

# Trajectories Towards Transformation: An Abolitionist Analysis of Student Organizing at Mount Allison University

BY

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## **Abstract**

This thesis explores student organizing at Mount Allison University through frameworks of analysis derived from prison abolitionists. In the context of the research, abolition is regarded as a broad theory of emancipation and social transformation, presented in conjunction with theoretical perspectives on Black Marxism, decoloniality, and critical pedagogy. Seven semi-structured interviews were conducted with self-identified student organizers, surrounding the themes of accountability and social change. A qualitative analysis was conducted on the contents of the interviews. Three major themes emerged: neoliberal organization, community accountability, and transformative practices. In the following chapters, these themes are analyzed in correspondence with existing literature, which draws from the works of scholars and organizers such as Angela Davis, Paulo Freire, Ruth Wilson Gilmore, and Mariame Kaba. Additionally, the research also references studies on other social movements, including the Zapatista Movement, the Maple Spring protests, the Sir George Williams University student uprisings, and the fossil fuel divestment movement. The findings reveal the importance for developing critical consciousness and community accountability practices in organizing, as well as identify the reproductive role of neoliberal institutions.

## Acknowledgements

I offer this research as a love letter to all the people and experiences I encountered as I grappled with what it meant to be an organizer. Looking back on the last four years, I truly feel that I had undergone a profound metamorphosis. I had come to recognize, with crystal clarity, the person I hope to become and the life I yearn to build. I find myself deeply indebted to everyone in my life who supplied me with the strength to be passionate, honest, and firmly grounded. Whenever I feel overwhelmed and lost, I come back to the things we have nurtured throughout space and time, and I remind myself that I am not alone.

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## **Trajectories Towards Transformation: An Abolitionist Analysis of Student Organizing at Mount Allison University**

I encountered the notion of prison abolition at the beginning of 2020. The meaning of the movement struck me with devastating clarity in June, as I witnessed mobilizations that spread like wildfire in the heart of the empire. The rising calls to “defund the police” signified a potentially shifting popular consciousness. Such a consciousness, with its increased awareness towards the failures of the carceral system, was poised to question the necessity of prisons and policing (Kaba, 2021; Taylor, 2021).

Ruth Wilson Gilmore proclaims: “the path to abolition goes through every aspect of life. There is no body and no form of life that is outside the imperative for abolition today” (Haymarket books, 2021, 9:24). In this project, I explore the ways through which abolition weaves across different emancipatory struggles. I formulated the research through my own experiences as a student organizer, aiming to study the position students occupy within social movements. Student organizers reckon with a number of tensions and contradictions. Past movements have demonstrated that students play a vital role, as either a reactionary or revolutionary force. Due to our positionality in academia (and in the case of Mount Allison, a predominantly white, affluent institution), many of us are insulated from the risks that come with being on the frontlines. However, many of us also come from marginalized backgrounds and are deeply committed to transforming our communities.

Through a series of interviews, student organizers at Mount Allison University were asked to speak about their involvements, how they understood accountability, and how they viewed social change. The interviews examined how abolition was applied, intentionally or unintentionally, in organizing spaces. The format of data collection took a pedagogical approach, where the experiences of organizers served as the point of contact to develop a conversation about transformative practices. This format generated a diverse array of testimonies and

perspectives. Ultimately, my project blossomed into a broader investigation about transformative social movements and the reproductive role of neoliberal institutions.

In the following chapters, I compare the experiences of student organizers from Mount Allison University to theories and anecdotes from a range of movements. I rely on the analysis of abolitionist organizers, Neo Marxists, Black radicals, and decolonial thinkers to guide my investigation. The interviews are analyzed through three core themes: neoliberal organization, community accountability, and transformative practices. I conclude by demonstrating the implications of the study for student organizers and future directions for researchers.

### **A Note on Language**

Throughout my thesis, I typically use “organizing” as a term that describes the conscious, continuous work to orient the masses towards collective liberation. This is distinguished from the more commonly used term “activism”. This distinction avoids connotations with “activism” as defined by Paulo Freire (2018), which refers to actions undertaken *without* critical reflection. I have avoided labelling myself as an “activist”, because co-optation and commodification of the term have deprived it of its radical connotations and diluted it into a neoliberal occupation. To me, this undermines how attending to the life and wellbeing of each other is an intrinsically human duty. Therefore, I rely on the language of “organizing”, borrowed from the analyses of revolutionary thinkers such as Kwame Ture (ITS-IN-SCOPE, 2021) and Angela Davis (2005), to describe actions towards social transformation.

I use “transformative practices” to encompass actions undertaken on interpersonal and systemic levels to enact accountability and positive change. This incorporates Freire’s (2018) concept of revolutionary praxis as “people’s transforming activity” (p. 101) and abolitionist perspectives on transformative justice, which capture the interpersonal and structural dimensions of harm (Kim, 2018). The combination of two theories of change reflects the study’s commitment to exploring abolitionist teachings across multiple forms of revolutionary

organization. The actions of student organizers may not fit neatly within terms provided by Freire or Kim, therefore “transformative practices” is adopted as an expansive term to describe them.

### **Reflections on Positionality**

Academic research cannot be value-free. Therefore, academics must remain attentive to their positionality and relationship to their research. This is especially pertinent in the context of my thesis. Abolitionist scholar Joy James (2003) observes academia’s commodification of political prisoners and their struggles:

Here (in academia), especially, political prisoners as 'imprisoned intellectuals' find themselves in peculiar situations. At the university, they can be encased in window displays, bartered and sold in the academic market as the objects of inquiry for studies in political resistance or pathology. Showcased in the scholarly text, trade book, Masters thesis, doctoral dissertation, a course, conference paper, or anthology, their currency accrues, but often only to be managed by others. (p.5)

James is critiquing academic research driven by market forces and alienated from their subjects of inquiry. Academia’s tendency to dispassionately examine social movements overlooks the deeply personal and emotional nature of them. Revolution is a life-affirming practice. Those who are committed to studying them must attend to the twin dimensions of rigorous practical analysis and radical love for the oppressed.

Before I am an academic, I am a human being in community with others. I am a Chinese person from a working-class family, but our Canadian immigration status is testament to the socioeconomic advantages we possessed in our home country. I have the privilege of attending Mount Allison University, a prestigious liberal arts institution in a small rural town. Despite being quite active within a group that is perceived as “radical” by many of my peers, I am still a

NBPoC and a settler organizing on a predominantly white campus. My proximity to power protects me from experiencing the brunt of carceral violence and ecological destruction.

Nonetheless, my topics of inquiry are anything but impersonal. Abolition offered me life-saving ways to articulate my own experiences of alienation and isolation. It also drew my attention towards the great, grotesque injustices inflicted by carceral institutions. In addition to being a student of abolition, I am a young person who, like so many others across the world, constantly reckons with the impending climate catastrophe. In the last three years, I have been predominantly involved with Divest MTA, a group of students from Mount Allison University organizing towards institutional divestment from the fossil fuel industry. I make references to Divest throughout this work, because I cannot conceive of a way to study student movements without making sense of my position within them. My research emerged from my constant grapples with accountability and social change. I hope to engage the research participants, movement organizers, and revolutionary theorists included in this study as human beings deeply committed to improving our collective wellbeing.

## **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical foundation of my research is built from a number of intellectual traditions, in order to make sense of the dynamics of organized resistance as embodied by university students. In this section, I introduce crucial perspectives from abolitionism, Black radicalism, decoloniality, and emancipatory pedagogy. These interlocking bodies of thought demonstrate the centrality of critical and reflective action within movements of emancipation. Furthermore, they adequately contextualize the current conditions for movement organizers, and aid me in analyzing the capacities and limits of students within hegemonic educational institutions.

### **Abolition: A Theory of Social Transformation**

The contemporary abolitionist movement confronts how prisons and mass incarceration serve as a crucial form of coercion and control in modern Western societies. In *The New Jim Crow*, Alexander (2010) demonstrates that prisons represent the contemporary manifestation of a racial caste system in America. A coordinated effort from all levels of state institutions in the 20th century constructed the racialized notion of the “criminal” and drastically expanded the carceral system. Alexander argues that the label of criminality utilized race-neutral language to justify the persecution, segregation, and confinement of human beings. Despite the color-blind branding, these practices remained disproportionately directed towards racialized communities. Similarly, Maynard (2017) argues that the prisons and policing constitute a major tool in state-sanctioned anti-Black violence in Canada. Black feminist abolitionists have consistently drawn connections between the functions of Slavery, Jim Crow, and carceral institutions in American and Canadian society. Indigenous abolitionists have brought attention to the ways through which prisons enforce the political legitimacy of the settler colonial state. Nicols (2014) indicates that prisons are not only sites for racialized violence, but also a manifestation of the settler

colonial state that seeks to impose its laws and authority over sovereign Indigenous nations, rendering them domestic political subjects.

Abolition, as a theory of social transformation and a radical movement rooted in the centuries-long struggle against Slavery and colonization, provides a crucial foundation for this project. Abolition does not simply mean eliminating police and prisons. It is fundamentally a project of creation, one which interrogates the conditions of structural and interpersonal violence where prisons and policing are posed as the sole solution. Abolitionist praxis means creating conditions that render prisons obsolete (Davis, 2003). Davis (2005) discusses the application of Du Bois' notion of abolition democracy, which regards the abolition of Slavery as an incomplete emancipatory project. Abolition democracy requires eradicating the founding conditions for Slavery, which must be achieved through building institutions that guarantee the economic and social wellbeing of emancipated Black people. Abolition is not a single-issue movement. Incarceration further entrenches the oppression of all vulnerable groups, including women, queer people, disabled people, poor people, etc. (Kushner, 2019). As Davis (2016) notes, the Black radical tradition that gave rise to abolitionism is related to all movements of emancipation. The concept of abolition democracy poses prisons as a manifestation of an oppressive and undemocratic state. Therefore, abolition must be regarded as a broader critique of state violence (Nicols, 2014).

The abolitionist movement provides revolutionary frameworks for conceptualizing accountability and justice. Conceptualizing and navigating pathways to justice outside of existing institutions is especially relevant when organizing against structural violence and seeking collective emancipation. Furthermore, abolition's interconnections with other social movements yield important lessons regarding movement building and radical organizing. Davis (2005) indicates that prisons are part of "established circuits of violence" (p. 46) built from global systems of oppression. Abolition, as an analysis of state-sanctioned violence, explores

how oppressive systems coalesce to generate conditions for precarity, conflict, and alienation. Understanding the expansiveness of capitalism, racism, incarceration, and militarism allows abolitionists to build a global network of struggles beyond spontaneous, fragmented movements.

Abolitionism as a theoretical framework illuminates a path of inquiry for student organizers. When abolitionist consciousness is understood to be oriented towards total liberation from the colonial capitalist state, and abolitionist organizing a radical ideological and practical break from hegemonic institutions, the abolitionist framework can serve as a litmus test for what constitutes transformative action. The analyses of abolitionists, utilized in conjunction with the works of Freire (2018), Robinson (2000), Mignolo and Walsh (2018), etc., formulate an account of power and oppression that is incredibly relevant for current social movements. Abolitionism is inextricably connected with the task of fostering radical imagination (referring to ways of conceptualizing total, revolutionary social transformation), which emerges through emancipatory pedagogy. Regardless of whether university students are organizing explicitly for abolition or not, their understandings of accountability and social transformation reveal their perception of hegemonic institutions and their reproductive roles.

### **Black Marxism: Cultivating Critical Consciousness**

Black Marxism and Black radicalism are key theoretical contributions to the Neo Marxist tradition. Similar to other Neo Marxist theories, Black Marxism formulates a critique of capitalism that accounts for its economic, social, and ideological dimensions. However, Cedric J. Robinson (2000) indicates that Black Marxism's critique of capitalism derives specifically from the Black radical tradition, the conditions of which are laid in the indigenous epistemologies of the African continent. Black Marxists such as Robinson (2000) expand Marx's economic analysis to conceptualize capitalism as a system inseparable from anti-Blackness, white supremacy, patriarchy, and colonialism. According to Robin Kelley, instead of viewing these

oppressions as distinct and separate systems, Black Marxism suggests that they are deeply intertwined (KODX Seattle, 2017). Therefore, Kelley states that capitalism must be understood as a racialized and gendered structure of power. This formulates a comprehensive critique of racial capitalism that corresponds with abolitionist notions of total social transformation.

The Black radical tradition is inextricably connected with the centuries-long resistance to enslavement and colonization, yet it cannot be defined merely through the birth of racial capitalism (Robinson, 2000). Robinson describes Black radicalism as “the continuing development of a collective consciousness informed by the historical struggles for liberation and motivated by the shared sense of obligation to preserve the collective being, the ontological totality” (p. 171). This holistic approach attends to both the material conditions of racial capitalism and the ideological formation necessary for collective liberation. Gilmore (2019) observes how Robinson “persuasively argued multiple geographies that can, if carefully examined, show both residual and emergent alternative – or if you will, abolition – life ways at everyday, expressive, resistant, and revolutionary registers” (p. xi). In this sense, the Black radical tradition is intrinsically present across movements of emancipation.

The notion of an emergent collective consciousness is reflected in the works of modern abolitionists and Black radicals, such as Angela Davis (1971), who indicates that to resist the expansion of the carceral system, prisoners must understand their status as political prisoners: “they are political prisoners in the sense that they are largely the victims of an oppressive politico-economic order, swiftly becoming conscious of the causes underlying their victimization” (p. 37). Similarly, prison organizer George Jackson (1972) states that “consciousness is the opposite of indifference” (p. 22). Consciousness is therefore not only essential for developing a critical awareness of one’s own conditions of oppression, but also necessary for establishing a sense of connection with the oppressed masses.

