed their lives for the better, in some way. From my heart, I reply that as much as they may have been looking for me, I am always also looking for them. We need and sustain each other. And it's in this context and spirit that I hope this book can find even a few more people, share some of the studying we can do together, and create improvised communities of learning, wherever you are and whatever else you're doing.

To these ends, it might help to explain a bit more how I approach political education in this book. When I was a teenager and began searching for a “political education” I wasn't getting in school, my method was not very different from how I was learning to navigate the social scene of adolescence. It all kind of boiled down to trying to associate with whomever was most popular amongst the circles I wanted into. To educate myself, and in an era way before social media and even before the internet, I just paid attention to the leaders that I heard name-dropped by whatever cool people I could come across, almost by happenstance, and I searched for their books at the library or used bookstore. And while I think there are strengths to this approach, particularly when one doesn't have much guidance and needs to start

somewhere, our ambition can be hindered by results that are not exactly holistic, consistent, or focused. Popularity isn't necessarily an indicator of quality, and even less so when in search of political thinking addressed specifically to marginalized people. The stuff available through mainstream channels might talk *about* us but, even now, much more rarely talks *to* us or *with* us (and I know that to follow this thought, I'm asking for your willingness to suspend skepticism of this generalized "us" that glosses over different degrees and forms of marginalization). A great example is one of the first books I came across in the genre of political education, Saul Alinsky's *Rules for Radicals*.¹² As its title suggests, this 1971 classic presents straightforward protocols for launching successful community organizing campaigns, written in a style that epitomizes the baseline for what many think of as political education: pragmatic, instructional, results-driven.

This book you're reading now is not exactly that. It's doing a different kind of work. I don't task myself with telling you what to think, and I certainly *can't* task myself with telling you what to do. I'm not writing this book because I think I know better than you, although I do hope I can somehow support your learning — if only because of the luxury of time I've devoted to honing my studies, practising my skills, and searching for wisdom. Likewise, while I privilege specific key thinkers and texts for practical purposes — to provide strong examples and to build the huge ideas in this book with stable scaffolds — this privileging is to facilitate explanations, not to reinforce a formation of another elite or in-crowd. None of us are here merely to learn the "correct" way to do or say something, or to dictate a solution that will work every single time for every single person. Instead, these lessons are for those who seek or already prioritize an intellectual practice of care, necessarily rooted in the tender humility that comes from realizing that the problems we face are dangerous and difficult. And in facing this abyss, this book can

serve as a resource to nourish creativity where the aspiration exists but the intellectual space may not, or it may not be robust enough to hold the weight of our aspiration. We have imaginative space here to hold our aspirations as well as our anxieties steady, so that we are stronger with them.

This reminds me of a time in grad school when one of my classmates kept picking apart the argument in a book we were reading, spending all their energy (and our shared class time and space) looking for what the author does wrong, rather than working to understand how the argument works, why it might matter, and how it can be useful in our own efforts. Exasperated by this kind of academic routine, our professor, Ruthie Gilmore, remarked, “Our task isn’t just to point out flaws. Our purpose is to understand how things work and use this understanding to make our own work stronger.” When I say now, then, that I mean to prioritize an intellectual practice of care, I’m talking about learning how to question and think in ways that help us get strong. And it’s this *how* to think that endures beyond the *what*. From this perspective, I’m passing along this first lesson in how to read this book, or any (haha, so I guess I *am* telling you what to do — as an agreement of reciprocity, or receiving the gift someone is offering, which is a condition of this kind of learning): for the moment, just put all your attention into trying to appreciate how a worldview works as it’s communicated through complex arguments and details. This part, as a scholar, I can help with. And once you better understand, only then can you grow in a sense of how or whether you will decide to carry these worldviews into your own life, which is largely beyond my control.

