

**A Letter to
Incoming
Progressive/
Radical Students**

National Lawyers Guild

Summer 2021

A complement to the National NLG Disorientation Guide

Prepared by Stanford Law School Students

Adapted for NLG-LA 2021 DisOrientation Retreat

In the coming year, you may find yourself seriously reconsidering why you came to law school.

You may find yourself...

- feeling a resistance to the doctrinal materials;
- feeling outraged at the blatant racism/homophobia/xenophobia, etc. perpetuated by the law;
- and feeling confused at the tacit acceptance of all of the above by your peers and professors.

Unfortunately, we've all been there. If you find yourself trying to reconcile your decision to pursue law school and its hierarchies with your own anti-racist, anti-capitalist, etc. beliefs, hopefully this guide can be of some assistance.

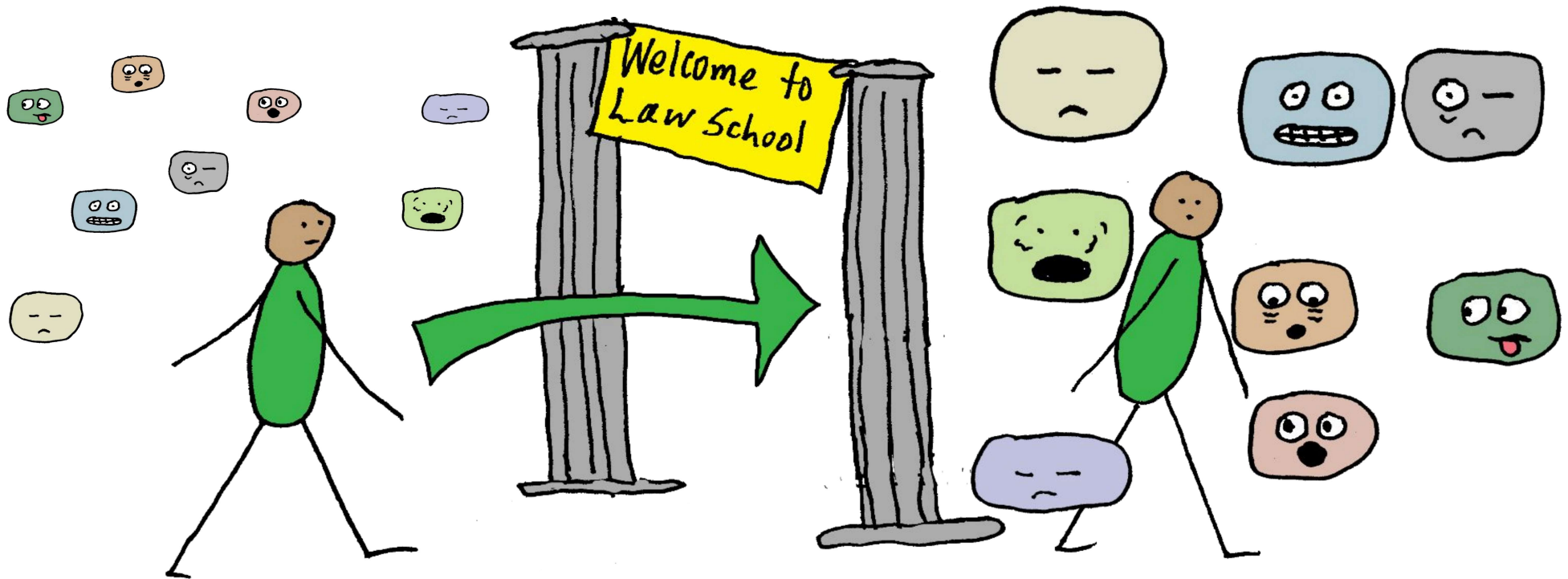
Welcome to Law School!

We hate to be the bearers of bad news, but law school is a pretty messed up place.

But it can also be a place where you can forge relationships of learning and growth—if you’re able to consistently reject the bullshit that law school throws at you, from problematic ideologies (like cost-benefit obsession and focus on “national security” to serve xenophobic interests) to hierarchical pressures (like the push toward clerkships and firms).



