

June 2018

We've Been Here Before: An Open Letter to Defy, Resist, and Build

Jessica N. Lester
jnlester@indiana.edu

Allison Daniels Anders
University of South Carolina

Nicholas Mariner

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/taboo>

Recommended Citation

Lester, J. N., Anders, A. D., & Mariner, N. (2018). We've Been Here Before: An Open Letter to Defy, Resist, and Build. *Taboo: The Journal of Culture and Education*, 17 (2). <https://doi.org/10.31390/taboo.17.2.08>

We've Been Here Before

An Open Letter to Defy, Resist, and Build

Jessica Nina Lester, Allison Daniel Anders, & Nicholas Mariner

Abstract

We write this open letter in a historical moment in which President Trump has at once been described as “making America great” and “making America weak.” In this letter, we take up the position that Trump’s rise to power offers visible evidence of settler colonialism, white supremacy, and the permanence of racism. Drawing upon critical race theory and postcritical ethnography, we highlight how this radical new ‘normal’ is one that requires us, as qualitative researchers, to think carefully about our work, our practices, and the ways we navigate and come to know in the world. Specifically, we discuss how we might represent in our work structural violence that defies explanation. We thus invite readers to engage in the production of narratives that disrupt and resist seducing readers into substituting participation with consumption.

An Open Letter

Dear colleagues:

We write this open letter during what many people have characterized as an unstable time in US history. The historical present has at once been described as a time when “America [is] weak again” (Freedland, 2017, para. 15), and, in the words of President Donald Trump (2017), a time when “together we will make America strong again”. While some have heralded Trump’s presidential win as a sign of the

Jessica Nina Lester is an associate professor in the School of Education at Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana. Allison Daniel Anders is an assistant professor in the College of Education at the University of South Carolina, Columbia, South Carolina. Nicholas Mariner teaches history and world studies at a high school in Dallas, Texas. Email contact is jnlester@indiana.edu

© 2018 by Caddo Gap Press.

return of the right's power, economic growth, and stability, we, like many others, view Trump's rise to the White House as visible evidence of settler colonialism, white supremacy, and the permanence of racism (Bell, 1992; Tuck & Guishard, 2013). Even as Trump sells white supremacy to his voters, he rejects the reality that whiteness and wealth had anything to do with his accumulation of assets. As critical race theorist Derrick Bell argued, victories "slide into irrelevance as racial patterns adapt in ways that maintain white dominance" (p. 12). Perhaps the legacy of President Barack Obama's time in the White House may be an exception. Perhaps not. In his undoing of President Obama's achievements, President Trump seems to seek not only to challenge his predecessor's accomplishments but to erase them altogether. As Harris (1993) noted:

The law has accorded "holders" of whiteness the same privileges and benefits accorded holders of other types of property. The liberal view of property is that it includes the exclusive rights of possession, use, and disposition. Its attributes are the right to transfer of alienability, the right to use and enjoyment, and the right to exclude others. (p. 1731)

Whiteness as property includes expectations of how whiteness is deployed, including its right of use and enjoyment and its right to exclude (Harris). Through President Trump's tweets, we now stand witness to how he manages a violation of expectations whenever his deployment of whiteness is challenged, limited, or derailed altogether.

This radical 'new' normal emerging from communities and institutions of higher education is one that we suggest requires us, as qualitative researchers, to think carefully about our work, our practices, and the way we navigate and come to know in the world. As post-critical ethnographers (Noblit et al., 2004), we have begun to think carefully about what the historical present means for how we represent our work, as well as our role in producing narratives of defiance (Bell, 1992). 'Hope' seems to imply that things will change as does racial idealism. In contrast, defiance seems to lean into a moral imperative that things ought to change but may not. Racial realists encourage defiance. So, where do we find sustenance these days? In one or the other? Perhaps they are productive together, hope and defiance. How, then, shall we seek and represent narratives, tactics, and strategies of defiance alongside ideas of critical hope (Hyttén, 2010)? How do we represent that what we see in our work is not a history of progress but one of violence and oppression (Anders & Lester, 2011)? How can we foreground that many people have always lived with systemic violence, their bodies have always been targeted, their minds always ignored, erased, and questioned? How might we generate narratives that make visible that the world is on fire and has been for some time? How might we represent suffering in ways that avoids damage-centered research (Tuck, 2009) and "embed individual biography in the larger matrix of culture, history, and political economy" (Farmer, 2005, p. 41)?