Ultimately, what has been most substantial in my own search for a political education — what I’ve uncovered about my own motivations, assumptions, and judgments, and what I thus share in this work — goes beyond just finding and learning from the greats. My political education

has been about developing means to inhabit my own presence and absence in ways that allow me to be a meaningful part of the world I live in and better know my role in maintaining its sacred beauty. As lofty as it all sounds, this desire grew out of very concrete and constant pressures that most minoritized people face every moment of the day, in all kinds of ways (and notice I say “minoritized,” as in people who are subject to social processes intended to make us feel small; relegated to a “minority” when most of the time, factually, we are part of a measurable majority). Starting from when we’re children, we face an onslaught of immediate and consequential choices about when we should speak and when we need to let things go; when it’s advantageous to go unnoticed and when to make ourselves known. Minoritized people, particularly those whose forms of queerness are visible, are often gawked at when we don’t want to be and rendered invisible precisely when we should and need to be acknowledged. And the advice we get can be just as confusing, as it’s always contingent. Like, “your silence will not protect you,”¹³ except when it does (like our right to remain silent). Or the more generic and presumptuous “see something, say something,” except when we can’t make out exactly how and what we’re seeing or how on earth to say it (like sometimes when you just know something big in your life needs to change). And the contingencies spiral without end. For example, what about when we see something and *want* to say something, but it’s within a larger context in which none of the options seem to work — like being aware of abuse within a community but knowing that alerting an authority could throw ourselves or someone we love into greater violence, with no further recourse? Navigating all this in relative isolation, regardless of age or maturity, can be maddening and put ourselves and others in profound danger. So, for me, political education has become about finding the tools to combat all forms of isolation and be in the moment, most prepared to do the things we need to do and doing the least harm as we make our way.

Making Do

It wasn't actually Socrates but Paulo Freire who really spoke to me about of the power of dialogical education: dialogue as a creative act, embedded in a struggle to transgress the "banking method" of learning in favour of *conscientização*, or a shared process of cultivating critical consciousness to end oppression.¹⁴ He called it "radicalization" before US politicians and military commanders turned that word into synonym for terror — though Freire acknowledged as he wrote in 1970 that *conscientização* radicalizes precisely because it forces us to confront our deepest fear of freedom (in his "Message to the Grassroots,"¹⁵ Malcolm X, though coming from a somewhat contrasting perspective in 1963, similarly remarked, "You don't know what a revolution is. If you did, you wouldn't use that word"). It is in this terribly beautiful spirit that I mean to dialogue virtually with *you*, the reader, as well as with the materials I reference in these pages and, equally crucially, with the materials I do *not* reference in these pages but could have and, some would surely say, should have. This is partly to say that I'm hesitantly eschewing the copious footnotes of other scholarly works that have influenced my thinking in sweeping ways or on big-picture ideas, instead including citations only when I reference someone's work explicitly. By doing this, I don't mean to overlook grounds and genealogies of knowledge or disrespect those whose knowledge on matters may far exceed my own. Rather, I avoid citing heavily throughout this book in the service of readability, or greater ease in exploring ideas we are holding, for the moment, under common consideration.

When I decided to go to graduate school, it was the early 2000s and I was in my mid-twenties. By that point, I'd hobbled to the end of my undergraduate career after taking some unexpected time off, in the afterfog of date rape and a series of my own questionable choices. Therapy wasn't really as common a thing at that time (at least, not that I knew