What's up with the legal profession?



[This slide and any with a “JO” stamp in the corner are adapted from a presentation Janelle Orsi from the Sustainable Economies Law Center did last year at SLS. Here are her [slides](#).]



Eeee, these numbers:



- 3.6x the rate of depression
- 2x the rate of substance abuse
- 36% of lawyers struggle with alcohol abuse
- 4th highest rate of suicide rate among professions
- 70% of Yale Law students surveyed by the Mental Health Alliance struggled with mental health issues during law school
- Associate attorney is the #1 unhappiest job in America

What Have We Discovered in Law School?

- ❑ Law school is a slow-moving, conservative place.
 - ❑ Even with all the liberal faculty, the teaching style is very old-school, and every day you learn about how evil the US legal system is.
 - ❑ Check out the [NLG Radical Law Student Manual](#) put together by NLG affiliates across the country for a look at how students can try to change law school practices and pedagogy.
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What Have We Discovered? (Cont'd)

- ❑ Elite law schools exist to serve elite interests—upholding the patriarchal racial colonial capitalism that crushes people and planet.
 - ❑ SLS is funded by and actively steers students to protect corporate interests advancing such projects.
 - ❑ Wanna unpack those buzzwords? Check out this lovely, extensive [Building for Radical Lawyering reader](#) that fellow law students put together.
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Money, Status, Prestige

Everything in the legal profession is extremely hierarchical, and SLS is no exception.

And Slowly.... Learning How Not to Give a Fuck

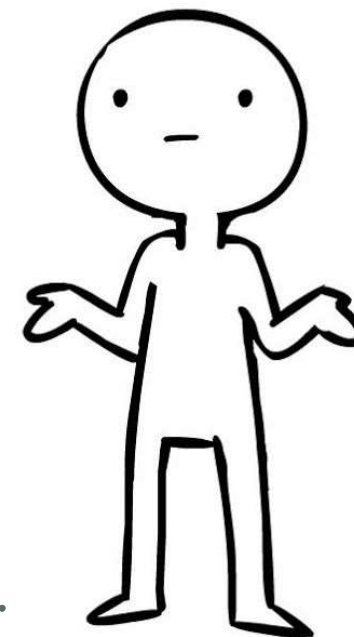
Get ready for:

- Grade grubbing + gunnering
- Thinking that *better at* means *better than*
- Applying for things constantly, like classes and activities (cuz we stan the meritocracy)
- Feeling like every decision from jobs, clinics, classes, journals, etc. is a reflection of where you are on a hierarchy and determinative of the rest of your life

So Why Are We in Law School?

Sometimes we're not really sure...

And we'd encourage everyone to think hard about whether/why the social justice work they want to do requires a JD... especially given how demobilizing debt is and how terrible law school can be.



BUT! You're here now, so let's make the best of it.

- ❖ Read about "[Public Interest Drift](#)" here and develop strategies and community if you want to avoid it~

What's the Relationship between Law and Social Change?

- ❖ Well, it depends on what kind of change you want. If you want transformative change, a court or lawsuit can't deliver that. It will take mass mobilization and robust movement building. Lawyers are not the solution; people power is.
 - HIGHLY RECOMMEND checking out [Dean Spade's resources](#) on the role of lawyers in social movements. We love Dean. So much so that we invited him to talk at SLS just a few months ago ([link to recording](#)). Here's the [article form](#) if you prefer.
 - ❖ So the question becomes: *How can lawyers be in relationship with social movements?*
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Movement Lawyering!