As white scholars, we have been wrestling with these questions for several years, and yet with the rise of Trump, we are left feeling that this is an even more important consideration, as we work collectively to resist. Moreover, we recognize that:

Postcritical ethnographies in an important sense are not designed but enacted or produced as moral activity. Postcritical ethnographers then must assume they exist within a critical discourse that in part makes them responsible for the world they are producing when they interpret and critique. (Noblit et al., 2004, p. 24)

So, with a recognition that we are “in part...responsible for the world”, we write this letter from a postcritical orientation – one which emphasizes positionality, critiques objectification, and questions representation and power. In so doing, we aim not to offer a set of ‘rules’ or even a cohesive roadmap. Rather, we invite readers, particularly critical and postcritical scholars, to engage with our thinking-being and the cautions we offer about the allure of neat and tidy narratives. We invite readers to engage in work and the production of narratives that disrupt, defy, and ultimately create dis-ease, perhaps especially among the “parlor liberals” (Douthat, 2005, p. 200).

“Welcome. This Has Always Been My Life”

*It was two days after the 2016 US Presidential elections.
A monthly committee meeting focused on equity in higher education was just about to begin. Sitting around the table were five white academics.
Perhaps unsurprisingly, the conversation settled on sharing fears and concerns about the incoming Trump administration.
“What does the new administration mean for us as scholars?”
“What does it mean for our students—many of whom are from ‘targeted’ countries?”
“What does this mean for our family and friends whose lives are daily targets?”
Just as the final question was voiced, our African American colleague entered the room.
He smiled and said,
“What does this mean?
Welcome.
This has always been my life.
I’ve been living this my whole life.”*

We have been sitting with this moment, this word “Welcome,” for several months now. When we decided to craft this open letter, we thought about audience and the earliest moments where these questions about narratives of resistance and the seduction of narrative work began bubbling for us. For us, it returns again and again in the questions of how we write against ourselves (Noblit, 1999) and how we represent in our work structural violence that defies explanation (Farmer, 2005). The world is on fire. It has always been. Just not often for white folks of privilege in the U.S. We live next to, alongside of, and for some, with violence all of the time. The differences cannot be underestimated and should not be compared—nor should our complicities.

So, we believe it is particularly important to clarify that *we have been here before*. We have walked this road and tread this river many times. Certainly, in the historical present, our responses may demand a radicalism to our 'normal' as academics, but the targeting of immigrants, immigrants of color, communities of color, women, transgender communities, and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and queer communities, and social welfare program recipients reflects presidential agendas we have seen before. From the violent histories of compulsory sterilization programs to the illegal deportation of immigrants and myriad human rights and civil rights violations, many presidential administrations have sanctioned and their government agencies executed violent policies of subjugation against targeted communities (Begos, 2012; Foner, 1970; López, 2006). For instance, between World War I and World War II the administrations of Wilson, Harding, Coolidge, and Hoover demonstrated a marked commitment to isolating the United States from European and global affairs and reducing rates of immigration from particular areas of the world. While creating a quota system to maintain minimal immigration, they also presided over concerted federal efforts to eradicate transgressive immigrant behavior. The Palmer Raids of 1919-1920, spearheaded by Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer, targeted immigrants accused of holding radical Leftist ideologies, and marked the zenith of the era's Red Scare. The immigrants, often first targeted because they were of Italian or Eastern European descent and little more by way of evidence, faced deportation as Palmer believed the elimination of an immigrant population was the most effective solution to maintaining order in the post-war landscape. Because Palmer and his team arrested many more suspected radicals than for whom they had issued warrants, many deportations occurred without proper due process. It should be noted that while sitting President Woodrow Wilson did not expressly advocate the raids, General Palmer coordinated with FBI director J. Edgar Hoover and received substantial monetary support from Congress to execute the raids. Presidential politics in the 1920s tended toward a laissez-faire approach to economic, racial, and social issues, which allowed for lesser state agents or local groups to target vulnerable or marginalized populations, including the Palmer Raids and the renewed expansion of the Ku Klux Klan and other racist nativist groups (Higham, 1955).

Perhaps, then, shock about the agenda in 2017 reveals commitments to ideas of progress. Bell (1992) warned us against believing in the promise of empathy and incrementalism. As a racial realist who believed in the permanence of racism, Bell invited folks to join him in the fight to delegitimize white supremacy and to find meaning in the struggle. But learning to live with the dread takes practice, especially for white folk.