Freire (2018) echoes this understanding in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, indicating a need for revolutionaries to realize the conditions of oppression and to be in communion with the oppressed. Any self-proclaimed revolutionary must approach the oppressed with humility, love, and trust in order to be “reborn” (p. 61) with the oppressed. This rebirth, in which the revolutionary leaves behind any marks of the oppressor class and joins the struggle of the oppressed, signifies the emergence of a collective consciousness. Robinson, as cited by Myers (2021), expresses similar sentiments when problematizing the presence of prisons and defending the right of prisoners to be authorities on the brutality of incarceration. In his teachings, Robinson sought to place emphasis on the role of the followers and the masses in social movements (Myers, 2021). In this sense, Black radicals and Freire have all established collective, revolutionary consciousness to be a crucial part of any emancipatory project.

### **Decoloniality and Emancipatory Pedagogy: A Jailbreak of Imagination**

Consciousness does not only require understanding the conditions of oppression, but also a commitment to radical imagination. Abolitionists such as Kaba (2021) refer to this ideological leap of faith as a “jailbreak of imagination” (p.52). Mignolo and Walsh’s (2018) critique of modernity and coloniality reflects an ontological challenge to racial capitalism. According to Mignolo and Walsh (2018), Western modernity demonstrates a worldview which regards time as linear and forward moving. The expansion of colonialism and capitalism reflects modernity’s prioritization of so-called growth and development. However, modernity’s promises of progress are fulfilled through the organized violence of colonialism and capitalism (Guggenheim Museum, 2016). Similar to Black Marxism, the theory of decoloniality attends to the ideological and social dimensions of modern racial capitalism, situating it as an ontological and epistemological phenomenon within interlocking global processes. Mignolo states that “putting life at the service of institutions is the basic principle of modernity/coloniality, of Eurocentrism, and of the colonial matrix of power... Decoloniality emerges out of the need to

delink from the narratives and promises of modernity” (p. 145-146). The ontological and epistemological domination of Western modernity is facilitated through violent acts of subjugation and exploitation. Grosfoguel (2013) reflects on how material oppression of colonized peoples serves to eliminate alternative epistemologies and reinforce the global hegemony of Eurocentric knowledge. The praxis of decoloniality calls for reviving a plurality of worldviews and challenging epistemological universality (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018).

Freire (2018) highlights the role of emancipatory pedagogy in catalyzing such a social transformation. Systematic education, as a product of modern racial capitalism, seeks to replicate the dynamics of domination and extract consent from the oppressed. Freire explicitly refers to the need to develop an emancipatory pedagogy *with* the oppressed. Such a pedagogy requires political organizers to reject paternalism and engage communities in authentic dialogue and revolutionary action. This reflects Grosfoguel’s (2013) call for educators to embrace epistemic plurality and challenge the prescription of Eurocentric knowledge. Education for liberation, according to Freire (2018), entails subverting the dynamics of domination by being in communion and in dialogue with the oppressed.

Emancipatory pedagogy reflects a commitment to achieving liberation through prefigurative practices (Bolin, 2017). This corresponds with Mignolo and Walsh’s (2018) proclamation that decolonial praxis cannot be articulated through existing structures of dominance, such as the colonial state. Similarly, abolitionists utilize transformative justice practices to generate tools to respond to harm without incarceration (Kim, 2018). Developing spaces for transformative justice cultivates a broader vision for a world without prisons. Emancipatory pedagogy, transformative justice, and decolonial praxis are actions that blossom from radical imagination. Consciously developing a “jailbreak of imagination” amid organizing for social change allows organizers to manifest their vision for the future *in the present*. These

frameworks provide crucial grounds for interpreting the work of student organizers within the university.

### **Freirean Praxis: Undertaking Transformative Action**

Transformative action can be understood through Freire's (2018) notion of praxis. Praxis is an essentially human activity. Humans engage continuously in the historical process through creation and transformation of the world. Freire states that praxis ultimately becomes the *raison d'être* of the oppressed. Revolutionary activities are not simply hobbies or careers, praxis is intrinsic to one's very being and purpose.

A central characteristic of revolutionary praxis is dialogical action. The foundation of dialogical action is formed through critical awareness of the conditions of oppression and the necessity of unified resistance. Furthermore, dialogical action is dependent on forming a reciprocal relationship between leaders of movements and the oppressed masses (Freire, 2018). Freire argues that "dialogue with the people is radically necessary to every authentic revolution" (p.128). A revolution is distinguished from a coup because it is pedagogical. Whereas a coup merely entails seizing the existing state apparatus, a revolution requires cultural and social transformation enacted through dialogical action.

Jackson (1972) draws attention to Freire's (2018) conceptualization of praxis as reflective action, pointing out the need to establish a dialectical relationship between revolutionary theory and popular struggle for American abolitionists. Notably, many mainstream social movements may fall short of Freire's (2018) definition of praxis, as it is defined through critical reflection *and* liberatory action. Davis (2005) warns that in the age of social media and "instantaneous movements" (p. 86), it is easy to mistake mobilization for organization. The masses taking to the streets is merely one dimension of organization: "If the demonstration is the monumental public moment and people return afterwards to lives they construe as private, then, in a sense, we have unwittingly acquiesced to the corporate drive for

privatization” (p. 86). The separation between public moments and private lives that Davis is referring to describes the failure to make praxis the *raison d’être* of the oppressed.

Transformative justice can be understood as a form of abolitionist praxis. It applies the principles of abolition towards reimagining and shifting the current conditions of the justice system. Restorative and transformative justice are two approaches typically employed as alternative “solutions” to criminality (Kim, 2018). Notably, despite being developed as an alternative to incarceration, restorative justice programs have historically been organized by law enforcement and the state. Transformative justice differs from restorative justice as it is typically adopted within social movements for prison abolition. Consequentially, transformative justice approaches illustrate how forms of structural violence, such as poverty, racism, colonialism, etc., facilitate conditions for interpersonal violence (Kim, 2018; Mingus, 2019). Therefore, it is not merely a downstream response to crime, but also a proposition for transformation that addresses crime at its roots. Kim states: “While the term restoration implies the desire to return to such conditions [of harm], transformation requires moving beyond” (p.227).

This vision for broader social change corresponds with Davis’ (2005) notion of abolition democracy. Communities mobilize networks of care to formulate a continuum of interventions to interpersonal and state violence (Mingus, 2019). Transformative justice practices conceptualize accountability as a communal process. Solutions for harm are not prescribed upon communities, but rather developed collectively through dialogue. Key elements of transformative justice practices, such as collective accountability, just relations, and dialogical action, all closely relate to central tenets of emancipatory pedagogy (Freire, 2018). Transformative justice, as the conscious act of realizing the abolitionist vision, corresponds with Freire’s (2018) concept of dialogue and praxis as means of transformation. Student groups and community organizations offer spaces for transformative dialogue to emerge. Therefore,

transformative justice, as a set of principles and practices adopted in social movement spaces, are a crucial area of interest in student organizing.

### **Neoliberal Institutions: Mapping the Terrain for Student Organizing**

Neoliberalism, as an economic model and a social system, contains core characteristics such as individualism, competition, free market capitalism, and so on (Anderson, 2018). Kelley observes that the expansion of neoliberal capitalism leads to increased privatization, austerity, and authoritarian governance in response to capitalism's crisis (KODX Seattle, 2017).

Abolitionists such as Gilmore and Kaba observe that neoliberal policies which seek to dismantle the welfare state and construct "organized abandonment" are often accompanied by an increase of policing and organized state violence (The Graduate Center, 2020). The notion of organized abandonment is echoed by Freire (2018), who critiques the loveless and dehumanizing nature of oppression. Freire further states that hegemonic institutions exist "within the structures of domination" (p.154) to manufacture consent of the oppressed and reproduce dynamics of oppression. Within the context of racial capitalism, neoliberalism must be considered a reflexive drive for the capitalist system to preserve itself in the face of its contradictions.

In the context of universities, neoliberalism manifests as increased focus on performance, profit, career preparation, and standardized evaluations (Richter et al., 2020). Heightened levels of isolation and competition within neoliberal organizations serve to diminish reciprocity, solidarity, and even morality (Courpasson, Younes, & Reed, 2021). Richter et al. (2020) describe the neoliberal university as an entity where "prioritization of profit, management, and labor intensification views students as individual customers rather than as holistic members of larger communities, and views faculty as education managers" (p.1016-1017). This echoes Freire's (2018) critique of "banking" education, where systematic processes are utilized and students are treated as dehumanized vessels to be filled with knowledge from

the expert. The neoliberal management of universities generates alienation and inhibit radical imagination both inside and outside the classroom.

Freire (2018) draws a distinction between hegemonic education and educational projects based on emancipatory pedagogy. Educational projects are carried out with the oppressed with the explicit goal of political organization. Emancipatory pedagogy cannot be fully realized within neoliberal educational institutions, where the dynamics of oppression are left unchallenged. Student organizers must navigate this contradiction between hegemonic pedagogy and emancipatory pedagogy. Furthermore, they must reckon with the neoliberal co-optation and cannibalization of social movements. Their envelopment in the university may stifle their critical consciousness, while their organizing experiences may create opportunities for raising it.

## **Review of Literature**

This section further develops main concepts discussed in the theoretical framework. It provides existing literature on emancipatory pedagogy, abolition, and revolutionary organizing. The works presented serve to highlight the scope of the emancipatory project, the transformative actions required, and how resistance is taken up by hegemonic institutions such as the university.

### **Laying the Foundations**

Freire (2018) asserts that consciousness-raising is crucial in all movements of emancipation. Such a critical consciousness is essential for the oppressed, as it allows them to realize the conditions of their oppression and their collective agency in overthrowing it. Davis (2005) observes that mass mobilizations without a critical consciousness cannot result in transformative action. Critical consciousness reveals the distinction between mobilization and organization. Kwame Ture points out that mobilizations lack critical consciousness because they are often generated around a single issue, whereas organization is focused on dismantling a system (ITS-IN-SCOPE, 2021). Ture states: "...The unconscious can usually be captured easily around one-issue items, around mobilization items, but it's hard to capture them around organization. But these unconscious must be brought to organization" (sec. 3). Without critical consciousness or sustained organizing, momentum from mobilizations may be co-opted by neoliberal institutions to sustain the status quo. Therefore, it is imperative to look beyond one's immediate reality and conceive of a greater, collective transformation.

In the case of prison abolition, unjust imprisonment or police violence may be an issue that the masses readily mobilize around, but it requires genuine reflection to realize these instances of injustice are a product of a system to be abolished (Yao, 2021). Similarly, student advocacy around individual issues such as tuition increases or sexual violence may occur, but one must establish a critical connection between discrete events and broader structures. Critical

consciousness must contain a collective dimension. Organizing for change under a neoliberal capitalist environment filled with rampant individualism means that this consciousness becomes all the more necessary. Realization of oppression does not simply mean one comes to terms with one's individual situation, but rather it is becoming aware of one's position as part of an oppressed mass (Freire, 2018). If one comes from the oppressor class, then realizing the conditions of oppression also entails renouncing the characteristics of the oppressor and being "reborn" (p.61) with the oppressed.

Being in communion with the oppressed means approaching the oppressed with love, trust, and hope (Freire, 2018). Kaba (2021) proclaims that "hope is a discipline" (p. 60). This notion of hope is critically grounded in awareness of one's material conditions. However, awareness of oppression without reflective action leads to fatalism (Freire, 2018). Organizers cannot become dehumanized vessels immobilized from carrying knowledge on all the injustices of the world. Recognizing resistance as an ongoing historical process liberates one from the burden of fatalism. Freire indicates that the reality of oppression is not "a closed world from which there is no exit" (p.49), but a limiting situation that can be transformed. Many abolitionists understand that they are part of a movement that will outlast them (Kaba, 2021). Freire suggests that the oppressed must find ways to critically maintain hope and develop unity for liberation. Disciplined hope espouses the twin dimensions of material analysis and trust in the community's capacity to transform.

Situating oneself within transnational and intergenerational processes, instead of focusing solely on the individual, the empirical, and the present, poses a challenge to modern colonial temporality (Blackstock, 2011). Mignolo and Walsh (2018) indicate that Western ontologies assert that the linear progression of time accompanies the development of civilizations. The logic of coloniality assumes Western societies represent the advanced "present", while other cultures are an embodiment of the regressive "past". Similarly Mills and

LeFrançois (2018) observe that the metaphor of the child is invoked to suggest a naturalized, subordinate status for the racialized and colonized other. Mignolo articulates that the language of growth and development become weaponized to justify the violence of colonialism and capitalism (Guggenheim Museum, 2016). The purpose of emancipatory pedagogy is to disrupt the superiority of such perspectives. Alexander (as quoted in Walsh, 2018), defines emancipatory pedagogy as methodologies as “both epistemic and ontological project bound to our beingness” and “pedagogies [that] summon subordinated knowledges that are produced in the context of the practices of marginalization in order that we might destabilize existing practices of knowing and thus cross the fictive boundaries of exclusion and marginalization” (p. 91). Therefore, Blackstock (2011), Grosfoguel (2013) and others regard epistemic and ontological transformation to be central to the decolonial project. Such a transformation regards the past, present, and future to be of equal importance and value. It also rejects individualism and affirms the existence of multiple unique perceptions of reality.

Developing the notion of *pluriversity* and adopting a relational worldview is crucial to formulating an ideological challenge to systems of oppression (Freire, 2018; Grosfoguel, 2013; Walsh & Mignolo, 2018).<sup>1</sup> These ideological practices are essential guides for student organizers who seek to contribute to profound social change. A critical consciousness is exemplified

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<sup>1</sup> Grosfoguel (2013) refers to Enrique Dussel’s notion of *Transmodernity*, a term that implies moving *beyond* Western modernity: “To move beyond Eurocentered modernity, Dussel proposes a decolonial project that takes seriously the critical thinking of the epistemic traditions of the Global South” (p.88). Affirming epistemic diversity challenges the *uni*-versality of European modernity. While *uni*-versality indicates that “one that defines for the rest”, *pluri*-versality implies “the many defines for the many” (p88-89).

through their beliefs, values, visions, and imagination. It is also inextricably connected with their commitment to transformative action.