(which has a long history and goes by many names, including rebellious lawyering, community lawyering, and radical lawyering)

There's so much to learn and explore about this approach:

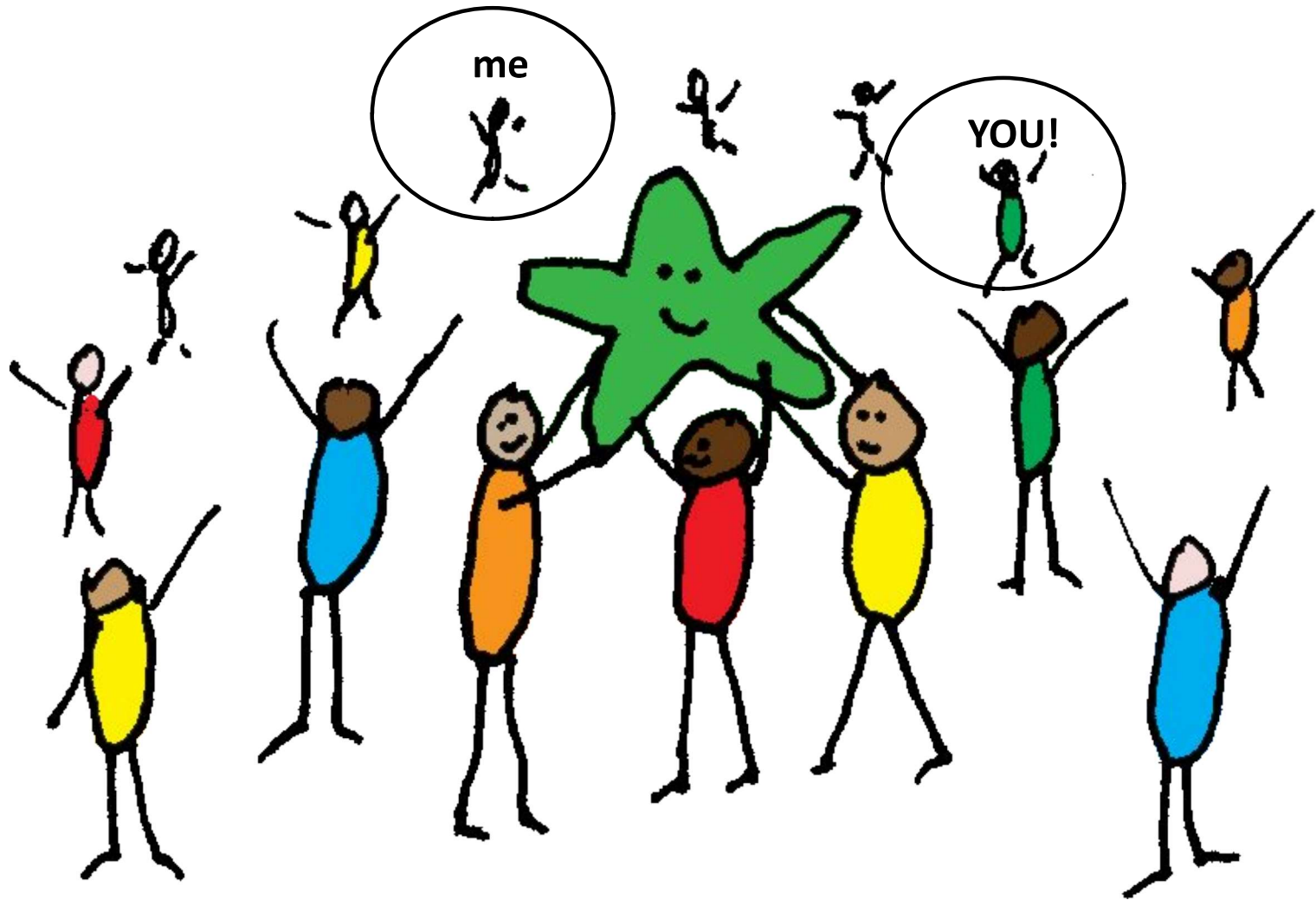
- ❖ How can you remain accountable to organizers on the ground **most impacted by intersecting oppressions**?
- ❖ How can you defer to the needs of the social movement fighting for transformative change instead of co-opting or selling out the movement as lawyers often do?

Ways to Practice Movement Lawyering

- ❖ Just showing up consistently in radical organizing spaces. Being in deep relationships, and not assuming you have all the answers because you know some law.
 - Resist how SLS can impair your willingness to take nontraditional paths.
- ❖ There are few legal jobs that will pay you to undermine capitalism. (Although there are a few, and SLS grads have disproportionate access to them.)
 - Don't expect to be paid for all the movement work you do!
 - Maintain a political home outside of your job.