of); anyway, by then I was fully convinced not only that therapy was the indulgence of rich white people but that, in an amateurish reading of Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth*, anything other than Revolution was a waste of time. I eventually made my way through that impasse with the kindness of my best friend, who let me crash as a third roommate in her one-bedroom apartment in Berkeley and introduced me to all her student activist friends, an experience that heartened me to return to my own university and finish. In the subsequent years, non-profit jobs in education and youth development in the San Francisco Bay Area paid my bills and financed what I thought of as my *real* vocation: to radicalize our communities for greater social change through the daily activities of service and care work. I tried to model my life after the grassroots movements I admired, volunteering my time beyond the 9–5 at a woman of colour (WOC) feminist women's shelter and muckraking at the local indie news weekly. Intent on advancing the project of abolition, I also threw myself into volunteering at California Prison Focus and teaching at San Quentin State Prison, where, perhaps inevitably, surveillance of our activities got overwhelming.¹⁶ Intimate entanglement in so many layers of state violence made it impossible to ignore that I was in over my head with all the things I'd hoped I could just learn by myself, in the arrogance of my privilege and youth. Still skeptical that individuated therapy could offer me any real help, I considered graduate school as my next best option. I imagined it as time that I could use to find help in figuring out my enemies and my own missteps and get my path sorted again. As someone who was not necessarily in pursuit of a professional calling, I went in and out of three different graduate programs, the last one finally being exactly the one I needed to support me in what I needed to learn. Once I found that, I had no other plan or goal except to study my guts out, as if religiously. And I did.

I'm writing this small book now from Canada, where I moved by coincidence rather than intention — in other words, I got a compelling job offer here, but I wasn't decisively fleeing the tyranny of the States in favour of the promised land of socialized medicine. From this distance, I'm witnessing all the things in the US go down, staged in the form of macabre reality television — or commercial breaks in between the global theatre of atrocities — meant to delight the rich or tease the bloodthirst of those at their own edges. People here who know that I'm American say to me, "You must feel so relieved you're not there anymore!" But muscle memory and emotional habit are curious things. I don't know what my life would be like now if I was still living and working as an ethnic studies professor in Eugene, Oregon; I just know that I don't *feel* much of a distinction between "there" and "here." My nervous system still responds the same, and all my people are still there, fighting. Plus, in many ways it's hard for me to say if or how much "better" I think Canada really is.

All that to return to the point: The opportunity to write this book has come at a time when the learning experience I personally had been able to access or create within the structure of university learning — already challenging to accomplish *then* — has become, at this moment, relatively unthinkable. At the same time, I know that what I was able to make of my education did a great deal to save my own life, and I still believe that there are difficult things we can't just teach ourselves. My basic aim here is thus to provide some shortcuts and distill, in the easiest ways I can (though never easy), a few of the most essential lessons I learned through my formal studies. Drawn partly from what I've done in the classroom and partly from other areas of my intellectual life, the topics and materials included in this book relate to three main areas of questioning and learning. First, I focus on providing overviews of big-picture systems, such as knowledge production, racial capitalism,

nation-statecraft, and carceral geographies: emphasizing their general contradictions or tendencies and the circumstances through which they generate so much preventable suffering. Second, I'm interested in how those forms of suffering relate to, or manifest as, intimate experience, or the ways we encounter ourselves and the worlds we live in. And most importantly, in giving names to and explanations for these problems, I'm ultimately driven by the histories and resources that allow us to move beyond what the dominant rules expect for our lives. And while we already know and carry these gifts within us, recognizing and affirming them, especially when every technology on earth is involved in wiping them out, does something to activate our shared possibilities in ways we can't wholly predict or even understand. And this inexplicable quality is precisely how I know this work matters: the power and the potential of this unpredictability, amid the otherwise deadly things spelled out every time I hear the latest activities of CEOs and politicians on the daily news.

Tying all these inquiries together, most of what I study and teach revolves around two concepts or phrases I learned in grad school that completely transformed my worldview — as if by way of spiritual revelation — and as such, they also guide the through line of this book. The first is *social reproduction*, which I've interpreted in the most basic sense as referring to all the resources and processes necessary to keep something alive from one moment to the next. Relatedly, the other epiphany came from hearing the phrase in lectures by my mentors, “*conditions of possibility*.” Wrapping my head around what on earth that could mean, it was as if a two-dimensional world became three (or maybe more accurately, a 3D world became dizzyingly more than that). It's almost as if the phrase itself only makes sense as an endless question — that is, what are all the things that would need to come together in order to make something *possible*, or to create a possibility of something where that possibility has not yet materialized? Some