### **Struggling towards Transformation**

Praxis is reflection and action, which entails conscious acts of creation and transformation (Freire, 2018). Core ideas from Freire are evident in radical movements around the world. Reflecting on this, Walsh (2018) indicates: “Social struggles for Freire are pedagogical settings of learning, unlearning, relearning, reflection, and action. The educational nature of struggle is what interested Freire most, along with the pedagogical practice of working toward individual and collective liberation” (p. 88). Freire draws a distinction between systematic education and educational projects. This indicates that hegemonic institutions constitute poor sites for realizing emancipatory pedagogy. James (2003) expresses: “The academy is not geared toward immediacy or urgency (or radical democracy), but seems dedicated to a construction of dispassionate objectivity, a discipline to detail, and painstaking rigor of sustained investigation and study” (p. 5). While such characteristics are not inherently undesirable, neoliberal academia’s uncritical worship of them results in them being weaponized against those who express righteous anger towards injustice. James suggests that academic interrogations cannot be alienated from emotions of love and rage, which are intrinsic to social movements that act as subjects of study. Therefore, emancipatory pedagogy must be firmly grounded within revolutionary praxis.

Authentic dialogue and emancipatory pedagogy cannot be delivered through hegemonic institutions because their very mode of operation is built upon the dynamics of an oppressive system (Freire, 2018). When Freire critiques hegemonic education and indicates that existing social struggles are the terrain for developing emancipatory pedagogy, he implies that liberation cannot be granted through the colonial, capitalist nation state. Just as hegemonic systematic education is poorly equipped to deliver a truly emancipatory pedagogy, the colonial, capitalist

state is poorly equipped to deliver liberation. As abolitionists remind us, transformative justice cannot be delivered through the carceral state: “It’s impossible for non-oppressive policing to exist in a fundamentally oppressive and unjust society” (Kaba, 2021, p. 89). Transformative justice, as a form of abolitionist praxis, is deeply rooted within communities resisting state surveillance and carceral violence (Kim, 2018; Mingus, 2019). Therefore, as long as the state apparatus remains intact, no amount of restorative programming or police reforms will end carceral violence (Kaba, 2021). Instead, the capacity for transformation lies within movement spaces and frontline communities. Transformative justice, developed by and for marginalized communities, reflects a continuum of responses to harm rooted in the material struggles of the community practicing it (Mingus, 2019). The principle of transformative justice reflects Freire’s (2018) notion of a pedagogy of the oppressed, which is that communities are encouraged to assume collective responsibility over their wellbeing and adopt anti-oppressive approaches to accountability. Open communication and relationships built on love and trust are foundational to developing community accountability strategies that do not rely on the carceral system.

Similarly, Mignolo (2018) indicates that decoloniality cannot be articulated through the colonial state, or its principles of modernity and coloniality. Walsh (2018) cites the Zapatistas as a crucial case study for the praxis of decoloniality. The Zapatista Movement and the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (Zapatista National Liberation Army/EZLN) have waged an ongoing resistance against colonialism and neoliberal globalization since the 1990s (Stahler-Sholk, 2007). The Zapatistas attribute their movement to the 500 years history of indigenous resistance to colonization and incorporate Mayan and Mestizo philosophies into their praxis (Hayden, 2002). Contrary to other decolonization movements of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Zapatistas did not seek to seize the existing apparatus of the colonial state, but to transform it altogether (Walsh & Mignolo, 2018). They have vocally resisted efforts by the Mexican government to incorporate indigenous communities into its multicultural programs and to articulate

indigenous autonomy through the lens of colonial economic development (Mora, 2007). Until 2018, they have refused to engage in electoral politics and legitimize colonial state institutions (Stahler-Sholk, 2007).

The Zapatista philosophy of “a world where many worlds fit” (Hayden, 2002, p. 304) echoes Grofoguel (2013) and Blackstock’s (2011) visions for a postcolonial pluriversal society. This philosophy is practiced through decentralized, horizontal organizing. Zapatistas have typically utilized diffused leadership and rejected hierarchies within the movement (Hayden, 2002). As part of its 2003 restructuring efforts, the Zapatistas criticized altruistic aid as a form of allyship, citing the unequal power dynamics that typically existed between grassroots movements of the Global South and its allies in the North (Andrews, 2010). The movement sought to resist humanitarian aid from the North that absolves it of its role in upholding oppression. Since 2003, the Zapatistas limited engagement with NGOs and governmental organizations and opted to direct their efforts towards transnational solidarity with grassroots campaigns (Andrews, 2010). Instead of accepting direct aid, the Zapatistas called upon its collaborators to take lessons from Chiapas and organize against neoliberal capitalism in their home communities. It dedicated its efforts to developing “The Other Campaign”, empowering communities and establishing transnational partnerships for collective emancipation (Andrews, 2010).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> La Otra Campaña (the Other Campaign) was developed in 2005, in critique of leftist political parties in Latin America and their departure from their radical roots. Mora (2007) states that the campaign was an effort to “link nonpartisan anticapitalist national liberation

Much like the abolitionist movement, Zapatistas seek to organize beyond state institutions towards a fundamental social transformation. Moreover, these movements are oriented around the central principle of emancipation while centering the knowledge and expertise of frontline communities. They do not prescribe sets of approaches that are universally applicable, but rather focus on accounting for the unique material conditions of each community and developing organizing strategies accordingly. As Freire (2018) points out, emancipation cannot be achieved through reproducing the dynamics of oppression. Bolin (2017) refers to this principle as part of the prefigurative tradition, which typically takes the form of decentralized, non-hierarchical organizing. Prefigurative practice refers to realizing the revolutionary vision in the very process of organizing (Bolin, 2017). The Zapatistas strive to construct “a world where many worlds fit” by building movement communities around values of mutuality and equal exchange. Transformative justice reflects the same commitment to prefigurative practices, aiming to mobilize communities to develop a continuum of alternatives to the death-making institutions of incarceration (Davis, 2003; Kim, 2018).

Despite the importance of criticizing oppressive practices within organizing spaces, it is nevertheless important to note that no movement can fully divorce itself from its present conditions. Bolin’s (2017) narrative of the prefigurative tradition certainly serves as a useful tool of analysis, yet many would argue that one cannot construct a movement as the mirror image for

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struggles around the country” (p. 64). A critical component of the Other Campaign was engagement in dialogue with communities resisting neoliberal capitalism. This dialogue transcended colonial national borders and was characterized by Andrews (2010) as a practice in mutuality. Mora believes that the Campaign strengthened the development of a global civil society surrounding the struggles against capitalism and for indigenous sovereignty.

a post-revolution society, nor can one discount the centralized organization in revolutionary movements altogether. Dogmatic adherence to abstract principles such as nonviolence or decentralization, which is exemplified through Bolin's invocation of Gandhi and Chomsky, would be opposed by many theorists and organizers I have drawn from in this paper.<sup>3</sup> How emancipatory education occurs prior to, and post revolution, will be different, precisely because educational projects are always dependent on the material conditions they are undertaken in (Freire, 2018). This is a profound contradiction that organizers must navigate. However, the existence of these contradictions is not inherently negative. In discovering ways to resolve them, we also strengthen our radical imagination. Critical examination of the limits and possibilities for reflective action within our realities is an inevitable part of organizing.

Freire (2018) discusses a similar tension on the topic of cultural synthesis. How do revolutionary leaders respond when the masses are mobilizing around a single demand, but have not yet conceived of the deeper revolutionary change beyond this demand? In the case of abolition, the popular consciousness may be prepared to engage with the demand of defunding the police, but have not made the greater leap towards calling for police abolition (Yao, 2021).

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<sup>3</sup> Chomsky, as an anarcho-syndicalist, suggests that revolutions “fail” due to centralization and hierarchal organizing. Revolutionaries such as Jackson (1972) would suggest that disciplined and centralized action is crucial for revolutionary success. Gandhi, who proclaims “be the change you want to see” (Bolin, 2017, p.750), faced criticisms for his approach. Arundhati Roy (2013) points out that “Gandhian non-violence in some ways needs an audience. It’s a theatre that needs an audience... How are the hungry to go on a hunger strike?” (para. 6). Freire (2018), Davis (1971), and Shevek (2022) all indicate that one cannot conflate violent resistance to oppression with the oppressive violence itself.

Abolitionists must navigate how to pose the problem of prisons, policing, and state violence to the people without resorting to cultural invasion (Freire, 2018). Moreover, abolition also risks being co-opted by neoliberal institutions. Shevek (2022) warns that such co-optations distort “the political project of abolition to be less threatening, centered only on ‘non-violence,’ unconditional forgiveness (but please don’t ask us who tends to be excluded from this forgiveness anyway), and total, slate-cleaning stories of personal redemption” (para. 5). Shevek asserts that abolition cannot be reduced to a set of transformative/restorative practices while overlooking the necessity for a militant, organized resistance to state violence. Rather, abolition must always contain a collective dimension that strives to resist the expansion of carceral institutions.

The Zapatistas also navigated similar dilemmas regarding the autonomy of the movement. The difficulties of building self-sufficient autonomous communities means that the movement, especially in its early stages, inevitably must rely on aid from some NGOs (Stahler-Sholk, 2007). While it commits itself to lateral organizing, the movement is also wary of efforts to dilute the mission of the movement and reducing it to neoliberal multiculturalism. The 2003 restructuring efforts can be interpreted as an authoritarian move by some, despite its intended goal of addressing inequitable dynamics between movements in the Global North and the South (Andrews, 2010). Nevertheless, this was a key challenge to the power NGOs, colonial governments, and the Global North holds over grassroots movements. When communities take a stance against the conditions of oppression, they always risk becoming regarded as unpalatable through the gaze of the oppressor. However, organized resistance from the oppressed and efforts to preserve the integrity of radical movements cannot be conflated with the violence of the oppression itself.

Although Zapatistas seek to defend the sovereignty of indigenous communities, their goal is not to establish separate communities that coexist with the Mexican state (Stahler-Sholk,

2007). While they aim to criticize and challenge state institutions, they cannot fully divorce themselves from the society these institutions operate in. Ultimately, the need to practice revolutionary thinking and create alternative ways of existence is constrained by being immersed in an oppressive society. Conversations with different organizers will no doubt reveal a multitude of interpretations of transformative practices, which demonstrates our capacity to conceive of a multitude of visions for social change.

### **Navigating the Neoliberal Institution**

Neoliberalism's profit-driven motive and individualized focus obscure the role of the state in "organized abandonment", making inequality appear as matter of individual merit (The Graduate Centre, 2020; Apple, 2001) Neoliberal management in institutions is often exemplified through increased corporatization, bureaucratization, and standardization. The purpose of such processes is to reduce individuals to objects of management. Freire (2018) regards such processes as "death-affirming" (p.68), because they systematically dehumanize and exploit the oppressed masses. The depletion of essential human characteristics from neoliberal organization ultimately furthers oppression.

In the context of universities, neoliberal organization may mean an increased focus on performance, profit, career preparation, and standardized evaluations (Apple, 2001; Richter et al., 2020). Apple (2001) notes the rise of the marketized and "self-managing" (p.416) educational institution. The marketisation of educational institutions reflects a focus on branding and performance measurements over pedagogical practice. Power becomes consolidated in the administrative structure. This neoliberal shift contains specific implications for student activism. Scott and El-Assal (1969) observe that after the student movements of the 1960s, many universities saw an increase in size, complexity, and bureaucratic structure. Their study finds that in larger universities, formalization and routinization creates a structural separation between the students and the administration, which ultimately contributes to a sense

of alienation. Student activists, particularly those from larger universities, often felt the necessity to resort to illegal or extralegal direct actions to make grievances known (Carty, 2018; Franklin, 2003; Scott & El-Assal, 1969).

Freire's (2018) concept of manipulation speaks to the challenges of student organizing. The dominant elite, in this case being the hegemonic educational institution, seeks to co-opt revolutionary action and incorporate it into the neoliberal bureaucracy. This process subverts authentic organization and leads to anti-dialogical action. Revolutionary "leaders" who enter into dialogue with the dominant elite instead of the people come to participate in the manipulation of the oppressed, which anesthetizes them into accepting reforms as replacements for genuine change (Freire, 2018). Dialogue without conscious action towards dismantling structures of oppression fosters false generosity. Freire states: "The generosity of the oppressors is nourished by an unjust order, which must be maintained in order to justify that generosity" (p.60). False generosity is characterized by Freire as a mistrust of the oppressed, where they are regarded as objects without agency or purpose. Furthermore, false generosity's existence is dependent on the continuation of oppression. Inauthentic dialogue, characterized by prescription, paternalism, and false generosity, contributes to the dehumanization of the oppressed and reinforces the conditions of oppression.