Yet, even still, to pursue the task of making meaning in the face of suffering and death and to recognize one's complicity in systems of interlocking oppressions (Collins, 1989; Noblit, 1999) is not easy. Often for those of us who are classed or raced or gendered or located and positioned with privilege, or for whom provenance

and the body go unquestioned, understanding that the production and perpetration of harm is the status quo may mean we must learn what we have not lived—that oppressive relations of force are always already present (Butler, 1990; Foucault, 1990; Gramsci, 1995).

We do not think this learning takes place all at once nor is it evenly distributed with understanding across all issues of injustice. Some of us repeat lessons again and again. Others are learning to live with injustice and the dread that often accompanies it for the first time. Sometimes our learning nests in the projects of inquiry we pursue, lacing our work with tension and humility.

As postcritical ethnographers (Noblit et al., 2004), who for four years studied the systematic targeting of Burundian families with refugee status who were resettled in southern Appalachia in the US, we have wondered how we are to represent moments so violent that they defy meaning. In our ethnographic work, we have sought to work against what Malkki (1996) described as central in the literature surrounding refugees:

It is striking how often the abundant literature claiming refugees as its object of study locates ‘the problem’ not in the political conditions or processes that produce massive territorial displacements of people, but, rather, within the bodies and minds (and even souls) of people categorized as refugees. The internalization of the problem within ‘the refugee’ is the more contemporary study of refugees now occurs most often along a medicalizing, psychological axis...The point here is obviously not to deny that displacement can be a shattering experience. It is rather this: our sedentarist assumptions about attachment to place lead us to define displacement not as a fact about sociopolitical context, but rather as an inner, pathological condition of the displaced. (p. 443)

Alongside this understanding, we have also leaned heavily into Bell’s (1992) work around the permanence of racism. Critical race theorists and in particular racial realists reoriented the ways we began conversations about racism and racial justice inside and outside the classroom. Bell’s arguments and allegories about the permanence of racism forced us to name the permanence of our own racism. Identifying as racist instead of cataloging our commitments to anti-racist work changed the ways we were able to talk to White folk and Black folk. In contrast to opening a dialogue about “social justice” with a statement about anti-racist commitment, we found that starting conversations with, “I’m racist and always working on my racisms” turned the dialogue in new directions. For us, reading about racial realism gave us language to say what was evidenced daily by most of the White men and women we knew growing up—their racism was not going anywhere. In *Faces at the Bottom of the Well*, Bell offered, too, particular roles for Whites to fulfill who were interested in racial justice. Briefly, he argued that if White folk worked with folks of color toward racial justice, they did so by the terms dictated by Black folks. And he argued that White folk needed to work with other white folk to fight white supremacists. Even if our racism is permanent,

even when we are complicit in the reproduction of whitestream institutions and practices, there seems to be at least the possibility of working toward the delegitimation of white supremacy.

Further, from racial realists we have learned to resist the telling of success stories—stories most often generated for and consumed by Whites and people of privilege. In our work with Burundian families, we encountered success story after success story, circulated most often by the White leaders of Riverhill—the monolingual, industrial town where Burundians we worked with lived. Many Burundian adults were told by the local affiliate supervising resettlement to work as janitors or in food preparation at a local university. Although Burundian adults repeatedly requested access to English classes, they had access only to a volunteer tutor two mornings a week for a couple of hours. They were rarely offered any support for learning how to navigate their new country. Yet, local newspapers and organizations reported their arrival and “integration” as a “success,” with some organizations even noting that they helped them become “productive, successful citizens.” Officials from a nearby university noted that the children were “learning to adapt and hoping for a better future.” Others described Burundians as “working toward a good life.”

Indeed, Bell (1992) said that we often “yearn” that “our civil rights work will be crowned with success, but what we really want—want even more than success—is meaning” (p. 198). He also argued that turning to and learning from those “who have been most subordinated,” who have “survived as complete, defiant, though horribly scarred beings” (p. 198) is a way toward meaning. So, for us, we ‘turned toward,’ and learned that these success stories were strikingly different than what we observed in the local schools where Burundian children were enrolled, and the housing projects where many Burundian families lived. Further, we learned much about the lived realities from the stories that Burundians shared. One Burundian mother shared:

They [resettlement agency] should have told us the truth... They should have said that upon arrival in the U.S that we will have to pay for housing, we will have to pay for healthcare. They should have said that we will be on our own. [Laughs] Also, they should have said that the ones who were chosen to come to the US won't be able to see their relatives that they left behind in the camp. If they had said that, nobody would have come. When we told them when we were in the camp that we couldn't leave without our parents, brothers/sisters, they told us that during our interview we will need to mention the names of our family members. Then they said that we will have to go to the agency that will welcome us in the US and tell them about our brothers and sisters that didn't come with us.

