

**Using Personal Experience to Develop Unschooling Theory: A Book
Review of *Raising Free People: Unschooling as Liberation and
Healing Work* (2020, PM Press, Akilah Richards)**

Komencanto Eterna

Raising Free People: Unschooling as Liberation and Healing Work is a monograph that resists traditional academic classifications. Part memoir and part how-to book, unschooling parent, podcaster, and influencer Akilah Richards draws on her own lived experiences as a Black mother to write about her family's journey into deschooling and unschooling, and to give practical advice relevant to people at various stages throughout that journey. Richards provides accessible vocabulary to theorize unschooling not merely as a practice of granting children autonomy, but also as a process of liberation and decolonization rooted in social justice. Released at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, this text still provides much needed interventions into the culture of unschooling, tackling head on issues of race and gender that remain marginal in mainstream discourses on unschooling. The book is presented chronologically, addressing concerns at each stage of the deschooling process, and introducing relevant vocabulary that may be unknown to a popular audience.

The first chapters are titled with two key phrases that Richards returns to throughout the book: *schoolish* and *mad question askin'* (the latter of which was coined by Notorious B.I.G.). Richards presents being schoolish as thinking like the school (which can be interpreted as the broader educational-industrial complex) and contrasts it with self-direction (a term that she nonetheless problematizes and delves into). Richards "define[s] mad question-askin' (MQAs, if you're feelin' extra fly) as a process of questioning the intention behind your concern, instead of

questioning to try to resolve your concern. MQAs seek out causes; regular questions focus solely on addressing symptoms” (p. 34). The practice of mad question askin’ is used in later chapters to directly contradict schoolish epistemologies and schoolish life. Richards continues defining easy-to-use vocabulary throughout the book.

Chapters four, five, and six dive into the topics of bodily autonomy, consent, race, and colonialism. In them is an exploration of Richards’ personal shift from seeing unschooling as a lifestyle choice to seeing its linkages to intersectional feminism, liberation, and healing work. To create these linkages, Richards draws on her experiences both as a young person and as a parent. Richards describes how she was brutalized by a cop as a child and her family’s lacking response. She also discusses her concerns as a Black mother raising Black daughters, and how her parenting approach differs from other Black parents. She claims her approach is decolonial as it rids itself of the violence enslaved Black people were historically forced to enact on their children.

In chapter nine, Richards theorizes what she calls *parenting patois*. Drawing from her linguistic background as a Jamaican American, she discusses the need to intentionally create liberatory language to communicate with children rather than maintaining oppressive language. She explains that a sort of patois naturally occurs between children and parents, but often parents force children into oppressive language. The implications of this are wider than just linguistic; they imply that we should co-create our entire lives non-coercively with our children. Chapter ten goes into detail about how Richards practices parenting patois with her daughters. I find the theorization of parenting patois to be one of the most engaging parts of the book. It shows how unschooling yourself can lead to new experiences that allow for emergent, unique, and poignant

knowledge production. I would like to see more scholarship and discussion surrounding parenting patois and its implications, as, thus far, it seems underexamined.

It is evident that Richards is deeply intentional with the politics of language throughout this text. She doesn't conform to a conventional academic style of writing, instead using AAVE, Jamaican English, and occasionally profanity to communicate smoothly and emphasize key points and emotions. Another stylistic choice Richards makes is to include at length the perspectives of other people of color unschoolers (especially her daughters' perspectives via dialog). These stylistic choices make the book more approachable and accessible, especially for readers who come from similar linguistic backgrounds. This has helped afford it relative popularity. An audiobook version of the text was released in 2021, a rare occurrence for a book on self-directed education.

My only substantial criticism of this book is that it doesn't have citations. Richards places the transcript of the introduction to her podcast *Fare of the Free Child* between chapters six and seven. In this introduction, she names several of the most prominent scholars of unschooling, including John Holt, Carol Black, and Pat Farenga. Without specific elaboration on how each of these scholars influenced her, or citations to any of their specific works, it is difficult to trace how these thinkers and practitioners genealogically relate to this text. A robust citation system would be useful for building a concrete epistemology of youth liberation, self-directed education, and unschool in opposition to oppressive hegemonic ontologies of childhood, education, and parenting.

Despite this, *Raising Free People* is a landmark work in the literature on unschooling and self-directed education. It is one of the first books that delves deeply into unschooling as it relates not just to colonialism, but also to intersectional feminism, travel, bodily autonomy, and

anti-Blackness. The way that the text is written prioritizes blurring the lines between unschooling theory and practice, using them to generate one another. In this way, the text is not just useful for parents who want to unschool, but also researchers of unschooling.

References

Richards, A. (2020). *Raising Free People: Unschooling as Liberation and Healing Work*. PM Press.

Biography: Komencanto Eterna is a first year M.A. student in Comparative Studies at The Ohio State University. Over the past four years, she has led grassroots youth movements in Columbus Ohio, co-founding the organization Central Ohio Youth Liberation in 2021. Through this, she has engaged in youth liberation, unschooling, and deschooling theory and scholarship, and she currently acts as a research assistant for the Learning and Liberation documentary series. Her other interests span queer ecologies, decolonial theory, and interlinguistics