Ture asserts: "The struggle is never an event, it's a process, a continual eternal process" (ITS-IN-SCOPE, 2021, sec. 3). An examination of Ture, Davis (2005), and Kaba (2021) reveals that organizers must regard liberatory action as an ongoing, collective process. The nature of revolutionary action betrays the goals of neoliberal governance, which seeks to dehumanize, objectify, and manage human activities to maintain oppressive control (Freire, 2018). Institutions and bureaucracies aim to reduce social movements to discrete and digestible units, leading to the co-optation and deradicalization of these movements. This can be easily observed in the aftermath of mass mobilizations in response to police violence. The summer of 2020 saw

widespread mobilizations, during which reformist campaigns such as #8CantWait also gained traction. A number of infographics circulated on social media, calling for reform measures including banning chokeholds and strangleholds, requiring de-escalation, requiring warnings before shooting, and requiring all force to be reported (Campaign Zero, n.d.). Abolitionists criticized this campaign, pointing out that in high profile police murders, such as cases concerning the Minneapolis police department and the NYPD, reform measures had already been adopted (Fathallah, 2020; Kaba, 2021). Regardless of protocols in place, officers are typically authorized to break them if they feel threatened. #8Can'tWait represented an attempt at reform without addressing the dramatic power offered to the police that enables them to kill. Despite surging calls to defund the police (which was an abolitionist position), popular interest dwindled rapidly, organizers were rebuked by the political establishment for “divisiveness”, and police departments ultimately saw increased funding (Barrón-López & Otterbein, 2020; Maynard, 2021; Yao, 2021). Often, mobilizations in response to police violence yielded reform outcomes that did not challenge the hegemony of policing. This reveals the shortcomings of single-issue mobilizations, which were often incorporated into neoliberal institutions and preoccupied with incremental reforms.

Under neoliberal governance, reform is adopted as the alternative to revolution (Freire, 2018; ITS-IN-SCOPE, 2021). Freire observes that the dominant class attempts to preserve its status through incorporating revolution into a counter-revolutionary bureaucracy. Universities often adopt progressive language as branding for reformist actions. An example of neoliberal co-optation is “leadership training courses” (Freire, 2018, p. 142) by the dominant class. These initiatives select representatives of the oppressed class to engage in disingenuous dialogue with the ruling elite, thereby immersing the so-called leaders with values of the oppressor, leading them to make concessions in the name of realism. Student organizers are constantly the targets of these campaigns. As this study will reveal, universities often establish working groups or seek

out student input without intention of engaging in genuine dialogue. Furthermore, those who self-identify as organizers are often immersed in the university bureaucracy and readily become spokespeople for the institution.

Which student actions garner commemoration and recognition from the university versus which face retaliation and marginalization is particularly telling. Davis (1971) observes that historically, revolutionary action has been criminalized. Their criminalization was not due to the technicalities of the transgressions, but rather because by seeking to overthrow an oppressive institution, revolutionaries have become enemies of that institution by default. Heidi Kiiwetinepinesiik Stark (2016) makes similar observations, indicating that Indigenous resistance has been continuously criminalized by America and Canada to reinforce the legitimacy of the settler colonial political order. James (2002) supplies the example of the FBI's COINTELPRO (Counter Intelligence Program), which infiltrated radical movements such as the American Indian Movement and the Black Panther Party, causing the imprisonments and killings of its core organizers. Consequently, revolutionary action has always revolved around disobeying unjust institutions and utilizing all means necessary to fight for the oppressed.

Historically, the university has always been part of the terrain of struggle. Rogers (2012) recounts the push from Black Students' Unions and the broader Black Power Movement for the establishment of Black Studies in American universities. Despite countless expulsions, injuries, arrests, and retaliations, a national Black Campus Movement thrived from the 1960s to 70s (Rogers, 2012). Rogers attributes the success of the institutionalization of Black Studies and the push for diversification in education to the violent campus rebellions undertaken by students.

In 1969, at Sir George Williams University in Montreal, Quebec, students protesting institutional racism resulted in 97 arrests and 14 deportations (Greenidge & Gahman, 2019). The university administration was not only unresponsive to student demands but also complicit in escalating the situation. The uprising had lasting implications beyond the university. Student

organizers drew from the works of Black radicals such as Frantz Fanon, Angela Davis, Assata Shakur, etc., and remained politically active after their deportations. Greenidge and Gahman indicate that “resistance like that of the students at SGWU not only raised political and Black consciousness in Trinidad and Tobago but was contagious. It provoked grassroots mobilisations and prompted youth throughout the Caribbean to further stand up for themselves” (p. 38). Student organizing situated within greater movements for change have immense potential. Though the neoliberal structure of the university poses constraints to radical imagination, and the administration strikes back furiously against organizing it considers radical, students have continued to claim their agency as political actors.

In more contemporary contexts, student organizers still face a very similar set of challenges. Carty (2018) indicate that in mobilizations against tuition hikes in the 2000s-2010s, student groups negotiating for reform with elected officials and university authorities encountered very little success. In contrast, the “more militant and combative tactics” that “relied on methods of direct action, civil disobedience, and the disruption of the normal functioning of the university” (p. 104) adopted by larger organized coalitions such as CLASSE (Coalition large de l’association pour une solidarite syndical estudiante) catalyzed more substantial change. Furthermore, CLASSE engaged with the civil society by tapping into “pre-existing grievances” and establishing a sense of collective identity “under the rubric of economic injustice” (p. 105). Despite police violence and retaliations from institutions, the mobilizations culminated into the movement known as “Maple Spring”, which Carty indicates was the longest and largest student strike in North American history. Key lessons from organizing against tuition hikes reflect earlier observations in the chapter regarding the importance of dialogue, coalition-building, and the reproductive role of neoliberal institutions.

In addition to having expansive bureaucratic structures that inhibit radical change, universities and local authorities continue to surveille and categorize certain student

organizations. Fossil fuel divestment on university campuses constitute a student environmental justice movement which revolves around the issue of fiduciary duty and (un)ethical investments (Apfel, 2015). Across North America, student organizing for fossil fuel divestment has frequently faced pushbacks from the university administration, resulting in arrests and disciplinary action (Apfel, 2015; Casey, 2019; CFS-Ontario, 2021; Schroeder, 2016). Even in smaller institutions such as Mount Allison University, Divest organizers have been stopped and questioned by campus security, arrested at protests, and harassed by university faculty (Casey, 2019; Fleming, 2021). Meanwhile, campus climate initiatives concerning food waste and green roofs were commended by the university (MacEachern, 2022; Mount Allison, 2019). While it is situated within the broader climate justice movement, fossil fuel divestment campaigns consist of a specific demand which directly confronts the university's investment structure (Apfel, 2015). This does not leave room for amorphous messaging or vague, individualized notions of environmentalism. In fact, divestment specifically condemns hyper-focusing on individual action, questions the supposed neutrality of institutional investments under free market capitalism, and generates potential threats to the university's progressive branding. All of this contradicts the neoliberal foundations upon which the institution is built on. Therefore, it becomes clear why certain environmental action receive commendations while others face pushbacks from university administrations.

Within social movement spaces, organizers must consider how to move beyond neoliberal organization. Davis (2005) warns against the neoliberal drive to model movements "after fast-food delivery" (p. 86). Emancipation cannot be corporatized. Modeling social movements after corporate entities reinforces the exploitative dynamics of neoliberal capitalism. James (2003) reminds us that our pursuit of knowledge and struggle for liberation are both vulnerable to market forces:

Conformity and compliance, rebellion and resistance, are often channeled through and structured by markets that turn intellect and action into objects for trade and barter in competition for status and acquisition, while making our ideals (freedom and justice) and their representatives (prisoners of resistance) into commodities. (p. 5-6)

The struggle against commodification of radical ideas and movements becomes all the more pertinent in the digital age. Davis (2005) anticipates that social media will give rise to more instantaneous movements, which are conflated for organization. Carty's (2018) research on social movements in the digital age corroborates Davis's concerns. Although social media can be an important tool for raising awareness and generating connections, it cannot replace on-the-ground organizing. Carty argues that "wired activism does not replace but rather adds to traditional forms of protest activity" (p. 116). According to Carty, direct action is irreplaceable in social movements because they foster a sense of collective identity, which allows organizers to maintain dialogue with the oppressed and practice transformative action. In our attempts to resist the expansion of neoliberal capitalism, organizers must look beyond the rapid mass mobilizations brought about by social media and consider how to harness this momentum towards raising critical consciousness and enacting revolutionary change.

## **Methodology**

The research aimed to uncover the interconnections between social movements and the role of post-secondary students within them. These inquiries were approached through a series of interviews with student participants. I formulated my interviews with the following questions in mind: How do post-secondary student activists view their role in social movements? How are abolitionist lessons applied (whether consciously or unconsciously) in postsecondary organizing spaces? This section details the methodological process of my study.

### **Recruitment**

The Mount Allison University Research Ethics Board (REB) approved the study design in June 2021, in compliance with the Tri-Council Policy Statement (TCPS) for the Ethical Conduct of Research Involving Human Participants. After REB approval, participants were recruited by targeted emails to student advocacy groups on campus and an open call for participation (Appendix 2). The recruitment material called for students engaged in advocacy, organizing, or activism, in an effort to invoke vocabulary commonly associated with being politically active. Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, all recruitment activities took place through digital platforms.

The call for participants was posted to my personal social media, the Mount Allison “Class of ...” Facebook groups, the Mount Allison Association of the Chronically Ill and Disabled Students (ACID) Instagram page, and the Divest MTA organizers’ Facebook group. I also shared the call with executive members of CATALYST (support/advocacy group for 2SLGBTQ+ students), the Indigenous Student Support Group, the Black Students’ Union, and the Mount Allison Students’ Union (MASU) to circulate with their members. Additionally, I reached out to the VP Student Life of the MASU, hoping to obtain a list of contacts from all MASU clubs and societies (which constitute the majority of student groups on campus). I chose to recruit through the executive members of clubs and societies to avoid appearing as though I am recruiting

participants through personal ties, which can generate expectations regarding participation. Unfortunately, due to the timing of recruitment (June/July), some clubs and societies did not have their Constitutions finalized, which led to difficulties identifying their executives. I ultimately did not receive further information from the VP Student Life regarding a list of clubs/societies contacts.

### **Participation**

A number of students reached out to me to express their interest in participating. I typically responded by providing them with the research consent form and a list of potential research questions (Appendix 1). The student affirmed their willingness to continue with the research study by providing me their written consent electronically. Participants were chosen on a first-come, first-served basis. Ultimately, seven students proceeded to the interview.

**Table 1**

#### ***Demographic breakdown***

<b>Age</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Racial Identity</b>
19	Cis woman	Southeast Asian
20	Non-binary	Mi'kmaw
20	Cis man	White/Eastern Indian
20	Cis woman	White
21	Non-binary	White
21	Cis man	White
21	Cis woman	White

### **Interview Process**

After participants confirmed their consent and availability, we arranged a virtual meeting for the interview. At the beginning of the interviews, I asked for verbal consent before

starting the recording of the meeting. Next, I reviewed the consent form and obtained verbal consent before moving onto the interview questions.

The interviews were semi-structured and ranged from 40 minutes to 1 hour. The interview questions served as a thematic guide. They encompassed topics such as advocacy, movement organizing, community accountability, and institutional accountability. I attempt to adopt Freire's (2018) dialogical approach and allow participants to formulate their own connections to these subjects. The interviews utilized the lived experiences of participants as the departure point and invited them to consider how concepts rooted in abolitionist teachings fitted into their work.

After the interviews concluded, participants were issued a gift card valued at \$15 for their time and energy. Additionally, participants received a thank-you note via email that contained instructions regarding transcript review, a link to an anonymous form for potential feedback, and available campus supports if needed. When I had prepared the transcriptions, I provided participants with the document for review and additional debriefing information regarding the research.

### **Transcription and Analysis**

Interviews were recorded via the recording function in Microsoft Teams and saved to Microsoft Stream. In the case of one interview, the participant encountered internet issues which compelled the interview to discontinue. A second part of the interview was conducted in a study room at the Mount Allison University library while maintaining social distance. The interview was recorded via the camera function on my computer and saved to Microsoft Stream. Transcriptions were generated via the subtitle function on Microsoft Stream and manually edited for clarity. I attempted to capture quotes from participants verbatim to the best of my abilities.

Transcription files were assigned a numerical value between one and seven based on the chronological order of the interviews. These files were stored separately from consent forms and electronic recordings were deleted. After participants reviewed the transcript, the anonymized transcripts underwent the coding process. I utilized a generalized thematic analysis to interpret the latent themes of the data. During the coding process, I highlighted key phrases and noted candidate themes within each interview (usually evident through repetitive reference or extended discussion). I also underlined pertinent quotations from participants that articulated the emerging themes. Final themes were determined through collaborative analysis with my faculty supervisor. Quotes were selected and included within the findings to illustrate the perspectives of participants and their interpretations of central concepts. Gender-neutral placeholder names were generated for each participant for presentation purposes. When quotes were used, the participant was only referred to through their placeholder names.

## Findings

### Overview: Tensions and Contradictions

Occupying the space between a student and an organizer often means navigating the tensions and contradictions between academia, bureaucracy, community, grassroots movements, and so on. Many participants view organizing as something deeply connected with their identity and values. They are keenly aware of the need for social change, yet they are often entangled in the networks of neoliberal bureaucracy that limit these very changes. Each organizer seeks to resolve this contradiction in their own ways. The resolution is realized through their actions and the justifications they provide for them.

All participants volunteered for the interviews because they have self-identified as student organizers or activists. However, their varied organizational affiliations demonstrate competing understandings of activism. Two of the respondents were active in student government, two others had limited involvements in student government and were also active in other campus/community groups, and three were only affiliated with advocacy groups outside of student government. For the two participants in student government, they self-identified as student activists due to their leadership positions. They had a broad understanding of activism and viewed their jobs as their primary terrain for organizing. Activism and organizing, in this sense, referred to all the advocacy they partook in as student representatives. This was contrasted with more issue-based approaches from other participants, who were often organizing outside existing institutions. For those primarily involved in social justice movements or community initiatives, there was more specificity in terms of how they discussed major social issues and their role in addressing them. To them, activism was less of a job description and more of a political position. The tensions between diverse ways of interpreting student organizing were significant in how the participants approached accountability and political change.