Further, as one Burundian father shared:

Like us, if we knew that things were going to be like this, we would have stopped our journey in [Africa], we would have stopped our trip in [Africa]. But now, we have lost everything that we left behind, and that would be hard for us to go back. And at this point we don't have a choice. They told us: ‘You that are going to

America, you are going to forget the problems that you had in the past and have a better life.'

Burundian families told us again and again that they did not "forget"; rather, they experienced more loss and targeting after coming to the U.S. As many of their children were tracked into special education, diagnosed with 'mental issues,' and heavily medicated, we wondered how we might represent the world as 'on fire.' There was no promise land. Yet, we also knew that these success tellings, implicitly and explicitly, were often woven into our very retellings and representations as qualitative researchers, seducing readers, and perhaps even ourselves, into substituting participation in an 'on fire world' with consumption.

Seduction...Narratives of Injustice

What if narratives of injustice seduce readers into substituting participation with consumption? Does consuming national and international news or reading non-fiction accounts of atrocities in Sudan, Iraq, Haiti or Guantanamo sate moderates on the left? What if a book club reads *We Wish to Inform You That Tomorrow We Will Be Killed with Our Families* (Gourevitch, 1998)—what comes of this? How about participating in letter-writing campaigns directed to leaders who violate human rights as a part of a human rights movement? Or following a link from an online petition? Stories of suffering abound. Structural violence is ever present. Does knowing about suffering mean we will do something about it? Does the consumption of particular narratives keep us from activism? From joining social movements for justice? Or does it motivate us to do more?

In his autobiographical work about the structures and practices of privilege at Harvard, Douhat (2005), described "parlor liberals" as:

...forming the mainstream at elite colleges. They sit comfortably on the left of the American political spectrum, believing in gun control and gay rights, in affirmative action and abortion, in a multilateral foreign policy and a significant social safety net and they will likely vote Democrat until they die. Yet there is something conservative about them. They are creatures of their class, not would-be traitors to it, and they are deeply uncomfortable with radicalism in any form. This discomfort...extends easily to anyone who displays too much self-righteousness and zeal, too much anger at institutions and leaders and structures of powers...Parlor liberals are ultimately well disposed to the world and to their privileged place in it, believing that what injustices there are can be righted without too much upheaval and unrest, and perhaps even without raising taxes. (pp. 203-204)

We argue that consuming narratives of injustice may seduce Douhat's "parlor liberals" (p. 200) into substituting participation in the politics of eradicating social and economic inequities with the act of consuming stories about disenfranchisement and abuse (Anders, 2007).

There is investment of time and effort in being well informed. And the abil-

ity to participate in conversations about politics, equity, and justice cogently can invite others to consider issues of social justice. But narrative has its limits. For all the potential that narrative has, narrative is not action. Although reading makes one well informed and perhaps well-heeled in an argument, it is not activism. And activism is needed. The spectacle and politics of the new Republican administration have required the very “upheaval and unrest” (Douthat, 2005, p. 204) that makes parlor liberals uncomfortable. Finding productive and strategic responses to the injustices the current Republican administration, House and Senate members are perpetuating protests, marches, rallies, sit-ins, and organizing.

Villainy

Because we know that systemic inequity and systemic oppression are just that—systemic, and that rhetoric and ideology have been deployed to conceal and justify its production and reproduction (Farmer, 2005), when we can identify and uncover the origins, practices, and perpetrators of structural violence, we want to eradicate its presence, erase the atrocities. In identifying the perpetration of violence, the temptation to cast as villains those who harm others and bind their actions to monolithic charges of malevolence is real. Farmer noted that:

Human rights violations are not accidents; they are not random in distribution or effect. Rights violations are, rather, symptoms of deeper pathologies of power and are linked intimately to the social conditions that so often determine who will suffer abuse and who will be shielded from harm. (p. 7)

Living with harm that ought to have been and could have been otherwise is another violence. Witnessing and representing harm that ought to have been and could have been otherwise is messy business. In our own work with Burundian children with refugee status and their families, we saw school leaders and teachers, medical professionals, and social workers target and harm Burundians. Abuse of power, manipulation of the systems that already established their favor, and discriminatory decision-making became ways we marked their perpetration of structural violence. Vilifying their actions was appealing. Writing for revenge was alluring (Goodall, 2000). Narratives of good versus evil and the redemptive tale run deep in the West. But they are not always productive or strategic. And, so, for us, for now, we have attempted to represent in layered, complex, and creative ways at the axes of structural violence and how individuals delivered its destruction. We have noted elsewhere that:

Denigrating the choices and practices of professionals in both spaces was emotionally appealing but pedagogically limiting. The vilification of the professionals and their choices narrowed and bounded our understandings in ways we resisted (Crenshaw, 1995). That storyline only seemed to be teaching a rule: “Don’t do this.” We feared that such a message would reproduce a monolithic narrative of a villain and a victim, flattening the dimensionality and complexity of trauma and suffering (Krumer-Nevo, 2011; Tamas, 2011). (Anders & Lester, 2015, p. 171)

Even as we wrote against it, the seduction of representing villainy remained. Contextualizing ideological commitments was a significant step in our understanding of what happened and became an aim in creating an allegory to excavate the horrific tensions between a health care provider and his patient (Anders & Lester, 2015). The productive force of writing creatively kept us from turning narrowly to grand narratives of good versus evil. Vilification is always an option. Writing against its allure was a way to respect its power and potential for destruction. Having said that, we want to acknowledge that our decision was one among others and may not stand the test of time. There may be circumstances that invite the representation of diametrically opposed positions and clearly defined villains, victims, and heroes.

We identified and represented the structural violence that Burundian children and their families endured, but holding perpetrators of such violence accountable as ethnographers is difficult, and not representing villainy does not mean it does not exist. As Farmer (2005) reminds us, "Human rights violations are not accidents; they are not random in distribution or effect" (p. 7). When we can identify perpetrators of structural violence, how do we respond? When the perpetrator is the president of the United States, what do we do?

The bans President Trump has ordered against Muslim individuals seeking refugee status in the U.S. and foreign nationals from Iran, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, Yemen, and transgender individuals serving in the U.S. military, are assaults on constitutional rights (Harris & Nixon, June 28, 2017). Discriminating against nationality and religion and gender, Trump abandons commitments to humanitarian aid and disregards First Amendment protections and freedom of expression. His orders assail the senses of parlor liberals.

Trump peddles exclusion, extremism, and neo-isolationism. His executive orders tear down rather than build up. He divides, denigrates, and demoralizes his own party, his own supporters. Casting Trump as a villain seems quite reasonable, rationale, and apt. But doing so makes him a hero to many who voted for him. Harris (1993) suggested that:

White workers often identify themselves primarily as white rather than as workers because it is through their whiteness that they are afforded access to a host of public, private, and psychological benefits. It is through the concept of whiteness that class-consciousness among white workers is subordinated and attention is diverted from class oppression. (p. 1760)

And so how do we respond? How might we generate meaning when structural violence defies explanation (Farmer, 2005)?

The Search Never Ends

Grieve and Face the Dread

It is important for critical and postcritical qualitative researchers to understand that survival is not always redemptive for participants who endure structural violence

(Arnault, 2003). Some tales will never be stories of redemption; some stories will mark “the co-presence of ongoing death and ongoing life—without resolution” (Greenspan, 1992, p. 148). Work toward social justice cannot always heal, cannot always mend. There is loss and grief in that acknowledgement and in what could be, but is not. There is loss and grief in the daily assaults against targeted communities and in the fractures of sense making that cruelty and horror build and constrain. And yet qualitative researchers are in the business of making meaning.

And so, how do we respond? We make time to grieve, practice facing the dread, and where we can, heal. We argue we have much to learn from critical race theorists, including Bell (1992), who described his surprise when in the early 1960s as a civil rights lawyer working on school desegregation cases in the deep South, he found that society did not “shift” when the court ruled in favor of desegregation in *Brown versus Board of Education*.

In an oral history interview, Bell (n.d.) shared, “I was very concerned about school integration. I really believed that that was going to be the answer for effective schooling for Black children.” Under Justice Thurgood Marshall, Bell filed desegregation cases throughout the South. “We all believed,” he explained, “that this society when the courts spoke was going to shift.” Bell shared:

You know, the amazing thing, and you get this in reading Bob Carter’s book, is the strength of the belief in the law, that if you once got the court to say officially what we knew from experience, that then, there would be compliance, that white folk who had been benefitting all these years from segregation would now, that the law was clear, that the court had spoken, would, with some, you know, foot dragging and all, would go along with the law.

We all believed that this society when the courts spoke was going to shift. And Carter writes years later that we thought segregation was the evil. We came to see that segregation was a manifestation of the real evil: racism. And racism is more than just bad white folk hating Black folk. It is a, it is the major underpinning of this capitalist society of control of both Blacks and Whites. And don’t we see that today?