social theorists (many in Black studies¹⁷), for instance, began reading up on beginner's quantum physics to open out parallel lines of inquiry in their own fields. They worked through basic questions quantum physicists were asking about how subatomic particles come together or fall apart to cohere into tangible matter: How, *specifically*, do things materialize amongst the literally infinite possibilities or combination of ways that an atom can form? What relations of energy allow for certain particle combinations to cohere, causing other possibilities to decohere or fall away? Are there patterns to this, and if so, what are they? What are the particles doing that haven't cohered into anything yet? And what is that vast majority of "dark matter" that scientists know pretty much nothing about, besides that its negativity comprises most of the weight and energy of the universe? You can see why these problems are mind-bending.

At a more tangible level, though, these physical mysteries can shape our thinking about the social worlds in which we live by opening entirely new dimensions of struggle to consider. We're normally taught to ask questions about whatever is given as "reality" — if we are taught to question at all. Thinking about social reproduction and conditions of possibility, though, requires us to shift both our intellectual attention and privileged terrain of focus to the *dialectics*, or dynamics, both within and between what has already materialized as "reality," on the one hand, and, on the other, everything that is always still in the ever-fragile process of *becoming*. Much of the latter is invisible (and ultimately somewhat unknowable, if inquiries into quantum are any indication), and yet that process of becoming — social reproduction! — is precisely what makes *possible* anything we might, only later, come to take for granted as "real." In short, we're talking now about social struggle as an epic *creation* story: always in the making and unmaking, wherein impossible things can happen *if* we can discern and generate their minimum conditions of

possibility. We can thus think of studying not only as ongoing practice in discernment, but as something we can do to reproduce and sustain ourselves even when everything else seems impossible.

From this perspective, both the conditions and contents of this book demonstrate the interdependence of unique and shared studying, or practices that are at once individuated and communal. Most acts of reading and writing, even when they're happening with the support of others, involve creating solitude within that company to focus on certain things we must do, in essential ways, alone — the key word there being *focus*, as in anchoring or centring ourselves so we can think. But *alone* here doesn't mean all by ourselves, and communal learning in this sense implies recognition that there is ultimately no "alone" in the process. It must also always involve more than one — including the acknowledgement that within your "self" resides a mess of multiplicity. And in another way, communal learning suggests that our thinking and learning isn't conceived in terms of survival of the fittest or a competition to boost our own individual profiles, proving we're stronger than others to conquer all. Instead, our purposefulness in studying — to reproduce ourselves and give ourselves the best life chances — is interlocked with a broader orientation to living, in which we understand our selves in and *as* a dynamic part of the world around us, all fates conjoined. In this sense, learning itself becomes nothing more or less than a practice of social relation: to our selves, to ideas, to each other and all the wonders of collective life.

The rest of this book hence outlines and affirms this orientation to living and learning. Part One, "A Feel for Thinking," relates to techniques I've learned to approach intellectual labour in embodied ways, traversing that shadowy line between hiding behind books and letting them transform us. There are different ways to consider intellectual labour, and reading specifically, as an escape. One way is to read and study as a

form of escapism to avoid life's challenges. Distinct from that practice, though, this book regards intellectual labour as equipping ourselves with tools for an emancipatory escape — like when we must confront an immediate need to overcome someone or something coming to hurt us. There are subtle ways that reading can meaningfully help us elude harm. But activating these resources entails challenging the dominant norms of rationality, in which we're taught to act as detached observers of external phenomena, working our brains like instruments programmed to read and record facts accurately. Instead of this kind of thought, in Part One, I share how and why critical thinking requires a decisive avowal that we are alive and invested in our own learning, that we have things to gain and lose, and that the way we identify those things for ourselves creates movement and change in our environments. Part One unpacks the greater structures and stakes involved, both in controlling the ways people can show up in dominant contexts of civic engagement and in our own efforts to be sentient and engaged in the questions we face. Part Two, "Care Work," continues this line of argument to synthesize perspectives on racial capitalism, abolition, and social movements that privilege questions of *reproduction*, distinct from prevailing approaches that abide by stricter logics of economic rationality. Affirming the place and significance of radical imagination and grounded theory, I share the most compelling explanations I have found to understand racism and the work and meaning of freedom struggles.