Most participants had “a foot in both worlds”. They often occupied leadership positions within neoliberal organizations or ended up working closely with them, in addition to organizing within their communities. The MASU’s role frequently came up in the interviews, with some respondents viewing it as an advocacy body and some viewing it as an extension of the university bureaucracy. There is a tension between two polarities, one being realism, associated with change enacted *within* existing institutional means, the other one being radicalism, which sought to break free from neoliberal organization. Participants identified with various points on this continuum due to their unique positionalities. All participants were aware of the limits of existing institutional processes, and many expressed frustrations at how these processes were poorly equipped to fulfill their vision for a better world. They grappled with this contradiction in varied ways. Some leaned into neoliberal organization and suggest ways to “change the system from within”, some engaged with the system despite their disillusionment because they felt that it was the only way to enact change, and some found mass mobilizing to be the most effective way to push for radical social change. In the context of this study, the most significant indicator of how a participant would navigate the tensions and contradictions of student organizing was not age, gender, or racial identity, but their organizational affiliation.

### **Neoliberal Organization**

The neoliberal institution serves as the primary terrain for student organizing. In the context of this study, “neoliberal institution” primarily describes the structure of the university and its bureaucracy, but it also encompasses the functions of most governments, corporations, nonprofits, etc. under racial capitalism. “Neoliberal organization” refers to neoliberal strategies institutions utilize to manage themselves. Characteristics of neoliberal organization include standardization, commodification, bureaucratization, etc. This section explores student experiences engaging with neoliberal institutions through themes of alienation, accessibility, and accountability.

### ***Alienation and Disillusionment***

A majority of participants were not enthusiastic about participating in neoliberal bureaucratic processes. All of them observed disengagement and disillusionment in these processes from their peers. Whether it was lobbying governments, or advocating to the university administration, or voicing grievances through the Students' Union, student organizers considered these "proper" channels a limited way of enacting social change.

Quinn, who was a part of a student organizing group, stated in their interview:

In the past we have gone the bureaucratic route and had meetings with administration members, and it tends to be pretty frustrating... It's just kind of empty responses back and they pretend they're listening, they nod and smile, and then nothing actually changes.

Dixie, another student organizer, described actively "trying to get out of anything institutionalized" because of their frustrating nature.

Kennedy, who participated in a campus working group, made the following observation:

Mount A sneezes and it has a working group... [At one of the meetings], it was myself and then the two people that organized it there, and they were like "we're not getting a whole lot of people", and I think that in itself says something.

Alexis noted the MASU's struggle to engage with students: "When a student gets an email to students at Mount A and it's the third one they've got from [the MASU President] in a week, are they really gonna read it? Probably not". They also noted that institutional processes were most effective when there was high engagement: "...There definitely [are] accountability practices, and when students are interested enough, they engage in them".

Part of the reason why participants were reluctant to engage in institutional processes was because they often faced tokenization, paternalism, precarity, and false generosity. Ellis, a

participant who frequently interacted with regional governments as a young organizer, pointed to ageism as a key challenge:

Most political leaders are people who [are older], who are more experienced, and that gives them the power to think that we are not having the same level of knowledge to speak to them, to educate them, to recognize the advantage and disadvantage of a solution, so that's the difficult part about it.

While the marginalization Ellis faced as a young person may not be shared by other participants, many of them did acknowledge a sense of power imbalance. Factors such as age, social status, economic class, racialization, etc. all contributed to the unequal power dynamic between student organizers and governing bodies. Quinn noticed paternalist sentiments when engaging with the university administration: "...It kind of feels like they're not meaningfully engaging with us. They're not taking our ideas seriously". Some organizers felt that the administration relied on the turnover of the student population to avoid accountability. They pointed out that when it came to issues such as fossil fuel divestment, the administration often regurgitated the same arguments and attempted to dismiss organizers, hoping that as they graduated, advocacy efforts would lose momentum.

Harley noted that being an organizer meant "giving a lot of free labor", which is "rewarding, but super draining". This drew attention to the uphill battle that student organizers undertake when they push the institution towards change. When the university administration did seek out student input, many found it to be symbolic gestures. Kennedy recounted that when they were recruited by the administration for an initiative, they were constrained in their capacity to make the changes they wanted to see: "It's like, you can only make change, but within a certain kind of frame". Including tokenized student leadership for the sake of "checking off a box" often led to disillusionment and disingenuous engagement. Kennedy viewed their

participation as “not something that I’m necessarily going to be proud of doing but feel obligated to”.

Attempting to fit community organizing into the framework of neoliberal organization results in false generosity (Freire, 2018). Kennedy observed false generosity when a community initiative became incorporated into a course at the university, and students were participating in it only for the purpose of easily receiving a good grade. Many participants recounted instances where individuals and institutions engaged with social movements to gain social capital, instead of out of genuinely care for the community.

Dixie believed that organizations adopt bureaucratic processes not to become more accountable, but “to compensate for growing in size and dealing with more funds”. This hinted at the neoliberalization of social movements, where they stray from their proclaimed goals and become preoccupied with benefitting from racial capitalism. Grassroots movements are vulnerable to precarity and competition, which drives them towards neoliberal institutions in hopes of securing resources and popular support. They adopt rationalization and bureaucratic organization as means of appealing to neoliberal entities. However, as these movements become more aligned with hegemonic institutions, they are also further entrenched in racial capitalism. As the interview testimonies demonstrate, neoliberal organization ultimately reinforces alienation and disempowerment.

### ***Inaccessible by Design***

Participants viewed the lack of transparency as a huge barrier to accountability. More specifically, they discussed how obscure and convoluted institutional processes created challenges for student organizers. Harley admitted that “if you’re not familiar with the system, it’s especially inaccessible”. They also found that institutionalized accountability processes were ill-equipped to respond in instances of harm:

I think it's really complicated going through a lot of the bureaucratic channels... I previously had an issue with the school where I had filed a complaint as a member of a group, but they wouldn't accept that complaint because they didn't have a procedure for accepting a group complaint, so we had to file the complaint as separate individuals to have the same effect, but we just spent more time doing paperwork rather than getting anything done. So I think a lot of those processes are unnecessarily convoluted.

To participants such as Dixie, this lack of transparency appeared deliberate: "It's definitely limiting the way of like, even knowing what's going on... And so, having [a group] translate, almost, this information and make it more accessible... I get the feeling the university doesn't love that".

Some participants mobilized informal relationships to overcome the confusion of bureaucratic procedures. Alexis felt that when it came to advocacy, informal processes may increase the rate of success:

...We've gotten advocacy points, and I think that's because we've been able to have formal meetings... but also informal meetings with the sort of stakeholders on the administration who are actually making these high-level decisions... When you have a relationship with somebody, there's an informal structure where you can sort of push your agenda informally as well as formally, and I think they're more apt to listen when you're doing it both ways.

Harley believed a mix of direct action and mobilizing informal relationships was important, which often meant confronting key actors: "...I feel like there are also ways to bypass a lot of the bureaucracy by getting directly involved speaking face to face with people, writing letters on your own, and bringing it in to discuss".

However, organizers such as Ellis found that there was a steep learning curve:

...There's no blueprint for us, we have to figure everything out by ourselves, we have to figure out how to address the government speaker politely, respectfully, and how to make our point clear but not too demanding. We have to figure out all that speech stuff. And we also have to try to manage the people to not offend the government that we're working with, because if we upset them, it will be harder for us. So we have to manage both sides without a clue of what to do at first.

Rory noted that the Students' Administrative Council (SAC) utilized the Roberts Rules of Order, which could be confusing for students-at-large. Alexis remarked that marginalized groups often did not have access to knowledge about bureaucratic processes or informal networks, which created more hurdles: "Maybe it's a pessimistic view, but some of the lobby groups seem to control government interests, and maybe have more direct connection and influence to actually get that done, whereas like five or six random citizens don't". When formal institutional processes fall short of their promises of expediency and simplicity, individuals are compelled to seek other paths for change. In a neoliberal context, this often means relying on personal relationships and proximity to power.

### ***Limited Institutional Accountability***

When instances of harm arose, participants felt that institutionalized processes did not lead to closure or accountability. While neoliberal organization prioritizes standardization and formalization, these processes can have dehumanizing outcomes. According to participants, these processes were often poorly equipped to deal with the complexities of human conflict. Many indicated that institutional processes did not reflect ways they would approach harm or conflict in their organizations or their personal lives. Rory recognized this contradiction: "Those formalized organizations don't really account for the nuances of people, they're very set in stone... But also, in a sense too, that can be a good thing, it simplifies things down".

Quinn considered punishment to be the primary goal of institutionalized accountability measures such as incarceration: "... We come at it from the punishment perspective... But that just perpetuated these cycles of violence and harm.... It's the way we decide to focus on punishment rather than actually repairing harm." They were the only participant who made a clear reference to mass incarceration. However, other participants articulated similar frustrations with the neoliberal nature of institutionalized accountability. The matter of efficiency came up frequently. Kennedy observed that prioritizing "quick and easy" solutions above all else may lead to poorly developed responses that cause more harm. Harley found that institutional accountability processes were also "not equipped to deal with things happening quickly", which led to inadequate responses to harm.

In contrast with the previous accounts, Alexis believed that "jumping the gun too quick" was undesirable in advocacy work, as it potentially damages working relationships with the university administration. They discussed an instance where their organization had to respond to tuition increases: "When we're drafting a press release, do we want to go super hard and say we hate the university? We hate tuition? And then risk damaging these collaborative relationships that I've sort of outlined?" This illustrated an approach towards accountability that prioritized preserving relationships within neoliberal structures. On the other hand, Rory asserted that navigating leadership in the absence of formalized procedures prevented accountability:

In [dorm], we had a similar structure to [student government]. We had a council that we reported to, for the executives, we had that structure. But a difference with that was that I saw less accountability only because there was less formal reporting, there was less things that that council could take away too if the executives weren't being accountable, and there also is less power vested in the Council... I went in with limited knowledge on

those organizational structures that are set up for accountability and then the people around me too had limited to no understanding of what that is.

Dixie thought that in smaller groups with less formal organization, the lack of structure was not necessarily what led to less accountability. They believed that unaddressed power inequalities, such as white supremacy or patriarchy, may contribute to accountability issues within organizations. Quinn claimed that in their experiences, organizing groups operated better with a “looser structure” and “community focus”.

Overall, many participants felt that institutional accountability prioritized elements such as status, profit, reputation, etc. over amending harm. The lack of attention given to centering those harmed often resulted in inefficient and traumatizing processes. Kennedy detailed their experiences as a queer person on the university judicial panel handling an instance of homophobic and transphobic online contents:

I had a very, very different reaction than a lot of the people in the group... If that individual was in my residence, I would want to know. If they were sitting next to me in class, I would want to know... We let him off and we said ‘hush hush, don’t do that again buddy’...They encourage you the speak up, but once your words and that kind of things perhaps don’t agree with what they think, no more speaking up, hush hush, we’re not going to schedule for another panel.

Participants such as Harley noted the institution “doesn’t always respond to the needs of the people that form the community”. They attributed this disconnect to the function of the university, which may position it as “a business” rather than “an institute of learning”.

Whether it was due to individuals with privilege occupying positions of power, or disingenuous attempts to appear forward-thinking, participants consistently indicated that institutional processes did not promote accountability. Participants believed that true accountability acknowledges the complexities of harm, centers those who are harmed, addresses

individuals' capacity for growth, and interrogates the root conditions of harm. These notions allude to key principles from transformative justice, which positions itself as a challenge to neoliberal organization.

### **Community Accountability**

In their interview, Dixie posed the question: "What kind of change are you going to make in the world if the people in your group don't feel safe?" This demonstrated the importance of critical, transformative actions that are directed both internally (within organizations) and externally (through collective organizing). Participants recognized the importance of creating a just future through carving out spaces of alternative practices in the present. In the interviews, student organizers discussed how they attempted to create more accountable groups through practicing transparency, having "call-ins", developing horizontal governance, constructing open dialogue, etc. Since many participants were critical of institutional accountability practices, they sought to build better practices in their organizational spaces.

### ***Equitable Organizational Structures***

Many participants recounted experiences in groups with some form of horizontal structure. Some of them described decentralized governance without designated roles or hierarchies. Ellis described their group as structured through levels of involvement, instead of having traditional titles such as "President":

We don't have a president and all that stuff. We just have core members who had to attend every meeting and stuff like that... Everyone's the same. We do have levels because there are people who can contribute more time and more quality ideas, so yeah, we do have group core members and we have groups of people who chime in from time to time to help with the stuff that we need more people for, like having a protest, something like that.

In this case, despite using the language of “levels”, Ellis outlined a relationship network where all were equal. The members’ contributions determined whether they were in the core or periphery of the group. Others described similar ways of non-hierarchical operation within their groups (e.g. Divest MTA), where individuals contributed based on their skills and abilities. Ellis indicated that group members took collective responsibility for the group’s actions. In instances of harm, no member would be singled out:

...We want to avoid getting the mistake ever again, being wrong ever again. And we avoid our best to find out who is responsible for that, because, even though we try to keep our most open mind, we can still sometimes [have prejudice against] that person, and it can be something very unconscious. That’s why we try to find the root...

For many participants, having a non-hierarchical structure meant a communal approach to harm. This may entail group discussions, collective negotiation of consequences, and investigating the source of the harm. Such approaches resemble community accountability methods utilized in transformative justice. Some participants were wary of utilizing formalized structures, as it could reinforce power imbalances. Harley stated: “Wherever there is a power hierarchy, there is the possibility of abusing the power hierarchy”. Kennedy thought that sometimes, specific roles such as President, Vice President, or VP Finance may help “streamline jobs”, but it is important to distinguish those roles from “an authoritarian type of hierarchy”. Dixie observed that in non-hierarchical groups, the lack of formalized hierarchies did not necessarily mean power imbalances are nonexistent:

...You’re always going to have maybe some people who like to plan more or people who take up the most space in the room. And so, when that becomes like, problematic...It’s definitely an ongoing struggle of activist groups, like how to deal with these types of things, but don’t make it like, an unsafe or hostile environment for people. Because like,

how are we going to go and demand things out of the world and like, try to make change if we're not [accountable]?