(More) Ways to Practice Movement Lawyering

- ❖ Bringing your full self to social movements, recognizing that the movement needs cooks, artists, care workers, agitators, healers, financial experts, etc.
 - Bring all the hats you have!
- ❖ There are many strategies that movement lawyers take. To name a few:
 - protest defense, public records requests, participatory defense, policy drafting, know your rights trainings, and affirmative litigation
 - The movement needs all kinds of lawyers!



Movement Lawyering Resources:



- ❑ Here's a [curated resource guide](#) that an SLS NLG subgroup put together earlier this year!
 - ❑ Here's a [video](#) of the incredible movement lawyer Amanda Alexander speaking at SLS last year.
 - ❑ Here are some syllabi on the topic:
[Building 4 Rad Lawyering](#)
[Movement Law Lab Founder Guide](#)
[Columbia Law School Syllabus](#)
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We love radical solidarity!

Movement lawyering is not the only framework that inspires us, but radical social movement struggle is often the source of the political frames that resonate with us.

Some Inspiring Movement Demands

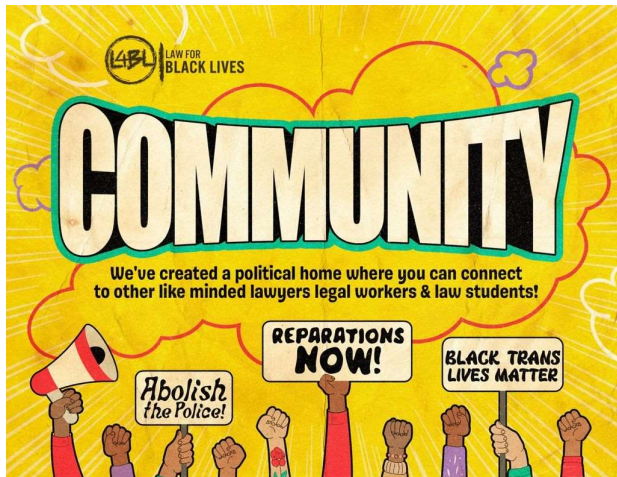
1. The Movement for Black Lives' Vision for Black Lives and Red, Black, and Green New Deal
2. A People's Orientation to a Regenerative Economy
3. Movement Generation's Just Transition: From Banks and Tanks to Cooperation and Caring

Helpful background:

- A cartoon zine that introduces "Racial Capitalism and Prison Abolition"
- The incredibly moving essay by Robin D.G. Kelley, "Finding The Strength To Love And Dream"