And so, the great challenge when my students, particularly the white students [ask]: “I want to work in civil rights. What should I do?” I said, “The great challenge today is to get white folks to acknowledge the benefits of racism and to see that it comes at too high a price.” (Civil Rights Cases, The Visionary Project)

White folks did not comply with the law and in fact actively sought ways to fight *Brown versus Board of Education* in the lower courts (Mariner, 2010). The legal strategies of white oppositionists and the rulings in the lower courts in the decades following *Brown* led Bell and other civil rights attorneys to recognize the historical and transcendent pervasiveness of white supremacy and racism. Acknowledging the humanness and the limits of the courts, Bell (1992) encouraged his students to work against racism and delegitimate white supremacy. It was the recognition that:

...even those herculean efforts we hail as successful will produce no more than temporary “peaks of progress,” short-lived victories that slide into irrelevance as racial patterns adapt in ways that maintain white dominance. This is a hard-to-accept fact that all history verifies. We must acknowledge it, not as a sign of submission, but as an act of defiance. (p. 12)

Bell's emphasis on defiance and his invitation to African Americans to confront and conquer the dread in facing “the otherwise deadening reality” of a permanent subordinate status resist nihilist interpretations. Indeed, Bell called for struggle against white supremacy—even as he believed racism was permanent.

In this historical present, with his travel ban orders abandonment of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), and exclusion of transgender service members from the military, Trump has pursued discriminatory policies that violate constitutional law. His Department of Justice seeks to un-do Federal protections based on sexual orientation. Critical race theorists remind us that neutrality in the judiciary is a myth; and that a teleology of progress, although a “comforting belief” (Bell, 1992, p. 13), may blind us from the settler colonialism, and white supremacy that pervade our courts, streets, and everyday lives. So, what are we to do? We grieve and face the dread, and then imagine and create anew.

Imagine and Create Anew

For us, turning to art has helped. As we shared above, writing allegorically has opened new ways for us to understand the reach of institutional power and privilege, our own complicity in whitestream institutions (Grande, 2004; Urrieta, 2004), our roles as advocates and researchers and contested, complicated relationships with different community members in Riverhill. Noblit (1999) discussed ethnography as literature and metaphor, irony, tragedy, comedy, satire, farce, and allegory as literary devices that can enable “a ‘sense of things’ that literal texts are unable to render. This ‘sense of things’ is largely what empirical and literal accounts of social and cultural scenes miss” (p. 25). Noblit argued that, if we want readers to engage with our work aesthetically, “we must invite their participation in meaning making” (p. 24). Similarly, Garoian and Gaudelius (2008) noted that we should and can engage in “art-making for transgressive and transformative experiences” (p. 1). For instance, drawing from a larger interview study of special education professionals and children labeled ‘disordered’, Lester and Gabriel (2013) crafted a performative text designed to foreground the ‘absurdities’ associated with the technical practices described as ‘rational’ that result in labeling children’s minds and bodies as ‘disordered’, ‘troubled,’ and ‘problematic.’ This text was performed in a local community center and university classrooms with and by community members, with the hopes of inviting audience members to embrace a poetics of resistance (Ayers, 2009). Other scholars, including Denzin (2017), have argued that we create safe spaces when we produce autoethnographic dramas “that move

back and forth between the personal and the political, the biographical and the historical”, particularly as we work to “understand meanings of oppression” and in doing so enact “a politics of possibility” (p. 14). Social theater, then, is one tool by which to center the experiences of those who are most affected, and holds the potential to “heal, empower, respect, create community solidarity” (Denzin, p. 14). Sharing language and communal spaces of resistance enables us, at least in part, to confront oppressive ideologies, engender dialogue and hope, bear witness, and perhaps even restore integrity and the aesthetic of a moral community.

So, colleagues, we call for new imaginings and creations anew, recognizing that we do this in a historical context in which social harmony is not a priority. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Archbishop Desmond Tutu (1999) said “ubuntu” was difficult to translate into Western language. He noted that:

When we want to give high praise to someone we say, ‘Yu, u nobuntu’; ‘Hey, so and so has ubuntu.’ Then you are generous, you are hospitable, you are friendly and caring and compassionate. You share what you have. It is to say, ‘My humanity is caught up, is inextricably bound up, in yours’... We say, ‘A person is a person through other persons.’ (p. 31)

For Tutu, social harmony is the “greatest good” and, “anger, resentment, lust for revenge, even success through aggressive competitiveness, are corrosive of this good” (Tutu, 1999, p. 31). Yet, we live in traps of neoliberalism in the West, where ideological commitments toward social harmony have been framed as liberal fantasy. Certainly, under the current administration, led by a President for whom social harmony is no priority, we face fierce and fictive resistance to any analysis or critique that is expressed. What if in the analyses and critiques we make, we sought and practiced high praise for ubuntu? For bleeding heart advocacy? For resistance against ideologies of settler colonialism and white supremacy and the violence they bear? What if one place where this might unfold is in our art-making? Art-making, then, as defiance and resistance.