Throughout this book, when I speak of tools and techniques of thinking and learning, I'm primarily referring to the ideas themselves. That is, I'm engaging ideas not merely to describe but to help *create* our realities. This latter assumption — of language as generative versus merely descriptive — also supposes that reality is neither singular nor fixed, not simply handed down to us by somebody else; rather, it is infinitely dimensional, constantly becoming and coming undone.

Unlocking the creative aspects of language, then, can give us an entryway to participate in these processes rather than be consumed in our relegated places as bystanders, servants, or casualties in “a land where other people live,”¹⁸ as Audre Lorde puts it. In thus working through language as a creative act, I’m sharing a practice of studying in which the words we choose to use, and the way we choose to interpret the words we read, are not automatic or negligible but necessitate our active social care and decision. Moreover, this care and decision is all for the purpose of naming our realities and infusing them with more generative possibilities. The ideas I’m thus offering here, best received as analytical tools rather than as answers, are means that have supported me in making sense of everything in my life, in a way that’s helped me create more livable space. Towards this end, the *method* I practise in this book is primarily close reading: doing the work to attend to the universe of meaning someone else is speaking from, the distinctive social world that animates their words, the weight of their critical choices and perspectives, and the problems and relationships that are reaching out to us as readers. Intended to provide guidance on how to work through ideas, this book models the labour of close and contextual reading so that you have examples and foundations from which you can keep building your own skills and applying these skills to your own life. In each of these regards, please note that my writing and thought processes tend to move in cyclical rather than linear patterns. As such, you don’t need to assume or expect to understand everything right away. Instead, the main ideas and concepts in this book circle back, repeat, and deepen for a more gradual unfolding of thinking and engagement.

I’ve had the great fortune this year to begin studying Choy Lay Fut (Southern Fist) kung fu with my seven-year-old, in an all-ages class at our community centre that happens to enrol primarily women of colour, elders, and families. Steve Si Hing drills in us the significance of

the basics, starting with Say Ping Ma, or “Square Horse”: the grounded standing pose that determines all proper body alignment, movement, power, and future growth. The same is true in a lot of other sports and crafts, whether we’re talking about yoga or basketball or musical scales or heeding that miniscule vanishing point in a perspective drawing — that is, coming back to the building blocks or basic foundations of an art will get you through challenges you can’t yet handle, during those times it seems like you’ve reached your limits of possibility. I think of the ideas in this book like my intellectual Square Horse, giving me the essential tools I need to ground myself, find my centre line, and generate a question when little else in the world feels right or makes sense.

In class or in conversation with students, the questions that come up often move us through the dominant worldviews we’ve all been taught, calling attention to the techniques trained in us to learn and reproduce them. It’s as if we’ve learned a basic grounding pose that’s contorted our whole alignment, breaking things in us that become our responsibility to heal. As we thus practise undoing all that, I’m also reminded of how much intellectual work still remains for us to do: nothing short of a systematic (not to say uniform) re-envisioning of the foundations, relations, and possible trajectories of the whole of the modern world. And when I say it aloud, I’m always in awe, too, of how much we’ve already been given, the abundance of struggle we carry, to keep forging through. This work thus involves not only our ability to critique the dominant world or diagnose its problems; rather, both our resources and our motivations for doing so must come from somewhere else and be building something different. My greatest hope for this book is to help share, in any small way, some of the tools and insights needed to fortify us — to continue the work we are already doing in our lives, to understand how our lives are connected with others, and to articulate our relations with the precision and power

needed to vindicate the varied sins and sacrifices of our ancestors. I'm humbled by the responsibility and honoured for the chance to play any part in this collective labour.

Excerpt