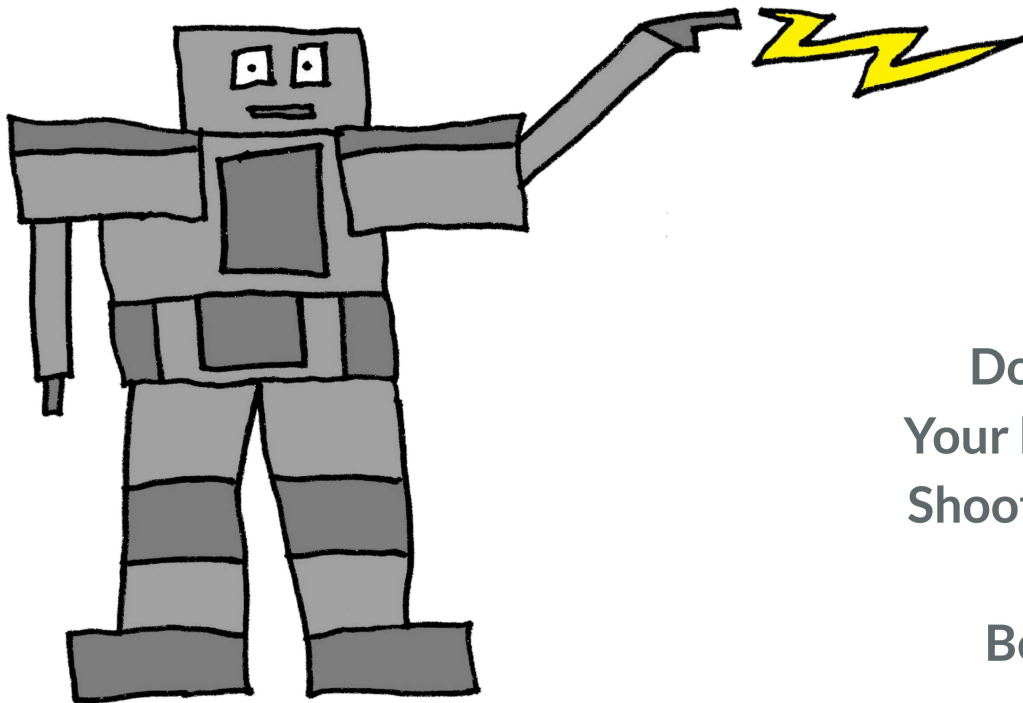


Lovely Legal Communities To Plug Into:



1. Join the national movement lawyering / racial justice network, [Law for Black Lives](#)
 - a. Explore ways of being an abolitionist lawyer—e.g. as a public defender, organizer, or providing mutual aid to incarcerated folks.
2. Learn about the [solidarity economy](#) and its [lawyers](#) who empower collective stewardship of housing, land, work, food, etc.
3. Learn about [Just Transition Lawyering](#) through its up-and-coming institute
4. Follow the progressive legal academia movement, [Law and Political Economy](#)
5. Join the [National Lawyers Guild!](#)

In the legal profession, domination is supreme.



Be competent.
Be knowledgeable.
Be confident.
Be perfect.

Control outcomes.

Don't lose. The stakes are high.

Your best will never be good enough.

Shoot lightning from your fingertips.

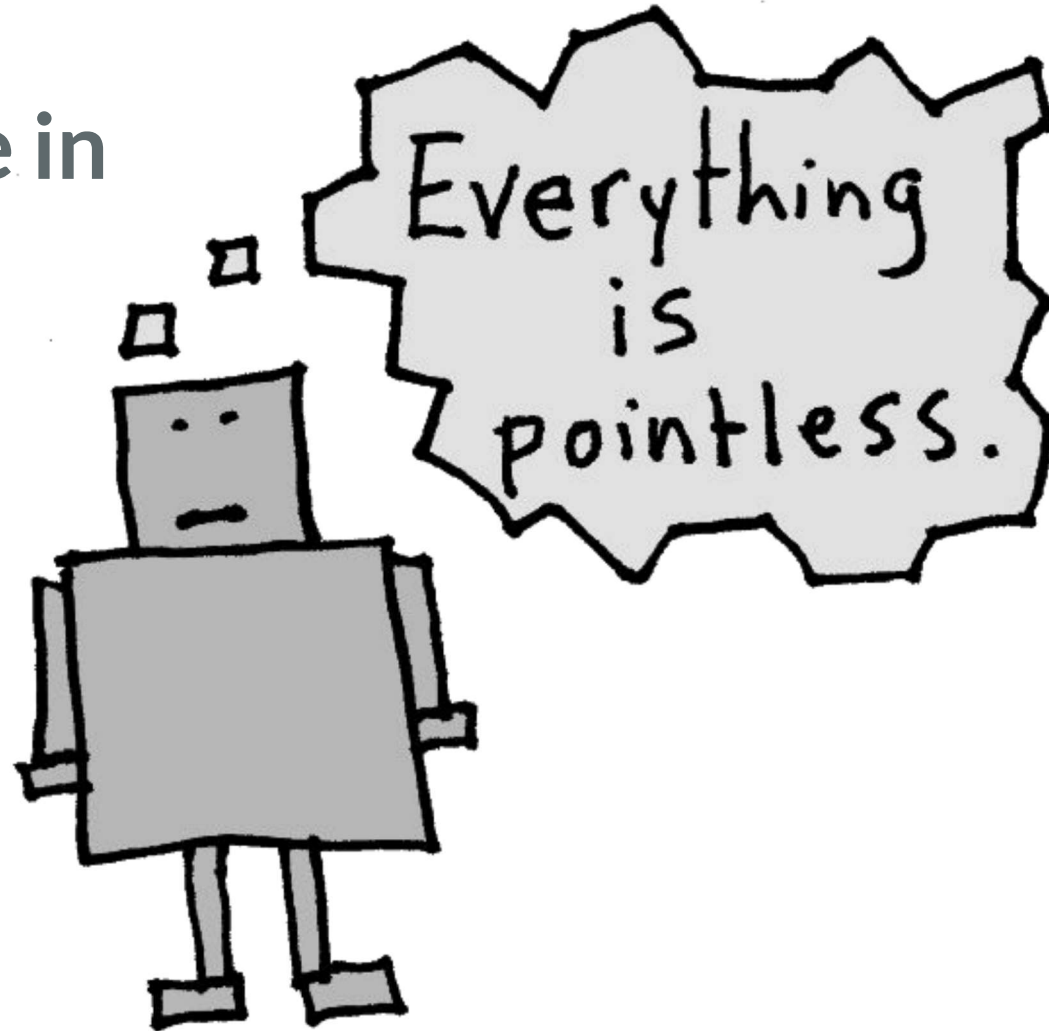
Crush the opponent.