Defy, Resist, Build

Bell (1992) said that in this work we must “remind the powers that be that out there are persons like us who are not only not on their side but determined to stand in their way” (p. 199). This work is both the “futility of action—where action is more civil rights strategies destined to fail—and the unalterable conviction that something must be done, that action must be taken” (p. 199). Guinier and Torres (2002) conceptualized an idea they name political race as a way to open new ways to engage in raced politics and democracy. Political race serves a diagnostic function and a way to pursue aspirational goals and activism. Working with the metaphor of the miner’s canary—the canary’s “distress signaled that it was time to get out of the mine because the air was becoming too poisonous to breathe” (p. 11)—they work against deficit perspectives and toward racial equity and justice. They further noted:

Racialized communities signal problems with the ways we have structured power and privilege. These pathologies are not located in the canary. Indeed, we reject the incrementalist approach that locates complex social and political problems in the individual. Such an approach would solve the problems of the mines by outfitting the canary with a tiny gas mask to withstand the toxic atmosphere. (p. 12)

Specifically, Guinier and Torres called not just for grassroots organizing but also for concerted development of leadership in organizing. Political effectiveness is the goal—not just political activism. Citing the possibilities of “cross-class convergence” in racial groups, the power cultural bonds have to deepen racial bonds, and the significance of religious associations as spaces that can “engender feelings of political efficacy” when individuals are linked “to a community of people who share a common culture or similar experiences” (p. 80). They argued for the importance of tangible, local goals rather than abstract universals. Indeed, Bell’s own witnessing to the undoing of civil rights legislation in the lower courts and tenacious white supremacist backlash led him to reframe his beliefs in the power and centrality of the judiciary. Finding traction with the use of rights discourse often remains equally challenging.

Given the dominance of neo-liberalism and critique that critical race theorists provide, local may be the only substantive change. And maybe that is the good news. We can work to hold local and state officials accountable, identify and critique the structural violence they perpetrate, and coalition build around the pursuit of local goals. Local knowledges and often the histories held within them may provide productive strategies against local threats (Scott, 1998). We turn toward our elders who have been here before and listen and heed for the next seven generations. In so doing, we work to generate narratives of defiance, resist “the powers that be,” and build at a local level.

Together, let’s defy, resist, and build.

In Solidarity,
Jessica, Allison & Nicholas

References

- Anders, A. D. (2007). *Revisiting the panopticon: Educational narratives from incarcerated youth*. The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Chapel Hill, NC: Unpublished dissertation.
- Anders, A., & Lester, J. (2011). Living in Riverhill: A postcritical challenge to the production of a neoliberal success story. In B. Portofino & H. Hickman (Eds.), *Critical service learning as revolutionary pedagogy: A project of student agency in action* (pp. 223-249). Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing.
- Anders, A. D., & Lester, J. N. (2015b). Navigating authoritarian power in the United States: Families with refugee status and allegorical representation. *Cultural Studies/Critical Methodologies*, 15(3), 169-179.
- Arnault, L. S. (2003). Cruelty, horror, and the will to redemption. *Hypatia*, 18(2), 155-188.