Rory and Alexis interpreted community accountability through checks and balances in the MASU, which was much larger and contained more formalized structure than other student organizations. They discussed how in addition to democratic voting, entities such as the Ombudsperson and the SAC existed to keep the executive accountable. Rory explained:

...So just kind of like, having multiple safeguards of people who [the executive] have to report to. Even though [people think of the executive] as like, the top people, but no, [they're] still accountable to others... There's no one in the organization that doesn't answer to someone. The only people that don't are the students, and that makes sense.

All participants grappled with addressing unequal power relations in their groups and beyond. From having complex structures to completely decentralized, participants conceptualized accountability within their spaces in a spectrum of ways. Despite the varied approaches, there was a consensus on the necessity of confronting oppressive dynamics to ensure internal and external accountability.

### ***Humanizing Environments***

Participant testimonies revealed the importance of establishing an environment of trust in addition to building equitable organizational structures. Mutuality and reciprocity blossom from an environment of trust. These notions disrupt neoliberal ideas of individualism and affirm the humanizing nature of transformative movements. Kennedy suggested combatting alienation through the formation of identity-based communities:

If it was a group of people I literally didn't know from the man on the moon, but I knew that they were definitely part of the queer community and I was going to speak on behalf of lived experience, fantastic, absolutely fantastic. I don't care if they're the CEO of Gays

'R Us, you know, cool. I would just feel so much safer because we share that same piece of our identity.

While organizers build communities with others who share their marginalized identities, they must also confront their own immersion in oppressive structures such as white supremacy and patriarchy. Some participants observed that informal dynamics of power, such as social connections or one's identities, may influence accountability processes. Organizers addressed these factors through individual reflection and group discussion. Many participants recognized the importance of dialogue. Harley discussed how "call-ins" were utilized in their organizing:

A call-in is, usually from my experience, discussing one on one with a person or with a small group saying, 'hey, this is what we take issue with, this is why, and here's how you can learn and be better', rather than doing so in a public space... There is an open dialogue between all parties involved, but not necessarily [with] parties outside of the group.

They described community accountability as "holding space for people" and "creating balanced systems to work through conflict". Quinn suggested that institutional processes fail to fulfill these purposes: "I feel like there's a lot of community and individual healing that can come from having discussions instead of just locking people up, putting them on trial".

Participants frequently articulated, through their own experiences, the centrality of humanization in accountability practices. Dixie stated:

I think accountability is not like, deciding I'm going to be perfect, I'm going to do everything right by the textbook. It's like, oh, I messed up, and I need to apologize when it's due, and I need to make things right in [ways that are] appropriate at that time... So personally, I think it's about not holding ourselves to such high standards that we can't mess up, [but] trying to do our best when we do mess up and realize when we've done harm.

Similarly, Harley asserted:

[Accountability] is really dependent on seeing other organizers as being human and individual and flawed. We could talk about call-out culture as well, like the idea that people are supposed to know, and not allowing room to be educated safely in a one-to-one manner rather than being dog-piled.

Many organizers adopted a transformative approach that viewed human beings as relational and capable of growth. This approach disrupted the oppressive tendency to categorize human beings through binaries and absolutes.

### ***Dialogical Responses to Harm***

Establishing trust and care within the group does not mean harm will never occur. Therefore, organizations must construct effective responses to harm that do not reinforce existing oppressions. Participants presented a range of responses when asked about how their organizations handled harm. In instances where someone made mistakes due to inexperience or ignorance, participants suggested having open dialogue and taking collective responsibility. Harley observed that in their experiences, it was important to approach harm as learning opportunities, instead of shunning individuals from the space immediately. Ellis noted that when issues occurred, it was often organizational mistakes that did not directly harm someone in the group. “Fixing” them usually involved straightforward actions, such as redoing plans together. However, it was important that they were dealt with communally: “...When we go as a group, we can have that process of someone making a mistake, and the other one points it out... That will eliminate the change of singling out the one person who made the mistake”.

A pedagogical approach to accountability was revealed through participants’ emphasis on dialogue, education, and growth. This approach was how participants preferred to deal with harm when it involved well-intentioned individuals they were in community with. However, certain participants had to navigate situations where individuals in their organizing spaces

committed significant harm. Sometimes, individuals behaved in bigoted ways that made the space unsafe for other members. In those instances, organizers confronted the individual and attempted to address the harm by asking them to depart from positions of power.

Organizers had to consider accountability in terms of who to build community and enter dialogue with. This may entail rejecting collaboration with harmful entities or refraining from publicizing certain information. Dixie and Kennedy both recounted instances where their organization had to sever connections with another group, such as the Salvation Army, due to their transphobia/homophobia. Several participants expressed that organizations should strive to handle disputes internally. However, for larger groups such as the MASU, one may feel the duty to be transparent with the broader community. Rory discussed navigating this tricky balance:

I think probably one limit at least I see especially looking at transparency is that boundary between what is confidential and then what should be publicized...There is a line where some information can't be shared with people, because it's confidential. But like that line isn't set in stone, it's very blurry. At least from the examples that I've seen where things are like, yeah, that could be considered confidential, but then also there would be value in people knowing.

Although in this instance, Rory was only referring to the limits of institutional accountability processes, this struggle remained relevant in all organizations. Organizers had to consider how much of their internal accountability process they want to publicize, and how to do so in a way that avoided compounding harm.

Finally, organizers must conceptualize accountability in macro ways. What needs to be done when it is institutions or larger groups that are perpetuating harm? Can we enter dialogue (in the Freirean sense) with the oppressors? According to participants, evaluating the scale and degree of harm matters. Harley believed that “the town creating policy for people” has “totally

different consequences and different harm than a group that thinks individually to present ideas and organize with other people”. Considering the size of the group and the power it holds was crucial. Organizers are constantly demanding accountability from various entities who hold much more power than them. This entails a vastly different approaches than managing communal accountability. Several participants provided examples of asking the university or local governments to be accountable. Quinn explained this struggle in climate organizing:

With big [fossil fuel] corporations, who do you talk to? Who’s the person that has to have that conversation, you know? Not to take the blame off of individuals in the fossil industry, but you’re fighting against the system itself and the systems within fossil corporations, and just capitalism in general has allowed us to get to this point... No individual is fully responsible for that, and you can’t really single out who made capitalism be what it is. So, in that way, it’s hard to come at accountability from a discussion focus, I suppose.

When it came to transformative justice, participants understood the need to develop ways to address harm both individually and collectively. They conceptualized harm both as interpersonal conflicts and as products of systemic injustices. The following section delves into how individuals attempted to challenge these systemic harms and organize for social change.

### **Transformative Practices**

To the participants, organizing was inextricably connected with accountability. While they strived for accountability in their own groups, they also demanded accountability from their institutions and governments. Participants discussed a range of ideas on how to enact political/social change. Some focused on electoral politics, others brought attention to mass political education. Many of them emphasized the need for interlinked social movements. This section explores participant perspectives on how structures of power can be shifted to generate to create social change.

### ***Working With(in) Institutions***

Bureaucratic channels remained an important avenue for change despite its shortcomings for many participants. This was demonstrated through discussions of mobilization through electoral politics, incremental change, or strategic involvement. For Alexis, preserving a good working relationship was paramount:

I found the relationships that I have built with some people who are in the administration at MTA have proven to be useful for actually pushing the [advocacy agenda] through. However, you have to stay an arm's length away too, because we are not the administration, we are advocating to them. But I found sort of a more collaborative approach has worked more so than a hostile approach in that respect.

Rory found that groups such as the MASU had robust democratic structure and resources to advocate on behalf students: “[MASU was] given the opportunity by others to make change and have this power, so the people who gave [it] that opportunity can also take it away”. The same applied for electoral politics, where the voters held the most power: “... Politicians are there to work for the people. So, if the people say that they want something, then the amount of power behind it is a lot”. Some other participants, such as Kennedy, were less inclined to have faith in institutional procedures:

You know, you pray and hope that someone is gonna listen to you and make this change that you're suggesting. So you do value that kind of participation [in institutional accountability processes]. But it's very frustrating when you're asked to take part because you're being tokenized... As a student activist, you're not usually given the top part of your little hierarchy...

Many organizers understood how establishing allies sympathetic to their causes within dominant institutions can expediate change. However, working with institutions often meant

bargaining and making concessions because of neoliberal organization's reproductive function.

Ellis explained a "step-by-step" approach youth climate activists employed:

So we try with the smallest step, with the smallest idea and request that the government can accept right away, and then we try to push more boundaries every time. Right now, we still didn't give them the idea of what we will actually want yet, because it's still something very bizarre to them, but we're on our way to that. So yeah, 'cause we don't want ourselves to be in the blacklist, so we just try our best to just go little by little to ease in.

Quinn believed that causes such as climate justice involved more organizing from the "outside":

I'd say real political change comes from resisting current systems that are in place, 'cause not all that much is going to change if you're just operating within the systems that you're trying to change. So going outside of that, and being more radical... Because if you don't make the people who are in power feel pressure to change then they won't, because they don't have to personally, because they are gonna be fine if they keep doing what they're doing.

If organizers hyper-focus on advocating within the scope of bureaucratic procedures and come to regard that as a substitute for movement building, then they risk compromising the integrity of the movement. While participants such as Ellis viewed incremental change as a step towards the right direction, others believed it represented manipulation by neoliberal institutions. This distinction emerged principally regarding climate action. Dixie pointed to greenwashing as a way of curbing more radical changes, such as fossil fuel divestment:

I feel like it's a little bit [of] like, throw people a bone here and there. But it's almost like little disguises... It's really not much. But then sometimes they'll just get to throw green labels on things, looking at sustainable development and trying to like, come off as a green institution or something.

Participants may adopt some level of strategic engagement with neoliberal institutions. Harley acknowledged this by stating: “What the institution decides is not always justice, but there can be justice served through it”. Like most participants, Harley operated “both within the system and from outside of it”. They stated that it was “a nice perspective to have both on the proceedings and on things that can be accomplished without necessarily going through the traditional channels of making change”. They believed that depending on the nature of the situation, organizers must make decisions on how much they wanted to rely on bureaucratic channels.

### ***Developing Critical Consciousness***

Many participants alluded to raising critical consciousness through either formal schooling or social movements. This reflected Freire (2018) thesis that becoming conscious about the conditions of oppression is the first step to emancipation. Kennedy noted that when they participated in community initiatives such as the food bank, individuals did not necessarily make the connection between structural inequality and food insecurity: “People get to pick and choose what seems the most palatable”. The food bank came across as a non-threatening “easy fix”. However, community initiatives can become political if organizers consciously incorporate an intersectional analysis. Participants such as Harley identified the need for reflection and action in their organizing:

Theory only gets you so far in terms of implementing actual change... “Activism” is inaccessible to people in a lot of ways. Like sometimes certain justice is only approached from one angle rather than being connected intersectionally, and sometimes the intellectualization of social movements isolates the working class especially, or people with neurodivergences, mental illnesses, physical illnesses, stuff like that.

The respondents found that educating the public directly or bringing social movements into the curriculum empowered individuals to partake in transformative action. This reflected the

pedagogical dimension of social movements as conceptualized by Freire (2018). Rory believed that political engagement should be encouraged in public education:

I think it's something that should be really emphasized in schools more, the power of people in society and organizations. Because with more education on how much power they do have and what they can do, I can see that being so beneficial to people...

Quinn thought that protests and mass movements compelled those with more privilege to become aware of systemic injustices: "...Just be really, really vocal about issues. Have that vocalization come from all people, people who typically wouldn't have their voices heard on these matters, those who are highly affected by these things". According to the participants, educating community members about oppression did not only mean explaining concepts such as intersectionality, but also meant directing them towards organizing.

### ***Cultivating Collective Action***

Social change requires individuals who are aware of interlocking oppressions to collectively mobilize. Harley indicated that activism and accountability are "two sides of the same coin". They expressed:

You need the institution to be accountable for any student progress to work, but you need the student progress to hold the university accountable. So it's sort of one of those tricky balance things that has to happen between a university that respects the people that are within that institution and a student body that actively wants to push change for its institution.

This described a functional community where the institutions and the population have a reciprocal relationship. Even when this is not the case, students must still be motivated towards organization. This may require applying pressure on those in positions of power through collective action. Harley stated: "... A bunch of mildly interested students supporting a bunch of extremely invested students will have more of an effect than just a couple of extremely

motivated students”. Similarly, Quinn believed their biggest contribution to the environmental movement was not through individual actions, but through organizing with others:

I try to do a lot of those things to lessen my individual impact, but I think most of the value and where I fit into the climate movement is in organizing for larger change ‘cause I think that’s where real power comes in, is where people come together to push for institutions and governments- institutions that have a lot of power- to change... Most of my individual power comes from my collaboration with other people and my organizing with other people.

In addition to coalition building, Ellis mentioned that sharing lessons and resources help younger organizers:

...The groups who tried to fight for the better cause, most of them are too busy to make a journal or something like a tip list, just like a blog to post about their experiences and share that with others, like how scientists usually do. So there’s no common ground, or a forum for people to exchange their ideas and exchange how they work with the government, their experiences...

Participants argued that with such a high turnover rate in student organizing, the administration often exploited this lack of continuity. Building movement communities, sharing lessons, and keeping consistent records help organizers preserve momentum. These practices in mutuality challenge the neoliberal focus on self-responsibility. Dixie observed that political change occurred through “the power of people coming together and organizing in numbers”, but some of it is “reflexive”. In this case, they alluded to Ture’s analysis of the unconscious mind being easily captured by single-issue mobilizations (ITS-IN-SCOPE, 2021). Dixie emphasized the need for building movement communities: “I think political change happens when people stick together and realize that there’s like, collective issues.” Other participants presented similar understandings of incorporating individual agency and collective action.