Be better than everyone else.

[More slides from [Janelle Orsi's presentation](#).
Her reflections on law school and how she's shifted gears.]



This was me in
law school:



This is belonging and liberation.



Some Saturday morning cartoons:

From Sustainable Economies Law Center, generally:

- [Nurturance Lawyering: How to Bring Connection and Healing To Our Work in Challenging Times](#) (30 min cartoon)
- [From Dominance Lawyering to Nurturance Lawyering](#) (article)
- Join this community: www.Law4EconomicDemocracy.org
- [Three Legal Principles for Rebuilding the Commons](#) (article)
- [Legal Structures for Economic Transformation](#) (1 hour cartoony workshop)
- [Visual Guide to Decommodifying the Law](#)
- [Legal structures for social transformation](#) (short article)
- [Practicing Law in the Sharing Economy](#) (book)
- [Law as Commons](#) (5 min cartoon)
- [The Legal Roots Of Resilience](#) (4 min cartoon)
- [How octopuses can inspire legal documents](#)
- [Law Center teach-ins playlist](#)
- [Black Women Lawyers Matter](#) (interview series)

Radical real estate law videos:

- [The History of Land Grabs and How to Fight Back](#) (webinar)
- [Radical Homeownership](#) (Part 1 webinar)
- [Legal Tools for Radical Homeownership](#) (Part 2 webinar)
 - [Link to Slideshow](#)
- [The Pathologies of Homeownership](#) (short cartoon)
- [UnSelling MamaEarth: Povertyskolaz Teach How To Build A Homeless People's Solution to Homelessness](#) (webinar)
- [Liberating Land Use: How Zoning Promotes Cultural Genocide and White Supremacy & How We Fight Back](#) (webinar)
- [Permanently protecting community assets from sale](#) (short cartoon workshop)



There is so much more to you & life than law school

Self-Care/Community-Care ideas to consider, but no pressure:

- ★ Say “no.” You do **NOT** have to do everything, *including anything on this list*
 - You will absolutely be fine if you skim or skip readings. You’ll be fine if you opt out.
- ★ *You will probably care more about grades than you want to...* develop strategies to remind yourself: grades do not measure your intelligence, legal learning, or ability to help people
- ★ Go outside. Walk/run/hike/bike/sit...but soak up some sunshine & trees
- ★ Remember your value is soooo much greater than your identity as a student
- ★ You are NEVER alone—your peers are in it with you and want to support you <3
- ★ Read for fun, even if it’s just 15 minutes before bed set aside to read a novel
 - Netflix is also awesome
- ★ Connect with non-law school friends/family
- ★ Dogs (or cats)
- ★ Reach out to help and be helped!
- ★ Volunteer somewhere that has nothing to do with law
- ★ Make time for therapy (or whatever form of mental health practices work for you!)