- Ayers, W. (2009). Barack Obama and the fight for public education. *Harvard Educational Review*, 79(2), 385-395.
- Bell, D. A. (n.d.). Civil rights cases, National Visionary Leadership Project Oral History Archive. Retrieved from: <http://www.visionaryproject.org/bellderrick>
- Bell, D. (1992). *Faces at the bottom of the well: the permanence of racism*. New York, NY: Basic Books.
- Begos, (2012). *Against their will: North Carolina's sterilization program and the campaign for reparations*. Apalachicola, FL: Gray Oak Books.
- Butler, J. (1990). *Gender trouble*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Collins, P. H. (1989). The social construction of Black feminist thought. *Signs*, 14(4) 745-773.
- Crenshaw, K. (1995). *Critical race theory: The key writings that formed the movement*. New York, NY: The New Press.
- Denzin, N. (2017). Critical qualitative inquiry. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 23(1), 8-16.
- Douthat, R. G. (2005). *Privilege: Harvard and the education of the ruling class*. New York, NY: Hyperion.
- Farmer, P. (2005). Suffering and structural violence. In P.S. Rothernberg (Ed.) *Beyond borders: Thinking critically about global issues* (pp. 368-384). New York, NY: Worth Publishers.
- Foner, E. (1970). *Free soil, free labor, free men: the ideology of the Republican party before the Civil War*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Foucault, M. (1990). *The history of sexuality* (Vol I). New York, NY: Vintage.
- Freedland, J. (2017, July 7). No wonder Trump is Putin's favourite: He's making America weak again. *The Guardian*. Retrieved from: <https://www.theguardian.com>.
- Garolan, C. R. & Gaudelius, Y. M. (2008). *Spectacle pedagogy: Art, politics, and visual culture*. New York, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Goodall Jr, H. L. (2000). *Writing the new ethnography*. Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press.
- Gorevitch, P. (1998). *We wish to inform you that tomorrow we will be killed with our families. Stories from Rwanda*. New York, NY: Farrar Straus & Giroux.
- Gramsci, A. (1995). *Further selections from the prison notebooks*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Grande, S. (2004). Whitestream feminism and the Colonialist Project: Toward a theory of indigenista. *Red Pedagogy: Native American Social and Political Thought*, 123-157.
- Greenspan, H. (1992). Lives as texts: Symptoms as modes of recounting in the life histories of Holocaust survivors. In G. C. Rosenwald & R. L. Ochberg (Eds.), *Storied lives: the cultural politics of self-understanding*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Guinier, L. & Torres, G. (2002). *The miner's canary: Enlisting race, resisting power, transforming democracy*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Harris, C. I. (1993). Whiteness as property. *Harvard Law Review*, 1707-1791.
- Harris, G. & Nixon, R. (2017, June 28) Stepsister, yes; Grandma, No: U.S. sets guidelines for revised travel ban. *New York Times*. Retrieved from: <https://www.nytimes.com>.
- Higham, J. (1955). *Stranger in a strange land: Patterns of American nativism*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Hirschfeld D. J., & Cooper, H. (2017, June 26). Trump says transgender people will not be allowed in the military. *New York Times*. Retrieved from: <https://www.nytimes.com>.
- Hyttén, K. (2010). AESA 2009 Presidential Address: Cultivating hope and building com-

- munity: Reflections on social justice activism in educational studies. *Educational Studies*, 46, 151-167.
- Krumer-Nevo, R. (2011, May). Writing against othering. Keynote presentation at the International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry, Urbana-Champaign, IL.
- Lester, J. N., & Gabriel, R. (2013). Six characters in search of an author: A performative text of the naming of the dis/abled. In Gabriel, R. & J. N. Lester (Eds.), *Performances of research: Critical issues in K-12 education* (pp. 71-93). New York, NY: Peter Lang.
- López, I. H. (2006). *White by law 10th anniversary edition: The legal construction of race*. New York, NY: New York University Press.
- Malkki, L. (1996). National geographic: The rooting of peoples and the territorialization of national identity among scholars and refugees. In G. Eley & R. Grigor Suny (Eds.), *Becoming national: A reader* (pp. 434-453). Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Mariner, N. S. (2010). "People who look like me": *Community, space and power in a segregated East Tennessee school*. University of Tennessee. Knoxville, TN: Unpublished dissertation.
- Noblit, G. W. (1999). *Particularities: Collected essays on ethnography and education*. New York, NY: Peter Lang Publishing.
- Scott, J. (1998). *Seeing like a state: How certain schemes improve the human condition have failed*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press
- Tamas, S. (2011). Biting the tongue that speaks you: (re)writing survivor narratives. *International Review of Qualitative Research*, 4(4), 431-459.
- Trump, D. (2017, January 20). *Presidential inauguration speech*. Washington, DC.
- Tuck, E. (2009). Suspending damage: A letter to communities. *Harvard Educational Review*, 79(3), 409-428.
- Tuck, E., & Guishard, M. (2013). Uncollapsing ethics: Racialized sciencism, settler coloniality, and an ethical framework of decolonial participatory action research. In C. S. Malott, B. J. Porfilio, & T. M. Kress (Eds.), *Challenging status quo retrenchment: New directions in critical qualitative research* (pp. 3-27). Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing.
- Tutu, D. M. (1999). *No future without forgiveness*. New York, NY: Image Doubleday.
- Urrieta, L. (2004). Dis-connections in "American" citizenship and the post/neo-colonial: People of Mexican descent and Whitestream pedagogy and curriculum. *Theory & Research in Social Education*, 32(4), 433-458.