## Discussion

### **Neoliberal Organization**

The function of universities and state institutions can be understood through the logic of neoliberal organization. Such logic, as discussed by Apple (2001), Freire (2018) and others, runs contradictory to the goals of social movements. By adopting incremental reforms, maintaining control through objectification, incorporating revolutionary action under its bureaucracy, tokenizing revolutionary leaders, and manipulating the oppressed, neoliberal institutions circumvent revolutionary change. In the interviews, alienation, inaccessibility, and failed accountability emerged as dominant issues encountered within neoliberal institutions. This section analyzes university responses to student movements and the institution's reproductive function, in hopes of formulating an explanation for these observations.

### ***Manipulation and Inauthentic Dialogue***

Kelley points out that “popular consent can be mobilized by incorporating popular discontent” (KODX Seattle, 2017, 51:00). As the literature review indicated, Freire (2018) positions institutional reforms as false solutions that detract the authentic organization of the oppressed. Neoliberal institutions benefit from the lack of critical consciousnesses because they can satisfy reformist demands and obscure the necessity for transforming the whole system. If student demands can be placated through incremental changes and symbolic gestures, then the university may readily adopt them and brand itself as a champion of progress. This explains the alienation felt by participants as they navigated institutional processes for change. As Scott and El-Assal (1969) observe, the expansion of the bureaucratic structure and the routinized management of concerns creates a sense of divide between the students and the university. Even in a small undergraduate institution such as Mount Allison University, students still expressed this sense of alienation. Many respondents realized that reform measures fell short of authentic change.

The university may also respond to significant concerns through working groups or task forces. These initiatives often focus on substituting genuine communication with tokenization of a few student voices. This led to Kennedy's comment: "Mount A sneezes and has a working group". Neoliberalism is preoccupied with production outcomes. The number of working groups or the mere establishment of them are often invoked as metrics of progress, but this does not critically evaluate the accessibility and responsiveness of these groups. Students selected as representatives in working groups and other leadership positions may be committed to improving the community, but these initiatives cannot act as substitutes for authentic dialogue. As Freire (2018) points out, authentic dialogue must be undertaken *with* the oppressed. The oppressor must recognize their positionality within the oppressed class, renounce it, and join the oppressed. In this instance, working groups and task forces have not addressed the profound power imbalance between administrators and students. When organizing becomes institutionalized, the oppressed stray into inauthentic dialogue with the elite. Respondents like Kennedy noted a lack of genuine student participation in these processes and indicated that in instances when students engaged in them with the hopes of improving the institution, they often ended up giving free labor or feeling limited in their ability to affect change.

### ***Co-optation of Grassroots Movements***

The MASU emerged as a significant entity in the interviews because it occupied a unique position. While students' unions are a product of the student movement and a crucial vessel for student advocacy, they can also readily become an extension of the administrative bureaucracy. In the case of Mount Allison University, student leaders who worked closely with the administration adopted their language, their logic, their responses, and their approaches to advocacy. Respondents in student government posited civil collaboration with the administration as central to effective engagement. Furthermore, these students' accounts focused on the intended purpose of institutional processes (e.g. student councils, judicial panels,

committees, etc.), which diverged from the accounts of other organizers (inaccessible processes, failed accountability, lack of transparency, etc.). This revealed a clear contradiction between the proclaimed functions of bureaucratic structures and their real impacts. More importantly, this demonstrated that despite the radical roots of student governmental organizations such as student unions, they were not impenetrable to neoliberalization.

Anecdotes from Mount Allison University students corresponded with accounts from other student movements. As Carty (2018) observes in the example of Maple Spring, student leadership who engaged in reformist discussions with university administrations and governments were largely proven unsuccessful. As noted in the previous section, one of the respondents indicated that preserving a good working relationship with the administration was paramount when partaking in student advocacy. They cautioned against appearing overly controversial and sabotaging relationships with the administrators when they stated: “do we want to go super hard and say we hate the university, and we hate tuition?” This demonstrated a commitment to dialogue with elites (Freire, 2018). At Mount Allison University, advocacy surrounding tuition is typically undertaken by student leaders through working groups and university committees. This corresponded with the prior reformist, single-issue approaches that student organizations adopted in the context of Maple Spring. Such an approach was contrasted with CLASSE’s impact, which resulted from organized direct action by students and the broader community: “...Once students pivoted from compromise and reform to contentious politics and radicalism, they drew in more recruits and gained leverage against their opponents, and ultimately were successful in achieving their goals” (p.117). Carty’s observation revealed diverging approaches in student tuition advocacy: one was concerned with gaining legitimacy and support within existing institutions, the other was concerned with exerting pressure on these institutions through mass mobilizations.

Respondents recounted similar phenomena of neoliberalization involving community engagement projects, non-profit organizations, working groups, etc. Once grassroots movements start to measure their success through neoliberal standards, they are vulnerable to false generosity, oppressive hierarchies, paternalism, alienation, and deradicalization (Freire, 2018). No organization or movement is inherently radical. The resistance to tuition increases clarified this: whereas Maple Spring organizers positioned themselves within the broader struggle against the expansion of neoliberal capitalism, Mount Allison University student leaders regarded tuition as an independent issue to be resolved through institutional processes. Social movements require resources and popular support in order to organize under the conditions of neoliberal capitalism. Due to the unequal distribution of resources under neoliberal capitalism, organizers may appeal to hegemonic institutions to provide such supports. But as these movements become mainstreamed and grassroots organizations increase in size, they face increasing pressure to become entrenched in neoliberal capitalism.

### ***The “Threatening” Alternative***

Freire (2018) states: “The dominant elites can lead people into an unauthentic type of ‘organization’, and can thus avoid the threatening alternative: the true organization of the emerged and emerging people” (p.148). Unauthentic organization refers to the formation of a leadership class that *includes* the oppressed without genuine engagement *with* the oppressed. Neoliberal institutions generate the illusion of change by building a leadership class in the image of the oppressed, but this process implicitly validates the existence of the oppressive structure itself. When liberation becomes synonymous with representation in neoliberal organizations, the so-called radical becomes regarded as the enemy of the oppressed. By convincing the oppressed that they are each other’s biggest threats and that they must compete for validation from the oppressive system, the oppressor sows divide and prevents the formation of a collective critical consciousness (Davis, 1971; Freire, 2018).

Authentic organization with the oppressed challenges the conditions of oppression and constitutes an existential threat to hegemonic institutions. In an act of self-preservation, neoliberal institutions resort to outright opposing “radical” demands and labelling them as divisive or unrealistic. In addition to suppressing critical consciousness by discrediting and diluting “threatening” demands, neoliberal institutions deploy violence to silence those with the potential of raising it. This was reflected in participants’ fears surrounding retaliation from powerful figures or state governments. This was also revealed in more drastic ways through the operations of COINTELPRO, the martyrdom of George Jackson (1972), and the imprisonment of radical intellectuals such as Mumia Abu-Jamal (James, 2003). As Davis (1971) and Stark (2016) assert, organized violence is unleashed to delegitimize and eradicate authentic organization of the oppressed.

Student organizers must remain deeply conscious of how the dynamics of state violence cannot be isolated from the reproductive role of the academy. Grofouel (2013) details how the supremacy of Western epistemology was constructed through the deliberate exclusion of alternative knowledge systems within the Westernized university, accompanied by the targeted extermination of physical bodies that held the knowledge. James (2003) observes that academia and activism can become sites of imprisonment. Under racial capitalism, intellectuals and social movements are surveilled, managed, and restricted through market forces. Revolutionary leaders and their philosophies are reduced to two-dimensional objects for impassive examination, their names serving as currency in the marketplace of ideas. Organizing becomes conflated for sales-pitching, with groups clamoring over each other to achieve the most retweets, the cleverest hashtags, and the largest mobilizations.

Neoliberal institutions cannibalize social movements, exchanging transformative action for corporate management. Walsh and Mignolo (2018) demonstrate the pitfalls of articulating decolonial struggles through the language of colonial states, and Kaba (2021) cautions against

looking to carceral institutions to deliver transformative justice solutions. These lessons urge us to embrace “the threatening alternative” of authentic organization. Organizers must look beyond neoliberal institutions to conceive of justice and emancipation. The following discussions explore the terrains of struggle beyond neoliberal institutions.

### **Community Accountability**

Transformative practices are an exercise in creating a more just future through the present, specifically in terms of adopting anti-oppressive practices within social movement spaces. Participants considered the notion of community accountability in terms of organizational structure, conflict intervention, and practical limitations. Their responses alluded to concepts from prefigurative and transformative justice practices (Bolin, 2017; Kim, 2018). Building upon these testimonies, this section delves into the application of abolitionist strategies in movement organizing.

### ***Structure vs. Hierarchy***

Within the interviews, students described a spectrum of ways to organize their groups and to address harm. From completely non-hierarchical and decentralized groups to complex bureaucracies with checks and balances, many participants acknowledged the importance of organizational structures in facilitating accountability. They generally felt that a communal approach helped members be more honest and accountable to each other. Participants’ interest in horizontal governance demonstrated the value in studying the precedent of other movements, such as the Zapatista struggle. It also drew attention to Bolin’s (2017) analysis of prefigurative practices, which describes the importance of organizing democratic movements.

However, participant testimonies also revealed the importance of not conflating formalized structure with oppressive hierarchies. As Dixie noted, organizations can still replicate oppressive power dynamics in the absence of a formalized structure. Mingus (2019) corroborates this observation: “Many of our community responses to violence can be just as

harmful as state responses... Our communities are not perfect and have also internalized the state and its tactics (e.g. shame, blame, revenge, isolation)” (para. 9-10). Abolitionists proposed that abolition is not the absence of prisons, but the presence of life-affirming structures. The same logic can be applied in organizing spaces, where the absence of bureaucracy and formal structure does not indicate the presence of accountability. Relying purely on informal relationships for accountability without a conscious, anti-oppressive approach demonstrates a lack of critical reflection.

### ***(Un)Conscious Action***

Respondents described various approaches to mitigate harm. Some acknowledged the need for a pedagogical approach, others suggested the importance of regarding community members as complex human beings. Love, trust, and humility were the basis of alternative accountability actions disclosed by participants, which reflected key values of dialogical action (Freire, 2018). Communal accountability processes, such as call-ins, create the conditions for open dialogue and anti-oppressive organization. However, dialogical action requires critical reflection. The application of strategies that correspond with abolitionist approaches does not automatically indicate an abolitionist consciousness. Some participants applied transformative justice strategies in conscious ways, while others may have referred to them unconsciously.

The lack of a critical consciousness led some participants to attribute the shortcomings of institutional accountability to individual causes, such as the lack of knowledge or the lack of initiative, instead of to the inherent contradictions of neoliberal organization. Thus, they indicated that legislative measures or procedural adjustments can ameliorate institutional issues. Even organizers who were disillusioned and frustrated with navigating the iron cage of bureaucracy may not have conceived of any alternatives. These sentiments are reminiscent of the reflexive urge to demand reform actions in mobilizations against police violence (ITS-IN-SCOPE, 2021; Kaba, 2021). Without understanding the structural roots of alienation and

developing a clear goal of disrupting carceral violence, adoptions of transformative justice practices within organizations resembled Freire's (2018) concept of unconscious action.

Nonetheless, most respondents articulated an understanding of what “works” and “does not work” concerning accountability. They referred to the rigidity of institutional accountability procedures and utilized the language of transformative justice during the interviews. This indicates a clear capacity for developing critical consciousness. An explicit connection must be drawn between their alienating experiences, the reproductive role of neoliberal institutions, and abolitionist critiques of state violence.

### ***Challenges and Limitations***

Before diving deeper into the limits of applying transformative practices, we must begin by discarding the notion of a standard, perfect model of justice. The search for an easy answer to community accountability reflects a carceral mindset, because prisons, as institutions that operate with high consent, are widely regarded as the one-size-fits-all solution to social problems (Davis, 2003; Shevek, 2022). Just as abolitionists seek to build a continuum of alternatives to prisons, organizers navigate a plethora of approaches to resisting oppression. It is important to remain conscious of Grosfoguel's (2013) notion of pluriversity. In our pursuit for emancipation, we must reject prescribing a singular approach upon all communities in struggle, but rather develop diverse strategies oriented towards justice that account for each unique situation.

Testimonies from this study must be interpreted within the context of the conditions at Mount Allison University. Despite interview questions being generated with a transformative justice focus, responses did not contain abundant references to criminalization, incarceration, or abolition. This is not surprising, given the positionality of many students at Mount Allison University. Being situated within a small town and a close-knit community, even students who regard themselves as politically active may not come into direct contact with the brunt of

carceral violence. More importantly, the relatively simple structure of the university (small, primarily undergraduate) suggests that students ultimately face fewer bureaucratic hurdles in their advocacy efforts compared organizers in larger complex institutions (Scott & El-Assal, 1969). It becomes easier to overlook shortcomings of neoliberal organization and the magnitude of our alienation. Therefore, we are far more susceptible to formulating accountability and social change through frameworks provided by neoliberal institutions.

Nevertheless, the challenges and limitations discussed in abolitionist movements are still discernable within participant accounts. In their process to make sense of community accountability, organizers navigated questions such as who to include in certain discussions, which groups to ally with, how to account for the size of organizations and evaluate the impacts of harmful actions, and so on. These struggles are also prevalent in abolitionist spaces, as practitioners of transformative justice grapple with how to respond to different forms of violence and harm (e.g. Whynacht, 2021, on domestic homicide). The most significant struggle that emerged was how to address harm on a structural level. As Quinn indicated, processes such as community discussions cannot be applied in instances of profound power imbalance. This is reflected in Whynacht's (2021) discussion on how typical transformative/restorative interventions fail to address intimate terrorism. It is also discussed within Shevek's (2022) critique of liberal pacifist abolitionism. Shevek suggests that abolition emerges from a material analysis of harm and an opposition to state violence, therefore "abolitionism can and does include processes of accountability, but it also must include other tactics that can work to reduce people's capacity to harm in instances where harmers refuse to engage in that accountability" (para. 10). This clearly articulates an abolitionist position on the nuances and limits of prefigurative practices (Bolin, 2017). Resolving a dispute between friends will look vastly different from demanding accountability from an abuser; approaching accountability within a community organization will drastically diverge from resisting an institution of domination. In

this sense, accountability and activism become inextricably linked. As organizers are working to develop solutions to harm on an interpersonal level, they must also resist structural harms. Transformative justice within organizations must be connected to the broader project of social transformation.

### **Transformative Practices**

Participants highlighted several ways they work with(in) hegemonic institutions: raising grievances through available bureaucratic channels, circumventing the bureaucratic process by contacting individuals in positions of power directly, or applying pressure through direct action. This section reviews how student organizers conceived of empowerment and change through three themes: the role of institutional channels, the critical reflections of organizers, and the interconnections between social movements.

### ***Colluding with Institutions***

The primary focus towards mobilizing through bureaucratic structures corresponds with respondents' positionalities within a small post-secondary liberal arts institution. As Scott and El-Assal (1969) observe, institutions with larger sizes and more complex bureaucracies are more likely to see students resort to illegal or extralegal means to raise grievances. Findings from Scott and El-Assal's research suggests that for a small, primarily undergraduate university located in a close-knit community such as Mount Allison, there is less perceived distance between the administration and the students, which results in decreased feelings of alienation. This can explain why some of the respondents conceived of activism principally through bureaucratic means. However, as mentioned previously, the small size of the institution does not mean an absence of neoliberal organization. Therefore, feelings of frustration and alienation persist.

Every organizer must navigate the balance between transformative action and the constraints of current conditions. To a certain degree, organizers must utilize all available means

to generate change. However, the situation becomes truly limiting when they perceive institutional processes as the *only* viable path to seeking change, in spite of how dehumanizing and draining this form of engagement can be. For the environmentalist organizers interviewed, there were clear contrasting understandings of incrementalism. Ellis' group did not want to be "blacklisted" for approaching the government with overly radical demands, while Divest organizers criticized incrementalism and regarded them to be deliberate measures against authentic transformation. This exemplifies tensions in the environmental movement between individualized approaches that emphasize ethical consumption and systematic approaches that demand radical change.

Organizers were hesitant to appear overly militant or radical due to the false notion that the most effective path to change lies with policy and legislation. Accounts from the interviews suggest that some students perceived institutional channels as the *best* way to achieve policy changes. However, lessons from the Black campus movement, the student protests against tuition raises, the fossil fuel divestment movement, and the abolitionist movement all indicate that the biggest drivers for social and political change came from "radical" organizing (Carty, 2018; Franklin, 2003; Greenidge & Gahman, 2019; Kaba, 2021). Solutions for oppression are not prescribed by the neoliberal institution. Even when organizers refer to the usefulness of harness laws and authority to achieve just ends (e.g. participatory defense campaigns discussed by Kaba, 2021), they must also recognize that such outcomes are achieved through protracted, authentic organization of the masses.

### ***Critical Self-Reflection***

Participants' entry points into advocacy and organizing can shape their conception of power and change. Certain respondents volunteered for the interviews because they self-identified as student organizers or activists, but they could not point to specific causes that concerned them. Instead, they offered generalized statements on equality or transparency. This

lack of focus corresponded with their definitions of organizing, which was delivered solely through accounts of institutional engagement. Freire (2018) makes the observation: “For an alienated person, conditioned by a culture of achievement and personal success, to recognize his situation as objectively unfavorable seems to hinder his own possibilities for success” (p. 157). This is not to imply those entering organizing through lived experiences automatically qualify as radicals. Often, respondents described their personal identities and values as entry points into organizing. Many of them still spoke of engagement with neoliberal institutions. They also observed others partake in mobilizations around certain causes without realizing that individual issues were symptomatic of bigger systemic flaws. A lack of critical consciousness regarding the material conditions of oppression can lead even the most well-meaning individual away from transformative action (Freire, 2018).

The interviews also reveal the importance of inhabiting the collective dimension of critical consciousness. Organizers perceived of their respective causes in varying scopes. Some heavily focused on their activities within the university community, some discussed parallels to other universities, and some discussed their position within global movements. In several cases, organizers acknowledged students’ individual agency within the university, but also pointed to the importance of collaboration with others. Many respondents saw themselves as part of broader movements beyond the university campus. On the other hand, some participants conflated inauthentic dialogue or engagement with those in positions of power as collective action. Nevertheless, respondents all seemed to agree that collective effort was necessary for change.

### ***Unity for Liberation***

The contact points between environmental justice and abolition illustrate Freire’s (2018) notion of unity for liberation. In their interviews, Divest MTA organizers echoed Freire perception of neoliberalism reforms as the alternative to revolution. They specifically denounced

incrementalistic approaches within the environmental movement. This position can be discerned in the nature of the fossil fuel divestment movement. As Apfel (2015) observes, fossil fuel divestment, as part of the greater climate justice movement, contains an explicit organizing target. Not only does divestment challenge the nature of fiduciary responsibility and bring into question the university's investment structure, but it also implicates an industry that constitutes a foundational part of modern capitalism.

The movement rejects any engagement with the fossil fuel industry because organizers believe that an industry whose entire business model is based off fossil fuel extraction cannot be reformed. In this sense, divestment from fossil fuels and concepts of a just transition resemble abolitionist calls for defunding and divesting from police/prisons. Both movements advocating shifting resources away from entities that commit profound harm and reallocating them towards building sustainable, life-affirming alternatives. Ruth Wilson Gilmore beautifully articulates how movements for emancipation are deeply interconnected:

Abolition has to be “green.” It has to take seriously the problem of environmental harm, environmental racism, and environmental degradation. To be “green” it has to be “red.” It has to figure out ways to generalize the resources needed for well-being for the most vulnerable people in our community, which then will extend to all people. And to do that, to be “green” and “red,” it has to be international. It has to stretch across borders so that we can consolidate our strength, our experience, and our vision for a better world.

(Kumanyika, 2020, 52:13)

Unity for liberation can be developed both with other social movements and within one's community. These interviews serve as a starting point to exploring how student organizers can position themselves within broader movements. Ellis indicated that younger organizers could benefit from shared lessons and resources. This reveals the importance of developing mutuality between organizers and movement communities. Soule (1997) observes tactical diffusion

between university movements to divest from South Africa Apartheid, particularly regarding the strategy of building “shantytowns”. Similarly, Carty’s (2018) account of student tuition protests and Greenidge and Gahman’s (2019) analysis of the SGWU uprisings illuminate the interconnections between campus organizing and greater movements. Due to the transient nature of university students, it is often difficult to establish sustained cultures of campus organizing. Developing a collective critical consciousness allows organizers to trace the interconnections between social movements. As Grosfoguel (2013) and the Zapatista Movement have demonstrated, building mutuality between liberation struggles is crucial to resisting the global expansion of neoliberal capitalism (Andrews, 2010). Communities must be empowered to organize in the context of their unique conditions, but these initiatives cannot be reduced to discrete, single-issue mobilizations. A coherent goal of emancipation must be clearly established between movements, facilitating the transmission of strategy, resources, theory, and lessons.

Finally, organizers must also attend to how to bring their community to action. As the interviews reveal, advocacy through neoliberal institutions is not an accessible means through which to expand radical imagination and raise critical consciousness. Freire’s (2018) notion of emancipatory pedagogy becomes a pertinent subject of study for organizers. In instances where individuals feel that institutional processes failed them, or when organizers witness disingenuous participation in community initiatives, a potential for critical consciousness emerges. Freire points out that organizers can utilize problem-posing education to guide individuals towards recognizing the interlocking oppressions that are the root causes of social problems. Without the deliberate application of emancipatory pedagogy, individuals exemplify a form of submerged consciousness, which fail to realize the real scope of oppression (Freire, 2018). Jackson (1972) notes the importance of attending to the basic needs of the community and ensuring its survival pending revolution. As participants have observed, although individuals may participate in initiatives such as community food banks, they often do not

understand the roots of precarity and food insecurity. It is crucial to provide political education and organize the community to confront state institutions. Jackson specifically discusses the notion of “radicalizing an area of their natural environment” (p.110), which requires organizers to engage individuals at rallies and ask for specific, ongoing contributions they can make towards the organizing effort. This demands organizers to firmly ground their organizing within the material conditions of their communities. While organizers seek to meet the community’s immediate needs, they must also engage in pedagogical practices that lead individuals to see their struggles as part of existing systems of oppression. All of this cannot be delivered through neoliberal organization. Therefore, it is pertinent that student organizers recognize the radical potential of engagement with the community.

## Conclusion

If we cannot practice equality, mutuality, and humanization within our organizations, our communities, and our universities, how can we hope to transform the world? My research sought to explore Ruth Wilson Gilmore's proclamation, as quoted in the beginning of this thesis, about "no body and no form of life" being "outside the imperative for abolition today" (Haymarket books, 2021, 9:24). Therefore, I relied on abolitionist perspectives to craft my observations on building transformative change. I set out to understand how these perspectives can be applied in my immediate environment, which included the attitudes of my peers and the university community I organized from.

My findings yielded key insights on the function of the university institution. Through the themes of neoliberal organization, community accountability, and transformative practices, participants recounted the complex challenges of creating change. More importantly, these accounts revealed how students often came to understand activism and organizing within the frameworks of bureaucratic channels. They pointed to the institution's role in limiting radical imagination and reproducing hegemonic structures of oppression. The tensions and contradictions student organizers struggled with were reflected in analyses from abolitionist struggles, decolonial movements, and other student mobilizations. Therefore, these dynamics illuminate greater social relations of power. The politics of resistance within the university demonstrated a need for critical reflections and collective consciousness within social movements, particularly regarding neoliberalism's role in reinforcing structures of oppression.

Accounting for the small size of Mount Allison University and the limited scope and resources of undergraduate research, this thesis was still constrained in its abilities to formulate the connections between student organizing and liberation movements. The study did not suggest the complete absence of critical consciousness in student organizing, but rather outlined the limitations for it in students who have volunteered and considered themselves politically

active. Notably, some participants' approaches to generating social change did not fit neatly under the concept of "organizing" (as defined in the introduction). The interview questions were designed to encourage connections to social movements such as abolition, but these connections were not always clearly established. This suggests the need for re-examination of the interview structure and re-evaluation of the methods of recruitment. The demographic composition of the participants allowed for studying neoliberal organization and its influences over student approaches to making change. It did not adequately allow for studying the perspectives of young organizers in university who are also explicitly invested in liberation movements.

Some questions remain unanswered by the research. What roles can university students play in the abolitionist movement? How can critical consciousness be raised, and how can emancipatory pedagogy be practiced in student organizing? When students refer to ideas from abolitionists and revolutionary thinkers in unconscious ways, what resources are available to bring these connections to light? What does education for resistance look like, especially when the neoliberal educational institution fails to nurture radical imagination? What does radical organizing look like in a small liberal arts institution or in rural communities? All these questions present paths for future investigations.

Ultimately, it is imperative that we do not distance our pursuits of knowledge from the struggles at hand. Jackson (1972) reminds us: "...After we are done with our books, they must be put aside; and the search for method will depend on observations, correct analyses, creativity and seizing the time" (p. 23). If we are committed to dismantling systems of oppression, then we cannot spend all our time debating, theorizing, and waiting for the conditions to be "right". Instead, we must be willing to take the leap of faith and commit to radical, transformative action. We must make praxis our *raison d'être*. If liberation movements and radical thinkers throughout time have taught us anything, it is that no structure of oppression is so absolute that it cannot be

dismantled. Hope is a discipline (Kaba, 2021). It must be deliberately nurtured from disillusionment, desperation, and complacency. We must learn to care for each other so fiercely, love life so deeply, rage against injustice so decisively, and dream of emancipation so fearlessly, in order to transform the world.

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## Appendix 1

### Interview Questions

The first section explores how students navigate activism and political change. The questions include:

- Describe your involvements and your connection with political organizing.
- How do you view your role in the causes you participate in?
- How do you honor your beliefs and values in your activism?
- What is the most important aspect of organizing?
- What do you think political change means?
- o Potential follow-up: how do you think political change occurs?

The second section explores how students relate to abolition through their activism. The questions include:

- What do you think accountability means?
- What does community accountability look like to you?
- How is your organization structured? Do you think this grants accountability between members? Why or why not?
- How do you address instances of harm in your community?
- Is participating in institutionalized accountability processes (e.g. courts, university procedures) important to you?
- o Potential follow-up: what are the limits to institutional accountability?
- Do you think accountability practices connect with your organizing activities?

## Appendix 2

### Call for Participants



Image description: The image has a black background and the title reads “Call for Participants” in bold orange letters. It is followed by three bullet points:

- Are you passionate about student advocacy?
- Are you an active member of a campus organization?
- Are you interested in discussing accountability and transformative justice?

Smaller white letters indicate below: “I am looking for self-identified student organizers to participate in my Sociology Honours Thesis on student activism and transformative justice practices in post-secondary education.

Participants will engage in a 40-minute virtual interview and speak about their experiences as a student activist, how they view political change, and how they navigate accountability. Participation is 100% voluntary and participants are not obligated to answer all interview questions. They will remain anonymous in publications of the research.

For compensation, participants will receive a \$15 gift card to a local business. If interested, please reach out to Helen Yao at [xyao@mta.ca](mailto:xyao@mta.ca).”